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***“Keep all the pieces in place”***

***Narrativity in four Contemporary American Novels***

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« Car l'homme est cet être sans âge fixe, cet être qui a la faculté de redevenir en quelques secondes de beaucoup d'années plus jeune, et qui entouré des parois du temps où il a vécu, y flotte, mais comme dans un bassin dont le niveau changerait constamment et le mettrait à portée tantôt d'une époque, tantôt d'une autre. »

(Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*)



## INTRODUCTION

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### ***“Keep all the pieces in place”***

This dissertation is a study of three novels – Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), Nicole Krauss’ *Great House* (2010), and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) – and a graphic novel by Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (2012), which may exemplify a recent development in contemporary American fiction. These texts share a number of common aspects, such as the division of the text into chapters that follow distinct storylines, each merging into a bigger narrative; the tight interconnection of such storylines, on which the overall plot of the novel depends; the presence of a major motif that intersects the stories and unifies them; a multiplicity of voices, each in charge of presenting a story; the nonlinear organization of chronology and, finally, the central role of memory that allows for the coexistence of various temporal perspectives.<sup>1</sup> In all these texts, the apparently fragmented episodes that compose the narrative gradually fall into place as individual sides of the same multidimensional story. The clearest example of this trend can be found in Chris Ware’s graphic novel *Building Stories*, from which the title of this dissertation is taken, as it represents a fitting metaphor to express the organization of the novels of McCann, Krauss, Egan and Ware. To “keep all the pieces in place” refers to the strategy carried out by one of the characters as she describes her attempt to make sense of the many conflicting episodes she recalls from her past. Acknowledging the tension

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<sup>1</sup> The universal recognition and critical attention these four novels have received have confirmed their status as some of the most significant texts in the contemporary American literary scene. McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2009; *Great House* was a finalist for the same award the following year, while Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2011. In 2012, Chris Ware’s graphic novel *Building Stories* won four Eisner awards, the most prestigious recognition for comics.

between the fragments of her story and the composite unit they generate – her life as seen retrospectively – she can produce a meaningful, coherent image of herself.<sup>2</sup>

Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* follows the lives of ten different characters on the day they witnessed a funambulist's performance between the towers of the World Trade Center in 1974. The personal recollections of that event become the trigger for a thorough investigation of the characters' individual backgrounds as well as of the social and historical scene of the United States in the seventies. Similarly, Nicole Krauss' *Great House* gathers the stories of five people whose paths cross through the presence of an imposing writing desk that the Nazis stole from a Jewish historian in Budapest. Tracing the trajectories of the desk, the characters' lives are revealed alongside the historical circumstances that have marked their experiences. Both novels use the characters' personal stories to incorporate multiple – and, at times, clashing – perspectives on major historical events and to investigate the weight of history on individual lives and on interpersonal relationships. A different tone is perceived in the novels of Jennifer Egan and Chris Ware, less concerned with historical events and more keen on observing social change. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan depicts the evolution of the music business in the United States as the background for a generation of characters who have grown up in the seventies and who reconsider their past in the attempt to come to terms with the realization of their vanishing youth. The characters in Chris Ware's graphic novel, who for some time during the 1990s are tenants in the same apartment building in Chicago, are similarly occupied in revisiting a personal past they perceive as fragmented, trying to create a narrative that can sustain the diversity of experiences they have collected over the years.

The goal of what I will refer to as the fragmentary aesthetics of the four analyzed works in this paper is to tell a story that does not simply correspond to the sum of its single

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of this episode, see page 111.

parts, as it is the case with collections of short fiction and novels-in-stories, but one that benefits from and depends on the special relation that connects the individual elements to the larger narrative. The inherent multiplicity of these novels seems to express the desire to test the formal possibilities of fiction, while at the same time maintaining the overall coherence that stories possess. Also, as the close reading will reveal, these texts share a major thematic preoccupation – an essential concern with the question of time. The four novels portray characters who, through memory, confront the intersections between personal and historical time. They revisit individual and national representations of the past while attempting to reconstruct a viewpoint of the events they have lived through against a larger historical framework. The reading of these four texts will not only investigate how time is treated in the novels, but also explicate the dynamics that regulate the relation between time and narrative. What will emerge from this study is that the fragmentation of the books, especially concerning chronology and temporality, not only contributes to the unity of the stories, but also acts as its fundamental condition.

In the four chapters that follow, the novels are analyzed chronologically according to their order of publication. The first two books, *Let the Great World Spin* and *Great House*, explore the narration of personal time that guides the process of self-imagining as inseparable from that of major historical events. The second two novels, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Building Stories*, address a concern about understanding the dynamics of the passing of time. Moreover, in Egan's and Ware's texts the narration of time is materially supported by the fictionalization of different media.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One of the chapters in Egan's novel is structured as a PowerPoint presentation that shows the unfolding of time from the perspective of a twelve-year-old girl. The story of Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, a graphic novel composed of fourteen separate elements, is told through the usage of various media such as books, booklets, foldouts, comic strips, newspapers and posters.

## ***Classifying contemporary American literature: an unnecessary trouble?***

The definition of the contemporary is quite a risky endeavor, and it is not the objective of this study to categorize current developments in the literary field. However, it is perhaps necessary to attempt to position these four novels within the debate concerning periodization in recent American fiction. Contemporary fiction in this dissertation is viewed in a very narrow sense, indicating the literary production that is strictly coeval with the perspective from which the phenomenon is being observed. This means that the current study will be limited to texts that have been published roughly in the past ten years. Immediate objection to this definition can be observed in its lack of proximity to other scholarly assessments of contemporary literature. Positioning new tendencies in the history of fiction has been a concern for literary historians. Due to its elusive nature, defining the concept of the contemporary has proven particularly challenging for scholars. In fact, agreement on the definition of contemporary literature and its boundaries has been understood so broadly that the term is still occasionally used to refer to all literature after World War Two.<sup>4</sup> Even though some critical texts insist on using 1945 as the standard date to mark the beginning of the discussion on contemporary literature, it often remains unclear where the subsequent boundaries are to be set.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Attempts at categorization have been made since the 1950s: John Aldridge tried prematurely to make sense of what was happening in literature after modernism in *After the Lost Generation* (1951). However, as John Duvall points out, the authors Aldridge considered have been largely forgotten, with the exclusion of only three writers: Norman Mailer, Truman Capote and Gore Vidal (1). Postwar fiction was then at the center of Tony Tanner's 1971 *City of Words*, which featured, among others, Barth, Barthelme, Bellow, Brautigan, Burroughs, Malamud, Roth, Pynchon, Updike, and Vonnegut, the authors whom would later be identified as the major representatives of postmodernism. However, the vast notion of postmodernism itself defies periodization and at times fails to provide a valid explanation of the concerns that emerged in fiction after the postwar years. I tend to agree with historian Stefan Jordan, when, in accessing the various historical discussions that either invoked the term postmodernism itself or the dangers of such a term, compares the word to a piece of chewing gum. "Chewed on long enough," Jordan sardonically claims, "it can take on any form and changes its flavor and color until finally, only a tough scrap remains that one no longer feels like chewing" (179).

<sup>5</sup> Published in 1988, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* ended with a section called "1945 to the Present," which investigated fiction up to the mid 1980s. Similarly, the seventh volume of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, published in 1999 and edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, covered the years 1940-1990 and contained the section "Postmodern Fictions, 1970 to 1990." More recently, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945* (2012) Duvall

Periodization has been suggested and discussed among others by Amy Hungerford, who, reflecting on the implications of using the term ‘contemporary’ to refer to fiction after 1945, has noticed that although 1989 and 1992 could provide significant markers because of their historical resonances, they hardly represent evocative watershed moments for American literature.<sup>6</sup> Because Hungerford sees fiction produced after the Second World War in continuity with the tradition of modernism, she suggests that it could be more appropriate to speak of “long modernism” to refer to the ‘contemporary’ (419).<sup>7</sup> Yet, when assessing the present situation, she chooses to proceed thematically, for example reading literature of the early twenty-first century through the lenses of the increase in sincerity and religion, or exploring how the Internet and computer technology have changed the way we read and write (414-415). The difficulty concerning periodization reflects the uncertainty surrounding the understanding of how literature evolved after modernism and in response to it. The confusion intensifies when it comes to the texts published around and after the turn of the millennium, resulting in an accumulation of ‘post-’ labels.<sup>8</sup>

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admitted that the book “may well be the last volume to ever survey American fiction from 1945 to the present” (1). The text includes an essay on “Fiction and 9/11” as well as a discussion of novels published after 2000 by authors like Louise Erdrich, Jonathan Franzen and Mark Z. Danielewski.

<sup>6</sup> Hungerford points out that 1989 marked “the fall of the Berlin Wall, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War” and seemed to suggest the beginning of “the age of multiculturalism, or, more negatively, sectarianism.” 1992 on the other hand, corresponded to Francis Fukuyama announcing the end of history as well as to the beginning of the Bosnian War, “the most dramatic example of resurgent sectarian strife in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union” (410).

<sup>7</sup> Hungerford believes that the influence of modernism on fiction after 1945 is visible “in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally” (418). She shares the view that Mark McGurl proposes in *The Program Era* (2011), where he argues that an understanding of the fiction produced in the context of creative writing programs in American universities is essential to the analysis of how contemporary literature has evolved after the Second World War. In particular, McGurl understands this literature as a reaction to modernism, and divides it into three major groups: technomodernism, high cultural pluralism and lower-middle-class modernism. McGurl’s distinction has been confronted in *MFA VS NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* (2014), a collection of essays edited by Chad Harbach, where writers describe the two major contexts in which American fiction has been developing.

<sup>8</sup> Among the scholars who have attempted to interpret the evolution of twenty-first-century fiction, Charles B. Harris spoke in 2002 of the demise of postmodernism, claiming that “although PoMo’s wake has dragged on for several years now, the corpse remains suspiciously lively” (“PoMo’s Wake, I”). In 2004, Robert McLaughlin compared the work of Jonathan Franzen and David Foster

Embracing Hungerford's perplexity when she questions the validity of "the arguments about how to choose beginnings and ends," this study does not intend to place twenty-first-century literature, nor the novels under investigation and their authors within labeled categories (418). Conversely it is perhaps more interesting and more productive to search the texts looking for the questions contemporary writers are asking, to examine how their perspectives clash and converge, and to establish a dialogue between them that sheds light on the reaction of literature when confronting the pressing issues of the present.

### ***Mapping recent fictions: an emerging concern with time***

Rather than discussing how to classify contemporary literature in periods, some critics who have analyzed fictional production around the turn of the millennium have adopted a different approach, aiming to isolate the common preoccupations that characterize twenty-first-century American fiction.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, many of these attempts have focused on the concern with time present in recent novels, at times with very different outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging the response of twenty-first-century fiction to the legacy of

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Wallace and argued that their writing was distancing from the tradition of postmodernism, stirring in the direction of what he called "post-postmodernism."

<sup>9</sup> Caren Irr's comprehensive work for instance, has approached the study of the contemporary novel analyzing space from a geopolitical perspective. Irr has framed the international nature of contemporary fiction as part of the geopolitical global discussion, arguing that texts written after 2000 "address the interconnected global environment of the new millennium" and "reorganize [...] existing literary forms actively seek[ing] creative ways to move beyond existing national forms" (2). On the contrary, Bruce Robbins has argued that the twenty-first-century American novel has in fact not become worldly enough, claiming that "the post-9/11 novel is first of all disoriented" and that "a number of 9/11 novels [...] retreat into domesticity – behind national borders, behind the door of the family home" (1096-97). Robbins sees this celebration of domesticity as connected to "public events that, like 9/11, have some claim to the status of national trauma: the Vietnam War, the Soviet atom bomb testing at the beginning of DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), and the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the late 1990s, to which the title of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) refers" (1077).

<sup>10</sup> According to Peter Boxall, twenty-first-century Anglo-American fiction is characterized by "lateness," a tension between a concern about "historical completion" – what Frank Kermode has called "a sense of an ending" – and the experience of an ever-changing present that is under constant renovation ("Late" 682). Considering the work of DeLillo, Boxall argues that the end of the century and the United States' path towards globalization informed novels like *Americana* (1971) and *White Noise* (1985), where an apocalyptic sense of ending prevails. However, DeLillo's recent novels such as *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Point Omega* (2010) are characterized by the

modernism, Peter Boxall has convincingly argued that it is the treatment of time that marks a caesura with the novels of the new millennium: “linear historical narrative [...] does not survive Eliot’s discovery of a poetic time that passes otherwise, that slips through the net of any linguistic tense” (*Twenty-First-Century Fiction* 45). There is, Boxall has noticed, “a persistent fascination with the shifted temporality that characterizes the new century, with a time that passes in a way that we cannot quite capture, that eludes our narrative grasp” (*Twenty-First-Century Fiction* 9). Contemporary texts reflect the “transformation in the way that history is understood, and in the narrative mechanisms with which we inherit the past” and display “a new commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past and our ethical obligation to bear witness to it” (12).

Boxall’s assumptions about the central role of temporality in twenty-first-century fiction have been widely confirmed in the present analysis of time in the novels of McCann, Krauss, Egan and Ware. These writers are searching for innovative ways to narrate the way time is perceived and understood, and to describe the interaction between the different temporalities that make up our experience. Interpreting the passing of time seems to be a recurring feature in recent American fiction, especially when characters are confronted with a personal and national past defined by traumatic events.<sup>11</sup> Composite and fragmented narratives become a creative means to revisit these experiences at a moment

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disorienting absence of time and space as directing forces (“Late” 697). Instead, Amir Eshel has interpreted the palpable interest of recent novels for the past as future-oriented. In Eshel’s view, “futurity” represents the capacity of literature to expand its narrative potential so that the understanding of the past – in particular of “modernist events’ such as the Sino-Japanese War, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the wars of the Middle East, and the political realities that emerged after the end of the Cold War and after 9/11” may serve as the basis for our creative representation of the future (3-5).

