Illusions of Escape: Representations of Harry Houdini in Contemporary U.S. Narratives

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Dedicated to Mike Skipper – who told stories, and warned me of the dangers of writing in handcuffs.

Abstract

This thesis is the first full-length study of the significance of Harry Houdini for U.S. literature and culture. Despite his enormous and enduring fame, Houdini does not appear in literary fiction until the 1970s. Through readings of his representation in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), and Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017), I argue that these contemporary writers turn to Houdini as a diegetic symbol of, and formal model for, their self-reflexive, overtly illusionistic representations of history. In this, I suggest Houdini as a common means of mobilizing what has recently been called a 'neo-historical' generic mode – an emergent post-postmodern form typically concerned with re-representing the past in order to offer meaningful comment on the present.

While this reflexive neo-historicism marks a kind of literary 'confinement', I argue that the rich dialecticism of the escapologist / magician enables writers to express, and potentially redress, the representational limitations suggested in critical accounts of neoliberal or capitalist realist (post-)postmodernity. As an escapologist, Houdini mobilizes rich textual metaphors of confinement, escape, and the imperiled (masculine) body. As a magician, however, Houdini inspires the reflexive framing of these often materially concerned metaphors within a meta-discourse of illusionism. This discourse means that the metaphors Houdini mobilizes tend to double-back into self-conscious, ambivalent reflections on the nature of fiction-making. Against assumptions that the 'nostalgic' cultural products of capitalist realism fail to critique the present, I argue that all three of these reflexive neo-historical novels turn to Houdini in order to engage with the 'illusionism' of contemporary economic-cultural logic.

Throughout, I assess the extent to which these representations of Houdini suggest solutions or alternatives to various impasses and schisms within contemporary literary discourse following the 'turn from critique' in the academy. These theoretical impasses – namely, a general questioning of literature's capacity to represent the 'real', the often binarized attitudes of irony and sincerity, and the abstractions of economic neoliberalism – are all related to the more totalizing impasse of illusionistic neoliberal culture, which representations of Harry Houdini help to articulate, historicize, and critique. The literary Houdini, then – to paraphrase Mark Fisher – offers a means of connecting 'effect… to structural cause'; Houdini facilitates a de-mystification of contemporary unreality by showing its roots in historical illusionism.

Contents

He is no fugitive – escaped, escaping.
No one has seen him stumble looking back.
His fear is not behind him but beside him
On either hand to make his course perhaps
A crooked straightness yet no less a straightness.
He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.
He is a seeker who in his turn seeks
Another still, lost far into the distance.
Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.
His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever.
It is the future that creates his present.
All is an interminable chain of longing.[1]

> - Robert Frost, 'Escapist – Never' (1962)

The individualized everyday culture of the West is simply a culture of built-up knowledge and self-confidence.[2]

> - Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (1994)

[1] Robert Frost, 'Escapist – Never', in *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem (London: Vintage, 2013), p.421.
[2] Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p.20.

Introduction

This thesis argues that the magician and escapologist Harry Houdini (1874 – 1926) becomes, in the contemporary era, a vital figure for expressing and navigating apparent impasses and contradictions in literature's capacity to represent reality. In line with Fredric Jameson's account of 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984) and Mark Fisher's more recent *Capitalist Realism* (2009), I describe these impasses as a direct result of the rise and reification of neoliberalism over the past five decades. However, while these descriptions of contemporary reality see little or no evidence in cultural production of resistance to capitalism's totalizing logic, I argue that the literary Houdini evidences a post-postmodern interrogation of the stifling condition that these theories describe. Against critical suggestions of an insurmountable disappearance of history, or a total failure in contemporary literature's ability to critique reality, I identify Houdini's representation in three critically and commercially successful historical novels – E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), and Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017) – as enabling a recuperation of the past that offers meaningful comment on the economized culture of the present.

Recent critical work identifies 'neo-historical fiction' as an emergent post-postmodern narrative form generally concerned with similar acts of narrative recuperation of the past. It has mainly been discussed with regard to the British neo-historical or neo-Victorian novels of Hillary Mantel, Sarah Waters, David Mitchell, Ian McEwan, and Kazuo Ishiguro. In a U.S. context, the term has been slower to gain traction. Critics such as Mitchum Huehls do identify a historical turn in contemporary U.S. fiction (evident in the later work of Michael Chabon, George Saunders, Jennifer Egan, and Colson Whitehead),[1] but their descriptions differ from the neo-historical mode in one crucial regard: they do not adequately account for the 'forwards facing' element of neo-historical fiction – its capacity to illuminate the present through the disclosure of the falsity of its own historical representation. Thus, Huehls echoes Jameson and Fisher's stifling conclusions regarding neoliberalism's total dominance of

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[1] It is my regret that there was not the time or the room in the process of producing this thesis to engage fully with Colson Whitehead's recent novel *Harlem Shuffle* (2021). Whitehead's novel is also a neo-historical narrative (of the 1960s) in which Houdini is briefly, but significantly alluded to. This omission is something I hope to change in revision for publication. Many thanks to Hamilton for bringing Whitehead's novel to my attention.

culture: these neo-historical texts indicate primarily the 'shared attempt to think the present historically in a moment marked by the end of any strong sense of the past.'[2] Similarly, Jon Doyle aligns Egan's *Manhattan Beach* with Sam Sacks' assertion that these new historical novels exhibit an 'exuberant nostalgia' and serve as an escape from the complexities of present reality.[3]

The work of neo-historical fiction, however, as Elodie Rousselot writes, is to turn 'the "falseness" of nostalgia… into a mode of critique of nostalgia itself.'[4] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewllyn describe the genre as *'self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision'* [original emphasis].[5] As these emphasised semi-parenthetical terms suggest, neo-historical fiction makes it clear – even if it pretends the opposite – that its representations are not 'real' history, and that it does not have textual authority over history. Katharine Harris, in her recent dissertation, defines this ambivalent, self-contradictory relationship to history as the hallmark of a 'neo-historical aesthetic.' She clearly identifies the mode as 'a post-postmodern literary response to postmodern theories about the limitations of narrative for accessing the past.'[6] Neo-historical fiction is, she writes, intentionally 'anachronistic', and it is the deliberateness of its move away from realistic representation that makes these kinds of texts 'recognise their own failures even as they attempt to overcome them.'[7]

I identify Houdini as the central figure in my three chosen texts for facilitating or conjuring the neo-historical mode. In this, a secondary aim of this thesis is to contribute to the emerging field of neo-historical criticism – both by mobilising the term more fully in the context of U.S. literature, but also by describing Houdini as a *common means* of creating a neo-historical aesthetic. Elodie Rousselot's and Katharine Harris's work breaks crucial ground in identifying key tropes of prolepsis and anachronism in the neo-historical mode, but, in general, neo-historical criticism is still grappling with the genre it has identified. I

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[2] Mitchum Huehls, "Historical Fiction and the End of History", in *American Literature in Transition 2000-2010*, ed. by Rachel Greenwald Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp.138-151 (p.148).

[3] Doyle, p.269. Sam Sacks, "They Could Be Heroes", in *The New Republic* (March 14th 2017), https://newrepublic.com/article/140954/nostalgic-fiction-booming-eggers-chabon-lethem [accessed 12/10/2021].

[4] Elodie Rousselot, *Exoticising the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.2.

[5] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewllyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.4.

[6] Katharine Harris, *The Neo-Historical Aesthetic: Mediations of Historical Narrative in Post-Postmodern Fiction* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2018), p.4.

[7] Ibid.

argue that Houdini's common, and central, presence in three landmark U.S. versions of the form helps greatly in understanding neo-historical fiction as intentionally illusionistic. This also helps in understanding the nature of what neo-historical fiction is trying to illuminate in the present.

I argue that all three of these novels turn to Houdini in order to suggest the liberating and restricting aspects of a neoliberal culture which is magical – seductive, spectacular, enchanting – and illusory, that is, riven by 'falseness', manipulation, and untrustworthy or hollow representations. These ideas will be explored further in my chapters, however, the underlying argument that late twentieth / early twenty-first U.S. culture is marked by a proliferation of illusory images and consumerist spectacles (as well as a broader, more insidious kind of representational legerdemain attendant to neoliberalism), is familiar enough from accounts of postmodernity emphasising the dominance or overtaking of reality by images – including Jameson's account, and, in particular, the work of Jean Baudrillard – and also from studies of U.S. 'image culture', such as Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962) and Chris Hedges' *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (2009).[8] While a register of magic and illusion is often called upon in these texts to describe U.S. culture, the literary Houdini, emerging in the 1970s, serves to seriously examine the metaphor, connecting critical ideas regarding the disappearance of history to the actual practice of stage magic and to the body of perhaps its most famous practitioner.

Through my readings, I want to make a case both for the significance of secular magic in contemporary U.S. literature and culture, and for the unique capacity of Harry Houdini to articulate and interrogate this significance.[9] Due to his status as both an illusionist and an

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[8] See also Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), and George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2010).

[9] Both strands of this discussion are under-examined in American Studies, and in academia generally. As stated in my abstract, this thesis is the first book-length study of Houdini outside of biography, and the first to assess Houdini's relationship to fiction and / or contemporary culture. Academic studies on magic – particularly *stage* magic – are likewise few and far between, while in the context of American Studies I have encountered only one text foregrounding the rich historical and philosophical connections between magic and U.S. culture in its account of American modernity – Jackson Lears's excellent *Fables of Abundance* (1994). There are however, several academic texts I have encountered that deal brilliantly with magic either on its own terms, or as part of a discussion of a tradition of deceptive entertainment in U.S. history. These include Simon During's *Modern Enchantments* (2002)*,* James Cook's *The Arts of Deception* (2001), Fred Nadis's *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (2005), Gary Lindberg's *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (1982) and Neil Harris's *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (1973) as amongst the most useful for this study – however, Lears's work is unique in assessing how aspects of nineteenth-century magic are taken up by a

escapologist, Houdini is an inescapably dialectical, deeply ambiguous figure. He presents numerous apparent binaries or contradictions – including confinement and escape, mystification and demystification, truth and fiction – but brings these things together within the same act, dynamically shifting between different registers and contrasting iconography in order to create the powerful, and peculiar, aesthetic of his own brand of magic. The writers I examine in this thesis – all of whom are situated within the neoliberal culture I have begun to describe above – mobilise the ambiguity and dialectical power of Houdini in a variety of ways, but, I argue, for the same essential purpose. In order to illuminate contemporary concerns regarding or relating to neoliberal capitalism, these writers turn to Houdini as a guide for formal and thematic representations of a dialectical unsettling of categories of historical truth, fictional genres, gender norms, and, more generally but more essentially, types of selfhood and modes of being-in-the-world.

Before turning more fully to my reading of Houdini and his act, I want to elucidate the contemporary economized culture in which the literary Houdini makes his intervention. In the following theoretical discussion of the relation between neoliberal culture and literary representation I wish to emphasize my reading of the 'illusionistic' and 'entrapping' elements of Mark Fisher's theory in order to build my case for Houdini as a vital contemporary figure, and to better define this thesis's titular phrase. The 'reality' of capitalist realism, I argue, both appears and functions (socially, politically, and culturally) as an 'illusion of escape.' I contrast this throughout my thesis with the 'illusions of escape' provided by these neo-historical novels. *Potentially* complicit, *potentially* entrapped, these writers all self-reflexively turn to Houdini – who made the production and performance of 'illusions of escape' his life's work – in order to explore the extent to which artistic acts of make-believe may counter the making-of-belief characterizing contemporary capitalism. The objectives of this thesis are therefore threefold: first, to make a case for Houdini as a significant figure in U.S. culture and in contemporary literature; second, to contribute to emerging criticism on neo-historical fiction by assessing Houdini's common appearance in three major novels of the

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burgeoning advertising industry, which, in turn, impacts on the nature and common understanding of a dominant culture of consumerism throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. As Lears writes: '…the overall pattern of nineteenth-century change was a developing balance of tensions – within the broader society and gradually within advertising itself – between dreams of magical transformation and moralistic or managerial strategies of control. The recurring motif in the cultural history of American advertising could be characterized as the attempt to conjure up the magic of self-transformation through purchase while at the same time containing the subversive implications of a successful trick.' Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, pp.41-2. Lears's phrasing here underscores the connection between Houdini's ambiguous art and the (capitalistic representational) activity of Madison Avenue.

form; and third, to suggest the value of Houdini-esque discourses of illusion(ism) and escape in understanding our contemporary reality.

Illusions of Escape: Contemporary (Un)reality and Reflexive Literary Representation

In *Capitalist Realism* (2009), Mark Fisher describes contemporary culture and political subjectivity as trapped at an impasse. He positions his analysis as something of an update to Fredric Jameson's 1980s account of postmodernity.[10] While Jameson, in his 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), wrote with 'horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious', Fisher argues that 'what we are dealing with now… is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility.'[11] Capitalism has now 'colonized the dreaming life of the population'; in becoming 'ontologically, as well as geographically, ubiquitous', it 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.'[12] Fisher observes that it is now 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' – viable political alternatives, in their final throes at the time of Jameson's writing, are no longer valid.[13] Cultural production has likewise stalled. Capitalism's plasticity, its ability to absorb alternatives into itself, mean that 'the old struggle… between subversion and incorporation seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead… the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.'[14] This phenomenon is exemplified, for Fisher, by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain: 'Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew

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[10] Fisher writes: 'What I'm calling capitalist realism can be subsumed under the rubric of postmodernism as theorized by Jameson… [However] I would want to argue that some of the processes which Jameson described and analyzed have now become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind.' Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p.7.

[11] Ibid., p.7.

[12] Ibid., p.8 and p.77.

[13] Fisher identifies Margaret Thatcher's doctrine of 'there is no alternative' as both a 'brutally self-fulfilling prophecy' and 'as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for.' Ibid., p.8.

[14] Ibid., p.9.

that even realizing it is a cliché.'[15] For Fisher, 'the impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Jameson described… "[where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles…" Here, even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed.'[16] In the decades since Cobain's death in 1994, Fisher argues, this impasse has only become more naturalized – it now seems to exist, for artists, and, Fisher suggests, for their audiences too, 'without anxiety.'[17]

The apparent naturalization of this impasse is key to Fisher's bleakly compelling account of capitalist realism as 'not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself.'[18] Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, expanding on the relation of Fisher's argument to the literary, explain that 'realism, as described by Fisher, is not a representational mode or aesthetic. It is instead a general ideological formation in which capitalism is the most real of our horizons, the market-dominant present that forms the limits of our imaginaries.'[19] They clarify that Fisher's analysis helpfully goes beyond previous, related arguments regarding neoliberalism and postmodernism by emphasising the role of 'representation and belief in *producing* that which becomes reality.'[20] This conceptual move is crucial because 'it insists on the circulation between imagination and reality, the ways in which this relationship is produced and disavowed.'[21] In other words, Fisher's emphasis on capitalist realism as imaginatively constituted, as produced through representation and belief, goes some way towards denaturalizing the very naturalization it describes. Fisher writes:

> As Alenka Zupančič explains, psychoanalysis's positing of a reality *principle* invites us to be suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural… "The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact (or biological, economic…) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as non-ideological)."[22]

The sole escape route Fisher sees from the naturalization of capitalist logic is through this 'suspicion' of reality as ideologically mediated. Through my reading of Houdini, I want to suggest that this 'suspicion' can be understood affectively as the lived experience of a

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p.9.
[17] Ibid., p.10.
[18] Ibid., p.2
[19] Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, 'A Theory of Capitalist Realism', in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, ed. by Shonkwiler and La Berge (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp.1-25 (p.2).
[20] Ibid., p.6.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, pp.17-18.

sense of confinement and restriction. The impasse of capitalist realism – by virtue of its sensible paralysis – then holds within itself the potential to provoke the kind of 'suspicious' scrutiny of the 'natural' that Fisher sees as politically hopeful. The resonance of this with the other side of Houdini's dualistic signification – those ideas related to illusionism – is suggested in Fisher's powerful conclusion to his argument. He writes: 'What is required is that effect be connected to structural cause… From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.'[23]

In establishing itself as 'realism', capitalism closes off political alternatives. However, Fisher suggests, through his description of contemporary subjects caught in its impasse 'without anxiety', that under capitalist realism there is often also a kind of affective absence of the *desire* to escape.[24] This lack of desire to escape (which more properly constitutes the 'realism' of capitalist realism than does the lack of political alternatives) is, however, not indicative of consent to existing conditions, nor even of cynical or apathetic disengagement, but of what Fisher calls 'reflexive impotence.'[25] Using the college students he teaches as a case study, Fisher describes reflexive impotence as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in which people 'know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it.'[26] This 'knowledge' is not arrived at independently – it is a product of capitalism's key, related ideological logics of deferral and disavowal.

These latter two concepts are essential to understanding this thesis's description of neoliberal reality – and, by extension, the neo-historicist novels that Houdini reveals as speaking to that reality – as 'illusions of escape.' In clarifying what is meant by the concepts, I want to emphasise that Fisher describes capitalist realism as dependent upon prior (and continuing) acts of illusionistic misdirection from history that *produce* the illusion that is capitalist reality. This brings me to three key inter-related terms in this thesis: illusion, illusionism, and reflexivity. I wish to define these terms now in the interest of making the below discussion of the logics of deferral and disavowal, and how this connects to Houdini, clearer.

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[23] Ibid., p.77 and p.81.
[24] In Fisher's argument, it is this lack of *conscious* desire to truly 'escape' (i.e., work towards an authentic transformation of subjectivity / consciousness into something better able to navigate and overcome the impasses and contradictions of capitalist realism) that he wishes to productively recast as signifying an actual confinement.
[25] Ibid., pp.21-30.
[26] Ibid., p.21.

W.J.T. Mitchell's definitions of the former two terms are invaluable – he defines illusion as 'a *natural*, universal phenomenon, transcending cultural boundaries and historical epochs' [my emphasis]; illusion*ism*, meanwhile, is 'a specific cultural practice, valued only at certain special historical moments.'[27] Mitchell expands his thesis into an intentionally provocative set of dialectically entwined 'theses'. Amongst these is a further set of dialectical analogies for the phrase 'illusion is to illusionism as':

> Forgery is to imitation
> *errore* is to *similitude*
> delusion is to illusion
> 'the real' is to realism
> realism is to surrealism
> ideology is to art
> machine is to (self)conscious being
> animal is to human.[28]

The full implications of Mitchell's startling comparisons and analogies are beyond the scope of this current project to tease out. The essential points I want to emphasise, however, for my discussion – aside from the evident inter-relatedness of commonly opposed categories – are most clearly related to the third, fourth and sixth propositions on the list: 'illusion is to illusionism as… delusion is to illusion; 'the real' is to realism… ideology is to art.' Put in the simplest possible terms (the chapters of my thesis will expand on the rich dialecticism of these novels' Houdini-esque mobilization of illusion and illusionism), illusion refers to the kind of naturalized Lacanian 'real' that Zupančič and Fisher see as suggesting, by virtue of the unsettling concept of a 'reality *principle*', the actual unreality (and thus ideology) of capitalist realism. Illusion*ism*, however, refers more to the practice of creating knowingly false illusions via technical means. That this reflects the work of both Houdini and the neo-historical novel is made clear by Mitchell's later explicit definition of illusionism as 'a dialectical realm… on the boundary between fact and fiction.'[29]

The Houdini-esque conjunction, in the idea of capitalist realism, between a discourse of illusion(ism) and the feeling of potentially 'real' entrapment emerges through the third key

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[27] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.336. In light of Mitchell's definitions, this thesis also wants to tentatively suggest that our contemporary moment is one of these 'special historical moments.' I will expand on this claim a little in my conclusion.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., p.337.

concept in this thesis: reflexivity.[30] Initially theorized in the 1980s by scholars such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, the notion of a 'reflexive modernity' has become an important concept in the study of contemporary literature. This is because it connects major stylistic and thematic developments in the literature of the past half-century (such as the rise of self-reflexive metafiction) with the exploitation and encouragement of individual self-consciousness by a contemporary neoliberal culture in which corporate ideals of efficiency and self-management work their way into notions of cultural and human value.[31] As Sarah Brouillette puts it in *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014): 'Overlapping therapeutic and Maslovian terminologies, celebrating the self in reflexive and lifelong pursuit of its own best version, are by now culturally dominant.'[32]

Characterizing contemporary culture as reflexive resonates with the figure of Houdini in several different ways. The concept echoes the way that magic, as an overtly illusionistic art form, is reflexively based on the observation, schematisation, and subsequent manipulation or exploitation of everyday human behaviours.[33] Brouillette's description also suggests an understanding of such an involution as paradoxically driven by (escapist) desire. Her concept of the contemporary self as engaged in 'lifelong pursuit of its own best version' recalls the language of Robert Frost's 1962 poem 'Escapist – Never' (which serves as an

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[30] I will develop over this thesis my own definition of this term as usefully signifying both a potentially enclosing, entrapping kind of self-monitoring that recreates capitalist logic, *but also* a potentially productive act of (self)scrutinization; a potential means of connecting cause to e/affect. In this, I wish to suggest 'reflexivity' as a crucial post-postmodern reworking of the Jamesonian representational concept of a nostalgic, 'dead' return.

[31] Mark McGurl discusses reflexive modernity in relation to contemporary U.S. literature in his excellent *The Program Era* (2009). He identifies reflexivity as central to both corporate practices and acts of authorship when he writes: 'the category of "personal experience" has over the course of the twentieth century, and in the postwar period in particular, achieved a functional centrality in the postindustrial economies of the developed world. These economies in turn inhabit what Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and others have described as "reflexive modernity." The utility of this concept for understanding the metafictional impulse in postwar writing leaps off the page, suggesting that literary practices might partake in a larger, multivalent social dynamic of self-observation. This would extend from the self-observation of society as a whole in the social sciences, media, and the arts, to the "reflexive accumulation" of corporations which pay more and more attention to their own management practices and organizational structures, down to the self-monitoring of individuals who understand themselves to be living, not lives simply, but *life stories* of which they are the protagonists' [emphasis in original]. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p.12. See also Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. by Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992) and Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[32] Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p.13. Brouillette clarifies that this conception 'of the reflexive individual's enterprising and expressive labor' is 'in a sense originally American but now globally resonant', p.5.

[33] I discuss this facet of magic in detail in the first section of my reading of Houdini himself.

epigraph to this thesis). In the poem, Frost describes his 'Escapist' as someone who 'is a pursuer… His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever / It is the future that creates his present. / All is an interminable chain of longing.'[34] Both Frost and Brouillette then describe an affective scenario in which satisfaction is constantly deferred.[35] Frost's escapist is ironically entrapped in 'an interminable chain of longing', while Brouillette describes the reflexive individual's pursuit of an idealized self as 'lifelong.' Frost's poem – which, devoid of any contextual information regarding time and place, offers an abstract, archetypal-seeming account of its subject – helps in understanding the condition of 'lifelong pursuit' as entailing perpetual yearning. The condition Frost describes is an impasse of desire, emerging from the lack of a suitable object, and it finds ideal representation in the language and imagery of protracted, endless escape.

It is clear from this how Houdini might emerge as an apt symbol for certain anxieties and ironies of contemporary culture. Accounts of modernity as reflexive, I argue, also suggest the close relation in contemporary society between Houdini-esque affects of ironically entrapping desire, and a magician-like, transcendent perspective on the everyday as constituted by observable, contingent, manipulable habits.[36] Importantly, while the former has more to do with the individual's own experience, the latter is something shared by both individuals and institutions: the individual scrutinises and manipulates aspects of their own self in order to fit an ideal; the corporation scrutinises and changes its own practices to accord with ideals of accumulation and/or efficiency. This relative fungibility of individual and corporate processes of reflexivity has guided sociological debates regarding structure and agency. In simple terms, these debates are concerned with the degree to which an individual can act on their environment, and the degree to which that environment controls or influences the individual.[37] To the extent that this suggests an uncertainty as to whether what an

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[34] Frost, *Collected Poems*, p.421.

[35] This scenario is also at the heart of Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, which describes an ironic immurement resulting from perpetual (re)attachment to supposedly fulfilling objects of desire: 'Where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place.' Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp.24-5.

[36] This idea is reflected in my second epigraph, from Beck, Giddens and Lash: 'the individualized everyday culture of the West is simply a culture of built-up knowledge and self-confidence', *Reflexive Modernization*, p.20.

[37] Anthony Giddens developed his theory of structuration as an intervention into this argument. Cautioning against two forms of reductive sociological thought – one which 'in seeking to show the foundation of institutions in the unconscious, fails to leave sufficient play for the operation of autonomous social forces', and the opposite perspective, which, in 'wanting to show how much of social life is governed by dark currents outside the scope of actors' awareness, cannot adequately grasp the level of control which agents are

individual desires is something internally or externally directed (Brouillette indicates this problem in her description of overlapping 'therapeutic' and 'Maslovian' terminologies), it also suggests uncertainty regarding whether reflexive culture should be understood as something restrictive, or as something potentially (self-) liberating.[38] The capacity of Harry Houdini to signify both the structural and affective ambiguities of reflexive culture is attested to not only in the dualistic symbolism of his escape act, but also by the anxiety-riddled self-construction of his biography.[39] This conjunction is also readable in Houdini's appearance in recent self-help guides, which combine the modalities of therapeutic manual and business-success guide in their suggestions that readers, for example, 'use the power of thinking inside the box to unleash the power of innate creativity', and 'Discover the key to being more effective, productive and successful; Feel good more often, have more fun and get more done.'[40] Brouillette's 'overlapping terminologies' are evident here, but, significantly, in both the therapeutic and business-oriented elements of these guides, Houdini is used as an ideal figure for reflexive (self-) examination and (self-) improvement, with the iconography of confinement and escape signifying the expected vicissitudes of the reflexive process – its supposed movement from crisis to solution.

As indicated through Mitchell's inter-related antagonisms, thinking about illusion, or illusionism, almost inevitably leads to a reflexive awareness of the way these things mutually constitute each other. In order to unpack the importance of this idea in looping together literary-representational and cultural-critical ideas of neoliberal 'illusions of escape', I will

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characteristically able to sustain reflexively over their conduct' – Giddens instead proposes 'structuration' as a concept accounting for the ways in which agency and structure are mutually constituted: 'In and through their activities', Giddens writes, 'agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible.' Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1984), p.5 and p.2.

[38] Ulrich Beck, for example, semi-ironically uses the word 'liberation' to describe the movement 'from industrial society into the turbulence of the global risk society… This liberation is taking place… against the background of the expansion of education, strong demands for mobility in the labour market and a far advanced juridification of labour relationships. These make the individual as an individual – or, more exactly, only as an individual – the subject of entitlements (and obligations).' Ulrich Beck, 'The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization', in *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.1-55 (pp.7-8).

[39] Both of these things will be discussed in more detail below. Suffice to say here that Houdini, in both the actual facts of his life and career, as well as in his tendency to invent or fictionalise details of his life, demonstrated a desire to construct an ideal self – to pursue a 'best version', to use Brouillette's terms – and that this 'best version' was deeply informed by certain national ideals – for example, of (masculine) bravado, ingenuity, and physical strength.

[40] Ernie Schenck, *The Houdini Solution: Put Creativity and Innovation to Work by Thinking Inside the Box* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), back cover. Tim Kenning, *The Houdini Principle: Discover Harry Houdini's Secrets of Creativity and Confidence* (London: Lean Marketing Press, 2006), back cover.

now turn back to the aforementioned capitalist logics of deferral and disavowal; those same logics which *Capitalist Realism* describes as producing contemporary culture's 'reflexive impotence.' As I will argue throughout this thesis, the reflexive reciprocity between illusion and illusionism in constructing 'reality' – while it does index, and to an extent explain, the paralyzing impasse of capitalist realism – is also overtly present, formally and thematically, in the Houdini-esque neo-historical novel. This suggests this post-postmodern narrative form as questioning, and potentially subtly dismantling, naturalized conceptions of reality.

Fisher draws on Deleuze's analysis of late-capitalist countries as 'control societies' to explain how illusive, unreal-seeming capitalist 'atmosphere' nevertheless constitutes a dominant, and dominating, perspective on reality. Deleuze 'distinguishes between the disciplinary societies described by Foucault, which were organized around the enclosed spaces of the factory, the school and the prison, and the new control societies, in which all institutions are embedded in a dispersed corporation.'[41] This 'dispersal' means that there is no central authority enforcing power relations or ideological messages. Instead, these things are internalized by a reflexive, self-monitoring individual – 'external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing.'[42] As Fisher writes, this ontological 'succession' following the disappearance of coherent externality aids and abets a kind of endless entrapment: 'Education as a lifelong process… Training that persists for as long as your working life continues… Working from home, homing from work… The carceral regime of discipline is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development.'[43]

This latter description of 'systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development' suggests that part of this internal policing involves a subjectively reproduced capitalist-consumerist logic of deferral – what Fisher calls 'indefinite postponement.'[44] The escape implied in contemporary culture's apparent move away from Foucauldian 'carceral regime[s]' is then, for Fisher, illusory. 'Control societies', according to Deleuze and Fisher, dominate via a 'regime of affective management.'[45] If capitalism's external signs of power are 'invisible', mere 'atmosphere', this is because its power is maintained not so much through enforcing agents or institutions, but through the subtle reproduction of its logic at the

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[41] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p.22.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., pp.22-3.
[44] Ibid., p.22.
[45] Ibid., p.74.

level of individual thought and feeling.[46] As an example, Fisher describes how his students seem to affectively intuit that the promise of capitalism is illusory, but still act and think in accordance with its values. Most students, he writes, are in a state of 'depressive hedonia… There is a sense that "something is missing" – but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle.'[47] Sensing, but not fully realizing, the absence at the heart of capitalist promise, the students are still subject to its asymptotic logic. For escape from the system of perpetual consumption, they turn to the 'soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana.'[48] It is not so much that there is no desire to escape from capitalist realism, then, but that capitalism reflexively distorts and repackages the desire to escape as only achievable within its own terms. Caught up in capitalist realism's regime of 'affective management', but still sensing the emptiness at the heart of capitalism's promise, the students' only response to this impasse is to consume more.

The logic of 'deferral' conjoins with the logic of 'disavowal' to produce what I am calling capitalist realism's production of an ironically entrapping illusion of escape. In a kind of subjective mirroring of capitalism's centreless authority, Fisher describes his students endlessly deferring their own satisfaction through an attachment to hollow objects. If 'deferral' refers more to asymptotic perpetuation (endless struggle, repackaged as endless escape) then 'disavowal' refers more to an illusionistic method which sustains that condition.

In explaining the logic of disavowal, Fisher indicates the real history of this historically deleterious process. Describing a kind of original sin of the neoliberal project, Fisher argues that 'in many ways, the left has never recovered from being wrong-footed by Capital's mobilization and metabolization of the desire for emancipation from Fordist routine.'[49] Fisher describes how the 'advocates of *post*-Fordist Capital' [my emphasis] presented themselves as 'opponents of the status quo, bravely resisting… fruitless ideological antagonism' – they were able to do so because post-Fordist capitalism's ability to achieve 'emancipation' was (falsely) premised on its disavowal, or supposed transcendence of ideology.[50] Fisher, however, through the arguments of Slavoj Žižek, makes clear that

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[46] Ibid., p.74.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., p.23.
[49] Ibid., p.34. As suggested through Fisher's argument, the implicit illusionism of this 'wrong-footing' of the leftist desire to escape from oppressive labour conditions is somewhat more sensible (that is, affectively present) in the contemporary period due to the intensification of capitalist logics.
[50] Ibid.

capitalism is not post-ideological, but that its ideology consists in this very disavowal: 'The role of capitalist ideology is not to make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief.'[51]

If capitalism is able to present itself as non-ideological because it is not *dependent* on 'subjectively assumed' beliefs, Fisher clarifies that it does nevertheless mobilise a particular kind of ideology. This ideology consists in the 'overvaluing of belief… at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behavior. So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange.'[52] Fisher summarises Žižek's arguments as follows:

> Capitalism in general relies on this structure of disavowal. We believe that money is only a meaningless token of no intrinsic worth, yet we *act* as if it has a holy value. Moreover, this behavior precisely depends upon the prior disavowal – we are able to fetishize money in our actions only because we have already taken an ironic distance towards money in our heads.[53]

For Žižek and Fisher, this structure of disavowal enables capitalism to persist, in spite of its its apparent contradictions, as 'an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself' – that is, as ideology in its 'highest' form.[54]

Capitalism's structure of disavowal is akin to illusionistic misdirection, in that the catastrophic 'effects' of its system (Fisher's big examples are environmental disaster and the extraordinary rise in mental health conditions amongst young people) are deflected as failures of individual responsibility and / or 'impotent government.'[55] This scapegoating – alongside the apparent lack of a central authority to appeal to – contributes to the mystification of contemporary power structures. As Fisher describes it, the current intensified cultural, ontological, and political reification of capitalist logic is paradoxically marked by its relative

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[51] Ibid., p.13

[52] Ibid. This is evident in much online activist discourse, which has an unfortunate tendency to edge the productive aspects of 'woke culture' into the hopelessly restrictive logic of 'cancel culture'. For an expansive discussion of this, see Helen Lewis's article 'How Capitalism Drives Cancel Culture', in *The Atlantic* (July 2020), https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/07/cancel-culture-and-problem-woke-capitalism/614086/ [accessed 11/09/22].

[53] *Capitalist Realism*, p.13.

[54] Ibid.

[55] *Capitalist Realism*, p.63. This general idea is also at the heart of recent accounts of 'zombie' capitalism and 'zombie' politics. In both cases, the term 'zombie' refers to the essential hollowness of what capitalism presents as real. See Henry Giroux's *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism: Second Edition*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

invisibility. Capitalist realism appears 'more like a pervasive *atmosphere* [emphasis in original]… acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.'[56] This disappearance into an 'atmosphere', an 'invisible barrier', marks the naturalization of capitalism as 'reality.' It also, however, suggests that reality to be profoundly unreal.

It is the unreality described by Fisher that leads Shonkwiler and La Berge to a broadly neo-historicist perspective in their argument for literary representation as newly important terrain in light of capitalist realism's reliance on 'representation and belief.'[57] Realist modes in the contemporary world, they write, 'cannot make the same kinds of claims to truth', but can still represent the present meaningfully.[58] If this is a symptom of the capitalist realist impasse, it is also, for Shonkwiler, La Berge, and for me, a sign that it is possible to 'energize' the impasse critically. Shonkwiler and La Berge summarise their argument as follows, articulating an alternative logic for critique that is also the foundational assumption of this thesis:

> Capitalist realism… can also operate theoretically and critically to describe the relationship between accumulation and representation in the present. Against those who would insist that capitalist realism does not describe an aesthetic form, and that the concept's strength lies precisely in exceeding the limitations of a representational or aesthetic theory, we counter that it is possible to have it both ways… Like any contest, therefore, this contest of representation is open to potential transformation.[59]

Peter Boxall – although he does not make the explicit link to capitalist realism – argues that contemporary literature's renewed interest in realism, and, relatedly, in the historical novel, is a response to this emergence of '[a] global regime that is almost unreadable to us.'[60] Boxall identifies a 'general groundlessness to contemporary being' as one of the side effects of the 'virtualisation of capital' (and, more widely, the 'tectonic shifts in the global distribution of capital… [the] massive transformations in the global balance of power after 9/11… the decline of US imperial power, and… the growing urgency of eco-catastrophe.')[61] He connects this ontological 'groundlessness' to a resurgence of interest amongst contemporary writers and thinkers in trying to grasp or represent the real. He neatly

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[56] Ibid., p.16.
[57] *Reading Capitalist Realism*, p.6.
[58] Ibid., p.8.
[59] Ibid., p.7.
[60] Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.15.
[61] Ibid., pp.75-6.

summarises 'the impasse in which we find ourselves now' as one in which 'a reawakened hunger for the real is combined with a crisis in the authenticity of the realist modes in which we might represent it.'[62]

In identifying realist modes themselves as in crisis, Boxall refers firstly to the ruptures in notions of literary authenticity and representation that accompanied the movement from nineteenth-century realist fiction to modernism. As he writes, fiction across this period 'went through a kind of demystification and staged a revelation of the mechanics of its own mimicry of vocal presence.'[63] This point is echoed in Fredric Jameson's claim that, related to the representational strategies of realist modes, but ultimately referring to the same kind of 'realism' as Fisher, with modernism 'the ideological and social preconditions of realism – its naïve belief in a stable, social reality, for example – are now themselves unmasked, demystified, and discredited.'[64] For Boxall, the demystification of and subsequent scepticism towards the classic techniques of realism only intensifies through postmodernism, which created a 'kind of writing which consistently exposed its own artificiality.'[65]

If postmodernism 'debunked' the illusion of realist representation, Fisher, by way of Žižek, explains this demystification as itself somewhat naïve. Žižek writes:

> The cynical reduction to reality is inadequate: when a judge speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the Words of the Institution of Law) than there is in the direct reality of the person of the judge – if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point… those who do not let themselves be caught in symbolic deception / fiction, and continue to believe their eyes, are the ones who err most. What a cynic who "believes only his eyes" misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality.[66]

I argue that what makes Houdini's role in these texts a particularly *post*-postmodern one is his mobilisation of a kind of ambivalently renewed faith in the symbolic order, following a disillusionment with the aridity of postmodernism's debunking. Reflexive illusionism may necessarily share ground with dominant illusions, but these texts disclose their belief that an *artistic* intensification of, or doubling-down on, illusionistic technique may generate alternate affects and suggest the logic driving those forces of obfuscation.

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[62] Ibid., p.48. Boxall connects this diagnosis to David Shields' identification of a contemporary 'reality hunger'. David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), quoted in Boxall, p.10.
[63] Ibid., p.28.
[64] Ibid., p.28, and Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', p.256.
[65] Boxall, p.28.
[66] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), p.347.

Indeed, Boxall argues that there has been a 'material turn' in contemporary literary discourse, in response to the dematerializing tendencies of contemporary geopolitical power and virtualized capital: 'It was as the west reached the height of its power in the wake of the cold-war, as history appeared to be drawing to a close, as western capital appeared to be synonymous with the very virtual-global environments we inhabited, that bodies receded to the point of invisibility', he writes.[67] However, Boxall argues that, more recently, with the rise of New Materialism and thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, there has been a 're-appearance of the stubbornly material grounds upon which discursive processes are played out.'[68] In light of these arguments, I want to suggest Houdini as a vital post-postmodern figure in part because he places (or neo-historically reinstates) what can be read as a form of dialectical materialism within an always-already-present reflexive discourse of illusionism. In this, he resonates with concepts of totalized contemporary disappearance, but also retains subversive potential.

In moving away from a strictly Jamesonian postmodern perspective of contemporary narrative's relationship to history, I hope to follow the examples of my chosen novelists. The thinking behind this is quite simply that Doctorow, Chabon and Egan – as is evident from their essays, interviews, as well as the novels themselves – have thought more deeply about Houdini than the academy has. This is also why, in my readings of Houdini, I prefer to use the terms suggested by the authors themselves for their Houdini-esque representations, rather than established neo-historical concepts (such as anachronism, spectrality, hauntology). One of the clearest advantages of this approach is in terms of defining the neo-historical mode: because Houdini is a common feature in three well-known examples of the form, he offers insights into the narrative interests, critical debates, themes, and influences that unify the genre.

This thesis is primarily interested in Houdini's use in a particular genre of literary novel and the attendant critical debates regarding the representation of reality under neoliberalism / capitalist realism. It is not a general survey of Houdini's appearances in U.S. literature. As such, other texts either featuring or starring Houdini are excluded from discussion, most notably Muriel Rukeyser's poetic, and bizarre, musical *Houdini* (1973) and Daniel Stashower's crime series *The Harry Houdini Mysteries* (1999 – 2001). Glen David Gold's novel *Carter Beats the Devil* (2001), while it shares some conceptual ground with the

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[67] Boxall, p.75.
[68] Ibid.

concerns of this thesis, has been excluded because its themes and concerns revolve around its titular magician – Charles Joseph Carter – with Houdini only making an occasional appearance to advance the plot. Doctorow, Chabon and Egan's novels, however, self-consciously turn to Houdini as a figure of representational possibility and potential contemporary meaning. Retaining the richness of Houdini's ambivalent dialecticism, Doctorow, Chabon and Egan uncannily, proleptically silhouette neoliberal culture in a neo-historical recovery of not only the increasingly inscrutable present, but also the historicity of a U.S. culture which has long been preoccupied with national-cultural illusionism. *Ragtime*, for instance, represents the development of film in the 1920s and the subordination of material politics to its spectacular image; *Kavalier & Clay*, set in the 1940s, explores the corporate exploitation of creative labour in the production of superhero comics; and *Manhattan Beach* depicts the machinations of bankers during World War II as creating a world akin to a mystery novel, full of secrets and hidden power. In this, these three texts also offer a productive tracing – however partial – of the roots of an illusionistic present in early-twentieth-century economized popular and national culture.

The chapters of this thesis are discursive – I hope to their benefit – as I attempt to use the escapologist / magician's over-abundant, reflexive signification to explore the 'dual-facing' tendencies of these neo-historical representations. I also attempt throughout to dis-embed useful contemporary literary-critical concepts, such as Surface Reading and the New Sincerity, from a worrisome critical tendency to presuppose the textual form as hopelessly stuck in the logic of total closure.

This thesis orders its novels chronologically in part to reflect the historical narrative of economic changes from the 1970s through to the present. Through the following chapter summaries – and in the spirit of these texts' neo-historical silhouetting of capitalist culture – I will use Huehls and Greenwald Smith's model of 'four phases' of historical neoliberalism to set the context for my discussions.

My first chapter questions Jameson's reading of Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) as the exemplary postmodern text of historical disappearance. Through my reading of Houdini as performing 'Pantomimed Sermons', I argue that the text conducts a highly self-reflexive, appropriately contradictory, interrogation of the historical roots of U.S. cultural-economic illusionism. By Huehls and Greenwald Smith's chronology, the historical moment from which Doctorow is writing lies somewhere between the 'first' and 'second' phases of

neoliberalism, described as, respectively, the 'economic' and the 'political-ideological' phases.[69] The instantiating moment of this first phase, they argue, was in 1971, when Richard Nixon 'unpegged the dollar from its regulated gold equivalent, effectively undoing the Bretton Woods monetary agreement.'[70] Accordingly, in light of neo-historicism's 'dual facing' aesthetic, Doctorow (re-)represents modern America as on the cusp of unsettling change. I assess Houdini's centrality to this representation, connecting the escapologist / magician to Doctorow's broader, powerful ideas regarding fiction's ability to give counsel by unsettling dominant illusions.

My second chapter, on Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* (2000), is in many ways the heart of this thesis.[71] It traces the novel's expansive, self-reflexive interrogation of the value of illusionism. I follow Chabon's nuanced and dialectical representation of differing kinds of escape through to his endorsement of an alternative 'gift economy', which seeks to evade, in its reclaiming of the concept of value, the restrictive and rigidly binary conditions of the literary marketplace. Wrapped-up in this argument is an engagement with New Sincerity debates regarding the relative merits of irony, credulity, and sincere affect in contemporary fiction. These debates are themselves riven by the impasses associated with capitalist realism. Huehls and Greenwald Smith, describing the third phase of neoliberalism as a 'sociocultural phase, subjecting literature and other forms of art… to a rigorous economic calculus', turn immediately to the kind of New Sincerity writing associated with Chabon, Dave Eggers, and David Foster Wallace, as examples of literary fiction which merely 'reiterate neoliberal capital's expanding investment in consumer affect and sentiment.'[72] Chabon's neo-historical novel stages these debates within a self-reflexive story of the creation of a 1940s comic-book hero: The Escapist. I analyse this Houdini-esque re-representation of supposedly 'dead' cultural forms (by which I mean the realist historical novel, as well as the 40s superhero comic) as in fact demonstrating an essential post-postmodern revision of the concept of nostalgia into a reflexively productive, Houdini-esque, mode of 'Trickster' literature.

Following the neo-historical cue of Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017), I start my third chapter with a reconstruction of the historical narrative it indicates: the post-war

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[69] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Huehls and Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp.1-18 (pp.5-6).
[70] Ibid.
[71] It was also the chapter that nearly led to my own 'escape' from academia. Many thanks to Hamilton and Andrew for helping guide me back in.
[72] 'Four Phases', p.8.

economic changes which, as alluded to above, following Nixon's 1971 'unpegging' of the dollar, then morphed into the kind of neoliberalism which now appears as capitalist realism.[73] *Manhattan Beach* was published eight years after Fisher's diagnosis of capitalist realism. Its contemporary moment is, then, well into what Huehls and Greenwald Smith describe as a 'fourth, ontological phase' of neoliberalism, which established itself through the 2000s with an 'extension of market rationality… from a way of thinking… to a way of being.'[74] Appropriately enough, in this context of capitalistic disappearance, Houdini is all but concealed in the novel. I nevertheless argue that his textual presence is essential to Egan's neo-historical text, picking up on her repeated use of the term 'allegory' to suggest the text's self-conscious deployment of a kind of magically affective, sensuous lure, an illusionistic clue that something is there to interpret. In this, I argue, Egan's neo-historical novel attests to the lived experience of capitalist realism, where abstracted power cannot necessarily be seen, but can be intuited. Huehls and Greenwald Smith helpfully identify fiction of this fourth 'ontological' phase of capitalism as correspondingly engaged in an attempt to imagine an immanent, sensuous politics (even if it appears they believe this is impossible). I adjust this slightly in my reading of Egan's novel as presenting a dialectical immanence of surface-in-depth (the dialectical aspect of which is mobilised via the affective 'lure' embedded in the surface). In making this claim, I expand on the connections between magic and phenomenology, ultimately arguing that Egan's novel presents the experience of struggle and risk as producing a sensuous knowledge that enables a grasping of the framework of illusionism. While the novel remains highly ambivalent about the political implications of individuals manipulating this framework, it nevertheless argues for a liberatory magic of sensuous experience that entails an incisive critique of masculinity and its relation to financialized power.

I wish now to introduce this thesis' primary historical subject, and the central figure in informing these novels' reflexive attempts to grasp illusionism: Harry Houdini. In the following account of his art and act, I want to emphasise magic as an art form founded on a transcendent perspective on everyday reality. I want to suggest how magic both resonates with contemporary accounts of 'affective management', and how it offers useful lessons in how to frame accounts of its power with an awareness of its essential falsity. I read the first

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[73] As Mark Fisher clarifies – again indicating the centrality of the logic of disavowal to the appearance of neutrality – 'while neoliberalism was necessarily capitalist realist, capitalist realism need not be neoliberal' (p.78).
[74] Ibid., p.9

two Acts of Houdini's final stage show – Act I: 'Magic', and Act II: 'Houdini Himself, In Person' – in order to draw out relevant themes, and to emphasise that the broad affective power of Houdini's escapology co-existed with the audience's awareness of his status as an illusionist. I also simply want to give a fuller sense of Houdini's contradictory, illusive character and the ludic vibrancy of his world – both of which inform contemporary representations of the performer. Following these two sections, I will then discuss how Houdini-esque themes of illusion and illusionism manifested at the 1893 World's Fair – an event at which Houdini performed one of his first shows, and which the historian Alan Trachtenberg views as marking a deep division in the nature of the 'real' in the United States.[75] In this discussion, and as a means of setting the stage for Doctorow's representation of deceptive historicity, I hope to indicate the deep involvement in U.S. culture between illusionism and the logic of economised culture.

Act 1. Magic

Following the dimming of the auditorium lights, attendees of Harry Houdini's 1925-1926 tour would hear a strange collocation of sounds. The orchestra struck up Sir Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance", but through this stately, swooning tune would also come – from somewhere offstage – the twelve ominous gongs of a clock striking midnight.

The two sounds together suggested the peculiar contrasts of the figure about to walk on stage. By 1925, Elgar's piece was already associated with the formal ceremonies of U.S. graduations.[76] Houdini's use of it to introduce his new show was pointed. The two-and-a-

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[75] He writes that the event disclosed a divide in the 'true and real meaning of America.' Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), p.234.
[76] Kat Eschner, 'Why Does Every American Graduation Play "Pomp and Circumstance"?', in *Smithsonian Magazine* (June 2nd, 2017) https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/why-does-every-american-graduation-play-pomp-and-circumstance-180963504/ [accessed 12/11/21].

half-hour-long show, simply titled *HOUDINI* (although frequently lumbered with a strapline promising '3 Shows in 1'),[77] promised a new era for the performer as much as it served as a triumphant overview of his career. Through his efforts to debunk fraudulent spiritualist mediums, Houdini had recently achieved a much-longed-for level of professional respect amongst the scientific and intellectual community. This was remarked upon by Edmund Wilson just a few months before *HOUDINI* went on the road: 'Houdini', Wilson wrote, 'has achieved a new kind of celebrity in connection with the investigation of spiritualism.'[78] Wilson, who himself belonged to the intellectual community in which Houdini had long hoped to circulate, was somewhat dismissive of Houdini's escapology, describing it as 'less artistically interesting' than his demonstration of spiritualist effects; he was however, full of praise for the scholasticism of this latter activity:

> The truth is, of course, that in a committee of scientists of which Houdini is a member it is Houdini who is the scientist… Houdini is thus perhaps the first important investigator of spiritualism who is really competent for the task. He is one of the most accomplished magicians in the world and—what is rare—he has brought to the study of trickery a genuine scientific curiosity: he seems actually now to have become more interested in understanding how effects are produced than in astonishing people with them, and to derive more satisfaction from merely lecturing on the methods of the mediums than in contriving illusions of his own.[79]

Houdini, in Wilson's eyes, had graduated from performer and practitioner to researcher and educator. The selection of Elgar's piece for Houdini's new show reflected this shift.

HOUDINI was the first and only full-evening show Houdini ever toured in the manner of other famous magicians of the time, in which he was the sole attraction on the bill rather than the headline act of a vaudeville roster. Because of this, and because *HOUDINI* showcased far more magic tricks and illusions (as opposed to escapology) than Houdini usually performed, biographer Kenneth Silverman has suggested that 'after a lifetime in magic', Houdini's eponymous show can be seen as marking 'his professional debut as a magician.'[80] The strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" – triumphant, respectable, associated with the crowning events of coronations and graduations – were a perfect fit for this 'debut.'

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[77] See poster reproduced in Milbourne Christopher, *Houdini: A Pictorial Life* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), p.170.

[78] Edmund Wilson, 'Harry Houdini Investigates the Spirit World', in *The New Republic* (June 24th 1925) https://newrepublic.com/article/119015/edmund-wilson-houdini [accessed 12/11/21].

[79] Ibid.

[80] Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss: American Self-Liberator, Europe's Eclipsing Sensation, World's Handcuff King & Prison Breaker – Nothing on Earth Can Hold Houdini a Prisoner!!!* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p.388.

They suggested Houdini as having achieved, after all his trials and escapades, the sum of his ambitions and aspirations. He was *HOUDINI*, an iconic magician, and one so steeped in the history of his art, so committed to exploring its many varieties, that he appeared, as Wilson remarked, a 'scientist' at the vanguard of a culturally valuable project of studying trickery.[81]

But behind this was the tolling bell, falsely declaring midnight. The sound seems tonally and thematically at odds with Elgar's piece. In literature and folklore, the chimes of midnight have long been associated with magic and transformation. In Perrault's version of "Cinderella", it is at midnight that the spell wears off and Cinderella, her coach, and footmen are all transformed back into their original forms.[82] Elsewhere, in many of the Grimm Brothers' tales, midnight is the hour when magic begins, fantastic creatures emerge, and secret work is done.[83] In the 20th and 21st centuries, midnight retains its association with wondrous, sometimes threatening, magical transformation. It is the hour that ushers in the 'magical' aspects of magical realist novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). The latter opens with a lengthy episode in which Big Ben repeatedly chimes midnight. Carter describes the time's significance as 'the dead centre of the day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time.'[84] For Carter, midnight is strangely outside of time – it is 'dead' and 'still' – as much as it appears to be its epicentre. It promises 'vision and revelation': a transcendent understanding of the state of things. In this, Carter imbues the magic of midnight with eschatological significance, joining a long cultural

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[81] It is worth mentioning here that Houdini was by no means the only turn-of-the-century American concerned with the overlapping of science and the supernatural. Scientists such as Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla frequently staged their inventions as magical performances, while others, such as the psychologist William James, undertook psychical research into spiritualist phenomena and telepathy. See Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp.48-64 and pp.155-8. Jason Josephson Storm takes examples like this as evidence that the narrative of Weberian disenchantment in modern Western societies is a 'myth.' Storm surveys a wide range of supposedly 'rational', empirical thinkers – like Newton, Kant, Schiller, and even Marie Curie – and finds that: 'Thinkers usually associated with "the Enlightenment" and the "scientific revolution" were far from disenchanting materialists.' Jason Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.66.

[82] See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp.250-65.

[83] "The Elves and the Cobbler", for example, hinges on the sudden midnight appearance of 'two little naked dwarfs.' Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1917), p.341.

[84] Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006), p.30.

tradition – from Hamlet to the Doomsday Clock – of associating the hour with incipient crisis; impending revelation, or impending doom.[85]

In contrast, then, to the 'graduation' into intellectual respectability and rationalism that "Pomp and Circumstance" suggested, the melodramatic midnight chimes recalled the irrational, the mysterious, and the threatening. They represented the side of Houdini that Wilson preferred to ignore: the side still wholly committed to mystifying and astonishing audiences through illusions and the performance of supposedly impossible feats – many of which gave the impression that Houdini was risking death, and which were sometimes advertised in ways that emphasised this risk as a brush with the supernatural.[86] For all the respectability he had found in demystifying the apparently paranormal, Houdini was himself still frequently associated with the inexplicable and the supernatural. Later versions of street advertisements for *HOUDINI* provided one of the performer's common epithets – 'master mystifier' – with Houdini's smiling face appearing beside Halloween imagery of bats, owls, and witches on broomsticks.[87]

For more 'highbrow' commentators such as Wilson, there was an irreconcilable contrast in the apposition of Houdini as man of science and Houdini as occult mystifier and entertainer. Arthur Conan Doyle, a friend and correspondent of Houdini, wrote that 'Houdini is far and away the most curious and intriguing character whom I have ever encountered… I

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[85] The *OED* cites Hamlet's line – 'Tis now the very witching time of night, When Churchyards yawne, and hell it selfe breakes out Contagion to this world' – under its definition of 'Witching Hour', which it defines as 'Midnight, with reference to the belief that witches are active and supernatural occurrences take place at that time. More generally: the time, esp. the dead of night, when bad or sinister things are believed to be most likely to happen'. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, ii., quoted in 'Witching Hour', *OED*, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47156841 [accessed 20/11/21].

[86] Houdini's milk-can escape, for example, was advertised with the tagline 'Failure Means a Drowning Death', while his Water Torture Cell escape – which again presented the risk of drowning – was frequently advertised with an orc-like creature holding Houdini down in the cell. See posters reproduced in Silverman, pp.116-7, Walter B. Gibson, *The Original Houdini Scrapbook* (New York: Sterling, 1977), p.154, and Christopher, *A Pictorial Life*, p.34.

[87] John Cox – a screenwriter, lecturer, and Houdini superfan – reproduces this image on his website: https://www.wildabouthoudini.com/2019/08/houdini-halloween-window-card-and.html [accessed 20/11/21]. This advertisement is for one of the last shows Houdini would ever perform. *HOUDINI* began touring again in September 1926. About a month later, while backstage in his dressing room at the Princess Theatre, Montreal, Houdini would encounter the McGill student called Whitehead who would, in an apparent challenge to the performer's famous strength, deliver the stomach punches which killed him. The day after the attack, doctors at Grace Hospital, Detroit, found that Houdini had a ruptured appendix and peritonitis. Houdini died a week later, on Halloween, 1926. See Silverman pp.406-412. Although this advertisement is for the last show Houdini would ever perform, the epithet 'mystifier' was applied to Houdini throughout his career. It marked his very first show in London, at the Alhambra Theatre in 1900, where he was billed as 'The World's Greatest Mystifier'. See Christopher, *A Pictorial Life*, p.13.

have never met a man who had such strange contrasts in his nature, and whose actions and motives it was more difficult to foresee or to reconcile.'[88] For Doyle – although matters were complicated by his own personal belief in spiritualism – the contrasts he notes in Houdini's character rested on the same apparent divide between respectable scientific endeavour and the morally dubious world of trickery and hokum. After Houdini claimed that the famous spiritualist, Ira Davenport, had accomplished his feats by natural trickery, Doyle homed in on the apparently irreconcilable moral contradiction this brought forth. If what Houdini said was true, Doyle wrote, then Davenport was 'not only a liar but a blasphemer', because he 'went around with Mr Ferguson, a clergyman, and mixed it all up with religion. And yet you [Houdini] are photographed as a friend with one whom, under those circumstances, one would not touch with a muck-rake. Now how can one reconcile that?'[89]

For Houdini, who had a detailed knowledge of Davenport's tricks and an awareness of their position in magic history, there was no dilemma to reconcile.[90] Performers of magic have always relied on the gleeful mixing-up of the grand and the meretricious, the authentic and the ersatz. Davenport going around with a clergyman was par for the course – it would generate publicity for the act, and give a (false) stamp of authenticity to his spiritualist shows. The problem Houdini faced in the musings of people like Doyle and Wilson, who could endorse part of him and his world, but denied or dismissed other parts, was more than simply the ignorance or disapproval of the highbrow to the apparently lowbrow. It stemmed from a general lack of public insight into the long history of magic, the traditions and refinements of methods of deception and trickery which had developed over centuries.

It is a fundamental paradox of magic that in order for an illusion to be effective, the public must have little or no clue what has actually taken place on stage. Accordingly, they must have as little knowledge as possible regarding the techniques employed in producing the effect. Because of this, magic as an art form has an element of self-obfuscation built into its performance. It must keep its methods secret whilst also, by necessity, publicly and

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[88] Arthur Conan Doyle, *On the Edge of the Unknown* (1930), quoted in Ruth Brandon, *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini* (New York: Random House, 2003), p.239.

[89] Arthur Conan Doyle, letter to Houdini 26th January 1922, Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, McManus-Young Collection (MYC), Houdini Correspondence, Magic Files Part 1, box-folder 21/5.

[90] Ira and his brother, William Henry, performed together as 'The Davenport Brothers', first coming to prominence in the mid-1800's – just a few years after the Fox sisters sparked the Spiritualist movement in New York. In the Davenport's particular case, Houdini would also have looked kindly on the fact that neither brother themselves claimed to have supernatural powers (it was their manager who stated so on their behalf). See Brandon, p.235.

theatrically displaying those methods. In many cases, the display *is* the self-obscuring element; the theatrical presentation of the method obscures and distorts that method's most significant parts.

These paradoxes of magic performance mean that the magician, when before the public, must negotiate, and must build their act out of, a liminal space between 'insider' and 'outsider' systems of knowledge and behaviour. As the anthropologist Graham M. Jones writes:

> Performing magic entails both crafting deception and presenting oneself as a craftsperson of deception before a public. The magician's identity as a competent deceiver hinges on the ability to display secrets effectively, to manifest the efficacy of those secrets in mystifying illusions without revealing them to outsiders.[91]

The magician, then, must successfully deceive and mystify (and, of course, entertain) despite acknowledging themselves as 'a craftsperson of deception.' They must do so through a public display of secrets which must, at the same time, remain unrevealed. If this constant navigation of disclosure and obfuscation defines the magician's art, it is easy to see why Doyle might identify 'strange contrasts' and obscure motives as Houdini's defining features. Jones states this problem of uncertainty in its simplest form when he writes: 'the magician has to be able to tell spectators one thing while thinking – and doing – something entirely different.'[92]

Jones notes the potential for resentment and dissatisfaction in this self-obscuring display. While spectators may 'react with hostility to a magician who seems to be asserting power or status through the exhibition of secret skill', magicians themselves face 'a potentially frustrating situation' in which their 'principal clientele is often unable to accurately assess a performer's skill.'[93] Frustrating as it may be, preserving and cultivating the mystery of magic is an essential part of the magician's work. Without the mystery, without the lingering question – *How did they do that?* – there would be little affective power in a magic act. Houdini acknowledged this in a response he once gave to that same question: 'If you knew [how I accomplish my feats], you would not consider the feat marvelous or even interesting.'[94] Jim Steinmeyer, a magic historian and inventor of illusions, captures both

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[91] Graham M. Jones, *Trade of the Tricks: Inside the Magician's Craft* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p.8.
[92] Ibid., p.6.
[93] Ibid., p.9 and p.18.
[94] Quoted in Adam Begley, *Houdini: The Elusive American* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), p.3.

the quixotic nobility and absurdity of this position in his description of the conjurer's dilemma: 'magicians', he writes, 'guard an empty safe.'[95] Modern stage magic, by these descriptions, presents a spectacle of enchantment out of a hollow, disenchanted core. Mechanisms, gimmicked props, bribery, and co-conspirators are among the thoroughly de-sacralised methods of trickery – the 'secret skills' – used by magicians to create their illusions of enchantment. Jones's description of the potential for reciprocal resentment in the obfuscation of 'secret skill', then, entails more than unequal power relations or unappreciated ability. It also indexes the resentments which may emerge from the audience and performer's shared knowledge of magic's disguised disenchantment – its hollow, unsatisfying centre.

The necessity of mystification and deception in magic performance – its disguising of the disenchanted techniques by which it represents or conjures enchantment – underpins the confusion of people like Conan Doyle. Doyle could not square the apparent sincerity and good character of Houdini with the associations of fraud, trickery and humbug attendant to the world of magic. How could Houdini respond to Doyle's question regarding Davenport, short of informing him of the context of a tradition of deceptive entertainment stretching back to antiquity?[96] This would disclose a disorienting moral and cultural relativism. It is not hard to imagine Houdini wanting to conceal this from his esteemed friend on the grounds of propriety, let alone the fact that knowledge and exploitation of such relativism was something of a master trope for magic performance. As Graham Jones writes:

> Magicians have known for generations what social scientific research has only recently demonstrated: that the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life is produced and maintained through sedimentary habits of thought and highly conventionalized patterns of interaction. In order to create illusion, they engineer situations in which reliance on these habits and conventions leads spectators to experience things that they know to be impossible.[97]

To apply this to Conan Doyle's outrage: because the 'habits of thought' and 'conventionalized patterns of interaction' which constitute daily life entail ideas of moral propriety and views on how people should or do act, it is unthinkable – 'impossible' – to

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[95] Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible* (London: Arrow Books, 2005), p.16.

[96] Jones notes that written accounts of the 'cup and balls' trick – magic's oldest illusion – date back to the second century AD. Simon During, in his excellent *Modern Enchantments*, goes back further, acknowledging stage magic's roots in the 'special effects' of Egyptian temples. During also notes that escape acts were commonly performed at Egyptian fairs. Jones, *Trade of the Tricks*, p.2. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.5 and p.8.

[97] Ibid., p.4.

Doyle that Houdini should look kindly on somebody who knowingly deceived the public, and who did so by making religion part of the persuasive force of their deception. What Doyle did not know – and he did not know this in part because of magic's esoteric, deliberately obscured history – is that the willingness and ability to stand outside of everyday reality, conventional morality, and typical patterns of behaviour in order to exploit their blind spots is absolutely fundamental to the magician's craft.

Houdini – who, in Edmund Wilson's terms, was committed to 'the study of trickery' – would have known this better than most.[98] Not only did he himself adhere to magic's tradition of deception (as Adam Begley writes: 'Honesty was not usually his [Houdini's] policy. Any untruth in the service of publicity was perfectly acceptable to him, as was any deception in the service of illusions performed onstage'),[99] but he also seemed aware of the peculiar liminality that accompanied knowledge of these traditions. The more Houdini learned about magical traditions and methods, the more secrets he had to keep, but, also, the more he must have seen that beyond the methods of specific tricks, the over-arching secret of the magician's art was their understanding of everyday life as constituted by exploitable, contingent, even arbitrary, patterns of behaviour and perception. Certainly, Houdini's approach to everyday life seems to have expressed an awareness of selfhood and character as constructed performances. He collected and made scrapbooks of cultural ephemera – brochures, pamphlets, clippings, postcards etc. – on a variety of subjects that interested him, including mail-order comportment guides with titles like 'The Culture Book' and 'The Key to Culture.' These guides stressed that 'you need not commit blunders. You can KNOW what is correct in every circumstance' and that readers could 'develop a magnetic personality', and become 'a model for any social occasion.'[100] Ruth Brandon highlights Houdini's performative approach to everyday life in her argument that Houdini's charisma stemmed from a lack of firm boundaries between his public and private life – 'For Houdini', she writes, 'the world was the stage, the stage was the world. He did not differentiate. As he himself once said, "All the world is a theater to me."'[101]

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[98] Silverman argues that the extent of Houdini's knowledge of magic was unique even amongst magicians: 'Probably no other magician has worked with such a broad, felt awareness of the history of magic.' Silverman, p.388.
[99] Begley, p.31.
[100] Harry Ransom Center (HRC), The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Houdini Papers (Performing Arts Collection PA-05215), Series VIII, Subseries B, box 51, fol.7.
[101] See Brandon, p.47 and p.55.

Houdini's view of the world as a performative space indexes his reflexive knowledge, gained through the study of magic history, that everyday codes of behaviour were not sacrosanct, but contingent, performative, and full of perceptual and cognitive blind spots. I would suggest that this knowledge also informed Houdini's famously scrappy attitude, which flattened the theologically-informed morality of people like Doyle into a do-or-die mentality. Edmund Wilson observed that Houdini's 'study of trickery' put the performer in an anxious position, whereby 'he has never yet been duped…he has been able to guess all the tricks that he has ever seen, but…he lives in constant terror of being outwitted.'[102] For Houdini, concepts of morality, sin, and 'proper' behaviour continually threatened to collapse into a simplistic model (but one validated by magic history) of the world as divided into tricksters and the tricked. This is suggested by what Houdini once gave as one of his favourite maxims – 'Do others or they will do you' – the language of which, as Adam Phillips has noted, conveys performative imitation as much as cold-bloodedness: 'Doing others is also what actors, and other performers do… Doing others implies both exploiting them, and being like them, with the covert implication that to imitate is to exploit.'[103] Houdini's knowledge of magical tradition would have taught him that for centuries magicians had exploited the credulous and taken advantage of habitual processes of human perception and thought, and that they would have done so, at best, with a sense of moral relativism – a temporary suspension of usual moral codes; deception in the name of entertainment – or, at worst, a malicious desire to extort and commit fraud.[104] Houdini could not reveal this to his friend Doyle, much less to the general public, both because of the necessity of secrecy in his profession, but also to avoid moral outrage. In the end, the extensive research that taught Houdini the traditions of magic performance would become its own cache of evidence for the moral flexibility of magicians, and, as such, would begin to answer that question – *How did they do it?* – both with specific details regarding certain tricks, but also with the disclosure of the magician's liminal, alternative mode of being.[105]

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[102] Ibid., pp.241-2.

[103] Adam Phillips, *Houdini's Box: On the Arts of Escape* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.10.

[104] Teller of Penn and Teller writes that this difference was 'a moral point for Houdini', and argues that – in contrast to those who attended séances – audiences of a typical modern magic performance were 'mystified, not suckered.' Teller, 'Introduction', in Harry Houdini, *The Right Way to Do Wrong: A Unique Selection of Writings by History's Greatest Escape Artist* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2012), n.p.

[105] Simon During suggests something similar to this in his rebuttal of Ruth Brandon's claim that Houdini assembled his immense magic archive primarily to invent himself as 'Merlin in his lair.' 'On the contrary', During writes, 'Houdini's collection… becomes not so much a monument to himself as an archive of texts and debris left behind by one of the greatest of all the West's failed projects, namely the solicitation and application of forces "beyond" nature… it makes at least as much sense to regard his [Houdini's] various

One of Houdini's achievements was the publication of several books on the history of magic and the methods of conjurors. This is somewhat understated in biographies and cultural histories of Houdini – probably because an unknown, but likely substantial, amount of the material was ghost-written, and, as Silverman notes, subject to Houdini's unfortunate 'indifference to dates and facts.'[106] Although Houdini's lack of attention to detail is frustrating for researchers, his published works – and, eventually, his enormous library of magic literature, most of which was donated to the Library of Congress after his death – nevertheless granted the public an astonishingly informative and revealing look inside the world of magic. Houdini's publications were not the first texts to discuss magic history or reveal the methods of conjurers – that honour goes to a book Houdini himself owned, Reginald D. Scott's *A Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), which revealed the secrets behind common illusions partly in order to protect conjurers from being burned as witches.[107] However, no other author of magic history or 'how-to' manuals had Houdini's level of fame and influence, let alone the financial means to acquire the amount of primary material Houdini eventually gathered together.

Houdini seemed to have had a genuine desire to disseminate knowledge of his world to the public and boost the profile of magic as an art form, despite the paradoxical bind of magic's secrecy. In 1916, he began correspondence with Robert Gould Shaw – whose private library would become the foundation of Harvard's theatre collection – and urged the wealthy Bostonian to publish a book about his collection, so that he could 'spread history in an accessible manner.'[108] Houdini also had high hopes for his own publications. During his initial research, he announced his intention to publish the 'biography, incidents, etc. of every magician, from the time of Moses to the present year.'[109] He began sharing research with fellow magic historian Henry R. Evans, and heralded their unpublished work with a heartfelt apostrophe: '*Let OUR TIME start the accurate magic age*.'[110] Towards the end of his life,

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obsessive efforts to preserve, respect, and own the past as equivalent to those Méliès films which embalmed the popular arts and magics of previous centuries… Memorabilia and archives, in all their inexpressivity, in their mute witness to the transitoriness of the live act and to our absolute distance from the "other side," had to suffice.' During, p.177.

[106] Silverman, p.132.

[107] See During, pp.75-6. In Houdini's own time, 'how-to' manuals explaining the secrets behind magic tricks were readily available from mail-order services and magic dealers – Silverman describes the trials Houdini had in combating those who claimed to be selling the secrets of his act: one English dealer offered 'THE GREAT HANDCUFF RELEASE As performed by Houdini' for a guinea. Silverman, pp.65-8.

[108] Houdini to Robert Gould Shaw, cited in Silverman, p.208.

[109] Silverman, p.76.

[110] Ibid., p.210.

while *HOUDINI* was on the road, Houdini also planned to found a college where members of the public could study and gain degrees in magic. Kenneth Silverman details the curriculum Houdini drew up: 'It included surveys such as '"History of Magic," theoretical courses on "Philosophy of Magic" and "Psychology of Magic," practical courses on advertising, showmanship, and presentation.'[111] The college never appeared, but Houdini clearly considered it important to make magic more prominent in the public consciousness and to ensure that it was better understood. In a drafted obituary for himself that he sent to his secretary, Oscar Teale, Houdini's plaintive frustration at the paradoxical secrecy of the magic world, the necessary ignorance of the general public regarding its history and methods, is clear:

> His [Houdini's] research into the files of Magical History is entirely a labor of love, and though he may not be renumerated for his labor, perhaps when the years have passed, and when he has long received his Mandate for the other world, perhaps the first authentic history of magic…will actually be his monument.
> Like Sir Wren, to whom no monument has been erected, and who is resting in St. Pauls London, when any one asks where is his monument, they say "Look around and see them."
> So Houdini may have erected his own monument for at no other period of printery has any one ever delved into the real magical history, and have same published.[112]

In mentioning his published 'real magical history', Houdini is referring to his *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (1908), which started life as an encyclopaedic history of magic before turning into a patricidal attack on Houdini's namesake – the French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871). In comparing himself to Christopher Wren, however, Houdini puts forward the hope that his works, collectively, may achieve a tangible transformation of public life and the landscape of the everyday.

The extent to which this hope emerged out of a sincere desire to raise the profile of magic as an art form, or whether it was simply a product of Houdini's legendary ego, is difficult to judge. It was likely a combination of the two. To take Houdini's ambition seriously, though, the question of how modern U.S. culture might have been affected by widespread public awareness and understanding of magic and its methods is a significant one. Beyond leading to a more accurate appreciation of the skill of magical performers, Houdini's ambitions for his college and his published works suggest an extension, to the public, of the

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[111] Ibid., p.405.
[112] Cited in Brandon, p.225.

magician's reflexive understanding of the relativity, contingency, performativity, and manipulability of human habits, behaviours, and perceptions.

What it seems Houdini hoped for in his time was a more historically informed and technically curious audience – one which would have held a more broad-minded approach to the morality of deceptive entertainment, but also a greater ability to discern 'actual' frauds, cheats, and swindlers. 'My brain is the key that sets me free', Houdini was fond of saying, and while the egotistical, ruthlessly competitive magician jealously guarded his own secrets, his efforts in the world of magic research and publishing suggest a contrary impulse to extend to others the freedom he found through study.[113] The historian James Cook, in his book on the 'artful deceptions' of P.T. Barnum and Barnum-esque entertainers (including Houdini), describes how deceptive entertainment may productively complicate binary thinking and reductive morality:

> …[The] striking ambiguities in the arts of deception cry out for historical verdicts. They encourage us to state our judgement in clear, unequivocal terms: either to view them as a gross imposition on the public (the trickster as show business manipulator), or as an egalitarian exercise in cultural sleuthing (the trickster as a maker of useful puzzles, cheerfully debated and solved by eager audiences). Yet this lingering impulse to take sides may in fact be Barnum's final ruse, for it encourages us to replicate much the same analytical mode as the nineteenth-century viewer: namely, debating the level of disingenuousness and moral propriety of the entire enterprise!
> Perhaps there is another way. Perhaps, that is to say, these artful deceptions need to be understood not so much in terms of zero sum choices (truth-making versus unmaking, fraud versus exposé), but as a more slippery mode of new middle-class play – a play whose moral ambiguity and epistemological flexibility were always built into the larger process.[114]

The acceptance of 'moral ambiguity and epistemological flexibility' was, as Cook suggests, typically absent from nineteenth-century audiences. However, Cook also acknowledges that the 'striking ambiguities' inherent in artful deceptions also work to move binary thinking towards something richer and more complex. These entertainments, Cook writes, 'helped socialize their audiences to a brave new world in which the very boundaries of truth were

[113] David Copperfield cites this maxim of Houdini's in *David Copperfield's History of Magic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), p.114

[114] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.28. Cook's connection of artful deception to 'new middle-class play' is historically situated and refers specifically to the typical audience for P.T. Barnum's humbugs and exhibitions. The broader point, however, regarding the ability of deceptive entertainment to encourage 'moral ambiguity and epistemological flexibility' is not reserved for the middle-classes alone.

becoming more and more puzzling… these exhibitory tricks alternatively defined, buttressed, skirted, and violated the values of their consumers, often in the very same show.'[115]

To illustrate the kind of 'striking ambiguities' that Cook notes, I want to draw attention to one of Houdini's tricks. An October 1925 notice for *HOUDINI* at the Shubert Murat Theatre highlights one particular effect from the show's first act. Titled 'Paligenesia', a subheading explains that the trick involves 'Taking a Living Man to Pieces and Restoring Him by Installment.'[116] As the notice discloses, this was an old trick developed by the English magician Dr. Lynn, and Houdini had managed to get hold of the 'IDENTICAL ORIGINAL' apparatus used in the old effect.[117] The trick begins with an assistant tied to a wooden door set against a black backdrop. With a large butcher's knife, Houdini would sever the man's arms and legs. He would toss the limbs onto a nearby chair, cut off the assistant's head, and then proceed to magically restore the missing body parts.[118]

As grisly as it sounds, the trick would not have been particularly shocking to a modern magic audience. It was outdated by the time Houdini presented it, and was advertised as an effect 'That Startled and Pleased your Grand and Great-Grandparents.'[119] Houdini's presenting the trick as vintage would have bolstered his reputation as a connoisseur of magic history, but it was also a reference to his own, mythologized history.

Although there is speculation as to its accuracy, a common origin story for Houdini's interest in magic is that, as a child, he saw Dr. Lynn performing 'Paligenesia.'[120] According to John F. Kasson, the young Houdini – then called Ehrich Weiss – was taken by his father, Mayer Samuel Weiss, to see Dr. Lynn in Milwaukee. Lynn's advertisements promised

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[115] Ibid., pp.28-9.

[116] Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, McManus-Young Collection (MYC), Magic Clippings Part 1, fol.22/15/a.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Silverman, pp.388-9.

[119] MYC, Magic Clippings Part 1, fol.22/15/a. Silverman likewise describes the effect as 'an amusing antique', and states that it 'would not chill or mystify an audience today.' Silverman, p.389.

[120] This account is notably excluded from Silverman's biography. Ruth Brandon, however, presents the story as a transformative moment in Houdini's life, writing that 'there is little doubt as to the actual performance that awoke his obsessional interest in magic.' Brandon, p.24. While providing the story as part of his biography of Houdini, John F. Kasson acknowledges in a footnote that the story 'cannot be regarded uncritically.' According to Kasson, Houdini may in fact have seen one of Dr. Lynn's many imitators – although he goes on to argue that, because Houdini was certainly fascinated by Lynn's trick, Houdini's account of this transformative childhood experience 'has a significance independent of scrupulous accuracy.' John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p.232, fn.13.

'another man cut up tonight', and his version of the trick included using a scimitar to sharpen the butcher's knife, while asking the audience for 'volunteers'. When nobody offered to go up on stage, he would then apparently use chloroform to knock out one of his assistants, before tying them to the door.[121] There are several, contradictory accounts of the impact this trick may have had on the young Ehrich. Ruth Brandon describes Dr. Lynn's performance as 'terrifying' and notes that, years later, Houdini wrote in his diary that he 'really believed that the man's arms, leg and head were cut off.'[122] Although Kasson is more sceptical, he joins Brandon in connecting 'Paligenesia' to Houdini's lifelong obsessions with 'the drama of bodily risk and recovery, mutilation and integration, death and rebirth.'[123] However, neither biographer takes into account the ways that the shocking elements of Lynn's act were mitigated and contained within the performance itself. Although 'Paligenesia' is a remarkably bodily magic trick, and would have been 'terrifying' to a child who believed what they were witnessing was real, the effect itself was crude, bloodless, and relatively easy to see through.[124] At the climax of the effect, the assistant's real head would be covered by a cloth, pushed back through a trap door in the backdrop, and replaced with a wire cage. It was this cloth-covered wire shape that would be passed around for inspection. This particular technique may have been familiar to some audience members from an old fairground trick called the 'Decapitated Head' (Lynn's illusion essentially added extra body parts and some surrounding drama to proceedings).[125] Dr. Lynn was himself aware of these limiting factors on the visceral affect of 'Paligenesia', and as such did not go out of his way to present the trick as something 'terrifying'; instead, as Geoffrey Lamb identifies, Lynn presented the trick as 'a humorous masterpiece.'[126] Lamb notes that 'amusing and lively patter' was Dr. Lynn's outstanding characteristic, and, as his request for 'volunteers' from the audience suggests, Lynn contained his spectacle of mutilation within layers of irony and humour.[127] This approach extended to his promotional material for the trick. In an appendix to one of his books, Dr. Lynn provided a spoof 'how-to' guide for anyone wishing to recreate 'Paligenesia'. It suggests that, after you remove your assistant's head, '(provided life is not

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[121] See Kasson, p.84, and Brandon, p.24.
[122] Brandon, p.25.
[123] Kasson, p.85. Brandon likewise argues that 'Houdini's over-riding preoccupation' was 'that point of elision between life and death.' Brandon, p.151.
[124] See Geoffrey Lamb, *Victorian Magic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp.92-95.
[125] Ibid., p.93.
[126] Ibid., p.94.
[127] Ibid., pp.92-3.

quite extinct) you take off the other leg and arm, throw the remains in a basket, and request the victim to put himself together again – and THAT IS HOW IT'S DONE.'[128]

I argue that Houdini's fascination with 'Paligenesia' – whether he did in fact see it as a child, or whether he discovered it later in life and worked it into a fictionalised biography – is as much to do with the complex affective dynamics of the trick as it is its staging of bodily dismemberment and renewal. The allure of the performance is in the way the magician both exaggerates and undercuts the 'terrifying' elements of the effect, turning what threatens to be either a cheap trick or a grotesque spectacle into something playfully retaining the affective qualities of both these things. As described in the notice for *HOUDINI*, the trick both startles and pleases. Such a self-containing aesthetic was, partly, to avoid public condemnation, but it also generated its own particular appeal, part of which stemmed from the complex power relations flowing between performer and audience, which were mediated and managed by the trick's vacillation between humour and shock. Despite his relative lack of skill as a conjurer, Dr. Lynn's combination of humour and simulated danger led him to become one of the most popular magicians of the Victorian age.[129] The performance of 'Paligenesia' that the young Ehrich Weiss saw may well have fuelled his obsession with bodily mutilation and death, but it also provided a lesson in the careful management of affective ambiguity in the service of retaining power.

The affective and aesthetic qualities of 'Paligenesia' rely on it hovering somewhere between appalling spectacle and practical joke. The degree to which it appears as one or the other is down to the showmanship of the performer: their management of the audience's perception of relative safety and risk, and their ability, in the moment of performance, to interweave these perceptions with the technical process of the trick. Indeed, Houdini does seem to have absorbed from his witnessing of 'Paligenesia' a lesson in showmanship and its relation to power. A souvenir program of Houdini's telling the story of his boyhood encounter with Dr. Lynn reveals that the jovial magician 'had the misfortune' to expose one of his own tricks, leading the young Ehrich to realise that 'there was no occult power vested in the performance.'[130] However much Ehrich may have 'really believed' the dismemberment presented in 'Paligenesia', then, it is clear this moment in Houdini's biography entails more than the awakening of his fascination with the macabre. As an often-cited origin point for

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[128] Cited in Lamb, p.93.
[129] Lamb, p.95.
[130] Brandon, p.24.

Houdini's interest in magic, it is significant that this interest seems to have emerged out of a moment of disenchantment and sudden scepticism, rather than credulous wonder. Houdini's souvenir program goes on to describe how the suddenly-disenchanted Ehrich scrutinised the rest of Lynn's performance, and 'gradually solved the problems that were presented.'[131] His fear, it seems, gave way to a technically-minded curiosity – one which rendered Lynn's illusions suddenly legible. With this transformation comes a dramatic shift in power relations – the child, no longer frightened, matches wits with the supposedly magical manipulator – as well as the recognition that apparently supernatural powers can be wielded through artifice. They can, therefore, be learned and reproduced.

The capacity to wield power – both the 'real' power of manipulating an audience, as well as the apparent power exhibited in an illusion – was an especially important part of Houdini's interest in magic. He was, apparently by nature, very competitive, and could often be controlling. In 1887, Mayer Samuel and Ehrich moved from the Midwest to New York to find work, and were joined by the rest of the Weiss family the following year. While in New York, Ehrich became a competitive boxer and swimmer, and began a habit of running ten miles a day. Silverman draws attention to a photograph of Ehrich aged seventeen – he is dressed in running shorts and vest, and his chest is covered in medals. However, Silverman points out that not all the medals are genuine. Some are 'self-glorifying fakes', and the picture, while partly representing Ehrich's actual athletic ability, is also 'the picture of a scrapper who feels he can never do enough, who wants all the medals there are and more – the picture of a title-taker.'[132] This drive to win by hook or by crook persisted throughout Houdini's life. In middle-age, when he was financially well off enough to purchase a New York brownstone and begin transforming it into what Ruth Brandon calls a 'Merlin's Cave' of magic ephemera, he would often receive visitors in his library and surprise them by bringing up a subject they had been discussing upon arrival. The baffled guests did not know that Houdini had wired his entire home, so he could listen in on conversations taking place downstairs from the sanctuary of his library.[133]

In a strangely gushing 1910 interview for Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph*, Houdini opened up about his drive for control and mastery:

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Silverman, pp.7-8.
[133] Brandon, p.230.

I want to be first. I vehemently want to be first. First in my profession, in my speciality in my profession. For that I give all the thought, all the power that is in me. To stand at the head of my rank: it is all I ask. When I can no longer, good-bye the joy of life for me! So I have struggled and fought. I have done and abstained; I have tortured my body and risked my life only for that – to have one plank on the stage where the imitators cannot come, and one spot where they all fall back and cry "Master!"[134]

The vehemence Houdini admits to here, the military language he uses to describe his desire to be at the head of his 'rank', and to fight to do so, suggest Houdini's fascination with magic as being deeply entwined with a desire for power. Indeed, this connection has been discussed by magic scholars as an essential feature of the art, with the will to power or urge towards technical mastery often being chief among the reasons why people become magicians in the first place.[135] For Houdini – who, later in his career, in his escape act, continually reasserted the physical power of his muscular body in spectacles of submission and triumph – magic was a means of exercising and achieving a power made subtle, even gregarious, through techniques of showmanship. 'Paligenesia' showed him, first, the illusion of power, and second, how to illusionistically produce and manage this power through technical skill and well-chosen patter. As will be discussed throughout this section of the introduction, Houdini became a master of generating this kind of ambiguity and uncertainty, fuelling an audience's identification and engagement with the spectacle on stage by manipulating perceptions of safety and risk, and, relatedly, blurring the boundaries between what was real and what was fake. And behind every moment of carefully planned joviality, every showman's quip, every gentlemanly appeal to his audience, and every fabricated anecdote, was his desire 'to be first', to have those around him call him Master, and to fulfil that striving for power which would become viscerally expressed in the spectacle of his struggling body.

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[134] William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero* (London: Pocket Books, 2007), p.255. Also see Brandon, p.27. Houdini may have been running on adrenaline in this interview – he had just become the first person to make a successful flight in Australia.

[135] Peter Nardi sees this as the reason why magic has historically been – and continues to be – a male-dominated practice. He writes: 'Magic is an aggressive, competitive form involving challenges and winning at the expense of others… It is creating an illusion that involves putting something over [on] someone, to establish who is in control, and to make the other (the audience) appear fooled.' Graham Jones cites Nardi's argument, but adds that magic is both 'ultraindividual' and 'quintessentially collective.' Jones emphasises that magicians are constantly engaged in 'managing the dimension of performance known as "co-construction"… This may seem obvious,' Jones writes, 'but magical illusions have no objective existence. Magicians provide only evidence of illusory realities; the actual illusions exist subjectively in spectators' minds. Magical illusions are therefore co-constructed accomplishments.' Peter M. Nardi, "The Social World of Magicians: Gender and Conjuring", *Sex Roles*, 19, 11-12 (1988), p.766. Jones, pp.24-25 and p.27.

Kenneth Silverman similarly highlights Houdini's drive, arguing that 'his every performance was a demonstration that he could and would not be hindered.'[136] Silverman writes that Houdini seemed driven by 'God-only-knows what kind of striving', but goes on to offer some suggestions as to what might be behind Houdini's force of will:

> Probably every kind [of striving] – immigrant grasping for material success, the spur of fame, a lifetime habit of hard work, celebrity status-seeking, animal fear of annihilation, romantic longing for transcendence, athletic record-keeping, American expansionism, overcompensation for a dismal past, a feeling that nothing he could do was good enough, counter-phobic risk taking, exhibitionism, narcissism.[137]

Of these suggestions, I would like to foreground two as especially important: Houdini's 'immigrant grasping for material success' and his 'romantic longing for transcendence.' The other factors Silverman lists, I would argue, can be seen as offshoots from these two desires. The former, in particular, is crucial to understanding the restraints which marked Houdini's own life, as well as the symbolic expression of this experience in the content of his act.

During the first act of *HOUDINI*, the effects came thick and fast. Houdini disappeared and reappeared several female assistants. He caught goldfish out of the air with a rod. In 'A Whirlwind of Colors' he pulled lengths of handkerchiefs and flags of different nations from a visibly empty bowl – some of these silks tied and untied themselves, others were burnt and restored. He presented mechanical illusions in which a series of alarm clocks expanded to the size of drums and a bare bush began to sprout roses. These owed a debt to Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, who was also a skilled clockmaker and crafter of automata. One of his most famous illusions was 'The Marvelous Orange Tree', in which blossom and fruit bloomed on request.[138] Robert-Houdin once wrote that he had 'always felt an irresistible inclination for mechanism', and Houdini, following in his footsteps, carried on the traditional partnering of magic with technological and mechanical marvels.[139]

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[136] Silverman, p.183.

[137] Ibid., pp.182-3.

[138] See James Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, p.183.

[139] Ibid., p.187. Houdini first encountered Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin's memoir as a teenager, and later recalled that he 're-read his works until I could recite passage after passage from memory' [see John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, pp.85-6, Cook, p.182, and Meyer, p.12]. Ironically, one of the main prongs of Houdini's later attack on his namesake, in *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, is to do with the genealogy of 'The Marvelous Orange Tree'. As evidence for his claims that Robert-Houdin was 'the prince of pilferers' and that none of his illusions were original, Houdini stated the mechanism for the trick had been invented by an English clockmaker named Christopher Pinchbeck around 1730. The irony, of course, is that most of Houdini's own illusions were not originals. Furthermore, as James Cook observes, Houdini's patricidal 'unmasking' of Robert-Houdin reflected a general tendency for each new generation of magicians to denounce

Amongst this roster of effects was an illusion called 'Money for Nothing'. It was Houdini's version of a trick called 'The Miser's Dream', pioneered by his friend, T. Nelson Downs, in which an abundance of coins were seemingly pulled from thin air.[140] Houdini had performed this effect many times before – according to Ruth Brandon, Houdini gave away over seven thousand dollars of his own money performing the trick for American soldiers during WWI.[141] As a counterpoint to the relative affective ambiguity of 'Paligenesia', 'Money for Nothing' was an illusion built on the powerfully simple appeal of endless, immediate wealth.

For Houdini, who had experienced harsh poverty for much of his life, this effect would have held deep personal significance. The 'immigrant grasping for material success' Silverman notes as, in part, driving Houdini, was a sharp need for the whole Weiss family during their early years in America. The family first settled in Appleton, Wisconsin in 1878. Although the town did not have a synagogue, Mayer Samuel found work as a rabbi, delivering services twice-weekly in a hall off College Avenue.[142] After four years, however, the congregation let Mayer Samuel go – most likely because the elderly Mr. Weiss felt too 'Old World' for the Appleton residents; they wanted someone who could, at least, speak English.[143] The family then moved to Milwaukee for a few, tough years. Mayer Samuel couldn't find steady work. One year, Ehrich's mother – Cecilia – appealed to the Hebrew Relief Society for coal and money to see the family through the winter. 'Such hardships became our lot', Harry once said, in reference to this period, 'that the less said on the matter the better.'[144] He retained a dislike of Milwaukee his entire life.

Conditions did not improve much after the next move, to New York. Mayer Samuel found himself working at the same necktie-cutting factory as the teenage Ehrich, who held a string of odd jobs during this period to help make ends meet.[145] When Mayer Samuel eventually died of cancer in 1892, he extracted a promise from Ehrich that Cecilia should 'suffer no want.'[146] Silverman describes Cecilia's words at the time of her husband's death,

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what had gone before, while, at the same time, participating in a 'business of artful deception' in which 'innovation almost always involves original productions of old ideas.' Cook, pp.183-6.

[140] See Silverman, p.187 and p.75, Brandon p.34, and Posnanski pp.115-7.

[141] Brandon, p.34.

[142] Silverman, p.4.

[143] Ibid., p.5.

[144] Ibid., and Brandon, p.20.

[145] Silverman, p.7.

[146] Ibid., p.8.

however, as being 'less full of grief than of accusation' – according to Harry's later recollection, Cecilia exclaimed 'Weiss, Weiss, you've left me with your children!!! What have you done?'[147] There were now six Weiss children: the eighteen-year-old Harry, his older brothers Nathan and William, and his younger siblings, Theodore, Leopold, and Carrie Gladys.

Harry was about to go on the road for the first time, performing with his friend Jacob Hyman as the 'Houdini Brothers.' This was highly unlikely to make enough money to fulfil Ehrich's father's request, but no doubt if it had, Ehrich would have made good on the promise. Ehrich loved Cecilia fiercely – biographers generally define the relationship as one of complete adoration, with Oedipal overtones – and Harry needed little encouragement in equating demonstrating that love with providing financial support. In later life, Houdini liked to tell the (probably invented) story of how, one Christmas, after hearing his father appealing to God for aid, he went out into the New York streets with a self-penned Christmas poem and a collection hat. By the time he returned, he'd almost enough to pay the overdue rent. According to the story, young Ehrich hid the quarters he'd collected in his hair, in his clothes, behind his ears. Walking up to his mother, he demanded: 'Shake me! I'm magic!' She did so. Coins fell from her son, appearing as if by magic.[148] The anecdote echoes another, more verifiable, moment from Houdini's career. While playing Hammerstein's Roof Garden in the summer of 1912, Houdini requested his first weekly salary to be paid in gold. He had just hit the coveted milestone of earning $1,000 a week. He carried the gold double-eagles home in a sack to his Harlem brownstone – no. 278 – where his mother had a room. He asked Cecilia if she remembered the promise he had made to Mayer Samuel. 'Look what I am able to bring you now!' he cried, 'Hold out your apron!', and proceeded to pour gold into his mother's lap. He later referred to this moment as the 'greatest thrill of his life.'[149]

Adam Begley, reflecting a tendency of Houdini biographers to be stunned by the performer's off-stage taste for melodrama, writes: 'Is this fantasy, or did a thirty-eight-year-old man, rich and world famous, act out this operatic scene? It has the elemental simplicity of a fairy tale and embarrassingly obvious sexual connotations.'[150] For Houdini, however, life was at its most satisfying when it approximated a fairy-tale simplicity – when desires and

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[147] Ibid.
[148] See Brandon, p.22.
[149] See Begley, p.92, Brandon, p.30, and Kalush and Sloman, p.278.
[150] Begley, pp.92-3.

fantasies appeared allegorically in real life – especially if he got to play the (Oedipal) hero. Bernard C. Meyer, in his psychoanalytic biography of Houdini, reads Houdini's manufacturing of moments like these as enactments of 'those fantasies known as Family Romances – imagined reshapings of one's past that serve to replace a humble and pedestrian origin with the glittering trappings of a rich and illustrious heritage.'[151] For Meyer, Ehrich and Cecilia Weiss 'together… enacted a Family Romance *à deux*', with Cecilia actively collaborating in 'the Houdini myth': 'she tinkered with truth and fiddled with facts in a manner that bespoke a rich and fertile imagination. Like her son, she was able to erase with ease the thin line separating daydreams from reality.'[152]

While Meyer's insights are illuminating, I want to foreground the social and material conditions underpinning his observations. Meyer points out that Cecilia Weiss muddled the details of Ehrich's birth, giving the date as April 6th, rather than March 24th 1874, and his place of birth as Appleton, Wisconsin, rather than Budapest, Hungary. Meyer describes this as 'fostering his [Ehrich's] illusions', and sees as secondary the fact that Cecilia, in this, is veiling Ehrich's Hungarian-Jewish identity with an American one.[153] Likewise, the 'Family Romance' which exchanges humble origins for the fantasy of wealth and 'illustrious heritage' is inextricable from the material context of the poverty the Weiss family endured as a direct result of their being first-generation Jewish immigrants. Additionally, the fantasy of an instantaneous transformation of material circumstances, or sudden restoration to a rightful state, would have held real force in the context of a country where speculative economic activity seemed to regularly facilitate such sudden, magical changes in circumstance. The historian Jackson Lears writes that as economic conditions in nineteenth-century America became more fluid, ideas of wealth became 'increasingly associated with "lucky hits" in real estate or on the stock market rather than with the gradual accumulation of land and livestock.'[154]

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[151] Bernard C. Meyer, *Houdini: A Mind in Chains. A Psychoanalytic Portrait* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1976), p.2. Meyer is specifically referring to an earlier occasion, in 1901, when Houdini bought his mother a dress which had been designed for Queen Victoria. He brought Cecilia over to Hamburg, where he was playing, and the pair travelled on to Budapest, where, in the Palm Gardens of the Royal Hotel, Cecilia donned the dress and – in Houdini's own words – played 'Fairy Queen' for the night. Meyer, pp.1-2.
[152] Ibid., p.2.
[153] Ibid., p.3. As an adult Harry sustained this myth himself, giving Appleton as his birthplace in interviews, articles, and even on his passports. See Silverman, p.134.
[154] Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p.57.

Such 'lucky hits' brought dramatic and sudden material change, and were associated with urban rather than agricultural enterprise. As such, Lears notes, economic speculation was seen to offer more than money: it offered self-transformation and suggested a new kind of U.S. citizen – a city-dweller, comfortable with 'the achievement ethos of a developing entrepreneurial society', but, at the same time, reliant on 'magical thinking to allay anxiety and sustain a dream of instantaneous change in their economic success.'[155] As Lears identifies, key in the rhetoric of both those who supported and cautioned against economic speculation was the idea of 'pursuit of personal transformation in a fluid money economy.'[156] As early as 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville had described 'the universal moment prevailing in the United States, the frequent reversals of fortune, and the unexpected shifts in public and private wealth' as giving 'an irresistible impulse to the national character.'[157] By the time Mayer Samuel extracted his impossible promise from Ehrich, then, there was an established speculative and entrepreneurial streak in American national character, linking, in the national consciousness, lucky breaks and the sudden acquisition of money to modern concepts of selfhood. These would have been compelling ideas for the romance-prone Ehrich, speaking to fantasies of wealth, but also to fantasies of assimilation.

These things lay behind Houdini's performance of 'Money for Nothing.' His first name now anglicized to Harry, he pulled money from thin air in a professionalized re-enactment of his attempts to realise a fairy-tale-like transformation of his family's circumstances. Like his earlier performances to his mother, the glaring symbolism and fairy-tale topos of 'Money for Nothing' presented this need as fantasy, and in doing so expressed not just the material need, but the accompanying desires.

Act 2. Houdini Himself, in Person

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[155] Ibid., p.44.
[156] Lears, p.73.
[157] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p.404, cited in Brianne Wolf, "'The Monetary Link': Tocqueville on the Second Bank of the United States and Liberal Political Economy", in *Exploring the Social and Political Economy of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. by Peter Boettke and Adam Martin (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020) pp.37-62 (p.53).

If Houdini's illusions expressed desires for power and personal transformation, his escape act made these ideas almost literal. In the second act of *HOUDINI*, Harry presented the 'feats that have made him famous', including, at the top of the bill, a performance of the illusion that galvanised his career: 'Metamorphosis.'[158] Relying on a piece of apparatus called a substitution trunk, 'Metamorphosis' was an illusion that employed escapologist techniques. In the effect, Harry would bring out the trunk – just large enough for a person to curl up in – and offer it to the audience for inspection. He would then be bound in rope and the knots sealed with wax. Thoroughly trussed, he would be put into a sack. The sack was sealed with tape, then put into the trunk, which was itself then padlocked and bound. The whole thing would be pushed inside Houdini's cabinet – a wooden frame with fabric on three sides and a drawable curtain across the front – with knocking and banging coming from the trunk all the while to prove Harry was still in there. An on-stage assistant would clap three times. At the final clap, the curtain would be pulled back by Houdini, now free, standing beside the apparently unspoiled trunk. Houdini would then quickly unlock the trunk and open the sack. The assistant would be inside, trussed in the same bonds with which Houdini had been bound mere seconds before.[159]

Adam Phillips – another psychoanalyst drawn to Houdini – writes that Houdini's escape act was 'the performance of a violent parody of assimilation.'[160] While 'Money for Nothing' spoke to a particular, entrepreneurial vision of U.S. national character, 'Metamorphosis' displayed 'the mysterious disappearance of constraints', which Phillips links to an assimilative desire to 'be the man who could adapt to anything.'[161] John Kasson takes a similar view, noting that Ehrich's 'shedding of his Jewish name and racial identity in favor of a more generalized whiteness' was part of the 'supremely masculine persona' which Houdini cultivated through his escapes.[162] While it is certainly true that Houdini found in escapology an ideal form of magic – one which spoke more directly to his (assimilative, masculine) dreams of power and personal transformation – it is important to keep in mind that the symbolism and available 'meanings' of escapology are manifold and flexible, to such an extent that this flexibility doubles-back on the idea of escape itself, and ends up constituting part of that term's meaning.

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[158] MYC, Magic Clippings Part 1, fol.22/15/a.
[159] See Silverman, pp.12-13, Kalush and Sloman, p.29.
[160] Adam Phillips, *Houdini's Box: On the Arts of Escape* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.8.
[161] Ibid., pp.4-9.
[162] John Kasson, p.84 and p.123.

Like all the tricks and challenges constituting Harry's escape act, 'Metamorphosis' represented broad, powerful ideas of confinement and escape, struggle and triumph. As will become clear throughout this thesis, these ideas – or themes – have a metaphoric capaciousness which enables them to be applied to many different situations. In the contemporary fiction studied in this thesis, for example, the polarity of confinement and escape is used as a metaphor for – amongst other things – models of selfhood (on a scale of restrictive to fulfilling), closeted sexuality, the vicissitudes of desire, and the act of writing itself (especially in relation to generic categories). It is the flexibility and capaciousness of metaphors of confinement and escape that make representations of Houdini 'work' so well in fiction. In all the texts studied in this thesis – even the almost Houdini-less *Manhattan Beach* – ideas and themes associated with Houdini disperse across the text, creating a semantic field exceeding the moments where he is represented as a character.

In Houdini's own time, the overabundant, elastic symbolism of his art, and the general, but powerful, implied narrative of struggle and triumph was picked up on by contemporary commentators, in particular by advertisers and political cartoonists. In one theatre magazine (a collection of advertisements and entertainment notices) a cartoon Houdini appears in the advertisements of two separate diamond companies. One states their diamonds are more mysterious than Houdini; the other promises that 'you will be mystified at the elaborate display of precious stones moderately priced.'[163] Newspaper cartoonists also frequently used Houdini and his associated themes of confinement and escape to satirise a diverse array of political crises. One 1917 sketch from the *Baltimore American* shows a worried-looking Uncle Sam trapped underwater in a submarine-diving-suit hybrid. The contraption is stamped 'U-Boat Crisis', and the caption warns: 'Your Uncle is Not a Houdini.'[164] A later Rube Goldberg cartoon depicts a man on the ground wrapped in a straitjacket labelled 'industry.' Another man holds a stopwatch, presiding over the spectacle. A sign in the background says 'The Wagner Act', referencing the 1935 legislation which gave workers the legal right to form unions. The caption reads 'Even Houdini Couldn't Do This One.'[165] Houdini's presentation of confinement and escape also provided ready metaphors for personal as well as national and political crises. He entered into the rhetoric of

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[163] Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, McManus-Young Collection (MYC), Magic Files Part 1, Houdini Memorabilia, fol.22/14.

[164] Harry Ransom Center (HRC), The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Houdini Collection (Performing Arts Collection PA-05215), Series IV, box 12, fol.7.

[165] MYC, Magic Files Part 1, Houdini Memorabilia, fol.22/20.

sermons, which preached on 'Houdini and the Art of Getting Out of Things' and cautioned against vice as a deadly trap: 'When whisky ties you up, you STAY tied… At last comes the straitjacket that no magician can escape.'[166]

Adam Begley writes that 'Houdini was not interested in the meaning of his stunts, [although] others always have been.'[167] However, it is clear that Houdini did at least recognise the semantic flexibility of his act, as he made use of it in several tongue-in-cheek acts of self-promotion. One posthumous newspaper article surveying the magician's career, for example, records Houdini's six rules for 'mystifying people.' Alongside practical rules such as 'acquire perfect co-ordination of the muscles of the body', and 'practice, practice, practice', Houdini gives the wry instruction to 'develop resourceful wits with which to crawl out of embarrassing circumstances.'[168] Houdini also prompted the publishers Funk and Wagnall to include the verb 'houdinize' in the 1920 edition of their popular dictionary; the definition was 'To release or extricate oneself from (confinement, bonds, or the like), as by wriggling out.'[169] Kenneth Silverman argues that, by 1916, Houdini was 'passing into the language… As a noun "Houdini" stood for an expert at extrication; adjectivally it signified "elusive"; in verb form it meant to make a quick getaway.'[170] Whether Houdini cared much for the meaning of his art or not, he understood that it expressed something which resonated – semantically, as well as (he hoped) affectively – with a fundamental aspect of human experience: the feeling of being trapped by or struggling against obstacles, and the urge to overcome, escape, or outwit them. Part of the significance of this for a consideration of Houdini and fiction is that this quality necessarily suggests narrative. Anyone who struggles against an obstacle is, at the same time as expressing suffering, expressing a desire – even if that desire is simply for the obstacle to disappear. And, as both narratological scholarship and creative writing guides attest, desire is inextricable from narrative.[171] Escapology, then, in

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[166] HRC, Harry Houdini Collection, Series IV, box 12, fol.5. Also see Silverman, p.203.

[167] Begley, p.188.

[168] Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, Harry Houdini Collection, Scrapbook #1.

[169] Silverman, p.204.

[170] Ibid., pp.203-4.

[171] The examination of the role of desire in the construction and consumption of narrative is the main purpose of Peter Brooks' well-known intervention into narratological study, *Reading for the Plot* (1984). Brooks writes that narrative plotting aims at 'the realization of a blocked and resisted desire. Plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward moving.' This observation leads Brooks to argue that 'the aims and imaginings of desire – its enactments in response to imaginary scenarios of fulfilment – move us from the realm of basic drives to highly elaborated fictions. *Desire necessarily becomes textual by way of a specifically narrative impulse*, since desire is metonymy, a forward drive in the signifying chain, an insistence of meaning toward the occulted objects of desire' [my emphasis]. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.12 and p.105.

representing struggle, broadly signifies desire – desire to break free, to transform circumstances, or to achieve a particular goal. The relative universality of this symbolism is attested to not only by the global fame Houdini would achieve, but also by the diversity of contexts in which Houdini is and was used as a metaphor.

From 1891 to early 1894 Harry's stage partner – and assistant in 'Metamorphosis' – was Jacob Hyman. Together, they performed in dime museums and small theatres in and around New York. They also, in 1893, made the trip to Chicago to perform on the Midway of the "World's Columbian Exposition" – The World's Fair.[172]

Illusion and Illusionism at The World's Fair, 1893

Much has been written about the significance of the Columbian Exposition as a fin de siècle event marking the ascendancy of a particular kind of American capitalism by presenting that economic system – staging it – as a paragon of modern civilization. Especially important for this thesis is the way in which that presentation was illusory in both content and method. This is one of the underlying ideas in the historian Alan Trachtenberg's well-known account of the Fair. Trachtenberg has described the 1893 Exposition as disclosing 'one of the deepest and most abiding issues accompanying the incorporation of America.'[173] The issue, according to Trachtenberg, is a contestation over 'the true and real meaning of America', and it was expressed at the World's Fair through its deliberate architectural separation of a 'center' of neoclassical, imperial-style monumentalism – evident in structures such as the imposing 'Court of Honor' – and 'the carnival atmosphere of the Midway Plaisance… of course the center represented America through its exhibitions, the outlying exotic Midway stood for the rest of the world in subordinate relation.'[174] This was an elitist vision of America. The hierarchical architectural planning of the White City literally marginalised certain elements, aligning entertainers like Houdini with the exoticized bazaars, mock-ups of

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[172] See Silverman, pp.8-10.
[173] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), p.234.
[174] Ibid., p.234 and pp.212-3.

ancient cities, and myriad displays of cultural 'otherness' that constituted the Midway. Trachtenberg argues that this design amounted to an imperialistic containment of the Fair's carnivalesque elements, thereby offering up a (falsely) 'unified' vision of burgeoning corporate America. 'It [the Fair] enforced its lessons by contrast', Trachtenberg writes, noting Henry Adams's questioning of whether the 'look of unity' worn by the Fair was 'real, or only apparent?'[175] The appearance of a unified sense of what America was and where it was heading played, in Trachtenberg's words, a specific cultural role:

> That role appeared as the making of a landscape of fantasy in which goods might be displayed as progress, as emblems of a beneficent future. The final message of the Fair concerned the method of making such a future: through a corporate alliance of business, culture, and the state. But another part of the message was precisely to keep that alliance aloof, not so much hidden and disguised but above reproach, beyond criticism. And, for this function, art and culture served simply to dazzle the senses in visible "beauty", to bathe the mind in delight… And that exactly proved the lasting lesson of Chicago, of White City: that the new society required the corporate version of "capitalistic methods," including the array of culture before the senses.[176]

There are several ironies in Trachtenberg's assessment of the Chicago World's Fair and its meaning, which only deepen when considering their correspondence with Houdini's fledgling act. Trachtenberg describes the cultural 'message' of the fair as one of order and rationality, absorbing and subordinating its own contrary elements through positioning them as culturally 'lower'. Trachtenberg describes this attempt at unification as 'contradictions held in momentary balance.'[177] As already argued, Houdini enacted a similar holding-together of contrasts in his performance, particularly the contrast between rational order and subversive irrationality. The former of these qualities, as shown in Trachtenberg's analysis, had by the close of the nineteenth-century become associated with a managerial, corporate attitude that greatly influenced the country's sense of its own progress. The Columbian Exposition, with its hierarchical, managerial urban planning, spectacles of commerce, and imperial gusto, represented a spectacular expression of the tying together of these ideas. While the White City may have been fairly unilateral in terms of which quality – and by extrapolation, which vision of America – it endorsed, a Houdini performance was much more ambiguous, delighting in the strange and the subversive as much as it put on the appearance of respectability.

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[175] Ibid., p.211 and p.217.
[176] Ibid., pp.217-220.
[177] Ibid., p.216.

However, Trachtenberg identifies a contradiction between the apparent values of order and rationality expressed in the World's Fair, and the fact of the City itself being 'a frank illusion… an admitted sham.'[178] Those neo-classical buildings were themselves illusionistic – they were not stone, as they appeared to be, but a plaster-like material called 'staff' poured over a steel frame; they were also, according to critic and Exposition attendee Montgomery Schuyler, 'a painter's dream of Roman architecture' – a representation of a representation, a kind of compounded fantasy.[179] More fundamentally, the vision of American society imagined by the Exposition was also illusory. Not only did the Fair encourage a 'landscape of fantasy' by connecting consumer goods to abstract ideals, it also operated via a kind of sleight-of-hand, used the glitter and glare of theatrical spectacle to obscure elements of the political and social reality of American life and affirm the 'beneficent' corporate future. As Trachtenberg writes, in its efforts 'to construct of the performances of economy a modern spectacle', the World's Fair 'seemed the victory of elites in business, politics, and culture over dissident but divided voices of labor, farmers, immigrants, blacks and women.'[180] This 'victory', implied in the elitist corporate ethos of the Fair, was also apparent quite simply in the fact of exclusion. African Americans were not allowed to participate in the Fair; the labour force were left out of the Fair Manual (that publication did, however, provide an overview of the company bylaws, board of directors, and prominent Chicago citizens involved); and the autobiography of one labourer describes how, as they built the Fair, the (often immigrant) workers were kept on-site in a building 'guarded by sentries and high barriers from unsought contact with all beyond… a marvelous artificial world.'[181] These obfuscations – of the black American population, of labour conditions on-site, and also of the fact of labour itself – contribute to Trachtenberg's assessment of the White City as an 'admitted sham' and yet, despite the relative transparency of some of its illusions (the critic Montgomery Schuyler noted that the 'illusion' of the plaster-cast buildings could be seen through 'at a glance'), Trachtenberg argues that the

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[178] Ibid., p.231.

[179] See Trachtenberg p.215. Schuyler quoted in Trachtenberg, p.230.

[180] Ibid., p.231. Richard Slotkin makes a similar point through his reading of Henry Adams's reaction to the Fair: 'Adams saw the White City as symbolic of the ultimate and necessary triumph of capital over labor, of managerial intelligence over the licensed anarchy of democracy. The esthetic and moral "harmony" of the White City expressed the victory of capitalists as a class.' Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p.64.

[181] Ibid., p.220 and p.210. See also Slotkin, p.65.

Exposition nevertheless insisted that it 'held a truer version of the real than did the troubled world sprawling beyond its gates.'[182]

To run with Trachtenberg's characterisation: the Fair and its surrounding discourse constructed an illusion, insisted upon its veracity despite knowing it to be illusory, and presented that illusion to the public as a manifestation of power. In connecting this to the practice of stage magic, I do not mean to suggest that there was a deliberate deception by a central, controlling figure, but instead wish to highlight a particular part of the critical discourse surrounding the Exposition – and the turn-of-the-century changes it is often taken to represent – as expressive of hitherto overlooked interconnections between stage magic and hegemonic U.S. culture. Trachtenberg uses his analysis of the White City to conclude his study of how the rise of the corporate system through the Gilded Age affected national culture. For Trachtenberg, the Exposition stands as a crucial moment in U.S. history: in expressing a particular alliance between corporate power and national culture, and in doing so in an illusionistic fashion, the Exposition represented an apt 'consummation' of the epoch, but it also 'lay bare a plan for the future.'[183] Trachtenberg ends his study there, but his attention to the deceptions of the Fair – what he describes as its 'weavings of the overt and covert' – suggests such spectacular, illusionistic functioning in the relation between economy and national culture as part of the American futurity imagined by the Exposition.[184]

Although scholarship on the 1893 Exposition is attentive to the illusionistic techniques deployed, and to the fantasy it represented, accounts of the Exposition do not typically make explicit links to the art of magic, nor do they extrapolate the illusionistic nature of the Fair's presentation as a key part of the event's cultural meaning.[185] This reflects the lack of scholarly attention paid to stage magic generally, but it also speaks to what Rosemarie K. Bank has argued to be the particular difficulty faced by historians (and history itself) of attempting to assimilate the complexities and ambiguities of performances. 'Performers complicate unitary readings', she writes, 'and performance resists binary

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[182] Ibid., pp.229-31.
[183] Ibid., p.209.
[184] Ibid., p.211.
[185] This is despite the fact that magic performances were prominent on the Midway – Houdini first met fellow magician Howard Thurston at the Exposition, and troupes of Indian magicians performed magic tricks as part of the Fair's ethnographic displays. See John Zubrzycki, *Empire of Enchantment: The Story of Indian Magic* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), p.215. Fred Nadis does, however, discuss magic as a key part of the later 'Century of Progress' Fair held in Chicago in 1933 (pp.179-210).

interpretations.'[186] Attentive to the Columbian Exposition as an ideological performance consisting of multiple other performances, Bank rejects readings of the Fair as made up of 'unitary or utopic / dystopic spaces', in favour of 'a heterotopic historiographical strategy', arguing that 'The White City and its Midway can be seen as a heterotopia of contesting sites – the "real," the faux, and the simulated; the educational, the aesthetic, and the entertaining; the State-sponsored, Fair-sponsored, and the commercially-produced.'[187] A historiography of this kind foregrounds representational ambiguity amidst the kind of hegemonic ideological discourses identified by Trachtenberg. In emphasising this 'heterotopic' aspect of the Fair, Bank opens up an alternative assessment of its cultural meaning – one that better reflects the audience's experience of a diverse range of performances, and one that, as Bank states, urges critical consideration of 'authenticity within representation.'[188] Bank concludes that Exposition audiences 'were able to understand contradictions offered by the site', in part because the nature of (viewing a) performance entails 'the canny creation of a self-conscious perception of the simultaneous presence of actual and assumed, real and simulated, and of the cultural assumption of the other as self.'[189]

It is this kind of co-presence of canniness and credulity in the formation of a self-conscious, spectatorial self that makes Houdini such a resonant figure for considering the particular kind of modernity – and modern subject – signalled by the 1893 Exposition. If Trachtenberg describes how hegemonic forces at the Exposition created an ideological illusion, Bank suggests that the Fair's cornucopia of performances helped to create an audience capable of scrutinising illusions and discerning the actual from the artificial. Such a view, as well as foregrounding the average Fair-goer's experience, suggests the particular relevance of magic and magic performance to the cultural work of the Fair. Bank concludes her essay by citing Joy Kasson's interpretation of Buffalo Bill, who set up his famous Wild West show just outside the Exposition. Kasson's statement reflects on the wider changes of U.S. modernity through the lens of a popular performer who blurred the lines between the real and the fake – as such, it also makes for a fitting description of Houdini, who was beginning his career on the Midway just a stone's throw away Buffalo Bill's established show. Kasson describes Buffalo Bill as 'an apt hero for the modern era, an age when images

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[186] Rosemarie K. Bank, "Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition", *Theatre Journal*, 54:4 (Dec. 2002), 589-606 (p.598).
[187] Ibid., p.599 and p.606.
[188] Ibid., p.606.
[189] Ibid.

have become indistinguishable from what they purport to represent and the content of national identity seems identical to its performance.'[190]

Houdini, whose persona, like Bill Cody's, was a performance of a specific kind of national identity, and whose art was directly concerned with representational slipperiness and illusionism, both fits and exceeds this description. Not only was Houdini's career more 'modern' than Cody's in terms of chronology (Cody's fame and popularity declined in the 20th century, whereas Houdini's skyrocketed), but Houdini, as a magician, more explicitly dramatized the 'modern' problem Kasson identifies of a national culture in which suspect representations and illusionism seemed to be an increasingly powerful part of public life. As the editors to *Performing Magic on the Western Stage* (one of the only collections of academic essays on stage magic) write: 'to study magic is to study the human imagination in frenzied dialogue with its own limits… magic offers insight into that most fundamental of endeavors – crafting another reality, conceiving a new world.'[191] If the White City's overt goal was to express, in material form, the utopian imaginings of the American elite – to create an artificial reality and offer it up as a definition of and direction for the New World – then that project can be understood as a national illusion, both in the sense that it represented the magical thinking of the state, but also because it employed illusionistic techniques to make those national fantasies appear to be real. Following Bank's argument, Houdini, as part of the heterotopic disturbance of the Fair's dominant message, emerges as a figure who may, paradoxically, counteract the illusionistic work of the Exposition. He presented a desacralized, and, to an extent, de-mystified, magic; one which dramatized deception and misdirection, and which challenged audiences to see through the illusion.

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[190] Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p.273. Cited in Bank, p.606.
[191] Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass, and James Peck, "Introduction", in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Coppa, Hass, and Peck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.1-12 (p.11).

'Pantomimed Sermons': Houdini, *Ragtime*, and the Illusions of Modernity

In 1906, Harry Houdini published a slim volume exposing various methods of deception. He called it *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals*. In typically combative fashion, Houdini structured the book as a number of 'shots' at the 'world of crime.'[1] These shots, which serve as chapters, each target a particular criminal enterprise, light-heartedly surveying the methods of burglars, swindlers, and pickpockets. However, near the end of the book, Houdini takes a shot which is both a shrewd marketing move and a respectful nod towards a tradition in U.S. popular culture of fusing deception with commercial amusement. 'A humbug or a hoax', Houdini writes, '[is] more in the way of a high practical joke upon the public. Long ago P.T. Barnum, the great American showman, declared: "The American people want to be humbugged." I believe he was right.'[2] Despite affirming the public taste for these hoaxes, Houdini quickly tries to separate his own escapology and magic acts from Barnum-esque fraudulence, declaring 'there is so much that is marvellous and wonderful that can be accomplished by perfectly natural means that I have no need to find recourse to humbugging the public. In my case, at least, truth is stranger than fiction.'[3] In making this distinction between Barnum's hoaxes and his own performances, Houdini nevertheless retains a slippery, Barnum-esque, notion of truth. It is a truth characterized by its strangeness, by its capacity to invite disbelief and evoke wonder, and it is a truth which still teases the likelihood of deception.[4] Houdini is aware that the public may doubt the authenticity of his feats due to their inexplicability, but he must continue to blur the

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[1] Harry Houdini, *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) p.3. The title of the book, of course, attests to Houdini's proximity with criminality as well as the moral ambiguity attending magicians and magic performance.

[2] Ibid., p.89.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Houdini further tests the credulity of his readers a few pages later when he lists his feats but refuses to disclose 'how I accomplish these things', thus making the tantalising suggestion that there is in fact a trick, or multiple tricks, to his method (p.92). In addition, Houdini's vague but insistent claims to 'natural' veracity echo the strategies of Barnum's most famous humbugs. For example, as Neil Harris writes, the marketing of the 'Fejee Mermaid' (a creature with 'the body of a fish and the head and hands of a monkey') repeatedly emphasised 'its natural origins'. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973) pp.62-63.

line between fact and fiction as an integral part of the magic of his act. The trick, for Houdini, is how to create a performance of authenticity through deceptive technique.

Seventy-two years after the publication of *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, in a 1978 interview with Paul Levine, E.L. Doctorow describes himself as a writer similarly concerned with performances of authenticity and fraught definitions of truth. Like Houdini paring his art away from the hoaxes of the past, Doctorow outlines the relationship between history and fiction in his novels as one of fraudulence versus artful veracity. Responding to Levine's query about whether writers are 'honest liars', Doctorow agrees, and then gives the following qualification: 'I'm under the illusion that all of my inventions are quite true. For instance, in *Ragtime*, I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen.'[5] Doctorow's use of the term 'illusion' here marks an initial, semantic connection in his thought between fictional representation, and the tricks and effects of magic. This chapter will explore this connection, investigating the extent to which Houdini serves as the diegetic double for Doctorow's own representational concerns. As his posturing in *The Right Way to Do Wrong* suggests, Houdini is a slippery figure, creating art which occupies a liminal space of uncertainty between 'truth' and potentially fraudulent illusion. I argue that Doctorow's means of re-representing history finds a correlative in these qualities.[6] In addition, I argue that Doctorow's portrayal of Houdini in *Ragtime* (1975) extrapolates these qualities in such a way as to make them central to the novel's wider representation of U.S. modernity. This is achieved through a kind of stylistic and thematic incorporation of Houdini, whereby images and themes associated with the escapologist percolate throughout the text, and animate the novel's acts of historical

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[5] Paul Levine and E.L. Doctorow, 'The Writer as Independent Witness', in *E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. by Richard Trenner (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1983), pp.57-69 (pp.67-69).

[6] Although my argument prefers to keep this discussion within the terms provided by Doctorow and Houdini, this reading resonates with Linda Hutcheon's assessment of *Ragtime* as 'historiographic metafiction.' This postmodern genre, Hutcheon writes, 'problematize[s] both the nature of the referent and its relation to the real, historical world by its paradoxical combination of metafictional self-reflexivity with historical subject matter.' This kind of historical representation 'is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society'. Hutcheon clarifies this genre emerges in part because 'In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken – shaken, but perhaps not yet destroyed.' While this suggests a fictional practice concerned with exposing the illusions and untruths of the past, Hutcheon argues that a certain separation between historiographic metafiction's 'formal auto-representation and its historical context' persists, and that this limits the critical potential of this kind of fiction – as she writes: 'there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here.' I instead focus on how Houdini – that essentially dialectical figure – bridges the apparent separation between *Ragtime*'s historical content and its postmodern form, allowing the latter to be understood as a reaction to and development of a cultural illusionism at play in the period surveyed by the novel. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.19, p.4, and p.106.

recovery. Images of the exploited, confined body, an imperilled masculinity, and a society preoccupied with forms of mass visual entertainment interweave with, and unsettle, a modernity which is self-reflexively represented as performing its own illusions, its own deceptive misrepresentations of history. Before elucidating this complex relationship, I wish to discuss further how Doctorow himself sees the relationship between the illusions of history and fiction, in order to better assess how Houdini's central presence in *Ragtime* echoes and informs these concerns.

In the interview with Paul Levine, Doctorow asserts that his fictional inventions are 'truer' by virtue of being fiction for two reasons. The first is because he recognises official historical narrative as a work of manipulation and composition that serves particular national or institutional ends. Doctorow states that 'it's possible to cut and slice history really any way you want to', and that in America, this resulted in 'whole peoples… [being] written out of our history – black people, Chinese people, Indians.'[7] History's misleading elision of facets of the past is opposed by what Doctorow calls 'the variousness of literature.'[8] A writer of fiction, as an 'independent witness…not connected to the defense of any institution', can recover in their work 'the absolute multiplicity of us all.'[9] In Doctorow's formulation, then, authors can portray past voices, attitudes, and cultural phenomena that recover and unsettle occlusions made by official historical narratives. This kind of truth-telling can rest quite simply on the representation of previously under-represented historical figures and events. It is a revisionary process that Doctorow makes frequent use of in his novels, which tend to highlight socially and politically oppressed voices in their re-creation of particular times and places.[10] However, Doctorow also seems to be implying another, more abstract notion of how

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[7] Ibid., p.59.
[8] Ibid., p.69.
[9] Ibid.
[10] These voices, typically, are those of the immigrant and industrial working class. Although Doctorow distances himself from 'the defense of any institution', what he is wary of here is the pushing of specific political messages (earlier in the interview with Levine he speaks of a 'kind of death that creeps into prose when you're trying to illustrate a principle, no matter how worthy' [p.60]). He does, however, advocate social engagement and critique in fiction more broadly. This is perhaps most powerfully expressed in his essay 'The Beliefs of Writers' (1985), in which he slams the apathy of contemporary U.S. writers and laments the 'raging, amoral system inside of which the artist is astute only in the act of withdrawal' (p.112). Doctorow's non-partisan, but socially conscious approach has led some critics to label him a 'Radical Jewish Humanist'. See John Clayton, 'Radical Jewish Humanism: The Vision of E.L. Doctorow', in *Essays and Conversations*, ed. by Trenner, pp.109-119.; E.L. Doctorow, 'The Beliefs of Writers', in *Poets and Presidents: Selected Essays, 1977-1992* (London: Papermac, 1994), pp.105-116. See also James R. Thompson, 'The Artist as "Criminal of Perception": E.L. Doctorow and the Politics of the Imagination', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 2:1 (1996), 147-155.

literature may convey truth. This involves a different kind of textual multiplicity – one which emerges from the reader's affective response to the text.

This second idea dovetails with the first, and is elaborated by Doctorow in his earlier essay 'False Documents' (1977). He writes: 'Fiction is a not entirely rational means of discourse. It gives to the reader something more than information. Complex understandings, indirect, intuitive, and nonverbal, arise from the words of the story…instructive emotion is generated in the reader from the illusion of suffering an experience not his own.'[11] Doctorow clarifies that these 'understandings', these 'illusions' created through the web of literary signification, are distinctly separate from fact. Designating what he calls 'the power of freedom' to fiction – to the 'false document' knowingly and imaginatively 'composed as a lie' – Doctorow sets up an opposition between fiction, written without institutional obligation, and the 'rational mentality' of official sources.[12] In this latter term, Doctorow refers to the bureaucratic rationality marking reflexive modernity. The tendency of 'rational mentality' to set the terms of a reductive, distorted history is exemplified, for Doctorow, in its official documents – data-focussed or institutional documents whose language reveals 'the power of the regime…which runs on empirical thinking', but which are also, at least before the rise of 'bottom-up' history, the documents preferred by historians.[13]

It is the counter-factual, 'irrational' qualities of fiction, then, which enable a particular kind of truth. However, Doctorow contrasts this with official sources which, as previously indicated, also produce deceptive, illusory representations of reality. The classifying of the registers of fiction and 'fact' into separate powers of freedom and regime only goes so far towards explaining why fictional representation is preferred by Doctorow as an expression of truth. The two languages Doctorow refers to are, after all, the same English language, even if there is a marked difference between fictional and empirical registers. It would be tempting to

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[11] E.L. Doctorow, 'False Documents', in *Poets and Presidents, Selected Essays, 1977-1992* (London: Papermac, 1994), pp.151-164 (p.151).