<sup>11</sup> The national past these writers confront often includes the traumatic events of the second half of the twentieth century (the second World War, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, the Vietnam War), but also refers to deep-seated issues such as the Jewish diaspora and slavery, as well as social questions, for instance the instabilities of the 1970s.

when linear storytelling can no longer offer an adequate response to the search for meaning.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Fragmenting linear time: a legacy of modernism?***

To authors like McCann, Krauss, Egan and Ware, the perspective from which to observe contemporaneity is always slightly removed from the present. It fluctuates in time, often moving to the past, but occasionally also jumping ahead to envision a possible future. A privileged point of observation is usually situated in the gaps and breaks that separate the multilayered temporal perspectives that coexist in these narratives. Analyzing the notion of the contemporary, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that a sense of disconnection determines our observation of the present (47). There is always a discrepancy that distances us from our time, and those who are contemporary know that the point of observation is precisely this “fracture” (ibid.). Because it marks an interruption in the linearity of chronology, this division of time allows the contemporary to be in a special relation with the past, but also with the future: to understand the present ultimately implies that one “is capable of transforming [time] and putting it in relation with other times” (53). Indeed, a similar disconnected view on the present emerges from the texts at the center of this study. The characters portrayed in novels such as *Great House* and *Building Stories* base their narratives on nonlinear paths across time, situating their perspective in the fractures between different levels of temporality.

In configuring the present, the novels analyzed in this study inevitably carry with them the memory of the past as a fracture that needs to be repaired. It is possible that this break, so strongly felt in contemporary fiction, is related to a notion of time that emerged

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<sup>12</sup> The inadequacy of linear storytelling is also to be understood considering the fact that authors like McCann, Egan, Krauss and Ware are writing at a time when the novel is called to confront a reality where narrative is no longer the exclusive domain of literature. The novel has been challenged to devise new strategies to face its newest competitors such as quality television shows, video games and digital narratives, as well as hybrid forms of creative nonfiction that prosper online. The formal experimentation detectable in the texts under consideration in this study is perhaps also a test of the artistic potential of the contemporary novel.



in a late phase of American modernism, whose methods seem to be repeatedly seeping through in the writing of authors like Egan, Krauss, McCann and Ware. The metaphor of the “fracture,” which Agamben develops from Nietzsche, and which returns in the syncopated temporality of many twenty-first-century novels, finds echo in a suggestive passage where Jean-Paul Sartre conveys his understanding of the present in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In his essay “Time in Faulkner,” Sartre argues that Faulkner conceived the present as a “monstrous and incomprehensible” event, “which comes upon us like a thief” (226). To explain Faulkner’s vision of the present, Sartre uses another metaphor, that of a man sitting in a car looking back. From the man’s perspective, the present is perceived as “flickering and quavering points of light” (228). It is “indefinable and elusive” and “full of holes,” allowing the past to resurface (ibid.). For Faulkner’s characters – think of Quentin Compson – the present is too obscure to be grasped as it happens, as it is repeatedly invaded by the memories of the past and it is thus knowable only in retrospect, once it has become, in turn, past. Faulkner’s time defies linear progression: “one present, emerging from the unknown, drives out another present,” Sartre writes (227). “It is like a sum that we compute again and again [...]. Faulkner makes his story a matter of addition. Even when the characters are aware of them, the actions, when they emerge in the present, burst into scattered fragments” (ibid.).

Faulkner’s fragmentation of chronology reaches one of its highest peaks in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). At the center of this novel is a concern with origin and identity, with the past and the burden that is passed down across generations, but also with the tragic historical past of the South during and after the Civil War. The past resurfaces in the form of documents, letters, overheard conversations and memories, and it takes the shape of a story that is told and retold from different perspectives. The characters’ function is crucial, because the attempt at historical reconstruction is defined by their recollections and their interpretation. Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve create their narratives

drawing on personal memories but also on deliberate inventions and presuppositions of what happened in the past. Peter Brooks has written that in *Absalom, Absalom!* “plot seems to have been lost, to have failed in its role as the cohesive bond of the narrative construction” (253). History, both personal and national, becomes a search that proceeds through a series of questions that do not lead to a resolution, but only trigger more questions, which are eventually left unanswered.

### ***The tension between fragment and unity: a desire for narrativity***

In the novels considered in this dissertation, the navigation of time that characterizes Faulkner’s late fiction persists, but it becomes a narrative technique rather than a theme, a means that allows fragments of life to be recomposed according to a new configuration. If plot was “lost” in Faulkner’s novels, in the four texts analyzed here, plot – or, more accurately, emplotment, following the lesson of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur – becomes the necessary condition that allows the confrontation of heterogeneity through narrative. Retrieving the past – which, Peter Brooks claims, is at the core of the impulse to narrate – and how to represent its re-construction, are crucial concerns in the novels such as *Let the Great World Spin* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. These texts signify their authors’ trust in the ability of narrative to make sense of temporality, to establish meaningful connections between present, past and future, and to order heterogeneous experiences by organizing them into a coherent whole. The fragmentation of linear time is essential to these novels, but what characterizes them seems to be a desire to elicit from their brokenness a renewed form of narrativity.<sup>13</sup> *Let The Great World Spin, Great House,*

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to narrativity as, following Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, a characteristic of stories that signifies itself through emplotment. According to Ricoeur, storytelling offers the possibility of expressing and refiguring experience. Plot is seen as “the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience” (*Time and Narrative* 1, xi). Like Ricoeur, White sees emplotment as the aesthetic process through which one organizes events into a whole, giving them “an aspect of narrativity” (“The Value of Narrativity” 8) so that they can “display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure” typical of stories (27). In the novels under investigation in this study, narrativity is to be understood as the poetic synthesis of different temporal experiences into a coherent, multilayered unit.

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Building Stories* are plural, heterogeneous narratives made of multiple stories, but they are nonetheless novels, whose internal disjunction is the key to their cohesion, both formal and thematic. The works of McCann, Krauss, Egan and, more significantly, Ware, do away with chronological time because they revolve around characters deeply concerned with the passing of time. Through the characters' fragmented memories, interconnectedness slowly emerges, making the pieces sum to a larger, coherent narrative. Such coherence, however, is the result of a tension between fragments and wholeness that tells of a deep concern about the telos and the configuration of a present that is made up of many pasts, as if the representation of the 'contemporary' could not erase personal or collective histories.

Like Quentin Compson and Rosa Coldfield, the characters in the texts analyzed here are in charge of historical interpretation – it is through their recollections that readers access the fragments of the past – but the questions they raise, which concern historical traumatic events as well as personal experiences, activate a search into the past that always strives towards a meaningful reconstruction. There is, in the characters that texts like *Let the Great World Spin* and *Great House* portray, an active struggle to compose a story that allows scattered episodes to fit into a whole. Using narrative to revisit and reconfigure one's own story offers the opportunity to retrieve memories and becomes the instrument to reinterpret them through the lens of the present.

### ***Narrating the self across time: Paul Ricoeur's "narrative identity"***

In the novels under consideration in this study, the reconstruction of one's story always coincides with a manipulation of personal and narrative time: sequential unfolding of events is deconstructed and reorganized according to the characters' personal perception of temporality. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur sees a close relation between time and narrative: "I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has

temporality as its ultimate referent” (“Narrative Time” 169). According to Ricoeur, this relation can help one to confront the complexity of life in its development through time. We make sense of our life, Ricoeur argues, in the same way we make sense of narratives, that is, by following a plot. However, Ricoeur’s intention is to critique the “illusion of sequence” that historiography and literary criticism have usually taken for granted, supposing that “every narrative takes place within [...] a time that corresponds to the ordinary representation of time as a linear succession of instants” (“Narrative Time” 170). Analyzing the relationship between self-understanding and narrative in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (*Temps et récit* [1983-85]),<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur argues that the concept of narrative can be used as a model to understand personal identity. Identity, far from being a stable object that persists throughout time, is a relentless act of self-construction that develops in the course of one’s life, and the similarities between life and narrative can help explain this process. “The plot of a narrative,” Ricoeur writes, “‘grasps together’ and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events” (*TN* I x). Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative as a mediation between diverse and seemingly unrelated events derived from the Aristotelian idea of plot as “mimesis of an action,” which can be understood in three ways: “a reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action; an entry into the realm of poetic composition; and finally a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood order of action” (*TN* I XI). It is the last sense, of mimesis as a temporal “refiguration” that allows the understanding of a story, that Ricoeur will investigate in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*.

Plot, Ricoeur argues, is the combination of two “temporal dimensions”: the “episodic dimension” defines a story as constituted by events, while the “configurational dimension” is what allows plot to combine heterogeneous events in order to constitute a

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<sup>14</sup> Hereafter: *TN*.

story as a narrative unit (*TN 1 66*). It is the configurational dimension, that Ricoeur calls “emplotment,” that defies the representation of time as an ordered sequence of events, in its “grasping together” disparate events and incidents and combining them into a “unity of one temporal whole” (*ibid.*).<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur calls “end point” the perspective that allows a story to be seen as a “whole,” and explains that what takes the story forward is “an expectation that finds its fulfillment in the ‘conclusion’ of the story (*TN 1 66-67*). It is precisely this path toward the conclusion that allows a reconfiguration of events that goes against sequential order: while the act of telling represents episodes chronologically, the act of “retelling” allows following a story “through a new quality of time” (*TN 1 67*).

Ricoeur’s narrative understanding of identity originates in his belief that people tend to see the events of their lives in terms of “‘(as yet) untold’ stories, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer anchorage points for narrative” (*TN 1 74*). It is the pursuit of narrative that leads the subject to invent a plot to establish continuity between these stories, in the attempt to reconfigure personal identity. Where life appears as a confusing mix of “action and suffering,” narrative uses creative imagination to interpret it (*TN 1 46*). The process of creative interpretation is fundamental in the narrative understanding of identity and it is a temporal process of constant mediation between past and future, of “sedimentation and innovation” (*TN 1 76*). The “end point” is always deferred, for we never stop reinterpreting our story. In fact, we uninterruptedly adapt it to combine memory and expectation, past actions with our prospects about the future. For this reason, the story of a life can be told in different forms and versions, and it will always be incomplete as long as the subject tries to incorporate the various experiences he has lived through.

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<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur defines emplotment as a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.” To configure an action in time through emplotment is to configure the single episodes into a story, shaping the heterogeneous elements of the action into an ordered structure, or “concordant discordance” (*TN 1, 65-66*).

Almost twenty years later, Ricoeur published *Memory, History, Forgetting* (*La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* [2000]),<sup>16</sup> where he explored the issue of the representation of the past. The reflection on memory and forgetting is one Ricoeur felt he had neglected in his analysis of temporality and narrative in both *Time and Narrative* and in *Oneself as Another* (*Soi-même comme un autre* [1990]). Historian Hayden White has noticed that Ricoeur's reflections in *Memory, History, Forgetting* originated from Ricoeur's belief that history "was necessary to a properly human conception of our humanity [and] our identities," especially at a time of "modernity-history" when, "if we are suffering from anything, it is from too much history" ("Guilty of History" 234). Historical consciousness, Ricoeur acknowledges, is based on memory, because it is memory that helps us making sense of the persistence of the past into the present. If subjective memory is the basis for a personal reconfiguration of our life story, as he argues in *Time and Narrative*, a shared memory can equally provide the foundation to establish a collective past. "Ricoeur regards memory as more fundamental for the understanding of the human condition than historical inquiry," White points out, "for memory is still in a certain sense 'wild,' belonging more to (human) nature than to culture" ("Guilty of History" 235). Ricoeur sees memory as fundamental because it is the only instrument that connects us to the past: "we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened *before* we declare that we remember it" (*MHF* 21). While history is repeatedly rewritten, hoping to reconstruct the past, memory engages with a search for "faithfulness," because it always refers to something that it knows to be true (*MHF* 55). What is remembered is always the representation in the present of something that is absent; it is rooted in experience. Drawing on the philosophy of Bergson, who wrote in *Matter and Memory* that "man alone is capable" of evoking the past, which is to "withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, [...] value the useless, [...] have the will to

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<sup>16</sup> Hereafter: *MHF*.

dream,” Ricoeur stresses the connection with the focus of his lifelong study of man as the “capable human being” (*l’homme capable*): “being able to speak, being able to intervene in the course of affairs, being able to recount, being able to ascribe an action to oneself by making oneself its actual author” (*MHF* 25). But this is a human being also capable of remembering: “if memory is in fact a capacity, the power of remembering (*faire mémoire*), it is more fundamentally a figure of care, that basic anthropological structure of our historical condition” (*MHF* 505). Memory is the means by which the subject composes his or her “narrative identity,” which is constructed through change in time, by recomposing the traces one has recovered from the past and connecting them to his or her intentions about the future.

### ***The “memory boom” and the concern with the past***

In the early 1990s, Sacvan Bercovitch wrote that he perceived in culture an unprecedented attention to the past: “at no time in literary studies has awareness about history – or, more accurately, theorizing about history – been more acute and pervasive” (“Introduction” 4). The passage from the 1980s to the 1990s was indeed defined by the “boom” of memory studies, a field of investigation where various disciplines contribute to the study of how personal as well as collective memory negotiate the exchange between present and past.<sup>17</sup> An international phenomenon, memory studies found expression in the fundamental endeavor of the French historian Pierre Nora to commemorate French history. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, a multivolume work published between 1984 and 1998, investigated how various elements such as monuments, museums, personalities, but also songs, symbols and dates can be considered repositories of national memory.<sup>18</sup> While

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<sup>17</sup> Andreas Huyssen first used the expression “memory boom” in his book *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995).

<sup>18</sup> Following Nora’s example, in Italy Mario Isnenghi edited *I luoghi della memoria* (1997), while Etienne François and Hagen Schulte began in 2001 their work on *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, where multiple perspectives are combined to investigate not only German sites of memory, but also the connections between Germany and Europe.