[12] Ibid., p.152.

[13] Ibid. Jieun Kwan discusses some of these ideas in relation to Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971). Describing Doctorow's premise that 'modern Western societies have given the primary authority to factual and documentary narratives' Kwan argues that Doctorow's ideas regarding rational mentality and official sources echo 'Foucault's knowledge hierarchy… [pointing] out the rigid classification of historical narratives based on scientific instrumentality.' Jieun Kwan, 'Redeeming the National Ideal: Revisiting E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Its Political Implications', in *E.L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration*, ed. by Michael Wutz and Julian Murphet (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp.111-131 (p.116). 'Bottom-up' history – which can be seen as historiography's response to these same issues – began to assume prominence in the 1960s, exemplified in the UK by the work of E.P. Thompson, and in the U.S. by the work of Howard Zinn. See Staughton Lynd, *Doing History from the Bottom Up: On E.P. Thompson, Howard Zinn, and Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

conclude from this that Doctorow's argument rests on an assumed superiority of fiction: some innate, magical, truth-telling property equivalent to the 'power' he describes. But, however much he valorises fiction as a medium, Doctorow is able to provide a formal explanation for this power.[14] In assuming the register of the authoritative source, he argues, fiction can both call attention to and efface its illusionistic practice. Doctorow writes that in order for 'false documents' to have their effect, they 'need only possibly be true' and he gives as examples Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*: texts which at their outset make the explicit (and blatantly misleading) claim to be memoirs or historical accounts that the author happened upon, rather than their own inventions.[15] These false documents – particularly *Robinson Crusoe*, which fictionalised the contemporaneous 18th century news story of castaway Alexander Selkirk – draw attention to the porous boundary between fact and fiction. The effect is not damaged by 'the transparency of the pretense', but rather the presentation of authenticity combined with the imaginative colouring of fiction leads to 'an indwelling of… art in real life… a mixing-up of the historical and the aesthetic, the real and the possibly real' which has the potential to recover a 'state of wisdom that existed…before fact and fiction became ontologically differentiated…when it was possible for fiction to give counsel.'[16] The illusion that makes Doctorow satisfied his fictional accounts of Morgan and Ford are true and the illusion that generates 'instructive emotion' in the reader are one and the same. They refer to the power of undifferentiated verbal representation, which smuggles imaginative content through the register of official discourse. This opens a space of epistemological uncertainty in the text, where the reader can intuit experiential meaning as part of the 'truth' of what is being portrayed.

While the power of fiction retains an 'intuitive', non-rational, affective quality, that this is achieved via formal artifice makes it appear 'magical' in a more secular sense – a sense closer to the pleasurable deceptions Houdini describes in *The Right Way to Do Wrong*. Fiction assumes the form of truthful representation and yet, as Doctorow makes clear, it is generally understood to be a 'false', deceptive practice. Not in spite of but *because of* this contradiction, Doctorow argues that fiction can create 'truthful' affects. The 'contradiction'

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[14] Throughout the essay Doctorow remains aware of this tendency to privilege fiction, worrying that his terms 'power of freedom' and 'power of the regime' are 'too grandiose'; tentatively suggesting that fiction is 'perhaps a superhistory', and ultimately remaining cautious that his argument is 'a novelist's proposition, I can see that very well.' 'False Documents', p.152, p.162, and p.163.
[15] Ibid., p.156.
[16] Ibid., pp.156-7.

between authenticity and artifice is not treated by Doctorow as an impasse, but as an energizing dialectic.

If these ideas outline a general method for Doctorow's historical fiction, this chapter will assess how this method is focalised through Houdini's role in *Ragtime*. I argue that in making the magician central to his representation of early twentieth-century society, Doctorow foregrounds not just the illusory performance of narrative, but the illusions and performativity which run throughout U.S. modernity. I argue that the novel correlates notions of representational and perceptual deception with dominant turn-of-the-century national-cultural attitudes. Further, the novel shows how rapid, reciprocal developments in mass entertainment and technology have the potential to both expose and reify the illusionism of the dominant class. As James Cook writes, in the late-nineteenth century there was an uncomfortable proximity between the 'central mythic hero' of the middle-class – the 'self-made man' – and the unruly 'white-collar criminal' of the deceptive, P.T. Barnum-esque 'confidence man'.[17] I explore how *Ragtime* uses Houdini to emphasise the illusory, deceptive aspects of dominant cultural attitudes – particularly those overlapping with masculinity – whilst also charting the metamorphosis of cultural illusion into new forms of mass entertainment and spectacle.

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow's concern with the illusions of history and fiction find particularly heightened expression. The novel has no clearly definable plot, and is instead a kaleidoscopic tumult of scenes in which historical personages intermingle with each other, and with fictional characters. The fictional characters are principally composed from three families, each of a different social class and racial demographic. Father, Mother, Mother's Younger Brother, Grandfather, and The Little Boy comprise the white, upper-middle class family, who are usually at the centre of the narrative action. This family, over the course of the novel, fragments. They are re-structured as members of the other two families –Tateh, a Jewish immigrant, and his daughter; and Coalhouse and Sarah Walker, a black couple, and their child – interpolate the wealthy family's insular lives. The trajectory of the families' interaction and rearrangement forms the closest thing to an over-arching plot, but, as Frederick Karl has observed, *Ragtime*'s narrative serves merely as 'a kind of glue for all the

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[17] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) p.26.

sideshows: Houdini, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit, Stanford White and Harry Thaw, Emma Goldman, Henry Clay Frick.'[18]

Karl's equation of historical figures here with a 'sideshow' is deliberate and suggestive. He highlights the way the novel's shifting from scene to scene emulates forms of popular entertainment, writing that *Ragtime* is like 'those musical comedy entertainments turned out by MGM and RKO in the 1930s': the story line exists 'solely as cement for the musical numbers, dance sequence, or spectaculars. They had, in a sense, some linkage to circuses, to Barnum and Bailey's three rings.'[19] In making these links, Karl seems to unwittingly sketch, in reverse, what I see as the implicit narrative trajectory of the novel: the transformation of popular culture from the freakish, fraudulent, Barnum-esque sideshow, through to the rise of film. There are more direct and meaningful relations between these entertainment forms than Karl allows. The potential for hoaxing – or 'humbugging' – in Barnum's act, the overwhelming spectacle of his circus, and the idea of the 'freakish' body (liminal, but powerful), are all qualities also found in magicians and magic performance. Through Houdini, *Ragtime* notes these connections and charts their further migration into the modern illusory art of film.[20] In drawing attention to this relation, my argument is more in line with Hillary Chute's assessment of the novel as chronicling 'the rise and transformation of popular visual art.'[21] However, while Karl acknowledges the connection between historical representation and a formal imitation of popular, visual culture, and while Chute discusses this in more detail by focussing on *Ragtime*'s 'graphic narrative',[22] I want to suggest that these connections cannot be fully explored without an in-depth consideration of the novel's primary popular figure and the first historical character to take the stage in the novel's sideshow: Harry Houdini. Through the novel's positioning of the magician and escapologist as central to its re-representation of history, I argue that *Ragtime*'s emulation of popular,

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[18] Frederick R. Karl, 'On *Ragtime's* Variations', in *Bloom's Guides: E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004) pp.64-66 (p.66).

[19] Ibid.

[20] This is also historically accurate. Many early film-makers – such as Georges Méliès – were also magicians, finding their skills in producing marvellous effects by practical, technical means well-suited to the film set and the movie camera. Houdini himself founded a production company called Houdini Pictures Corporation to produce and star in his own films. See Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.2 and p.102.

[21] Hillary Chute, '*Ragtime, Kavalier and Clay*, and the Framing of Comics', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54:2 (2008), 268-301 (p.272).

[22] Ibid. Chute argues that *Ragtime*'s 'graphic narrative' emulates a comic-strip form, which helps to emphasize the 'philosophic and democratic capaciousness of popular art' – this democratic capacity entails the accessible, and the heterogeneously inclusive, articulation of history (pp.270-272).

visual culture entails a richer, far more ambivalent, commentary on the development of mass entertainment from sideshow to silver screen.

In making these claims, my argument will fall into two parts. The majority of my discussion will examine how the novel represents and formally incorporates Houdini, assessing *Ragtime*'s reliance on a dialectic between dominant, deceptive, historicizing perspectives, and an alternative view of the modern U.S. which locates truth in the 'non-rational' and apparently counter-factual. I will then examine how Houdini organises in the novel, to use Bill Brown's phrase, a kind of 'material unconscious', assessing how the cultural ephemera of scenes of recreation are uneasy accompaniments to dominant U.S. culture.[23] The novel represents these ephemera in Houdini-esque terms, as sites of spectacle where the strange and the subversive are available to view. I will examine how Doctorow's representational method and depiction of recreational ephemera create a self-reflexive, and deeply ambivalent, assessment of the primacy of popular, visual culture in U.S. society. Throughout these assessments, I wish to pay attention to the socio-cultural illusions that Doctorow portrays as beguiling turn-of-the-century America, and thus give some indication of how the illusions of art may 'indwell' and respond to the conditions of everyday life.

Modernity and Misdirection: Houdini's Pantomimic Dialectic

In *Ragtime*'s opening pages, Houdini crashes into the narrative. Immediately after the narrator has given an initial, expository account of the performer as 'a headliner in the top vaudeville circuits' who performs various acts of escape, Houdini crashes his 'black 45-horsepower Pope-Toledo Runabout' into the telephone pole outside the wealthy family's house.[24] The specificity of the car Houdini drives, and the obstacle it meets, suggest from the

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[23] It is these recreational ephemera which, for Brown, constitute literature's material unconscious. As will be discussed, although Brown reads synchronously, studying the work of Stephen Crane for details about amusement in the 1890s, I read Doctorow as performing a retroactive version of the same process. Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp.4-5.

[24] E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006) pp.6-7. We are told that it is the Little Boy who has 'conceived an enormous interest in the works and career of Harry Houdini' (p.6), and the fact the narrative description of the performer and his appearance as a character follow this statement, and indeed the significance of Houdini to the novel as a whole, seems to give weight to critical speculation that the Boy is in fact the narrator. Allan Johnson writes that Houdini's sudden appearance 'introduces the Little Boy's powers of narrative conjuring', and Christopher D. Morris likewise maintains that the Boy is the narrator. However, this remains speculation, and for the purposes of this chapter I will refer to either 'the narrator', or Doctorow

outset Houdini's chaotic, unwieldy association with the icons and objects of modernity. Meanwhile, his sudden transition from expository historical subject to diegetic character indicates his centrality to the blurring of fictional and historical registers. I will explore these two inter-related aspects of Houdini's representation.

Houdini's sudden entrance as a character marks a transition from passive narrative object to active narrative subject. This mingling of passivity and activity is in turn a key facet of Houdini's ambivalent relation to modernity. When describing Houdini's acts, Doctorow blends passive and active voices, linguistically mirroring the dualism of Houdini's powerlessness in confinement, and his power in escaping:

> He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping… He was chained to automobile tires, water wheels, cannon, and he escaped. He dove manacled from a bridge into the Mississippi, the Seine, the Mersey, and came up waving. He hung upside down and strait-jacketed from cranes, biplanes and the tops of buildings. He was dropped into the ocean padlocked in a diving suit fully weighted and not connected to an air supply, and he escaped.[25]

In this passage, Houdini turns various icons of modern life – automobile tires, cranes, bi-planes and skyscrapers – into set-pieces for staging physical stunts. The passivity of 'accepting' bondage and being chained to these objects by an unspecified agent is counterpoised with the activity of escaping, of waving, celebrating the act of liberation. The repeated spectacle of these acts of confinement and escape lead the narrator to assert both that Houdini represents 'an American ideal', and yet also that 'his life was absurd.'[26] This dualism, I argue, is extrapolated by Doctorow into two different modes of historicising modernity: the former resonant with the deceptions of 'official' history, and the latter with the authentic illusionism of art.

Throughout *Ragtime*, Houdini self-consciously worries about his position in history. As the performer's popular success continues to grow, the novel's narrator nevertheless informs us that Houdini 'had never known such feelings of dissatisfaction.'[27] His discontent stems from a conviction that 'despite all his achievements' he is 'a trickster, an illusionist, a

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himself, when appropriate. Allan Johnson, 'The Authentic and Artificial Histories of Mechanical Reproduction in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 70:2 (2015) http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/oli.12060/full [accessed 20 November 2017]. Christopher D. Morris, 'Illusions of Demystification in *Ragtime*', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), pp.63-76.

[25] *Ragtime*, pp.6-7.

[26] Ibid., p.27 and p.6.

[27] Ibid., p.84.

mere magician', and will therefore never enjoy a longed-for authority in 'the history books.'[28] This pessimistic line of thinking is seemingly at odds with Houdini's extraordinary success in entertainment; something which left an enduring historical legacy in its own right. Indeed, Houdini's lasting significance not just in the popular imagination, but for the very purpose of mass entertainment, is indicated at the start of the novel by the narrator's assertion that 'today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger.'[29] Significantly, the future audience the narrator describes crave 'escapes': something conspicuously absent from the morose self-definitions of Doctorow's Houdini. This exclusion separates Houdini's escapes from the magic tricks and illusions he worries are historically insufficient, suggesting they align more with the 'achievements' he acknowledges he has made. His escapes are, however, still not enough to give him the position in history which he desires, and are subsumed into Houdini's vision of his life as devoted to 'mindless entertainment.'[30]

Houdini's phrase 'the history books', then, refers to a particular kind of history: one which assumes the authority of an official source. If Houdini worries that his status as an illusionist and entertainer obstructs his potential for real historical achievement, throughout *Ragtime*, Doctorow ironizes this by showing official history itself as marked by illusionistic performativity and deception. In discussing this, I want to suggest that the special privilege Doctorow gives to Houdini's escape-acts rests on their capacity to signify the strange violence inflicted on those who are obscured from official historical narratives. To create, in other words, a spectacle of suffering which signifies the underside of recorded history, and which, in turn, informs the 'truthful' affects of Doctorow's own narrative.

Houdini's dissatisfied musing follows a bizarre encounter with an injured 'sandhog': a workman – part of a team digging underneath New York's East River, creating a tunnel which will be used for a subway line connecting Brooklyn with the Battery.[31] The man has been injured in a 'blowout', described by Doctorow both as a 'typical hazard', and one of many 'horrible destinies' the workers are subject to in their underground labour.[32] The blowout occurs when compressed air, pumped into the tunnel to oxygenate it, finds a weakness in the tunnel's roof and pushes through it. In this instance the blowout has been 'so

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[28] Ibid., p.82.
[29] Ibid., p.7.
[30] Ibid., p.84.
[31] Ibid., p.80.
[32] Ibid.

explosive that it sucked four workmen out of the tunnel and blew them through twenty feet of river silt and shot them up through the river itself forty feet into the air on the crest of a geyser.'[33] Houdini reads about the accident in the paper and is amazed. He senses a connection between himself and what has happened to the man. Sympathetic to death-defying spectacle, he interprets the accident as an escape, but is jealous, aware that he has 'never done an escape that can touch this one.'[34] Running to the hospital to see the sandhog, Houdini presses him to reveal what the trick was: 'I want to know how it felt. I want to know what he did to get to the surface. He was the only one to make it. He must have done something.'[35] Desperate for the secret, he offers money to the man's family. The sandhog's two sons quickly and unceremoniously lift Houdini and carry him out of the ward. Outside the hospital, walking the streets in defeat, Houdini muses on what separates him from the sandhog:

> There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books.[36]

The realisation that there was no trick – no hidden mechanism, choreographed routine, concealed tool, training regime, or confederate – elevates the sandhog's accident to a position of reality denied to Houdini's escapes. Nevertheless, an element of performativity persists in linking the two together. The real event is described as an 'act' and is followed by allusions to sensationalized media spectacle (the 'headlines on the newsstand.'). Doctorow ironically correlates the planned, dramatized constraints of Houdini's escapology with the absurd contingencies – the 'typical hazard[s]' – created by industrial and economic development in modern America in order to show mechanised modernity creating a kind of stage for its own dysfunction. While still delineating between the 'real-world' act that enters history and Houdini's performances and career, Doctorow's novel associates the two in order to suggest socio-political historicity as its own kind of popular performance.

This relationship is crucial to what Fredric Jameson has identified as *Ragtime*'s representation of a 'crisis in historicity.'[37] He writes that the 'official "subjects"' of the novel

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[33] Ibid., p.81.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p.82.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) p.22.

– the disappearance of radical workers' movements in the face of new media and new cultural forms – are 'virtually impossible for us to reach and thematize', and that the historical disconnect this demonstrates is symptomatic generally of the historical novel's 'postmodern fate.'[38] However, by examining the role of Houdini – a role which Jameson himself describes as 'central'[39] – and how this connects with Doctorow's representational method, we can see that despite, and, indeed, directly *because of* the loss of historicity Jameson describes, the past is also opened up by the novel. Concealed historical currents and events are recovered, even if these elements are fragmentary and bizarre – closer to a 'sideshow' than a coherent socio-political message. In the process, the novel highlights an early-twentieth-century white-male subjectivity which is marked by violence and absurd performance. This creates a mood of uneasy disquiet and dissatisfaction in the novel which reflects revealingly upon the modern origins of a performative, illusory dominant culture in the U.S.

This mood of disquiet seems to correlate with what Jameson describes as the residual realism of *Ragtime*. He argues that postmodern cultural production is confined in a kind of Plato's cave, tracing its own mental images of the past upon the cave wall. Importantly, Jameson gives the expression of this condition in *Ragtime* an affective element: 'if there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement.'[40] It is my suggestion that this 'shock' of recognising confinement in a simulation of history is experienced by Doctorow's characters in moments where they perceive themselves as performing the modern era, with particular awareness of the absurdities or deceptions involved in that performance. Houdini – a trickster anxious about his own illusory historicity, engaged in an absurd drama of subjugation and victory with the objects of modernity – emerges as the central figure informing Doctorow's representation of this shock of discovery.

These elements of absurdity and performativity are at play in the episode of the sandhog, and offer a means of sketching out Houdini's connection to an illusory historicity. The real-world historical 'stage' for the sandhog's escape is set by three things which can also be observed in Houdini's act. These are: new industrial technologies, a kind of concealed

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[38] Ibid., p.23 and p.21.
[39] Ibid., p.23.
[40] Ibid., p.25.

– and masculinized – labour, and a related populist image of U.S. 'progress' as propulsive force. The sandhog episode opens with a description of the proliferation of railroads:

> Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads and street railways and elevated railroads, all laying their steel stripes on the land, crisscrossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization.[41]

This fervour for progress necessitates the employment of the 'sandhog' labourers to dig the subway tunnel. Doctorow, however, mimicking the language of the 'popular magazines', here shows how the abstraction of a concept of progress distances the labourers who work towards its actualization. It is the writers of the magazines who are 'visionaries.' The labour required for industrial development is subordinate to a more alluring, more 'popular', image of civilization maintained by mass media.[42] Doctorow makes clear that this image is illusory. The railway tracks are 'like the texture of' civilization, but do not represent it in actuality, and the suggestion that this civilization is 'indefatigable' clearly separates it from the people who construct it.

This popular image of a tireless civilization informs Doctorow's description of the subway line's construction as 'an engineering miracle', which takes place 'accordingly.'[43] This ironically suggests that with society's assumption of a growing image of power and industry, labour is elided into a spontaneously occurring act of god, which both occludes labour through mystification, and denies it any special value (the miracle takes place 'accordingly' – it is routine). Importantly, although the men are valorised in the press, this is not because of their role in the progress of 'civilization', but because of their exposure to risk: 'The work was dangerous. The men who did the work…were considered heroes. Working under the river they were subject to horrible destinies.'[44] The sandhogs consequently represent a complex relationship with the images and ideals of civilization. They work to materialise the image of progress, but this is invisible – literally underground – labour, excluded from the imagining of civilization as tireless and as routine 'miracle.' Likewise,

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[41] *Ragtime*, p.80.
[42] For a related discussion of how 'in America technological achievements became measures of cultural value' see David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p.xix. The concept of the technological sublime emphasises the historical tendency of Americans to privilege affective spectacles of technology. See also John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid. The casting of risk as 'destiny' here further mythologises the men as classical masculine heroes, even as it deprives them of agency.

their bravery seems a 'heroic' masculine ideal, but their bravery only exists insofar as they submit to the risks imposed on them by the companies contracting the work, and is only recognised by the public in the spectacle of disaster.

That Houdini detects some sort of real historical meaning in the worker's 'act', alongside sensing an affinity with his own escapes, should, however much Doctorow ironizes the connection, be taken seriously as an indicator of what connects Houdini's performances to the socio-economic milieu of his day. Alan Trachtenberg writes that in the late-nineteenth century, mechanised labour and an economic depression stretching from 1873 – 1896 increased public anxiety about the expanding industrial-capitalist system: 'recurrent cycles of boom and collapse seemed as inexorable as the quickening pace of technological innovation…the public sense of crisis deepened.'[45] Houdini's performances resonate with this sense of crisis. The dynamic of confinement and escape he enacts broadly symbolises the risks, restrictions, and relief of the market's cycles of boom and collapse. Indeed, in *Ragtime*, the Little Boy, for whom Houdini is a childhood obsession, seems especially attuned to this pattern of rise and fall: 'it was evident to him that the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction'.[46] The narrator states that Houdini's 'audiences were poor people', suggesting that those who suffer most from the effects of economic fluctuation find particular appeal in the performer's symbolisation of confinement and escape.[47] Doctorow expands on this aspect of Houdini's performances in a 2010 interview with Brooke Kamin Rapaport:

> I wonder if he knew the symbolic meaning of his endlessly contrived escapes. Why his immigrant audiences adored him. The poor, the working class. He had that first-generation strength of purpose to somehow succeed in America, to do whatever it took. Those escapes could have been pantomimed sermons. He could never let up.[48]

The escapes symbolically dramatize, in the moment of performance, an individual overcoming the obstacles of poverty, social class, and race. John F. Kasson interprets the performer's escapes along similar lines, but emphasises that this symbolisation tends towards a specifically masculine meaning, speaking to constraints imposed on the industrial labourer.

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[45] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) pp.39-40.

[46] *Ragtime*, p.6.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Brooke Kamin Rapaport and E.L. Doctorow, "Considering Houdini: Interviews: E.L. Doctorow" in *Houdini: Art and Magic*, ed. by Brooke Kamin Rapaport (New York: The Jewish Museum and Yale University Press, 2010) pp.116-122 (p.122).

'The new corporate industrial order', he argues, 'massively assaulted this power [of the worker's autonomy] and the ethic of manly pride and brotherhood among workers that sustained it. Through intense mechanization, division of labor, and "scientific management," industrialists endeavoured…to reduce the workers' bodies to components in a gigantic machine.'[49] Kasson argues that Houdini, like Eugene Sandow before him, in representing the liberatory potential of abundant physicality, reasserted 'in the guise of entertaining… the primacy of the white male body against a host of challenges that might weaken, confine, or tame it.'[50]

This, then, connects Houdini's escapology to the sandhog. In the death-defying 'act', the sandhog makes spectacularly visible the socio-economic constraints and hazards imposed upon the male body through industrial modernity's pursuit of an image of civilization. Houdini, perhaps in a spirit of 'manly pride and brotherhood', attempts to exploit this affinity, but comes to realise a crucial difference between them. The sandhog is granted reality because he is a victim of real contingencies created by the pursuit of an image of progress. There is no trickery involved, in contrast with the 'contrived' nature of Houdini's escapes. In keeping with Houdini's capacity to signify both 'an American ideal' and 'absurdity', this distinction highlights Houdini's symbolic production of messages of male triumph and liberation from bonds, but also represents the ironic paralysis which results from attempts to privilege that symbolic production with the status of reality. This self-defeating aspect of Houdini's relation to his own symbolisation – its combination of idealism and absurdity – is encapsulated in the phrase used by Doctorow above to describe Houdini's escapes: 'pantomimed sermons.'

As 'sermons', Houdini's performances represent an idealized image of hard work leading to success and material and mechanical constraints being overcome, regardless of social position. The symbolism of this contrivance, however, is distinctly separate from the 'reality' of the sandhog's signification. The 'primacy of the white male body' is not reasserted through the spectacle of the worker's accident; instead, Doctorow depicts that body in hospital as completely disabled: 'swathed in bandages from his head to his feet.'[51] The particularly 'American ideal' that we are told Houdini represents in *Ragtime* is in fact a

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[49] John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and The Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) pp.11-12.
[50] Ibid., p.8.
[51] *Ragtime*, p.81.

kind of entrepreneurial masculine selfhood expressive of a desire for historical validity; an entrance into the official narratives and images of U.S. progress which obscure and misrepresent important historical elements. The narrator asserts that it is Houdini's 'self-imposed training, his dedication to the perfection of what he did' that reflects an American ideal, and this ties in with a description of Houdini's 'high inchoate ambition' in which 'every development in technology made him restless…men were beginning to take planes in the air, or race automobiles that went sixty miles an hour. A man like Roosevelt…now sent a fleet of white battleships steaming around the world, battleships as white as his teeth.'[52] The achievements here all demonstrate men taking command of technology in spectacular, performative ways; even Roosevelt's battleships become something like a showman's smile as they spread across the earth. The hazards, conflicts, and exploitation of labour which may be involved in these industries are elided by an image of entrepreneurial success, which, in this elision, validates its own illusory historicity.

Houdini's capacity to embody both sides of this relationship dialectically, to undercut the ideal image by revealing its illusionism, is signified by the term 'pantomime.' The OED defines its verbal use as: 'to make an absurd spectacle or display of oneself, to go around behaving as though in a pantomime', or, 'to express or represent through mime or exaggerated gesture.'[53] In a U.S. context, the term refers less to a specific form of entertainment – the fairy tale pantomimes popular in Victorian English theatre – and more to a particular style of performance.[54] Daphne Brooks writes that pantomimes 'showcased narratives and performances of metamorphosis and transformation', and that it was the 'surplus corporeality and superabundant representation' of these performances that were adopted by American entertainment institutions.[55] According to Raymond Knapp,

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[52] Ibid., pp.26-7.

[53] 'Pantomime', *OED Online* http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137039?rskey=5KCCfd&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid [accessed 23rd November 2017].

[54] Robert Clyde Allen describes the brief tradition of U.S. pantomime as follows: 'The pantomime, whose primary American practitioners were the Ravel family and George L. Fox, was distinguished largely by its continued reliance on some vestige of the commedia-del-l'arte traditions of the form: stock characters and situations; a heavy dose of broad, sometimes violent slapstick; and the obligatory transformation scene.' Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.102:

[55] Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) p.23 and p.26. The American entertainment institutions that Brooks argues grew out of this pantomimic style are the extravaganza and blackface minstrelsy (pp.24-6). Minstrelsy's variation on pantomime leans suggestively against its function in Houdini's performances. Brooks writes that 'unlike pantomime, minstrelsy made systemic and repeated attempts to circumscribe the very surfeiting body that it produced' (p.26). Houdini's performances likewise circumscribe the body and attempt to wrest its signification

pantomime's emphasis on absurd, exaggerated bodily expression may have anticipated 'the likes of Buster Keaton', whose silent film performances rested on a 'mostly passive enduring of whatever came his way.'[56] Doctorow's use of the term in relation to Houdini, then, seems particularly pointed. It foregrounds the ways in which Houdini makes his own body an 'absurd spectacle', unwittingly dramatizing the confining, torturous aspects of the ideal that he wishes to represent. Through an excess of signification, embodying both passivity and activity in his metamorphosis from victim to victor, Houdini's 'pantomimed sermons' display both the anxieties and the ideals of modernity.

In examining this aspect of Houdini's representation, I hope to complicate Frederic Jameson's assessment of *Ragtime* as lacking historicity. Jameson writes that 'the novel not only resists interpretation, it is organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws.'[57] However, the perpetual holding-out and withdrawal of objects of social and historical analysis reflects the conflicting images and narratives at play in the tumult of modernity itself. This, as well as the proximity of this representational style to misdirection, is captured throughout the novel in Doctorow's succinct bathos, for example, when he writes that 'workers would strike and die but in the streets of cities an entrepreneur could cook sweet potatoes in a bucket of hot coals and sell them for a penny or two.'[58] Describing the street-vendor here as an 'entrepreneur' is a quick textual misdirection from the workers striking and dying in those same streets. In this, Doctorow formally reflects how modernity's tumult of contradictory images favours a pervasive, distorting idealism – what Doctorow, in this passage, calls 'the lines of flow of American energy.'[59]

This distorting perspective is intrinsic to the dominant mode of masculinity that Houdini wishes to emulate. In the passage where Houdini muses on reality and his own status as an illusionist, his thoughts move from the sandhog's escape as representing 'an act that used the real world for its stage', to the explorer, Peary, reaching the Pole as representative of

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into accordance with dominant US attitudes, but I am arguing that the pantomimic element here works to over-extend corporeal signification into a realm of meaning that, at least for Doctorow's Houdini, exceeds the performer's desire for control. For further discussion on the connections between Houdini's performances and minstrelsy, see Brian Roberts, 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45:3 (2004), pp.247-260.

[56] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) p.60.

[57] Jameson, p.23.

[58] *Ragtime*, p.111.

[59] Ibid.

a 'real-world act' that gets into the history books. The difference between these two events can be understood in terms of passivity and activity. The sandhog's act uses the real world as a stage – the reality of his unappreciated labour, his role in historical progress, is secondary to the theatrical display of risk and the forces which bind him to a hazardous situation. Peary's act, however, *makes* the 'real-world', and it is this that Houdini is particularly affected by. Peary makes historical reality: he claims territory, reasserts the individual's strength and primacy, and forces an entry into written history.

Peary's act, too, is driven by the pursuit of an image of 'indefatigable' American civilization, but while the sandhog shows up the hardships of the labour required to bring that image into materiality, Peary's act dramatizes victory; an individual's heroic conquest of risk. It is Peary's success in realising that image of civilization, and not the sandhog's suffering, which enters into 'the history books.' Doctorow's novel, however, again stresses the performativity of this act in order to undermine the authority of 'the history books' (which are presumably imagined by Houdini to use the newspaper headlines as primary material). Just as the 'visionaries' that write for the popular magazines overlook the sandhog's labour, the newspapers declaring that 'Peary had reached the Pole' overlook the hidden work this success is built on. During the episode detailing the expedition, Doctorow emphasises the role of Peary's black assistant, Mathew Henson, and the Innuit members of the team. Peary himself follows in the path that the others cut for him through the ice, and when he eventually catches up with them, he 'immediately occup[ies] one of the igloos built for him by Henson'.[60] This imposition of hazardous work is marked by Peary's racist nationalism, binding the workers further to an assumption of subordinate usefulness: 'Peary defined the virtues of Esquimos as loyalty and obedience, roughly the same virtues one sought in the dogs.'[61] By overlooking these aspects of Peary's expedition, the newspaper reports spread a distorted history of the achievements of American men. Indeed, the narrator reveals that Peary in fact 'couldn't find the exact place to say this spot, here, is the North Pole.'[62] Instead, he finds 'a paleocrystic peak…that might suggest a real physical Pole', and chooses this spot to plant a flag, then arranging Henson and the 'Esquimos' in front of it for a posed photograph.[63] This photograph of the expedition suggests that the exploited workers might finally be seen, but the narrator intervenes, revealing that in the photograph, 'because of the

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[60] Ibid., p.66.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., p.68.
[63] Ibid.

light the faces are indistinguishable, seen only as black blanks framed by caribou fur.'[64] In the official documents of the 'real-world act' exploited workers and members of other races are homogenised through occlusion as 'black blanks.' What qualifies as historicity is in fact a performance, granted authority only due to its bolstering of an illusory image of progress and achievement.

If Jameson sees *Ragtime* as filtering the past through a postmodern sensibility which entails 'a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and "spectacles"', then the novel is also involved in a much more realistic project than he allows.[65] This is because it emphasises the modern origins of simulated events and 'spectacles', particularly those which uphold a public desire for a certain image of the world. *Ragtime*'s eye for the cultural ephemera behind modern America restores fragments of occluded history, even while representing their suppression in illusory popular images. Between Peary and the sandhog, Doctorow delineates two kinds of historicity: on one hand, Peary represents official, recorded public history; on the other, the sandhog demonstrates the oppressive socio-economic forces working underneath the production of the official historical image. The newspapers, however – those 'official documents' indispensable to historiography – highlight the sandhog's accident as a spectacle of idealised masculine bravery, imposing on him a historicity in line with the image of a tireless, entrepreneurial American civilization. *Ragtime*'s representation of this process of obfuscation corresponds with Doctorow's views on fiction's ability to recover a truthful multiplicity against the misrepresentations of history. Doctorow represents Houdini as dialectically signifying both kinds of historicity – the idealised image and its torturous underbelly – but as ironically cut off from both due to his status as an illusionist and magician. Although Peary's image of historical achievement is a form of illusionistic misrepresentation, the 'trickery' behind it is not part of the discourse of its reception. In contrast, Houdini's audiences, and the press, are aware that the final image of success he produces rests on an unexplained, unseen trick. The narrator explains that 'his escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from. The screen was pulled away and there he stood dishevelled but triumphant beside the inviolate container that was supposed to have contained him.'[66] Through using the magician's screen,

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Jameson, p.18.

[66] *Ragtime*, p.6.

and in leaving the container undamaged, Houdini mystifies his own labour and signals that a trick has taken place. This casts doubt on his actual abilities (the container 'was supposed to have contained him'). Houdini's career depends upon the mystification of his technical skill, and yet it denies him a place in the world of manly technological entrepreneurialism that he wishes to occupy.

Equally, Doctorow represents Houdini as cut off from the historicity of the sandhog's signification of exploitation and risk. After visiting the worker in hospital and reading about Peary, Houdini decides 'to concentrate on his outdoor exploits', dispensing with his screening apparatus and the overtly performative setting of the vaudeville theatre.[67] He even develops a new escape in which 'a team of orderlies from Bellvue…come up on the stage and wrap him from head to foot in bandages', thus imitating the figure of the disabled sandhog.[68] Houdini seems to unconsciously realise here that his escapes, especially when stripped down to a spectacle of physical struggle, cut closer to an expression of reality than his cleverest tricks and illusions. However, despite trying to recreate the sandhog's 'real' signification, Houdini cannot perform the crucial task of failing. He can only offer a representation of reality which is pantomimic, presenting an absurd, exaggerated reality which ironically entails its counter-image. Doctorow bluntly represents Houdini's entrapment in cyclical performances of risk and success: 'they poured water over him to weigh down the wrappings. Houdini escaped. The old theatre people went wild. He was unsatisfied.'[69]

These bluntly declarative, dislocated sentences are, for Jameson, the novel's key formal expression of the postmodern 'crisis in historicity.' He argues that they 'transform the stream of time and action into so many finished, complete, and isolated punctual event objects', which formally express the condition of being unable to reach history except through 'our own pop images and simulacra' of it.[70] It is significant, then, that these sentences resonate particularly with the representation of Houdini. The novel's form seems to reify, finding its ideal subject in Houdini's escapes: 'He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped… He waved to the crowd. He escaped from a sealed milk can filled with water. He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture

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[67] Ibid., p.82. This reimagines an actual shift in Houdini's career towards what Matthew Solomon calls 'actuality magic'. From around 1906 through the 1910s, Solomon observes, Houdini concentrated on filming his outdoor stunts, and also introduced a number of 'tricks and escapes… [that] appeared to do away with concealment entirely.' Solomon, pp.80-81.

[68] *Ragtime*, p.83.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Jameson, pp.24-5.

crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship.'[71] These sentences emphasise Houdini's centrality as a figure for the novel's constant flirtation with, and withdrawal from, interpretable social and historical reality. His escapes are themselves isolated event-objects – spectacles which conceal the 'stream of time and action' in a performative image.[72]

If Houdini is central to the form of *Ragtime*'s sentences, he is also key to the narrative content that these stilted, declarative sentences arrange in absurd, often shocking, juxtaposition. Houdini is unable to access historicity because of his entrapment in a pantomimic dialectic between ideal and absurd / subversive images of American reality. *Ragtime*'s sentences formally reflect the perpetual holding-out-and-withdrawal of historicity entailed in this dialectic. But they also lend themselves to a re-creation of this dialectic at the level of content, allowing rapid, bathetic movement from ideal to subversive images, capturing the shock of its sudden appearance in the tumult of modernity. The passage describing Houdini's escapes, for example, suddenly twists towards the grotesque: 'He was buried alive in a grave and could not escape, and had to be rescued. Hurriedly, they dug him out… his nails bled. Soil fell from his eyes… his assistant threw up. Houdini wheezed and sputtered. He coughed blood.'[73] My next section will discuss in more detail how Houdini's association with bodily suffering informs the narrative depiction of modernity's illusionism as haunted by a strange violence. For now, however, I wish to turn to the novel's famous opening passage to better outline how Houdini-esque content is dispersed through the novel's representation of visual art forms and mass entertainment more generally, examining how Houdini's pantomimic signification guides *Ragtime* even in scenes in which he does not appear.

The opening pages of the novel present an opposition between two images of turn-of-the-century U.S. society. The first is a sentimental, idealized vision which introduces the novel's white, upper-middle class family both as characters, and as paradigms of a dominant mode of perception. Father builds a house at the top of a hill in New Rochelle, New York,

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[71] *Ragtime*, p.6.
[72] This is further indicated by the fact that many of the things he escapes from (the Siberian exile van, the English prison ship etc.) are historically significant objects. This informs their selection for use in Houdini's shows, but they are chosen because of particularly affective associations with torture, death and imprisonment. Houdini's performances emphasise the affective historicity of these objects above their social and political historicity, and, following the drama of escape, even this is subsumed under the image of Houdini victorious.
[73] *Ragtime*, p.7.

and the rest of the family – Mother, Mother's Younger Brother, The Little Boy, and Grandfather – move in on a summer's day. 'It seemed that all their days would be warm and fair', the narrator tells us, and in keeping with this mood of optimism, the wider circle of American life begins to be etched out in harmonious terms:

> Patriotism was a reliable sentiment… The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer.[74]

From this perspective, 'the population' are a homogenous group of urban, leisure-class citizens. Their social relationships are seamless and untroubled. More modern forms of entertainment such as vaudeville have been assimilated into their lifestyle of leisured enjoyment as smoothly and easily as the new forms of urban transportation which shift them from place to place. The romanticized simplicity of this representation is revealed a few sentences later to be an outright misrepresentation. We are told that 'there were no Negroes. There were no immigrants.'[75]

This clearly false statement is representative of Doctorow's own pantomimic historical method. He represents U.S. modernity's idealised images of itself in such starkly exaggerated terms that the declarative statement becomes imbued with a sense of its own absurdity, and this undermines its pretence to historicity. Just as Houdini's performances incorporate elements of historical 'truth' and yet exclude him from a valid historicity, so does Doctorow use an exaggerated, irreverent form of representation which both connects to the ways modern America (mis)represents itself, and signifies a break from 'authentic' representation. Theophilus Savvas argues that the above passage creates an image of the past which is 'distorted…premised upon the exclusion of undesirable elements.'[76] Directly referencing Jameson's idea that the novel's representation of history is only accessible through postmodern nostalgia, Savvas asserts that the passage serves as 'both product, and simultaneous critique, of the nostalgic consciousness', arguing that Jameson misses the 'latent irony of the book' by ignoring the deliberateness of its move away from realistic

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[74] Ibid., p.3.
[75] Ibid., pp.3-4.
[76] Theophilus Savvas, '"There is Only Narrative": E.L. Doctorow and Postmodernism' in *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.124-155 (p.140).

representation.[77] However, while Savvas usefully acknowledges that *Ragtime* self-consciously ironizes its representations of history, he nevertheless keeps his interpretation within Jameson's framework by explaining the passage as a knowing critique of nostalgic consciousness. Opportunities for reading the novel's manipulation of history as in fact reflecting something in the nature of that historical content itself are closed off, and the text is turned merely from unconscious, to conscious symptom of postmodernity. Reading with a greater awareness of Houdini's connections with deceptive historicism, however, helps to stress that the assertion that 'there were no Negroes' does not stem from postmodern nostalgia, but rather expresses, through absurd exaggeration, modern society as it is visible from the insular perspective of the white, upper-middle-class family.[78] As already shown, deceptive images of reality circulate throughout Doctorow's representation of U.S. modernity, and correlate with a dominant masculine attitude. This Family – headed by Father, who, as Christopher Morris argues, is an 'embodiment of the unexamined pieties of his day'[79] – mirror the social and racial blindness propagated in these images of modernity.

However, the passage shifts into an opposing image of American society which suggests the extent to which *Ragtime* also finds subversive potential in modern cultural forms. The romanticised description of homogenous, leisured citizens gives way, a few sentences later, to an opposing image of violence, conspiracy, and mystery. Doctorow hinges this opposition on an ekphrastic description of the painting of Winslow Homer:

> This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. A certain light was still available along the Eastern seaboard. Homer painted the light. It gave the sea a heavy dull menace and shone coldly on the rocks and shoals of the New England coast. There were unexplained shipwrecks and brave towline rescues. Odd things went on in lighthouses and in shacks nestled in the wild beach plum. Across America sex and death were barely distinguishable. Runaway women died in the rigors of ecstasy. Stories were hushed up and reporters paid off by rich families. One read between the lines of the journals and gazettes.[80]

This opposing image of American society emerges out of a re-representation of a modern visual art form. Doctorow creates his own history of 'odd things' by responding to a particular quality in a work of early-twentieth-century art, reading this as an indicator of the

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[77] Ibid., pp.139-140.

[78] Indeed, Doctorow attests to this more strictly diegetic position when he reveals that the whole book sprang from his imagining 'what life was like at that time... an upper-middle-class neighbourhood in which no black people or immigrants were visible.' 'Considering Houdini', p.120.

[79] Christopher D. Morris, 'Illusions of Demystification in *Ragtime*', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), pp.63-76 (p.67).

[80] *Ragtime*, p.4.

mood of the times. The seeming absorption and mimicking of the menacing light with which Homer inflected his paintings takes place at the level of *content* rather than form – the text uses the same declarative sentences with which the opposing, harmonious image was constructed. This indicates that *Ragtime* does not merely formally demonstrate history's disappearance under a postmodern image, but that there is a diffuse, ongoing dialectical investigation of historicity between different epochs and mediums. As demonstrated through Doctorow's re-creation of Homer's aesthetic tropes, both the modern and the postmodern art form have the capacity to unsettle idealised images of historical reality.

In this opening opposition, Doctorow puts into practice his view that 'facts are the images of history, just as images are the facts of fiction.'[81] For Doctorow, an image is the transmission of the experience of history via particular media – whether written, or, as in the case of Homer's paintings, explicitly visual. This transmission, he argues, 'constitutes a judgement', giving meaning to that history.[82] Doctorow's response in *Ragtime*'s opening passage to a mood of disquiet expressed through a representational work then stands directly opposed to the idealized mode of historical perception expressed in the statement that 'there were no Negroes. There were no immigrants.' If the latter mimics the perception of the wealthy white family, whose experience of social and racial obfuscation is privileged as a factual image in 'official', historical documents, then the former takes images as 'the facts of fiction', engaging with the tones and resonances of modern cultural representations in order to access, and re-invent, the hidden underside of history. *Ragtime*'s peculiarity, which Jameson struggles to interpret,[83] is that it combines both representational modes within the same text, mimicking familiar historical images, even as it finds disruptive potential within the cultural products it re-represents. I suggest that the strange mood of the novel, then, constitutes the truthful 'illusion' of Doctorow's narrative – the 'indirect, intuitive'

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[81] 'False Documents', p.161.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Attempting to explain what he sees as the novel's 'extraordinary sense of déjà vu and…peculiar familiarity', Jameson does acknowledge the presence of a 'narrative dialectic between what we already "know" about The Pretender…and what he is then seen to be concretely in the pages of the novel.' However, he does not allow for the extent to which the novel achieves its effect via an imitation of modern art forms which themselves question and unsettle the dominant discourses of modernity. As such, he restricts himself to a formal postmodern analysis which remains troubled by the idea that there is 'something more disturbing… some profound subterranean violence done to American English, which cannot… be detected empirically in any of the grammatical sentences with which this work is formed.' Jameson, (pp.23-24).

understanding which, in this case, affects the reader through an unsettling mood of disquiet – as it self-reflexively expresses a tension between the illusionism of history, and that of art.[84]

It is an anxiety associated with this tension that Houdini experiences and embodies. In the above passage Doctorow extends this anxiety to the general modern American citizen. The passage culminates in a description of an anxious reader: one who feels the need to scrutinize and read 'between the lines of the journals and gazettes.' By portraying opposing images of reality and strange affective currents as prevalent in the milieu of modern America (especially, as I show in the next section, through Houdini-esque forms of popular culture and mass entertainment), Doctorow's novel expresses what Hillary Chute describes as 'the productively unsettling effects of the visual in subject formation.'[85] If 'the visual' – by which Chute means popular visual art in particular – has potentially 'unsettling effects', these effects are also productive because they may deconstruct and challenge characters' embodied cultural performances.

For example, early in the novel, when Father sets out to join Peary on his Arctic expedition, he sustains a performance of manly propriety throughout a farewell ceremony and 'a champagne breakfast with the press.'[86] He shakes Younger Brother's hand and tells him to keep an eye on the business; he shares an affable goodbye with Mother; he doffs his hat to the family as he leaves. We are then told that 'it was not until some time later, when the *Roosevelt* had reached the open sea, that Father was persuaded of the actuality of the trip.'[87] This realisation occurs away from domestic and media structures which favour an idealized form of masculinity. It is followed by the sight of a 'transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants.'[88] As Father slips towards 'actuality', the illusion that 'there were no immigrants' is broken. This leads to an existentially and textually destabilising moment in the text. Both Father's subjecthood and the diegetic world suddenly begin to recompose themselves in a manner which owes further debt to Winslow Homer's paintings of menacing seas: Father, 'a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul…the wind came up, the sky had turned overcast, and the great ocean began to tumble and break upon itself as if made of slabs of granite and sliding terraces of slate.'[89] The word 'foundered' calls to mind

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[84] 'False Documents', p.151.
[85] Chute, p.272.
[86] *Ragtime*, p.11.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., p.12.

sinking ships, but also serves as a homonym, emphasising the moment of seeing, of discovery, as inseparable from personal reconfiguration. Father here seems to experience the 'shock' which Jameson describes as following the realisation of being confined in an image of history. His confrontation with 'actuality' uncomfortably reveals his previous perspective as illusory. By continuing to respond to the paintings evoked in the novel's opening, Doctorow emphasises the importance of the modern visual artform both for his own narrative representations, and as something which can replicate or 'transmit' the affective experience of alternate historicity. By describing Father's 'foundering', Doctorow suggests that the individual's emotions and perceptions are metaleptically involved with forms of cultural representation, just as *Ragtime* itself is.

That the novel is also concerned with changes in mass culture, then, has significant implications for its representation of the role of popular visual art and entertainment in reconfiguring modes of subjectivity and challenging cultural illusions. Hillary Chute asserts that the developments in popular visual culture chronicled by *Ragtime* demonstrate a decline in the utopian possibility of 'radical working-class politics', but the rise of a 'different optimism with which mass-produced art…can be invested.'[90] This optimism, for Chute, rests on the ability of popular art to democratically appeal to a broad range of people and to reconfigure the 'geography of the everyday', thus demonstrating 'the hopefulness and liberatory qualities of mass-produced art forms.'[91] In the next section, I investigate these claims in relation to Houdini, the novel's central example of a producer of popular visual art. I argue that by adopting Houdini's pantomimic signification as a method for his own historical representation, Doctorow presents a more ambivalent picture of mass entertainment. While burgeoning visual culture may be instrumental in dismantling oppressive, distorted historicising perspectives, Doctorow highlights that it may also continue to obfuscate and manipulate reality.

Subversive Harmonies: Houdini as Material Unconscious

Through *Ragtime*'s echoing of modern art forms, Houdini's influence on the novel's narrative emerges as twofold. Not only does his pantomimic (lack of) historicity provide a

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[90] Chute, p.272.
[91] Ibid., p.277.

representational strategy for Doctorow's narrative, but through Doctorow's own expansive pantomimic style, the motifs and associations of Houdini's performances are refracted throughout the novel's wider representation. Critics have previously identified ragtime music as the central popular cultural form guiding the novel's structure and its scattering of recurring motifs throughout the novel. John G. Parks highlights that the syncopated rhythms of ragtime music inform 'the sprightly energy of the sentences, the shifts in scene, the blending of the fictive and the historical, the parallels and coincidences, the repetitions and innovations.'[92] Without denying the importance of ragtime music for Doctorow's narrative structure, I argue that viewing Houdini as an organising metaphor helps more to account for the particularity of Doctorow's mimicking of popular culture. Houdini highlights the absurd, ontologically destabilising nature of the novel's 'parallels and coincidences', fictionalisations of history, and representations of mass entertainment.

While the novel's incorporation of the rhythms of ragtime provides a structural basis for textual harmonies and coincidences, the content and tone of these harmonies is most often linked to Houdini. Indeed, during a scene in which Houdini performs a jail-escape from the New York Tombs, Doctorow highlights the capacity of the escapologist to incite subversive mimicry. Houdini is led, 'stark naked' to a cell on Murderer's Row, and as the guards leave he begins to mine his own body for the tools he has concealed, extracting a strip of metal from a callus on his heel and a piece of wire from the knots of his hair.[93] Houdini steadily becomes aware that 'across the vault of gloom the cell directly opposite was lighted and occupied.'[94] Inside the cell, which, tellingly, glows 'like a stage', is Harry K. Thaw, the 'eccentric scion of a coke and railroad fortune' who is imprisoned for murdering the architect Stanford White.[95] As Houdini unlocks the prison door and dresses, Thaw begins to undress. This mirroring concludes in a grotesque parody of the masculine performance of the escape: the narrator discloses that 'the prisoner was now as naked as Houdini had been. The prisoner came up to the front of his cell and raising his arms in a shockingly obscene manner he thrust his hips forward and flapped his penis between the bars.'[96] Thaw here reflects the absurdity

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[92] John G. Parks, 'Compositions of Dissatisfaction: *Ragtime*', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), pp.95-107 (pp.97-98). See also Berndt Ostendorf, 'The Musical World of Doctorow's *Ragtime*' in the same volume, pp.73-93, and Brian Roberts 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45:3 (2004), pp.247-260.
[93] *Ragtime*, p.25.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., p.26 and p.4.
[96] Ibid., p.26.

of Houdini's pretence to masculine prowess (indeed, it is this incident that provokes Houdini's rumination on his exclusion from the ranks of men who race automobiles and fly planes). This scene outlines how Doctorow's narrative responds to and echoes motifs of the escapologist. While the sandhog episode serves as a key example of the parallels between Houdini and a historicity which Doctorow wishes to recover, the refraction of Houdini throughout the prose offers a continued disruption of idealised historical images of early-twentieth century modernity and masculinity. As Harry Thaw, described by the narrator as a 'grotesque mimic', helps demonstrate, *Ragtime*'s 'productively unsettling' metaleptic engagement with Houdini emerges via parallels and coincidences – subversive harmonies of confinement, claustrophobia, and spectacles of the performative, pantomimic body.[97]

These latter three aspects often interweave, and they greatly inform the fragmentation and re-arrangement of the dominant mode of perception embodied by the novel's insular, upper-middle-class family. The language and imagery of Houdini's acts of confinement, especially his failed escape from the grave where he emerges bleeding and gasping for air, refract and recur throughout the representation of characters' dawning awareness of oppressive, stifling environments. The newspaper reporter Jacob Riis, for example (represented in the novel as himself absurdly idealistic and quixotically out of touch), visits New York's cluttered, unsanitary tenements with the idea of providing 'air shafts. Air shafts, light and air' for the families living there.[98] All Riis does is photograph the families. The narrator reveals that 'after he left, the family, not daring to move, remained in the position in which they had been photographed. They waited for life to change. They waited for their transformation.'[99] The family's paralysis here represents the gulf between mass-distributed historical images and authentic historicity. Riis's photography confines the family in an illusory image of the impetus for change. Aware that historical validity appears to be determined by the media, the family *don't dare* to stop posing; as with Houdini's absurd, endless process of pantomimic escape, the prospect of a 'transformation' in actuality is ironically negated by the exaggerated pose. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator describes Tateh as similarly reaching awareness of the stifling inefficacy of images of progression. Tateh and his young daughter are involved in the mill-worker's strike and subsequent police violence in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He later reads a newspaper report of the strike which

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., p.15.
[99] Ibid.

describes the 'police terror', and knows that this turn of media sympathy towards the workers means the strike will be won. However, this victory is undercut by an image of continued confinement: 'But then what?... They would still live in that wretched room, in that terrible dark street. Tateh shook his head. This country will not let me breathe.'[100]

Motifs of suffocation and entrapment likewise orbit the Family's house. While this is markedly different from the confinement experienced by the industrial working class families living in poverty, the narrator reveals that Houdini himself, ironically, feels 'trapped by the heavy square furnishings, the drapes and dark rugs, the Oriental silk cushions, the green glass lampshades' of the Family's parlor.[101] If this testifies to Houdini's particular exclusion from the class of citizenship he aspires to, it also refracts into a more general indication of the imprisoning, performative qualities of this kind of subjecthood. This is suggested by the stage-like cell in which Harry Thaw is confined, which has been decorated in a manner correspondent with the WASPish taste exemplified in the Family's parlor: 'a Regency armoire stood against the stone wall. The ceiling fixture had been ornamented with a Tiffany lampshade.'[102] It is further indicated by Mother's Younger Brother, who, as he distances himself from his Family's attitude over the course of the novel, comes to see them 'in their suffocating parlor with its chaise and its mounted heads and fringed lampshades…he felt he couldn't breathe…the young man rushed from the room convinced he was strangling to death.'[103] Importantly, this Houdini-esque representation of the confining aspects of the Family's way of living is counterposed with a representation of its dissolution as an escape; a liberatory disorder which is marked by the increasing visibility of social and racial heterogeneity. This process begins when Mother discovers Coalhouse and Sarah Walker's child buried in the garden and brings it into the Family home. Continuing the echoes of Houdini's grave escape, the narrator describes how, after hearing 'a cry coming from her feet, from the earth', Mother digs into the ground, revealing 'a brown baby…[that] had been bound tight in a cotton blanket. Mother freed its arms…it was bloody, an unwashed newborn boy.'[104] This, of course, is another refutation of the social-historical blindness evinced in the novel's opening passage.

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[100] Ibid., p.108.
[101] Ibid., p.8.
[102] Ibid., p.26.
[103] Ibid., p.152.
[104] Ibid., pp.58-9.

The motifs and harmonies of Houdini in the above examples demonstrate the flexibility of his signification and the extent to which *Ragtime* is indebted to his particular form of popular art. Doctorow's narrative incorporates the escapologist as a means of providing tropes for pantomiming dominant masculinity, describing materially and socially confined citizens, and highlighting the liberatory unpicking of the constraints of illusory perspectives. It is this latter point that I now wish to focus on by assessing its bearing on the implicit narrative trajectory of the novel: the growth of film and other modern forms of mass entertainment out of earlier, magical-assemblage entertainment forms. Through its centralisation of Houdini, *Ragtime* presents a highly ambivalent depiction of popular culture's ability to effect change. While entertainment forms can express alternate images of reality and dispel certain social illusions, they may be ineffective, or they may propagate new, socially troubling illusions.

The long list of indoor and outdoor pursuits in the novel's opening passage – 'parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings…meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms' – indicate *Ragtime*'s representation of forms of entertainment and recreation as a key part of early-twentieth-century urban life.[105] This reflects Bill Brown's claim that at the turn of the century, 'the world of amusement [began to] appear an integral part of American daily life and the mode through which daily life had become public.'[106] Brown coins the term 'material unconscious' to signify the ways in which literature incorporates paraphernalia from this world of amusement, in the process disclosing 'their liberating and restricting contradictions.'[107] In *Ragtime*, the text's 'material unconscious' is guided by the novel's incorporation and refraction of Houdini. Recreational ephemera, through Doctorow's representation, become sites which can demystify the illusions of modernity, but may only be able to do so by signalling ongoing exploitation and absurdity. My usage of the term 'material unconscious' in relation to Doctorow's novel differs from its systematic use in Brown's theory. While Brown assesses recreational ephemera as unwitting, unconscious presences which create 'fissures in the literary text…[exposing] the fantasy for what it is', I argue that Doctorow self-consciously represents entertainment as something which can disrupt dominant fantasies. However, the term remains useful as a means of suggesting the underlying presence of recreational paraphernalia in the

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[105] Ibid., p.3.
[106] Brown, *Material Unconscious*, p.7.
[107] Ibid., p.13.

narrative, and the disruptive 'images' of history they can provide.[108] Houdini remains the primary figure informing the tension between illusory national 'fantasy' and its ambivalent disruption – Brown's language here of liberation and restriction indicates the pertinence of the escapologist as a figure for examining the contradictions of cultural forms.

Ragtime's overarching account of the Family's reconfiguration broadly reflects the productive social changes which some scholars see mass entertainment forms as helping to usher in. Historians have observed that the changing recreational landscape in modern America led to an emancipatory move away from stifling nineteenth-century codes of behaviour and towards a heterogeneous mixing of previously stratified social groups. Robert Snyder writes that vaudeville houses (which first became wildly popular in the 1890s) deliberately trod a fine line between licentiousness and respectability. In their efforts to cater for 'the old variety crowd and also attract those middle-class people who were chafing at the restraints of Victorianism', vaudeville managers took care not to offend those who were still bound to 'middle class ideals of self-control and self-improvement.'[109] Despite this lingering conservatism, Lewis Erenberg describes how 'in the 1890s American popular culture began a larger reorientation away from the confinement, restrictions, and conventions of urban industrial society and the code of gentility.'[110] Erenberg explicitly states that Houdini 'stands out as a symbol of the development of new trends in cultural life.'[111] In *Ragtime*, despite Houdini's ambivalence and his unhappy assessment of his life as devoted to 'mindless entertainment', Doctorow's narrative nevertheless echoes the progressive disruption these entertainment forms can provoke. To use Chute's terminology, the 'geography of the everyday' is reconfigured as the Family become aware of social and racial heterogeneity.[112] After the Houdini-esque appearance of the Walkers' child, for example, the diverse systems of labour which surround, and sustain, the Family's domestic environment become visible to Mother. She looks out of the window, suddenly seeing that 'every morning, these washwomen came up the hill from the trolley line on North and fanned into the houses. Traveling Italian gardeners kept the lawns trim. Icemen walked alongside their wagons, their

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[108] Ibid., p.14.
[109] Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000) pp.11-12.
[110] Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p.61.
[111] Ibid., p.68.
[112] Chute, p.277

horses straining…to pull the creaking ice wagons up the hill.'[113] This unsettling of previously exclusionary perspectives is often explicitly shown to stem from encounters with new forms of popular entertainment. The stifling environment of their house is, for example, enlivened by the presence of Coalhouse Walker and the ragtime music he plays, which no-one in the family except for Younger Brother has heard before. The narrator describes the 'vigorous' music using vibrant images of nature, emphasising the contrast with the usually airless, suffocating surroundings: 'small clear chords hung in the air like flowers. The melodies were like bouquets.'[114] Later in the novel, when Father takes the Boy to a baseball game, his middle-class myopia is further dispelled: 'there was a first baseman named Butch Schmidt, and others with the names Cocrehan, Moran, Hess, Rudolph, which led inevitably to the conclusion that professional baseball was played by immigrants.'[115]

This baseball game, however, stands as a key example of the tensions which Doctorow's attention to Houdini-esque motifs and associations casts onto sites of recreation. By elucidating this, I will move towards my concluding discussion of the novel's ambivalence regarding the development of film and the 'liberatory qualities of mass-produced art forms.'[116] Through Doctorow's representation, the baseball game emerges as a complex, composite recreational form which both productively challenges Father's cultural perspective – in Brown's terms, it exposes 'the fantasy for what it is' – but also demonstrates the cultural illusionism of forms of mass entertainment themselves.

The baseball teams each have their own human mascot. The Boston Braves have, for 'good luck…a midget, in a team uniform like the rest but proportionately minute', and the New York Giants display 'a strange skinny man whose uniform was ill-fitting, who had weak eyes that did not align properly and who seemed to shadow the game in a lethargic pantomime of his own solitude…Father began to watch the game less than he did this unfortunate creature, obviously a team pet.'[117] Doctorow here, through the Houdini-esque motif of the pantomimic body – that body whose 'surplus corporeality and superabundant representation' mimics idealised images, and yet disrupts them by caricaturing its own exploitation – mobilises a discourse of freakery within the baseball game.[118] The term

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[113] *Ragtime*, p.60.
[114] Ibid, p.132.
[115] Ibid., p.193.
[116] Chute, p.277.
[117] Ibid., pp.193-194.
[118] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, p.26.

emphasises not the designation of the bodies of the 'midget', and the 'strange skinny man' (whose name we are told is Charles Victor Faust) as freakish, but the ways in which their function within the baseball game harmonises with a pre-existing mode of American entertainment and exhibition. Rachel Adams argues that 'freak is not an inherent quality but an identity realised through gesture, costume, and staging'; similarly, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes that the 'extraordinary body' becomes freakish through the method of its presentation: 'Enfreakment emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize…at the same time that enfreakment elaborately foregrounds specific bodily eccentricities, it also collapses all those differences into a "freakery," a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness.'[119] The baseball teams' similar treatment of the bodies of the 'midget' and Charles Victor Faust reflect Adams' and Garland's definitions of freakery. Their uniforms serve as 'costumes' stressing their corporeal otherness – the midget's is deliberately made small, and Victor Faust's is pointedly 'ill-fitting' – and their symbolic role as good luck charms for the teams, as well as Victor Faust's pantomimic 'shadowing' of the game, indicate stylized 'cultural rituals' which distance their bodies as sites of otherness. The violence implicit in Thomson's description of how freakish bodies are 'colonized' by the exhibitors is evident in Doctorow's brief, blunt summary of Victor Faust's eventual fate: 'soon thereafter the players became bored with him and he was no longer regarded as a good luck charm by Manager McGraw. His uniform was confiscated and he was unceremoniously sent on his way. He was remanded to an insane asylum and some months later died there.'[120]

This nesting of freakery inside the baseball game reveals the ambivalence of *Ragtime*'s representation of developing popular culture and its increasing centralisation in modern U.S. life. It reflects an uncomfortable continuity of exploitative illusionism within forms of mass entertainment which may otherwise productively unsettle existing, oppressive illusory perspectives. However, this scene's ambivalence also rests on the depiction of active and passive modes of spectatorship, something which takes on especial significance in the novel's representation of film. Alan Trachtenberg, drawing on Neil Harris, writes that as mass spectator sports developed at the turn of the century, they adopted a 'management of

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[119] Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) p.6. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Introduction: From Wonder to Error – a Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity', in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp.1-19 (p.10).
[120] *Ragtime*, p.195.

illusion' by increasing the scale of the spectacle and dispensing with intimacy, and that this reflected a broader cultural trend of turning once active participants into 'passive spectators…consumers of images and sensations produced by others.'[121] This scene broadly reflects Trachtenberg's argument. The narrator describes Father as lamenting the loss of a smaller-scale baseball game and the interactive intimacy this allows. He reminisces about the games of his youth, 'when the players addressed each other as Mister and played…before audiences of collegians who rarely numbered more than a hundred.'[122] The passive spectatorship induced by this new, large-scale game is suggested by Father's drifting into solipsistic reverie: 'as the afternoon wore on he entertained the illusion that what he saw was not baseball but an elaborate representation of his own problems.'[123] As a spectator to modern baseball's 'management of illusion', Father begins to entertain illusions of his own. If this suggests a kind of (secular) magical thinking transmitting from the baseball game to Father, it ironically occurs because the baseball game fails to make its own illusionism entertaining.[124] The passivity of the spectacle means Father is simply bored. Significantly, however, the presence of the freakish mascots here disrupts the passive reception of the baseball game's spectacle – Father's eye cannot help but be drawn to the 'pantomime' of the 'unfortunate creature', and the 'solitude' of exclusion he enacts. In this, Doctorow's narrative continues to suggest that Houdini-esque signification may unsettle cultural images which might otherwise go unscrutinised. Not only do the motifs of the escapologist inform Doctorow's attention to Faust's pantomimic body, but the productively unsettling effects of this body (because it is embedded in the baseball game's spectacle) are tempered by a similar, ambivalent dynamism between passivity and activity, and between illusion and exposure. Guiding *Ragtime*'s material unconscious, Houdini is central to the novel's disclosure of, in Bill Brown's terms, the 'liberating and restricting contradictions' of recreational cultural forms.[125]

Accordingly, this ambivalence regarding mass entertainment ultimately maps across onto Doctorow's representation of film. However, by the end of the novel, the 'stakes' of

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[121] Trachtenberg, pp.122-123.
[122] *Ragtime*, p.194.
[123] Ibid., pp.194-195.
[124] There are echoes here of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of modern mass culture as creating a Houdini-esque asymptotic promise: 'the culture industry', they write, 'perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises... the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory.' Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), pp.92-3.
[125] Bill Brown, p.13.

Ragtime's ambivalence regarding the capacity of popular culture to subvert hegemonic illusions have been raised, via a gradual intensification in the novel's own pantomimic representation. The dialectic between the real historicity of exploited Others and the way this is contained and managed in illusory images converges, and (literally) explodes, in the episode of Coalhouse Walker's rebellion.

Walker is the victim of racial injustice, and this is visited on him particularly because he refuses to fit the mould of the white world's illusory term 'Negro.'[126] It occurs to Father one day 'that Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro… Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's.'[127] Coalhouse lives his life in refutation of the illusory 'reality' that he is inferior to whites. This is what leads to the escalation of his confrontation with Fire Chief Willie Conklin. Walker is out driving one Sunday when the volunteer firehouse staff stop him outside the station house and demand a toll. Even though the toll has 'never before been collected', Conklin pugnaciously informs Coalhouse that it is 'nevertheless in force.'[128] Doctorow here demonstrates, with sickening realism, the ease with which registers and systems of officialdom – the public toll, the firehouse and its staff – may not only mask real prejudice, but function as the illusive mechanism through which a broader, social prejudice may actualize as oppression.[129] The bureaucratic-rationality of modernity here pantomimes itself, its absurd deployment in service of Conklin's racism revealing the hollowness of its claims to objectivity and reason.

Walker is well aware that Conklin is lying, that the invocation of a toll is an illusion allowing power dynamics to hide in plain sight. He knows that 'in his dress and as the owner of a car he was a provocation to many white people. He had created himself in the teeth of

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[126] In this I mean specifically the false images, narratives, and associations that the dominant white world filled the word 'Negro' up with. Frantz Fanon powerfully details the real-world affects/effects of this process in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Under the gaze of a white child, Fanon describes how: 'My body was given back to me spread-eagled, disjointed, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly…'. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (Sidmouth: Pluto Press, 2008), p.86.

[127] *Ragtime*, p.134.

[128] Ibid., p.146.

[129] This is the fundamental insight running through James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Baldwin states that 'the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy… and are involved only symbolically with colour.' He also refers to the white world's systems of 'tricknology' in keeping these tensions in place (although this is Elijah Muhammad's term; Baldwin himself expresses deep reservations about the dialectical implications of Muhammad's stance – i.e., *total* rejection and reversal of 'the white world' leading to a mimicking of its oppressive logic). James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.82 and pp.60-61.

such feelings.'[130] He also knows that the road he is on is a 'public thoroughfare', and tells the firehouse staff such in an attempt to reason with them.[131] This attempt fails because the firehouse staff, comfortable inside their illusion, have no interest in being reasonable. Their response is to block Walker's car in the road. Coalhouse calmly considers whether he can drive around the blockade. The narrator asserts (pantomimically) that 'apparently it did not occur to him to ingratiate himself in the fashion of his race.'[132] The word 'apparently' is a key qualifier here – Walker is of course not ignorant of the dynamics of racist confrontations; he simply refuses to participate in their illusionism. In this, Walker comes far closer to embodying the 'ideals' of masculine self-creation, reason and objectivity which Doctorow shows, for the most part, as an illusory gauze disguising the real dysfunction of U.S. modernity.

Coalhouse's defiance turns into fully-fledged rebellion because his consistent reasonableness is met with consistent racist obstructionism. Structural racism reveals (in both Doctorow's novel and in 'real' life), the actual irrationality and dysfunction of supposedly rational and efficient systems. Walker leaves his car and goes to find a policeman. The officer tells Coalhouse that the firehouse 'boys' don't mean any harm and have probably grown tired of their 'sport.'[133] Walker returns to the car to find it vandalised. He demands the car be cleaned and the damage paid for. Another police officer then threatens to charge Walker with drink-driving and with vandalizing the car himself. Walker tries to fend off this encroaching illusory snare with factual reality: 'I do not drink… I did not drive my car off the road nor slash the roof nor defecate in it. I want the damage paid for and I want an apology.'[134] These statements get Walker arrested. Walker is bailed out by Father, and the next day Mother's Younger Brother goes to look at the car. It is now 'thoroughly vandalized', and lies half-sunk in a pond.[135]

Following this incident, Coalhouse's wife, Sarah, 'knowing little of government, nor appreciating the degree of national unimportance of her Coalhouse's trials… conceived the idea of petitioning the United States on his behalf.'[136] She attends a public appearance of Vice-President James Sherman. When she sees him, Sarah breaks through the line of people

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[130] *Ragtime*, p.145.
[131] Ibid., p.146.
[132] Ibid., p.147.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid., p.149.
[135] Ibid., p.150.
[136] Ibid., p.158.

and runs, 'calling, in her confusion, President! President! Her arm was extended and her black hand reached toward him… A militiaman stepped forward and, with the deadly officiousness of armed men who protect the famous, brought the butt of his Springfield against Sarah's chest as hard as he could.'[137] Sarah dies as a result of this injury. In grief and rage, Coalhouse then begins a violent rebellion by blowing-up the firehouse.

Tellingly, the sound and force of the blast from the fire-house is interpreted by an audience watching Houdini perform in a theatre two miles away as just 'another of his satanic tricks.'[138] While Coalhouse's trials have been gradually intensifying, so too have Houdini's illusions. After the death of his mother, Houdini's anxiety and depression spiral. His performances become more frantic and more disturbing as he drives himself 'beyond his own physical capacity'; the narrator asserts that 'in fact his performances were now of such intensity and had so strange and disquieting an effect on his audiences, that in some cases children were hurried out before the end of the show.'[139] This co-current intensification in the novel of Coalhouse's entrapment in racist illusionism and the 'disquieting' effects of Houdini's illusions further demonstrates the reciprocity between *Ragtime*'s diegetic content and the subversive – or 'weird' – tones and affects of Houdini's art. It also suggests a kind of narrative climax in the novel's dialectic between actual and illusory historicity. Blowing-up the station house is – as well as simply revenge – Coalhouse's effort to render his historicity spectacularly visible; to make an image that exceeds the capacity of racist illusionism to contain. However, in representing the explosion *first* through its misinterpretation in Houdini's act, Doctorow suggests that even this historically forceful act may be stage-managed into obscurity. This proves to be the case a few pages later, when, 'after conferring with the police', the editors of two local newspapers decide not to print the letters that Coalhouse Walker has left them explaining his reasons for committing the crime.[140] The letters are suppressed because their reasonableness and truthfulness threaten to dispel the illusionism upholding the status-quo: 'The letters were written in a clear firm hand and told of the events leading up to the attack on the firehouse… The newspaper editors and police officials believed it was in the interest of the public welfare not to print the letter. An isolated crazed killer was one problem. An insurrection was another.'[141]

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[137] Ibid., p.159.
[138] Ibid., p.171.
[139] Ibid., p.170.
[140] Ibid., p.176.
[141] Ibid., pp.176-7.

Doctorow's account of Coalhouse Walker's ensnarement in racist illusionism deepens the novel's concluding account of popular film's capacity to unsettle dominant perspectives. *Ragtime* suggests that the primary good of film is its ability to promote the visibility of social and racial heterogeneity. Tateh, after fleeing the mill-town of Lawrence, transforms himself into a successful filmmaker, renaming himself Baron Ashkenazy. At the end of the novel, he has an idea for a new picture: 'a bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds…who would have funny adventures in their own neighbourhood.'[142] The asyndetic removal of commas between the apparent dualisms of Ashkenazy's cast of characters indicates that the film, through its images of heterogeneity, will loosen exclusionary categorisation. The potential of film to be a 'liberatory...mass-produced art form' which reconfigures the 'geography of the everyday' is here indicated, and the significance of this is strengthened by *Ragtime*'s previous depictions of U.S. modernity as deeply riven by racist myopia and illusionism. In keeping with the novel's pantomimic style, however, this optimistic portrayal of film is undercut in the moment of its representation through the glibness of its tone. Although the 'pals' are diverse, it is far from clear how genuinely 'liberatory' their 'funny adventures' will be.

Doctorow's reservations regarding the liberatory potential of film are shown most strongly through his representation of its complicity with a Jameson-esque erasure of historicity by capitalistic spectacle. The narrator describes Tateh's self-transformation as pointing 'his life along the lines of flow of American energy', thus indicating his emulation of the U.S. entrepreneurialism which *Ragtime*'s Houdini has helped reveal as complicit in propagating dominant cultural illusions.[143] As Hillary Chute argues, Tateh's flight from his previous social and political activism cast him as an 'anarchist turned movie-making capitalist.'[144] If this is an implication of a Jameson-esque disappearance of radical politics under capitalism, elsewhere in the novel Doctorow explicitly describes how film's harnessing to capitalist interests threatens to erase social and political historicity. The actress Evelyn Nesbit gives testimony at the trial of Harry K. Thaw. The narrator pantomimically asserts that 'her testimony created the first sex goddess in American history.'[145] The 'business community' quickly catch on to the economic value of Evelyn's sexuality, seeing how it might be lucratively exhibited in 'moving pictures, or picture shows'; and thus, the narrator

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[142] Ibid., pp.269-270.
[143] Ibid., p.111.
[144] Chute, p.279.
[145] *Ragtime*, p.70.

asserts, 'did Evelyn provide the inspiration for the concept of the movie star system and the model for every sex goddess from Theda Bara to Marilyn Monroe.'[146] Importantly, the narrator describes how 'various trade union leaders, anarchists and socialists…correctly prophesised that she [Evelyn] would in the long run be a greater threat to the workingman's interests than the mine owners or steel manufacturers.'[147] Here, in what can be seen as a neo-historical tweaking of Jameson's argument, Doctorow acknowledges prophecies of a loss of historicity under capitalistic spectacle to be 'correct', but he qualifies this – and in doing so goes some way to restoring that loss of historicity – by uncovering the roots of this process in modernity.

Through his representation of Evelyn Nesbit, Doctorow makes popular culture's complicity in the obfuscation of historicity explicit. In the novel, the anarchist Emma Goldman asserts that the 'threat to the workingman' which film constitutes (not as a medium, but as an industry driven by desire conjured through an Evelyn-inspired movie star system) is that through viewing, the masses are 'persuaded to identify' with the dominant class: 'the laborer goes home…and he dreams not of justice but of being rich.'[148] What Goldman prophesises here, then, is that film will propagate an illusion of escape – an illusionistically produced fantasy that personal satisfaction and socio-political transformation can be achieved via a fulfilment of capitalistic promise. In a neo-historicist moment of prolepsis, the narrator of *Ragtime* seems to confirm this prophecy: 'today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger.'[149]

Doctorow literalizes the seductive, de-politicizing power of the desire mobilised by Evelyn-as-movie-goddess in his depiction of a romance scene between the actress and the Emma Goldman. This scene also foregrounds the Houdini-esque motif of bodily confinement to suggest that the illusionism of film, too, may rest on concealed corporeal exploitation. Goldman undresses Evelyn, revealing how 'marks of the stays ran vertically like welts around Nesbit's waist. The evidence of the garters could be seen in the red lines running around the tops of her thighs.'[150] Goldman, out of arousal and sympathy, peels off these restrictive garments and begins massaging Evelyn's welts. At this point Younger Brother bursts from the closet where he has been hiding, watching the scene. The narrator describes

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[146] Ibid., pp.70-71.
[147] Ibid., p.71.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., p.7.
[150] Ibid., p.53.

that he clutches 'as if trying to choke it, a rampant penis which… [launched] to his cries of ecstasy or despair, great filamented spurts of jism that traced the air like bullets and then settled slowly over Evelyn in her bed like falling ticker tape.'[151] In absurd, pantomimed form, Younger Brother here displays the 'rampant' desire which *Ragtime* suggests as following the construction of the movie star system. The corporeal exploitation underlying the production of this desire (the film industry's rapacious harnessing of Evelyn's sexuality) is shown both in the welts on Evelyn's body and through Doctorow's emphasis of the violence of Younger Brother's intrusion – his 'spurts of jism' trace the air 'like bullets.' Significantly, Doctorow then immediately shifts the simile to 'like falling ticker tape.' As William Lazenbatt argues, 'Younger Brother's ticker tape ejaculation links sexuality to the stock market values of capital.'[152] Ticker tape is also, however, associated with national celebrations and parades (especially when 'falling'). Through this pantomimic, over-abundant representation, Doctorow suggests the film industry to be a new national mode of cultural illusionism.

Via its Houdini-esque representation, then, *Ragtime* represents film as a potentially productively unsettling popular cultural form – it nevertheless *also* threatens to perpetuate and intensify the illusionistic obfuscation of social and political meaning. Doctorow's recognition of the growing power of spectacle reflects Trachtenberg's assessment of modern U.S. culture's reformulation of citizens into 'passive spectators…consumers of images and sensations produced by others.'[153] If, following Jameson, *Ragtime* lacks historicity, then this is in part due to the novel's concerted effort to represent the modern origins of a culture that – at the level of both its dominant ideals and its contestable new, popular cultural formations – misdirects from political meaning by privileging illusionism over reality. Doctorow finds the dialectical, illusionistic figure of Harry Houdini an ideal means for exploring these inter-related concerns. Through its self-reflexive representation of the magician and escapologist, *Ragtime* suggests how the postmodern novel may self-consciously thematize and redress the disappearance of historicity in late capitalist culture. In performing the illusion of historical empiricism – in its flagrant declaration of itself as a 'false document' – *Ragtime* encourages a

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[151] Ibid., p.54.

[152] William Lazenbatt, 'Taking Uncivil Liberties: Body and Body Politic in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow', *Irish Journal of American Studies*, 3 (1993), 55-71 (p.67).

[153] Trachtenberg, p.122. Indeed, Doctorow populates his novel with crowds of people who seem hungry for this kind of spectatorship: from the people looking on 'from their front yards' when Houdini crashes his car, to the 'swarms of people' circulating around urban entertainments, to the 'thousands of quietly watchful New Yorkers' whom Doctorow portrays as flocking to witness Coalhouse Walker's occupation of J.P. Morgan's library. *Ragtime*, p.3, p.7, and p.239.

scrutinization of its performance, intuiting that truth lies in the strange, the subversive, the counter-factual.

Creativity, Escapistry and Escapism in Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay*

Questions of escape loom large in contemporary literary debate. In a 2012 *New Yorker* article, Arthur Krystal surveyed the literary scene and saw a narrowing of the divide between literary fiction and 'escapist' genre fiction. 'The literary climate has changed', Krystal wrote: 'the canon has been impeached, formerly neglected writers have been saluted, and the presumed superiority of one type of book over another no longer passes unquestioned.'[1] Krystal is trepidatious that 'writers we once thought of as guilty pleasures are being granted literary status.'[2] Following George Orwell's concept of "Good Bad Books", he endorses an appreciation of genre fiction in which writer and reader remain aware that these novels have value and significance only within the bounds of their own categorisation as 'escape literature.'[3]

Krystal's article prompted a slew of criticism. Lev Grossman, writing a rebuttal in *Time* magazine, stated that 'to dismiss genre fiction as escapism is to seriously under-think what happens when someone opens a genre novel.'[4] Grossman argues that people do not 'escape' their problems in genre fiction. Instead, they encounter them in 'transfigured form', and this allows readers a better understanding of whatever it is that troubles them.[5] For Grossman, literary escape remains tethered to reality – the book is a kind of orbiting satellite, from which the reader can view their own problems at fresh angles. In addition to redefining the escapist work of genre fiction, Grossman offers a different perspective on the changing literary climate identified by Krystal. Rather than simply seeing a literary canon threatened by newly sanctified genre works, Grossman notices 'a vast blurry middle ground in between genre fiction and literary fiction', where contemporary writers – Michael Chabon among them – productively incorporate elements of genre fiction into their own work.[6] This

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[1] Arthur Krystal, 'Easy Writers: Guilty Pleasures Without Guilt', in *The New Yorker* (May 21st, 2012) https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/28/easy-writers [accessed 23/03/2021].
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Lev Grossman, 'Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction Is Disruptive Technology: How science fiction, fantasy, romance, mysteries and all the rest will take over the world', in *TIME* (May 23rd, 2012) https://entertainment.time.com/2012/05/23/genre-fiction-is-disruptive-technology/ [accessed 23/03/2021].
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

relationship runs the other way, too. According to Grossman, writers of genre fiction (such as China Miéville and Kelly Link) are 'gleefully importing literary techniques into genre novels, to marvelous effect.'[7] What is being escaped from in this back-and-forth, Grossman suggests, is not the distinctiveness of generic and literary forms, but an increasingly redundant perception of a hierarchy of literary value which would strive to keep those forms apart.[8]

This questioning of the nature, role and place of escapism in contemporary literature finds a counterpart within academic discussions of the post-postmodern. Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, in their introduction to a collection of essays assessing recent changes in literary studies, identify Michael Chabon's 'heartfelt embrace of genre fiction' not as an escape from literary hierarchies, but as a representative example of the 'shift away from "ironic watching" and toward the embrace of "single-entendre principles"' that characterises a new, post-postmodern 'literature of sincerity.'[9] In Gladstone and Worden's formulation the specific features of genre fiction matter less than the 'heartfelt' sincerity with which Chabon embraces it, because this embrace signifies the 'professional abandonment of postmodernism's signature affective stance.'[10]

Significantly, the 'abandonment' of postmodernist affect which Gladstone and Worden allude to both generates and responds to questions of escapism. This is made clear by David Foster Wallace in his 1993 essay on television and U.S. fiction, 'E Unibus Pluram', which is a foundational text in the study of literature's 'New Sincerity' (and also the source of the quoted terms in the above citation from Gladstone and Worden's introduction).[11] In the essay, Wallace calls for a move away from the irony and cynicism characterising much postmodern fiction. He quotes from cultural critic Lewis Hyde, who states that 'irony has

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. Grossman writes that the critical attitude which treats genre fiction as inferior 'smacks of mass cultural neurosis', remaining tangled up in outdated questions of social status. Krystal, in his follow-up article responding to Grossman and to the wider criticism his piece provoked from journalists, and from authors such as Ursula Le Guin, seems to miss the fact that Grossman's argument is against the hierarchical arrangement of fiction, not an assertion that genre and literary fiction are indistinct. Arthur Krystal, 'It's Genre. Not That There's Anything Wrong With It!', in *The New Yorker* (October 24th 2012) https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/its-genre-not-that-theres-anything-wrong-with-it [accessed 24/03/2021].

[9] Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, "Introduction", in *Postmodern/Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp.1-24 (p.1).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Adam Kelly's essay 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' inaugurated the literary study of New Sincerity through a reading of Wallace's work. Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp.131-46.

only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.'[12] In order to escape from this cultural cage of irony, Wallace suggests that contemporary (or post-postmodern) writers try and restore emotion and earnestness in their work, or, in Wallace's words, 'treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.'[13] The prevalence of irony in postmodern culture in the first place is, according to Wallace, the product of a complex double-bind of escapism. He writes that part of the problem with television's cultural omnipresence is that it 'render[s] me dependent on the device that affords escape from just what my escapism makes unpleasant.'[14] Irony does not break this cycle, but forms a key part of its allure. Wallace describes how TV shows and especially ads may appropriate an appealingly cynical voice and flatter the viewer as 'nobody's fool', so that watching TV becomes less easy to deride and dismiss.[15] This ultimately leads to the situation described by Wallace where, with the national average of TV viewing up to six hours per day, the viewer desires escape from a life that has been hollowed out and reduced by their lengthy daily indulgence in escapism.[16] Because of the complicity of irony in creating an alluring, entrapping televisual culture, Wallace suggests that 'the next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels,"… willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.'[17]

Although the ironic double-bind of an escapist culture creates, for Wallace, the need for a literature of sincerity, this objective has itself been criticised in recent years for amounting to yet another form of escapism.[18] John Doyle, for example, suggests that abandoning irony could result in a loss of critical thinking – he writes:

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[12] Lewis Hyde, 'Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking', in *American Poetry Review*, quoted in David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (Summer 1993), 151-194, p.183.

[13] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', pp.192-3.

[14] Ibid., p.188.

[15] Ibid., p.179.

[16] Ibid., p.151.

[17] Ibid., pp.192-3.

[18] In the two decades since Wallace's essay, many critically and commercially successful writers have emerged whose work seems to fit the New Sincerity values laid out in (and by) Wallace's writing. Adam Kelly sketches something like a New Sincerity canon when he lists Wallace's best-known 'peers and inheritors' as 'Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Tom McCarthy, George Saunders, Colson Whitehead and Zadie Smith.' Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts', in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(2):4 (August 2017), 1-32 (pp.10-11).

A retreat from cultural trends and hip disbelief could be viewed as a noble practice conducive to increased meaning and human connection, but a complete dismissal of skepticism would lead, at best, to an infantile refusal to confront the complexities of reality and, at worst, to a population open to manipulation by coercive, fascistic forces.[19]

Doyle's concern about a retreat from a critical attitude has, as its background, the decline of deconstructionist modes of thought within the academy, and a critical sphere diagnosed by Bruno Latour in 2004 as 'running out of steam.'[20] This conjunction of a move away from irony in fiction and the decline of deconstructionist critique – or, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms, the 'paranoid hermeneutics' of critical 'tracing-and-exposure'[21] – has worried theorists, who, like Doyle, see earnestness as threatening to create an overly credulous audience, one susceptible to dupability and ignorance. It is this kind of worry that leads Iain Bernhoft, in an article on escapism in *Kavalier & Clay*, to criticise the recent changes in literary discourse and to deride the cultural turn that calls 'into question the superiority of critical distance to affective immersion.'[22] Like Krystal, Bernhoft sees the 'ongoing elevation of popular entertainment' as symptomatic of this discursive turn, and he also identifies escapism as the key affective element at play in the literary 'elevation' of genre fiction and the changes in academic discourse.[23] Quoting from Rita Felski and Charles Altieri, Bernhoft writes:

> …a number of scholars have offered accounts of literature's function and relevance beyond critique. These approaches – surface reading, affect theory, the new sincerity – aim to "engage seriously with ordinary motives for reading," not the least of which is escape from the limits of quotidian life and the self (Felski 14). As Charles Altieri argues, "many readers see their interest in reading precisely as an opportunity to escape the empirical self, to undergo through imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy" (29). Imaginative escape from the self, the thinking goes, fosters greater empathy, sensitivity, and well-being.[24]

In presenting escape as the common element unearthed by a number of recent developments in literary criticism, Bernhoft means to show that these scholarly approaches are tarnished.

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[19] Jon Doyle, 'The changing face of post-postmodern fiction: Irony, sincerity, and populism', in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59:3 (2018), 259-270 (p.263). The other contemporary context which informs Doyle's striking concern regarding credulity is probably best expressed by one of his essay's subheadings: 'Making fiction great again'.

[20] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', in *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2 (Winter 2004), 225-248.

[21] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p.143 and p.124.

[22] Iain Bernhoft, 'The Politics of Escapistry: Harry Houdini, Nostalgia, and the Turn from Critique in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*', in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 64:1 (Spring 2018), 1-26 (p.2).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., pp.2-3.

The 'turn from critique', as he has it, threatens a 'systematic disappointment of… political and critical hopes' – escapism in art, which reflects the turn from critique, signifies 'an ongoing crisis of aesthetic production under neoliberalism', where these same political and critical hopes are lost, subsumed under 'the affective experience of the individual.'[25] For Bernhoft, alternatives to deconstructionist critique – including the New Sincerity – mean privileging escapism. Privileging escapism, in turn, means engendering political and social disengagement. Despite citing the arguments that imaginative escape fosters greater empathy and sensitivity, Bernhoft ignores the fact that these qualities are focused on understanding the other. Instead, he sees them as an emotional 'return' on a reader's investment; admirable personal qualities that people can develop via the well-being program of fiction.[26]

Ideas regarding the nature and value of escape, then, are central to the divisions in contemporary literary debate between sincerity and irony and the place of the popular. On the one hand, escapism in fiction seems a productive route to fostering empathy and understanding. It suggests a basis for reading and learning that, as it is affective rather than critical, offers an alternative to troubled deconstructionist hermeneutics and prompts a democratic assessment of people's motivation for reading. On the other hand, it is a quality that reflects a problematic decline in critical thought, promotes an insular, private experience of art, and threatens to disrupt the literary canon and muddy our perceptions of serious fiction.

This chapter argues that in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), the presence of Harry Houdini prompts an exploration of the concept of escape which is ultimately instructive in its resonances with – and departures from – the anxieties and hopes of humanities scholars. According to Joseph Dewey, a key concern across Chabon's fiction is 'the anxious tension between escape and engagement, between the sweet, centripetal pull of the imagination and the harsh, centrifugal pull of real life.'[27] If these fraught dynamics of escape are general in Chabon's work, *Kavalier & Clay* gives full voice to their complexity, articulating the vicissitudes of escape and engagement through the slippery figure of escape artist Harry Houdini. Dewey's use of 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal'

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[25] Ibid., pp.3-4.

[26] Ibid., p.13. There is something self-defeating in Bernhoft's argument here: in his attempt to position the market as a compromising force in the nexus of text and affect, and in arguing that empathy is desirable as part of 'self-managing and self-improvement', he is in fact himself performing the task of extending market logic to human emotion, inhabiting and performing exactly that individualistic 'neoliberal rationality' which he accuses contemporary fiction of propagating (p.13 and p.4).

[27] Joseph Dewey, *Understanding Michael Chabon* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), p.2.

forces as metaphors for the affective tensions in Chabon's work suggests both the inwards-moving, insular retreat and the empathic, outwards-looking connectivity that mark the two poles of contemporary views on escapism outlined above. The value of Houdini's dialectical escapology for Chabon is in its capacity to signify both inwards-and-outwards-facing dynamics of escape. In this chapter, I will trace and clarify Chabon's nuanced, ambivalent representation of escape in *Kavalier & Clay* as refracted into inwards-looking and outwards-looking versions, both of which are self-reflexively assessed in terms of their importance for artistic production and reception.

This latter point – the reflexive nature of Chabon's representation of escape – helps to assess the novel's relation to the contemporary literary debates summarised above. Although the novel is most explicitly concerned with escapism as it pertains to 1940s U.S. superhero comics, Chabon performs this exploration and re-representation within a neo-historical literary novel to examine what possibilities the 'escapism' of popular genre forms might hold for literary fiction today. As Dewey writes, *Kavalier & Clay* constitutes a 'landmark' in Chabon's oeuvre because it marks the beginning of his turn towards genre.[28] Dewey speculates that 'perhaps… Chabon had rediscovered in comic books his unironic adolescent infatuation with unaffected storytelling.'[29] Following this line of thought, and in line with the connections Krystal and Grossman make between escape and genre fiction, I will assess how Chabon's ambivalent examination of different kinds of escape also rests on – and articulates – Chabon's relationship to literary and generic forms. I will elucidate these interrelations via three sections that roughly correspond to three facets of the text's construction: theme, form, and storytelling (which, I will suggest, is a kind of communally and affectively-minded approach to plot formulae and tropes). In dividing my argument this way, I hope to further demonstrate the overabundant symbolism and dialectical expansiveness of the contemporary literary Houdini. Serving as something like the text's muse, Houdini is central to each of these three constituent parts. Chabon finds in the escapologist a rich thematic source, an inspiration for a trickster-ish formal method which pilfers, magpie-like, from different genres, and also a productive reminder of the capacity of fiction-making and storytelling to sincerely enchant. In short: Chabon casts Houdini as a vital figure for contemporary artistry, and in this, *Kavalier & Clay* offers solutions to the impasses of (post-)postmodern literary discourse.

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[28] Ibid., p.18.
[29] Ibid.

As suggested through the above, Chabon's work is often seen as representative of many of the issues currently at the forefront of literary debate. One consequence of this is that academic responses to his work (particularly to *Kavalier & Clay*) tend to reflect which of the two camps already outlined – in favour of escapism and the appropriation of genre elements, or not – the critic happens to favour.[30] Iain Bernhoft, for example, sees *Kavalier & Clay* as acting in tandem with neoliberal ideology, its 'immersive, harmoniously ordered narrative that reaches a satisfying closure' formally representing an escapism which 'renders art readily susceptible to a neoliberal rationality.'[31] Others, such as Hillary Chute, see the novel's representation of comic books as theorizing a 'vital transformation of culture' similar to that depicted in *Ragtime*'s more optimistic moments of popular appraisal.[32] This transformation borrows from Houdini's escapism 'in the sense that his creation of popular democratic art participates in a widespread and hopeful transformation of the possibilities and parameters of ragtime-era art and culture.'[33]

Reading in line with Harry Houdini's inherent doubleness, I wish to attempt a more non-partisan reading of the novel. My argument avoids being steered by, or into, convictions about mass culture and its relative risks or virtues – instead, I want to focus on how Chabon's Houdini-esque representation of these issues postulates particular kinds of readership and authorship. There are two advantages to this approach: firstly, it avoids reductive readings of the novel and/or of Houdini, allowing for the ambivalence of the former and the dialectical richness of the latter.[34] Secondly, it troubles the apparent critical assumptions that treat genre, sincerity, and a dupable public as self-evidently interrelated symptoms of (or even roughly

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[30] Accordingly, Doyle suggests Chabon's recent work amounts to 'an escapist refusal to confront the present' (p.267). In the introduction to one of the only published collections of scholarly essays on Chabon, however, Bob Batchelor and Jesse Kavadlo imply the opposing, 'centrifugal', outwards-looking, perspective. Their attention to Chabon's use of comics and genre fiction 'focuses on areas particularly important to the writer as he continues pushing the boundaries away from what an outsider might consider appropriate for a literary novelist.' Bob Batchelor and Jesse Kavadlo, 'Introduction', in *Michael Chabon's America: Magical Words, Secret Worlds, and Sacred Spaces*, ed. by Jesse Kavadlo and Bob Batchelor (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp.ix-xvi (p.xii).

[31] Bernhoft, p.2 and p.4.

[32] Hillary Chute, '*Ragtime*, *Kavalier & Clay*, and the Framing of Comics', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54:2 (2008), 268-301 (p.282).

[33] Ibid.

[34] This is the flaw in Iain Bernhoft's reading. He argues that Houdini's 'escapistry eschewed any of stage magic's skepticism or epistemic uncertainty.' As I hope this thesis has already done enough to demonstrate, this is a fundamental misreading. Even accepting that those stunts and escapes which took place in full view of the audience represented an attempt to make the trick *appear to be* natural – thereby possibly lessening 'epistemic uncertainty' – it does not account for the fact that Houdini was and is perceived as a magician, and that this association colours or frames *all* of his acts. Bernhoft, p.7.

interchangeable terms in) a contemporary cultural process of escaping from meaning. In my view, the relations between these things (both in Chabon's novel and in contemporary culture) are far from fixed or singular. The apparent equivocations of escape in the novel in fact articulate a nuanced, yet helpfully pragmatic perspective on escapism and art – one which credits both audience and creator with a critical consciousness, without denying the capacity of art to entertain and enchant.

As a first step this chapter will assess two differing concepts of escape found in the novel – escapistry and escapism. These different versions of escape contribute hugely to the division of critical opinion regarding the novel's socio-political meaning and its place in contemporary literary discourse. That Bernhoft can read escape in *Kavalier & Clay* as a critically enfeebling force co-opted by neoliberalism, and Chute can read it as a democratically expansive and transformative force in popular culture, reflects, along with each writer's particular sympathies, a different facet of the novel's presentation of escape. I want to distinguish between the terms 'escapistry' and 'escapism' as, respectively, indicating the incidents and practice of escape occurring within the diegetic narrative, and the 'theorizing' of escapism as a concept in art.[35] There is significant interplay between these two types of escape, but reading with a greater awareness of their differences allows a deeper understanding of Houdini's significance for Chabon's narrative, and, consequently, a more nuanced assessment of Chabon's position within contemporary U.S. literature. Taking the various tensions between genre forms and literary sincerity and irony into account alongside the themes and metaphors mobilised by Houdini, I argue that in *Kavalier & Clay*, Houdini is to genre what he is to history in *Ragtime*: a model for recuperative representation which urges self-reflexive commentary on the material being represented. Because the novel's Houdini-esque, dialectical representation mobilises both recuperation and reflexivity in its treatment of superhero comic books, the novel both deploys and critically interrogates escapism. Via its multiple diegetic levels and playful mixing of genres, *Kavalier & Clay* dips in and out of this immersive quality. By a kind of narrative sleight-of-hand, the novel offers critique even while tending to its own mechanics of escapism.

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[35] Bernhoft offers a similar distinction in a footnote, stating that '"escapism" denotes (the desire for) a flight from reality, while "escapistry" signifies aesthetic productions aimed at the same.' My use of the terms differs somewhat. While I will go on to discuss escapistry as artistic endeavour, in the first instance it signifies a broader attempt to flee from reality through a transformation of self and circumstance. I treat 'escapism' solely as an affect of art, preferring the term 'escapist desire' to denote '(the desire for) a flight from reality.' Bernhoft, fn3, p.23.

Interestingly, a suggestion of how these dynamics function is provided by Arthur Krystal in his controversial *New Yorker* piece. As an example of 'escape literature', Krystal quotes from the opening of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912). The narrator takes pains to emphasise his 'skeptical incredulity' upon first hearing the 'strange tale' of Tarzan, but goes on to assert that, having considered things at length, his repetition of the tale should stand as evidence for 'the sincerity of my own belief that it MAY be true.'[36] This kind of writing, Krystal concludes, is 'a form of silent-film acting, no more believable than the conspiratorial smiles and exaggerated frowns of hammy vaudevillians.'[37] While Krystal aims to be disparaging in this latter description, he nevertheless lands upon an important tenet of how fiction can negotiate its own relation to its escapist qualities. Through a kind of nudging and winking – an overt display of artifice that recalls the 'pantomimic' hyperbole of Doctorow's re-representations – fiction can frame its content (including its generic elements) with a tension between scepticism and sincerity, and, crucially, make that part of the fun. Such an approach is neither wholly ironic, nor sincere. In earnestly professing its own sincerity, the text generates scepticism and suggests a degree of irony in its approach.[38] Rather than settling on or endorsing either stance, the attitudes of scepticism and sincerity, and the tension between them, are incorporated as part of the text's aesthetic aims. As this chapter will argue, such an approach draws attention to *methods* of creating and framing escapism, thereby inviting the audience to scrutinise and critique, as well as enjoy, those mechanics. Just as this thesis's own (somewhat reformed) 'hammy vaudevillian', Harry Houdini, used to insist on the veracity of his performances while also generating epistemological uncertainty,[39] fiction that incorporates a tension between sincerity and scepticism as part of its aesthetic project lures its audience, remaining appealingly flexible in terms of the degree of credulity it supports and expects, but also tantalizing the vigilant, implying – and occasionally revealing – the apparatus behind the illusion.

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[36] Krystal, 'Easy Writers'.

[37] Ibid.

[38] This leans into an inherent difficulty with sincerity itself, which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter – namely, that it can always be taken for manipulation. Kelly details this problem of uncertain intentions, arguing that in writing aiming at sincerity 'this risk is fundamental.' Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', p.140.

[39] Kenneth Silverman sees the doubt, suspicion and intrigue created by Houdini's art as the key to his legacy: 'How did he do it? The gnawing uncertainty has been the main preservative of Houdini's fame.' Silverman, p.415.

'American Self-Liberator': Escapistry, Escapism and the Artwork

As David Foster Wallace makes clear in his critique of television, escape attempts are often essentially ironic – expressions of a double-bind, rather than a successful break away from something. His account of depending on TV for escape from a life hollowed out by this same escapism resonates with the ironically entrapping escapist desire outlined in my introduction as a key aspect of the Houdini figure. Robert Frost's 'Escapist – Never', Sarah Brouillete's description of the individual's 'reflexive and lifelong pursuit', and Lauren Berlant's concept of 'Cruel Optimism' all testify to a particular conceptualization of escape as asymptotic desire – as a pursuit of satisfaction which never actually achieves it – and help to identify it as a key affect in post-war U.S. life.

However, the concept of escape as desire, particularly a desire for self-transformation or self-fulfilment, is also of foundational importance in U.S. culture. In its formless 'longing' and desirous commitment to 'pursuit' (to borrow Frost's terms), it resonates with notions of the American Dream and self-invention. Not insignificantly, similar ideas have been discussed by American Studies scholars in relation to the magical-assemblage figure of the confidence man. As such, their arguments help to clarify the importance of illusionism and performative deception in this quintessentially American process of desirous, escapist self-pursuit.

Tony Tanner, in his essay on Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), discusses the connection between U.S. concepts of endeavour and mutability of the self, and also describes this relationship as generating a Houdini-esque discourse of illusionistic uncertainty. He writes: 'In a society where self-authoring is as common as self-parenting – people choose their parts then write their lines – there is no longer any source of reliable authorisation or legitimation.'[40] Tanner draws together several key U.S. figures – 'Poe's diddler, Emerson's sliding self-reliant metamorphoser, Franklin's craftily adaptable self, P.T. Barnum the hoaxer-showman, and the historically actual American confidence man' – in order to argue that the confidence man 'is a figure of quite special – and central – importance in American culture and history.'[41] His centrality in U.S. culture is partly because, in relying on a certain

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[40] Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.96.
[41] Tanner, p.85.

plasticity of selfhood for his endeavours (his 'traffic in "belief"', as Tanner puts it), the confidence man pantomimically reflects/reveals the illusionistic performativity which may adhere to the proximate concept of the self-made man – a cherished ideal of the middle-classes which, Tanner writes, 'is peculiarly American since, aptly ambiguous, it suggests both the independent achievement of success and a more radical act of self-parenting.'[42] It is in this 'ambiguous' uncertainty between independent achievement and 'a more radical act of self-parenting' that the confidence man's social illusionism threatens to become indistinguishable from the activity and accolades of the self-made man. The term 'self-parenting' – as implied by its near-oxymoron – suggests a particular groundlessness that easily accommodates deception. It implies not so much independent achievement but suspicious, wholesale self-reinvention.

It is, in part, the proximity in U.S. culture between notions of success and self-parenting that gives the concept of escape as personal transformation such traction in U.S. life. Gary Lindberg, also using the confidence man as a representative figure, suggests these ideas first triangulated because of the relative newness of American society and the 'unusually extensive' migration that characterized the forming of the country:

> In the popular mythology all the restless activities of continuing migration were interpreted as gestures of creation: making a new nation, making new villages and towns, making new selves… the larger enterprise was sanctified by a dazzling sense of promise. What counted was not who one was but who one could become.[43]

The newness of America meant its populace were able to feel themselves as blank slates on which success could be inscribed. If this was a kind of escape from their past selves and cultures, it also had the effect of positioning meaningful achievement entirely in the future, in the successful creation of 'new' villages, towns, selves, etc. While Lindberg and Tanner's discussions of confidence men help in understanding how this 'popular mythology' of self-creation provided fertile ground for deception, I also wish to emphasise that this popular mythology entails and supports Houdini-esque, future-oriented, asymptotic desire. Frost's poem and the work of contemporary cultural critics assist in understanding the 'dazzling' promise of self-fulfilment noted by Lindberg as a key part of earlier U.S. mythology – as well

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[42] Tanner, p.89. Elsewhere, Tanner places these ideas as central to the 'magic' of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Arguing that, culturally, 'the American "self-made man" had a prestigious legitimation and encouragement', Tanner suggests that Gatsby's attempts at self-making lead to an entrancing indeterminacy of character: 'now you see Gatsby, now you don't… This wonderfully maintained "vagueness"… is an essential part of the magic of the book.' Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery*, (p.184 and p.193).

[43] Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp.5-6.

as the associated ideas that fulfilment can be achieved through 'restless' activity and reinvention – as also indexing an 'interminable chain of longing.' The optimistic, Utopian impulses in American mythology are qualified, in the contemporary, neoliberal era, by their critical description as ironically inefficacious escape attempts (or, illusions of escape), entrapping the self in the desire for perpetual forwards motion, perpetual (re)creation.

The ambivalences of this kind of escape, its connections to selfhood and various acts of 'creation', are teased out over the course of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. At the outset of the novel, the protagonists, Sammy Klayman and Josef Kavalier, are unequivocally enthralled by the concept of escape as desirous pursuit and self-transformation. From the very first page, the novel introduces Houdini as the touchstone for what 'escape' might mean, with Sammy retrospectively analysing Houdini's 'first magic act' – 'Metamorphosis' – as: 'never just a question of escape. It was also a question of *transformation*.'[44] Chabon here draws attention to Houdini's 'Metamorphosis' trick in order to emphasise the liberatory potential of plasticity of the self – the Emersonian aspects of escape-as-transformation. And this is what the young cousins register in Houdini's art. His escapology feeds a nebulous boyhood dreaming – Sammy, a teenager cramped in a narrow bedroom in a 'solidly lower-middle-class building on Ocean Avenue' dreams 'the usual Brooklyn dreams of flight and transformation and escape.'[45] These dreams are described as 'Houdiniesque… the dreams of a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air.'[46] Sammy's Houdini-esque struggle is represented as his riffling through different selves, dreaming of 'transmuting himself into a famous American novelist, or a famous smart person, like Clifton Fadiman, or perhaps into a heroic doctor; or developing, through practice and sheer force of will, the mental powers that would give him a preternatural control over the hearts and minds of men.'[47] Meanwhile, Josef, growing up in Prague with its 'rich tradition of illusionists and sleight-of-hand artists', studies escapology.[48] He devotes himself to the 'trade of the *Ausbrecher*' and 'consecrate[s] himself to a life of timely escape.'[49] Through Josef's instructor, Bernard Kornblum, we learn that rather than a desire for technical mastery, or the thrill of performance, Josef is attracted to escapology because of 'dangerously

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[44] Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p.3.
[45] Ibid., p.6.
[46] Ibid., p.5.
[47] Ibid., pp.6-7.
[48] Ibid., p.23.
[49] Ibid., p.24.

metaphorical reasons.'[50] Both boys, then, are drawn to Houdini and his art because of the metaphorical capacity of the concept of escape. Broadly signifying the pursuit of different lives and different selves, this version of escape resonates with the adolescent desire to metamorphose.

Part of *Kavalier & Clay*'s interest in the concept of escape-as-transformation is the latter's centrality to immigrant experience and its consequent expression in early superhero comics. Just as Silverman describes Houdini and his art as driven by an 'immigrant grasping' for success, Chabon represents comic-book creators as working from the same determined, likely desperate, desire to change their circumstances. Many of the early comics pioneers – such as Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster – were Jewish, and the novel recounts this history, concluding that the post-Superman refinement of the form articulated 'a purpose for itself in the marketplace of ten-cent dreams: to express the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people with no leave to dress themselves.'[51] The desire to become someone else, Chabon asserts, is 'common enough among the inventors of heroes', and indeed it has become commonplace in comic book scholarship to identify Jewish-American desire for transformation (and, more uneasily, assimilation) as a driving force behind the creation of superheroes.[52] The superhero comic, then, is something like the 'gestures of creation' that Lindberg sees as inherent in American migration. Encouraged by a culture in which self-invention is understood as concomitant with success, Jewish-American artists anglicized their names and attempted to transform their material circumstances via the creation of superheroes. These superheroes, who often had the idea of transformation encoded in their own secret-identities and miraculous metamorphoses, in turn often came to be seen as archetypal 'American' characters.[53]

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[50] Ibid., p.37.

[51] Ibid., p.77.

[52] Gerard Jones, in his history of the birth of superhero comics, discusses how, at the turn of the century, extensive Jewish immigration to New York – part of the Romanian Diaspora – created a situation where it was 'important to invent a new self in the new world… reality was not what you were but what you said you were.' He later locates this idea in a fundamental narrative mechanic of Superman stories, describing it in terms which echo Houdini's repeated transformations from restrained to powerful: 'Jerry [Siegel] and Joe [Shuster] had found their alchemical story formula: Clark Kent playing at cartoon mundanity, then bursting free into hallucinatory grandeur before cloaking himself at the end and winking knowingly to the reader. It was an allegory that echoed for immigrants and Jews: the strange visitor who hides his alien identity so as to be accepted by a homogenous culture.' Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), pp.3-4 and p.173.

[53] Chabon himself gestures to this in describing comics as an 'indigenous' art form (*Kavalier & Clay*, p.75). The 'American-ness' of superheroes can be conspicuous, such as the overtly patriotic signalling of superheroes like Captain America, or titles such as *All-American Comics*. It is, however, a complicated issue – the alignment of

However, *Kavalier & Clay* proves highly ambivalent about the idea of escape-as-transformation. As stated above, I am using the term 'escapistry' to designate the general practice of escape within Chabon's narrative. Sometimes this includes literal descriptions of escapology, but more often than not it refers to the type of escape outlined above: a character attempting to transform their lives or 'escape' from their current reality through the pursuit of a particularly desired object or goal.[54] It also, as will become clear, refers to narrative mechanics, or 'tricks', deployed by Chabon in order to enhance the immersive escap*ism* of his own novel. These narrative tricks form a crux between escapistry and escapism, and they are key to *Kavalier & Clay's* negotiation of genre. They are responsible for the harmonious narrative ordering and 'satisfying closure' identified by Bernhoft as signifying a neoliberal mode of literary production, but also entail the appropriation and re-representation of comic book tropes identified by Chute as democratically transformative.

The term 'escapistry' is taken from the novel's own guru of escape: Bernard Kornblum. Around the novel's midpoint, in another self-immuring escape attempt, Joe has fled from the aftermath of his brother's death and joined the army. He is stationed at a remote military base in Antarctica, and is forced to escape yet again after a gas leak at the base. He stumbles out into the cold, and, just before he faints, he experiences a strange vision. Kornblum emerges from the Polar night carrying a brazier. He gazes down at Joe with a 'critical and amused' expression, before offering 'with his usual scorn', the single comment: '*Escapistry*' [emphasis in original].[55] The grammatical difference between the suffixes '-ism'

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superhero comics with national values has fluctuated throughout history. Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation* provides a rigorous survey of these vicissitudes, covering moments where superheroes worked contrary to the national interest – such as Marvel's decision to keep Captain America out of Vietnam – and moments where they harmonised, such as the 1950s post-comics-code 'clean up', where comics 'championed without criticism American institutions, authority figures, and middle-class mores.' Despite – and indeed because of – these vicissitudes, Wright argues that comics generally demonstrate 'a crude, exaggerated, and absurd caricature of the American experience.' Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.244, pp.175-6, and p.xiv.

[54] Critic Louise Colbran has identified this type of escape as signifying a kind of errant masculinity which the novel ultimately corrects. She writes: 'hegemonic masculinity is reconceptualised within *Kavalier & Clay* as escapism... this dominant masculinity is reconfigured, not as a strength, but as a safe haven where responsibilities can be abrogated and the world and its realities, such as vulnerability and personal relationships, can be denied.' I broadly agree with Colbran's argument and find it especially useful in suggesting how the concept of escape guides the events of plot and the actions of the characters. I take this, however, as representative of escapistry rather than escapism, and wish to treat that latter term purely as an affective quality available through art. Louise Colbran, 'The Grand Illusion: Hegemonic Masculinity as Escapism in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *Wonder Boys*', in *Remaking Literary History*, ed. by Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp.118 – 128 (p.119).

[55] *Kavalier & Clay*, pp. 430 – 431.

and '-istry' implies differing levels of agency. '-ism' generally refers to a process or a theory, whereas '-istry' incorporates the suffixes '-ist' and '-ry', both of which emphasise the practicability, and the human actor practicing, the process or theory.[56] In using the term, I wish to emphasise that these acts of escape are laden with the irony attendant to the self-created trap – implied, here, in Kornblum's scorn. I especially wish to emphasise the idea that escapistry is something which can be learned or practiced, implying a substrate of techniques and tricks upon which a person can attempt to actualise their urge to escape. Finally, I want to preserve the idea that escapistry can be viewed as Kornblum views it here: with a 'critical and amused' gaze. At once enchanted and disillusioned, critical and credulous, the attitude serves as something of a model for the way Chabon creates his work and the way he wishes it to be read.

If Josef and Sammy demonstrate the desire to transform, Chabon is well aware of the complexities involved in it being something that aims at a change in material circumstances, selfhood, or situation, and also something that can articulate itself through artistic representation and metaphor. However, as Sammy's dreams of 'transmuting himself' show, at the beginning of the novel, the emphasis is very much on the former. Desire for self-transformation, the novel shows, is an escape attempt jeopardized by the kind of endlessly constrictive irony that threatens Frost's escapist. This is most aptly expressed in another of Bernard Kornblum's maxims, which paints the possibility of resolution through escape as always already foreclosed: 'Never worry about what you are escaping *from*… Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*.'[57] The youthful desire to transform into somebody else marks the first step along the 'interminable chain of longing' which characterises the escapist Kavalier and Klayman. Although the novel never specifies exactly what the 'dangerous metaphorical reasons' drawing Josef to escapology are, Chabon does hint

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[56] The OED offers the following definitions of the suffixes: '-ism' is used in 'forming a simple noun of action…naming the process, or the completed action, or the result', or, it 'forms the name of a system of theory or practice'. '-ist' is used in forming 'a simple agent noun', or, it designates 'a person who practices some art or method' / 'an adherent or professor of some creed, doctrine, system, or art'. Finally, '-ry' is defined as 'Forming nouns with the senses: "the practices, products, or characteristics of a kind of person", as *masonry*, *punditry*, *rivalry*; "the use or characteristic behaviour of a kind of thing", as *rocketry*, *musketry*; "persons of a certain type collectively", as *parsonry*, *peasantry*…', OED online, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100006?rskey=SDK4uj&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100224?rskey=dEolG8&result=3#eid https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169238?redirectedFrom=ry#eid [all links accessed 26/04/21].
[57] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.37.

ominously at their outcome: 'Such men feel imprisoned by invisible chains – walled in, sewn up in layers of batting. For them, the final feat of autoliberation was all too foreseeable.'[58]

This warning paints the urge to escape as itself confining and draws an ironic equivalence between 'final', ultimate, escape and suicide. The warning proves prescient. Over the course of the novel, Josef and Sammy pursue their desires and create a comic book superhero called 'The Escapist.' Following in the footsteps of thousands of immigrants, including Houdini, they acquire a 'pair of newly minted American names' – Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay – intended to make their Jewishness less visible in their professional lives;[59] they achieve creative and commercial success, and they develop romantic relationships – Joe with the artist Rosa Saks, and Sammy with the male star of *The Escapist* radio show, Tracy Bacon. However, as the need to disguise their identity suggests, Sam and Joe's transformation is uneasy, marked as much by self-deception as self-fulfilment. Their economic success is dogged by lawsuits and the exploitation of their labour by corporate bosses. Romantic relationships are fled from, and the reality of Joe and Sam's identities as, respectively, a Jewish refugee with family in Nazi-occupied Prague, and a closeted gay man, becomes ever more visible and ever more enmeshed with the injustices of the world they inhabit. At the novel's climax, Joe, after years of hiding from his family, dresses himself in The Escapist's costume, stands on top of the Empire State building, and threatens to jump off. Chabon writes: 'Like Harry Houdini, Joe had failed to get out of his self-created trap.'[60]

This moment of failure marks the apotheosis in the text of a counter-current to the 'face forward' momentum of escapist endeavour that drives much of the novel's first half. Through that phrase, 'self-created trap', Chabon reinforces the idea of escapistry as ironically entrapping, and further suggests constructs of identity as central to the 'trap.' Just as Houdini captured the boys' imaginations with visions of transformation at the beginning of the novel, here he becomes a symbol for the failure of such visions, expressing the exhausted stalling of self-entanglement.

What Houdini signifies, then, and what escape might mean, is subject to revision in the novel's later pages. This re-definition is crucial to *Kavalier & Clay's* nuanced and pragmatic perspective on artistic practice. The above sentence: 'Like Harry Houdini, Joe had failed to get out of his self-created trap' forms the coda to a flashback describing 'the hour

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., p.148 and p.70.
[60] Ibid., p.536.

when the great one failed.'[61] Back in Prague, practising escapology, Joe listens to Kornblum tell the story of how Houdini was unable to open 'a nested pair of steel Bramah locks' during a 1906 performance at the London Palladium.[62] Kornblum is absolutely firm that Houdini could not open the cuffs and that it was his wife, Bess, who slipped him a key in a glass of water. Kornblum describes the audience's restlessness after almost an hour passes with Houdini still sealed inside his cabinet, struggling with the cuffs. Houdini emerges for a moment and asks a newspaper man if the cuffs can be removed temporarily to allow him to take off his coat. The request is denied. Houdini then manages to flip a penknife out of his waistcoat pocket and into his mouth. Wielding the penknife in his teeth, he wriggles his coat up over his head and cuts his way out of it. This 'minor feat', we're told, was 'among the finest bits of showmanship of his career… After viewing this display of pluck and panache, the audience was bound to him as if with bands of steel.'[63] The bond endures, and, following Houdini's eventual escape from the cuffs, 'the crowd suffered a kind of painful, collective orgasm – a "*Krise*," Kornblum called it – of delight and relief.'[64] As Houdini is hoisted onto the shoulders of the referees and paraded through the theatre, few audience members notice that 'his face was convulsed with tears of rage, not triumph, and that his blue eyes were incandescent with shame.'[65]

Two escapes take place in this anecdote. The first is Houdini's escape from the cuffs, accomplished, according to Kornblum, through trickery. The second escape is experienced by the audience. The drama of Houdini's protracted struggle and his plucky showmanship create an affective trap for the audience. They are bound in 'bands of steel', and only break these bonds once Houdini is out of his, at which point they experience 'delight and relief.' The audience, then, escapes into satisfaction; the escapologist, into shame and rage. Chabon here highlights the tribulations of escapistry while demonstrating the success of escap*ism*. Houdini's self-involved goal of achieving success and mastery through relentless endeavour collapses in his failure to open the handcuffs. Nevertheless, the audience is electrified by what they see as a successful escape. They are unaware that Houdini has resorted to having his wife slip him a key, and, crucially, they are all the more engaged for having witnessed the spontaneous moment of showmanship that the challenge's restrictions – the physical bonds

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[61] Ibid., p.532.
[62] Ibid. This escape – usually called the 'Mirror Cuffs' escape – actually took place at the London Hippodrome in March 1904. See Silverman, pp.57-63.
[63] Ibid., p.534.
[64] Ibid., p.535.
[65] Ibid.

and the regulatory authority of the newspapers and referees – both force and provide. In the face of these restrictions, unexpected creativity emerges, and this, as Chabon writes, recovers the 'tide of hope and goodwill' that has ebbed after an hour of Houdini struggling inside his cabinet.[66]

This key moment in the text depicts the 'failure' of the novel's central proponent of escapistry, and in doing so subordinates the practice of escape to affective escapism. In emphasising a resurgence in the affective response of the audience following Houdini's unexpected knife-flip, however, this anecdote also suggests how vitality and energy may be restored to struggling, exhausted art (not to mention artists) by working *within* as well as against restrictions. This reflects Chabon's own views on literary artistic practice. In his essay, 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights' (2008), Chabon confesses himself a 'bored reader.'[67] He is exhausted by, he writes, the 'contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story' which dominates the literary scene.[68] He argues that this literary monoculture has come about due to restrictions enforced by the publishing industry, which create the false perception that texts must fit into discrete genres – crime, sci-fi, horror, etc. – and that these genres are outside of literary value:

> A genre implies a set of conventions – a formula – and conventions imply limitations (the argument goes), and therefore no genre work can ever rise to the masterful heights of true literature, free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates.
> This emphasis on the conventionality, the formulaic nature of genre fiction, is at least partly the fault of publishers and booksellers, for whom genre is a marketing tool, a package of typefaces and standardized imagery wrapped around a text whose idea of itself as literature, should it harbor one, is more or less irrelevant.[69]

This is the precursor to the literary world described by Arthur Krystal in 2012, where (although the publishing industry may very well still prefer rigid distinctions between genres) there is a greater degree of flexibility regarding genre in terms of what is accepted into the canon, and what kinds of texts readers expect 'serious' writers to produce. Chabon here uses Houdini-esque language of confinement and escape to emphasise the generic categories

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[66] Ibid., p.534.
[67] Michael Chabon, 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story', in *Maps and Legends*, pp.1-14 (p.6).
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p.8.

endorsed by the publishing industry as restrictive – texts are 'wrapped' in 'typefaces and standardized imagery', whereas 'true literature' is supposedly 'free' of formulaic restrictions.

Importantly, although Chabon criticises rigid systems of classification and marketing, he does not want to deny that genres have their aesthetic tropes and formulae. Instead, he wants these things to be embraced. He makes clear that 'even among experienced, professional writers who have long since internalized or intuited the rules, and thus learned to ignore them, there are, at the very least, particular conventions…that are unique to and help to define their respective genres.'[70] Embrace of these conventions, in particular a 'fruitful self-consciousness about the conventions of…[a] chosen genre, a heightened awareness of its history', can encourage a writer 'not to flout or to follow them [the rules] but, flouting or following, to *play*.'[71] Houdini's penknife-wrangling showmanship exemplifies this call to neither flout nor follow. It demonstrates a playfulness with(in) the literal restrictions of the Bramah cuffs, the rules of the challenge, and the 'generic' restrictions of a typical Houdini performance.

The actual Mirror Cuffs escape that Houdini performed in 1904 proves especially relevant in regard to this latter point. It was marked by particularly heightened public discourse regarding the technical aspects of the challenge. As Kenneth Silverman notes, there was a storm of publicity in the run-up to the performance, with newspapers focussing on the cuffs themselves, detailing their design 'in awed absolutes.'[72] Although Houdini had at this point in his career firmly established himself as 'the Handcuff King', these cuffs were especially complicated. There was no chain – the manacles were welded onto a fat metal cylinder which contained two locks, one nested inside the other. Both were Bramah locks. Named after the eighteenth-century locksmith who invented the design, the lock had gone unpicked for sixty years despite a longstanding challenge from its inventor, who offered two-hundred guineas to whomever could accomplish the feat. In 1851, after forty-four hours of labouring, it was picked by locksmith Alfred Hobbs.[73] Houdini had two of these locks to beat. The audience, via newspaper accounts and publicity materials, was well aware of this history, the technical properties of the cuffs, and the severity of the challenge.[74] Thinking of this

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[70] Ibid., p.10.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Silverman, p.58.
[73] Ibid., p.60.
[74] Silverman notes that newspapers printed pictures of the Mirror Cuffs and 'discussed their difficulty.' This undoubtedly contributed to the electric atmosphere and the huge numbers who attended. Silverman writes: 'some four thousand spectators and more than a hundred invited journalists crammed the Hippodrome from

escape as within the typical 'genre' of a Houdini performance, it is clear, to borrow Chabon's terms, that there was a 'heightened awareness' of the technicity of the endeavour (for both performer and audience), and that this is what made the escape so affecting. John Cox, founder of www.wildabouthoudini.com, emphasises that audiences could easily imagine Houdini 'behind the tent struggling with the Mirror Cuffs. And the longer it went on, the more exciting it became.'[75] With this excitement already at a high pitch, Houdini's penknife-flipping, coat-shredding trick – which Kenneth Silverman describes as 'a moment of high spontaneous drama' – then drove the audience wild; according to the *Mirror*, they 'yelled themselves frantic.'[76] Acutely aware of the 'rules', then – the technical and regulatory make-up of the escape, as well as the usual process of a 'Handcuff King' performance – the audience's affective and critical engagement with the spectacle was heightened. Following Houdini's 'spontaneous', unexpected, *playful* moment of creativity, there was a surge in the audience's affective response – the intensity of which seems entirely proportional to their greater awareness of the nature of Houdini's struggle.

Through Houdini's example, this scene serves as Chabon's diegetic endorsement of playfulness with(in) restrictions. It represents the invigorating effect of the unexpected upon an audience, especially an informed audience. The extent to which this endorsement maps across to *Kavalier & Clay*'s own playfulness with the generic conventions of literary fiction and the superhero comic will be discussed in the next section. For now, I want to focus on the shift in emphasis between concepts of escape that this scene marks. Kornblum's description of Houdini's Mirror Cuffs escape as the 'hour when the great one failed' implies the collapse of an escapist project to elevate or transform the self – the isolated, self-sufficient 'great one.' But the 'bands of steel' that bind the audience to Houdini, and the '*Krise*' they experience following his release from the cuffs, demonstrate that the affective power of his art remains uncompromised – the audience's escapism is heightened, in fact, by the creativity that Houdini's 'failure' forces.[77] Over the course of the novel, Chabon spins this relation between escapistry and escapism out into the tale of Joe and Sammy's artistic maturation. *Kavalier & Clay* suggests this maturation to be a kind of pragmatic disillusionment that nevertheless, once it is embraced, offers renewed possibility for artistic production.

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stalls to gallery. When Houdini appeared in the arena… he "received an ovation worthy of a monarch," a London paper said, "one of the finest ovations mortal man has ever received.' Silverman, pp.58-9.

[75] Quoted in Joe Posnanski, *The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2019), p.140.

[76] Silverman, p.61.

[77] *Kavalier & Clay*, pp.532-5.