Nora's example has been followed by similar projects in Europe, nothing of the sort has been attempted in the United States. American Studies professor Udo Hebel has identified in two issues of *Representations* two fundamental moments for memory studies in the United States: the publication, in 1989, of *Memory and Counter-Memory*, and in 2000 of *Grounds for Remembering*.<sup>19</sup> In two collections of essays published in 2003 and 2009, Hebel himself attempted a reflection on the historical memory of the United States, combining interdisciplinary and international perspectives on American culture.<sup>20</sup> Hebel convincingly frames the recent interest in memory, both individual and collective, within the sweeping historical and cultural changes that took place in the second half of the twentieth century. Not only a sense of finitude connected to the end of the millennium, but an engagement with processes of collective memory as a response to fast social, cultural and political changes as a way to confront "eroding cultural roots and blurred historical identities" (*Sites of Memory* IX).<sup>21</sup> Hebel points out that while the process of remembering had traditionally been regarded as an individual practice, associated to one's "intellectual

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<sup>19</sup> The 2000 issue, *Grounds for Remembering*, investigates how space that has historical significance can become a site of memory. Thomas Laqueur wrote in the introduction that the relationship between history and memory has become today "intensely political" (2). Laqueur makes reference to two provoking essays in the collection, Kervin Klein's and Idith Zertal's, who both perceive memory as a menace to critical history, and commemoration as an obstacle to accessing the past. The 1989 issue of *Representations* responds to a "fascination, even obsession, with historical memory" at the time. Davis and Starn in the introduction point out that a connecting thread in the issue is a reflection on memory as "polymorphic and historically situated," and that all the essays investigate the gap between memory and history (3). The issue features Pierre Nora's essay "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." A specific recent publication on the field is the journal *Memory Studies*, which has been published since 2008.

<sup>20</sup> In 2003 Hebel edited *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures*, and in 2009 *Transnational American Memories*. Both are collections of essays that try to map the concern with memory in the field of American studies.

<sup>21</sup> Hebel argues that memory has become an instrument to face watershed historical events like the Second World War and the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and 9/11. More recently, the processes of memory have had to come to terms with the new possibilities offered by technology and media to archive large amount of data, as opposed to the time-oriented organization of material archives like libraries and museums.

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abilities and emotions,” recent developments have “reconsidered [it] in constructivist terms, in collective contexts, and in regard to its social determinants and political functions” (x). Offering a place of exchange between present and past – to investigate memory informs the time remembered as well as the time of remembering, – memory now

is studied as a transformative force in the construction, contestation, and revision of individual and collective identities; memory is investigated as a productive influence in the formation, preservation, and problematization of group coherence; memory is taken as a shaping factor in acts of political legitimization and opposition.

Remembering makes sense, recollection entails interpretation, memory generates (re)constructive semiotic energy. Memory is explored as the production of inclusion and exclusion. (x)

The novels examined in this dissertation fit precisely in this spirit. What McCann, Krauss, Egan and Ware attempt in their texts is an investigation of the history of the United States through the combined perspectives – personal, geographical, temporal – of multiple observers. This process allows the writers to avoid a universalistic vision in favor of a story whose nature is essentially polyhedric and pluralistic. It is memory that makes possible the multiple configurations of these four novels. The characters they depict revisit and narrate their personal and historical pasts – usually marked by experiences of loss and trauma – in order to reorganize the defining experiences of their lives into a cohesive story. Memories intertwine with the possibilities offered by narrative; they allow a reconstructed personal story as well as a collective take on shared experiences; they contribute to a revision and a reconfiguration of the present by turning to the past.

### ***Narrativity and realism: between the social and the experimental novel***

The strive for narrativity that can be observed in part of contemporary American fiction, seems to present itself, despite the structural fragmentation of time, as a comeback

of the poetics of realism. Critics like James Wood have noticed two opposite trends: towards social realism on the one hand, and towards experimentation or “hysterical realism” on the other. The texts under investigation in this study seem to be situated at the crossroads of these positions, borrowing elements from both, but connected by a common interest for the recovery of the past, both personal and historical. In drawing from the real, the novels by McCann, Krauss, Egan and Ware express a desire for coherence, and the tension between fragment and whole, between the single episodes and the main story they create, is signified in the narration of memory. Memory is the metaphor for the recovery and the reconstruction of history. It is memory, individual but also collective, that constitutes the crucial element in these novels and that conveys narrative integrity.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Wood observed that the novels written in the last decade of the century represented a turn in fiction towards what he labeled “hysterical realism” (“Human, All Too Inhuman”).<sup>22</sup> The critic argued that the “big contemporary novel” is made up of too many stories and sub-stories that obstruct the flowing of the narrative, in the attempt of pursuing “vitality at all costs” (ibid.). What novels of this kind share is a sense of attachment to the connections between the stories they tell, entangled in a web of relations that not only feels forced, but also reveals the lack of “the human,” which was Wood’s main objection.<sup>23</sup> When Jonathan Franzen’s third novel, *The Corrections*, was published in 2001, Wood used it as an example of another tendency, social realism. According to Wood, Franzen had been trying to set the novel in competition with the culture it was trying to represent, but, noticing the inevitable failure of such a premise, had concluded that the novel seemed to have lost its validity as a cultural instrument for social

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<sup>22</sup> Wood’s article appeared in *The New Republic* and was a review of Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth* (2000), which Wood placed alongside the novels of Rushdie, DeLillo, Pynchon and Foster Wallace written at the end of the 1990s.

<sup>23</sup> Zadie Smith replied to Wood in her essay “Two Paths for the Novel,” where she argued that two recent books, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005), embodied the two main trends in the contemporary Anglo-American novel. *Netherland* as the expression of what Smith labels ‘lyrical realism,’ while *Remainder* represented for Smith the future of the experimental novel.

representation, and had therefore retreated to the novel's aesthetic value.<sup>24</sup> Wood welcomed Franzen's decision to trust the aesthetic potential of language as coincidental with a deeper investigation of consciousness and the soul, a return to "the novel of character" ("Abhorring a Vacuum"). In short, Wood claimed, *The Corrections* came to represent "a correction of DeLillo in favor of the human" (ibid.). In *The Corrections*, Wood pointed out, Franzen followed DeLillo's example in *Underworld*, creating a novel that could represent American society as a wide canvas, but while *Underworld* did this "by picturing it as a web threaded on strings of paranoia and power," Franzen's work had a new focus: it "was centered on human beings" ("What the Dickens"). Consciousness is, according to Wood, precisely what cannot be removed from the novel, especially at a time when new media make us extremely self-conscious by offering endless reproductions of the self. The challenge for contemporary novelists, Wood wrote, lies in the ability "to connect the inner life of our culture with the inner life of the human and to describe both vividly (to connect the "intimate" with the "present") [...] and to fulfill this very modern challenge while holding to the older idea that the novel, of all forms, offers the greatest chance of providing this fulfillment" ("A Reply").

### ***A turning point: Franzen's The Corrections***

The publication of Franzen's *The Corrections* in 2001 marked a break not only with his own two previous books, but also with the experimental novels of the writers of his generation.<sup>25</sup> *The Corrections* tells the story of the Lamberts, a Midwestern family whose elderly patriarch, Alfred, a retired railroad engineer, has been sick with Parkinson's disease

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<sup>24</sup> The critic was referring to Franzen's *Harper's* essay, where the writer lamented the impossibility of writing a social novel in a present that felt transitory and thus difficult to represent, and in a time when "modern technologies do a much better job of social instruction" ("Why Bother" 65).

<sup>25</sup> Franzen published *The Twenty-Seventh City* in 1988 and *Strong Motion* in 1992. Both are tightly plotted novels that generally follow in the experimental tradition of postmodernism, formally and thematically. For a detailed analysis of Franzen's relationship to postmodernism and the development of his writing from *The Twenty-Seventh City* to *The Corrections*, see Stephen J. Burn's *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*.

and is slowly dying, while his wife Enid is trying to get her three adult children – who, in the meantime have all relocated to the East coast – back home for their last Christmas with their father.<sup>26</sup> As it investigates family dynamics and the Lamberts' personal struggles, the novel reconstructs four decades of American history through the story of the children's coming of age, at the same time delving into broad social analysis exploring the omnipresence of multinational corporations, the reckless maneuvers of the pharmaceutical industry and the effects of the New Economy towards the end of the twentieth century.

The wide-ranging scope of Franzen's book is supported by a peculiar structure. Each of the central chapters of the novel focuses on a member of the family, and the stories are intertwined so that temporality, although intricate, is carefully organized to reflect the characters' struggles and the nature of their crisis.<sup>27</sup> Each chapter swings back and forth in time across the present of narration avoiding linear progression and repeatedly investigating the characters' past.<sup>28</sup> However, recurring themes and symbolism establish a web of connections between the parts, giving the novel an organic and cohesive structure. This way *The Corrections* engages with readers' expectations, repeatedly deferring closure, while the present action gradually proceeds according to an irregular pace.<sup>29</sup> The analepses

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<sup>26</sup> While all the characters are tangled into their own web of self-deception, at the center of the novel Franzen depicts the generational conflict between the parents and their children, the latter trying to 'correct' the mistakes of the former, while the parents intrude on their children's lives hoping that they meet their expectations, in the attempt of redeeming their own faults.

<sup>27</sup> Burn provides a detailed analysis of how chronology is devised to suggest a parallel between structure and themes in the novel. For a detailed analysis, see Burn's chapter "Millennial Fictions" in *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*.

<sup>28</sup> Although references in the novel indicate that the story is set at the end of the 1990s, it is impossible to locate the exact year. Asked to motivate the choice, Franzen explained: "the chronologies aren't designed to bear up under close scrutiny, I try to make the day-to-day and month-to-month progressions fairly plausible, but with the larger chronologies [...] I am often stretching Twister-like to reconcile the fixed coordinates of my back story with the hideously rapid progress of contemporaneity. This is one reason I try to keep the particular year of the present action unidentifiable or at least blurry: I need wiggle room" (Burn 139).

<sup>29</sup> The most immediate example of this technique is the concern that troubles Enid from the very beginning of the novel, that is, if she will eventually be able to reunite her family for one last Christmas in St. Jude, before Alfred dies. The reunion only comes 400 pages later, after Enid's progressive attempts to make everyone agree on getting together have been repeatedly interrupted by long flashbacks. The temporal handling of this issue mirrors the intricate relationship of the Lambert children with their parents: as their lives independently progress, Gary, Denise and Chip

and the suspense they create are designed to provide an almost deterministic insight into the characters' history and motives, slowly preparing the foundations on which to build the concluding reintegration of the family at the end of the novel.

### ***Narrating time in contemporary fiction***

Franzen's complex handling of time in *The Corrections* is representative of the necessity to describe a present that is rapidly progressing while placing it in continuity with the past that produced it. It is in moments of personal crisis or drastic change that the characters' present narratives intersect with the past, signifying their necessity to create meaningful connections between the episodes of their lives and to restructure them coherently.<sup>30</sup> This kind of narration may be seen as a response to a century whose end coincided with shockingly rapid changes that influenced the perception of temporal progression. In *Consuming Life*, Zygmunt Bauman describes modern time using the metaphor of Pointillism, the Impressionist technique developed by painters like Seurat and Signac at the end of the 1880s:

[...] time in the liquid modern society of consumers is neither cyclical nor linear [...] it is instead [...] pointillist [...] marked as much (if not more) by the profusion of *ruptures* and *discontinuities*, by intervals separating successive spots and breaking the links between them, than by the specific content and the spots. *Pointillist time is more prominent for its inconsistency and lack of cohesion than for its elements of*

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are never really free from their parents' control, and even though they claim autonomy from their family of origin, Enid and Alfred will turn out to be catalyzing forces in their lives.

<sup>30</sup> Franzen explained the structure of the novel as a deliberate architectural project: "I was very aware of how time would be handled. Once I'd finally figured out that a large novel could be constructed out of multiple short novels, each of them building to a crisis in which the main character can no longer escape reality, I had an opportunity to play with time management—how far back into the past to plunge after the opening section, how to parcel out the gradual return toward the present, where to situate the meeting of the backstory with the present story. I sketched out in pencil how the chronology would work in each of the five novellas, and I was pleased to have a different structure for each of them. I also liked the way the graphs looked: A horizontal line, representing the present action, was interrupted by chunks of backstory which would rise at various slopes like something surfacing. Like a missile rising up out of the past to intersect with a plane flying horizontally in the present" ("The Art of Fiction").

*continuity and consistency* [...] Pointillist time is broken up, or even pulverized, into a multitude of 'eternal instants' – events, incidents, accidents, adventures, episodes – self-enclosed monads, separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximated to its geometric ideal of non-dimensionality. (32)

Contemporary fiction seems to be reacting to this sense of dislocation and discontinuity, perhaps also as an answer to the way technology has altered our understanding of time. The Web has possibly made us more aware of the effects of time – online, news becomes obsolete almost immediately – and it has exposed us the experience of temporality as multilayered rather than linear. Also, the Internet has provided us with an archive where the past seems to be more easily retrievable than ever before. These changes are detectable in part in the renewed interest for serialized narration that has corresponded to a wave of quality television in the past fifteen years and that has recently affected an apparently outdated medium like the radio.<sup>31</sup> Such narrative forms engage the audience with the same tension that is at play in *The Corrections*: they tell a story that is only complete when observed from multiple perspectives, and whose fragments eventually converge into a unified whole. Interestingly enough, when Jennifer Egan explained the structure of her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, she quoted as a main influence the series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), where she detected a “lateral feeling [...] – the same kind of sense of movement in all directions, but not necessarily forward. The movement from central to peripheral characters from season to season, or even within a season” (“Jennifer Egan”). Many recent works of fiction have engaged with a similar form, breaking up linear chronology and leaving to the reader the task of reconstructing the story. A few examples

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<sup>31</sup> The interest in the form of serialized narration is demonstrated in the recent success of a streaming service like Netflix, where entire seasons of television series such as *House of Cards* (2013) have been released at once, emphasizing the series' tension between the single episodes and the season as a whole. As for the impact of seriality on the radio, a case in point is the program *Serial* (2014), a hybrid between fiction and reality, based on the investigation of a real murder case. The program was conceived as a series of podcasts distributed once a week over the course of three months.

include Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), a novel-in-stories that depicts the life of interconnected characters living in a fictional village in Maine, where linear progression is interrupted by the characters' frequent recollections of the past. Similarly, Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* (2011) combines stories told by several characters and scattered across time, where the Mojave desert in California functions as connecting element. *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* (2013), Ayana Mathis' first novel, tells the story of a woman who moves to Philadelphia from Georgia during the Great Migration, and her past can be reconstructed by placing together the interwoven stories of her twelve children. Although the novel's main action proceeds chronologically from the 1920s to the present, the narrative is broken into juxtaposed episodes that are regularly interrupted by long analepses.<sup>32</sup>

Texts of this kind, of which the novels by Colum McCann, Nicole Krauss, Jennifer Egan and Chris Ware are distinguished representatives, seem to confirm the audience's expectation after a novel like Franzen's *The Corrections* put the reader in charge of reconstructing the story. Including a graphic novel like Ware's *Building Stories* helps investigating how contemporary fiction is opening up to new ways of engaging with time. Ware's physical deconstruction of the text, where each element corresponds to a piece of the characters' memories, takes to extremes the interest for the reconfiguration of the story and of history that we detect in much of the current literary production.