The final nail in Houdini's coffin comes during the novel's lengthy denouement. Joe, following his 'escape attempt' from the top of the Empire State Building, drives to the Jewish cemetery at Machphelah to visit Houdini's grave. Against Jewish tradition, the tomb is lavish, replete with a bust of the magician and a marble balustrade.[78] Joe finds it 'gauche and disturbing', the magician's bust looking 'as if he had just licked a battery', the self-composed tributes to his mother and father 'prolix' and extravagant.[79] 'Gauche' and 'prolix' imply aesthetic judgements: Joe, now an artist himself, critiques Houdini's flashy showmanship as distasteful (in this context, at least). Joe also notices there are little notes slipped into cracks and fissures in Houdini's monument. These are 'messages left by various devotees of spiritualism and students of the next world who offered posthumous forgiveness to the great debunker for having oppugned the Truth that he had, by now, undoubtedly discovered.'[80] Joe studies these messages and then attempts to sense a spiritual presence – of Houdini, of his dead brother, Thomas, and, finally, of anyone at all. He doesn't feel anything. 'He could be ruined again and again by hope', Chabon writes, 'but he would never be capable of belief.'[81]

The equivalence this scene draws between a critical view of Houdini and a loss of belief in the idea of life after death casts Houdini as a kind of barometer for credulity – how he and his art are viewed broadly reflects an individual's capacity for enchantment. The promise of escapistry to somehow transcend is shown as suddenly naïve against the finality of death. For better and worse, Joe is now a sceptic, and Chabon positions this at the end of his narrative to signify maturation. Joe's disillusionment here also responds to a harsh lesson in audience reception. The Spiritualist notes demonstrate the inefficacy of Houdini's life's work, appearing, significantly, in cracks in the magician's otherwise meticulously designed tomb. Joe's mature disillusionment, then, entails the realisation that an artist cannot control how their work is received. Regardless of the creator's own position on the scale of credulity, the audience may still retain the capacity to be enchanted.

This realisation is highly ambivalent. It conjoins the failure of escapist fantasies of the self with the potentially productive awareness of escapism's place as an affective element in art. Questions of what escapism might mean to an audience, how it might be generated, and what cathartic work it might do for the artist all attend this shift in emphasis from escapistry

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[78] This is an accurate representation of Houdini's real grave. Kenneth Silverman notes that the bust, specifically, disregards 'Jewish funerary prohibitions against graven images.' Silverman, p.416.
[79] *Kavalier & Clay*, pp.606-607.
[80] Ibid., p.607.
[81] Ibid.

to escapism. This is clarified by a passage which stands as a first step in Joe's reappraisal of artistic value, occurring just a few pages before his visit to the cemetery. Here, Chabon uses the Golem as a metaphor for the work of art, which, throughout the novel, consistently shadows the figure of Houdini and the theme of escape:

> The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something – one poor, dumb, powerful thing – exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws. Harry Houdini had roamed the Palladiums and Hippodromes of the world encumbered by an entire cargo-hold of crates and boxes, stuffed with chains, iron hardware, brightly painted flats and hokum, animated all the while only by this same desire, never fulfilled: truly to escape, if only for one instant; to poke his head through the borders of this world, with its harsh physics, into the mysterious spirit world that lay beyond. The newspaper articles that Joe had read about the upcoming Senate investigation into comic books always cited "escapism" among the litany of injurious consequences of their reading, and dwelled on the pernicious effect, on young minds, of satisfying the desire to escape. As if there could be any more noble or necessary service in life.[82]

Chabon here develops the conceptual split suggested in Kornblum's story of Houdini's failure. It is the practice of escapistry which is portrayed as futile and ironic, whereas the notion of escap*ism* seems to be wholeheartedly endorsed. Houdini, the supposed master of elusion, who in many of his tricks, including 'Metamorphosis' and 'Walking Through a Brick Wall', presented the notion that he could slip free of materiality, is here ironically 'encumbered'; laden down with the material trappings necessary to present the illusion of liberation.[83] Chabon's version of Houdini is 'animated' in these efforts by the desire to actualise an impossible, transcendent escape and poke his head into the 'spirit world'. The undertones of death here echo Kornblum's assessment of men who become escapologists for 'dangerously metaphorical reasons.' As with Joe and Sammy's impulses towards escapistry, Houdini's 'vain wish' remains 'never fulfilled.' Contrasting with this, however, is the escapism which readers find in comic books. Chabon describes them as successfully 'satisfying the desire to escape', and, in doing so, they perform a 'noble and necessary

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[82] Ibid., p.582.

[83] Houdini's slipping free of materiality was 'scientized' and considered a real possibility by Arthur Conan Doyle. Kenneth Silverman quotes from Doyle's letters to Houdini, in which Doyle states that, along with the Davenport brothers, Houdini possesses a: '"dematerializing and reconstructing force" that could momentarily separate "the molecules of that solid object towards which it is directed," such as handcuffs. "My reason tells me that you have this wonderful power," he told Houdini, "for there is no alternative."' Silverman, p.259.

service.' The work of art – specifically, here, the mass cultural form of the comic book – then emerges as an important mediating object, something that intervenes in a reader's escapist desires. It affectively and imaginatively redirects the Houdini-esque impulse to live in constant pursuit, in thrall to some 'vain wish.' In the Senate's view, comic books generate rather than sublimate escapist desire, seeding it in a person's mind as an 'injurious consequence' of reading. Joe, in contrast, has the wisdom to see that escapist desire is an already present impulse. He suggests here how the artwork's careful facilitating of the experience of escape may temper escapist impulses towards (capitalistic) self-transformation.

As Chabon describes it, the artwork includes the creator in its tempering of escapist impulses. In as much as it articulates the artist's 'vain wish' to escape, the artwork becomes a successful escapist expression even if it cannot actualise that intent. 'The Escapist' superhero stories in the *Radio Comics* series in *Kavalier & Clay* offer a self-reflexive example of this. The superhero's name alone stresses the artwork's affective function, and Chabon elaborates on this theme throughout the text in analyses of his own fictional creation. For example, while creating the debut Escapist story, a fellow novice artist becomes the first to critique Joe and Sammy's work, gleaning, in the story, Sammy's desire to overcome the effects of polio: '"…it's all what some little kid *wishes* he could do. Like for you, hey, you don't want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk."'[84] Sammy is unaware of this sublimation. Nevertheless, once told, he sees the truth of it and wonders 'what other wishes he might have subsumed unknowingly into the character of lame Tom Mayflower [the Escapist's alter ego].'[85] Likewise, Joe channels his rage and frustration at the Nazi regime trapping his family in Prague into the cover illustration of the debut issue. He draws the Escapist punching Hitler in the face. Hitler flies out towards the viewer, his jaw 'trailing a long red streamer of teeth.'[86] The violence of the image stirs 'mysterious feelings in the viewer, of hatred gratified, of cringing fear transmuted into smashing retribution.'[87] Joe, too, finds gratification in the art he has created. Chabon writes: 'Nothing that Joe had painted had ever satisfied him more', and that in making it he had felt an 'intense and durable and strangely redemptive' pleasure.[88]

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[84] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.145.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p.150.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., p.159.

This is a modified version of the way escape is theorized at the beginning of the novel. In shifting escapist attitudes away from the self and onto the creation and consumption of art, the novel reflects disillusionment whilst also holding out the possibility that, through art, a kind of enchantment is still possible. In the above examples there is a transformation not of self or circumstance, but of affect. Fear is 'transmuted' into retribution, while frustration and powerlessness become satisfaction and pleasure. The desire for self-transformation is, then, relocated in the mediated, affective, and transient experience of viewing / reading. This suggests an acquiescence as much as it constitutes a recognition of art's power. The pain of Joe's loss is described as constantly with him, present as 'a cold smooth ball lodged in his chest.'[89] A half-hour spent reading *Betty and Veronica* causes the 'icy ball' to melt away 'without him even noticing' and Chabon asserts: '*That* was magic – not the apparent magic of the silk-hatted card-palmer, or the bold, brute trickery of the escape artist, but the genuine magic of art' [Emphasis in original].[90] As earnest as this conclusion is, it is clear that the pain of Joe's loss has only temporarily disappeared. The sentence shows a heightened critical awareness of 'apparent' – not 'genuine' – magic. The technique of card-palming, the 'brute trickery' involved in escape acts, and the foppish showmanship of the silk hat are all exposed, even as Chabon reasserts the enchantment available through reading. The point here is not so much to suggest that magic performances do not provide 'the genuine magic of art' – that would contradict the description of the crowd's '*Krise*' following Houdini's struggle with the Bramah cuffs – but, rather, to further emphasise the split between the techniques of the artistic practitioner (which, however masterful, remain 'trickery') and the affective reception or experience of art. Escape, Chabon insists, is only achievable as an affective, mediated experience – i.e., as escapism – and it is this abstract, mysterious feeling that qualifies as 'genuine' magic.

The contrasting representations of Houdini in *Kavalier & Clay* point the way to these differing versions of escape. Houdini, with his absurdly over-stuffed 'cargo-hold' of set-pieces and hardware, is nevertheless able to use his ingenuity to create stunningly affective art out of these inert mechanisms. In Chabon's multivalent representation, Houdini, driven by escapist desire to transform and transcend, enacts escape on the stage and generates affective escapism for his audience. As will be discussed in greater detail below, part of the literary

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[89] Ibid., p.576.
[90] Ibid.

value Chabon sees in Houdini is that the affects generated by his art tend to turn reflexively towards the methods employed in their production. As Matthew Solomon writes:

> Stage magic allowed audiences to see extraordinary things that seemed to defy the laws of nature, but its illusions also worked simultaneously to make people look differently and to question what they were ostensibly seeing, encouraging a form of skepticism that was uniquely attuned to the visual deceptions of the modern world and of image-based media.[91]

The question – 'how did they do that?' – always attends the performance of stage magic. It demonstrates a technical curiosity about how the illusion works that coexists with (and even feeds) affects of astonishment, wonder, and enchantment. Solomon astutely describes this as creating a kind of scepticism that ultimately extends beyond the artwork and encourages audience awareness of illusionism in the modern world. Chabon's Houdini presents the possibility of a similar kind of healthy scepticism, at a time when fiction, as described by Foster Wallace and New Sincerity scholars, is reckoning with its own illusionism.

'Conspiratorial Smiles and Exaggerated Frowns': Genre and the Performance of Sincerity

To the extent that irony reflects disillusionment while sincerity hopes for a credulous, affectively positive, response (hoping to avoid the 'rolled eyes'), it is clear that Chabon's detailing of escapistry and escapism mobilises both ironic and sincere attitudes within the text. In this, far from exhibiting the naivety that some critics expect to follow from the turn from critique, *Kavalier & Clay* in fact sets out a nuanced schematic for how *potentially productive* enchanted attitudes towards art can coexist with a disillusioned, even cynical, awareness of art's limitations. Although Jon Doyle dismisses *Kavalier & Clay* – alongside all of Chabon's later work – as a withdrawal into 'nostalgic, escapist fantasies', an appreciation of the nuances of escape in the text discloses a level of jadedness that would seem to meet Doyle's own criteria for an ideal post-postmodern novel – one which exhibits 'a perpetual readjustment of the scales so that neither irony nor sincerity can gain detrimental

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[91] Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.3.

prevalence.'[92] *Kavalier & Clay*'s ambivalent presentation of escape – seeing it as at once a fantasy of the self that is ironically constricting, and an element in art that constitutes 'genuine magic' – reflects this kind of tussling between irony and sincerity.

Kavalier & Clay puts these two attitudes to work in its complex but instructive approach to genre forms. The novel's different diegetic levels correspond to different genres. The 'main' narrative level – telling the story of Joe and Sammy's youth and their efforts in the comic book industry – takes the form of historic realism.[93] But there are chapters that create another diegetic level by narrating stories from the superhero comic book world created by Sammy and Joe. It is impossible to ignore the fact that one of these genres is more typically 'escapist' than the other. Although the contemporary neo-historical novel is seen by some critics as escapist because it does not overtly engage with or critique contemporary society (it is this 'retreat' into history that leads Doyle to describe Chabon's work as 'nostalgic, escapist fantasies'), the superhero comic book sets out to be escapist in the first instance. Comic books, to use *Kavalier & Clay*'s description, are 'Kid Stuff, pure and true'; they set out to entertain, and, in their depictions of the fantasies of their creators, they express escapist desire and eschew realist representation.[94]

This co-presence in the novel of overtly escapist and realist genre forms underlies, and to an extent organizes, the text's elements of sincerity and scepticism in several important ways. On the one hand, as Gladstone and Worden have it, Chabon's 'heartfelt embrace of genre fiction' – the unironic way in which he pays homage to superhero comics, both through appropriating the form and through directly praising its artistic merits and escapist qualities – constitutes an act of sincerity in itself. It is tempting to sketch from this a simple affective-generic model whereby the genre fiction elements of the text are aligned with sincerity, and with the production of affective escapism. The realist diegetic level could then be understood as retaining more of a critical attitude; the cerebral scaffolding around the superhero comic's affective indulgences. On the other hand, however, Chabon's nesting these overtly generic chapters inside a realist novel implies a certain jadedness regarding both

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[92] Doyle, p.267.

[93] Joseph Dewey, summarising critical reception to *Kavalier & Clay*, writes that reviewers commended the novel as 'a meticulously researched old-school tome that drew (by Chabon's admission) on model-texts of nineteenth-century historic realism such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and, particularly, Leo Tolstoy's towering *War and Peace.*' Dewey, p.75.

[94] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.77.

forms – neither is wholly committed to, and the imperative to play with genre conventions can be seen as an attempt to redress each form's particular 'failings'.

I argue that *Kavalier & Clay* in fact illusionistically presents the former affective-generic model as a means of indicating the actual presence of the latter. For my purposes, a more compelling account of the relationship in *Kavalier & Clay* between realist and escapist genre forms, sincerity and scepticism, sees the tension between these things as an aesthetic and artistic goal in its own right. This is, of course, the more Houdini-esque approach. If Houdini creates affectively powerful art, he also creates art that teases the audience's notions of what may be a trick and what may be genuine. One effect (or 'goal') of this is to provoke discussion over how he accomplishes his feats – which, for Houdini, is the same thing as discussing how the art is produced. As in the example of the Mirror Cuffs, the technicality of the endeavour forms a key part of the discourse surrounding the performance (and actually enhances its affective potential). This, I argue, is also Chabon's goal in combining an 'escapist' genre form – typically seen as making overt use of conventions and formulae – and a 'literary' form – whose status as 'literary' typically extends from its supposed lack of conventions.[95] He wishes to highlight not only the fact that literary fiction, too, has its conventions, its tricks and techniques, but also that by embracing the technical side of writing (and revealing just enough of its artifice to the reader) an alternative literary affect is created – one that retains elements of scepticism and sincerity, but includes these in the broader goal of generating curiosity about the art of storytelling. If sincerity risks being duped by illusions, and irony risks a destructive debunking, then *Kavalier & Clay*'s Houdinism prefers to keep both attitudes in play, mining the tension between them for insights into how the illusion is created.

It is in moments where Chabon emphasises the intrusion of 'reality' that the novel's ideas regarding escape begin to graze against the above questions regarding genre and technicity. Throughout the novel Chabon repeatedly describes the limits of imaginative escape – the moments where escapist fantasies collide with a disenchanted or 'deceptive' reality. For example, Sammy's optimistic belief in the 'Science of Opportunity' and notions of 'Enterprise Rewarded' preached by his boss, Sheldon Anapol, lead him to imagine that he

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[95] As quoted above, Chabon sees publishers and critics as sustaining this argument in their classifications of works of fiction: 'no genre work can ever rise to the masterful heights of true literature, free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates.' *Maps and Legends*, p.6.

can be made editor of the fledgling comic book series.[96] When Anapol instead appoints 'the unquestionably qualified and proven George Deasey', Sammy experiences this as a betrayal, the shock stemming from the sudden realisation that he has been humbugged, and that the arguments constituting the 'Science of Opportunity' are, in fact, 'ludicrous.'[97] In addition to charting the cousins' disillusionment with the transformative promise of escapistry, Chabon goes on to emphasize certain limitations on escap*ism's* efficacy. The 'genuine magic' of art described above, for example, simultaneously casts reality into greater relief. Joe values the escapism provided by comic books so highly *because* he is painfully aware of the reality they temporarily dissolve. Similarly, the emotional catharsis Joe feels while working on the Escapist stories becomes increasingly ephemeral and ambivalent the more successful the comics become (i.e., the more the escapist illusion is consumed). Their success necessarily implies the comics' increased presence in 'reality', and it is as if Joe's creative escapism is in inverse relation to this increased dissemination. Chabon writes: 'The surge of triumph he felt when he finished a story was always fleeting, and seemed to grow briefer with every job… The Escapist was an impossible champion, ludicrous and above all *imaginary*, fighting a war that could never be won. His cheeks burned with embarrassment. He was wasting his time. [Emphasis in original].'[98]

The artist's hope of creating something 'exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation' then painfully doubles-back on itself. What the artwork is free from, it also (apparently) cannot affect. This, alongside Chabon's focus on mediation and transience, emphasises the confines curtailing an artwork's escapist remit. Additionally, by using the Golem as a metaphor for the artist's invested hopes, Chabon stresses that the fulfilment of this remit can be unwieldy and unpredictable. A Golem is a 'poor, dumb, powerful thing', which the artist can fashion, bring to life, and endow with hope, but ultimately cannot control. It lumbers free of its own volition. Seth Johnson, in an essay focussing on Chabon's use of the Golem, points out that traditional Judaic Golem stories foregrounded the creature's tendency to scupper the creator's original intent. Fashioned from inanimate matter, brought to life often by spoken or written words, the Golem 'successfully protects and otherwise aids its creator', until it 'becomes too powerful

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[96] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.155.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., p.168.

and ultimately uncontrollable, wreaking havoc upon those it was created to protect.'[99] In the archetypal narrative of Rabbi Loew's Golem of Prague, to draw from Johnson's example, an early hint at this ultimate uncontrollability is provided when the Golem performs menial tasks 'too well': 'the Golem is sent to fetch water but is not told to stop and floods the house.'[100]

'The Escapist' series in *Kavalier & Clay* can likewise be seen to perform its task 'too well'. Not only does it flood the offices of Empire Comics with money and gain sufficient national attention to become the target of lawsuits and Senate investigations, but it is also seen to be *too effective* at generating escapism. Throughout the first half of the novel, Chabon weaves a cautionary tale that reflects his insistence on the limiting of escapism to a mediated, transient affect. This subplot centres around a strange, solitary German man named Carl Ebling. He is a Nazi sympathiser, and the sole and founding member of the 'Aryan-American League.'[101] He enters the narrative when Joe, angrily pursuing German New Yorkers after the death of his father, spots the AAL sign and breaks into Ebling's office. Alongside Nazi publications and a photograph of Adolf Hitler are numerous comic books, including *Radio Comics*. Ebling is particularly obsessed with The Escapist stories and has written a lengthy memorandum on the subject. Joe sits down to read it. After a few paragraphs of anti-Semitic condemnation, the tone of Ebling's writing changes. Chabon describes how 'the sense of critical purpose seemed to abandon the author', and Joe notices that 'Ebling's tone of dismissive scorn and outrage moderated and then vanished altogether.'[102] Joe realises that Ebling is 'in spite of himself, a fan.'[103]

At first glance, this appears to be an optimistic portrayal of an artwork dissolving toxic ideology in the wash of affective experience. However, while Chabon is certainly emphasising that possibility, he also details Joe's shame in 'having produced work that appealed to such a man', and shows Joe realising 'the mirror-image fascism inherent in his anti-fascist superman.'[104] This is, then, an example of the artwork as Golem. It wanders into

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[99] Seth Johnson, '"An American Golem": The Necessity of Myth in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*', in *Michael Chabon's America*, pp.97-110 (p.101).
[100] Ibid.
[101] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.189.
[102] Ibid., p.203.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., p.204. It should be noted, however, that large sections of the memorandum are relatively free from ideological arguments, with Ebling mainly contenting himself by 'summarizing and describing the adventures of the Escapist' (p.203). The 'mirror-image fascism' of the superhero has been pointed out in criticism of the genre, most notably by Art Spiegelman, who argues that 'the triumph of the will, the celebration of the physicality of the human body at the expense of the intellect, is very much an impulse in Fascist art.' Art

the office of the fascist Ebling and is put to an entirely different purpose, upending the creator's intent. Once there, it proceeds to do its job 'too well', generating not just interest, but obsession. This subplot culminates in Ebling ultimately losing sight of the boundary between fiction and reality. He identifies himself with the villain of 'The Escapist' – The Saboteur – and attempts to kill Joe Kavalier with an improvised pipe bomb. His delusion is such that when on trial for this offence he confesses to a litany of other crimes, including 'minor fires, synagogue vandalizings, phone-booth bombings, and even an attempted subway derailment', of which at least the latter we can assume to be a crime committed by the fictional Saboteur.[105] The hopeful socio-political possibilities suggested by Ebling's suspension of his ideological purpose in favour of affective experience are here warped into a cautionary tale regarding the necessary limits of escapism and the uncontrollability of the artwork's affective power.

The example of Ebling complicates critical assessments that see the novel as championing escapism for its therapeutic qualities. However, it opens the way to reading escapism simply as a compelling, even (however perversely) inspiring narrative affect – one which can be studied, obsessed over, and recreated. As is clear from the desires Joe and Sammy channel into The Escapist and the enthusiastic readership it finds, the pleasure of escapism can be felt by both reader and creator as a kind of wish fulfilment, and this is predicated on the artwork's capacity to create images, events, and characters which are exempt from the difficulties in peoples' lives (from 'the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation'). Lee Behlman, focussing on this, argues that 'Chabon's intent in exploring superhero comics is not to issue a postmodern critique of the "real" and realistic art forms, nor a populist anti-intellectual assault on "elites" and their art, but to show, in a phenomenological way, how fantasy feels, and how it may assuage pain.'[106] Iain Bernhoft, meanwhile, asserts that the majority of criticism on *Kavalier & Clay* has 'largely taken for granted its premises concerning the merits of escapism' – these merits being, primarily, 'the therapeutic value of escapist entertainments.'[107] However, although the novel undoubtedly

does champion the therapeutic capabilities of popular art and escapism, the example of Carl Ebling self-reflexively shows how escapism's affective power can fulfil the much simpler purpose of propelling diegetic action and engaging readers. Ebling is not therapized by art – he is enchanted by it, to the point where he suffers the illusion that he is a character from the comic book series.

Significantly, because of the nature of this delusion, Ebling becomes a bridge between the novel's diegetic levels. He thus helps to clarify the method behind, and the nature of, *Kavalier & Clay*'s construction from genre and realist forms, affective power and criticality. The chapter in which Ebling attempts to kill Joe Kavalier is narrated as if it is an episode from *Radio Comics*. Chabon uses the same present-tense narration and sparky, exclamatory style that he uses in previous chapters to narrate Escapist stories. Having encountered two of these chapters already, as readers we are shocked and surprised to learn, after a few pages, that this episode is taking place in the 'reality' of the main diegetic level. The pleasure of this is akin to Houdini's unexpected knife-flip: there is surprise, and enjoyment at witnessing virtuosity in playing with(in) particular restrictions or conventions. Chabon is clearly taking pleasure, too, in this mixing of worlds, playing with the humour that comes from nesting a comic book villain inside an ordinary man: 'Is there a smell of beer and sausages on the shoulder of the costume…?'; 'his rent on the Lair is cheap, but his pay is low enough without being docked again for lateness… his sister Ruth has already warned him that she will not "prop him up."'[108] This playfulness demonstrates the pleasure of using conventions in unexpected ways. However, the way this playfulness functions borrows from Houdini in another, more fundamental sense. In imagining the comic book villain in realist terms, Chabon conducts a kind of narrative sleight-of-hand. He at once parodies the decadent megalomania of superhero villains as madness, as a delusion of grandeur, and yet is also able to retain within his realist narrative the affectively gripping episode of attempted murder that this character type facilitates.

Kavalier & Clay, then, has its own method for generating immersive, compelling escapism. This method exploits the tension between realist and 'escapist' genre forms. The diegetic co-presence of enchanted and disillusioned attitudes towards art (associated with the more general cultural attitudes of irony / sincerity) finds a parallel in the novel's formal method, which enthusiastically re-creates *and* critiques the comic books that Chabon finds

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[108] *Kavalier & Clay*, pp.329-30.

inspirational by nesting these re-creations inside a neo-historical novel. This is a Houdini-esque method of writing, where, in Joseph Dewey's terms, the 'anxious tension between escape and engagement' is embraced as part of the artistic project. Teasing and testing the relationship between what is overtly illusory and what appears to be real becomes an affective and aesthetic goal in its own right; it offers a 'centripetal' escape into pleasurable immersion, but it also generates a 'centrifugal', outwards-looking 'engagement' with the illusion's construction.

Chabon's narrative sleight-of-hand often explicitly references the generic differences that it both relies on and draws into proximity. For example, Joe reflects that 'the usual charge levelled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed…actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf' [emphasis in original].[109] Chabon clarifies that this opinion emerges from Joe's own traumatic experience and the wider reality of a world at war. Joe has escaped 'from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing his death. The escape from reality was, he felt – especially right after the war – a worthy challenge.'[110] These lines have generally been interpreted as the crux of the novel's argument in favour of escapism as therapeutic. However, examining the technique of the argument reveals Chabon's Houdini-esque method. In listing Joe's escapes as a set of traumatic experiences which he requires a further 'escape from reality' to soothe, Chabon once again demonstrates the split between escapistry and escapism – escapistry being the practice of escape within the diegetic 'reality' (Joe's flights and escapades), and escapism being the affect which temporarily salves the desire for escape. Here, though, the split explicitly designates the events of the novel as 'reality.' This is contrasted with the fictionality, the un-reality, of comic books. While it constructs a key tenet of *Kavalier & Clay*'s theory of escapism – i.e. comic books are valuable *because of* their unreality – sketching this split also has the effect of attesting to the realism of Chabon's fictional representations, asserting the plausibility of the novel's plot and the verisimilitude of its world. At the same time, in recounting the events of the novel in this manner – condensing them into an episodic reel – Chabon suggests the influence of a comic-book style on his own, purportedly 'real', narrative. This textual trick then exposes and enchants at the same time. It critiques as much as it creates; indeed, it creates *through* a signalled critical awareness of the

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109 Ibid., p.575.
110 Ibid.

illusionism (the manipulable and affectively manipulating techniques) of supposedly uncritical 'escapist' art. This is a showman's technique: the Houdini-inspired practice of diverting attention by exposing the illusions of supposedly inferior 'frauds' and 'hucksters' before going on to beguile with your own illusions. The act of exposing bestows greater trustworthiness, greater validity on the showman's own tricks – tricks which then proceed to test and question that validity by re-deploying and modifying the techniques of the exposed, critiqued hucksters. As I will explain more fully below, the realist diegetic level then becomes a performance of sincerity – one which productively signals its own illusionism.

This is not meant to paint Chabon as cynical or ruthless, and it is far from the case that Chabon views comic book artists as hacks or frauds (although this cynical perspective does haunt the novel's representation of comics). The comparison is more meant to highlight a particular feature of Chabon's text which, in my view, forms the heart of *Kavalier & Clay*'s negotiation of genre and demonstrates the importance of Houdini not only to the novel's thematic content, but to its formal argument.

The practice of debunking-enchanting, these verisimilitude 'tricks', are, to a certain extent, inherent to the novel's project of ekphrastic re-representation. Andrzej Gąsiorek sees Chabon's recreation of comics as constituting an 'ekphrastic fiction' that stages 'an internal debate about the merits of two different kinds of art: the purely literary versus the hybridized form of the comic book, which combines image and text.'[111] This internal debate, as Stephen Cheeke makes clear, is a creative act entailing elements of critique. Cheeke writes: 'Ekphrasis is an example both of the creative act itself – through the Greek *mimesis*, imitating, copying – and of the secondary critical act of commentary, description, revelation.'[112] Inasmuch as ekphrasis highlights the conjoining of creativity with critical insight, it is a useful description for *Kavalier & Clay*'s formal project. It suggests how the novel might offer an alternative to the binary of critical irony vs. enamoured, dupable naivety that some literary critics see as a polarising impasse in post-postmodern literature. However, the term does not adequately account for the fact that, as Gąsiorek acknowledges, the object of the novel's ekphrastic attention is the 'hybridized form' of the comic book (and a non-existent comic book at that), and not, as is typical in ekphrasis, a purely visual object.[113] Nor

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[111] Gąsiorek, pp.877-8.

[112] Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.185. Quoted in Gąsiorek, p.878.

[113] Chabon's fictional comic book does, however, recreate images from existing comic books. That provocative front cover of *Radio Comics* #1, for example, is directly borrowed from the first issue of *Captain America*

does it properly account for the fact that *Kavalier & Clay*'s 'internal debate' about different kinds of art extends beyond re-representations of a visual object, and into the general self-conscious diffusion of comic book tropes and literary tropes throughout the novel.

As such, I wish to recast this modal interplay as Chabon's own practice of escapistry: tricks and techniques borrowed from both literary and comic book forms, deployed in the novel in order to achieve a self-reflexive, self-exposing escapism. Such a recasting emphasises the centrality of Houdini as a model for the novel's form. The conjunction of creativity and critique deployed in ekphrasis is retained in the Houdini-esque practice of debunking-enchanting outlined above. Reading Houdini as a formal model, however, shifts the focus from a discussion of the merits of different mediums to more technical ideas of craft and more abstract ideas of affect – ideas which are linked, in Chabon's novel and in his essays, with the potent metaphors of trickery, magic, enchantment and (dis)illusion. At the same time, because Houdini is essentially associated with representational and epistemological uncertainty – even untrustworthiness – this shift in focus helps to foreground the critical issues of sincerity and scepticism which attend Chabon's generic sleight of hand.

For example, reading one of the most typically 'ekphrastic' passages in the novel – the representation of the first Escapist story – as Houdini-esque highlights the self-reflexive playfulness of its method over and above the implied 'merits' of the media involved. Issue #1 of 'The Escapist', by *Kavalier & Clay*'s account, begins like this:

> The curtain itself is legendary: its dimensions, its weight, its darker-than-chocolate color, the Continental fineness of its stuff. It hangs in thick ripples like frosting poured from the proscenium arch of the most famous theatre in the most celebrated block of the world's greatest city. Call it Empire City, home of the needle-tipped Excelsior Building, tallest ever built; home of the Statue of Liberation, on her island in the middle of Empire Bay, her sword raised in defiance to the tyrants of the world; and home also of the Empire Palace Theatre, whose fabled Black Curtain trembles

Comics, which shows the titular hero slugging Hitler in the face. See Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 30 and p.32. Also, in the early 1970s, Jack Kirby created *Mister Miracle* – a superhero escape artist who, according to Mark Evanier, represented Jack's 'feelings of imprisonment in the comic-book industry.' Mark Evanier, 'Introduction', in *Jack Kirby's Mister Miracle* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), p.4. Chabon does not mention the existence of Mister Miracle in his essays or commentary on the novel. However, in his author's note to *Kavalier & Clay* he does acknowledge 'the deep debt I owe in this and everything else I've ever written to the work of the late Jack Kirby, the King of Comics', *Kavalier & Clay*, p.639. It must also be mentioned here that in 2004 Dark Horse comics released issue #1 of *Michael Chabon Presents the Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, which, in a kind of reverse-ekphrasis, depicted the Escapist stories described in Chabon's novel, alongside many other original tales.

now as, at stage right, the narrowest of fissures opens in the rich dark impasto of its velour. Through this narrow gap a boy peers out.[114]

This passage marks the novel's first extended foray into another diegetic level. The tense suddenly changes from past to present, imitating the narration boxes appended to comic book panels, and also, in its immediacy, reflecting the 'considerable vitality' which Chabon ascribes to early comic books.[115] It is, unsurprisingly, a highly visual passage. The imagery is rich and sumptuous, with attention paid to texture and colour as the prose zooms in on the curtain, and then zooms out to the wider locale. However, in accordance with the Houdini-esque method described above, Chabon laces his representation with a self-exposing playfulness which ultimately reflects not on the medium of the comic book, or of the novel, but on the creative method at work in the passage itself. The 'velour' of the curtain is described as a 'rich dark impasto.' In this – because 'velour' describes a material and 'impasto' refers to a painting technique – Chabon both sustains and breaks the illusion that the curtain is real.

The representation of Empire City – a metamorphosed version of New York – also discloses its own constructed nature. It stands as an example of what Chabon has elsewhere called a 'scale model': a fictional world created by its maker as a 'partial and inaccurate' reflection of 'that mysterious original [world], unbroken, half-remembered', which is apprehended in childhood.[116] Chabon compares these fictional worlds to the boxes made by the artist Joseph Cornell. Such a work of art 'draws a boundary around the things it contains, and forces them into a defined relationship, not merely with one another, but with everything outside the box.'[117] Empire City, then, encased in the imaginary frame of a comic book panel, and in turn nestled within Chabon's neo-historic-realist narrative, brings into focus the relationship between its artistic fragments and the 'reality' that lies outside its bounds. This external 'reality' includes the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds. For example, transforming the Statue of Liberty into 'the Statue of Liberation' is at once a reference to Joe Kavalier's younger brother, Tommy (who, early in the novel, refers to the famous monument with the same sleepy malapropism),[118] and a reference to the escapist quality of art as wish fulfilment

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[114] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.123.

[115] Ibid., pp.76-77.

[116] Chabon, 'The Film Worlds of Wes Anderson', in *The New York Review of Books* (March 7th, 2013) https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/03/07/film-worlds-wes-anderson/ [accessed 09/11/2020]. The concept exerts a strong pull on Chabon's imagination: he titled his 1991 short story collection *A Model World and Other Stories*, with the second half of the collection titled: 'The Lost World'.

[117] Ibid.

[118] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.59.

– the abstract ideal of 'liberty' can, in the exuberant realm of comics, be transformed into the gung-ho action of 'liberation.' Empire City's 'Excelsior Building' is a similar kind of composite fragment. It nods to Marvel editor Stan Lee, who, in the mid-1960s, began to include a bulletin inside his comics entitled 'Stan's Soapbox', which he would sign off with his signature motto: 'Excelsior!'[119] This is, of course, an anachronistic reference for Joe and Sammy, who create this story in the 1940s. It is a reference that deliberately exceeds the diegetic frame. For the contemporary reader, it is most likely to call to mind Stan Lee or the general miasma of comic fandom; for Joe and Sammy, we may assume they know the phrase as the state motto of New York.[120] 'Excelsior' translates as 'ever upward.'[121] In using the term as the name of the tallest building ever built, Chabon textualizes and signals the verticality of this comic-book city, and the real-life city of which it is a version. In its expression of the idea of constant growth and progress, 'excelsior' also resonates with the concept of imperialism, which Chabon here likewise whittles down into the nominative signal: 'Empire City.'

These brief, over-laden references express something crucially important about Chabon's view and use of comic book artistry. Namely, that it is constituted of iconographic fragments, which condense ideas about the world down into essentialist representations. Scott McCloud, in his influential *Understanding Comics*, casts this as a vital property of comics. He argues that the medium is built on the cartoon, which is a variety of icon that makes use of 'amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential "meaning," an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't.'[122] In Chabon's textual version of comic book art, names and naming perform the pictorial function of simplifying and amplifying meaning. The key point I want to emphasise for my reading is that this compressed kind of expression necessarily contains creativity and critique in the same act. Whittling something down to its 'essential meaning' involves a

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[119] Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), p.112.
[120] There are, of course, other sources of the phrase prior to Stan Lee. Two of the most 'likely' sources for Joe and Sammy, considering their knowledge of and ambitions in the fields of literature and prestidigitation, are Walt Whitman's poem 'Excelsior', published in the 1856 version of *Leaves of Grass*, and the 1901 short film of the same name by magician and filmmaker Georges Méliès.
[121] New York State Library online http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/emblems/flag.htm#:~:text=The%20figures%20on%20either%20side,official%20records%20of%20the%20State [accessed 30/11/20].
[122] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p.30.

process of critical thought and analysis in order to arrive at that distilled version. Thus, 'Empire City', which seems a brief nominative gesture, rests on a critical awareness of U.S. imperialism. This stands shoulder-to-shoulder with awareness of U.S. exceptionalism, expressed here by the 'Statue of Liberation' with her 'sword raised in defiance to the tyrants of the world' – an attitude which recalls, with proleptic irony, the exceptionalist notion of 'exporting democracy' which became an increasingly important, and highly problematic, part of U.S. foreign policy post-WWII.[123] This method of creating-through-critique resonates with the dualism of enchanting and debunking that Houdini encapsulates. As with Houdini's illusions, the method allures and intrigues. Transforming these critical ideas into the creative fragments of a 'scale model' invites interpretation: the fragments appear as gnomic products of an obscured knowledge, in the same way that a final effect in magic appears as the tip of an iceberg, the skill and the apparatus concealed, but guessable. Framing these fragments within a model world solicits further scrutiny: why have these things been arranged here? How do they appear familiar?

In Chabon's Houdini-esque novel, these questions ultimately turn back to the technique of (re-)representation and the potential for literary reinvigoration. For Chabon's purposes, precedence is given not to the critical ideas themselves, but to the manner of their expression and relative containment. As he elaborates in his discussion of Cornell and framing worlds, 'the crucial element' in such a work of art is not one or even all of the fragments contained within; instead, 'the important thing… is the *box*.'[124] As Chabon makes clear in his essay on the film worlds of Wes Anderson, it is the capacity of art to self-disclose its artificiality that fascinates and inspires him. He writes that 'artifice, openly expressed, is the only true "authenticity" an artist can lay claim to… the magic of art, which renders beauty out of brokenness, disappointment, failure, decay, even ugliness and violence – is authentic only to the degree that it attempts to conceal neither the bleak facts nor the tricks employed in pulling off the presto change-o.'[125] Chabon's 'Escapist' story, then – in suggesting the

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[123] See Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1992) for an unapologetic account of foreign policy burdened with nationalistic exceptionalism. See Amin Saikal and Albrecht Schnabel, ed., *Democratization in the Middle East: Experiences, Struggles, Challenges* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003) for a more measured view. Paul S. Hirsch's book *Pulp Empire: A Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) offers a thorough examination of the links between imperial policy makers and comic books from WWII onwards.
[124] Chabon, 'The Film Worlds of Wes Anderson', in *The New York Review of Books* (March 7th, 2013) https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/03/07/film-worlds-wes-anderson/ [accessed 09/11/2020].
[125] Ibid.

'tricks' that lie behind New York's metamorphosis into Empire City – demonstrates this open expression of artifice, making the process of creation thrillingly visible.

At the same time, Chabon's overtly artificial escapistry in this comic-book chapter serves as a Houdini-esque misdirection. As Chabon's comments on visible artifice being the most important aspect of art imply, the iconographic fragments of his comic-book world exist, for all their critical freight, primarily as exemplary comic-book-style abstractions. This exemplariness draws on a historicism that ultimately creates an imbalance of authority between diegetic levels. Empire City's skyscrapers and statues (and, beyond the passage cited above, its uncommon number of underground lairs, criminal goons, and imperilled citizenry) are like artefacts in a museum of popular culture: curated and displayed for their representative qualities.

In this sense, the critical awareness compressed into Chabon's scale model is, first and foremost, the history of comic books themselves. Chabon distils the universe of superhero comics into identifiable, re-deployable conventions, reflecting his notion of 'fruitful self-consciousness' and 'heightened awareness of… [a genre's] history.' That this practice of identifying genre formulae entails historical work is made clear by popular fiction scholar John G. Cawelti. He describes it as:

> Generalizing the characteristics of large groups of individual works from certain combinations of cultural materials and archetypal story patterns. It is useful primarily as a means of making historical and cultural inferences about the collective fantasies shared by large groups of people and of identifying differences in these fantasies from one culture or period to another.[126]

Chabon's project of performing this kind of analysis within a fictional narrative that recreates the very thing it examines cannot help but make this historical survey part of the dialog, or tension, between the comic book and literary novel.

As discussed above, Chabon's escapistry – his Houdini-esque method of creating through critique – also works to bolster the verisimilitude of parts of his own narrative. Chabon's diegetic forays into a comic-book world are themselves narrative flights; escapes from the realist literary mode that guides the bulk of Chabon's writing, and which *includes* a historical consciousness as part of its method of generating textual authority and realism. The account of 'The Escapist' Issue #1 ends with the sound of the comic characters' voices

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126 John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p.7.

floating up from their subterranean hideout and emerging 'through a grate in the sidewalk, where it can be heard clearly by a couple of young men who are walking past, their collars raised against the cold October night, dreaming their elaborate dream, wishing their wish, teasing their golem into life.'[127] The overtly fictional world that has immersed us over the chapter is rendered immaterial by this transition, turning to sound floating through a grate. The illusion evaporates. The tense shift from present to present-continuous works to cross diegetic levels, reminding us that the ongoing action of reality frames this narrative excursion. Joe admits to Sammy: 'I wish he [The Escapist] was real', firmly placing us back in a world supposed to serve as the realistic counter to the escapist comic book narrative.[128]

Elsewhere, this distinction is upheld by Chabon working an authoritative historical voice into his prose. The novel contains a history of superhero comics' production, distribution and development. This history spans the cultural roots of the comic book in the newspaper strip – which is 'a proud American cousin, in indigenous vitality and grace, of baseball and jazz' – covers the 'magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes' represented by Superman, who himself became the archetypal comic book superhero, and, finally, describes the decline of the 'golden age' of superhero comics following 'the defeat of those actual world-devouring supervillains, Hitler and Tojo' and the looming shadow of an unbeatable 'new villain' in the development of the atomic bomb.[129] In offering this analysis, suggesting cultural and historical changes as explanations for variations in the form, Chabon performs critical and creative acts together. This Houdini-esque practice utilizes authoritative explanation in the midst of illusion-making in order to give the impression of realism and to grant authority to the diegetic level in which it appears. Chabon takes full advantage of this function, weaving his fictional history into the accepted history of comics. At the same time, however, he offers a knowing wink to the artificiality of the enterprise. In sketching the history of comic books' emergence, rise, and fall, he also implies the movement of enchantment to disillusionment, vitality to exhaustion, that his own narrative follows.

As mentioned above, in holding the tension between different mediums and genres open, the novel productively retains elements of both scepticism and sincerity. Joe's heartfelt admission to Sammy, for example – 'I wish he was real' – expresses this sustained tension, at once marking a sincere emotional need, critical awareness of the impossibility of its

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[127] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.134.
[128] Ibid., p.135.
[129] Ibid., p.75, p.78, and p.484.

fulfilment, and, also, the generic differences underpinning this (im-)possibility. In sustaining these tensions Chabon performs a sleight-of-hand, granting immersivity and authority to his realist narrative, but also stimulating readers' awareness of the 'tricks' involved in pulling off this immersive illusion, with this latter awareness of technicity being partly stimulated via the overt artificiality of the novel's generic chapters. Such an approach – which is something like a more strategically deployed version of the 'silent-film acting… of hammy vaudevillians' that Arthur Krystal identifies in *Tarzan of the Apes*'s nudging-and-winking performance of its own sincerity – offers an escape from the arid irony that David Foster Wallace saw as entrapping literary culture. Wallace argues that irony is 'critical and destructive, a ground clearing… irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.'[130] The value of Chabon's Houdini-esque mode, then, which follows Kornblum's 'critical and amused' stance in its sustained irresolution of sceptical and sincere attitudes, is that it can conjure up illusions in the place of those it debunks – even if those illusions are visibly artificial. It is this pleasurable artificiality that Chabon sees as an instructive and inspirational aspect of genre forms. As will be discussed more fully later in this chapter, one result of Chabon's Houdini-esque approach to genre forms is to suggest that a productive means of taking the contemporary novel forwards is to utilise popular culture not merely as postmodern referent, but as exemplary model for the value of enchantment, and as a productive reminder to authors of the technical side of their endeavour – a suggestion to refocus on the fundamental practice of storytelling.

Tension between scepticism and sincerity guides *Kavalier & Clay*'s formal method, but, as is indicated by Chabon's chronicling of the cousins' disillusionment, it is also a key aspect of the novel's content. Chabon peppers his narrative with moments where irony and scepticism are portrayed in a manner which shares in David Foster Wallace's distrust of à la mode scoffing and its destructive effect on meaning and value. For example, when Joe and Rosa meet for the first time at a Greenwich Village party full of the New York intellectual and artistic elite – including Salvador Dalí – Joe responds to Rosa's query as to whether they have met before with the unashamedly cheesy line: 'Someone like you I would absolutely remember.'[131] This causes one of the men already crowding round her to exclaim '"Oh, good God,"… in disgust', but Joe's unironic, flirtatious rejoinder makes Rosa smile, and leads to an unguarded exchange which allows intimacy to grow between them: 'As his glibness had

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[130] 'E Unibus Pluram', p.183.
[131] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.238.

departed him, so a more earnest nature seemed to feel greater liberty to confess itself in her.'[132] This moment sparks Rosa and Joe's relationship, and the fact their romance forms the heart of the novel (it drives much of the action in the novel's latter half, and consistently pulls against Joe's escapist fleeing) suggests that such an uncynical, sincere approach is integral to creating meaning and value.

Chabon's cautiousness around irony is also shown through *Empire Comics* editor, George Deasey, who is described as having 'an all-consuming cynicism.'[133] He constantly derides the comics and pulp fiction business he has found himself in, referring to the former as another step forward in 'the devolution of American culture.'[134] Chabon describes how Deasey-esque cynicism leaks into later instalments of 'The Escapist':

> In later years, in other hands, the Escapist was played for laughs. Tastes changed, and writers grew bored, and all the straight plots had been pretty well exhausted. Later writers and artists, with the connivance of George Deasy, turned the strip into a peculiar kind of inverted parody of the whole genre of the costumed hero. The Escapist's chin grew larger and more emphatically dimpled, and his muscles hypertrophied… [he] deliberately introduced obstacles and handicaps into his own efforts to thwart the large but finite variety of megalomaniacs, fiends, and rank hoodlums he fought in the years after the war, in order to make things more interesting for himself.[135]

The post-war Escapist, running out of legitimate targets, suffers from an 'exhaustion' of plots. Chabon deliberately gestures here to John Barth's well-known essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (1967). Barth describes incipient postmodernism as founded on 'the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities' – namely, the forms and possibilities of the traditional nineteenth-century novel.[136] Chabon's description of the post-war comic strip, then, remains self-consciously hand-in-hand with literary discourse. That this parody of the superhero is described as being created with 'connivance' indicates that sardonicism motivates this transformation, rather than a sincere desire to expand the genre via formal play.

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[132] Ibid., p.239.
[133] Ibid., p.156.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., p.359.
[136] John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.62-76 (p.64).

Although Barth in fact shares with Chabon a sense of the playful vibrancy that can emerge from this 'exhaustion',[137] the parodic, postmodern Escapist is here depicted more as an expression of boredom than as a remedy to it. This kind of cynical parody, as John Joseph Hess has made clear in his essay on Chabon's relationship to Quentin Tarantino, is to be distinguished from Chabon's own conceptualization of pastiche and parodic play. According to Hess, Chabon's novel *Telegraph Avenue* (2012) mounts a 'specific critique of an academic version of postmodern aesthetics as they have generally been understood.'[138] One character in the novel – an academic called Peter Van Eder – teaches a course on Tarantino's films, describing their postmodern aesthetics as 'self-enclosed, self-reflexive... a hermetic, empty universe of physical artistry.'[139] This idea of postmodern referentiality as a closed-off, involuted aesthetic is, Hess argues, counter to Chabon's own 'pop-infused language... [which] functions as a common language... [and] enables subtle and productive communication between different characters.'[140] Chabon is against postmodern aesthetics that amount to solipsism – in the face of generic exhaustion he prefers formal experimentation and referentiality to look forwards and gesture outwards, rather than turn inwards. The post-war Escapist – who introduces unnecessary 'handicaps' to his crime-fighting purely 'to make things more interesting for himself' – exemplifies the kind of involuted postmodern aesthetic that Chabon sees as unhelpfully cynical.

The ensuing description of the pre-war Escapist, then, seems more like a lament for a loss of meaning and value:

> The Escapist who reigned among the giants of the earth in 1941 was a different kind of man. He was serious, sometimes to a fault... And his missions were just that – his business, fundamentally, was one of salvation. The early stories, for all their anti-fascist fisticuffs and screaming Stukas, are stories of orphans threatened, peasants abused, poor factory workers turned into slavering zombies by their arms-producer bosses... In his combination of earnestness, social conscience, and willingness to

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[137] David James positions Barth as taking an 'initial role' in what he calls a 'counterplot in the story of late twentieth-century fiction.' The counterplot James identifies is 'an earnestly motivated and assiduously maintained dedication to the possibilities of fiction', against the familiar account of postmodernism's 'generic fatigue.' Although Barth is 'typically viewed as an archetypal postmodernist', James argues that his comments on literature's exhaustion are in fact positive rather than negative, demonstrating a 'sense of sheer drive rather than deflation, of renovation rather than resignation' in their anticipation of exuberant experimentation with form. David James, 'How Postmodernism Became Earnest', in *Postmodern/Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, pp.81-91 (pp.82-3).

[138] John Joseph Hess, 'Quentin Tarantino and the Paradox of Popular Culture in Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*', in *Michael Chabon's America*, pp.31-47 (p.39).

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid., p.40.

scrap, he was a perfect hero for 1941, as America went about the rumbling, laborious process of backing itself into a horrible war.[141]

With a sense of purpose equivalent to a religious mission, the Escapist tramps through these early stories making good on the nobler, but also more earthly, promise of his name: he liberates the oppressed. A sincere sense of earnestness and social conscience guides his actions. However, the final line of the above passage indicates equivocation regarding the benefits and the purity of intention behind this sincerity. Chabon's following claim that 'the Escapist no doubt would have faded from the national memory and imagination' were it not for Joe's formal innovation cements the idea that the only trustworthy form of sincerity is one that openly declares its artificial construction.[142] Remaining aware of the deleterious effects of irony, Chabon nevertheless understands that self-consciousness regarding art's illusionism can lead to fruitful progress within a medium. Joe's formal experimentation is inspired by *Citizen Kane*, which, he tells Sammy, demonstrates 'the total blending of narration and image that was…the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling, and the irreducible nut of their partnership.'[143] It is not, as Joe insists to Sammy, merely a matter of 'adapting the bag of cinematic tricks' in *Citizen Kane* (close ups, strange angles etc.), but a matter of learning from this adapting that narrative is saved by form, and form saved by narrative:

> Without the witty, potent dialogue and the puzzling shape of the story, the movie would have been merely an American version of the kind of brooding, shadow-filled Ufa-style expressionist stuff that Joe had grown up watching in Prague. Without the brooding shadows and bold adventurings of the camera, without the theatrical lighting and queasy angles, it would have been merely a clever movie about a rich bastard.[144]

In this passage, which self-reflexively represents a lesson learned from popular culture, Chabon outlines how technical play can be sincere and expressive, rather than ironic, through its fusing with narrative. In turn, plots and stories are saved from 'exhaustion' through a heightened attention to technique, which enables elements of the story to be articulated in new and innovative ways.

This approach can be seen as a kind of 'making whole.' The impasse between scepticism and sincerity is bridged by this transformation of formal play from an expression

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[141] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.360.
[142] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.360.
[143] Ibid., p.362.
[144] Ibid.

of 'boredom' to something that contributes to the affective power of the artwork.[145] This does not mean, however, that formal experimentation or playfulness with conventions lose their associations of trickery or artifice. Instead, the affective lessons that form takes from content, and vice versa, mean that the tension between ironic play and affective sincerity is expressed *within* the workings of both form and content, rather than as neatly separated between the two. The *story* of *Citizen Kane* is spatialised as a 'puzzling shape', suggesting the narrative has been constructed with a formal consciousness akin to that which creates the film's 'queasy angles.' At the same time, the typically narrative trope of 'bold adventurings' is undertaken by the camera itself, the lens's wanderings and intrusions generating its own formal expression of audacity and derring-do. *Kavalier & Clay* self-reflexively enacts this reciprocity of formal innovation and affective narrative content. The novel attempts to fill the void created by postmodern irony, replacing what has been 'debunked' with a reinvigorated sense of affective possibility. At the same time, it soothes the fractures in readers' credulity with the reassuring gloss that it, too, knows itself to be illusory.

Kavalier & Clay's enacting of this Houdini-esque approach works rhetorically to demonstrate its technique and postulate its success. At the novel's close, Chabon aims for a fulfilling, emotionally affecting ending. With Joe now returned to New York and living with Rosa and Sammy, a box inexplicably arrives on their doorstep, filled with mud from the river Moldau. This is taken to be the crumbled remains of the Golem of Prague.[146] Joe feels that the box is much heavier than it was when the Golem was intact, and remembers some 'paradoxical wisdom' of Kornblum's teaching 'that it was the Golem's unnatural soul that had given it weight; unburdened of it, the earthen Golem was light as air.'[147] Joe wonders 'if possibly there could have been more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily.'[148]

The implication is that the box of silt is laden with the 'lost souls' of those who died in the Holocaust. That this serious, sincere, affecting moment is also the most explicit 'magical' occurrence within *Kavalier & Clay*'s realist narrative – a moment which seems to verify an ancient myth and the idea of migratory souls – serves as a kind of final flourish to

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[145] This 'transformation' in the treatment of formal play is of course not a discovery but a *remembrance* – a reinstallation of the kind of affective technicality characterizing Houdini's art and *Citizen Kane*, designed to remedy a critically dominant version of postmodernist aesthetics.

[146] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.611.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid., p.612.

the novel's generic escapistry. Earlier in the novel, after Joe misplaces the last letter his mother will ever send him (it remains forever unread), Chabon characterises the 'true magic' of the world as one which causes things to properly 'vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place.'[149] In contrast to this, the stage magician 'seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear.'[150] The return of the Golem at the novel's close, then, with the 'lost souls' recovered, clearly indicates that this is a 'falsely' magical plot contrivance – we are in the realm of illusion-makers, who can restore lost things. However, it nevertheless provides an emotionally resonant scene, not least *because* it is framed as artificial, thereby indicating the real, irrecoverable historical loss outside of this fictional gesture. At the same time, the moment seeks to reaffirm the novelist's ability and right to create affective enchantment. The placement of this overtly magical event at the novel's close – after over 600 pages of historic realism, where magical events are confined to the pages of *Radio Comics* – is an appeal to a reader's faith, an illusion self-consciously proffered, in the hope that, as with the jaded George Deasey, the reader will remember the 'flavour' of 'faith in the power of art.'[151]

I wish to round off this discussion of genre and sincerity through focussing on a second example of 'magical' recovery in the novel – one which also revolves around unread letters. Joe, stationed in Antarctica, has with him a bundle of Rosa's letters, covering 1941 – 1943. All of them are unread. Just before he sets out on a mission from which he does not expect to return, Joe opens and reads the letters. Not only does this scene explicitly recall Joe's mother's lost letter and the ensuing comments on true and false magic, it also stands as an example of Chabon deploying, under his own definition, a common trope of literary fiction. In his essay 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights', Chabon argues that 'the genre known (more imprecisely than any other) as "literary fiction" has rules, conventions, and formulas of its own', and that one of these key tropes is the use of 'letters and their liability to being read or intercepted.'[152]

When Joe reads all the amassed letters from Rosa, this is a self-conscious step into literary fiction, in the midst of a section of the novel that, perhaps more than any other,

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[149] Ibid., p.339.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid., p.268.
[152] 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights', p.10.

incorporates the tropes, language and imagery of comic books into its prose. The Antarctic base itself – Joe's 'deep-buried polar tomb' – is a version of Superman's own remote, icy hideout: the Fortress of Solitude.[153] Recounting death, assassination, warfare, and madness, this section of the novel also runs closest to the pulpy themes of *Radio Comics*. Although Chabon does inflect these themes with a dose of realism (far from exhibiting super-heroic zeal, for example, Joe experiences the 'stupendous tedium of adventure'), the language in this section regularly pulls us back to a comic-book world.[154] Joe is a 'man of mystery'; the freezing cold jerks 'at his chest like a wire snare' and falls 'on him like a safe.'[155]

Additionally, when Joe reads the letters he feels the pull of his love for Rosa for the first time since absconding: 'until now, Joe had told himself that he had buried his love for Rosa in the same deep hole in which he had laid his grief for his brother… now, as he returned the last letter to the packet, he was almost sick with longing.'[156] In this, Chabon tallies the deployment of a literary trope with an emotional resurgence, figuring both of these things as a nascent homecoming. Indeed, in a kind of authorial brinkmanship, Chabon goes as far as to state that 'the letters were like fragments from an old-fashioned novel', self-reflexively signalling his use of a literary formula, and indicating that the novel is about to return more fully to the historic realism of its previous sections.[157] In a reminder that Houdini is the representative diegetic figure for affective technical play, Chabon describes the resurgence of Joe's buried emotions in the language of escapology: 'His entombed memories of Rosa were hauled up…the lock on the capsule was breached, the hasps were thrown, the hatch opened… he recalled the sweet illusion of hope that her love had brought him.'[158] As much as comic books, then, serve as an escapist medium – both for their readers and for Chabon, who appropriates their conventions to escape the confines of an 'exhausted' literary mode – here, the text performs a further escape from the limits of a comic-book-esque tale of warfare *back into* an emotionally expansive, realist narrative. The literary value of Houdini as a dialectical figure who transforms from one state to another, who escapes from rigid restrictions via masterful technical knowledge, through 'brute trickery', or a combination of the two, is self-consciously foregrounded in this moment of generic slippage. That the move

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[153] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.441.
[154] Ibid., p.452.
[155] Ibid., p.427 and p.430.
[156] Ibid., p.457.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid., p.458.

is figured as a breaking-free implies the liberatory triumph that Chabon casts on the restoration of emotion to technically playfully fiction.

This moment demonstrates how emotional meaning can co-exist in literary fiction with generic trickery. Importantly, this relationship necessarily involves questions of plot and storytelling. One of the only points of agreement between Lev Grossman and Arthur Krystal is that genre fiction and intricate plotting are closely associated. Krystal writes that, when we read genre fiction, 'it's plot we want and plenty of it.'[159] Grossman, going further, states: 'even if you grant that the standards for writing and characterization in genre fiction are lower than in literary fiction, the standards for plotting are far, far higher.'[160] Delving into comic-book territory, the plot of *Kavalier & Clay* wraps itself around incidents which – like the Escapist's obstacles and challenges – productively misshape the 'exhausted' straight story of its literary genre. These complications entertain, but they also serve to increase the emotional stakes. The remembrance of lost love is all the more urgent and poignant for occurring during Joe's traumatic Polar experience, while he is trapped in his fortress of solitude, obsessed with revenge, with only the meagre sidekicks of a mad pilot and a half-blind dog for company.[161]

Significantly, because Joe reads all Rosa's letters at once, he is able to form 'a kind of continuous narrative' out of them.[162] The letters, initially delivered 'with gaps of weeks and months between them', when read together allow Joe to put together the pieces of a puzzle. The narrativized consumption of what should have been episodic allows Joe to discern that Rosa has falsified the birthdate of her son, hiding the fact that Joe is the child's father. If Joe had read the letters when they arrived, Chabon writes, 'he might have been deceived by the falsifying of the date of baby Thomas's birth', but in a continuous narrative, he is able to see through the deception.[163] It is literary narrativization here, then, which provides a critical demystification and an emotional 'unlocking.' If the 'magic' of art is in recovering what has been lost and making whole what has been torn into pieces, then Joe's piecing together of Rosa's letters stands as a self-consciously literary artistic trick: one which solicits an emotional response, *and also* provokes sceptical scrutiny.

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[159] Krystal, 'Easy Writers'.
[160] Grossman, 'Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle'.
[161] Shannenhouse and Oyster, respectively, both of whom die, leaving Joe all the more bereft.
[162] Ibid., p.457.
[163] Ibid., p.457.

In this, Chabon suggests the ability of self-aware, generically playful narrative to productively retain attitudes that the fractious perspectives on contemporary fiction's approach to irony and sincerity often see as mutually exclusive. In having Joe assemble his continuous narrative out of what should have been episodic instalments of a story, Chabon gestures to his own novel's project of historical re-representation, which gathers up the history of comic books (themselves originally published in episodic instalments), and forms them into what Bernhoft criticises as a 'harmoniously ordered narrative.' Far from representing an overly credulous immersion in plot-driven escapist fiction, however, this deeply self-reflexive scene demonstrates that a self-aware embrace of narrative conventions can liberate the novel from emotional stagnation, and from its own generic exhaustions.

Chabon's generic play, then, and the tensions between realism and artifice, sincerity and scepticism that guide it, demonstrates that Houdini is both inspiration for and reflection of the idea that writers can create work which productively debunks and enchants, critiques and conjures. To conclude this chapter, I wish to continue the examination of this method in relation to the novel's representation of money and storytelling. *Kavalier & Clay*, and Chabon's essays, connect the Houdini-esque trickster to a concept of literature which is committed, playfully and expansively, to *narrative*, to the telling of tales. Such a commitment folds in the ideas of technical craft and appropriation of styles in the service of imagining literature as an open, ongoing conversation – between different artists, and also between artist, work, and audience. This forms a kind of alternative economy, which I will set against the novel's representation of money and the financial side of popular artistry in order to better examine critical claims that Chabon's escapistry reflects a 'neoliberal rationality.'[164]

Imagination at Work: Formulae, Money, and Storytelling

From the beginning of *Kavalier & Clay*, creativity is represented in terms which qualify abstract notions of inspiration with a focus on the craftsman-like borrowing and appropriation of the techniques of others. The novel pays lip service to a concept of creative incipience as mysterious, divine inspiration – the idea of the Escapist is described elbowing its way around

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[164] Bernhoft, p.4.

Sammy's mind 'like Athena in the cranium of Zeus'[165] – but, for the most part, Chabon represents creativity as firmly grounded in technical knowledge and mastery, with those moments of inspiration inextricable from intimate knowledge of form and formulae. The divine genesis of the Escapist only occurs after Sammy and Joe have a long, detailed conversation about what kind of superhero they want to create, with their discussion running the gamut from superheroes based on animals, to those who can turn into acid, electricity, ice, fire, etc.[166] It is, in fact, a moment of critical, deconstructive insight that paves the way for their original creation. Sammy arrives at a key question: 'what is the why?', meaning what is the reason why their superhero would dress in a costume and fight crime.[167] Sammy critically analyses Batman, arriving at the conclusion that 'even though he's just a guy who dresses up like a bat and beats people up' he is also an emotionally compelling character driven by revenge and grief over the murder of his parents.[168] This shift in the cousins' discussion from what to why represents an analytical step in their appraisal of the genre of superhero comic books, with deep familiarity of conventions ultimately allowing the element which may distinguish and elevate their work to become visible.

The potentially productive creative impulse to scrutinise other artworks and borrow from their styles is, however, rendered ambivalent through the novel's sustained attention to the dialectics of escapism and escapistry. The impulse to mimic and appropriate is represented in the novel in terms which subtend affective artistic enthusiasm with the language of commerce and material success. Conventions are something of an intermediary between these two things: enthusiasm for art becomes a study of what makes it affecting, which is, at the same time, a study of what makes it successful. The details gleaned from this study – for example, the insight that Batman is an interesting character because he has a motive for his actions – are then open to appropriation and redeployment. That this process is also an escapist endeavour, an attempt to actualise the urge to escape in reality (through the potential material rewards of a successful imitation), is made clear by Chabon in the opening pages of the novel. While outlining Sammy's 'Brooklyn dreams' of transformation and escape, in which he transforms into a famous novelist, a heroic doctor, or someone with telepathy, Chabon writes that Sammy dreams 'with fierce contrivance.'[169] The literary

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[165] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.120.
[166] Ibid., p.93.
[167] Ibid., p.95.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid., p.6.

associations of this 'contrivance' are emphasised through the ensuing description of the ways in which Sammy has, so far, attempted to actualise his dreams. In a desk drawer, we are told, lie 'the first eleven pages of a massive autobiographical novel to be entitled either (in the Perelmanian mode) *Through Abe Glass, Darkly* or (in the Dreiserian) *American Disillusionment* (a subject of which he was still by and large ignorant).'[170] The modes of this autobiographical work are available before the work has been completed, before the life which would create the content has yet been lived; even the final 'massive' size of the novel is already present as an inherent feature of the kind of text Sammy imagines it to be. This shows the budding creative mind enthused by the tone of existing artists and artworks, landing on certain formal conventions in order to imitate this tone (the size of the work, the syntax, sound and subject of the title). Sammy turns this same attention towards comic book art, creating scrapbooks showing 'a thousand different exemplary poses and styles', clipped from newspaper strips and existing comic books.[171] Chabon emphasises that this artistic enthusiasm for imitation – for scavenging modes, formulae, and styles from existing art – dovetails with commercial interests when he describes Sammy as 'an *enterprising* thief' [my emphasis].[172] He reveals that the common thread running through Sammy's escape plans is a desire for 'the attainment of fabulous sums of money.'[173]

The dovetailing of financial gain with escapist impulses and artworks is key to Iain Bernhoft's assessment of the novel – and Houdini's role within it – as reflecting a neoliberal rationale. He argues that 'the novel's treatment of escapistry is bound up with crises in the privatization of art, the commodification of creative labor, and the translation of artistic value into individual enrichment.'[174] Bernhoft reads these issues as 'neoliberal aspects of contemporary Houdinism', and he sees the novel more generally as 'captur[ing] the contradiction [which Sarah] Brouillette ascribes to neoliberalism between the valorization of the entrepreneurial individual (implying faith in free enterprise and social mobility) and the exploitation and marginalization of creative labor.'[175] I agree with Bernhoft's observation

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[170] Ibid., p.7. Sammy's autobiographical novel reappears towards the end of *Kavalier & Clay*, where it bears the sole title: *American Disillusionment*. This further suggests the gradual dismantling of childhood enchantment over the course of Chabon's narrative. Sammy is, however, still imitating various modes. Chabon describes its later manifestations as 'a bitter comedy, a stoical Hemingwayesque tragedy, a hard-nosed lesson in social anatomy like something by John O'Hara, a bare-knuckles urban *Huckleberry Finn*.' *Kavalier & Clay*, p.543.
[171] Ibid., p.7.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Bernhoft, p.13.
[175] Ibid., p.14 and p.15.

here. Chabon's word choice above – 'attainment', rather than 'acquisition' of fabulous sums – implies a faith in the entrepreneurial individual's ability to succeed on their own merits and escape their socio-economic position. Meanwhile, the corporate bosses at Empire Comics – Sheldon Anapol and his brother-in-law Jack Ashkenazy – merely acquire cash, profiting off the comic book artists' labour. An early scene in which Joe offers to fix the company's stock of novelty radios for free causes Anapol to 'raise a meaningful eyebrow at his brother-in-law, promising or threatening something.'[176] That 'something' is the possibility of exploiting the cousins' naivety, which is, ultimately, what happens. The cousins agree to sign away the rights to the characters they create for $150. When the success of *Radio Comics* booms, Anapol clings to this contract, later feigning graciousness by cutting in Sammy and Joe for 5% of the profits from their new character, Luna Moth. The financial imbalance caused by this contractual entrapment is coldly spelled out by Chabon in the following chapter: 'In 1941, its best year ever, the partnership of Kavalier & Clay earned $59,832.27. Total revenues generated that year for Empire Comics, Inc…. though harder to calculate, came to something in the neighborhood of $12 to $15 million.'[177]

In this uneasy collision between financial gain and artistic endeavour, the formula, or convention plays a pivotal role. As outlined above, appraising genre formulae and attempting to imitate them is portrayed by Chabon as an initial step in an artist's development, but it is also an initial step towards the commercialisation of that art. When Sammy and Joe present Anapol with the first Escapist story, Anapol, weighing up whether to buy it, wonders: 'Is it the same kind of trash as Superman, that's what I want to know.'[178] This ambivalent relationship persists throughout the novel, with the degree of capitulation to genre conventions often appearing as an effective measure of whether, in artistic production, the scales are weighted in favour of the artists or the institutions within which they are commercially embedded. Sammy and Joe regularly attempt to break the conventions of their genre. Through their Rosa-Saks-inspired character, Luna Moth, the pair introduce 'the addition of sex to the costumed-hero concept'; Joe also creates formally innovative art that attempts to 'break free' of the regular nine-panel page layout and overcome 'the cheap conventions, the low expectations among publishers, readers, parents, and educators, the spatial constraints that he had been struggling against in the pages of *Luna Moth*.'[179]

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[176] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.89.
[177] Ibid., p.291.
[178] Ibid., p.157.
[179] Ibid., p.277. and p.361.

Although these innovations are eventually implemented in the pages of *Radio Comics*, they are initially met with suspicion from Sheldon Anapol because they do not adhere to established formulae. Genre conventions appear to offer market safety, but the artistically stifling effects of sticking too closely to these 'safe' conventions are indicated through the Houdini-esque language of 'constraints' and 'breaking free.' This latter point is emphasised in Sammy's later role at Pharaoh Comics; a steady job, which he takes to sustain his suburban lifestyle. Here, he produces work mechanically, his brain 'becoming an instrument so thoroughly tuned to the generation of highly conventional, severely formalistic, eight-to-twelve-page miniature epics that he could, without great effort, write, talk, smoke, listen to a ball game, and keep an eye on the clock all at the same time.'[180] The contemporary 'Houdinism' that Bernhoft describes as entailing a contradiction between the valorisation of the entrepreneurial individual and the exploitation of creative labour can be roughly mapped across onto this representation of vacillation in the relative commitment to conventional genre formulae. The language of 'spatial constraints' and 'breaking free', as well as Sammy's stifling self-instrumentalization, suggest Houdini as a figure for the tension inherent in the artist's relationship to genre formulae, and the attendant tension in this between market risk and market safety.

This is, ultimately, where my reading of Houdini in *Kavalier & Clay* parts ways with Bernhoft's. Addressing the neoliberal 'contradiction' outlined above between a championing of entrepreneurial individuals and the corporate exploitation of their labour, Bernhoft writes that 'a commitment to the former persists within the novel, in spite of the realities of the latter.'[181] I argue that the novel does not champion individual entrepreneurialism; rather, it champions creativity, which, as it manifests as artistic endeavour and consumption, collides uneasily but necessarily with the institutions and market forces involved in creating and distributing the products of the escapist imagination. This is, in essence, the dialectical problem encapsulated by Houdini between escapistry and escapism, but specifically placed in the context of artistic production. Escapist longing must inevitably engage with real life if it is to begin actualising itself. The uneasy intersecting of imagination and reality may produce ambivalences, concessions and disillusionment as much as it may result in work that successfully generates escapism. Ultimately, the dilemma this confronts is not how an individual's efforts can be aptly rewarded within a corporate hierarchy, but, rather, how

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[180] Ibid., p.486.
[181] Bernhoft, pp.15-16.

imagination and enthusiasm for creativity and storytelling may persist in spite of the structures within which they are embedded.

Financial gain, as a particular avenue of escapist desire, is portrayed in highly ambivalent terms. Chabon casts the attainment of wealth as a Houdini-esque double-bind. Sammy and Joe are both initially pleased with the offer of $150 for the rights to the Escapist, and, later, despite feeling the injustice of the disparity in earnings between themselves and Empire Comics, neither of the pair particularly desires more money. Joe hardly spends a penny – his one indulgence is bananas – while Sammy, with his 'twenty-nine thousand and change', conducts what he considers to be lavish spending (eating lox for breakfast every day; purchasing a phonograph) but still finds that, even after giving away half his earnings to his mother, he has 'more money left over than…[he] knew what to do with. It piled up in his bank account, making him nervous.'[182] This nervousness around money is something shared by Sheldon Anapol. The prospect of financial success gives him a 'look of incipient nausea'; he feels 'uncomfortable' in his new, spacious, black-marble office inside the Empire State Building.[183] He sits hunched in his chair 'as if to simulate the paradoxically comforting effects of more cramped and uncomfortable quarters.'[184] This reflects the Houdini-esque self-confining irony of escapistry, encapsulated in Bernard Kornblum's warning to 'reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*.' In extending this irony to financial success, Chabon undermines the idea that entrepreneurialism is a laudable thing to pursue, or that it might result in satisfaction.

Bernhoft does acknowledge the ambivalences of *Kavalier & Clay*'s representation of money, but for him this does not alter the novel's concession to neoliberalism. He writes that 'escapistry in *Kavalier & Clay* is not a passageway but rather a cul-de-sac, a way of circling back on a lost past.'[185] Bernhoft connects this idea to Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. As outlined in my introduction, Berlant's theory strongly resonates with the concept of an illusion of escape – she defines cruel optimism as a relation 'that exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing', elaborating on the idea by describing it as 'an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies

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[182] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.291-292.
[183] Ibid., p.278 and p.280.
[184] Ibid., p.280.
[185] Bernhoft, pp.3-4.

have come to represent.'[186] Anapol, whose wife asks of him 'why can't you ever *enjoy* anything you get?', is caught in this characteristic bind of capitalist realism – he cannot relinquish his attachment to the goal of accumulating money, nor the fantasy of the good life associated with that goal, even as affective evidence of his dissatisfaction continually rears its head.[187] However, for Bernhoft, the 'lost past' that haunts this process is evidence of *Kavalier & Clay*'s failure to properly critique neoliberalism. The novel's political and formal possibilities, he argues, are closed off by 'the nostalgic character of the novel's resolutions.'[188] Houdini is a figure for this because his repetitive escape acts displayed a 'magic of no-progress.'[189] Bernhoft sees this reflected in the 'continuation or return' marking many aspects of the novel's plot – for example, Joe returns from the war and rekindles his relationship with Rosa; Sammy and Joe, after years away from 'The Escapist', eventually buy Empire Comics from Anapol; the coffin containing the Golem of Prague, which Joe uses to flee the Nazis, turns up at Sammy's door; and Tommy – Rosa and Joe's son, who is named after Joe's dead brother – attempts to piece together the mystery of his parentage in a subplot which, in foregrounding Tommy's obsession with magic and comic books, recalls Sammy and Joe's childhood passions (Chabon makes this echo explicit when he writes: 'It all began – or had begun again – with the Ultimate Demon Wonder Box').[190] These narrative 'cul-de-sacs' lead Bernhoft to the following conclusion:

> The novel animates, like Houdini, the longing for art that can escape its economic determinants and imaginatively alter reality, but it conceives of this only in terms of recovering lost or outmoded art forms. So even as the novel is a paean to the power of imaginative fictions, specifically as delivered by mass-cultural entertainment, it is also a melancholic testament to their limitations. Repeatedly, it suggests that their magic lies not in any reconfiguration of the existing world but in private experience, idealized in the relics of an earlier, more innocent era of entertainment production and consumption. Nostalgia for Houdini is thus symptomatic of the diminished cultural function accorded to fiction today.[191]

I do not accept that *Kavalier & Clay* presents the affective power of fiction as a strictly 'private experience', nor do I think that nostalgia – in the context of Chabon's illusionistic, neo-historical act of recovery – seals off as much as Bernhoft suggests. What

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[186] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p.1 and p.51.
[187] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.280.
[188] Bernhoft, p.4.
[189] Adam Phillips, *Houdini's Box: The Art of Escape* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p.82, quoted in Bernhoft, pp.16-17.
[190] Bernhoft, p.17. And *Kavalier & Clay*, p.498.
[191] Bernhoft, p.21.

Bernhoft sees as nostalgia can be rethought in terms of influence, in line with the novel's emphasis on the productive transmissibility of formulae. This changes Houdini's escapistry from a symptom of nostalgic withdrawal to a sign of attentive creative practice. Engagement with past art forms is undertaken not out of an inability to offer meaningful comment on the present, but out of sheer *desire* for the artwork, out of the possibility of learning from it in order to create new forms, and out of the hope of creating something which – like the models which initially enthuse the artist – can generate affective engagement and inspiration. This would reanimate the dead connection which Bernhoft sees between the novel's political and formal possibilities and its recuperation of outmoded art forms. Such a conception of the novel's representation of Houdini and creative work keeps the contradictions between entrepreneurialism and exploitation of labour, between faith in the power of fiction and knowledge of its limitations, open. The collision of the artistic imagination with the reality of commercial culture is yet another space where the escape artist can express tensions between the concepts, and ultimately refocus discussion not on the potential resolution of this tension, but on how to *play* – technically and affectively – within it.

This perspective hinges on the idea that Houdini represents enchantment and disillusionment at the same time; that he embodies scepticism *and* credulity. Bernhoft rejects this possibility, writing that Houdini's contemporary appeal lies solely 'in the fact that he legitimates a simple, uncritical form of enjoyment that locates the value of art in affective qualities of belief and wonder.'[192] Chabon's novel, however, clearly and consistently demonstrates that the affective experience of art – its 'magic' – is not uncritical. Perhaps most explicitly, *Kavalier & Clay* describes Kornblum's 'brand of illusion', stating that its 'success, after all, increased in direct proportion to his audience's constant, keen awareness that, in spite of all the vigilance they could bring to bear, they were being deceived.'[193]

This comment on Kornblum's magic echoes the terms in which Chabon describes magic in his essay collection *Maps and Legends* (2008). I wish now to turn to these essays in order to flesh out how Houdini suggests a more technically-minded model for storytelling and creativity, and what place this model may have within a contemporary literary and cultural discourse which Bernhoft sees as troubled by a privileging of affect over critique.

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[192] Ibid., p.12.
[193] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.265.

In the closing essay of *Maps and Legends*, Michael Chabon draws an explicit parallel between the work of fiction and the work of stage magic. They are both, he writes, feats 'of sustained deception in which by imagery and language the trickster leads the audience to believe in the existence or possibility of a series of non-existent or impossible things.'[194] This statement follows the transcript of a talk which Chabon intended to be a 'demonstration' of how writers create stories out of a complex tangle of truth and lies.[195] In the talk, Chabon tells the story of a boyhood encounter with the writer C.B. Colby. Colby is responsible for one of ten-year-old Chabon's favourite books: a compendium of 'inexplicable and supposedly factual incidents and phenomena' titled *Strangely Enough!*[196] A school librarian informs Chabon that Colby lives locally. As it turns out, he lives just down the street from the Chabon family's new home in the planned community of Columbia, Maryland. Chabon plucks up the courage to go and visit Colby, whose real name, he has learned, is Joseph Adler.

Their meeting is brief and awkward. Adler dismisses his pseudonymous work, and is keen instead to show Chabon a manuscript of his memoir. The manuscript, eventually published as *The Book of Hell*, describes Adler's internment at Theresienstadt concentration camp. At this point in the talk, Chabon addresses his audience directly. 'Those of you who lived in and around Washington, D.C. during that time', he says, 'may dimly recall the scandal that followed the book's publication, and a few particulars of the strange case of the writer the *Washington Post* called "The Liar Who Got Lost in His Lie."'[197] Chabon explains that Joseph Adler, after being recognised from the author photograph on the book's cover, was exposed as in fact being Victor Fischer – a Czech Nazi journalist, who was 'one of those chiefly responsible for spreading the lie about the ideal conditions to be found in Theresienstadt.'[198] Adler admits to being Victor Fischer, but soon after the scandal breaks, overcome with stress, he suffers a stroke. From his hospital bed he tells the press how he transformed from Fischer to Adler after marrying a young Jewish girl who rescued him from the hands of 'a roving gang of Jews bent on murderous revenge', emigrating to New York and thus, with the help of his new wife, beginning his 'lifelong charade.'[199] Joseph Adler

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[194] Michael Chabon, 'Golems I Have Known, or, Why My Elder Son's Middle Name is Napoleon: A Trickster's Memoir', in *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), pp.181-210 (p.206).
[195] Ibid., p.205.
[196] Ibid., p.193.
[197] Ibid., p.197.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid. p.197-198.

never returns to his house in Columbia, and his eventual fate is left unclear. Chabon's mother thinks he dies in a convalescent home, and that the woman who exposed him later retracted her accusation. Chabon's father, meanwhile, asserts that C.B. Colby is a real writer, and that in fact all of Adler's numerous pseudonyms were the names of existing authors which he stole for his own purposes.

Most of the story, Chabon reveals in his postscript, is false. Far from wanting to dupe his audience, Chabon explains that his intent was to extend a kind of participatory pleasure to his listeners, to 'let them feel (or so I hoped) the excitement that comes from handling the raw materials of golem-craft.'[200] In explaining how this story-teller's excitement is conveyed to an audience, Chabon expands on the connection between magic and fiction as feats of deception:

> In fiction and in stage magic, one result of this deception…is the experience of pleasure in the audience at the verisimilitude of the effect. In both cases the pleasure is possible – indeed, it depends entirely – on the audience's knowing perfectly well that it is being fooled, on its avid willingness to be fooled, to participate in creating the illusion of reality.[201]

The reader, then, experiences pleasure when witnessing the final product – the successful illusion – but also shares the creator's excitement and pleasure through participating in making that illusion. It is an enjoyment in which the audience, ideally, is always aware of the distance between fiction and reality, however slight it might be, noting the illusion's 'verisimilitude' and aware, through their own participation, of the constructed nature of the effect. This is, then, contrary to Bernhoft's insistence that the audience of contemporary Houdinism is stupefied and critically unaware. Indeed, *Kavalier & Clay* itself is populated with characters – such as Carl Ebling and the members of the Senate Committee – who represent 'bad' readers: readers who fail to exercise in themselves or credit in others the capacity for a 'knowing… willingness to be fooled', or, in other words, to carry a critical awareness through the midst of affective, pleasurable immersion.

The above anecdote, as well as exhibiting Chabon's creative tangling of truth and lies, also offers an example of *how* audiences can participate in storytelling. Adler's story does not have a definite conclusion, and this leads both of Chabon's parents to pick up the narrative and supply their own endings to the story. Their participation reflects Chabon's wider ideas

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[200] Ibid., p.207.
[201] Ibid., p.206.

regarding escapism and escapistry in that to continue the story suggests both an affective investment in the tale from the audience, and a kind of technical or generic awareness regarding how an ending could, or should be constructed. In his essay 'Fan Fictions: On Sherlock Holmes', Chabon expands on the idea of such participation in creative work. He writes that deliberate and accidental 'lacunae… tantalizing gaps' in the Holmes stories led to the 'mock-scholarly tide of the Sherlockians': writers, 'well known and obscure', who attempt to fill those gaps with their fan fictions, essays and monographs.[202] Chabon reveals his own membership of this group, stating that the first story he ever wrote was a Sherlock Holmes story, 'a pastiche written in a clumsy, ten-year-old's version of the narrative voice of Dr. Watson.'[203] In a move which underscores the enduring influence of childhood pleasures for Chabon, the essay culminates in a broad assessment of the author as fan:

> There is a degree to which…all literature, highbrow or low, from the *Aeneid* onwards, is fan fiction. That is why Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence has always rung so hollow to me. Through parody and pastiche, allusion and homage, retelling and reimagining the stories that were told before us and that we have come of age loving – amateurs – we proceed, seeking out the blank places in the map… All novels are sequels; influence is bliss.[204]

Including successful and unknown writers, enthusiastic children and enraptured fans, Chabon's view of literature is of a tradition driven by pleasure in artistic illusionism – the pleasure of self-consciously imitating and exploring past styles, voices, and formulae in the name of further creation.

Chabon's posited term for this 'fruitful self-consciousness about the conventions of…[a] chosen genre, a heightened awareness of its history, of the cycle of innovation, exhaustion, and replenishment' underscores its connection to Houdini: 'Trickster Literature.'[205] While this description folds in elements associated with postmodern pastiche, Chabon's essays aim to (re-)connect these ideas with broader, more fundamental principles of storytelling. Chabon reinforces this connection, in both his essay 'Trickster in a Suit of

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[202] Michael Chabon, 'Fan Fictions: On Sherlock Holmes', in *Maps and Legends*, pp.23-45 (pp.41-42).
[203] Ibid., p.44.
[204] Ibid., pp.44-45.
[205] Chabon, 'Trickster', p.13. Chabon's term pays homage to Lewis Hyde's book *Trickster Makes This World*: *How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017). Many of Hyde's conclusions resonate with the concerns of Houdini-esque fiction. Hyde writes that the mythological trickster figure is responsible for 'creative lying': 'Trickster discovers fabulation, feigning, and fibbing, the playful construction of fictive worlds. It is trickster who invents the gratuitous untruth.' In a strikingly Houdini-esque characterisation, Hyde describes how trickster 'can slip a trap, then turn around and make his own…he can debunk an illusion, then turn around and conjure up another.' Hyde, *Trickster*, p.45 and p.78.

Lights' and in *Kavalier & Clay*, through references to Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" and the notion of the 'tale.' Before discussing Lewis Hyde instead, Chabon writes that he had intended on referencing Benjamin's 'bottomless' essay, hoping to make use of 'the famous distinction he makes in it between the "trading seaman," the storyteller who fetches his miracle tales, legends, and tall stories from abroad, and the "resident tiller of the soil" in whose memory are stored up all the sharp-witted wisdom tales, homely lore, and useful stories of a community.'[206] Chabon considers applying the distinction to the contemporary literary scene – sci-fi and genre writers being the travelling sailors; naturalistic short story writers being the homegrown, community-minded resident tillers. That he opts for the concept of tricksterism instead suggests his noticing of a different version of the literary marketplace – one which is at once more self-conscious and more open to the kind of genre-mixing and playful appropriation he endorses. The proximity of the two notions in Chabon's thinking, however, allow a conceptualization of the heart of Chabon's work as an attempt to recuperate within contemporary literature an older, even a folkloric attitude towards creating and experiencing fiction. This suggests a very different affective model from that suggested in accounts of contemporary fiction as enacting a neoliberal affective 'return' on a reader / consumer's investment, without denying that the text is embedded in the capitalist realist logic that makes these accounts convincing. This broadly neo-historicist recuperation of trickster-ish storytelling carries its own political and social possibilities, which are key in moving past the impasse faced by contemporary literary discourse.

For Fredric Jameson, Benjamin's essay on storytelling is 'perhaps his masterpiece.'[207] Summarising Benjamin's ideas, Jameson stresses that Benjamin champions the 'tale', not the novel, as a literary form that abides by ancient storytelling principles. Because of its roots in oral tradition, because it springs 'from collective life…using what everyone can recognize as common experience', and because of its association with working people (like tillers and sailors) the tale is, for Benjamin and Jameson, 'the product of an artisan culture, a hand-made product, like a cobbler's shoe or a pot', which requires the artist to live 'his activity as a technician.'[208] There is a clear parallel here with Chabon's trickster-author, who approaches their work with a technician's eye for its constituent parts, and a box full of generic tools to spark it into life. The artisanal aspect of this mode of creativity is further emphasised in

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[206] Chabon, 'Trickster', p.11.
[207] Fredric Jameson, 'Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia', in *Salmagundi*, no.10/11 (Fall 1969 – Winter 1970), 52-68 (p.65).
[208] Ibid., pp.65-67.

Chabon's essay on Howard Chaykin, who Chabon considers to be a 'pop artisan', someone who 'operates within the received formulas… and then incorporates into the style, manner, and mood of the work bits and pieces derived from all the aesthetic moments he or she has ever fallen in love with in other movies or songs or novels, whether hackwork or genius.'[209] An artist's aesthetic experiences, then, their attentive engagement with prior art forms, constitute the contemporary version of Benjamin's 'craftsman's workshop' where knowledge is passed down to apprentices – the tale which emerges from such workshops, Benjamin suggests, is artisanal in as much as 'the storyteller's traces cling to…[it] the way traces of the potter's hand cling to a clay bowl.'[210]

Perhaps the clearest example of Chabon indicating the importance of the 'tale' to his work is his use of a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Wakefield' (1837) as one of *Kavalier & Clay's* two epigraphs. Underneath a quote from Will Eisner ('We have this history of impossible solutions for insoluble problems'), the epigraph from 'Wakefield' simply reads: 'Wonderful escape!'[211] 'Wakefield' tells the story of a man who leaves his house one day, kisses his wife goodbye, and does not return for the next twenty years. He rents an apartment just a few streets away from his home. Occasionally, he spies on his wife and checks on the house. They both seem of 'another world.'[212] Then, two decades later, on a cold, rainy night, Wakefield walks past his house and sees the roaring fire inside. He walks up the front steps, re-enters his life, and remains from that point on a 'loving spouse till death.'[213]

'Wakefield' is an important reference point for *Kavalier & Clay* not only because the story's concept of 'escape' chimes with Joe Kavalier sequestering himself in the Empire State Building (a form of escapistry which, as Louise Colbran argues, represents an errant masculinity where 'responsibilities can be abrogated'),[214] but also because the story is a model example of Hawthorne's 'repeated fascination with stories and their tellers.'[215] This fascination with storytelling results in a highly reflexive form of fiction. Critic C.S.B. Swann draws attention to the title of the collection of stories in which the tale first appears – *Twice-*

[209] Michael Chabon, 'The Killer Hook: Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!*', in *Maps and Legends*, pp.85-93 (p.86).
[210] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', in *The Storyteller Essays*, trans. by Tess Lewis, ed. by Samuel Titan (New York: New York Review Books, 2019), pp.48-73 (p.50 and p.56).
[211] *Kavalier & Clay*, n.p.
[212] Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Wakefield'
[213] Ibid.
[214] Louise Colbran, p.119.
[215] C.S.B. Swann, 'The Practice and Theory of Storytelling: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walter Benjamin', in *Journal of American Studies*, 12:2 (August 1978), 185-202 (p.185).

Told Tales – to argue that Hawthorne's concern 'with repetition and the differences that repetition can generate' aligns him with Jorge Luis Borges (a writer more obviously, more self-reflexively, fascinated by the process and practice of storytelling).[216] The repetition evident in 'Wakefield' self-reflexively calls attention to the crafting of the tale. As Swann points out, Hawthorne first summarises Wakefield's story as he found it in a newspaper report, and thus the 'story-as-suspense is over by the end of the first paragraph.'[217] Swann's observation that Hawthorne's brief plot summary abolishes the 'suspense' aspect of story can be expressed, from the reader's point of view, as a shift in the *interest* of the text from the plot-driven allure of 'what happens next' (in narratological terms, the desirous force of *sjuzet*), to the process of narrative construction itself and the nature of fictional representation.[218] In telling the tale first as 'factual' anecdote, Swann argues, Hawthorne hides his authorial presence in plain sight, and the telling of the tale becomes almost stunt-like in the transparency of its endeavour:

> The challenge is the more exhilarating as Hawthorne ties his own hands… whatever incidents he invents, whatever meanings he imposes or discovers can be tested against the original anecdote as it appears in the first paragraph. Hawthorne is not entirely free, or, rather, we can see him (and join him?) in the act of claiming and exercising his freedom. *Thus departure from the original can become an opportunity for display* [my emphasis].[219]

Following Swann's description, Hawthorne becomes a 'storyteller' via a Houdini-esque 'challenge'; a 'display' of showmanship under restraint. This authorial showmanship is entirely based on the reflexive, repetitious aspects of the narrative. Chabon, working from a supposed historical archive of Escapist stories and reflecting the actual history of superhero comics in his narrative, is writing in this same spirit of self-conscious invention, riffing on anecdotes, characters and incidents from comics' Golden Age. His mixing of novelistic and comic book tropes feeds into this storytelling endeavour, summoning the repeatability of the tale by redeploying familiar conventions. As with Hawthorne's audience, readers can 'join' Chabon 'in the act of claiming and exercising his freedom' – they can participate in the

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[216] Ibid., pp.185-6.

[217] Ibid., p.193.

[218] For a discussion of narrative plot, readerly desire, and their bearing on the Russian Formalist concepts of *fabula* and *sjuzet*, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[219] Ibid., p.195. This final sentence underscores the connection of these ideas regarding storytelling to my wider argument regarding the potentially *productive*, forwards-facing, aspects of 'nostalgic' cultural forms.

excitement of 'golem-craft' – by bearing witness to the modifications and departures he makes from the original material.

There are several other clear signs in *Kavalier & Clay* of Chabon's indebtedness to the concept of the storyteller. For example, Joe and Sammy can be read as embodied versions of Benjamin's two kinds of storyteller – Joe being the 'trading seaman' who brings knowledge from his travels, and Sammy, who has 'never gone farther on his soda-straw legs than Buffalo' but is 'an omnivorous reader', representing the 'resident tiller' who unearths his stories from his homeland.[220] Indeed, their surnames – the world-weary, debonair whiff of 'Kavalier', and the earth-bound 'Clay' – also reflect this distinction. Even more explicitly, Chabon insists on the oral origins of art, including The Escapist:

> Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world…was summoned into existence through language, though murmuring, recital, and kabbalistic chitchat – was, literally, talked into life. Kavalier and Clay – whose golem was to be formed of black lines and the four-color dots of the lithographer – lay down, lit the first of five dozen cigarettes they were to consume that afternoon, and started to talk.[221]

As Walter Benjamin argues, the oral tradition is what distinguishes the kind of 'storytelling' evident in the concept of the tale from the novelistic form.[222] Chabon's representation of creativity as thoroughly rooted in conversation, can be seen, alongside those features mentioned above, as a self-conscious novelistic deployment of Benjaminian principles of storytelling.

In a recent monograph which identifies the 'return' of a Benjaminian concept of storytelling to contemporary fiction, Areti Dragas helps to break through the rigid distinction (unhelpfully emphasised by Benjamin himself) between orality and written forms. She questions 'the myth that the storyteller is only associated with the oral tradition and with oral storytelling, a narrative mode which, as with the perception of the storyteller himself, is very loosely defined in academic criticism.'[223] Dragas takes the fact that, in Benjamin's foundational text, his discussion of storytelling and oral tradition is paradoxically centred around the textual work of Nikolai Leskov as a cue for assessing how the storyteller may in fact persist in novelistic and written forms. She argues that the idea of the storyteller can be 'textually generated' and identifies a 'trend in post-war fiction which began to simulate this

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[220] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.6 and p.4.
[221] Ibid., p.119.
[222] Benjamin writes that the novel 'neither comes from nor feeds into the oral tradition.' 'The Storyteller', p.52.
[223] Areti Dragas, p.3.

return to the 'authenticity' that the storyteller…represented.'[224] According to Dragas, this results in a paradox in contemporary fiction whereby:

> The storyteller still exudes authority… [but is] also a figure constantly playing evasive strategies. The postmodern storyteller is one who self-consciously takes up his role. He is aware of his historicity, of his bardic ancestors and their positioning within *their* own historicity… The larger project of his fictional play, one that highlights the artifice of fiction itself, has the consequence of shifting the emphasis onto story wherein the storyteller's 'authority' disappears.[225]

The connection Chabon hints at between the storyteller and the Houdini-esque 'Trickster' is made clear in Dragas's arguments. Constantly involved in 'evasive strategies' that hinge between mustering the authority of the authentic and disclosing artifice, the contemporary storyteller self-consciously draws on a historical awareness of the modes and genres of other artists. With a trickster's ironic-sincere dialecticism, they undermine their 'authority' as storytellers by highlighting the artifice of the whole undertaking, an act which exposes the artists they draw on as much as it does themselves.

To shift this further into the language of Houdini: the contemporary storyteller mystifies and demystifies, debunks and enchants, at the same time. As is clear from Dragas' argument, this restores a 'historicity' to contemporary fiction. If this is not an explicitly politically charged historicity, as Jameson would hope for, it is nevertheless, and in accordance with the implications of neo-historical criticism, a historicity that holds social and political potential. Consistently 'evasive', (post-)postmodern storytellers cycle through registers of storytelling, enjoying a perpetual confinement in and escape from textual authority. The consequence of this 'fictional play', according to Dragas, reflects exactly what I argue occurs in *Kavalier & Clay*: namely, that the emphasis is shifted onto 'story', onto the joy and power of narrative as such. As Dragas writes: 'the storyteller emerges defiantly as one who is capable of wearing all narrative masks and assuming all authorial positions', and this ability to 'shape-shift' offers new possibilities for 'the role and purpose of fiction itself.'[226] No longer bound to a rigid authorial authority, the novelist-as-storyteller can tell tales, embracing the porousness of a fictional practice derived from orality. Chabon's emphasis on The Escapist beginning in conversation, then, inasmuch as this represents a principle of storytelling, makes orality a central part of his novel's 'meta-account of the act of creation'. This then adds depth to Chabon's call for a playful, trickster-esque mode of fiction

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[224] Ibid., p.68 and p.54.
[225] Ibid., p.66.
[226] Ibid., p.2.

– it is not simply a call to move forwards from a contemporary problem by re-mixing genres and forms; it is, instead, a call for a deeper return, a reminder of the roots of fictive world-making.

Both orality and the artisanal tale rely on communal, collective wisdom. There is a constant feedback loop between tale-teller and listener, between artist, other artists, and audience. For Chabon, it is this communality that stands as the most instructive facet of the storytelling concept. As suggested by his endorsement of an artisanal piecing-together of pop cultural and literary fragments, Chabon sees fiction as intimately connected to collective life – both in its plundering of prior art forms and its willingness to be plundered in its turn. He expands on the affective dimension of this reciprocal exchange when he writes of fiction's imperative to entertain, emphasising that the original meaning of the word was 'a lovely one of mutual support through intertwining, like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other.'[227]

Kavalier & Clay's productively sincere, self-reflexive approach to fiction has also mobilized this conception of artistic communality in real terms. The novel has proved the source of a multitude of spin-offs. As Stephen Hock details, Chabon partnered with Dark Horse Comics to produce *Michael Chabon Presents the Amazing Adventures of the Escapist* (2004), which tells stories of the Escapist 'in pastiches of different comix genres and periods spanning comix history from the golden age to the present. Of all the comix stories and text-only essays that fill the anthology's eight issues, Chabon apparently wrote only five.'[228] Chabon gladly hands his creations over to other artists, who range from established names in comics – like Will Eisner and Howard Chaykin – to lesser-known artists working at DC and Marvel. This anthology then spawned Brian K. Vaughan's comics series *The Escapists*, which follows a group of independent comics artists as they purchase the rights to the Escapist and create their own series featuring the hero: 'As such', writes Hock, '*The Escapists* reflexively dramatizes the premise of the anthology that gave birth to it: other creators working on characters created by Chabon… or Kavalier and Clay, as the case may be.'[229] Incidentally, but essentially, *Kavalier & Clay* has also inspired the rescue of a bankrupt Berkeley comic-book store. After its closure, Berkeley native Jack Rems bought the store, kept on all the old employees, and renamed the store The Escapist, using Chabon's

[227] Chabon, 'Trickster', p.3.
[228] Stephen Hock, 'Comix Remix', p.85.
[229] Ibid.

superhero's key emblem as a company logo.[230] Chabon himself lives near the store and attended its opening night, commenting: 'I like to think I'll be customer number one.'[231]

This kind of readiness to make contemporary literary fiction more open, more collective, reflects an imperative of storytelling. It is important, for the purposes of this thesis, to bear in mind that in *Kavalier & Clay*, this idea is as much connected to Houdini as the other aspects of Chabon's trickster-storyteller narrative method (that I have attempted, in this chapter, to elucidate). Although Houdini himself was ruthlessly protective of his tricks and gleefully destroyed his competitors – going as far as to attend other magician's performances in disguise and heckle them, before leaping onstage to reveal his identity and humiliate the other performer[232] – he nevertheless stands in *Kavalier & Clay* as the prime representative of a world which is predicated on shared esoteric knowledge, appropriation and reworking of established tricks, the support of a network of confidants and assistants, and a reciprocal, interactive relationship with an audience. 'Magicians have always stolen, borrowed, and reproduced tricks', writes Joe Posnanski, and Houdini was no exception.[233] Jim Steinmeyer, writer, and designer of magic effects and program material for stars such as David Copperfield and Orson Welles, reveals that Houdini 'purchased' the secret behind his biggest illusion – the vanishing of a three-ton elephant from the New York Hippodrome stage – and that this secret technique, in turn, was 'the result of over fifty years of careful experiments by stage magicians in France, England, and the United States.'[234] Likewise, Walter B. Gibson, in his 1930 compendium of Houdini's tricks, compiled from Houdini's own notebooks, writes that Houdini's escape acts often 'relied on accepted methods', with Houdini's particular skill being the modifications he made in their functioning, and the showmanship with which he presented the effects.[235]

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[230] Lance Knobel, 'The Escapist comic book store opens on Claremont', in *Berkeleyside* (March 16th, 2011), https://www.berkeleyside.com/2011/03/16/the-escapist-comic-book-store-opens-on-claremont [accessed 10/02/21].

[231] Ibid.

[232] Joe Posnanski records a particularly unedifying occasion where Houdini humiliated a small-time German performer named Hilmar the Uncuffable. Houdini jumped on stage and snapped what he deemed a 'common pair of German handcuffs' on Hilmar's wrists. Hilmar could not get out of them and asked Houdini to release him. Houdini pulled the defeated magician to the footlights and demanded he admit his failure to the audience. Hilmar refused and Houdini left him cuffed, ordering him to go to the locksmith. In his diary, Houdini wrote gleefully that Hilmar 'cried like a babe'. Posnanski, *The Life and Afterlife*, p.196.

[233] Posnanski, *The Life and Afterlife*, p.236.

[234] Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible* (London: Arrow Books, 2005), p.6.

[235] Walter B. Gibson, *Houdini's Escapes and Magic* (New York: Ishi Press, 2011), pp.8-10.

The sharing of knowledge within (and between) national and international networks of magicians meant that the multitude of inventions they created over the centuries were essentially available for any performer to research and replicate, to modify and improve upon. If this community forms the 'hidden' foundation of a magic act, the act itself relies on a further communal reciprocity with the audience. Houdini, like most magicians, invited audience members on stage to scrutinise the apparatus of the trick, or to seal him in to whatever he was escaping from. He also frequently encouraged and accepted challenges from local businesses or residents in the towns he visited.[236] As much as Houdini wanted the limelight to himself, he also relied on a team of faithful assistants, and even included them as beneficiaries in his will.[237] Indeed – if I may commit the sin of revealing one of Houdini's methods – according to Jim Steinmeyer, Houdini's famous Chinese Water Torture Cell escape did not rely on Houdini operating the Cell's mechanism, but actually required one of his assistants, usually Jim Collins, to free him (save him) with every performance.[238]

Kavalier & Clay displays its awareness of these communal aspects of the world of magic. Chabon describes Tannen's magic shop in New York as 'the greatest supplier of tricks and supplies on the Eastern seaboard…still the unofficial capital of professional conjuring in America, a kind of informal magician's club where generations of silk-hat men… had met to exchange information, to cadge money, and to dazzle one another.'[239] Perhaps most tellingly, too, Chabon makes his sublimated version of Houdini – the Escapist – 'dependent on his team of assistants', one of whom, Omar, is described as adept at 'bribing a prison guard before a jailbreak stunt to plant a key in a cell, or a reporter to inflate the number of minutes that the Master remained underwater during a bridge leap.'[240] Such a depiction demystifies the concepts of both the magician and the superhero (fused, in Chabon's text, through the fictional Escapist) by showing their supposed powers as reliant on the help of others. The critical deconstruction of these seemingly highly individualistic figures, especially within the context of a neo-historical novel that represents creativity as a communal enterprise, reflects back on that other supposedly individualistic magician / hero – the author. Areti Dragas,

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[236] See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, pp.119 – 123.

[237] According to Kenneth Silverman, Houdini left five hundred dollars each to three assistants: James Vickery, Franz Kukol, and Jim Collins. Silverman, p.374.

[238] Posnanski, *The Life and Afterlife*, p.248.

[239] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.500.

[240] Ibid., p.588 and p.125.

summarising the perhaps unintentional effects of Benjamin's essay on the literary landscape, writes:

> …the storyteller has been pushed out by the bolder, stronger other, by the individualist bully otherwise known as the novelist and his duplicitous partner-in-crime, the reader. Unlike the storyteller's partner the listener, whose main inclination was to repeat the story he heard – thus creating a context for the communicability of experience and the transference of a story's ultimate purpose, which is to offer counsel – the reader is fuelled by a desire to possess the text. A dirty picture thus emerges: the reader is a jealous creature and, like an illicit lover, is driven by the author's careful promise of individual gain, fired by suspense, at once consumed and consuming, guarding the story as his own.[241]

This concept of a storyteller-less literature reduces the communality of fiction to a parasitic, hopelessly enclosed, reciprocity between individualistic authors and readers. It is the same picture of literature painted by those contemporary critics who worry that the turn from critique and/or the privileging of popular forms prompts a literature of escapist affect that merely mirrors neoliberal principles in its emotional economy.[242] However, by textually generating the concept of the storyteller through an emphasis on the communality of art, Chabon attempts to widen the affective economy of the novel to include a collective audience of fans, who – as we know from Chabon's writings on fan fictions – are potential artists themselves, inspired to replicate, modify, and transform the tale they fell in love with. Dragas's picture of an illicit affair then becomes something more like polyamory – 'consumed and consuming' the reader may be, but they are not 'jealous' or guarded; rather, rejecting possessive individualism, their pleasure is in sharing and forming part of a group.[243]

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[241] Dragas, p.1.

[242] As already discussed, Bernhoft takes this view, following critics such as Ben Anderson, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Jodi Melamed in his description of how, following the translation of 'literary value into coin for purchasing emotional and interpersonal enhancement…the potentially social and political dimensions of affective experience become tools for personal gain.' Bernhoft, p.13. Mark McGurl, meanwhile, maintains that there are creative freedoms unaccounted for in such a description, although he does take note that contemporary society's 'experience economy generalizes the affective protocols of consumerism', and reveals the novel as 'after all, a very good example of an "experiential commodity" whose value to its readers is a transvaluation of the authorial labor that went into its making, and most often has little to do with the economic value of the pulp upon which it is pressed.' Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p.14 and p.15.

[243] Although not explicitly referenced in the novel, this kind of collective fandom also formed a key part of the comic book industry from the late 1950s onwards, peaking in the 60s and 70s (and thus coinciding with Chabon's childhood). Ramzi Fawaz charts Mort Weisinger's introduction of a 'letters page' to DC comics, a concept which soon spread to Marvel and became so popular that 'by the mid-1960s these print forums had produced an affective counterpublic (which included the institution of fan clubs and comic book conventions) where readers could voice their relationship to the characters and worlds they followed monthly while democratically debating the comics' content.' Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), p.19. Bradford W. Wright

This rejection of individualism is perhaps best symbolized in the novel by its denouement at Houdini's grave, where the Spiritualist notes crammed into the monument's fissures are evidence of a community affectively engaged in Houdini's legacy and work, thriving in spite of the performer's egotism.

The alternative affective economy conjured by the trickster-storyteller is one of productive and open exchange. In its communality, its readiness to be appropriated by others, and in its own declaration of what it has borrowed and stolen, it reflects Jonathan Lethem's concept of 'The Ecstasy of Influence.'[244] Lethem's essay is itself a 'plagiarism', a collage formed of other writers' sentences and paragraphs, and it connects the 'ecstasy' of re-appropriation with the non-monetary, non-market-reliant 'gift economy.'[245] The phrase (and indeed, the whole section of Lethem's essay in which it is discussed), is, once again, Lewis Hyde's. Hyde / Lethem asserts that the work of art, whatever its commodity value, also contains a 'gift' element, which circulates between artist and audience as a kind of 'feeling-bond… an uncommodifiable surplus of inspiration.'[246] Significantly, in expanding out from an author-reader relationship to a community of engaged, creative fans, this emotional economy actually meets Rachel Greenwald Smith's requirements for affects which do *not* reinforce a neoliberal rationale. She advocates a 'shift from affects understood as personal property to affects understood as evidence of interconnection', and argues that literature should be seen as an ecosystem, wherein 'works of literature can be understood to materially influence those with whom they come into contact in ways not entirely circumscribed by the various roles of buyer and seller.'[247] Such an ecological perspective, aware of the multitude of connections between work of art and world, is able to see literary affects that exceed the jealous, possessive reader, thus offering 'an alternative to the market model for the conceptualization of literary circulation.'[248] The 'uncommodifiable surplus of inspiration'

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similarly covers Stan Lee's efforts to 'generate reader intimacy with the Marvel staff' in the 1960s, efforts 'designed to impart that there was more to the Marvel experience than just reading a comic book and throwing it away.' 'During the 1970s', Wright argues, 'fan culture became a cottage industry in and of itself.' Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, pp.217-8 and p.252. This history, of course, forms part of Chabon's revelation of a community of readers behind the illusion of individualistic consumption.

[244] Jonathan Lethem, 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism', in *Harper's Magazine* (February 2007) https://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/the-ecstasy-of-influence/ [accessed 12/02/2021].

[245] Ibid.

[246] Ibid.

[247] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.25 and p.26.

[248] Ibid., p.26. It is ironic, and entirely indicative of the issues this thesis is trying to address, that much criticism on Chabon misses his emphasis on such an alternative.

that is the currency of the gift economy, then, as it circulates through a storyteller's version of the literary world, creates communities of influence rather than isolated, hoarding consumers. Chabon's escapologist superhero himself reflects this affective economy by following the mantra of the 'League of the Golden Key': 'freedom was a debt that could be repaid only by purchasing the freedom of others.'[249] The 'League' form a network of 'free' citizens, using the language of economics to refer not to private monetary transactions, but to a kind of transmissible liberation (which Chabon clarifies can be 'metaphysical' and 'emotional' as well as literal),[250] forming a community as it touches each individual, in much the same way that artistic pleasure transmits through fan networks and influences artists across generations.

In this way, *Kavalier & Clay*'s Houdinism suggests a means of overcoming the impasses reached in contemporary literary discourse. Rachel Greenwald Smith herself argues that the ecological view of literature's affects of interconnection is a complementary theory to Bruno Latour's 'matters of concern', which he puts forward as a solution to the contemporary impasse of critique's apparent 'running out of steam.'[251] Part of the novel's Houdinism involves conjuring such affects of interconnection, but it is also significant that the affective economy outlined above is wholly reliant on the conjunction of critical *and* credulous approaches to fiction. Immersed in the pleasures of escapism, but with full awareness of the artificiality and technicality (the escapistry) of the affect, readers have both the emotional imperative and the critical means of continuing the story, by creating their own fan fictions and forums, or by becoming artists themselves and making their own generic interventions. Houdini inspires and, as a character, self-reflexively reflects *Kavalier & Clay*'s conjunction of critical and enchanted attitudes. As John F. Kasson writes, the historical Houdini 'appealed to both a skeptical rationalism and a deep-seated desire for magical transformation'; in holding this contradiction open and retaining mystery, his escape acts 'gained power by leaving… narrative possibilities unresolved and enlisting the viewers' imaginations to complete them.'[252] Chabon's explicit correlation, in his essays, of Houdini's art with the act of writing illuminates *Kavalier & Clay*'s own self-reflexive dramatization of how Houdini-esque creativity – while it is necessarily silhouetted within a neoliberal culture – can productively mine cultural tensions between scepticism and credulity. Relying on epistemic

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[249] *Kavalier & Clay*, p.131.

[250] Ibid., p.133.

[251] Greenwald Smith, p.26. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', in *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2 (Winter 2004), 225-248.

[252] John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, p.124 and p.114.

teasing and emotional pull, such Houdini-esque art consistently reaches out to its audience and makes them part of the performance. In this, Chabon's Houdini unifies the concepts of the boundary-crossing, fact-and-fiction-blurring trickster, and the storyteller – the craftsman entertainer who shape-shifts between authorial guises and highlights the productive aspects of the repeatability of the tale.

Reading *Kavalier & Clay* through these concepts – the concepts Chabon and his novel themselves provide – allows a much deeper understanding of the great potential that Chabon sees in Houdini as a model for narrative recuperation. Houdini promises a solution to the contemporary dilemma of whether emotional sincerity can fill the void left by postmodern irony without leading to uncritical affective immersion (which, alongside dropping productive aspects of a sceptical attitude, may threaten reading with a susceptibility to individualistic market logic). *Kavalier & Clay* demonstrates that affective enchantment and critical deconstruction can productively intertwine in the creation and experience of art. It rhetorically presents awareness of this as key for the continuation of narrative possibility and the fostering of creative community. In short, Chabon's prismatic Houdini works to free the contemporary novel, picking the lock of generic categories, grappling with coils of irony, while the audience – half-rapt, half-suspicious – wonders.

'The Elusive American': Houdini, the Body, and Contemporary Abstraction in Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*

Jennifer Egan has described her fifth novel, *Manhattan Beach* (2017), as an escape from the formally 'tricky' writing characterising her previous work. In a 2015 interview with George Saunders, she states: 'I realize that I'm actually pretty sick of writing in tricky ways about image culture. So the new novel [*Manhattan Beach*] has become a delivery out of that, at least for now.'[1] *Manhattan Beach* employs what Egan describes as 'straightforward, immersive narration' and 'verisimilitude' to tell the story of Anna Kerrigan, a young woman who works at the Brooklyn Naval Yard in the 1940s.[2] The depictions of Anna's work and home life are interweaved with her attempts to track down her father, Eddie, who disappears from her life in a Wakefield-esque abscondence when she is fourteen.[3] As Egan herself identifies, this story, with its WWII setting, confronts a different world to the technology and media-saturated landscapes of her previous fiction, and she suggests this constitutes a thematic break as well as a formal one:

> One of the things that drew me to the 1930s and 1940s, I think, is that all of my media and image culture concerns are irrelevant. None of it had happened yet. America wasn't a superpower yet. It's proved to be a clean way of leaving behind just about everything I've cared about as a writer, and looking at other things instead… And of course, leaving behind those preoccupations also meant leaving behind the techniques that felt necessary to embody them.[4]

However, Egan does not leave these themes behind quite so cleanly. If – as is implicit in Egan's statement above – media and image culture are intertwined with America's rise as a superpower, then *Manhattan Beach* evidences not so much a break from these concerns as a neo-historicist return to their origin.

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[1] Jennifer Egan, 'Choose Your Own Adventure: A Conversation with Jennifer Egan and George Saunders', in *The New York Times* (Nov. 12th, 2015).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Egan first discloses this information in the following sentences: 'Her father had left the apartment as he would have on any day – she couldn't even recall it. The truth had arrived gradually, like nightfall: a recognition, when she caught herself awaiting his return, that she'd waited days, then weeks, then months – and he'd still not come.' Jennifer Egan, *Manhattan Beach* (London: Corsair, 2017), p.53.

[4] Zara Dinnen, '"This is all artificial": An Interview with Jennifer Egan, in *Post45* (20/05/16) https://post45.org/2016/05/this-is-all-artificial-an-interview-with-jennifer-egan/ [Accessed 06/07/2021].

This covert continuity is something that Egan has suggested in other interviews. She states that, during the early stages of writing the novel, the events of 9/11 served as something like a bookend to an imagined wider narrative: 'I felt [9/11] was the end of something, or at least an important event in a trajectory that had begun with the rise of America as a superpower at the end of World War II.'[5] Her interest, then, in depicting a time when the U.S. was not yet a superpower is partly to do with examining the origins of the 'trajectory' that led to the country's ascendance.

Manhattan Beach is occasionally explicit about this wider narrative of U.S. power. Importantly for this thesis's concerns, when Egan does drop these proleptic hints, they suggest the post-war trajectory of U.S. power to be intimately related to incipient changes in financial logics. Arthur Berringer – a powerful banker, and father-in-law to the gangster Dexter Styles – tells his family: 'I see the rise of this country to a height no country has occupied, ever… Not the Romans. Not the Carolingians. Not Genghis Khan or the Tatars or Napoleon's France.'[6] He clarifies that this new American empire will be a subtle force: '…our dominance won't arise from subjugating peoples. We'll emerge from this war victorious and unscathed, and become bankers to the world. We'll export our dreams, our language, our culture, our way of life. And it will prove irresistible.'[7]

Arthur Berringer's prediction that the U.S. will act as a world bank while exporting its culture and its 'dreams' worldwide references post-war U.S. economic imperialism and cultural hegemony. I want to briefly sketch how these processes developed historically, in the post-war years, in order to better understand *Manhattan Beach*'s allusive, neo-historicist representation of economic reform and U.S. power. As I will argue below, Egan's novel deploys aesthetically certain qualities that have become associated, in the contemporary era, with hegemonic financialized capitalism. I argue that these same qualities are connected to the novel's representation of Harry Houdini, and in such a way as to demonstrate the escapologist's aptitude as a figure for representing contemporary socio-economic affects and tensions. Egan's representation of Houdini as a figure for these economic affects, then, directly addresses capitalist realist concerns about capitalist logic becoming inscrutable and un-representable. The novel's connection of capital's immaterial and abstract facets to the

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[5] Rachel Cooke, 'Jennifer Egan: "I was never a hot, young writer. But then I had a quantum leap"', Interview in *The Guardian* (2017) https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/24/jennifer-egan-quantum-leap-manhattan-beach-visit-from-the-goon-squad [accessed 06/07/2021].
[6] *Manhattan Beach*, p.91.
[7] Ibid., p.92.

magician / escapologist emphasises the intensified obfuscating function of virtualized financial capital – its logic of disavowal – but, at the same time, discloses the illusionism of a brutally material confinement under concealed structures of power.

As David Harvey details, the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 'turned the dollar into the world's reserve currency and tied the world's economic development firmly into US fiscal and monetary policy.'[8] This helped the United States, in the post-war decades, become the homeland of a new form of international capitalism: 'Under the hegemonic umbrella of the United States' financial and economic power backed by military domination', Harvey writes, '…the United States acted as the world's banker in return for an opening up of the world's commodity and capital markets to the power of the large corporations.'[9]

By Harvey's account, this post-war economic landscape metamorphoses further through the economic reforms and crises of the 1970s to produce a contemporary capitalism based on intensified processes of global dispersal and abstraction. These developments are tied to the increasing *financialization* of capitalist economy – which can be thought of essentially, as the increased reliance on abstract, immaterial 'tools' (financial instruments) with which to gimmick and manipulate the market into generating money out of money (and not from 'real', material things like commodities). As Harvey argues, since the 1970s, 'there has been a dual movement, on the one hand towards the formation of financial conglomerates and brokers of extraordinary global power, and, on the other hand, a rapid proliferation and decentralization of financial activities and flows through the creation of entirely new financial instruments and markets.'[10] The qualities of financial capital Harvey notes here – its free-floating, decentralised mobility, its global reach, the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of individuals – are all key factors in the widespread critical understanding of contemporary capitalism as virtualized and mystifying, somehow unreal, and yet at the same time (because cultural and social normativity has been thoroughly steeped in capital's hollow, illusory logic), immanent, sensible everywhere.

Harvey references this latter idea when he writes that 'political-economic processes… are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily

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life.'[11] Although his own account of postmodernity is strikingly historicist in its attempt to redress postmodernism's rejection of historical narratives, Harvey nevertheless also acknowledges the relative inscrutability of financialised capital. He argues that the proliferation of 'new financial instruments and markets' creates a global financial system which 'is now so complicated that it surpasses most people's understanding.'[12]

This sense of the financial system as over-complicated and arcane conjoins with its abstracted, virtualised functioning – its ability to generate money and create value without seemingly being tethered to production[13] – to make financial capitalism appear immaterial and mystified. These qualities are also emphasised by Fredric Jameson in his 1997 essay "Culture and Finance Capital", which describes the financialised economy as a world of 'specters of value… vying against each other in a vast, world-wide, disembodied phantasmagoria.'[14] The future indicated by Arthur Berringer, then, is one in which U.S. power is expressed and furthered through economic globalisation, but also one in which, during the latter decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, economic processes become increasingly abstracted and mystified. Egan's neo-historicist reference to a 'trajectory' of U.S. ascendance, I argue, also refers to the economic and

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[11] Ibid., p.117. The granular influence of economic logic on daily life is a central tenet in accounts of contemporary neoliberal culture (of which finance capital is a part). See Randy Martin's *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002). Most critics agree that this granular influence affects subjectivity and selfhood. Fredric Jameson, for instance, writes that under the contemporary financial system, there is an 'intensification of the forces of reification', which suffuse 'through ever greater zones of social life (including individual subjectivity.' Similarly, Rachel Greenwald Smith states, as a founding principle for her study of affect and neoliberal culture, that 'the consequences of neoliberalism extend beyond the particularities of economic and political policy, affecting the assumptions that underlie political subject formation.' Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', in *Critical Inquiry*, 24:1 (Autumn 1997), 246-265 (p.256). Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.5

[12] Ibid., p.161.

[13] Alison Shonkwiler examines this abstracted functioning at length in *The Financial Imaginary* (2017). Because finance capitalism works by 'comparing hypotheticals and actuals, and trading on the difference, thereby *realizing* that which had been hypothetical or unreal', material relations of production are absent from its logic: 'Accumulation no longer depends on production; it is transformed *into* a mode of production.' Although Shonkwiler stresses this element of the 'unreal' in the practice of finance capitalism, she also stresses that this does not mean relations of production or material inequalities are not visible. On the contrary, finance capitalism's abstracted logic assists the global spread of its concrete effects, while at the same time working to obfuscate those effects. Shonkwiler writes: '"virtual" doesn't mean illusory or powerless. Quite the reverse, it is the reality of abstraction that allows finance capitalism to achieve its extensive reach and concrete effects. Global structures of inequality, the politics of immigration, the outsourcing of work, the dismantling of social protections, the "realism" of austerity politics, and all kinds of social, political, and environmental violence are very real. Financialization specializes in in putting distance between these concrete effects and the structural violence of an abstract value that is measured by nothing but the stock market.' Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp.xxiv-xxv, and p.xviii.

[14] Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', in *Critical Inquiry*, 24:1 (Autumn 1997), 246-265 (p.251).

cultural power of the U.S., which, following Egan's own suggestion of a periodizing marker, suffered a decline after 9/11.[15] The timeline established through Berringer and Egan's comments on U.S. power, then, reveals *Manhattan Beach* as speaking to a narrative of economic change, with both the post-war years and the contemporary era from which Egan writes marking historical moments in which capitalism's strategies for accumulation metamorphose in response to crisis.[16]

Houdini's Hidden Presence

In moving away from formally 'tricky' writing and into 'straightforward verisimilitude', *Manhattan Beach* can be read within the context of the historical narrative of economic changes described above. It reflects the argument put forward in my introduction for the renewed interest of contemporary literature in realist modes (and the neo-historical mode in particular), as a post-postmodern literary turn indicating a reaction to, and an illuminating of, the increasingly affectively-sensible illusionism of capitalist realism. In this, I am firmly siding with Alexander Moran's conclusion that 'Egan's historical fiction is not nostalgic, nor is it didactic in the manner of her contemporaries, but rather it resonates with the instability

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[15] This was a relatively consistent theme in retrospective journalism covering the twentieth anniversary of the attacks. Writing in the Washington Post in September 2021, for example, Ishaan Tharoor states that following 9/11 'the expensive, bloody entanglements in Afghanistan and Iraq ran alongside an epochal financial crisis that shocked the global economy.' He cites a senior member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations' view that 'the invasion and its chaotic, violent and destabilizing aftermath shattered the notion that the United States is indispensable and a force for democracy.' Ishaan Tharoor, 'The World 9/11 Created: The Waning of the American Superpower', in *The Washington Post* (September 10th, 2021) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/10/911-waning-american-superpower/ [accessed 08/10/2021].

[16] To underline this latter point – David Harvey also holds up the post-war economic reforms and the economic crises and changes of the 1970s as essential periodizing moments in the history of U.S. capitalism. The former, through globalization and 'the proper configuration and deployment of state powers… brought Fordism to maturity as a fully-fledged and distinctive regime of accumulation.' This caused an economic boom that stayed 'broadly intact until 1973', until the oil crisis and recession ushered in a new, 'troubled period of economic restructuring and social and political readjustment.' This 'historical transition, still far from complete' at the time of Harvey's writing in 1990, involves a new regime of accumulation that Harvey calls 'flexible accumulation… [which] looks more to finance capital as its co-ordinating power than did Fordism.' This regime of flexible accumulation, beginning in the 1970s and guided by the principles of finance capital, is then the incipient form of the contemporary world of financialized capitalism described in Shonkwiler's study and in Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. The former, being published in the same year as *Manhattan Beach*, is especially useful in connecting these historical developments to the moment of Egan's writing. Harvey, p.129, p.145, p.173, and p.164.

of the present moment.'[17] Through a reading of Houdini's role in the novel, I will suggest that *Manhattan Beach* reveals the escape artist / magician as a figure eminently suited to informing narrative strategies for representing contemporary abstraction and tensions between the material and immaterial.

While the novel's move away from 'tricky' writing towards 'verisimilitude' may suggest a *departure* from a Houdini-esque mode of reflexive, neo-historical fiction, Boxall offers the productive reminder that both realism and the historical novel are illusionistic generic modes that have, at their core, a fraught relationship between word and world – between reality, and the representational act which aims to capture or describe something of that reality. Boxall productively complicates the view that realism, even classical, nineteenth-century realism, effectively represented the real when he writes that 'the history of realism itself is the history of an ongoing struggle between word and world, in which the capacity of the word to represent has always been fundamentally shaped by the resistance of the world to its mimetic power.'[18] Throughout the history of the realist novel, Boxall argues, this fundamental tension reveals itself: from Balzac through to Dickens and Tolstoy, there is 'an increasingly finely tuned dialectic between presence and absence', and this observation leads Boxall to conclude that the realist form 'requires that we live in the bottomless gap between the word and the world.'[19] As is implicit in Rousselot's statement that contemporary historical novels stage an 'interrogation' of the past, neo-historical fiction, too, inhabits a liminal space between reality and representation, because – in the manner of Linda Hutcheon's 'historiographic metafiction' – it attempts to recover hitherto obscured historical realities via fictionalised representation.[20]

Neo-historical novels necessarily engage the tension Boxall identifies between the 'mimetic power' of representation and the real world. As artistic forms, especially as reflexively nostalgic artistic forms returning to supposedly 'dead' modes, they are fundamentally artificial. Egan herself acknowledges the artificiality of supposedly realistic literary modes in terms that provide an initial link to Houdini, and shed some light on how Egan transforms his signification into *Manhattan Beach*'s own representational style. In an interview for *Post45* magazine, Egan states that verisimilitude is perhaps 'the most artificial

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[17] Moran, p.119.
[18] Boxall, p.61.
[19] Ibid., p.61 and p.67.
[20] Rousselot, p.1.

of all' narrative modes, but that it proved, in the writing of *Manhattan Beach*, to be 'the only artifice that seemed to open things up rather than closing them down.'[21] In the same interview, she mentions her reliance, in constructing plausible narratives and diegetic worlds, on 'the energy of logic' – a phrase / concept associated with the novelist Jane Smiley. Egan interprets the concept as referencing a 'dialectic between solutions and problems.'[22] Early reviewers for *Manhattan Beach* picked up on Egan's use of the phrase and applied it to her turn to historical fiction. Ruth Franklin, in *The Atlantic*, connects it to James Woods' apparently derisory comment that contemporary historical fiction is 'science fiction facing backward', suggesting that the combination of 'research and imagination' needed for both generic modes exemplifies the kind of steady, world-building construction implied in Smiley's phrase.[23] Similarly, in *The New Yorker*, Alexandra Schwartz writes that, in contrast to Egan's other works which imagine various near-future scenarios, 'with "Manhattan Beach," Egan took the energy of logic in the opposite direction', and Schwartz connects this backwards-looking logic to Egan's stated sense of a connection between WWII and 9/11.[24]

As a mode of composition encouraging the writer down the path of a 'dialectic between solutions and problems', the 'energy of logic' is strikingly Houdini-esque in its sense of creativity as a kind of wrangling – a puzzle, solved through a combination of logic and imagination. It is a link furthered through Egan's association with George Saunders. Although Houdini isn't mentioned in their 2015 conversation cited above, Saunders has elsewhere explicitly connected his own method of composition with Houdini's art, and in terms which echo Egan's reliance on Smiley's 'energy of logic.' In a 2007 interview, Saunders urges writers to 'get yourself in a trap.'[25] In puzzling your way out of the trap, Saunders argues, you find yourself with a story:

> Everything is a problem. You have three hundred sixty degrees of possibility, and as
> soon as you write one sentence suddenly you're down to twenty degrees. You're

[21] Zara Dinnen, 'This is all Artificial', https://post45.org/2016/05/this-is-all-artificial-an-interview-with-jennifer-egan/ [Accessed 06/07/2021].