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<sup>32</sup> Other examples of fragmented, composite novels include: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004); Daniel Clowes, *Ice Haven* (2005); Kate Walbert, *A Short History of Women* (2009); Tom Rachman, *The Imperfectionists* (2010); Karl Taro Greenfeld, *Triburbia* (2012); Zadie Smith, *N/W* (2013); Colum McCann, *Transatlantic* (2013); Eleanor Catton, *The Luminaries* (2013).

## CHAPTER 1

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### On the Wire of History: *Let the Great World Spin* and the Search for the Past

“I will carry my life across the wire, as your life, as all our lives, past present and future”

(Philippe Petit, *To Reach the Clouds*)

#### 1.1 “*Whatever we were is whatever we are*”

*Transatlantic* (2013), Colum McCann’s latest novel, merges some of the writer’s most distinctive subjects, such as emigration, loss, and the search for one’s roots, and presents many connections with his 2009 novel *Let the Great World Spin*. Spanning roughly two centuries, *Transatlantic* mixes the fictional stories of four generations of women with fictionalized accounts of historical events, such as Frederick Douglass’ visit to Ireland in 1845, the first non-stop transatlantic flight in 1919, and U.S. Senator George Mitchell’s peace negotiations in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1990s. McCann was born in Dublin in 1965, and although his books, especially at the beginning, have been placed within the canon of Irish contemporary production, the breadth of his writing – geographic but also temporal – has been often emphasized.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, McCann’s fiction has always been international in spirit and filled with the characters’ back-and-forth trajectories between Ireland and the United States, which so strongly reflect the writer’s own experience.<sup>34</sup> A *New Yorker* for more than twenty years, McCann began his career as a

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<sup>33</sup> 2011 saw the publication of two scholarly studies on McCann’s writing, John Cusatis’ *Understanding Colum McCann*, and Colum McCann and the *Aesthetics of Redemption*, by Eóin Flannery. Both works underline McCann’s redefinition of the contemporary Irish novel towards a more international character, as well as his interest in the intersections and exchanges between cultures and between generations. *This Side of Brightness* (2012) is a collection of essays edited by Flannery and Susan Cahill on McCann’s fiction.

<sup>34</sup> McCann’s debut book was the short-story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), which was followed by his first novel *Songdogs* (1995). *This Side of Brightness* (1998) was his first international bestseller. *Everything in this Country Must* (2000) followed, and it included two short stories and a novella. McCann’s most recent novels all deal with the fictionalization of



journalist at twenty-one, when he left Ireland and began reporting for the *Evening Press* in Dublin while on a bike ride across the United States that lasted a year and a half. This trip on the road was McCann's "education," the spark and inspiration for his literary career (Cusatis 5).<sup>35</sup> McCann's international recognition came with *This Side of Brightness*, his first "American" novel, where he explores underground life in the subway tunnels of New York. *This Side of Brightness* and the following books, a collection of short fiction and two novels, observed transnational experiences across generations, and were generally warmly received. Yet, it was *Let the Great World Spin* that granted McCann critical praise and earned him the National Book Award. In line with his previous works, *Let the Great World Spin* is a book deeply concerned with the past, where historical investigation is directed at illuminating the present: "whatever we were is whatever we are," McCann explained; "I have an interest in generations [...] But not in an historical manner – more their effect in the present" ("This Side"). This speaks to McCann's idea of the writer's task in relation to history:

I suppose the job of telling stories is to probe the small, anonymous corners of the human experience that are sometimes beyond what we would normally term non-fiction or history. But then, lurking over your shoulder, there's the inescapable force of public events and the moments of history. As a writer you want to see inside the dark corners in order to make sense of the room that has already been swept clean (or clean-ish) by historians, critics, and journalists. The story-writer has to follow a sort of reckless inner need in order to go on a journey into an unreliable or perhaps

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historical figures: *Dancer* (2003) is based on the Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev, *Zoli* (2006) on the Romani poet Papusza, while *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) fictionalizes the 1974 performance by the French funambulist Philippe Petit. *Transatlantic* (2013) is McCann's latest novel, again the blending of historical events and fictional stories. His most recent book, *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, is a collection of short fiction published in October 2015.

<sup>35</sup> McCann has occasionally continued writing non-fiction pieces, published in magazines and newspapers both in the U.S. and in Europe. He has also written the screenplay for *Everything in this Country Must* (2004), adapted from his 2000 novella and turned into a short film by Gary McKendry. He is currently developing the screenplay for a movie based on *Let the Great World Spin* with *Lost* creator J.J. Abrams.

previously undocumented area of the human experience. Poets do this also of course. So too do historians, but in a different way. (“Dancer Interview”)

This is especially true of *Let the Great World Spin*, where McCann describes New York in the 1970s from the perspectives of those who live in the “dark corners” of the city, both physically and emotionally. McCann’s interest for the past finds expression in the investigation of the stories neglected by official narratives. This can be contrasted with the way it is realized in the fictionalization of historical figures, which allows him to reconstruct history from unusual perspectives. Questioning the legitimacy of historical accounts as modes of representation, the novelist, according to McCann, can blend fact and fiction in order to “come up with a deeper truth, and also get at the old verities of human experience at the same time” (“Colum McCann on *Transatlantic*”). In *Let the Great World Spin*, and similarly in *Transatlantic*, McCann realizes his view of history’s plural nature by distributing the narration among a diverse cast of characters and by entrusting it to the workings of memory.

### **1.2 A “middle point” in time: how personal and historical past collide**

Among the stories in *Let the Great World Spin* we find the heartbreaking tale of Adelita, a woman from Guatemala who has migrated to New York with her two children after her husband was killed in the civil war fighting for the military regime of Carlos Arana. Adelita works as a nurse in New York and falls in love with Corrigan, an Irish monk who lives among the prostitutes and the poor in the Bronx.<sup>36</sup> The couple lives a passionate, although tormented relationship: Adelita hopes that Corrigan makes up his mind about abandoning his religious order, while Corrigan is torn between his love and his faith. A few months into their relationship, in August 1974, Corrigan dies in a car crash, and it is at this point that Adelita’s narration starts, describing one particular day that repeatedly comes

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<sup>36</sup> The figure of Corrigan was inspired by the American poet Daniel Berrigan (1921-), a Jesuit priest who is known for his activism and antiwar views (Cusatis 183-184).

back to her. It is a memory of home, of a lazy morning a week before the accident. She and Corrigan have spent the night together at Adelita's place, and during breakfast she watches him tenderly hugging her children. Looking back, Adelita reflects on the force of memory: "I know already that I will return to this day whenever I want to. I can bid it alive. Preserve it. There is a still point where the present, the now, winds around itself, and nothing is tangled. The river is not where it begins or ends, but right in the middle point, anchored by what has happened and what is to arrive" (279). Adelita knows that this fragment of domestic life, so familiar and intimate, is part of a continuum of past and future events, and yet through memory she can isolate it in an eternal present.

On August 7<sup>th</sup> 1974, the day Corrigan dies, a tightrope artist walks on a wire between the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. This is the "middle point, anchored by what has happened and what is to arrive" at the core of McCann's novel. The tightrope performance functions as the background action for all the stories in the book: the novel is a snapshot of life in New York on the day of the walk, exploring how the lives of the characters unfold and collide as the walker is crossing the space between the towers.<sup>37</sup>

The novel is divided into ten chapters, each focusing on the story of a different character.<sup>38</sup> Similarly to the other novels analyze in this study, the individual parts are conceived as autonomous stories that make sense on their own. Every new story departs from the plot of the previous one, but maintains a connection to either a character or an element with which readers are acquainted; a narrating technique that enables readers to

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<sup>37</sup> The short opening vignette that introduces the walk, "Those Who Saw Him Hushed," is detached from the rest of the novel, which is divided into four books. All the chapters are set in New York City on the day of the performance, with two exceptions: the chapter "Etherwest," which portrays a group of hackers in Palo Alto, California, who experience the performance by hacking a public telephone in New York and having people describe the funambulist's walk, and the last chapter, "Roaring Seaward, and I Go," which is set in New York in 2006 and is told from the perspective of Jaslyn, an African American woman in her thirties.

<sup>38</sup> I consider chapters those that focus on the characters. The three sections that focus on the funambulist – the opening one, and the two that are placed at the end of the first two books – I will refer to as vignettes, as they have no direct connection to the other storylines. Half of the stories are first-person accounts of the characters' lives, while the other half are told in the third person and usually employ free indirect speech, giving direct access to the characters' thoughts.

gradually construct the connections between the storylines. The first story in *Let the Great World Spin* sets up the main narrative threads that will develop in the following chapters, at once tying and untying plot knots.<sup>39</sup> The first story introduces Ciaran, who leaves Dublin as a young man after the terrorist attacks in the spring of 1974 and decides to go to New York where his younger brother John lives. John, whom everyone knows by his surname, Corrigan, belongs to a religious order and has chosen to live in the projects of the Bronx among society's outcasts. On the day of the tightrope performance Corrigan dies in a car crash as he is driving home from a trial that has sentenced his friend Tillie, an African American prostitute, to spend time in prison. In the accident, Tillie's young daughter Jazzlyn is also killed, leaving behind her two small children. From here on, every chapter concentrates on the individual stories of a series of people who are related to Corrigan and Jazzlyn's accident to different degrees, describing – or having them describe – their lives on the day of the funambulist's performance. After Ciaran's chapter, readers are introduced to Claire, a housewife who lives in Park Avenue and is hosting a support group for mothers whose sons have died in Vietnam. Chapter three is narrated by Lara, the woman whose husband drove the car that caused Corrigan's accident, and who will become Ciaran's wife. José, a Hispanic teenager who takes pictures of underground graffiti tags, is the protagonist of chapter four. He is the one who captures the moment when a plane is flying in the sky above the towers as the funambulist is performing his walk. Sam, a young man in Palo Alto, narrates chapter five, and tells about hacking into a public phone in New York during the tightrope performance, and talking to José.<sup>40</sup> Chapter seven introduces

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<sup>39</sup> Not all the characters know each other, but each of them is connected to at least another character in the story. Although many of the relations are sketched out in the first chapter, where Ciaran tells about his brother's accident, the process of discovering the connections between the characters is a slow and gradual one that is completed only in the last chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Sam is part of a group of hackers working for the Pentagon on the project of the ARPANET. Claire's son Joshua had worked on the same project before he was sent to Vietnam, where he died. The ARPANET was the precursor of the Internet, developed at the end of the 1960s by the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). Initially related to technological progress in the military field, ARPA later expanded to sponsor technological research

Claire's husband, Solomon Soderberg, the judge who sentences Tillie to prison. Adelita, Corrigan's lover, occupies chapter eight. In chapter nine we meet Gloria, the African American woman who adopts Jazzlyn's daughters after the young woman's death. The book closes with a chapter set in 2006 and told from the perspective of Jaslyn, one of Gloria's adopted daughters, who is now a woman. Finally, two short vignettes are placed respectively after chapters three and six, and convey the funambulist's retrospective account of his trainings and of the day of the performance.<sup>41</sup>

As in all the novels I analyze, these stories are connected by one main element that guarantees coherence in the novel.<sup>42</sup> In the case of McCann's book, the link is provided by the funambulist's walk. Although it never interferes with the action of the stories, the walk provides a setting common to all, and it is observed from different perspectives: as the characters try to provide an account of the day of the performance, which for all of them has a special meaning, their narratives blend with personal recollections. Each story then presents a unique handling of time, never chronological, but rather a juxtaposition of significant episodes the characters remember. The memories that emerge from the characters' stories are usually connected to experiences of trauma and loss, and the idea of home often emerges as a crucial concern. The characters assembled in the novel actively search into their personal story in the attempt to understand or reconstruct the past that was complicated by difficult family situations and damaged by traumatic historical events.

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and computer programming in American universities (Cfr. Urs von Burg, *The Triumph of Ethernet*, 47-77).

<sup>41</sup> The walker, a character who remains nameless throughout the novel and who is not related to any other character in the story, is based on the French funambulist Philippe Petit, who walked on a tightrope wire between the Twin Towers on August 7, 1974. A historical figure, the funambulist is both a referential and symbolic presence in the novel. While it gives the story a firm base in reality, especially recalling the history of the World Trade Center, the funambulist's performance mirrors the characters' uncertain walk through life. After 9/11, Petit's performance has received new interest: a documentary was dedicated to the walk, *Man on Wire* (2008), directed by James Marsh, and *The Walk*, a movie based on Petit's memoir *To Reach the Clouds* (2002), was released in September 2015, directed by Robert Zemeckis.

<sup>42</sup> In Nicole Krauss' *Great House* the main element is a writing desk that, more or less directly, touches on all the characters lives. Egan uses the development of the music industry in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in order to tie her stories together, while in Chris Ware's *Building Stories* the elements are connected by a brownstone building in Chicago.

At the same time, each memory carries with it the historical background that formed the characters' past, so that August 7<sup>th</sup> 1974 actually only constitutes the "middle point" of a larger story: the novel captures the social, political and cultural zeitgeist of 1970s New York, but it is inserted within a larger narrative that looks both at the historical past and at the present of the city, and of the United States more broadly.