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ruth Franklin, 'Jennifer Egan's Surprising Swerve Into Historical Fiction', in *The Atlantic* (November 2017) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/jennifer-egan-manhattan-beach/540612/ [accessed 10/10/21].

[24] Alexandra Schwartz, 'Jennifer Egan's Travels Through Time', in *The New Yorker* (October 2017) https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/jennifer-egans-travels-through-time [accessed 10/10/21].

[25] George Saunders, 'Choose Your Own Adventure: A Conversation With Jennifer Egan and George Saunders', *New York Times* (November 2015) https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/magazine/choose-your-own-adventure-a-conversation-with-jennifer-egan-and-george-saunders.html [accessed 10/10/21].

eliminating options. You're writing yourself into something like those Chinese thumbscrews. Until at some point your trap becomes your way out — and you *can* get out, but not without conceding a lot of the ground… It's like Houdini. If Houdini said, "I am going to get up from this chair," no big deal. But if he's chained into the chair and then he gets up, now that's entertaining.[26]

In Saunders' Houdini-esque writing, then, the process of composition itself lays a productive trap, sentence by sentence. It limits horizons of meaning and directions for plot until, suddenly, through process of elimination, the trap reveals its own escape route. Egan's reliance on an 'energy of logic' suggests a similar Houdini-esque method of creative puzzling as guiding *Manhattan Beach*'s representation of a connection between post-war economic change and contemporary conditions. Through Egan's Houdini-esque reverse-engineering, contemporary qualities of abstraction and unreality accompany Egan back into the past and colour her representation of 1940s New York. It is my view that Egan, following her 'energy of logic', discovers verisimilitude as 'the only artifice that seemed to open things up' for *Manhattan Beach* because it is a form that inherently expresses – and sustains – the fraught relation between reality and representation that finds itself at the heart of contemporary feelings of 'groundlessness.' Following Boxall's claim that illusionistic / realistic modes encourage us to 'live in the bottomless gap between the word and the world', I broadly examine, in this chapter, how Egan's Houdini-esque verisimilitude is connected to *Manhattan Beach*'s representation of characters scrutinising and prising open the various illusionistic discrepancies they encounter in the surface of modern life. Learning how to inhabit, and even exploit, a blurred zone between the real and the unreal, the material and the immaterial, these characters suggest – highly ambivalently – a contemporary mode of subjectivity which is formed through a heightened awareness of the illusionistic structures underpinning and constituting the illusory-feeling reality. Houdini – himself a figure characterised by dialectical tensions between real and unreal, problems and solutions – then emerges in the novel as a key figure for the representation of contemporary affects, and for the formal possibilities of a literary realism which might embrace the uncertainty and abstraction at the heart of its own representational strategy.

A key part of Egan's neo-historical unsettling of *Manhattan Beach*'s own realism is its self-conscious description of futurity – in particular the shifts of power involved in

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[26] Ibid.

creating that future – as a mystical force. If Egan's prolepsis through Arthur Berringer seems oddly overt and oracular, this is because Berringer is *supposed* to be magically prophetic, generating the idea of a fated future via the presupposed accuracy of his prediction. Berringer, weirdly attuned to the currents of history, suggests how the 'trajectory' of U.S. dominance that fascinates Egan manifests anachronistically in the novel as a magical force – something invisible and powerful operating beneath the surface of everyday life. This magical quality entrances the gangster, Dexter Styles. Egan describes his reaction to Berringer's proselytizing as follows: 'For him, the existence of an obscure truth recessed behind an obvious one, and emanating through it allegorically, was mesmerizing.'[27] Significantly, this sense of a partially hidden, partially visible truth leads Dexter to acknowledge a parallel between the 'machinations of bankers' and the coded gestures, subtle hierarchies, and power moves that constitute the 'shadow country' of his own clan of gangsters.[28] Both Dexter's world of crime and Berringer's world of finance create concealed networks of power.

Egan's alignment of these worlds, of course, implies the crookedness and criminality of bankers, but she nevertheless stresses a crucial distinction between the two:

> …while Dexter's power derived from physical force, the old man's had been distilled into abstraction. The Berringers were wearing top hats to the opera when Dexter's people were still copulating behind hay bales in the old land. He liked the thought that his own power would one day be refined into translucence, with no memory of the blood and earth that had generated it.[29]

The distinction drawn here between embodied and abstract power is crucial to *Manhattan Beach*'s representation of a trajectory – or, here, a 'refinement' – of power. Associated with 'blood and earth', and with 'the old land', embodied physicality is portrayed as unmodern, in contrast to the sleek 'translucence' of abstract (in particular, financialised) power. Egan's language here of abstracted power as 'refined' and 'distilled' proleptically conjures a neo-historical impression of oil distilleries. To follow David Harvey's periodization of neoliberal accumulation beginning after the oil crisis of 1973, Egan's self-conscious but coded gesture can be read, neo-historically, and in Fisher's terms, as indicating the cause producing the effect.

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[27] *Manhattan Beach*, p.91.
[28] Ibid., pp.91-2.
[29] Ibid., p.90.

That this contrast and connection between embodiment and abstraction is also key to the novel's Houdini-esque representation of power as magical underscores the capacity of the performer to reflexively, somewhat evasively, represent what is unreal. As will be examined in the next section, *Manhattan Beach* details how the abstracted workings of power are intuited by an affectively perceptive body as a sense of mystery, or, in Dexter's words, the sense 'of an obscure truth recessed behind an obvious one.' However, while the sensing body may be entranced by and ultimately complicit with power, I will argue that Egan's novel also represents the body as providing a means of resistance to its enchanting force.

Egan's focus on the Houdini-esque body reflects Boxall's parallel argument that there has been a 'material turn' in contemporary literary discourse, also in response to the dematerializing tendencies of contemporary geopolitical power and virtualized capital. He writes: 'It was as the west reached the height of its power in the wake of the cold-war, as history appeared to be drawing to a close, as western capital appeared to be synonymous with the very virtual-global environments we inhabited, that bodies receded to the point of invisibility.'[30] Boxall argues that, more recently, with the rise of New Materialism and thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, there has been a 're-appearance of the stubbornly material grounds upon which discursive processes are played out.'[31] I argue that *Manhattan Beach* broadly reflects this renewed interest in materiality – which forms a part of the contemporary hunger for the real discussed throughout this thesis.

In *Manhattan Beach*, Anna's work as a diver, her disabled sister, Lydia, and her father Eddie's instructive (and telling) transition from stockbroker, to employee of Dexter Styles, to returned, chastened father, offer strikingly embodied narratives that exist alongside the novel's depiction of abstract forces of financial power and historical disappearance gathering around these characters. Egan herself, in an afterword to a special edition of *PMLA* devoting half its issue to essays on *Manhattan Beach*, writes of her sudden realization, after hearing an academic paper arguing for each of her novels as oriented around one of the five senses, that 'my novel in progress [*Manhattan Beach*] was built around the sense of touch.'[32] In light of this, the next sections of this chapter will pay sustained attention to ideas of physicality and

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[30] Boxall, p.75.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Jennifer Egan, 'Notes From an Academic Interloper', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019) 416-417 (p.416). This account of reciprocal interchange between an academic audience and a contemporary writer reflects at once the kind of reflexivity Mark McGurl details in *The Program Era*, and the kind of creative interchange which Chabon endorses, indicating the self-fulfilling problem/solution of perspective in accounting for contemporary reflexivity.

embodiment through a close reading of *Manhattan Beach*'s Houdini-esque representational strategy. I argue that Egan presents the Houdini-esque experience of bodily risk as a road to a valuable kind of embodied knowledge. That knowledge grants characters different perspectives, different concepts of self and world, that may in turn provide the means to evade the various traps laid by powerful men, and by the expectations and demands of a transforming society.

By way of introducing these ideas, I want to turn to *Manhattan Beach*'s two explicit references to Harry Houdini. This section argues for Houdini's 'Hidden Presence' in the novel because, while he is only mentioned by name twice, he nevertheless informs the mobilisation in Egan's novel of a Houdini-esque dialectic between surface and depth – between apparent and hidden truth – which itself entails motifs and themes pertinent to the escape artist. These motifs and themes in turn inform *Manhattan Beach*'s approach to gender and sexuality, which, as I argue in the final section of this chapter, assists in the construction an uneasy, ambivalent vision of how embodied subjects experience and live amidst obscure currents of power.

The novel's two explicit references to Harry Houdini highlight two different facets of the escapologist, which reflect the parameters of the text's neo-historicist concerns with embodiment and abstraction. Early in the novel, Egan describes Eddie's childhood growing up in a Catholic Protectory following the death of his mother. As a young boy, Egan notes, 'his only noteworthy traits were an ability to slip through doors locked only with a chain and shimmy up streetlamp poles like a monkey… He'd once stayed underwater longer than two minutes in Eastchester Bay.'[33] Egan then clarifies that these traits are Houdini-esque. After Eddie and the other boys leave the Protectory, 'to the bewilderment of his friends, Eddie gravitated to vaudeville, where he danced, sang badly for comic effect, hung like a bat from theater rafters, and tricked his body into Houdini-like escapes.'[34]

The physical dexterity and capacity for endurance that Eddie exhibits as a child are utilised in his brief vaudeville career, and the surprising syntax here – he 'tricked his body' – emphasises that, in this utilisation, the relationship between self, or agency, and body has shifted. As a child, Eddie's physical feats are 'noteworthy traits', activities that seem naturally instilled and coextensive with his character. As a young man embarking on a career,

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[33] *Manhattan Beach*, p.35.
[34] Ibid., p.41.

Eddie himself interrupts this seamless relation. The activities become 'Houdini-like escapes' only when they are performed for a purpose, directed by a self that commands the body and even works against its natural habits and limits by 'tricking' it into unnatural contortions. Such a separation of the subject into self and body – particularly when that self is making specialised demands of that body in the name of utility – reflects conditions of modernised, Fordist labour whereby, through processes of mechanisation and bureaucratic rationalisation, the worker becomes alienated from the production their body is engaged in.[35] However, while the Fordist worker's body has demands put upon it from some external authority – a boss or a foreman – the 'Houdini-like' physicality that Eddie exhibits rests on the internalisation of that power relation: the self oversees and adjures its own body. Egan's use of Houdini here, then, resonates with John F. Kasson's reading of the escapologist as a figure who can 'tell us about how modernity was understood in terms of the body… how the white male body became a powerful symbol by which to dramatize modernity's impact and how to resist it.'[36] Eddie's Houdini-like internalization of the fundamental, and unequal, power relations guiding modern labour both 'dramatizes' the impact of modernity upon the individual body, and also provides the subject with a kind of reflexive willpower which indexes the potential for individuals to reclaim their embodied-ness. Although *Manhattan Beach* expresses deep ambivalence regarding this subjectivity, it nevertheless teases the potential to resist modernity's traps.

The second explicit reference to Houdini occurs much later in the novel. Through analepsis, Egan recounts the moment when Dexter Styles 'asked for Harriet's hand.'[37] Typically of the male-dominated society represented in *Manhattan Beach*, this conversation does not take place between Dexter and Harriet, but between Dexter and Harriet's father – Arthur Berringer. The conversation is presented by Egan as a confidence trick. Berringer threatens and manipulates Dexter into promising fidelity to his daughter. Speaking of the apparent social gulf between Dexter's gangster associates and Berringer's banker friends, Berringer concludes ominously: 'I think they'd have a great deal in common, although they might not like to admit it.'[38] Having established that he, too, has a shadowy network of

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[35] David Harvey flags this disconnect in his reading of Marx. He writes that, under modernised capitalism, the worker is 'typically alienated from the product, from command over the process of producing it, as well as from the capacity to realize the value of the fruit of his or her efforts… The result is an organized detail division of labour within the factory, which reduces the labourer to a fragment of a person. "The absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa, which makes man a mere fragment of his own body, becomes realized" (*Capital*, 1: 340).' David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.104.

[36] Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, p.19.

[37] *Manhattan Beach*, p.278.

[38] Ibid., p.279.

powerful friends at his back, whilst simultaneously soothing Dexter's worries about how his future father-in-law will react to his occupation, Berringer imposes a requirement for approving Dexter and Harriet's engagement: 'She will be your one and only. This is where I draw the line, Mr. Styles. Not at your friends, not at your line of work, your reputation, your history. Fidelity. That will be your promise to me.'[39] Later, Dexter reflects on the conversation and realizes he has been manipulated:

> Of course he hadn't understood. And later, when he began to, Dexter could only marvel at the sleight of hand whereby his father-in-law had jimmied himself out of a straitjacket with enough leverage to extract promises. Houdini couldn't have topped it: his daughter was knocked up and refused to have it taken care of. Had Arthur withheld his consent, she'd have run away with Dexter: a disgrace. The old man hadn't had enough room to scratch his nose, yet he'd bargained as if the advantage were all his – intuiting with eerie perspicacity that, although criminal, Dexter was a man of his word.[40]

Berringer here enacts what Gary Lindberg has put forward as a definition of 'the confidence game': 'the practical making and manipulating of belief without substance for it.'[41] Berringer's 'sleight of hand' obscures the fact that he is performing an abstract version of Houdini's 'jimmying.' The belief he manufactures is the illusion that he is in a position of power, when in fact he has been trapped in a tricky situation and is working to extricate himself. As such, Egan connects both Berringer's conversational gambit *and* the occlusion of his strategy to Houdini's art, aligning the escapologist with the combination of manipulation and mystification necessary to create an illusion of confidence. Through this, it is clear that Egan's thinking about Houdini drifts towards the deceptions and strategies – the causes – that underpin the sensible effects.

Indeed, characters in *Manhattan Beach* are often semi-aware of networks of power and control, intuiting their presence even if they fail to fully articulate this to themselves. Dexter, for example, imagines that 'he could actually *hear* Mr Q.'s [his employer's] power pulsing through ordinary life inaudibly as a dog whistle.'[42] Similarly, Eddie's dealings with the corrupt union boss John Dunellen rely on his successful navigation of an abstracted realm of magical-feeling power: 'From within the abstracted, half-drunken heap that was John

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[39] Ibid. To the extent that 'fidelity' is synonymous with 'faith' and 'confidence', Berringer's condition here is also neo-historically resonant with the making-of-belief characterising capitalist realism.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.7.
[42] *Manhattan Beach*, p.203.

Dunellen, there prickled a supernatural awareness, as if his perceptions were routed through his radio and magnified. Here was the Dunellen most men failed to see until it was too late – the one who could read your thoughts.'[43]

Power, then – through the poker-faced 'sleight of hand' of people like Arthur Berringer – becomes felt rather than understood. It manifests, in the first instance, as an unknown presence running through the everyday, and it is this intuiting of an abstract, not-quite-visible force that contributes to the experience of power as magical. The comparison to magic is supported by Hans-Joachim Backe's emphasis on magic performances as dependent on the obfuscation not just of technical trickery, but of the power relations inherent to illusionism: he writes that 'the stage magician's misdirection is essentially a power mechanism based on illusionism.'[44] The specialized, secretive knowledge and skill of the performers allow them to subtly exploit and manipulate attention, suggesting the kind of 'affective management' which Deleuze and Fisher identify as the hegemonic strategy of 'control societies.' *Manhattan Beach*'s most powerful characters – Dunellen, Mr Q., and Arthur Berringer – wield power in this disguised fashion, making it appear as magical-feeling abstraction: the immateriality of a 'dog whistle', or the ability to read thoughts.

Manhattan Beach's two explicit references to Houdini, then, highlight two facets of the performer: his physicality, or embodiment, and his association with abstract, obscured power. Over the course of *Manhattan Beach*, these two facets emerge as key factors in a dialectic between surface and depth – a dialectic that encapsulates the bodily experience of power (its ability to sense or intuit power, as well as the ways the body is involved in dominating or being dominated), and power's hidden structures of deception and mystification. On one hand, via Eddie Kerrigan, Houdini represents an embodied, material subject – one with a degree of reflexivity that reflects, but also suggests the capacity to evade, the co-opting of the body by forces of capitalistic modernity. On the other hand, Houdini represents the abstraction and mystification of power associated with those same forces. As will be discussed below, *Manhattan Beach* uses images and metaphors of surface and depth to spatialize this dynamic into visible and hidden elements.

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[43] Ibid., p.31.
[44] Hans-Joachim Backe, 'Disappearing Acts: Stage Magic and the Illusion of the Body,' in *Comparative Critical Studies* (2013), 91-105 (p.94).

Structuring Mystery: Surface, Depth, and Allegorical Signification

It is my suggestion that Houdini – through the associations mapped out above – colours the entirety of *Manhattan Beach*, contributing to the novel's sense of atmosphere and tone. He provides a set of metaphors and a register for Egan's representation of power and futurity, which, in its strange spatialization of everyday life, and its nebulous sense of mystery and magic, offers a neo-historical interrogation of the nature of embodied existence at a transitional, liminal point in history.

The chief means by which this neo-historical, Houdini-esque representation is mobilized is through the novel's frequent allusions to the existence of 'surface' and 'shadow' worlds. [45] The subject, perceiving only surface, nevertheless senses the disturbances that take place in the shadow world. Egan's shadow worlds are in fact highly structured, sensible sites of power relations and hidden desires. They guide, and often disrupt, the activities and appearances of the everyday world. It is precisely such Houdini-esque 'dual' moments – moments where the skin of things becomes thin, where depth can be sensed as immanent to surface – that *Manhattan Beach* pursues.

The term 'surface' itself has become associated, in recent literary discourse, with the concept of Surface Reading (which, like the New Sincerity, is another critical / literary strategy for reading the present following the turn from critique). As it is defined through Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's influential essay "Surface Reading" (2009), and through the critical responses to that piece, surface reading intentionally moves away from the 'symptomatic reading' previously dominating the academy. It endeavours to leave behind what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described as a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in favour of an

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[45] Recently, in the first and only book-length academic study of Egan's work, Alexander Moran has noted that a 'preoccupation with surfaces and depths' is evident across Egan's fiction. Moran uses this observation in support of his argument that Egan's oeuvre is preoccupied with 'staged authenticity' – a concept that refers to a spatialized (and highly illusionistic) view of peoples' behaviour as including a front-facing performativity and an 'authentic back world' that only a few people are allowed access to. This concept of 'front and back regions' and the 'pretense of barrier removal' between these two regions occurs, according to Moran, across Egan's fiction. Alexander Moran, *Understanding Jennifer Egan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021), p.10 and pp.6-7.

engagement with textual 'surface', or, in Best and Marcus's terms: 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding.'[46]

In this endorsement – as with other contemporary strains of thought encouraging alternatives to deconstructionist critique – surface reading has been accused of complicity with neoliberal culture, indexing a loss of critical power and a reality in which capitalism, in its totalizing logic, has absorbed all viable alternatives and critiques into itself. As Jason M. Baskin writes, surface reading has been linked to 'a retreat from social and political engagement into either the immediacy of sensual experience or the objective neutrality of empirical data.'[47] This critique of surface reading as 'retreat', as Baskin's argument implies, is somewhat self-fulfilling and tautological in its assumption that there can be no depth in post-postmodern literary surface (it is thus reflective of the logic of Fredric Jameson's concern that 'the rejection of depth is symptomatic of an inability to cognize the structuring totality of contemporary capitalism').[48] Although the contemporary interest in surface – Baskin puts forward that surface can be considered 'a historical problem specific to the present'[49] – bears uneasy proximity to postmodern 'depthlessness', I follow Baskin's assertion that, in fact, surface does not have to be thin, hard, reflective, but can contain its own important qualities of depth and 'thickness.' As much as attempts to engage these qualities may demand a different hermeneutic to the unearthing of hidden elements practised in symptomatic reading, the idea of surface as having its own depth ultimately speaks to the contemporary condition in ways that cannot be dismissed as mere replication of neoliberal logic, or as marking the 'retreat' of an otherwise efficacious critique. As Baskin argues: 'Beyond the ongoing scholarly debates between depth and surface, hermeneutics and description, critical and postcritical reading, various writers and thinkers deploy the concept of surface to reveal, and in some cases critique, the seemingly fluid and immaterial world of neoliberal global capitalism.'[50]

It is this deeper, richer sense of surface that I am arguing *Manhattan Beach*, via its extrapolation of the dialectical figure of Houdini, conjures and constructs its narrative around. Surface and depth do not have to be rigidly opposed binary qualities, but, as Baskin writes, are 'mutually constitutive, each immanent to the other… rather than covering up history

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[46] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations*, 108:1 (Fall 2009).

[47] Jason M. Baskin, 'The Surfaces of Contemporary Capitalism', p.87.

[48] Ibid, p.87.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

(depth, structure), the surface (ornament) communicates it, specifically at the level of the bodily experience.'[51]

For Baskin – and, as I will argue, for Egan, too – phenomenological 'bodily experience' is the philosophical and cognitive stance most suited to apprehending the mutual immanence of surface and depth. Phenomenology, as Baskin shows through his reading of the poet Lisa Robertson and the arguments of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is well suited to grasp the 'constitutive, dialectical interrelation' of surface and depth, because, in its sustained attention to processes of perception, it remains aware of 'the irreducible complexity and ambiguity' that sustains both perceiver and perceived as entities embedded in 'a greater totality.'[52] Put slightly differently: because human perception is necessarily partial and provisional – perceiving (with) a part of the whole – phenomenology takes as a given that surfaces are intertwined with depths which cannot be seen. 'Merleau-Ponty shows', writes Baskin, 'that for embodied viewers there are neither "surfaces" nor "depths," but only a dialectically intertwined *surface-in-depth*… [which remains], even if only to a minimal extent, elusive and mysterious, "thick" with "gaps" and "folds."'[53] As I hope to draw out in the below discussion, such a phenomenologically informed concept of surface-in-depth rehabilitates 'the immediacy of sensual experience' from something indexing critical 'retreat', to a newly valuable critical territory: a site where knowledge is generated as well as received, and, as such, a site where received norms can be contested.

Egan refers to obscured networks of power – largely criminal, but also including Berringer's network of bankers – as a 'shadow world.'[54] Dexter's criminal network is described as a 'shadow government, a shadow country', and Egan extends this shadowy quality to Berringer's bankers because both networks indicate 'an obscure truth recessed behind an obvious one, and emanating through it allegorically.'[55] The language here is almost identical to an earlier scene in which Eddie talks with John Dunellen, the corrupt president of the local union. As a youth, Eddie saves Dunellen and another Protectory boy, Bart Sheehan, from drowning. Egan describes how this episode pulsates beneath the surface of Dunellen and Eddie's adult relationship: 'The truth was never mentioned but ever present';

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[51] Ibid, p.88.
[52] Ibid, pp-89-90.
[53] Ibid, p.90.
[54] There are numerous instances of this phrase, but most prominent is as the subheading to the novel's second part – 'Part Two: Shadow World', *Manhattan Beach*, p.45.
[55] Ibid., pp.91-2.

'occasionally… the ocean rescue that had forged the bond between them and still radiated, allegorically, through all of their discourse, broke the surface and moved into the light.'[56] Through this recurring idea of some deep truth 'radiating' or 'emanating… allegorically' through conventional discourse, Egan sets out a spatial and phenomenological schema for how everyday life veils a deeper significance, as well as how this veiling – which obscures 'truth' behind codes and implications – hints at its own obfuscating function, and, therefore, at the existence of what it is trying to hide.

This kind of Houdini-esque signification is wrapped up in Egan's use of the adverb 'allegorically.' Understanding the term is crucial to understanding the spatial and phenomenological qualities of the world *Manhattan Beach* constructs, and the connection of these qualities to the practice and performance of magic.[57] Allegory has a long and complex history, but, as Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck write, it generally 'refers to two related procedures, a manner of composing and a method of interpreting.'[58] 'To compose allegorically', the authors write, 'is usually understood as writing with a double meaning: what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points.'[59] Allegorical interpretation, meanwhile, 'is understood as explaining a work… as if there were another sense to which it referred, that is, presuming the work or figure to be encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority.'[60]

The degree to which the 'double meaning' of allegory is encoded and prescribed by the composer or constructed by the interpreter is a highly charged topic of debate in the history of allegory – so much so that, as Peter Berek observes, some critics ultimately conclude that '*all* interpretation is allegorical.'[61] However, there are certain properties of

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[56] Ibid., p.27 and p.31.

[57] I am treating the term 'allegorically' in *Manhattan Beach* as a productive literary-generic translation of Baskin's idea of 'surface-in-depth'. The proximity between the terms should become clear in the ensuing discussion.

[58] Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. by Copeland and Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.1-12 (p.2). This collection of essays covers the complex history of allegory, from its Classical origin, through the Romantic redefinition of allegory as separate from, and inferior to, symbol, and, finally, to its rehabilitation in deconstructionist thought. In describing this long and varied formal history, I want to suggest Egan's attention to allegory as marking a similar kind of reflexive, post-postmodern interest to that of Chabon's in tricksters and storytelling.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Berek specifies that Northrop Frye and Morton Bloomfield reach this conclusion. Peter Berek, 'Interpretation, Allegory, and Allegoresis', in *College English*, vol.40, no.2 (October 1978), 117-132 (p.117). Paul de Man also took this view, arguing, according to Copeland and Struck, that 'all reading, all critical practice, is allegoresis, that is, allegorical interpretation.' *Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, p.10.

allegory that are unique and especially illuminating in the context of *Manhattan Beach*. Most fundamental amongst these is that allegory mobilises the idea of intertwined surface and depth, and, as such, functions as a call for interpretation. Allegory solicits and invites interpretation precisely because it is associated with an act of composition that deliberately encodes meaning on its surface to an extent, and, with a coherence, that distinguishes it from non-allegorical work. It is this quality that leads Martin Heidegger to assert that 'the presentation of an allegory, of a sensory image, is… nothing else than a clue for seeing (a provision of a clue through something which is presented sensuously).'[62]

In providing a 'clue for seeing', the allegorical image urges the gaze of an onlooker in a particular direction. This echoes the manipulation of gazes inherent in a magic performance, but, if the magician *mis*directs gazes to conceal the structure underpinning the effect, the allegorical image works to direct the viewer towards its available meanings. The important point of similarity, though, between allegory and magic performance, is that they both highlight, thematize, and aestheticize *as illusionism* a more fundamental, phenomenological relation between surface and depth. Magic performance and allegory both rely on the imaginative capacity of interpretation to connect visible and invisible layers of meaning. As Steven Mailloux writes, in allegorical traditions there is 'a focus on interpretation, not only as a process for making sense of allegorical clues but also as an occurrence to which allegory draws our attention.'[63] Paul de Man similarly emphasises the relation between levels of meaning over and above the finished construction of ulterior meaning. In allegory, as in irony, he writes, 'the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference.'[64]

Allegory's particular aesthetic of providing 'clues' to direct a reader's attention, and of self-consciously 'thematizing' these clues, contributes – alongside allegory's long association with myth and theology – to the often observed tendency of allegory to generate 'magical' affects. Numerous critics draw attention to the feeling of allegory as arcane and mystical: James K. Brown argues for allegory as 'a mode of representation which renders the supernatural visible', whereas Copeland and Struck conclude that 'at its most fundamental…

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[62] Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002), pp.12-13. Quoted in Steven Mailloux, 'Hermeneutics, Deconstruction, Allegory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, pp.254-265 (p.254).
[63] Mailloux, 'Hermeneutics, Deconstruction, Allegory', pp.12-13.
[64] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.207.

allegorizing is a search for esoteric truths, for meaning that is concealed but ultimately interpretable.'[65] Steven Mailloux, using language particularly apt for *Manhattan Beach*'s representation of hidden worlds, simply writes: 'Allegory is narrative with a shadow story.'[66]

Egan's 'shadow stories' – the hidden networks of power, and the deeper truths of characters' relationships that Egan describes as functioning 'allegorically' – mobilise the sense of mystery inherent to allegory by disclosing that *something is there* to interpret. *Manhattan Beach* takes cues from the form in order to build the allusive, neo-historical (facing both ways) suggestion that everyday life itself has an allegorical quality. The 'obvious truth' that, for Dexter, conceals a more arcane truth, and the 'surface' through which the hidden reality of Eddie and Dunellen's history breaks, are the quotidian discourses of everyday life that Egan's novel self-consciously deploys in its neo-historicist verisimilitude.

Egan herself indicates the connection between magic performance and allegorical layering when she describes the 'sleight of hand whereby the shadow world blended with the one everyone could see.'[67] This statement comes during a scene in which Hugh Mackey, an employee of Dexter's, commits the transgression of turning up at his boss's home on a Sunday in order to wheedle his way out of a work problem. In Dexter's words, Mackey is 'sore about something', and is desperate for Dexter's help.[68] Over the course of the scene, it becomes clear that Mackey's transgression is severe enough to warrant his murder. Dexter reasons that Mackey's 'family was better off without him, for all the care he'd taken to protect them.'[69]

Mackey's sin consists in breaking the performative surface of social and linguistic codes which obscure criminal activity and keep it relatively separate from family life. Egan describes Mackey's 'mournful rejection of the sleight of hand' by which the shadow world allegorically articulates itself in everyday life, writing that he was 'reckless to have broken rules that everyone in the shadow world knew like a catechism'; 'He could not – or would not – play his part.'[70]

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[65] Mailloux, p.254.
[66] Ibid.
[67] *Manhattan Beach*, p.96.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p.100.
[70] Ibid., p.96, p.97, and p.100.

In rejecting his proper 'part', Mackey brings the shadow world uncomfortably close to the surface, and ultimately gives an exaggerated, clownish performance of deference and desperation. It is this rendering obvious of what is supposed to be obscure which provides the motive for Mackey's murder: 'Maintaining an appearance mattered as much – more – than what was underneath', writes Egan, 'the deeper things could come and go, but what broke the surface would be lodged in everyone's memory.'[71]

What is striking in Egan's representation of this collapse of performative selfhood is the way in which the competing tensions of allegorically disguised power relations are played out upon the body. Mackey is a social actor in the process of rejecting his expected role. Egan writes (highly suggestively in light of the novel's neo-historical concern with neoliberal futurity), that his 'desperation had trumped his ability to play along.' His physical appearance reflects this rejection.[72] Egan describes him as 'gaunt, almost skeletal, with an odd stretched-looking face that might have seemed more at home in clown makeup: a wide mouth and crescent-shaped eyes.'[73] Without a role to play, he resembles a clown out of costume. His gaunt frame makes him seem thinly-sketched, his odd, 'stretched' face suggesting the strain of constant manipulated expression. Dexter, Mackey, and Dexter's daughter, Tabby, walk along the beach beside Dexter's home, giving Mackey a chance, possibly, to re-enter the shadow-world's codes. Tabby takes off her shoes and asks her father to do the same. She does not ask Mackey, because 'it was hard to believe, from his weary clown's face, that Mackey had feet.'[74] Reflecting Mackey's floundering at the threshold of surface and shadow worlds, then, his body is subject not so much to degrees of disappearance, but to degrees of disbelief.

This scene ends with a moment that is in itself highly allegorical, in light of the novel's neo-historical resonances with the logics of contemporary capitalism. Mackey – after getting false reassurance from Dexter that he is safe – exposes the falsity of the prior disavowal of his body simply by taking off his shoes. It is Dexter, the enforcer of illusionistic

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[71] Ibid., p.96.
[72] Ibid., p.95.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., p.97.

codes, who then ends up feeling disturbed and uncertain. Egan writes: 'His [Mackey's] big white feet splayed obscenely against the sand. Dexter couldn't look.'[75]

Dexter's visceral reaction to Mackey's body builds on previous physical reactions to the abstract push-and-pull of power that marks their encounter. He experiences Mackey's arrival at his house as a vulgar physical intrusion: 'he might as well have been pissing on the parlor floor', and, when Mackey makes a veiled threat – 'I know what I know', he says, 'but I don't know what other people might say if they knew it too' – Dexter does not reply, but experiences physical responses which Egan leaves unattached to any particular thought, or even to any recognisable emotion: 'Dexter's ears began to ring. He had an urge to spit into the sand.'[76]

This scene demonstrates how Egan, taking a cue from Houdini, uses pantomimed material embodied-ness to express and negotiate a sensible mutual immanence of surface and depth. If the surface of things is magical for Egan because it works allegorically through 'sleight of hand' (illusionism) to veil the shadow world in social norms and codes, then this scene of slippage also emphasises the shadow world as magical in a different sense: power is a sensible quality, and it provokes a physical and affective response that, on the face of things, seems irrational and strange. We are never given a reason why Dexter cannot look at Mackey's feet, or why they are 'obscene', but we may intuit, through Dexter's reaction, the sensing body as a site where power relations can be (re)written.

Before turning to the key example in the novel of a dialectic between surface and depth – the example of diving – I want to try and flesh out the theoretical strands of my argument regarding phenomenology, with a view towards better understanding how Houdini and magic provide Egan's novel with such a rich register for the representation of encounters with modernity's hidden aspects.

The mutual immanence of surface and depth, the allegorical functioning of conventional discourse, and the role of the body as mediator, are all subjects explored by the philosopher David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), which describes at length the connections between phenomenological experience and magic. His arguments consistently reference the parallel existence of a surface world of rationalised, categorising thought, and a

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[75] Ibid., p.101. It is my hope that at this point in the thesis the resonances of these allegorical, self-reflexive, neo-historicist, post-postmodern allusions with the illusion(ism) of capitalist realist logic are either self-evident, or productively suggestive.
[76] Ibid., p.96 and p.98.

deeper world of intuited experience which resists rationality and categorisation. Abram clarifies that this deeper world is equivalent to Edmund Husserl's concept of 'the life-world'. He writes:

> The life-world is… reality as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our science… The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of "facts" – prior, indeed, to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion.[77]

The 'enigmatic multiplicity' of a pre-conceptual experience of the world is, Abram argues, something that magic performance and practice aims to provide via a disruption of perceptual norms. Describing the shamans and sorcerers of tribal cultures, Abram writes that their practice of magic depends on 'the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture – boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language.'[78] For Abram, the human body is crucial to the process described above – it is the organ of reception and discovery for the enigmatic 'life-world', as well as the site where new perceptual possibilities are formed. Describing a sleight of hand magician manipulating a silver coin, Abram writes that there are 'ambiguous gaps and lacunae in the visible trajectory of the coin', and that the spectators, eyes glued to the coin, 'spontaneously fill in those gaps with impossible events.'[79] This spontaneous, non-rational 'filling in' of the unseen is, for Abram, evidence of how the sensing body can 'make tentative contact…with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible.'[80] He argues that 'the perceiving body does not calculate logical probabilities; it gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully.'[81] In Abram's formulation, then, magic foregrounds the elusive 'gaps and lacunae' in surface appearances, emphasising the reciprocal role of the embodied subject in filling these gaps with meaning and creating new perceptual possibilities.

Abram is not alone in highlighting the connections between magic and a re-thinking of everyday perceptual experience. Eugene Burger has argued that performance magic is 'the only art form that is always and forever concerned with *transcendence*… [it] *always* deals

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[77] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), p.40.
[78] Ibid., p.9.
[79] Ibid., p.57.
[80] Ibid., p.58.
[81] Ibid.

with reaching beyond the ordinary and the everyday' [italics in original].[82] Similarly, the philosopher Lawrence Hass, using Christopher Bollas's concept of 'the unthought known', has linked the art of magic to a preconceptual, phenomenological experience of reality. Magic, he argues, 'reminds us that in the heart of our visual field, as an unthought known, is an overlooked yet constitutive zone of illusion. Everyday perception is itself a life magic performance.'[83]

In making this claim, Hass is drawing on the same body of phenomenological work that informs Abram's discussion of the 'life-world' as a realm of experience that shares, with magic, the capacity to rearrange perceptual norms through a foregrounding of the mystery, ambiguity, and 'lacunae' which haunt surface appearances. This tendency of phenomenological thought to characterise the pre-conceptual experience of the world with which it is concerned as unfathomable and mysterious demonstrates how the registers of phenomenology and magic performance overlap. Maurice Merleau-Ponty himself arrives at 'magic' as an appropriate descriptor for uncanny processes of perception and embodiment. He speaks of the body as 'a prepersonal cleaving to the general form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence' that is present 'beneath…personal life' in the same way as repressed trauma.[84] A subject's awareness of their body as a biological organism, and its connection, in that organic-ness, to a 'general' sensuous world, is largely repressed or sublimated by 'personal existence.'[85] Phenomenological thought, however, may rekindle awareness of this 'prepersonal' corporeality. Merleau-Ponty himself, attempting to hone in on the experience of moving his body from one place to another, affirms the occult nature of his discovery: 'The relationships between my decision and my body are, in movement, magic ones.'[86]

Reading in line with the above, it is my suggestion that *Manhattan Beach* represents the body in two different ways, each of which corresponds to a different conception of the magical. The body is both a keen sensor of surface-in-depth and slippage between allegorical

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[82] Eugene Burger, 'Foreword', in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass, and James Peck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.ix-xii, (p.xi).
[83] Lawrence Hass, 'Life Magic and Stage Magic: A Hidden Intertwining', in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage*, pp.13-31, (p.18)
[84] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p.97.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p.108.

layers (it perceives ambiguity and attempts to imaginatively construct [im]possible meanings: a process Abram sees as inherent to magic performance), but it is also a biological organism that, in its sensuousness, connects to a 'prepersonal' experience of the world that retains something of the magical in the way it is experienced. That Merleau-Ponty describes this prepersonal corporeality as 'magic' is not, of course, meant to mean that the action of the body and the untraceable 'decisions' involved in its movement *are* magic, but that the lived experience of such elusive processes has a magical quality. Hass's claim that everyday perception is a 'life magic performance' speaks to both of the above concepts: it refers to the existence of a magical-feeling 'unthought known' of pre-personal sensing, and also to the subject's ability to organize this pre-personal experience into coherent – if inherently illusive – perceptions and thoughts.

These variations of the body's 'magical' functioning in turn suggest variations of what the 'deeper' layer of reality that Egan describes as allegorically present actually is. On the one hand, as in Dexter and Mackey's conversation, the body perceives, expresses, and participates in the veiled expression of power relations. On the other hand, as will be discussed in more detail in the next section, the body can also attune itself to the obscured reality of its own status as a biological organism. In *Manhattan Beach*, these two variations play off each other, each offering Houdini-esque representations of the body as magical. Characters like Eddie Kerrigan are Houdini-esque because they can 'trick their bodies' and exert agency in order to put their body to some purpose. This is a schema that contains the potential for liberatory self-mastery, but is also uncomfortably reflective of internalized power dynamics. However, Egan's novel also suggests an alternative. Through Houdini-esque moments of risk and physical challenge, the biological aspect of the body emerges as something with its own obscure logic and needs, even as something which produces its own epiphanies, bypassing characters' normative concepts of self and world, and prompting a change in how they exert agency. As I will argue below, *Manhattan Beach* expresses this complex interplay through Houdini-esque themes of bodily mastery and bodily abjection in order to examine the opportunities the modern subject has to escape. As I will also suggest, this entails an incisive neo-historicist critique of masculinity and its relation to power.

Bodily Knowledge: Phenomenology, Gender, and Self-Liberation

It is through Anna Kerrigan's story that this complex interplay, and its relation to masculinity, becomes clear. Anna's efforts to become a diver and her efforts to track down her father both involve her entry into masculine environments that are otherwise closed off to her, and that exist, as such, for her, in the allegorical fashion outlined above. Through the utilisation of her own body – pushing it through the ordeal of training to dive, and having an affair with Dexter, who is the man responsible for her father's disappearance – Anna disturbs the surface of her everyday life, entering into these other, masculine realms. The gangsters' shadow world, which is presided over by mob boss Mr. Q., and which Dexter and Eddie Kerrigan are both involved with, is described as an 'invisible landscape'; a 'latticework of codes and connections that shrank the everyday world into nonexistence.'[87] Around mid-way through the novel, when Anna is living alone in her family's apartment, Egan describes how the mystery novels Anna reads provide her with a memory of her father's coded world. Each mystery novel, Egan writes, contains 'a landscape vaguely familiar to Anna from long ago… these novels had become trapdoors leading Anna to memories of accompanying her father as a little girl.'[88] Egan again describes the process of intuiting this 'landscape' as working allegorically – the mystery novels do not provide Anna with any answers, but they provide a 'clue for seeing'; they seed an urge to look deeper:

> What had he [Eddie] been doing exactly? Was it dangerous? Here was the mystery that seemed now to have been flashing coded signals at Anna from behind every Agatha Christie and Rex Stout and Raymond Chandler she'd read. Becoming aware of this deeper story made it burn through the allegorical surface of whatever plot she was reading until she found herself not reading at all, but holding the book and remembering. Puzzling. Mr. Styles was part of the mystery.[89]

The plots of mystery novels here become allegorical surfaces behind and through which 'the mystery' of her father's disappearance burns. Mystery novels themselves provide clues towards the solution to the puzzles of their plots, and Anna senses in this 'coded' functioning a connection to the allegorically expressive shadow world of her father and Dexter Styles.

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[87] *Manhattan Beach*, p.203.
[88] Ibid., pp.210-11
[89] Ibid., p.211.

The other mysterious realm to which Anna seeks access is the underwater world explored by divers. This world is obscured to Anna on two counts: firstly, the natural barrier of the sea – which Egan describes as 'a glittering curtain drawn across a mystery'[90] – and, secondly, the prejudices of a patriarchal society which prohibits women from certain kinds of work. *Manhattan Beach* represents the increased access women had to the workplace in the 1940s due to the war effort – Anna already works for the Naval Yard at the novel's outset, measuring ship parts – but Egan shows such access as unaccompanied by any real change in attitude.[91] Male bosses simply use, in an act of illusionism, a workplace discourse of concern for the bodily wellbeing of their female workers to perpetuate restrictive prejudice. For women at the Naval Yard, as the commandant tells Dexter and his family during a guided tour, 'jobs requiring physical strength or sustaining of extreme conditions… are all off-limits.'[92] Similarly, Anna's immediate boss, Lieutenant Axel, tells her that 'it is enormously taxing for the human body to perform underwater… We've no idea how the female body would react.'[93]

Diving is, then, a realm where the shadow worlds of masculinized power and biological limits meet and overlap. If the body is especially, magically, attuned to the immanence of surface and depth, then Anna's diving presents opportunities both for the intuiting of a masculine world of power relations, and also the 'prepersonal', embodied, phenomenological lessons emerging from the experience of risks and hazards.

I have argued that Egan's presentation of surface-in-depth – an everyday 'surface' world that partially veils an 'obscure' truth – is Houdini-esque in its allegorical functioning, and in its representation of the body as a vital participant in the experience of mystery. However, in the case of diving – the novel's chief metaphor for the embodied subject's ability to successfully navigate surface-in-depth – Egan also quite explicitly represents the activity as a kind of spectacular magic performance. Such a representation emphasises diving

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[90] *Manhattan Beach*, p.160.
[91] Jordynn Jack, drawing on Ruth Milkman, notes that this is a historically accurate representation: 'Wartime propaganda oversold the extent to which women's work transformed industry or improved women's fate in the workplace. As Ruth Milkman argues, women's experiences were shaped by an "idiom" of sex typing, through which occupations were cast as either men's or women's jobs; when men's jobs needed to be handed off to women, they were reshaped into tasks it was assumed women could perform… As Milkman puts it, "Contrary to the presumption of most commentators that sex segregation was broken down during the war… new patterns of segregation were established 'for the duration' within previously male sectors. Rosie the Riveter did a 'man's job,' but more often than not she worked in a predominantly female department or job classification" (9).' Jordynn Jack, 'Gender and Wartime Work', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019) 398-404 (p.398).
[92] *Manhattan Beach*, p.133.
[93] Ibid., p.147.

as predicated on the Houdini-esque conjunction of bodily risk, manliness, and 'magical' new technology, as well as recalling Houdini's own historical association with diving. Many of Houdini's escapes involved being underwater, from his 1907 milk can escape – advertised with posters that promised 'Failure Means A Drowning Death!'[94] – to his manacled bridge leaps, to his famous Chinese Water Torture Cell. In 1918, Houdini participated in *Cheer Up*, a twice-daily program of acts that Kenneth Silverman describes as 'a patriotic extravaganza' intended to raise national morale during the First World War – during each performance's intermission, Houdini taught young soldiers how to escape from torpedoed vessels and stay alive underwater.[95] Houdini also once performed an escape from a diving suit, and even patented his own improved version of a diving suit, designed to allow the diver quick release from the suit while underwater.[96] These associations between Houdini and diving are never made explicit in *Manhattan Beach*, but are woven through the text's surface – so much so that Anna, on seeing a man in a diving suit for the first time, dimly recognises it as 'something primally familiar… as if from a dream or a myth.'[97] If there is a recognition of Houdini here, it is attended by the perception of magical-feeling allegorical signification,

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[94] Joe Posnanski, *The Life and Afterlife*, p.196.

[95] Silverman, pp.226-7.

[96] Silverman notes Houdini's diving suit escape in passing, p.161. Kevin Connolly has tracked down what seems to be the only known clipping relating to this escape, which John Cox has posted on his website: https://www.wildabouthoudini.com/2014/07/houdini-and-diving-suit-challenge.html [accessed 13/09/21]. Silverman describes Houdini's improved diving suit, p.212. The original patent for Houdini's suit is available to view online via the United States Patent and Trademark Office, Patent Number US001370316: https://pdfpiw.uspto.gov/.piw?PageNum=0&docid=01370316&IDKey=FE760C78537A%0D%0A&HomeUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fpatft.uspto.gov%2Fnetacgi%2Fnph-Parser%3FSect1%3DPTO1%2526Sect2%3DHITOFF%2526p%3D1%2526u%3D2Fnetahtml%2FPTO%2Fsrchnum.html%2526r%3D1%2526f%3DG%2526l%3D50%2526d%3DPALL%2526s1%3D1370316.PN.%2526OS%3D%2526RS%3D [accessed 13/09/21].

[97] *Manhattan Beach*, p.62. As discussed in my first chapter, the suffusion of Houdini-esque motifs and iconography throughout a text can be thought of along the lines of Bill Brown's concept of a 'material unconscious.' It is testament to the iconic and symbolic richness of Houdini – by which I mean the plethora of striking, modernistic images he provided via his set-piece stunts and challenges, as well as the symbolic content of his performances – that every text studied in this thesis contains numerous such associative fragments and dispersed motifs. Houdini's richly diverse imagery is, perhaps, not so surprising for a performer who self-consciously sought to associate himself with new technologies – in particular, the aeroplane and motion picture technology – and whose image was contemporaneously dispersed across the globe in a wide variety of media (see Silverman, pp.202-4). However, it is worth noting the breadth of potent iconography contained within Houdini's performances themselves. The huge array of set-piece contraptions and containers, as well as the endless materials and tools of restraint from which Houdini escaped, is partly due to the numerous challenges issued by local manufacturers and department stores to Houdini on tour, which saw the magician escape from an assortment of objects so varied, and so absurdly familiar to modern citizens, that John Kasson has described them as 'the menacing, phantasmagoric materials of a nightmare of modern life' (Kasson, p.121). It is also, however, a symptom of Houdini's own escapist – arguably modernist, even futurist – drive to constantly reach for the new and constantly out-do himself with more inventive, more spectacular performances. Kenneth Silverman notes this tendency, describing Houdini's 'deep reserves of élan… [and] creative will driven by God-only-knows what kind of striving.' (Silverman, p.182).

'dreams' and 'myths' being prototypical forms of allegory.[98] Anna seems to perceive, then, in the diving suit, an allegorical sign of deeper worlds to which she desires access – a perception which is given weight in Egan's ensuing description of diving as performative, fantasized masculinity (the men who help the diver into the suit are 'like squires fitting a knight for battle') and as boundary-crossing, perception-muddling activity ('the bay looked impenetrable as stone,' Egan writes, 'yet he [the diver] lowered himself into it until only the bulbous helmet showed above the waterline. Then he was gone, leaving behind a coruscation of bubbles.')[99] Anna exhibits 'riveted attention' – she is 'spellbound' as she watches the divers.[100] Diving initially presents itself to Anna, then, as an enchanting spectacle, and it appears as such because it conjures a Houdini-esque sense of mystery and magic – a sense of depth and surface intertwining – and because it teases access to this mystery via Houdini-esque specialized physicality, endurance and skill.

When Anna does eventually perform her first dive, during a training exercise, these elements are fused in Egan's description of the experience as 'like magic', but also her attention to the 'challenge' of the training exercise itself.[101] The diving suit weighs two-hundred pounds, and, on land, Anna experiences 'the brutal sensation of being crushed by it.'[102] Once underwater, however, this weight disappears, and Anna experiences a preconceptual burst of pleasure: 'She felt a rush of wellbeing whose source was not instantly clear. Then she realized: the pain of the dress had vanished.'[103] The underwater world, which introduces different physical forces – like buoyancy – to the human body, then engages a phenomenology that acts 'like magic' in David Abram's sense of reconfiguring perceptual norms. At the same time, the dive represents a Houdini-esque challenge. Anna, along with the other trainee divers, must use a hammer and nails to build a box out of five pieces of wood whilst underwater. Egan emphasises the fact the challenge will be timed – 'Every diver would be timed, of course. "The clock ticks more loudly underwater," Lieutenant Axel had warned. "If you have to surface to retrieve your wood, you've wasted precious bottom

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[98] Peter T. Struck devotes half of his chapter 'Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism' to the discussion of Greco-Roman 'dream books', which, he states, proved 'tremendously influential in the Middle Ages, where dream narrative is the field *par excellence* of allegorical poetics and interpretation.' Peter T. Struck, 'Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (pp.57-71), p.63 and p.64.
[99] *Manhattan Beach*, p.62.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., p.217.
[102] Ibid., p.215.
[103] Ibid., p.216.

time.'[104] This emphasis on timing recalls Houdini's underwater stunts, where the amount of time he could hold his breath for was a crucial feature of the tension of the act. Houdini would encourage audience members to hold their breath along with him, and even, in later years, had a giant stopwatch on stage with him, counting through the seconds, creating what John Kasson has called 'a drama of time.'[105] Lieutenant Axel's melodramatic warning, which emphasises the exaggerated loudness of the clock's ticking, as well as the striation of time into finely grained margins of 'bottom' and top time, transforms this exercise into a Houdini-like challenge. Through a close reading of the task itself the register of Houdini-esque challenge becomes clearer, and I want to pay attention, now, to how this register recalls and modifies the reconfiguration of the relationship between body and self, or agency, that made Eddie's own physical feats and contortions 'Houdini-like.' Here is Anna, underwater, attempting to build her box:

> A piece of wood shot from the bag, and in trying to seize it, she released the two from under her arm. She was barely able to block and snatch the three errant pieces before they lofted out of reach. Her heart stammered, and she felt light-headed. Panic, or any exertion underwater, made you exhale more carbon dioxide, which then weakened you when you breathed it back in. Anna returned everything to the bag and closed it. She took a long breath and shut her eyes and immediately felt a new responsiveness in her fingertips, as if they'd suddenly wakened from sleep. Of course. She would keep her eyes closed. Anna loosened the mouth of the bag and let two wood pieces nudge their way into her right hand. With her left, she prised free the hammer and a single nail. She hung the bag on her left shoulder and braced the wood pieces at a right angle against the lead blocks of her belt. With a somnolent underwater motion, she hammered the nail until it perforated the soft wood and joined the two slats. Her hands were in charge; she hardly looked.[106]

Egan's painstaking attention here to the elements of the challenge – each of the wooden pieces; the tools Anna uses; the way she must co-ordinate her body with her equipment – creates a Houdini-esque register in multiple ways. Egan's detailed, highly spatialized description gives the impression of an enclosed space in which this ordeal is occurring, recalling Houdini's sequestration in tight, hidden spaces, and the minute, precise bodily

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[104] Ibid., p.217.

[105] Kasson, p.130. In *Houdini's Magical Rope Ties and Escapes* (1920), Houdini himself describes the giant stopwatch: 'for my under-water tests, I had specially made by a watchmaker in Glasgow, the largest stop-watch in the world, by means of which persons in the gallery who did not possess such watches themselves could see the second hand as it jumped around the dial, and thus share in the interest', quoted in 'The Myth of the Giant Clock?', https://www.wildabouthoudini.com/2014/12/the-myth-of-giant-clock.html [accessed 17/09/2021].

[106] *Manhattan Beach*, p.217.

movements and manipulations such a contained environment necessitates. The narrative

tension is wound tight via this granular attention, through the near-miss with the 'errant

pieces' of wood, and through the spur-of-the-moment adaptations and innovations demanded

by the difficulty of the task. Anna's own body, in the diving suit, also becomes a potential

risk which she must manage. She must not panic, or else risks breathing in too much carbon

dioxide, and – to the extent that this demonstrates a counter-intuitive response to the

condition of being underwater, struggling with a difficult task – it also reflects a Houdini-

esque imposition of the will on bodily functioning, akin to the way her father 'tricked his

body into Houdini-like escapes.'[107] However, contrary to this idea of tricking the body, the

above passage reveals that the way Anna overcomes the challenges of this environment is

through a letting-go of her sense of self, a kind of passivity which paradoxically enhances the

capability of the body. It is when Anna closes her eyes that her fingertips wake up with 'new

responsiveness.' She no longer grabs for the pieces of wood; instead, she lets them float out

of the bag and 'nudge their way' to her hand. She hammers the nail with 'a somnolent

underwater motion', indicating that her movements are now attuned to the conditions of her

environment. And, when Anna finally has success in building the box, it is because 'her

hands were in charge; she barely looked.'

This Houdini-esque representation of diving, then, culminates in a reconfiguration of

the relationship between self and body. Agency becomes less associated with the subject's

intent, and more associated with the body's own capabilities. This recalls phenomenological

arguments that the body has its own preconceptual, sensuous intelligence, and – particularly

relevant to the representation of Houdini-like ordeals and challenges – that this corporeal

intelligence supersedes everyday perception and thought processes during moments of risk.

Merleau-Ponty speculates that 'It may even happen when I am in danger that my human

situation abolishes my biological one, that my body lends itself without reserve to action.'[108]

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[107] Ibid., p.41.

[108] Merleau-Ponty, p.97. Merleau-Ponty's – or his translator's – use of 'human' vs. 'biological' situation is
somewhat confusing here. For the purposes of Merleau-Ponty's argument – which immediately goes on to
discuss how everyday existence 'represses the organism' – it would seem to make more sense read the other
way around: i.e., that in moments of danger, in contrast to everyday experience, the subject's biological aspect
comes to the fore. This would correlate with the claim that, in danger, the 'body lends itself without reserve to
action.' I can only speculate – because Merleau-Ponty does not define the term – that 'human situation' does
not mean the conceptual, social world that one might imagine as contrasting with the 'biological', but instead
refers to the 'prepersonal cleaving to the general form of the world' discussed a few sentences earlier as the
original state of the organism. That this is contrasted with the 'biological', then, could refer to the ways in
which the organism in danger can exceed its usual biological limits – demonstrating increased strength,
reaction time etc. This is the way I am reading the sentence, raising as it does the idea of a bodily intelligence
that is neither impulsive, biological response nor conscious thought, but something between the two. This, I

Similarly, Michel Serres, in the startling opening to his *The Five Senses* (2008), describes how his experience of being trapped on a burning boat and attempting to escape through a porthole window made him understand the knowledge and intelligence contained within the body itself:

> Knowing how to hold your breath, to estimate the distance to the heart of the blaze or to the point beyond which one is in mortal danger; how to estimate the time remaining, to walk, to move in the right direction, blind, to try not to yield to the universal god of panic, to proceed cautiously towards the desperately desired opening; these are things I know about the body.[109]

Serres describes the moment he became stuck in the porthole window – half his body inside the burning ship, half his body out in the freezing sea air – as prompting a re-examination of where he considers his 'I', his agency, to be. He concludes: 'You only have to pass through a small opening, a blocked corridor, to swing over a handrail or on a balcony high enough to provoke vertigo, for the body to become alert. The body knows by itself how to say I.'[110] Moments of risk, for Serres, produce tangential situations where 'the body goes searching for its soul'; extrapolating from his experience of being trapped in the porthole window, he writes: 'There is an almost identifiable point which, in the spatial experience of passing from inside to out, is proclaimed by the whole body. The I as a whole leaps towards this localized point.'[111] This kind of localization of agency – the surging of the 'I' towards a particular point of the body – is something like what Anna manages to achieve during her diving challenge, when her hands take charge and 'she' does not look. Houdini himself – who had more than his fair share of 'the spatial experience of passing from inside to out', and who concentrated his training on specific parts of his body, such as his fingers and toes – can be understood as metonymically representing the hidden knowledge of bodily agency and capability in moments of risk. As John Kasson writes: 'If a magician is an enactor of miracles

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would suggest, is Merleau-Ponty's 'magic' of bodily decision, and it is akin to Michel Serres' notion of a 'common sense' that 'apportions the body better than anything else in the whole world.' Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), p.19.
[109] Serres, p.17.
[110] Ibid., p.19.
[111] Ibid., pp.20-21.

and a holder of secrets, then an escape artist is a special case: an enactor of the miracles and secrets of his own body.'[112]

In *Manhattan Beach*, the knowledge gained through the experience of bodily risk, and the re-organisation of the self that dovetails with such experience, represents an ambivalent fulfilment of the 'obscure truth' promised to Anna via the allegorical signification of everyday life. It does not solve any mysteries in and of itself, but, as a kind of unexpected side effect of Anna's exploration of shadow worlds, it offers a lesson in how to survive – how to live amongst, cope with, and even exploit, the mysterious structuring of the everyday. Anna, literally diving into the hidden, masculine 'shadow world', undergoes risk and challenge and learns how to displace herself and let her body take charge.

Elsewhere in the novel, Egan describes how Anna's encroachment on the criminal 'shadow world' – as opposed to the shadow world of diving – also involves a transformative encounter with risk. Once aware of Dexter's criminal activity, Anna begins to imagine 'dire, thrilling scenarios', and Egan describes the effect of this imagining as a bodily reinvigoration: 'There was dynamism in this new foreboding, a stinging vitality, as if she'd wakened from drugged sleep.'[113] I am arguing that this sense of 'stinging vitality' and bodily agency – this sensuous intelligence awakened through risk – is an 'ambivalent' fulfilment of the truth teased by allegorical signification partly because its discoveries are inwards-facing, and for the most part restricted to individualistic application. Anna's achievements do not produce any real change. Even after she successfully completes her training challenge, Lieutenant Axel continues to refer to the trainee divers as 'men', and stresses the word, 'as if he were conjuring her [Anna's] disappearance.'[114]

However, it is also uneasy because the shifting of agency – the way a subject's sense of selfhood and intent disappears and then reappears, modified, in bodily intelligence – involves a highly ambivalent detachment from usually-held concepts of self and world. As

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[112] John F. Kasson, p.113. Kasson also notes how Houdini trained his toes until they 'acquired the dexterity of fingers', p.112.

[113] *Manhattan Beach*, pp.106-7.

[114] Ibid., p.221. Related to this discussion, Maggie Doherty has criticised *Manhattan Beach* for its representation of female achievement as confined to individual success. She writes that the novel represents a 'kind of feminism [that] encourages women to succeed in male-dominated industries, often by dispensing with typically "feminine" affect and behavior, and to claim power for themselves'; 'Anna breaks through a number of barriers in *Manhattan Beach*, surpassing low expectations and winning over scornful men, but, in the end, she succeeds only for herself.' Maggie Doherty, 'Nevertheless, She Persisted', in *Dissent Magazine* (Winter 2018) https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/jennifer-egan-manhattan-beach-review-feminism [accessed 21/09/21].

will be examined in greater detail below, *Manhattan Beach* represents this detachment as, on the one hand, enabling an individual's 'escape' from oppressive conditions, but – on the other – as aligned with a kind of amoral masculinity that is always at risk of being co-opted by forces of power, and which occasionally, appears to be synonymous with the will to power itself.

This is ultimately the crux of *Manhattan Beach*'s Houdini-esque dialectic between embodiment and abstract power. If embodied knowledge, gained through an experience of risk often brought about by the demands of powerful structures – the workplace, the mob, etc. – produces a reinvigorated sense of self and agency, is there anything to stop that reinvigoration simply feeding back into the structures of power which put that body at risk in the first place? Are the bodily lessons learned through the experience of risk irreparably compromised by their tendency to echo the will to power, or should we, as readers, sense liberatory possibility in the representation of an individual recognizing their plasticity, their own ability to rethink their sense of self and evade modernity's traps? Is the limiting of transformative knowledge to co-optation, or to individual escape, a symptom of power being nebulous and abstract, graspable in everyday life mainly through allegorical nudges and winks? *Manhattan Beach* stages these questions through depictions of individual epiphany. In doing so, the novel speaks to the contemporary literary dilemma of what critical and narrative possibilities remain in an era where the efficacy of revelation – of demystification – is under question, and in which the forces of neoliberalism and financialization, with their respective tendencies towards totalization and immaterial abstraction, are understood to have aided and abetted a vanishing of critical power.[115]

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[115] Alison Shonkwiler, discussing financialization, argues that 'abstraction…presently dominates not only the economic but also the historical, cultural, and aesthetic domains.' Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, p.xi. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith discuss neoliberalism's 'immanence', writing that neoliberalism is 'everywhere but also, perhaps, nowhere.' For Huehls and Greenwald Smith, neoliberalism's elusive immanence makes it hard for critique to locate its object: 'the critical power of poststructurally inflected Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and other politically committed theoretical approaches loses purchase on a reality fully subsumed by capital', and this, in turn, leads to contemporary fiction which recognizes 'the potential obsolescence of earlier forms of representation and critique and struggle[s] in various ways to develop new literary modes that acknowledge that condition without succumbing to the neoliberal totality that produced it in the first place.' Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Huehls and Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp.1-18 (p.1, and pp.10-11). Shonkwiler also situates her readings against the background of a critical discourse that no longer believes demystification – critical exposure – has any real effect. She argues that while contemporary novels 'raise questions about realism's changed capacity for social and economic critique, they nonetheless demonstrate the contemporary persistence of the realist impulse to unmask the unreal', p.xv. As I will go on to argue, if there is an enduring 'realist impulse to unmask the unreal' in *Manhattan Beach*, then it is an impulse more

The awakening of bodily agency that Anna discovers while diving is mirrored in Egan's representation of Anna's early sexual experiences. This latter episode, however, emphasises the ambivalent dissolution of selfhood ushered in by risky bodily experience. This scene, too, takes place under Houdini-esque conditions. Anna is fourteen, playing a game of Ringolevio – described by Egan as 'hide-and-go-seek with prisons and teams' – with a group of kids from her block.[116] Anna, looking for a place to hide, makes her way into someone's cellar, where she hears a boy's voice call out to her 'from inside a storage paddock with high wooden sides.'[117] 'The door', Egan writes, 'was sealed with a padlock, but Anna managed to vault from a barrel over one of its sides onto what felt like logs but was actually – she knew by touch, it was too dark to see – a heap of rolled carpets.'[118] Anna joins the boy – Leon – in the dark, confined space of the paddock. She sees, through a gap in the planks, members of the opposing team searching the cellar, and is 'rigid with alarm at being discovered with a boy in an enclosed space.'[119]

Eventually, however, the opposing team members leave. Anna's panic subsides, leaving her with the physical sensations of her situation: 'the longer she lay still, the less urgent her departure seemed to be. It was rather nice to lie in the warm dark, hearing the distant thrum of the furnace and the boy breathing beside her.'[120] Leon takes Anna's hand. Egan describes the moment in terms that suggest a confrontation between assumed values and empirical physicality: 'Was she afraid to have her hand held? Obviously not.'[121] When the touching becomes sexual, this confrontation is extrapolated – perhaps entirely evaded – through the disassociation of self: '*I might not be here*, Anna thought as he moved her hand to his trousers, where the fabric strained against the buttons… *This might not be me.*'[122] Over the next few months, Anna and Leon regularly meet in the paddock and start having sex, a progression from their initial fumbling which Egan describes as a kind of energy of bodily logic coming to the fore through prolonged suspension of self:

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concerned with the process of locating the unreal, rather than with any effects that may follow its unmasking. The impulse is to understand the unreal in order to better occupy its mystery. There is little sense that the unreal, once unmasked, should disappear or lose power; there is little sense, in fact, that this would even be desirable.

[116] *Manhattan Beach*, p.119.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., p.120.

> But soon enough, layers of clothing began to yield to the marvel of bare flesh…. The greater logic they were yielding to contained an inexorable will to progress. Anna couldn't picture what they were doing: proof of her innocence. Even as she spent her days aching to renew their dark dream, she felt as if it were happening somewhere else, to a different girl. In the dark paddock, she slipped from her life like a pin dropping between floorboards. *I don't know what you mean, I haven't done those things*, she imagined saying, truthfully, to a faceless accuser. *I don't even know what they are.*[123]

Anna's disassociation here introduces ambivalence to the idea of escape that runs through the passage. If (in line with the argument put forward in *Kavalier & Clay*) escape necessarily involves some sort of transformation – of self, circumstance, or of affect – then here the transformation is arrested, stalled by Anna's feeling that her sexual encounters are 'happening somewhere else, to a different girl.' Her experience retains a feeling of unreality, occurring as it does in one of the novel's many dark, hidden, 'shadow world' spaces. As a consequence, the moment of transformative escape becomes something more like annihilation: 'she slipped from her life like a pin dropping between floorboards.'

This disassociation occurs in part because the Houdini-esque space of the paddock encourages sensual intelligence to awaken, which, in line with phenomenologist arguments, has a degree of independence from concepts of self, and from conceptual knowledge of sexuality. However, Egan also emphasizes the gendered reasons for Anna's disassociation. As suggested by the 'faceless accuser' in Anna's imagination, the other factor encouraging Anna's detachment from self is the risk of shame; in particular, the shame that comes from the perception of having lost 'innocence', or of being a certain 'type' of girl. It is this typification of women that presents the most prevalent 'trap' of modernity for Anna. Egan describes how relationships between girls and boys on Anna's block become fodder for gossip and teasing: 'There had been gropings on the block, kisses stolen and coerced, three boys and two girls in a closet at Michael Fasso's – an interlude no one stopped talking about for weeks.'[124] The gossip is focussed on the girls involved, with rumours of pregnancy and disgrace being particularly salacious: 'there were rumours at the high school of girls who'd had to depart suddenly to "live with relations." One of these, Loretta Stone, was now a year behind her peers: a chastened solitary girl whose alleged ruin was a succulent dish the other

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[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., p.121.

children feasted upon.'[125] Even Anna's own father, Egan writes, had he known about her and Leon, 'would disown her.'[126]

These, then, are the risks and hazards that Egan presents as potential consequences for Anna's deviating from a particular feminine role. Throughout *Manhattan Beach*, Egan emphasises the patriarchal demand for women to present a certain kind of femininity, and the pitfalls awaiting those who stray from prescribed codes of behaviour. Right from the start of the novel Egan uses theatrical language to show Anna, and others, as characterized by a performative femininity. The women working at the Naval Yard are mostly homogenized as 'the marrieds', against whom 'Anna had been cast – or cast herself – in the role of unruly kid sister.'[127] Later, when Anna meets the effervescent Nell and the two exchange stories about their supervisors, Anna becomes 'aware that she was playacting a little, invoking a version of Mr. Voss that was slightly outdated. Hanger-on seemed to be the part she was auditioning for, perhaps the only one available.'[128]

Nell represents an alternate, more modern femininity for Anna, one that seems less stifling than the virtuous 'good girl' persona she inhabits with her family: Egan writes, 'her [Anna's] role, so firmly established that she no longer recalled its origins, was to be impervious to the vices around her – *good*, despite everything, in her bones, heart, teeth.'[129] This expectation that Anna be '*good*' aims at embodiment – at soaking into 'her bones, heart, teeth' – but collides with Anna's own hidden, embodied knowledge of sexuality: 'The fact that she was not good in the way they thought – hadn't been since age fourteen – should have been easy to forget in their company. But Anna never quite forgot.'[130] As will be discussed in more detail below, this mismatch between the expectations of society and the family and hidden, embodied, individual experience – which is 'never quite' forgotten – sets up a gendered version of the allegorical intertwining of 'surface' and 'shadow' worlds that structures the novel's representation of its various mysteries. Over the course of the novel, Anna becomes more aware of the performative nature of her role as '*good*', and this is, in part, prompted by her participation in Nell's alternative performance of modern femininity.

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., p.47.
[128] Ibid., p.56.
[129] Ibid., pp.113-4.
[130] Ibid., p.114.

Anna borrows Nell's bike; she smokes a cigarette with her even though 'only boys had smoked on Anna's block – the girls had thought it dirty'; and the pair attend a nightclub – an evening that ends with Nell's assertion that the idea of women as 'angels' is completely false: 'Angels are the best liars, that's what I think.'[131] While this offers a potentially liberating alternative to Anna's role as virtuous woman, it is nevertheless still a performative attitude taken in response to a male-dominated society, and it entails its own risks and strictures. When Anna and Nell attend the nightclub, Nell, not wanting any men they meet to be put off by their work at the Naval Yard, urges Anna: 'Not a word about what we do.'[132] Later, when Anna bumps into Nell at the same nightclub, she is more aware of the performativity of Nell's persona – 'Nell's act was so overdone. Who was the audience?'[133] – but, at the same time, Anna is more comfortable in embracing the performance as such: 'When she [Anna] looked in the kitchen mirror, the glamour girl gazing back at her made her laugh. A disguise! Why hadn't she thought of this before?'[134]

That the various 'roles' taken by Anna and Nell are a response to the expectations of patriarchal society is made clear through Anna's growing realisation of her own, and others', performativity. 'It's hard to know what most girls are like', Anna murmurs to herself, after Lieutenant Axel tells her she is different from the majority of female workers.[135] When living alone for the first time, Anna registers a connection between this not-knowing what girls are like and a society that forces women into certain roles: '*A different kind of girl*. How did you know what kind of girl you were, with no one around you? Maybe *those kinds of girls* were simply girls who'd no one to tell them they were *not* those kinds of girls' [emphasis in original].[136]

Manhattan Beach demonstrates sustained attention to the ways women are expected to take up certain roles, and to the perils of deviating from such performances – indeed, it is the effort to overcome categorisation that forms the greatest challenge to Anna's becoming a diver. That both diving and Anna's early sexual experience hinge upon a disappearance of self and an awakening of the body demonstrates the value of sensuous phenomenological experience, its ability to usher in knowledge that, because it is pre-conceptual, bypasses the

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[131] Ibid., p.56, p.61, and p.74.
[132] Ibid., p.66.
[133] Ibid., p.228.
[134] Ibid., p.224.
[135] Ibid., p.419.
[136] Ibid., pp.233-4.

prejudices of normative modernity. Both incidents stand as examples of an experience of risk that alters the relation between self and body, and that unsettles received knowledge – about women's capabilities, or certain 'kinds of girls' – with its own embodied lessons.

This focus on the embodied experience of risk recalls Houdini. As mentioned above, the tension between performative selfhood and 'real' embodied knowledge forms a gendered version of the novel's broader Houdini-esque strategy of creating interplay between surface and depth to generate the feeling of allegorical mystery. Egan playfully literalizes this dialectic in Houdini-esque spaces that are literally deep or hidden in some way – the bottom of the sea, the dark paddock – and these spaces permit self-reinvention via experiences not normally available in everyday 'surface' life. The figuration of such experience as an escape also recalls Houdini because *Manhattan Beach*'s notion of escape is ironized by its relative inefficacy, its sense of annihilation rather than transformation. This is clearly shown when Anna and Leon's paddock is dragged outdoors into the street while the cellar is renovated. 'In the unforgiving daylight', Egan writes, 'she [Anna] saw a pile of moth-infested carpets crowned by a filthy bloodstained coverlet. She walked into her building, latched herself inside a first-floor toilet, and vomited… [Anna and Leon] never touched again. Rather, they continued not to know each other.'[137] The shadow world here migrates to the surface, and the suspension of normative perception, the sensuous lessons available through that space's hiddenness, seem expunged in the visceral reaction of Anna's vomiting.

Just as Anna, with her family, can 'never quite' forget her sexual experience, her and Leon's encounters persist in everyday life as secrecy. Any productive transformation of Anna's self, or any possibility to inhabit the knowledge of her sexuality, is foreclosed by this separate-but-adjacent structuring of experience. Once back in the surface world, Anna does her best to forget what she has learned and falls back on performing virtue: Egan describes how 'for the rest of high school and during her year at Brooklyn College, Anna tried to impersonate a girl who knew nothing. How would that girl react when a boy backed her against a wall and tried to kiss her? Would she be frightened when he ran his palms over her breasts through her sweater-blouse?'[138] The opportunity to self-liberate and escape internalised prejudice is shown to fail – or, more accurately, to have never really existed in the first place – in the face of a surface world which attempts to preserve its façade of

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[137] Ibid., p.122.
[138] Ibid.

equanimity through normative performativity, and through the separation of fields of experience into 'safe', permissible roles, and forbidden, risky activity.

The consideration of Houdini and gender, then, opens into the question of what kind of escape *Manhattan Beach* represents as achievable, and this – because escape in the novel is represented as morally ambivalent, individualistic, and largely ineffectual – helps to situate the novel within contemporary literary debate, which often assumes there is no escape from neoliberal capitalism's immanence, no non-complicitous discourse. *Manhattan Beach* seems to reflect this contemporary scenario by equating escape with a kind of masculinity that replicates the will to power, thereby also echoing the individualistic, striving selfhood many critics see as characterizing the neoliberal subject.[139] The tendency towards disassociation in the experience of bodily risk also occurs in male characters, and by examining these examples along with the epiphanies they generate, it becomes clear that what such embodied experience provides is not so much the means to escape, but a lesson in how to take advantage of the allegorical structuring of life into intertwined visible and invisible spaces in order to achieve personal gain. The sensing of a Houdini-esque structure of experience ultimately leads characters to realise how to get away with things; how to do things in the shadows while maintaining a surface life. To push this further into the language of Houdini: the realisation that everyday life is built upon illusions does not dispel those illusions, but instead teaches the subject how to become an illusionist themselves.

At the end of the novel, Anna is faced with the 'closed door' that her Aunt Brianne warns her of: she is unmarried, and pregnant with Dexter's child. In order for Anna to continue her life – both as a diver and as someone not castigated as an 'outcast' – she is forced to cobble together an escape plan. Anna requests a transfer to the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in California, to join her mother in the west. She must hide her pregnancy from her employer, but figure out a means of explaining it to her mother and to her gossipy neighbourhood. For this latter aim, Anna invents a husband – Lieutenant Charlie Smith – who, as she explains in letters to her family, courted her in a whirlwind two-week romance

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[139] David Harvey, for example, writes that there has been 'a general shift from the collective norms and values, that were hegemonic at least in working-class organizations and other social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, towards a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial culture that has penetrated many walks of life', *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.171. Similarly, Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that 'neoliberal policy has become increasingly normalized, accompanied by a corresponding shift in the social expectations that are placed upon individuals. Neoliberalism's emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing of structures of dependence, calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system', *Affect and American Literature*, pp.1-2.

before marrying her. He is, of course, shipped out to war immediately afterwards, where he will die, leaving Anna and the baby. This fabrication urges belief, and, as such, it is uncomfortably close to Berringer's earlier Houdini-esque 'jimmying', which urged Dexter's belief in his authority. Anna's deception, though, remains unexposed, and Egan describes the longevity of Anna's fabrication as a successful escape attempt:

> Her mother still believed in the doomed Lieutenant Charlie Smith. Anna wondered now if she would ever tell her the truth – whether it would even matter by the time the war ended. One thing was certain: Rose had been wrong about the world becoming small again. Or at least it would not be the same small world it had been. Too much had changed. And amid those shifts and realignments, Anna had slipped through a crack and escaped.[140]

Anna's escape here, with its suggestion of vanishing, echoes her experience with Leon of slipping from her life 'like a pin dropping between floorboards' – however, if the latter suggests a certain passivity, in the above passage there is a sense of deliberate motion, of Anna seizing her opportunity. It is this opportunism that connects Anna's escape to a masculinity which Egan presents throughout the novel as morally dubious, even though it emerges out of desperate personal or economic circumstances.

Indeed, Anna's taking advantage of the 'shifts and realignments' of the post-war world mirrors the logic of Berringer and Dexter's intentions to exploit changes in the economic landscape. It is a connection borne out in Egan's other descriptions of male characters seeking to amorally change their fortunes. When Eddie starts to work for Dexter Styles, Egan writes that 'he'd found an opening, a way out', and, later, Eddie advises the corrupt union boss Dunellen in much the same terms: 'look for your opening and get the hell out.'[141] Whatever sense of hope and triumph there is in Anna's escape must be considered alongside Egan's representation of masculine escape as opportunistic and amoral.

Egan's description of escape being a matter of 'finding an opening' both underscores the idea of surface-in-depth – a surface world full of gaps and folds – and re-conjures Houdini as a figure for self-liberation. It suggests a kind of confinement – escape is not something immediately available, but something you must watch for and wait to come around, as the people with real power cause the structure of the surface world to shift and rearrange. This concept of escape, as much as it suggests the subject's relative powerlessness,

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[140] Ibid., p.431.
[141] Ibid., p.313.

their entrapment within a system, cannot help but seem self-serving and somewhat mercenary. Indeed, Egan pays great attention to the guilt and shame experienced by male characters – particularly Eddie, who leaves his family – in their pursuit of better things, but she does not let these characters off the hook. The impulse to escape is described, in the first instance, as a particularly masculine kind of longing that echoes the will to power through the amorality, and the peculiar aimlessness, of its pursuits. This is first introduced through Eddie, who, in one of the novel's early scenes, deliberately rejects the happiness he starts to feel when at home with his family:

> And yet it could still be so sweet. Dusk falling blue outside the windows, Brianne's rum pleasantly clouding his thoughts, his daughters nudging him like kittens… Eddie felt a lulling possibility of happiness pulling at him like sleep. But rebellion jerked him back to awareness: *No, I cannot accept this, I will not be made happy by this…* He withdrew, holding himself apart, and in swerving away from happiness, he reaped his reward: a lash of pain and solitude.[142]

Eddie here demonstrates the kind of escapist longing that, as I have argued through my discussion of Robert Frost's poem 'The Escapist' and Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, ironically entraps the subject. The 'Houdini-like' Eddie Kerrigan is a representative escapist character. He desires endless pursuit, endless forwards motion, and, in this, he denies himself the possibility of happiness. After Eddie has approached Dexter Styles and begun his contact with the criminal Syndicate, Egan states that what draws him to Dexter is 'a restless, desperate wish for something to change. Anything. Even if the change brought certain danger. He'd take danger over sorrow every time.'[143] This is an attitude which Dexter shares. Eddie himself senses 'an affinity' with Dexter because of his 'restless dissatisfaction that registered as curiosity, energy', and Egan describes Dexter, too, as hungering 'for a sense of progress, of new things approaching while old familiar ones receded.'[144] Like Eddie, Dexter is willing to embrace danger and risk for the sake of satisfying his urge for progress. After his plans to join Berringer in legitimate business are rebuffed, Dexter remains undeterred: 'a dissatisfaction of weeks – months – had accumulated in Dexter's limbs, and he needed to act. Even the wrong move was more appealing than none at all.'[145] Berringer

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[142] Ibid., pp.16-17.
[143] Ibid., p.34.
[144] Ibid., p.273 and p.192.
[145] Ibid., p.284.

intuits Dexter's escapist impulses, and he connects them to masculinity and mid-life crisis: '"Not enough has been written about the treachery of middle life," the old man mused… "Dante went to hell to escape it, and I've seen plenty of other men do the same, metaphorically speaking."'[146]

This concept of deliberately courting danger and risk – of going to 'hell' in order to 'escape' dissatisfaction – is a critique of masculinity, but also of a modernity guided by the same escapist impulses. Although Berringer connects escapist desire to a specifically middle-aged masculinity, elsewhere, Egan shows the attitude as present in younger male characters. When Anna asks her colleagues – Marle and Bascombe – for assistance in her night-time dive to the bottom of New York Harbor, where she expects to find her father's corpse, the men react giddily, as if it was 'exactly the sort of crackpot adventure that had been missing from both their lives.'[147] Anna, who is steadily coming to understand the masculine culture in which she is immersed, feels 'compelled to remind them of the possible risks and pitfalls, but none of it registered in their dancing eyes – or perhaps the risks and pitfalls were the point.'[148]

Anna's recognition that it is perhaps the danger of the undertaking that is appealing to the men then reflects back on her own self-transformation. Egan shows it is not simply the case that Anna breaks the employment boundaries placed on women, but that in breaking these bonds, she adopts and utilises a particularly masculine attitude towards risk. This is something tacitly acknowledged by Margaret Cohen in her *PMLA* article, where she notes that 'Anna transgresses basic protocols of dive safety and incurs the wrath of her superiors. Her deviations in her life from the models of proper femininity are equally risky, dangerous, and enriching: nice women don't make history or venture where no woman has gone before.'[149]

For Cohen, Anna's risk taking adopts and modifies a gendered generic trope. She is 'a heroine who makes her way on her own, freed from feminine stereotypes, seeking a career open to talents, as is the due of male heroes in sea-adventure fiction.'[150] *Manhattan Beach* itself makes clear that this 'seeking a career open to talents' involves the kind of

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146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., p.324.
148 Ibid.
149 Margaret Cohen, 'A Feminist Plunge into Sea Knowledge', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019), 372-377 (p.375).
150 Ibid.

opportunistic risk taking which is also at the heart of Dexter and Eddie's amoral striving. When Anna undertakes her first dive since training, she is instructed to 'inspect the battleship's four propellors, locate the problem, return topside, and explain what needed to be done.'[151] However, once she is underwater – hidden away in that shadow world – she decides to fix the problem herself. Once again, Egan represents this underwater episode in the Houdini-esque language of performance and challenge. Here, also, Egan includes a register of criminality that foregrounds the link between Houdini's dextrous escapology and the techniques of thievery.[152] Egan writes: 'a stage – a platform lowered by ropes – had been prepared for her descent.'[153] Taking the stage, Anna is lowered under the water and again experiences the unsettling of perceptual norms. She rediscovers 'the sensation of being weightless', and, in an image that suggests the perspective of Houdini dangling from a newspaper building, she sees that the battleship itself looks 'like a skyscraper turned on its side.'[154] The ship's rudder is 'like the steel door to a bank vault', and, when Anna starts to saw through the rope which is entangling the blades of the rudder, she works 'like a thief trying to crack a safe before an alarm rang.'[155]

This Houdini-esque register of criminality associates Anna's actions with the high stakes of safecracking and robbery, boosting the scene's tension, but it also makes clear that Anna has not been given this opportunity to succeed in her work – she is having to steal it, from under the nose of an employer who would prefer to keep her excluded. However, in a novel where criminality is predominately associated with violent gangsters, this connection between Anna's actions and crime furthers the ambivalence qualifying Anna's otherwise self-liberatory action. This is because the act of self-liberation involves an individualistic opportunism which Egan represents as also motivating the unethical decisions of masculine characters, and as being a guiding force behind a U.S. modernity on the cusp of globalised economic imperialism. As John Kasson writes of Houdini's seemingly impossible escapes

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[151] *Manhattan Beach*, p.294.

[152] The connection between his art and criminality was played up by Houdini throughout his career in order to stoke public interest – indeed, it is the rationale behind his 1906 work *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals*. The media, too, responded to this connection. Following his 1906 jail escape from the Boston Tombs, the *Boston Post* published a report headed 'He Could Be Biggest Burglar in World.' It cited Houdini as saying: 'Were I to turn burglar tomorrow, I feel that I could plan and carry out to a successful end any number of big robberies right here in Boston, for I don't think there is a lock or a safe, guarding valuables in this city, which I couldn't break into and mysteriously dispose of the contents.' *Boston Post*, March 21st 1906. Quoted in Kasson, p.111.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid., p.295.

from handcuffs, jail cells, and various entrapping devices, his performance of 'amazing feats of mastery over objects and situations' made him 'an exemplary masculine figure', but this exemplary manliness also 'spoke to dreams of dominance and authority in the modern world.'[156] Anna's Houdini-like challenge here, and her decision to take command of the situation, uncomfortably replicate this masculinised urge for dominance. *Manhattan Beach* is fairly explicit about these uncomfortable caveats to Anna's escape from restrictive models of femininity. If a key tenet of the novel's representation of masculinity is the (escapist) desire for progress, which is opportunistic and willing to risk wrong decisions in the name of transformation, then Egan's description of Anna's decision to fix the ship's rudder herself demonstrates Anna's adoption of a masculine logic:

> But why should she go back up? Why not saw through the rope by hand, using the hacksaw in her tool bag? Anna made this choice in perfect knowledge that it was the wrong one. Following rules had got her nowhere. Passing tests had got her nowhere. In the course of getting nowhere, she had given up on some larger vision in which being good and trying to please made any sense. Why not take what she could while she had the chance?[157]

Anna deliberately makes the 'wrong' choice here. Although it is clear Anna does this because she is trapped by a culture that will not let her progress, Egan nevertheless stresses that Anna's decision is, at heart, 'pure selfishness.'[158]

The moral ambivalence of this replication of masculine escapistry is furthered by its association with U.S. imperialism, which, as already discussed, is nascent in the changing cultural and economic landscape of the final years of WWII. This connection is most explicitly made through Dexter Styles. Dexter is ultimately shot by a fellow mobster. As he lies dying, he re-experiences an epiphany he first had while diving for Eddie's corpse with Anna. Dexter's epiphany is grounded in a feeling of disembodiment and disassociation, and this abstraction contains its own phenomenological lesson which Egan, here, connects to the feeling of U.S. futurity:

> …[Dexter had] felt his own edges dissolve, and a surge of current had leaped from inside him toward a glowing intimation of the future. What he was trying so hard to do, he'd already done! He was American! The lust and yearning that seethed in his veins had helped to fashion whatever was to come.[159]

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[156] Kasson, p.79.
[157] *Manhattan Beach*, p.295.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., p.358.

The 'lust and yearning' which constitutes Dexter's escapist masculinity is, here, explicitly, proleptically described as taking an active role in the shaping of a post-war future which entails the ascendance of the U.S. as a superpower.

This nexus of escapist 'yearning', masculinity, and (imperial) progress also surfaces as an epiphany for Anna, during her train journey to California. Egan emphasises the connection of this nexus to Houdini by describing Anna's epiphany as equivalent to the sudden understanding of how a trick is performed. Anna, on the train, heads towards the 'orange blaze' of the western sunset.[160] As Margaret Cohen has noted, this romanticized image of western movement reflects 'United States imperial mythology', which associates the west with 'infinitely renewable natural resources and opportunities for self-(re)creation.'[161] In line with this, Anna consciously consigns her New York life to the past, experiencing its 'telescopic fading' as she rushes headlong towards the 'smoldering promise' of the horizon.[162] The connections between Anna's western movement, her self-transformation, and her appropriation of a masculine escapistry that reflects the logic behind the imperialistic ascension of the U.S. as a superpower, seem to be understood by Anna as the train hurtles into the sunset: 'She hungered toward it [the western horizon], longing for the future it contained. As the train roared west, Anna bolted upright. She had thought of her father. At last she understood: *This is how he did it*.'[163]

Anna's escape is here shown to be fuelled by the same kind of masculinized yearning that drives U.S. imperial ambition, and that led her father to abandon his family and fall in with Dexter Styles, who exhibits a similar restless urge for progress and adventure. Allan Hepburn, writing in *PMLA*, helpfully connects the idea of escape to the trope of disappearance in the novel. His reading, however, understands the transformation promised through escape / disappearance as positive, whereas I am arguing that Egan ladens these ideas with ambivalence – even pessimism – by connecting escape to an attitude that underpins an

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[160] Ibid., p.426.

[161] Cohen, p.376.

[162] *Manhattan Beach*, p.426.

[163] Ibid. The question of 'how did / does he do it?' is absolutely central to Houdini's art and his enduring fame. Houdini himself acknowledges this in *The Right Way to Do Wrong*: 'How does he do it? That is the usual question I hear asked about my work in the theater' (p.92), and Silverman concludes his biography of Houdini by arguing: 'How did he do it? The gnawing uncertainty has been the main preservative of Houdini's fame.' Silverman, p.415. The sudden introduction of this question at the end of *Manhattan Beach* – by way of its answer – reveals its animation of the previous 400-or-so pages, suggesting it as informing the novel's sense of mystery, and Anna's gradual adoption of an attitude of masculine escapistry. Considering the context of the revelation, and my arguments above, it is clear that Egan's 'solution' to this Houdini-esque question emphasises its gendered component ('how did *he* do it?').

era of U.S. dominance on the world stage, and which ultimately reflects neo-historically on the nature of embodied existence under immanent neoliberal capital. 'Through the trope of disappearance', Hepburn writes, '*Manhattan Beach* correlates the epic ambition to show historical transformation with the novelistic ambition to represent personal renewal.'[164] For Hepburn, the novel's representation of historical transformation and personal renewal is optimistic: 'Disappearances may be escapes, but they also forecast characters' fresh starts and future convergences… Disappearance instigates adventure; it is a disposition to the future, not just an escape from the past.'[165] Knowing the novel's representation of 'adventure' as amoral, and knowing that 'the future' pointed to by *Manhattan Beach* is one in which U.S. cultural and economic power goes global, ultimately producing contemporary conditions that Egan explores – with great ambivalence – in her more overtly 'tricky' fiction, I suggest that the trope of disappearance / escape in the novel in fact reveals its 'disposition to the future' to be much more pessimistic.

The Houdini-esque re-direction of potentially transformative sensuous knowledge into opportunistic individualistic actions foreshadows a contemporary world in which the potential critique of and resistance to capitalist logic ends up reproducing, or is incorporated within, capitalist logic itself. Alison Shonkwiler has discussed this totalizing tendency of contemporary capitalism through her concept of the 'financial imaginary', which, in her argument, is a contemporary mode of representation 'produced by the social uncertainties and precarities that result from the expansion of financialization over multiple domains of life.'[166]

Key to the representational qualities of the financial imaginary – and, I am arguing, also key to *Manhattan Beach*'s dialectical surface-and-depth, embodiment and abstraction – is an attempt to recognize 'a system that is understood to be less and less tethered to the material, less directly connected to specific modes of production, and therefore less tangible, visible, or controllable.'[167] It is this vanishing of the material through the production of the immaterial – a process that also entails the vanishing of a legible object for critique – that is, for my purposes, the notable contemporary referent for the novel's trope of disappearance /

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[164] Allan Hepburn, 'Vanishing Worlds: Epic Disappearance in *Manhattan Beach*', *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019), 384-390 (p.384).
[165] Ibid., p.384 and p.388.
[166] Shonkwiler, p.xi. See also Randy Martin's *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) for a discussion of how finance capitalism imposes its logic across fields of domestic experience and individual cognition, creating a situation where 'a financially leavened existence… [becomes] a proposal for how to get ahead, but also a medium for the expansive movements of body and soul.' (p.3).
[167] Ibid.

escape. As I've already described, *Manhattan Beach*'s attention to a 'trajectory' of power involves characterizing futurity as 'refining' physical power into the kind of abstract, immaterial, financial power wielded by Arthur Berringer. Reading with Shonkwiler, it is clear there is a connection between this 'trajectory' and the shifts that have taken place in the contemporary economy from material modes of production, to the 'less tangible, visible, or controllable' landscape of financial capital. Shonkwiler stresses that this movement from labour to speculative capital – this detachment from the material and drift towards the immaterial – is not necessarily new, but is intensified in the contemporary era: 'the structural pressures of abstraction, we might conclude, that were emergent in the nineteenth century are now fully articulated in the twenty-first.'[168]

For Shonkwiler, the increasing prominence of abstraction and immateriality in accounts and critiques of contemporary capitalism 'narrates capital's global expansion both as a historical moment and as a structurally immanent movement.'[169] Its virtuality, in other words, assists contemporary capitalism's dispersion across the globe, and lends it a quality of immanence – what Huehls and Greenwald Smith refer to as capital's ability to appear to be 'everywhere but also, perhaps, nowhere.'[170] *Manhattan Beach* exhibits a version of Shonkwiler's 'financial imaginary' through the use of Houdini-esque allegorical signification, which creates the feeling of a nebulous, mystified structure running through everyday life. The novel's attempts to pierce this mystery, reveal the underlying structure and access the 'shadow world' rely on phenomenological engagement with surface-in-depth. However, these attempts tend to reproduce the logic of finance capital because they result in individual gain, and because they interface with the shadow world primarily through actions and experiences of risk.[171]

The way individual characters in *Manhattan Beach* intuit immaterial worlds of power and money and then undergo risky 'escapes' from the strictures of those worlds ends up replicating financialized logic, but also, because escape is aligned with disappearance and vanishing, it re-routes and more firmly embeds the escapist character into a world of immaterial, immanent power by virtue of their own newly recognized ability to disappear – to

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168 Ibid., p.xx.
169 Ibid., p.xxi.
170 Huehls and Greenwald Smith, p.1.
171 Shonkwiler includes the rise of risk management as an essential part of finance capital's intensified abstraction: 'In essence, under the rule of finance, risk replaces money as the most abstract form of value and works to produce value through a "compounding" of abstractions', (p.x).

become immaterial themselves. In short, *Manhattan Beach*'s Houdini-esque representation of embodied existence in a world of mystified, allegorical structures reaches its ambivalent conclusion: characters learn how to occupy and exploit mystery, not dispel it.

For example, the disassociation Anna experiences in her risky behaviour mirrors the way Eddie alleviates his own sense of guilt during his criminal work, and following his infidelity with a prostitute. When working as a bagman, Eddie maintains 'an observational stance – he wasn't really doing what he was doing; he was watching it. This distinction was essential to assuage his sense of failure and despair.'[172] Similarly, wracked with guilt after his encounter with the prostitute, Eddie resorts to 'telling himself that it wasn't really *him* with the prostitute… "I'm not here now," Eddie said out loud more than once, the phrase providing, each time, a burst of analgesia.'[173] Eddie's ability to disappear and suspend his sense of self facilitates his amoral actions, which are based as much upon escapist masculinity as they are upon a logic of risk that recognises 'shadow worlds' and hidden spaces as being ideal zones in which to indulge amorality and take risks because, necessarily, there is the option of 'resurfacing' to perform normativity. Dexter Styles values, above all else, this protean aspect of Eddie's character. Styles admires Eddie's 'deep indifference' and 'cipherlike nature', which, because they make Eddie adept at fading into the background of wherever he goes, allow Dexter to vicariously experience 'freedom from the constraints of time and space… Omniscience. Invisibility.'[174] Both Dexter and Eddie seem to desire disappearance, and this idea of achieving 'invisibility', of being freed from the constraints of time and space, clearly recalls the globally dispersed immanence of contemporary capitalism – indeed, Alexander Moran links Dexter's disembodied power here to the economy of the internet age, describing it as a kind of mob version of 'the tactics of surveillance capitalism.'[175] Through this, then – and bearing in mind that Dexter's epiphany regarding U.S. futurity is intertwined with a feeling of 'his own edges dissolv[ing]' – it is clear that disappearance in the novel does, to an extent, what Hepburn says it does: it gestures towards the future. However, it is not a future premised on an optimistic notion of transformative return, but one that instead represents increased abstraction and de-materialisation as the fate of post-war history – a kind of vanishing that reflects the mystifying power of finance capital,

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[172] *Manhattan Beach*, p.270.
[173] Ibid., p.316.
[174] Ibid., p.314 and pp.339-40.
[175] Moran, p.103. Freedom from time and space was also a facet of pre-internet globalized, financialized capital. David Harvey cites a 1987 article in the *Financial Times* as stating: 'Banking… is rapidly becoming indifferent to the constraints of time, place and currency.' *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.161.

and also serves as an ambivalent marker of how individuals may come to replicate and dwell within its affects of mystery, its logic of dematerialisation.

If part of the pessimism in critical discourse regarding the abstractions of contemporary neoliberal culture is due to the perceived disappearance of a visible object for critique,[176] then *Manhattan Beach*'s treatment of escape as disappearance suggests Houdini as a figure for this vanishing. Indeed, the most prominent example in the novel of Eddie's Houdinism can be seen as a metaphor for the difficulty, in a world of mystified, allegorical relations, of critique locating its object. Anna, on her late-night dive to find her father's corpse, crawls over the sea-bed feeling for the body, but instead finds only 'an enormous padlock' affixing chains to a block of concrete.[177] Her father's body, which had offered Anna the chance to understand and dispel one of the structuring mysteries of her life, is gone.[178] As we later learn, Eddie's body is gone because he has performed a Houdini-esque underwater escape from his chains. Egan recounts the night of Eddie's attempted murder. Intuiting the coded signals of gang life, Eddie has an 'inkling' that he will be killed for informing on the Syndicate, and so turns up to the boathouse 'armed with a few tricks from his vaudeville days: razors in the lining of his trousers, a lock pick nestled between his jaw and gum.'[179] Drawing on both the physical abilities and the deceptive skills of an escape artist, Eddie feigns unconsciousness while being chained to the block and tipped into the sea, only commencing his 'spastic writhing' when he is sure nobody can see him.[180] Egan, then, shows Eddie's Houdini-like body as facilitating his escape, but leaving a hole, a lacuna, in Anna's search for understanding. It is only when conducting her own escape that Anna finds some understanding of 'how he did it' – but her epiphany feels tautological and enclosed, based on her own deployment of the escapist logic of disappearance and elusion.

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[176] Shonkwiler succinctly summarises this problem when she writes: 'The virtualization of capitalism makes it difficult to identify an object against which to protest… The sense that there is no there there beyond the shadowy interest of shareholders – among whose ranks we may in fact count ourselves – forestalls any effective figuration of agency, let alone of the structure of capitalist social relations more generally.' *The Financial Imaginary*, p.xv.

[177] *Manhattan Beach*, p.337.

[178] In this, the novel stages what David Harvey has put forward as one of the signifiers of a shift in modernist to postmodernist sensibilities – a shift that, in his account, reflects the issues of virtualization and abstraction discussed above. He writes that, following this shift, 'Characters no longer contemplate how they can unravel or unmask a central mystery, but are forced to ask, "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of myselves is to do it?" *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.48.

[179] Ibid., p.358.

[180] Ibid.

Through Dexter Styles, Egan furthers the connection between Eddie's Houdinism and contemporary critical vanishing. Egan writes that Dexter, 'having seen that chain… knew that nothing of his friend remained inside it – not a bone, stitch, hat, or shoe leather.'[181] Significantly, Dexter's realisation of Eddie's vanishing encourages him – 'this irregularity filled him with hope' – and prompts the resurgence of his epiphany, where he connects his experience of feeling 'his own edges dissolve' with 'American' lust and yearning, and 'a glowing intimation of the future.'[182] It is clear that Dexter is not so much hopeful for the survival of his old friend, but hopeful at his own intuited sense of what the future may bring. Dexter senses in Eddie's vanishing a suggestion of the mystifications of the future, and he finds this encouraging because it teases the possibility that his own desired 'invisibility', 'omniscience', and 'freedom from the constraints of time and space' could become reality; it suggests, in essence, that the perception-muddling shadow world may become the norm.[183]

If (as many critics, following Jameson, suggest) the mystifications of the contemporary world include an obscurement of history, then we can see Dexter's desire to be outside time and space as including an ahistorical sense in its wish for intensified abstraction. The novel's final image of fog rolling in across San Francisco compounds these suggestions of contemporary disappearance. The fog in San Francisco is, Egan writes, 'different': 'solid-looking enough to mold with your hands. It gushed in overnight, engulfing whole cities like amnesia.'[184] The approach of this amnesiac fog suggests a double disappearance: a 'forgetting' of history, as well as an oncoming future characterised by mystification and abstraction. Anna and her father watch the fog approach 'like a tidal wave about to break, or the aftermath of a silent, distant explosion', and the only thing Anna can think to say – and the closing sentence of the novel – is the ominous observation: 'here it comes.'[185]

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[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

[183] The shadow world's expansion through the consolidation of surface realms is arguably what Dexter tries to do in bringing his 'legitimate' assets to Berringer. Dexter is, however, rebuffed – Berringer tells him 'You possess a currency that cannot be used in any country besides its own' – and Dexter feels his relegation to the shadow world as entrapping: 'Dexter recognized his bind: any action he'd the power to take would push him further in the direction he wished to withdraw from. There was, quite literally, nothing he could do.' *Manhattan Beach*, p.282 and p.285. Being suddenly confronted with the bare concrete block and empty chains is then, for Dexter, a striking realization that somebody else supposedly stuck in a bind – where there was 'nothing' they could do – in fact overcame their attempted consignment to the shadow world and, through what looks like dematerialization, re-routed themselves back towards the surface. That Berringer uses the term 'currency' to aid his explanation of Dexter's confinement in a separate sphere underscores the point that, in Eddie's migrations between worlds, Dexter also senses the free movement of unfettered capital.

[184] *Manhattan Beach*, p.432.

[185] Ibid., p.433.

The oncoming fog is the novel's meta-textual gesture of finale – the curtain closing on its diegetic show. It underscores the novel's interest in disappearance and obfuscation, which I have, throughout my argument, linked to both Houdini and the affects of contemporary capitalism. I want to note here, before beginning my concluding discussion, that the arrival of the fog at the novel's end can also be seen – in its meta-textuality – to speak to the self-exposing tendency of neo-historical fiction. If, following Boxall, the renewal of realism 'requires that we live in the bottomless gap between the word and the world', and neo-historical fiction mines the gap between reality and representation, then the oncoming fog at the end of *Manhattan Beach* can be read as a concluding gesture that amplifies rather than resolves the uncertainty and liminality constituting the novel's own narrative modes. Anna and Eddie sit and watch the fog roll in and engulf cities, and the novel's final sentence suggests they too will soon be engulfed in its obliterative flow.

The characters are poised, then, at the close of the novel, between visibility and invisibility. They will soon occupy, it seems, the 'bottomless gap' between real and unreal that is inherent to realist narrative modes, and which also, in this case, indexes the characters' own newly found abilities to successfully occupy and live within the obfuscating mysteries of the everyday. In this meta-textual gesture, Egan makes literal what I have argued to be a fundamental facet of *Manhattan Beach*'s representational project – namely, the structuring and suffusion of the everyday with obscuring mystery. In this sense, we should understand part of the novel's contemporary Houdinism as suggesting a shifting of realism more fully, and more explicitly, into the uncertain territory between real and unreal. In a literary culture where realist modes of representation are generally seen to no longer be connected to efficacious demystification, Egan's Houdini-esque novel offers a realism that embraces mystery and indeterminacy, and that self-consciously displays these qualities as part of the verisimilitude of its world.

Although I have argued that, for the most part, *Manhattan Beach* represents Houdini-esque embodiment as leading to an ambivalent representation of escape, I want to pay attention now, by way of conclusion, to a key example in the novel of embodiment as non-complicit – as ushering in, in fact, a painful revelation of capitalism's domineering logic. If Houdini represents bodily mastery *and* bodily abjection, it is in the display and experience of the latter that Egan places revelatory, even liberatory, potential.

Several critics writing in *PMLA* took on the subject of disability, honing in on Anna's sister, Lydia, and the role she plays in Eddie's eventual redemption and reconciliation. Rachel Adams and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson both describe the moment where Eddie finally feels guilt, shame, and empathy regarding his disabled daughter as mobilising a stale, unhelpful generic trope of sentimental fiction – as Garland-Thomson puts it: 'In conformity to the sentimental disability plot, the dead Lydia becomes Eddie's conduit to redemption and reconciliation.'[186] For these writers, Lydia serves in the novel as an example of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have termed a 'narrative prosthesis', whereby the disabled body, in Adams' terms, 'uplifts and educates the novel's able-bodied protagonists.'[187] Without wishing to deny these readings (although they do both hinge on the fact that Lydia is dead when Eddie experiences his moment of compassion, thus framing it with the convenient alleviation of responsibility from care, when in fact Eddie does not know at this point that Lydia is dead, and, as such, his moment of compassion should not be seen as separate from the intention to actually interact with and care for his daughter), I interpret Eddie's 'redemption and reconciliation' by way of identification with Lydia as representing an alternative version of the embodied experience of danger and risk. If the examples I have surveyed so far mobilise a Houdini-esque sense of overcoming risk through bodily mastery, ultimately leading to amoral escape attempts, Eddie's identification with Lydia proceeds from an experience of sustained bodily helplessness, which redresses complicitous, escapist masculinity by removing Eddie's 'Houdini-like' ability to exert agency over and 'trick' his body. This, in turn, leads to a chastening of Eddie Kerrigan that suggests separation from the capitalist logic previously reflected in his protean metamorphoses and escapist disappearances.

Eddie's identification with Lydia occurs after the cargo ship he has joined, following his underwater escape from the concrete block, is torpedoed by U-boats. He manages to swim to a life-raft, and, together with some other survivors, subsequently to find a life boat with oars and some supplies. At this point, the narrative commences a tale of survival and

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[186] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Representing the Erotic Life of Disabled Women: Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* and Anne Finger's *A Woman, in Bed*', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019) 378-383 (p.379).

[187] Rachel Adams, 'Siblings, Disability, Genre in Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019) 366-383, (p.370). Both Adams and Garland-Thomson conclude that Egan's use of these stale tropes of the disabled body stems less from prejudiced representation, and more from a deliberate attempt to capture the ways disabled bodies were represented in sentimental fiction of the 1930s. As Garland-Thomson writes: 'I take this representational limitation not to be a prejudicial choice in Egan's novel but rather to be a necessity of the narrative genre… [*Manhattan Beach* summons] the sentimental figure of the disabled girl in the service of historical realism.' Garland-Thomson, p.379.

endurance, which is characterised throughout by Egan's emphasis on Eddie's body, and the descent into helplessness which accompanies his twenty-one days spent adrift at sea. From the very first day on the lifeboat, Egan presents an inversion of the Houdini-like relation between Eddie and his body – it is not he who 'tricks' his body, but his body that plays tricks on him: 'Eddie's ears began playing tricks as soon as the rowing began. Every pause seemed full of human-sounding cries.'[188] After the third day in the lifeboat, Eddie, who is familiar with passing through allegorical layers of life, suddenly finds himself in a world where structuring mystery departs, leaving behind the unstructured reality of organic life: 'Now the stars looked random, accidental – like the sea itself… Eddie understood that he had passed through another layer of life into something deeper, colder, and more pitiless.'[189] Egan describes how the 'cramped' and 'confined' conditions of the lifeboat become even more claustrophobic following the fourth day, when the wind stops, and the men find themselves stilled upon the ocean.[190] The doldrums persist for days, and here Egan's focus on bodily endurance and exhaustion comes to the fore. The men are powerless, their only relief coming from the contingencies of the weather acting on their failing bodies: 'The only bearable hours were in the early morning, when the sun sucked the dew from their boat and fell deliciously on their chilled bodies; and the evening, when a first intimation of cool salved their scorched limbs like the touch of a nurse.'[191] More and more, Egan's narrative fastens onto the bodily experience of the survivors, which serve as points of drama and change in their stalled voyage. The men pull buttons from their clothes and suck them 'to waken their saliva', Eddie's tongue lies in his mouth 'like shoe leather', and several men succumb to hunger, thirst, infection, and, in the case of the ship's second mate, Farmingdale, madness.[192] Eventually, Eddie and the ship's bosun find themselves alone on a life raft – Farmingdale has been killed by the bosun after attempting to murder Eddie, and the life boat with the other men on it has drifted out of sight. Egan describes their gradual starvation in terms that emphasise the lack of ability to exert agency over their bodily decline: 'Scorching sun, frigid nights, the press of their grating, unconquerable hunger. Eddie felt his body devouring itself, an agony like gnawing teeth.'[193] It is at this point that Eddie begins to identify with Lydia. Egan describes how, as Eddie's body fails, his mind 'whirled with elastic new freedom'; he

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[188] *Manhattan Beach*, p.371.
[189] Ibid., p.374.
[190] Ibid., p.388.
[191] Ibid., p.389.
[192] Ibid., p.391.
[193] Ibid., p.397.

takes baths in the sea, his helpless, unfurling body recalling an earlier scene in which Lydia is bathed, her 'coiled, bent form luxuriat[ing] visibly' in the water; and, finally, nearing death, Eddie experiences the following epiphany:

> Eddie hardly moved, hardly breathed, conserving the last of his energy, slowing things down nearly to the point of death in order to live another hour. He would die to stay alive, to savor the sensuous gallop of his thoughts toward some truth he hadn't yet perceived… He recalled his younger daughter – her mind locked inside a body condemned to stillness. His discovery of their likeness pierced Eddie with such intensity that he cried out… And for the first time, the only time, the crime of his abandonment assailed Eddie, and he cried out, "Lydia! Liddy!," his harsh choked voice shocking him as he groped for the child he had abandoned – the family he had abandoned.[194]

It is when Eddie becomes truly vulnerable – when danger and risk are taken to new extremes – that he manages to feel empathy for Lydia and finally realises the 'crime of his abandonment.' He exhibits no bodily mastery, but a bodily abjection that forestalls attempts to reroute sensuous knowledge into escapistry. The 'sensuous gallop of his thoughts' continues, asymptotically, towards 'truth' – but the experience is savoured for the sensation of the galloping itself; for the 'elastic new freedom' that comes from Eddie's relinquishing bodily control. As Janet Lyon argues in her *PMLA* article – which makes similar points to Adams and Garland-Thomson, but ultimately draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Margrit Shildrick to argue for this scene as representing a more hopeful, enlivening depiction of embodiment – through Eddie's identification, it is clear that Lydia's 'disability is the source and enabler of a form of vibratory, lively embodiment that overtakes the text and its central characters.'[195] This 'vibratory, lively embodiment' recalls the feelings of 'stinging vitality' that I have already described as pertaining to characters' experience of risk, but, here, this sensuous liveliness 'overtakes' Eddie, leaving no room for its misappropriation in escapist logic.

It is my suggestion that this depiction of extreme physical constraint, which paradoxically frees the mind, qualifies the novel's apparent pessimism regarding embodied subjecthood under neoliberal capitalism. If, as argued above, *Manhattan Beach* represents characters as becoming at ease – and therefore complicitous – with the disappearances and mystifications suggestive of virtualised contemporary capitalism, Eddie's experience on the

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[194] Ibid., p.397, p.25, and p.398.
[195] Janet Lyon, 'The Wheelchair: A Three-Part Drama', in *PMLA*, 134:2 (March 2019) 405-411, p.406.

life raft presents alternative knowledge through a visceral staging of the violence of capitalist logic. In this, I am drawing on Jane Elliott's concepts of the microeconomic mode and suffering agency. The former, Elliott writes, is a contemporary mode of writing producing texts which are 'characterized by a combination of abstraction and extremity.'[196] Expanding on this definition, Elliott identifies survival narratives – including tales set on life rafts – as a genre in which this combination is especially clear:

> Abstraction results from a focus on delimited or capsule world in which option and decision, action and effect, have been extracted from everyday contexts and thus made unusually legible – for example, the life raft, the desert island, the medical experiment, the prison cell. Extremity registers in forms of painful, grotesque, or endangered embodiment… The combination of the two results in situations in which individuals make agonized choices among unwelcome options, options that present intense physical or life-threatening consequences for themselves or their loved ones.[197]

In Elliott's thinking, the 'experience of highly consequential, utterly willed, and fearsomely undesired action' that characters undergo in the name of self-preservation constitutes her concept of 'suffering agency', which she has elsewhere discussed as reflecting contemporary political experience:

> Not only is self-preservation a foundational value for the forms of liberal political theory on which neoliberalism draws, but also, in the inexorability of what is commonly called the "self-preservation instinct," we glimpse something of the imprisoning nature of suffering agency, the way in which choices made for oneself and according to one's own interests can still feel both imposed and appalling.[198]

In short, suffering agency, because it is characterised by subjects inescapably caught amongst decisions they would rather not make, reveals the ways in which 'neoliberal governance operates through rather than against the agency of its subjects.'[199] What the survival genre enacts is this kind of double-bind, and it makes legible the ways in which capitalist logic dominates *through* a degree of freedom of choice – although those choices are, as Elliott states, 'fearsomely undesired.'

Manhattan Beach's prolonged episode of life-raft survival, then, can be seen as a sudden foray into the microeconomic mode. The life-raft is, as Elliott states, a 'capsule

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[196] Jane Elliott, p.34.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Jane Elliott, 'Suffering Agency', p.84.
[199] Ibid., p.87.

world', in which actions of self-preservation emphasise the freighting of choice and decision with appalling consequence. For example, Eddie must choose whether to give the bosun his ration of milk, or share it out amongst the others; the bosun must choose whether to rescue Eddie and kill Farmingdale, or leave them both behind; and, in a particularly tragic example, two of the sailors 'choose' to drink from the sea rather than go another day without water, resulting in their deaths.[200] I want to suggest, then, that Eddie's moment of compassion, regret, and empathy stems, in part, from his experience of suffering agency, which reveals to him the brutal logic of a nascent capitalism that exercises power through imposing impossible choices. Indeed, *Manhattan Beach*, in making this episode the climax of the novel, seems to deliberately introduce the depiction of agonized choices as a gloss on Eddie and Dexter's earlier willingness to exert agency even if it means making 'the wrong move', or choosing 'danger over sorrow'. The overt depiction of suffering agency at the novel's close reflects back on Eddie's previous choices, revealing them to have always been either imposed from outside, or to be products of economic necessity. Eddie's initial decision to approach Dexter Styles, for example, is partly because he needs money to buy Lydia a wheelchair; similarly, his job as a bagman for the Union is taken up because the Great Depression has destroyed his career as a stockbroker. These difficult decisions made at the behest of economic conditions exemplify suffering agency, but it is only on the life raft – where, through increasingly extreme conditions, choice and agency are steadily taken away – that Eddie comes to realise the 'freedom' in making no choices at all, of simply being a 'mind locked inside a body condemned to stillness.' Part of the significance of Eddie's identification with Lydia, then, is a recognition that surrendering agency may open a space in the self which is exempt from the capitalist logic of dominating through decision. This also seems to be the rationale behind Egan's pointed attention to the life raft as floating in 'a zone where the trade winds could not be relied upon to move a boat.'[201] It is as close as the novel comes to representing a space outside the reach of economic forces, and, if there is seemingly little cause for optimism in the novel's representation of extreme vulnerability and lack of agency as the only means of achieving freedom from capitalist logic, it is somewhat remedied by Eddie's chastened return to Anna at the novel's end. Egan describes Eddie's change as a shedding of 'a brooding abstraction that seemed, in its absence, to have been his most singular trait.'[202] Abstraction – the key term in critical accounts of virtualised capitalism and its affects, and the condition

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[200] *Manhattan Beach*, pp.388-394.
[201] Ibid., p.389.
[202] Ibid., p.430.

that *Manhattan Beach*'s Houdini-esque allegorical signification attempts to capture through its emphasis on mystery and magical-feeling – here disappears from the novel's hitherto most prominent escapist character. Eddie's change and continuation after his near-death experience resonates with what Janet Lyon refers to as the novel's 'epistemological elaborations of a disability aesthetic conveyed through Lydia.'[203] It suggests how vital, embodied experience and sensuous knowledge may, in fact, ultimately offer a site of knowledge free from the imposition of economic logic, leading to a way of living in which abstraction and suffering agency are understood to be, and avoided as, symptoms of exploitative, domineering forces.

Throughout the above, I have assessed the myriad ways in which Houdini influences Egan's novel, tracing motifs of embodiment and abstraction in relation to *Manhattan Beach*'s representational mode, its concern with U.S. futurity, its depiction of gender, and its relevance to contemporary critical debate. Although it appears pessimistic in its anticipation of obfuscating economic forces, the novel's qualification of this pessimism through Eddie's redemption reinstates the capacity of sensuous experience to create knowledge – and by implication, modes of living – that may evade an economic logic which at first appears to be totalizing and inescapable. In this, *Manhattan Beach* resonates with the resurgence of interest in the 'real' and the material as a response to the groundless affects of contemporary culture. As Peter Boxall has put it, the urgent task of fiction in the contemporary era is to 'rethink the nature of the bonds that hold us in the world. Our understanding of the relation between discursive forms and material embodiment is now in a state of crisis… the challenge… [is to understand] both our immersion within our ailing world and our partial freedom from its material constraints.'[204] *Manhattan Beach*'s conjuring of Houdini as a figure representing the vicissitudes of material embodiment, its capacity to intuit, evade, and assist the operations of abstracted power, addresses the challenge laid down by Boxall. Depicting both 'immersion' in and 'partial freedom' from the traps and pitfalls of the everyday, Egan's Houdini-esque novel demonstrates how narratives can grapple with the mystifications of contemporary culture, and the literary modes available to represent it, by embracing uncertainty, creating a surface-in-depth that weaves mystery throughout its diegetic world. In this, it presents Houdini as an especially apt figure for representing the affects of virtualised power, mobilising the escape artist to explore the contemporary era's severely delimited opportunities for escape.

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[203] Janet Lyon, p.411.
[204] Boxall, pp.91-2.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued for Harry Houdini as an ideal post-postmodern figure for facilitating a literary engagement with the illusions and impasses of reified neoliberalism / capitalist realism. Doctorow, Chabon and Egan are inspired by Houdini in various ways, but their novels each recognize the importance of reflexive, dialectical discourses of escape and illusion(ism) – both for their own craft, and for the articulation of a U.S. historicity in which boundaries of truth and fiction have long been porous, but which become increasingly difficult to discern under the cultural dominance of the abstracted logic of financialized capitalism. This logic, as discussed in my introduction, disavows responsibility for the ills of the capitalist system, consistently defers the satisfaction it promises to bring, and produces and grounds itself upon fictive representations of value. As Terry Eagleton described postmodernity in 1996: 'it would seem at present that what is real is irrational, and what is rational is unreal.'[1] The Houdini-esque trap this kind of inversion creates for individuals, whose lives are interpolated with market forces, is described by Lauren Berlant as 'cruel optimism', by Mark Fisher as 'reflexive impotence', and by this thesis as an 'illusion of escape.' It is a trap in which subjects are co-complicit in their own confinement, unable to see or choose escape routes beyond those laid down by capitalism itself, re-replicating in their thoughts and actions the neoliberal logic that keeps them dissatisfied.

Fisher's description of capitalist logic as illusionistic but as nevertheless forming the horizon of the real gives power to his final call for 'effect [to] be connected to structural cause.'[2] Differing somewhat from other scholars of neoliberal capitalism – such as Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, who describe neoliberalism's 'Sasquatch-like quality' of being 'everywhere but also, perhaps, nowhere'[3] – Fisher's account insists that capitalist realism can be mapped, and that connecting its disparate, virtualized or obfuscated effects is essential in re-vitalising political subjecthood. The value of such a process is first and foremost in the recognition of reality as a co-created act of illusionism – capitalist realism's effects may be nebulous and unreal, akin to delusion, but they are produced materially through human action.

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[1] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.ix.
[2] Fisher, p.77.
[3] Huehls and Greenwald Smith, 'Four Phases', p.1.

Reading capitalist realism in this way (as illusionistic) does not claim for itself the power to debunk or replace capitalist illusions. However, in emphasising, as Shonkwiler and La Berge identify, the importance of 'representation and belief in *producing* that which becomes reality', it does allow the impasse of capitalist realism to become 'critically energised' – particularly for literary study.[4] I have hoped to demonstrate a version of this critical energising through my readings: it is one in which tautological nostalgia can be reframed as productively reflexive; where absurd, anachronistic counter-fictions may contain historically truthful affect; where escapism indexes not critical retreat but a careful, sensitive reminder of the power of fiction; and where sincerity, affect, and a sensuously intelligent body are treated not merely as neoliberal symptoms, but as significant reserves of meaning and knowledge in their own right. Each of these transforms what are often read as the complicit illusions of contemporary literature – its historical turn, its 'escapist' turn to genre, its focus on the affective rather than the political – into knowing, yet still potentially complicit, acts of illusionism. The result is to emphasise the construction of illusion, the act of representation itself; to create a canny reader attuned to the inherent artificiality of fiction-making and the affects / effects that emerge from commingling the truthful and the false.

This dissertation is the first literary study of Houdini, and it has broadly argued for the performer as a significant figure in both U.S. culture and contemporary literature. The most famous modern American magician, Houdini points the way to a rich sub-culture whose relation to modernity is contradictory, fascinating, and critically overlooked. As Simon During writes, secular magic shows' supporting of both mystification and demystification, their heterogenous audiences and their destabilizing of hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' taste 'helped provide the terms and content of modern culture's understanding and judgement of itself.'[5] Their cultural role, in other words, was to occupy a reflexive, playfully self-thematized relation to the constitutive terms of modern reality itself. Beyond, but readable in, magic's connection to art forms which have received far more critical attention – such as advertising and cinema – its real significance lies in this utter reliance on a reflexive attention to reality and to the manipulable perceptual and cognitive processes by which human beings construct it. Early-twentieth-century magicians seem to have recognised the importance of this aspect of magic. The Houdini archives contain numerous examples of magicians speculating on the value of their craft. A handbook titled 'How to Become a Conjuror' boasts

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[4] Shonkwiler and La Berge, *Reading Capitalist Realism*, pp.6-7.
[5] During, p.1.

that magic 'awakens thought, and it arouses the ingenuity of the ingenious, leading up from facts to principles.'[6] Houdini also saved in a scrapbook an article written by the Presbyterian minister Dr Frank Crane which declares magicians to be public servants. They do a great social good, Crane writes, because 'the very foundation of sound thinking is to believe that there is a natural cause for every result. The magician helps establish this foundation because he convinces us that the cause is there even when we cannot see it.'[7] Houdini exemplified and exploited this quasi-scientific attitude. He insisted his effects were produced naturally and he was deeply involved, more than any other magician, in demystifying Spiritualist effects and in studying and writing about magic. It is, partly, the extent of Houdini's own reflexive relation to the practice of magic that makes him particularly well-suited to articulating and exploring its cultural significance.

Magic's preoccupation with connecting (and obscuring) cause and effect, its active involvement of the audience in the process of scrutinising illusions, are newly resonant in the context of capitalist realism. As I have argued, Doctorow, Chabon and Egan's novels attest to these contemporary resonances in their 'dual-facing', neo-historical representations of Houdini. 'Magician', however, is simply the broadest of Houdini's descriptions. Throughout my readings I have also attended to how, as an escapologist, Houdini introduces into discourses of illusionism a set of powerful, flexible metaphors of confinement, escape, and risk. These metaphors complement the more abstract discourse of illusionism with visceral, material referents. From the paralyzed immigrants yearning for light and air in *Ragtime*, to the representation of money in *Kavalier & Clay*, to Eddie Kerrigan's protracted 'suffering agency' in *Manhattan Beach*, contemporary literature re-appreciates Houdini's material meaning from an age in which economised logic has produced a more immaterial constraining of subjects' thought and action. Through their Houdini-esque representations of the past, these novels postulate a longstanding relation in the U.S. between illusionistic economic logic, ideas or fantasies of escape, and actual material restriction. They suggest this relationship to be ironically entrapping and connect it, in its ambiguous, murky dynamics of desire, to the affective and critical impasses of neoliberalism.

In making this argument, this thesis has also aimed to make a meaningful contribution to literary criticism – both to the emerging field of neo-historical criticism, and to critiques of

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[6] Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, McManus-Young Collection (MYC), Houdini Correspondence, Magic Files Part 1, box-folder 10/1.

[7] Washington, D.C., The Library of Congress, Houdini Collection, Houdini Scrapbook no.1 vol.2.

contemporary, financialized reality – in suggesting the value of reflexive, dialectical discourses of illusion(ism) and escape. Thinking with and through Houdini opens a critical terrain in which the potential falseness of representation and the moral and ethical ambivalences of 'escape' are always-already-present. Neo-historical fiction proceeds from this same ground – its histories are not 'true' histories; it evades direct representation of the present; it is more concerned with affect and allegory than with legible politics – but these features are premises representing a critically informed starting-point for exploring the continued possibilities of fiction in an age of capitalist realism, and not, as many contemporary critics conclude, a symptom of fiction's irredeemable compromising by neoliberal logic. In fact, it is often the critic themselves who performs the work of closing off alternatives, rationally packing the manifold meanings of the text into the straitjacket of their argument. This point is echoed in Bruno Latour's famous critique of critique, in which he calls for a discipline 'whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and care… to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who *adds* reality to matters of fact and not *subtract* reality [emphasis in original].'[8] In line with this, I have attempted to avoid 'debunking' the novels I have studied in favour of a discursive engagement with their premises. I have employed concepts such as Surface Reading and New Sincerity – themselves often 'debunked' as neoliberal symptoms – to illustrate these things as valuable, additional tools for critique, rather than signs of its degradation.

Houdini, then, does not so much haunt present reality as provide it with newly relevant conceptual tools for engaging with its illusive difficulty. At once a figure of entrepreneurial self-reliance and material suffering, a victor and a victim, Houdini speaks to the vicissitudes, ambiguity and contradictory registers of contemporary life. Rather than attempting to resolve such contradictions, the Houdini-esque novel embraces its compromised, uncertain position, crafting truthful fictions from the thicket of fictive culture.

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[8] Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', p.232.

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