The interaction between historical and personal time is a central concern in the novel: the stories investigate both how people make sense of their personal past and how historical events find their way into their individual lives either through direct experience or through the legacy that is passed on from one generation to the next. "The person we know at first [...] is not the one we know at last," concludes Jaslyn at the end of the novel, hearing a clock striking "a time not too distant from the present time, yet a time not too distant from the past, the unaccountable unfolding of consequence into tomorrow's time" (349). This is the reflection that echoes within the text, and that is found in the four novels under consideration here: how does one connect the experiences of the past to the person one has become? How can historical and personal legacies of trauma and loss be negotiated? And why, while trying to understand and make sense of the present, is one constantly drawn to search into the past? These novels try to answer such profound questions through the characters' retrospection on their lives, making use of chronological deviations that interrupt the progression of the main action. In *Let the Great World Spin* in particular, using New York's multilayered and polyphonic complexity as a frame, the characters become representative of their time and place and tell the story of a changing America. By combining stories about characters that are extremely diverse in background and social status, and by setting the last chapter more than thirty years after 1974, McCann explores how the issues that defined American society in the 1970s have developed in the present-day United States. Questions such as racism, immigration, poverty, war, idealism, religion and technology are investigated by following their evolution over time and their

impact on individual lives, and combined into a coherent discussion about America that is at the same time historical and contemporary.

### **1.3 *Beauty and trauma: the tightrope walk and 9/11 connect past and present***

The walker in McCann's novel remains anonymous and not much is known about his story. Although readers are given insight to his thoughts, which revolve around the preparation for the walk, the description of his movements, his motivations and the sensations he experiences during the crossing, the funambulist is more of an allegorical figure rather than a fictional character, and his presence in the story highlights the symbolic function of his performance. The walk is a form of art, a synthesis of technical, elegant movements of the body and physical and emotional impressions, and it is often opposed to the much more ordinary action that develops in the "dark corners" the novel explores. The funambulist's performance is then also a metaphor of the characters' hazardous walk through life, and it signifies the trajectory of each character's individual history.<sup>43</sup> But because the performance takes place in a site so central to the history of the United States and it evokes the events of 9/11, the walk also comes to symbolize the idea of past and present being sewn together in the unpredictability of history, suggesting how the place occupied by the buildings has become a repository of collective memory through time.<sup>44</sup> *Let the Great World Spin* was praised as the "first great 9/11 novel" for being a "a pre-9/11 novel that delivers the sense that [...] we are all dancing on the wire of history, and even on solid ground we breathe the thinnest of air" (Junod). Yet, the 2001 attacks are never directly mentioned in the text, although their traumatic memory vibrates throughout

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<sup>43</sup> McCann has underlined the metaphorical aspect of the walker's performance: "[...] the thing that holds the novel together is the very low tightrope of human intention that we all negotiate. Some of us walk very close to the ground, but we can hit it awful hard. We are all, in the end, funambulists" ("Interview").

<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in Chris Ware's graphic novel *Building Stories*, the building in Chicago where the main action takes place becomes a symbolic archive that connects its tenants' experiences as well as placing them in a continuum with the memory of the people who have occupied the apartments before them.

the story because of the correspondences that the narrative suggests between the historical reality of the 1970s and the present time.

The book opens with a vignette that is intentionally situated at the outskirts of the text and isolated from the main narration. “Those Who Saw Him Hushed” describes the mood of New York on the morning of August 7<sup>th</sup> 1974 and depicts the city from the collective perspective of the people down on the streets of Manhattan who are looking up at the tightrope walker standing on the edge of the southern tower. Long lists are used to convey the city’s complex diversity of location – “On Church Street. Liberty. Cortland. West Street. Fulton. Vesey,” – of sound – “Car horns. Garbage trucks. Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway,” – and of people – “Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores” (3-4). The multiplicity that defines the city, which will be explored in detail as the chapters delve into the lives of extremely diverse characters, is opposed to the isolation of the walker on the tower. The scene is also built around a vertical spatial opposition: the perspective repeatedly bounces between the ground and the sky and it suggests the contrast between the mundane lives of ordinary people unfolding below and the transcendent, artistic performance the walker is about to start. The everyday details that usually go unnoticed, “the leather of briefcases rubbed against trouserlegs,” and the burden of life’s monotonous routine, “another day, another dolor” (4), are juxtaposed to the “magical” and mysterious allure of the tightrope artist (7). The contrast between ordinary and extraordinary will emerge more clearly as readers realize that much of the story takes place in New York’s poorest sites, where art and graceful actions are harder to identify, but not less frequent. As McCann explained, what attracted him about this contrast was “[...] the mythic proportions of the story – especially if I could tell the stories of the forgotten corners, the Tillies, the Jazzlyns, the Glorias. I wanted to say that what happened on the streets of the Bronx that morning was just as important as any fancy tightrope walker” (“Interview”).



One image is particularly evocative of 9/11 to contemporary readers: as people are watching the walker on the southern tower, the presence of cops, fire trucks and security guards contributes to the mounting tension, which culminates with a white shirt floating in the air, which is initially confused for a body falling from the tower: “A body was sailing out into the middle of the air [...] The body twirled and caught and flipped, thrown around by the wind. [...] It was falling, falling, falling, yes, a sweatshirt, fluttering [...]” (7).<sup>45</sup> With the exclusion of the last chapter, the narrative does not go any deeper in directly evoking the fate of the World Trade Center, as the artist’s walk between the towers is portrayed in the stories only as background and never really takes up a major role. Symbolically however, the image of the tightrope performance relates the present of narration of the novel to the historical reality of the towers. A walk between life and death, both literally and metaphorically, the funambulist’s walk can be seen as an act of defiance of the sacredness of life: the soldiers’ lives that are ending in Vietnam, the life that the poor, the homeless and the drug addicts are losing in the Bronx, and also, to the contemporary reader, the life of the people who died in the 2001 attacks:

But death by tightrope?

Death by performance?

That’s what it amounted to. So flagrant with his body. Making it cheap. The puppetry of it all. His little Charlie Chaplin walk, coming in like a hack on her morning. How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone’s face? Making her own son’s so cheap? (113)

Claire, a mother whose son has died in Vietnam, is upset and offended by the stunt, and compares the deliberately risky walk of the funambulist to her son’s almost accidental death in Vietnam, emptying the performance of its artistic nature. However, as the deaths

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<sup>45</sup> The scene evokes what has become a symbolic picture of 9/11, “The Falling Man,” taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew. Journalist Tom Junod, who gave the photograph its title, wrote an article about it in *Esquire* magazine for the second commemoration of the attacks.

in the novel suggest, the performance could also be seen as a metaphor for the dangers and risks that are intrinsic to life itself and that people would normally have to confront.<sup>46</sup> Later in the text, another mother, Claire's best friend Gloria, looks back on her life and celebrates the beauty that is still possible despite trauma: "Gloria [...] said that she'd overtaken grief a long time ago, that she was tired of everyone wanting to go to heaven and nobody wanting to die. The only thing worth grieving over, she said, was that sometimes there was more beauty in this life than the world could bear" (339). Similarly, the funambulist's performance uses the metaphor of art as a celebration of man's ability to reinvent himself in time: "The core reason for it all was beauty. Walking was a divine delight. Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form" (164). In his fictional representation of the tightrope walk, McCann has tried to capture precisely the redemptive power of art and its ability to reimagine history:

[...] there are many ways to write about 9/11. In fact, there's probably an infinity of ways to do so. [...] I happened to take a time in the past. I think it applies quite provocatively to the whole experience of 9/11. The fact of the matter is that Philippe Petit did this incredible tightrope walk in 1974. His was an act of creation, and it's almost in perfect opposition to the act of the destruction. So there's something that's balanced about it, this idea of up and down, hope and devastation. ("Colum McCann Talks 9/11")

Art becomes a way to counteract trauma and destruction, and looking back from the present perspective to the memory of the walk, the performance becomes the allegory for an imagined renewal of the city. Despite the crude realism of life unfolding in New York that the stories describe, especially in the recesses of the Bronx projects, the novel shows

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<sup>46</sup> Claire's son is sent to Vietnam not as a soldier, but as a computer expert, and he dies in an attack at a café. Almost all the stories in the novel deal with trauma and death: Ciaran leaves Dublin after a terrorist attack; his mother dies of cancer when he is a teenager; Corrigan and Jazzlyn die in a car crash; Tillie commits suicide in prison; Gloria's brothers die in World War II and her sons in Vietnam, as does Claire and Solomon's son Joshua.

that beauty and salvation – physical and metaphorical – are indeed happening even amongst those who are excluded from the official narratives of history: “[...] the book comes down to a very anonymous moment in the Bronx when two little kids are coming out of a very rough housing project, about to be taken away by the state, and they get rescued by an act of grace” (McCann “Interview”). In this sense the novel becomes “an anti-narrative of the 9-11 experience,” because it aims at exploring moments of “grace and recovery, and making sense of the small lives at the bottom, like Tillie and Jazzlyn” (“The Rumpus”).

The kids McCann refers to are Jaslyn and Janice, the daughters of the prostitute who dies in the accident with Corrigan. Gloria, the African American woman whose three sons have died in Vietnam, adopts the girls and raises them away from projects. Jaslyn and her sister will appear again in the last chapter of the novel, when the narrative makes an unexpected forward jump to 2006. At this point, the references to 9/11 emerge more clearly as Jaslyn, now a woman in her mid-thirties who goes back to New York to visit her mother’s dying friend, describes a picture she bought in San Francisco at a garage sale, which depicts the tightrope walk between the towers back in 1974:<sup>47</sup>

Up there in his haunted silhouette, a dark thing against the sky, a small stick figure in the vast expanse. The plane on the horizon. The tiny thread of rope between the edges of the buildings. The bar in his hands. The great spread of space. [...]

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man

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<sup>47</sup> The photograph shows the funambulist on the wire as a plane is flying in the background in the direction of one of the towers, and it is reproduced after Tillie’s section, with a caption that reads “PHOTO: © FERNANDO YUNQUÉ MARCANO,” attributing it to one of the characters, José, a Hispanic teenager who takes pictures of graffiti tags in underground New York (237). The photograph was actually taken by Vic DeLuca for Rex Images on the day of the performance. McCann has claimed photography as a major source of inspiration for his writing: “The art form that most inspires my fiction is photography. I love looking at photographs. I feel that in some ways my job is to become a photographer with words, or to paint with words” (“Interview”).

were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart. (325)<sup>48</sup>

Jaslyn's reflections about the picture close the circle that the novel had opened at the very beginning with the image of the white shirt falling from the south tower, evoking the events of 9/11. Jaslyn's perspective is altered by the history she has lived. The plane in the picture reminds her of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center in 2001, but Jaslyn's imaginative power allows her to envision a different version of history. The association leads her to consider how stories – and histories – are braided together and how they meet at what Adelita calls the “middle point,” a moment in time that is both influenced by what has come before and that in some way anticipates what is ahead. The photograph fixes a moment in time that combines a personal memory – it was taken on the day Jaslyn's mother died – and a historical event, anticipating what happened in 2001. 9/11 becomes a way for the novel to problematize the relations between history and personal past and to explore how the characters negotiate the way these connections echo on the present.<sup>49</sup>

#### **1.4 Vietnam and the trauma of history**

History in *Let the Great World Spin* emerges indirectly through the characters' recollections and can be gradually reconstructed by combining their personal experiences.

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<sup>48</sup> Sheila Hones notices in this passage a reference to Yeats' poem “The Second Coming,” written after World War I, which suggests “a dark vision of the world, full of foreboding, a view of human history that must have seemed all too appropriate to many in the days of 9/11” (128).

<sup>49</sup> The novel's title and other references in the book are taken from Tennyson's poem “Locksley Hall,” which evokes the novel's concern with the past. Tennyson's poem is the story of a soldier visiting his native town and reflecting on his youth and the passing of time: “When the centuries behind me like a fruitful land reposed;/ When I clung to all the present for the promise that it closed:/ When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see; Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be. [...] Forward, forward let us range, /Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change” (102-109).

Even though the novel's main action unfolds during the summer of 1974, the chronological deviations that distinguish the characters' accounts shape the story's historical background, delving into major historical events, in particular slavery, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Troubles in Ireland, the Vietnam War, and eventually 9/11. Vietnam is undoubtedly the most prominent, as the characters' personal reactions to the traumas inflicted on their lives offer the opportunity to portray the country's response to the consequences of the war. Similarly to the role that the Holocaust plays in Nicole Krauss' *Great House*, Vietnam here represents the trauma of history, a cumbersome legacy imposed on the characters that sets them in relation with the social and political situation of the 1970s. Tillie, the African American prostitute who tells her story while in jail, provides her perspective on the war describing the veterans she meets through her job, and she stresses the tension between the desire of erasing the past, and an unfruitful future. Even though the soldiers are her "best clients" because they are desperately trying to use sex to forget about the war, Tillie recognizes this kind of sexuality as sterile, for the soldiers "smelled like small little graveyards" (208). Lara, the artist who is in the car that causes Corrigan and Jazzlyn's accident, associates Vietnam to the economic consequences that the war had on her personal life. Her family in Detroit has lost its money, and this means to Lara the loss of a past with which she can no longer identify. When looking at Nixon's face on a newspaper, Lara claims: "I had always hated Nixon, not just for the obvious reasons, but it seemed to me that he had learned not only to destroy what was left behind, but also to poison what was to come" (129). Similarly to Tillie's soldiers, who want to erase the past but have no hopeful future, Lara perceives the Vietnam War as a limbo from which it is impossible to escape.

In "Part of the Parts," readers are introduced to Solomon Soderberg, a judge at New York Centre Street courthouse. Solomon is married to Claire, with whom he lives in a Park Avenue apartment. He is the judge who sentences Tillie to jail and who is in charge of the

funambulist's trial. Vietnam represents to Solomon the embodiment of his own failed idealism and the stage of his son's death. Confronted by the misery he faces every day at work, and afflicted by mourning, Solomon recalls his vision of the future as a young man: "At Yale, when he was young and headstrong, he'd been sure that one day he'd be the very axis of the world, that his life would be one of deep impact. But every young man thought that. A condition of youth, your own importance. The mark you'd make upon the world. But a man learns sooner or later" (253). His expectations about the redeeming power of justice got crushed once he faced the reality of the courthouse: "Centre Street was a shithole" (253); "He refused to believe [the other judges] for many months, but slowly it dawned on him that they were correct – he was caught, he was just a part of the system, and the word was appropriate, a part of the Parts" (256).<sup>50</sup> The failure of the judiciary system exacerbated Solomon's discouragement towards history, which is rooted in the way American society has failed a whole generation of young people, including his son: "Perhaps it was just a process of growing older. You leave the change to the generations that come behind you. But then the generation that comes behind you gets blown asunder in Vietnamese cafés, and you go on, you must go on, because even if they're gone they still can be remembered" (254). These conflicting feelings prompt Solomon to reflect on the validity of the war and complicate his relationship to Vietnam, which he ideologically justifies as part of the country's fight for freedom:

[...] the war had been just, proper, right. Solomon understood it in all its utility. It protected the very cornerstones of freedom. It was fought for the very ideals that were under assault in his court every day. It was quite simply the way in which

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<sup>50</sup> Soderberg's disillusionment with the judiciary system is set against the background of the Watergate scandal, with which the judge's reflections obviously resonate. Nixon's resignation, symbolically a major failure of justice and the political system, happened on August 9<sup>th</sup>, just two days after Philippe Petit's walk between the towers.

America protected itself. A time to kill and a time to heal. And yet sometimes he wanted to agree with Claire that war was just an endless factory of death. (263)

Even though Solomon secretly believes his son to be “a custodian of the truth,” he cannot allow himself to question the government’s line, because in it he recognizes the same principles that direct his job at the courthouse (263). Instead, Solomon must continue to “pull out a good performance” in court, while secretly surrendering to his grief, alone in the bathroom as running water muffles the sound of his crying (272).

### **1.5 *Memory and the construction of a collective past***

All the novels examined in this study resist a unitary notion of history and construct instead a composite portrait of the past based on the arrangement of multiple perspectives. In McCann’s novel this process is especially clear in the opposing views of New York’s past that emerge in Judge Soderberg’s and Gloria’s chapters. Soderberg’s section opens with a reflection about the extraordinary nature of the tightrope performance, which he sees as emblematic of New York’s relation to its past:

[...] it was a city uninterested in history. Strange things occurred precisely because there was no necessary regard for the past. The city lived in a sort of everyday present. [...] No, the city couldn’t care less about where it stood. He has seen a T-shirt once that said: NEW YORK FUCKIN’ CITY. As if it were the only place that ever existed and the only one that ever would.

New York kept going forward precisely because it didn’t give a good goddamn about what it had left behind. It was like the city that Lot left, and it would dissolve if it ever began looking backward over its own shoulder. [...]

He had said to his wife many times that the past disappeared in the city.  
(247-48)

Solomon perceives in the city a sort of disregard for the past that he locates in the absence of monuments that commemorate the history of New York. According to Solomon, the memory of the city needs a physical site in order to exist and be celebrated.<sup>51</sup> Sarcastically, he calls the funambulist a “genius” for having been able to become “a monument in himself” in tune with the transitory spirit of the city, because the performance has left no tangible trace: “he had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city. A statue that had no regard for the past” (248).

On the other end of the spectrum is Gloria, the African American woman who ends up taking care of Jazzlyn’s young daughters. Gloria’s story best illuminates how the novel depicts the past as a sum of collective experiences. Born in Southern Missouri in the 1920s, Gloria’s recollections go back to her great-grandparents in the late 1800s, and this legacy extends to the story of her adopted daughters in the early 2000s. Centered on Gloria’s personal past, the chapter outlines some of the most traumatic events in the history of the country: from slavery and racism, to the years of the Great Depression, during which Gloria grew up, to the trauma of World War II, where she lost her brothers, to the Vietnam War, during which her sons lost their lives. Her friendship with Claire, whom she meets through a support group for mothers whose sons have died in Vietnam, starts with a faux pas on Claire’s part: after a meeting at Claire’s luxurious apartment in the Upper East Side, Claire, unable to recover from the loss of her son, offers to pay Gloria if she agrees to stay longer and keep her company.<sup>52</sup> At this point Gloria runs away, sets on a long walk from

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<sup>51</sup> Soderberg’s concern about the absence of commemorative monuments echoes Pierre Nora’s assumption that, because memory does not occur spontaneously anymore, we feel compelled to preserve it through “commemorative vigilance” by creating what the French historian calls *lieux de mémoire* (12). Sites of memory are, according to Nora, physical or abstract, and they are always at once “material, symbolic and functional” sites, where collective memory is signified (18).

<sup>52</sup> This episode evokes a scene from Claire’s chapter about her adolescence in Florida in 1939, when she once got upset at her father for saying “*I like Negroes, yessir, I think everyone should own one*” (78). Claire’s mistake with Gloria many years later is one way in which the novel shows how the origin of certain issues can be traced back to previous generations.



Park Avenue to the Bronx, her feet bleeding, and begins a deep meditation about her origins, mentally reconstructing her past: “my grandmother was a slave. Her mother too. My great-grandfather was a slave who ended up buying himself out from under Missouri. He carried a mind-whip with him just in case he forgot” (299).<sup>53</sup> While almost home, Gloria has her purse stolen and risks losing the pictures of her sons that she always carries with her. This moment marks an epiphany in Gloria’s story, and the overcoming of the trauma that history has imposed on her. Forced to stop walking, she realizes that the pictures have come to represent “her old self” (308). She decides to return to Claire’s, and when they drive back to the Bronx together, she sees Jazzlyn’s babies about to be taken away from a social worker, and decides to adopt them. Recalling the moment years later, Gloria declares: “It was a deep-down feeling that must’ve come from long ago. Sometimes thinking back on things is a mistake arising out of pride, but I guess you live inside a moment for years, move with it and feel it grow, and it sends out roots until it touches everything in sight” (285). The feeling that comes “from long ago” is the grief for having lost both her brothers in World War Two and her sons in Vietnam. Reconstructing her past has led to a re-fashioning of Gloria’s image of herself: not only does she narrate her identity starting from the origins of her ancestors, but she also includes it as part of the system of connections that to her is a peculiar characteristic of New York, so much so that she envisions her personal story within the city’s collective history: “It had never occurred to me before but everything in New York is built upon another thing, nothing is entirely by itself, each thing as strange as the last, and connected” (306). Aware that Jazzlyn’s children

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<sup>53</sup> In the process of reconstructing her past, remembering is a fundamental tool that Gloria has learnt to use from her mother, a bold woman who was “old enough to have heard all the slave stories firsthand and wise enough to see the value of getting out from under its yoke,” which is why she sold her mother’s exchange slip, “a memento [...] to remind her of where she came from,” to buy a sewing machine to work (286). Episodes in Gloria’s story reveal the struggles of growing up as an African American: she tells about her childhood in the colored part of the town, about her parents’ discrimination at the workplace, and about her experience as a young woman of color in Syracuse in college. With two failed marriages behind her, Gloria struggled to bring up her three sons, alone in the Bronx projects, and after their death she has lived alone in her room finding comfort in classical music and in the mothers’ support group, which keeps her anchored to the memory of her sons.

are dealing with a different kind of war, one against poverty, racism and oppression – a war that she has experienced on her skin – Gloria’s act of saving them is placed in continuity with her own past.

The discrimination that has haunted Gloria’s family history is perpetuated in her daughters’ experience. When Jaslyn visits Ireland with her sister she is called a “nigger” (341). In New York, when paying for a room at the St. Regis, the clerk asks her for her I.D., betraying her suspicion at an African American young woman being able to afford such an expensive room. However, Jaslyn has assimilated Gloria’s credo that “if you start forgetting you’re already lost” (299), and when asked about her life, she shows how her sense of self is rooted in the awareness and the memory of the traumas of her past:

What can she tell him? That she comes from a long line of hookers, that her grandmother died in a prison cell, that she and her sister were adopted, grew up in Poughkeepsie, their mother Gloria went around the house singing bad opera? That she got sent to Yale, while her sister chose to join the army? That she was in the theater department and that she failed to make it? That she changed her name from Jazzlyn to Jaslyn? That it wasn’t from shame, not from shame at all? That Gloria said there was no such thing as shame, that life was about a refusal to be shamed? (329)

Also, Jaslyn is curious about her personal history, as the flashbacks in her narrative indicate. She remembers visiting the Bronx in 1996 to see her childhood neighborhood, and her trip to Dublin in 2003, to visit Ciaran and inquire into her mother’s life.<sup>54</sup> Jaslyn’s need to trace her origins becomes a means to reimagine her history, leading her to rearrange fragments from her childhood into a coherent, reassuring image:

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<sup>54</sup> Jaslyn’s sister, who is in the army, has an opposite attitude towards her origins: “Her sister was the opposite – Janice wanted nothing to do with the past. The past embarrassed her. The past was a jet that was coming in with dead bodies from the Middle East” (341).

She likes the word mother and all the complications it brings. She isn't interested in true or birth or adoptive or whatever other series of mothers there are in the world. Gloria was her mother. Jazzlyn was too. They were like strangers on a porch, Gloria and Jazzlyn, with the evening sun going down: they were just sat there together and neither could say what the other one knew, so they just kept quiet, and watched the day descend. One of them said good night, while the other waited. (346).

Showing how Jaslyn's experience bears traces of the different generations of African American women who preceded her and who knew the traumas of slavery, racism and poverty, the story of Gloria's family suggests that even though history is not inscribed in a statue or a monument, as Solomon expects, such paradigmatic American experiences can be reconstructed by piecing together the fragments of the characters' personal past, whose commemoration coincides with the awareness of one's own legacy.

### **1.6 "What the past has done to the present"**

In the last chapters of the novels examined in this dissertation, the narrative threads are pulled and extricated, retrospectively illuminating the story that has been told, and at the same time opening towards a not too distant fictional future that functions as the representation of readers' present reality.<sup>55</sup> In the case of *Let the Great World Spin*, the last story jumps ahead to 2006 and focuses on Jaslyn, one of Gloria's two adopted daughters, now a woman in her mid-thirties, who travels to New York to visit Claire, her mother's dying friend. Through Jaslyn's flashbacks, readers discover a series of connections that not only reveal the evolution of some of the storylines, but also define the development of the United States in continuity with its history. By showing how the issues that were central in the 1970s have evolved in the years after 9/11, the novel uses the

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<sup>55</sup> This is only partially true in the case of Chris Ware's *Building Stories*. Because the graphic novel is physically divided into loose elements and readers are in charge of the reading order, the surfacing of the episodes that refer to the present of narration and the future depends on the individual reading experience.

characters' memories about the past to reflect on the understanding of the present. Gloria poetically expresses this process when she concludes: "Sometimes you've got to go up to a very high floor to see what the past has done to the present" (306).<sup>56</sup> The chapter unfolds in the course of two days during which Jaslyn leaves from Little Rock, Arkansas, where she works at a foundation that helps the victims of hurricane Katrina with their tax preparation. At the airport she meets an Italian doctor who has a mobile clinic for the veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. When she gets to Park Avenue, she is surprised to find that Claire's heirs have invited friends over for drinks, and that they oppose Jaslyn's request to visit the dying woman. Jaslyn leaves and checks into a hotel. The morning after she meets the Italian doctor at a café, and they have sex afterwards. That night she can finally see Claire, and the novel closes with Jaslyn lying on the bed next to the dying woman and watching her sleep.

Jaslyn's recurring memories reflect an active search into her origins: she recalls the insecurity about her past that she felt as an adolescent, her visit to the Bronx in 1996 to see where she was born, and her trip to Ireland in 2004 during which she asked Ciaran about her mother. The job at the foundation seems to be a response to this past: "She likes the people with the endurance to tolerate the drudge, the ones who know that pain is a requirement, not a curse. [...] At first they are stilted with her, but she has learned how to listen all the same. [...] She is attracted to their darkness, but she likes the moment when they turn again and find some meaning that sideswipes them" (337). Jaslyn seems to be aware that she has interrupted the past of prostitution that afflicted the women in her

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<sup>56</sup> The metaphor is both a temporal one – Gloria's perspective is that of an older woman taking stock of her life and realizing that her decision to adopt Jazzlyn's children is to be attributed to the experience of overcoming the loss that has characterized her past and that of her family – but also a spatial one, and it may refer to the fact that Gloria raised her three sons on the eleventh floor of a building in the projects, while she decided to raise Jazzlyn's daughters away from the Bronx, in a small house in Poughkeepsie. Also, it is the experience of being up in Claire's luxurious Park Avenue apartment that triggers Gloria's memories about her past and that eventually leads to her decision to adopt the girls.

family, and also the history of slavery and discrimination that Gloria's family had to endure, and her profession is a deliberate reaction against the poverty and misery of her childhood. Jaslyn's work with people from lower classes also seems to be an evolution of Corrigan's work among the prostitutes in the Bronx, and it comes from the same ability to empathize with their motivations: "[...] they're good people," Corrigan had explained to his disillusioned brother, "They just don't know what it is they're doing. Or what's being done to them. It's about fear. You know? They're all throbbing with fear. We all are" (29).

Readers can also detect a correspondence between Vietnam and the wars that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. The present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are only suggested, and the most evocative scene takes place at the airport, when the Italian doctor is violently forced away by the security police after telling a joke, making Jaslyn and the other passengers nervous and uneasy. The episode underlines the climate of anxiety in the post 9/11 years: while the country is at war fighting for a supposed freedom, even an innocent joke is perceived as a threat.<sup>57</sup> The scene establishes a parallel with the disillusionment about freedom that was experienced during the Vietnam years: Gloria bitterly remarks that by enlisting, her sons were supposedly "getting themselves free," considering how drugs were killing young people in the Bronx at the time (313). Lara, while reading about Watergate in the paper, wonders: "Nothing much more would happen than Ford might have a hundred days and then he too would put in an order for more bombs. [...] Freedom was a word that everyone mentioned but none of us knew" (313).<sup>58</sup> Claire too, while imagining a conversation with Nixon, claims: "All this talk of freedom. Nonsense, really. Freedom can't be given, it must be received" (108).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The series of wars on terrorism that followed the attacks on the Twin Towers of September 2001 were called 'Operation Enduring Freedom.'

<sup>58</sup> Another parallel between the two wars is the one concerning the young people who join the army: even though one of Gloria's sons tells her he is going to Vietnam in the name of liberty, Gloria thinks that "mostly he was doing it because he was bored" (131). Similarly, Jaslyn's sister, who works at the embassy in Baghdad, reveals a superficial behavior that seems to betray her lack of motivation, which Jaslyn underlines when stressing her sister's indifference towards the past: "Janice had just met a man. He was on his third tour, she said – imagine that. He wore size-

One last point where the novel makes the two worlds collide is in the relationship of people to art, exploring how time changes the value – monetary and emotional – that we attribute to objects. The last chapter opens with the picture of the walker that Jaslyn carries with her when she travels. It was taken by José, a boy with Hispanic origins who tried to escape the poverty of life in the projects by photographing tags in the tunnels of underground New York.<sup>60</sup> José had tried presenting his work to *The New York Times* and other magazines, but was either ignored or rejected. Years later, the picture has become valuable both in terms of money – Jaslyn buys it at a garage sale, and after 9/11 one can only guess at its worth – and emotionally, for it connects her to the world of her mother and her past. Another example is the painting by Miró that Claire used to own in her Park Avenue apartment. In the 1970s the painting represented the status of a prosperous family that could afford to buy European modern art thanks to their inheritance money.<sup>61</sup> When Jaslyn visits Claire’s apartment in 2006, she finds out that “she had sold some of the other

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fourteen boots, she added with a wink. [...] Every now and then she still gets a postcard from her. One of them is a picture of a woman in a burka: *Fun in the sun*” (343). Janice demonstrates none of the introspection her sister has developed, which, the novel suggests, is prompted by the inquiry into her origins.

<sup>59</sup> Throughout the chapter, minor thematic connections also emerge in the parallel between present and past. One concerns technology and its effects on place and mobility. Claire’s son Joshua, who used to work at PARC, a research center on informational technology in California, and was sent to Vietnam to develop a program that would allow an exact count of the dead. Technology appears to Claire as a way to connect with her son almost physically: “It was as if she could travel through the electricity to see him [...] she could see him, all of a sudden she was in the very same room (87). Similarly, Sam, a young programmer who narrates one of the chapters, sees programming as a way to reduce distances. Sam works for a tech company in Palo Alto whose revenue comes from hacking phones for the Pentagon. Considering the development of the ARPANET, Sam frames it within the peculiar conception of space in the United States, and compares it to a new frontier: “This is America. You hit the frontier. You can go anywhere. It’s about being connected, access, gateways” (197). In the present, technology has realized the possibilities of mobility that were being imagined in the 1970s. Pino, the Italian doctor, takes a picture of Jaslyn before they say goodbye in Park Avenue: “She thinks of herself, there, pixelated, [...] carried around in his pocket, to his jazz club, to his clinic, to his home” (333). But technology also becomes a means to access the past: it allows Jaslyn to track down Ciaran, who in the meantime has become “the CEO of an Internet company” in Dublin and the Silicon Valley” (341).

<sup>60</sup> José is the narrator of the fourth chapter, which bears some resemblance to the themes McCann explored in his 1998 novel *This Side of Brightness*, where he told the story of underground New York, first through the perspective of the immigrants building the tunnels at the turn of the century, and later through the eyes of the homeless who live there in the 1990s.

<sup>61</sup> Claire’s money comes from her inheritance, as she was born into a wealthy, conservative family in Florida.

paintings—even her Miró, to help pay the expenses” (335). Claire’s economic decline and the nurse’s revelation that the woman’s nephew has “brought a couple of real estate people to his parties,” suggests the financial crisis that would burst in 2007 (348). But selling the painting also signals a definite break with the world of the past, also dramatically marked by 9/11: one of the most valuable art pieces to be lost with the destruction of the towers was precisely a tapestry by Joan Miró.<sup>62</sup>

### **1.7 *The search for the past: connections of meaning***

Jaslyn’s final remarks draw attention to the connectedness between people’s experiences that is at the core of the novel: “We stumble on [...] bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. [...] The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough” (349). Watching Claire die, Jaslyn’s vision of the progression of life takes the shape of a metaphorical, endless walk during which people “stumble” in uncertainty but are nevertheless comforted by the invisible “ongoing” wires that connect them. Jaslyn’s sensations in this moment are purely physical, like the “sweetness” of biting into an apricot. Likewise, Adelita locates her memory of Corrigan in a sensual impression: “Words put it in time. They freeze what cannot be stopped. Try to describe the taste of a peach. Try to describe it. Feel the rush of sweetness (279). Transcending the boundaries of time, the relations celebrated in the novel find realization in the “beauty and a sense of immortality in human connectedness” (Cusatis 200).

Instead of making chronological connections between the events and the people he describes, McCann has linked the stories through associations that follow the characters’ process of self-investigation. The absence of linearity in the narratives reinforces the characters’ effort to reimagine their stories: by searching for meaning in the intersections between the present and their personal and historical past, they evoke significant memories “trying to maintain or regain a sense of wholeness” (Cusatis 194). Remembering

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<sup>62</sup> Cfr. Urschel.

his brother's death, Ciaran understands only years later that "there are moments we return to, now and always. Family is like water – it has a memory of what it once filled, always trying to get back to the original stream" (57). It is precisely connecting their subjective experiences of trauma and loss to the historical past that the characters' portraits offer an instrument to navigate time, not only between 1974 and the years after 9/11, but moving transversally, back and forth across the history of New York, the United States, and beyond. Gloria's chapter for instance, while focusing on her life mainly between the 1940s and the 1970s, refers as far back as to the lineage of her family in Africa. Describing a childhood memory of her mother reading articles from the newspapers she brought home from the office where she worked as a cleaner, Gloria recalls: "She read in a high African singsong that I guess came down along the line from Ghana long ago, something that she made American, but tied us to a home we'd never seen" (288). By combining multiple perspectives on issues like slavery, the Second World War, Vietnam and the conditions of New York's poor neighborhoods in the 1970s, and linking them to a reflection on the present, history emerges as fragments of the characters' personal recollections, but it achieves coherence once it is investigated as a collective sum of these experiences. Indeed, the focus of McCann's novel is on the correspondences that emerge when experiences are shared: "it doesn't have to be a 9/11 novel at all. It could also be just a book about New York in 1974 and how we are all intimately connected" ("A Conversation").



## CHAPTER 2

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### Nicole Krauss: Reconstructing a ‘Great House’ of Memories

How many kinds of remembering, and how many kinds of forgetting? To remember to remember, to remember how you forgot. To forget to remember, to try to remember what everyone else — in order to live again — tried to forget. To remember that even when you cannot remember and yet must remember, there is a part of you — your shape and form, born of the blunt force of all the lives that came before yours — that cannot ever forget. That to remember to live is to remember how they lived.

(Nicole Krauss, “On Forgetting”)

#### **2.1 Memory and the coherent self**

When Nicole Krauss’ first novel *Man Walks Into a Room* was published in 2002, Susan Sontag praised it as the book that marked the advance of Krauss “into the forecourt of American letters.” Born in New York into a Jewish family, Krauss was twenty-eight when the novel came out, and up to that time she had written and published mainly poetry, mentored by the poet Joseph Brodsky, whom she had met while at Stanford.<sup>63</sup> Three years later, Krauss published her second novel, *The History of Love* (2005), also widely acclaimed. She was included in *The New Yorker’s* 20-under-40 list in 2010, publishing an excerpt from her third novel *Great House*, which came out later that year, and received a nomination for the National Book Award. A recurring characteristic of Krauss’ fiction is the nonlinearity of her storytelling. Her novels develop through the voices of several characters, whose storylines drift in different directions, but also carefully coalesce in the connections she creates. Krauss has explained this tension between the

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<sup>63</sup> Krauss comes from a family of Holocaust survivors. Her great-grandparents died in concentration camps, while her grandparents managed to migrate to London and New York. Her personal background informs the sense of loss that her characters share: “I think it has something to do with - or everything to do with - the fact that my grandparents came from these places that we could never go back to, because they’d been lost” (“Have a Heart”).

single stories and the larger plot they sum to, with her fascination for metaphors: “when we link or juxtapose two seemingly unrelated things to reveal a commonality that feels at once surprising and inevitable, it confirms in us a sense of the unity and connectedness of all things” (“Three Questions”). This necessity for a sense of wholeness is reflected in her novels not only because disparate characters are assembled to converge inside a new single story, but also because at the core of the characters’ narrative impulse is the desire to understand a past that appears fragmented. The protagonist of *Man Walks Into a Room* for instance, is a man who loses his memory and has to reorganize the only available fragments in order to build a “coherent self” (“Three Questions”). In *The History of Love* Krauss explores how people confront loss through the imagination, which becomes a creative act inasmuch as it allows them to “alter their personal histories in the act of remembering” and to “forge a narrative act of the self” (“Interview”). The pattern is repeated in Krauss’ most recent novel, *Great House*, where the five protagonists similarly embark in long, retrospective narratives about their lives, each coming to terms with their own loss, and finding in remembering and retelling a surviving strategy. Krauss has commented on the use of memory in her writing claiming that “Memory, which is a creative and on some level willful act, is our primary means of creating a coherent self, and any exploration of the inner life, of what makes a character who he or she is, will have to confront the complexity of what James Wood once called “the remembering mind” (“Great House”).<sup>64</sup>

There are many analogies between *Great House* and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*, as well as with the two texts by Egan and Ware that are analyzed in the following chapters: the different storylines are also interwoven and connected, both structurally and thematically, and each chapter proceeds with a temporal logic specific to

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<sup>64</sup> Krauss is referring to a passage where James Wood claims that Saul Bellow’s prose is “densely realistic” even though it avoids the “usual conventions of realism,” in particular the linear description of sequential events, for many of the scenes Bellow describes are actually the representation of memories, and thus “filtered through a remembering mind” (“Give All”).

the characters' personal recollections. What is peculiar to Krauss' novel, however, is that her stories come across almost as confessions, and reveal the characters' strong compulsion to narrate their lives to someone else, to be recognized. Krauss has pointed out that "There is a tremendous desire on the part of all my characters to be seen and to be heard," which originates from their need to reinvent themselves ("The Books"). This reinvention has to do with Krauss' cultural background and it is a response, even though never direct, to the Jewish past and to how it has been destabilized by the traumas of history. The re-imagination that so many of her characters engage in is thus a variation of the reinvention of Jewish identity through memory, as a means of facing a cumbersome historical past.<sup>65</sup>

## **2.2 *Five narrators, a multiplicity of stories***

*Great House* is divided into two main parts, each made of four sections, where five different narrators take turns looking back on their lives to tell their personal story. The narrator of the first story is Nadia, a New York-based fiction writer in her fifties whose solitary life is intruded upon by Leah Weisz, a young woman who has come to claim Nadia's writing desk. In order to fool Nadia into giving her the prized possession, Leah pretends to be the daughter of the poet who gave Nadia the desk almost thirty years earlier. In the second chapter we meet Aaron, an old Israeli father and a widower who reminisces about his relationship with his long-estranged son Dov, a judge who lives in London. Arthur narrates the third section. He is also an old man and a widower who tries to make sense of the secretive life of his deceased wife Lotte, a Holocaust survivor. The fourth chapter introduces Isabel, a woman from New York who tells the story of her years as a

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<sup>65</sup> Krauss has in many occasions resisted being categorized as a writer of Jewish fiction, arguing that her work does not deal with the Holocaust directly, but with how people respond to loss and how loss prompts a mechanism of reinvention of the self: "I would not say that I've written about the Holocaust. I am the grandchild of people who survived that historical event. I'm not writing their story—I couldn't write their story. There are characters in my novels who have either survived the Holocaust or been affected by it. But I've written very little about the Holocaust in terms of the actual events. What interests me is the response to catastrophic loss" ("Nicole Krauss on Fame").

doctoral student in Oxford in her late twenties when she met and dated Yoav Weisz, Leah's brother. Nadia, Aaron and Arthur each resume their narrations in the second part of the novel, while Isabel's is substituted by a story told by Leah and Yoav's father, George Weisz. Weisz is an antiques dealer who has made it his mission in life to retrieve the desk the Nazis stole from his father in Budapest during the war.<sup>66</sup>

There is no hierarchy in the heterogeneous way the narrators' perspectives are organized: none of them takes on a prevailing role, but every voice is equally independent and authoritative. Krauss has explained that she thought of *Great House* as "a book without a center, made instead of many moving parts held together by shared emotional and intellectual forces" ("Great House"). Indeed, the different voices do not compete with one another, but every section contributes a distinctive perspective that, following a specific storyline, adds to the larger narrative that emerges from the novel. All the stories are narrated retrospectively, so that the characters return to their memories telling their stories from a distance. All are first-person narratives, so that multiple temporal perspectives coexist: that of the present self who remembers and those of all the past selves who are remembered. The use of the first-person adds to the confessional, self-investigative tone of the narratives. None of the characters fully identify with their remembered selves. This is because memory offers them the tools to re-shape the image of themselves, to question their choices and the vision of life, family and history that they had at the time.

The many embedded narratives that are blended into the main story contribute to the polyphonic nature of the text. In Isabel's chapter for instance, the memories of her personal history merge with stories about Leah and Yoav's childhood and adolescence that she has learnt from the siblings. These recollections are accompanied by a letter where

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<sup>66</sup> Nadia narrates chapters one and six, called "All Rise;" chapters two and five, "True Kindness," are narrated by Aaron; Arthur's sections, "Swimming Holes," are chapters three and seven; Isabel narrates section four, "Lies Told By Children," and Weisz is in charge of narrating the last chapter, named after him, simply "Weisz."

Leah writes about the epilogue of her father's life, thus providing readers with deeper insight on the Weisz's family lives. In his story, Aaron includes references to a book his son Dov used to write as a boy.<sup>67</sup> Arthur's section contains the story, narrated by the adoptive mother of Lotte's son, of how Lotte gave up her child for adoption, as well as Weisz's story about his search for the desk. The combination of voices and tales in *Great House* is an example of what Bakhtin called "dialogism," with which he referred to the recognition within a literary work of the existence of juxtaposed voices and perspectives that produce multiple meanings. According to Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel not only engages with a plurality of views, but it also explores "dialogic relationships [...] among all elements of novelistic structure" so that every utterance is directed towards a listener or it constitutes a response to someone else's view (40). This is a recurrent feature in the other texts under consideration. It has been shown how, in *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann represents the American society of the 1970s by juxtaposing, among others, the experiences of prostitutes, housewives, immigrants and artists. However, while in McCann's novel it is mainly the reader's task to establish a correspondence between the characters' voices, and none of the characters is addressing a specific recipient, the protagonists of Krauss' novel seem to be aware of an audience – the clearest examples are Nadia's and Aaron's narratives, which are both openly addressing Dov – and they establish a dialogue with each other, exploring the subjects of loss and trauma but also relationships, history, mortality and legacy.<sup>68</sup> It is this collaborative effort of multiple and overlapping voices that contributes to the cohesion of the story. Commenting on this tension between multiple narrative voices and cohesion in her novel, Krauss said:

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<sup>67</sup> Dov's story is about a shark floating in a tank while wires connect it to a group of sleeping people whose sadness is transferred to the animal. Krauss has written that the story of the shark allowed her "to think about the book as a whole, these different voices, confessions, or dreams, that are all being channeled toward some unified point: a great beast floating in an illuminated tank" ("Nicole Krauss on Writing").

<sup>68</sup> We discover in chapter five that the man Nadia is repeatedly addressing as "your honor," is Dov, Aaron's son, whom she has hit while driving through the streets of Jerusalem.

[...] the voices reflect, echo, dovetail, refract, and form symmetries with each other, creating a large interlocking structure with, I hope, many dimensions. I was interested in sustaining the separation between the voices, but at the same time my sense of the wholeness of the novel, its coherence as a unified story, however complex, was always the overwhelming force in writing it. Perhaps a way to think of it is as a large house where one dwells in many rooms, enters through many doors, follows voices down corridors, looks out through windows, before one is allowed, in the end, to see the house from the outside. (“Great House”)

The juxtaposition of different perspectives always sustains Krauss’ reflection on how people look for a new, unified image of themselves after troubling experiences of loss, and in particular her ongoing investigation into how Jewishness is paradigmatic of this process. Multiplicity becomes a necessary step to achieve coherence, to fulfill the “very attractive illusion that there is meaning in the world – things connect” (“The Books”).

### **2.3 Time and the ‘great house’ of Jewish memory**

Even though the reader of *Great House* can locate the action around the late 1990s, the story is not easily inscribed within a definite time span, because the episodes described repeatedly move the action – in the form of evoked memories – back and forth in time.<sup>69</sup> Krauss has organized the plot avoiding linearity and continuity, dividing the story into autonomous narratives, each with its own specific organization of time. Because each story is a retrospective account of its narrator’s life, memory shapes plot so that the action follows the stream of the remembering process. With memory acting as a filter and imposing a selection on the events, the structure of each story is broken into a series of crucial fragments that are not self-contained, but rather inserted into a network of references where one episode is always dependent on something else, while in turn

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<sup>69</sup> The only exception is “Lies told by Children,” Isabel’s narration. Here the present of narration is 2008. Isabel explains at the beginning of the chapter that ten years have passed since she met Yoav in 1998 (109).

influencing other episodes, so that a beginning or an end are always postponed. The plot of each chapter mostly consists of intersecting layers of time that have a flattening effect. The story is presented as the characters perceive it, that is, as a chain of simultaneous events, following the narrators' wanderings in and out of their own memories. Similarly to what happens in McCann's novel, memories resurface through associations of meaning. However, while in *Let the Great World Spin* the present action proceeds alongside as well as triggers the remembering process – think of Gloria's narrative of her origins unfolding as she walks from Park Avenue to the Bronx – the narratives in *Great House* seem to originate with the deliberate purpose of re-imagining one's story. In Krauss' novel time also appears to be stretched out and to extend almost infinitely, for the constant manipulation of chronology gives the impression of a development that resists closure in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>70</sup> The chronological boundaries that define each chapter are difficult to determine. Even when the reconstruction of chronology succeeds, we realize that this attempt in fact works against the intention of the narratives, because their structure fundamentally depends on the fragment as their basic unit.<sup>71</sup> For Krauss, breaking narrative time helps conveying a sense of uncertainty and indeterminacy that is fostered by the gaps in the narratives. The suspense concerning how and where each piece fits into the main narrative is maintained throughout the novel, as some of the gaps are filled – we

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<sup>70</sup> In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that plot in a tragedy should not “begin or end at any arbitrary point” but should rather imitate a “complete, i.e. whole action,” where a whole is “that which has a beginning, a middle and an end” (5.1). The lack of closure in *Great House* is more evident than in McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, where the last chapter, set in 2006, provides many storylines with a conclusion: besides learning about Claire's final hours and Jaslyn and her sister's current lives, readers are told about Gloria's death and about Ciaran and Lara's marriage. In Krauss' novel instead, the last chapter is more retrospective and fills in on Weisz's past. The hint to the future here is only within Weisz's imagination. In this sense, Krauss' novel is more similar to Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, where some of the storylines are never resumed.

<sup>71</sup> Analyzing time in *The Sound and the Fury*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that “The reader is tempted to look for points of reference and to re-establish the chronology for himself [...] But he stops [...] because he notices that he is telling another story” (“Time in Faulkner” 225-226). According to Sartre, Faulkner did not conceive the action of the novel as a chronological progression, because the story of *The Sound and the Fury* lacks a “focus” in the traditional sense, as the episodes narrated – all of which are crucial – seem to be happening in the same simultaneous present: “‘And...and...and then.’ [...] Faulkner makes his story a matter of addition” (226-227).

understand, for instance, the relationships between the characters, or acquire new details about their lives – while others keep surfacing.<sup>72</sup>

The personal reorganization of time within each narrative is derived from the process of self-imagining the characters engage in. By showing how memory allows the reconstruction of what has happened, Krauss is encouraging a vision of the past that transcends causality, chronological time and geographical boundaries, which is instead the realm of history. In Aaron's section – where he attempts to understand his son as well as to come to terms with his faults as a parent and to reconcile that with his Jewish identity – the distinction between memory and history emerges clearly. In a matter of fact way, Aaron condenses years of his son's personal and professional life in just one sentence: "You prosecuted and defended, balanced the scales of justice, the years passed, you married, divorced, were appointed judge" (193). This is a factual account of an individual reconstructed past; it is a mere "prosaic" representation, as Pierre Nora argues in his seminal essay when attempting to distinguish between memory and history (9).<sup>73</sup> Aaron has troubles accepting his son's decision to leave Israel, and for him the time Dov spends away from home is easily reduced to a dry list of successive actions and reads like a record of events. Quite differently, when recalling the moment Aaron heard his son's voice on the phone while at war in 1973, time is expanded and the scene is described poetically:

That night, two weeks after the war began, the telephone rang close to eleven. That's it, I thought, and the bottom opened out in the depths of me. Your mother had fallen asleep on the sofa in the other room. Bleary-eyed, with static hair, she stood now in

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, how Lotte got hold of the desk in the first place remains a mystery, and readers never learn the identity of her child's father. Nadia does not tell whether Dov survives the accident, because her chapter is abruptly interrupted when the telling reaches the present of the action. We know from Isabel's story that she and Yoav get married and have a son, but we are left in the dark concerning Leah's story.

<sup>73</sup> Nora claims that, in modernity, memory and history are located at opposite ends of the spectrum in the representation of the past. While memory is a creative, selective process that is constantly evolving, and is anchored to specific sites – the *lieux de mémoire*, – history aims at reconstructing and representing the past, but it is destined to remain a partial process, let alone a difficult one, always subject to investigation ("Between Memory and History" 8-9).



the doorway. As if I were moving through cement, I rose from my seat and answered. My eyes and lungs burned. There was a pause, long enough for me to imagine the worst. Then your voice came through. It's me, you said. That's all: It's me. But in those two syllables I could hear that your voice was slightly different, as if a tiny but vital piece had broken inside of it like the filament of a lightbulb. And yet in that moment it didn't matter. I'm all right, you said. I couldn't speak. I don't think you'd ever heard me cry. Your mother began to scream. It's him, I said. It's Dov, I choked. She rushed to me and we both put our ears to the phone. Our heads were coupled together and we listened to your voice. I wanted to listen to you talk forever. (185-186)

When reconstructing the past through memory, the discourse becomes almost lyrical. Memory establishes a distinct dialogue between past and present that is represented in the language Aaron uses when he becomes aware that his life is close to the end. Sentences like “We're running out of time, you and I [...] I'm rapidly approaching my death” rhythmically emerge in Aaron's narrative, interrupting the flux of memories and taking the story back to the present of narration (173). Thinking about his past as an old man also leads Aaron to question his political views. While still a young father, patriotism had precedence over relations with his son. Despite knowing the gruesome realities of war – Aaron fought in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and in the war of 1956 – his allegiance to his country remained visceral: “I would not leave. My sons would grow up [...] playing under Israeli trees, with the dirt of their forefathers under their nails, fighting if necessary” (49). While Aaron accepted the inevitability of the war and imagined a future where his sons would be equally willing to fight for their country, Dov's terrible experience with the Yom-Kippur War of 1973 was precisely what drove him away from Israel.<sup>74</sup> But after the suicide attacks in

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<sup>74</sup> Dov was forced to abandon another soldier on the battlefield, and after returning his watch to the family he received a letter from the soldier's father blaming him of his son's death, leaving Don with a terrible sense of guilt.

Jerusalem in 1996, Aaron recalls becoming disillusioned and forced to deal with the brutality of events stored in his memory and significantly concludes, “For once I think I understand. [...] One more question, Dovik. One more song. Five more minutes,” hinting at his realization that the commitment to his country led him to sacrifice the relationship with his son, which he is now desperately trying to salvage (198).

Although the author has claimed that every novel is, “in some vague way, about memory,” the stories she has assembled in *Great House* reveal a deep concern with how to reconstruct one’s personal past and reconcile it with the historical events one has experienced (“Great House”). The novel takes its name from a story of origin in Hebrew culture told by George Weisz, who in turn learnt it from his father, a Jewish historian who lost his life in the Holocaust. It is the story of rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who, after the Romans burned down Jerusalem and destroyed the second temple, asked the students of his school not to rebuild the temple, but rather to gather and write down the oral laws of the Jewish tradition. These scripts later became the Talmud, the sacred text of rabbinic knowledge.<sup>75</sup> This way, even without a home or a physical place where to worship God, Jews would have a shared memory that could be preserved by the community: “Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book,” Weisz explains, “Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form” (279). Ben Zakkai’s answer to the loss of the temple and the dispersion of Jews is to establish a collective tradition with which the following generations could identify. The “great house” then, is the idea of a New Jerusalem that overcomes its own loss and is reconstructed through the fragments of memory that every single Jew preserves. In other words, the “house” is memory itself, “a memory [...] so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original

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<sup>75</sup> The figure of rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai is a legend in rabbinic literature connected to the story of the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem by the Romans. Born probably in the first century in Israel, Ben Zakkai had favored the surrender of Jews to the Romans in order to save their city and their people, but was rejected. He then asked Vespasian permission to build a school in Jabneh, where he also established the “Sanhedrin,” a legal and religious council that was to function as a code for Jews. By doing so, ben Zakkai created for Jews a religious tradition independent of the presence of the temple as a place of worship (“Johanan ben Zakkai”).

itself” (279). Ben Zakkai’s example suggests not only that the sum of individual efforts contributes to establishing a solid communal memory, but also that an introspective reflection on the self is fundamental for the construction of identity.

#### **2.4 Jewish diaspora as archetype of loss**

Personal memory in Krauss’ fiction – and in much Jewish literature – always intersects with history. The memory of the individual is also the memory of Israel and of Jewish people, which inevitably seems to influence individual lives. The causality of history in relation to individual life is a pattern of Jewish literature, and, Philippe Codde argues, persists in the writings of third-generation Jewish authors. Their work, Codde claims, is obsessed with loss, with the “absent presences” of their parents and grandparents’ historical traumas, to which a fictional re-imagination offers a solution, even though illusory (674). Krauss has commented on the emotional legacy of Jewish history pointing out that because Jewish people had to endure the life of a diaspora, their whole identity “came to rest on the power of their memory” (“This Week”). This constant relation between past and present can be problematic, as Codde maintains, in that such a memory becomes a burden, an “ethical imperative to remember” (684), intensified by the fact that what must be remembered is a past that third-generation writers have not experienced themselves (675).<sup>76</sup> Speaking about her family, Krauss herself acknowledged the ambiguity of this legacy as part of her personal experience: “I cannot recall a time when I did not understand in my blood, that above all else the one thing I must do was remember. But remember what?” (Codde 674).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Assessing the repercussions of loss in the second- and third-generation, Eva Hoffmann concludes: “for the inheritors of traumatic historical experience, the ability to separate the past from the present – to see the past as the past is a difficult but necessary achievement” (415).

<sup>77</sup> This statement evokes the doubt that will haunt Weisz throughout his life. Reflecting on a lesson his father has imparted to him, Weisz feels overwhelmed with uncertainty: “[...] my father, a scholar of history, taught me that the absence of things is more useful than their presence. Though many years later, half a century after he died, I stood on top of a sea wall watching the undertow and thought, Useful for what?” (287). For a detailed analysis of this point, see page 68.

The sense of loss that emerges from Ben Zakkai's story is at the core of Jewish experience, and in the novel it becomes paradigmatic of the characters' stories. The Jewish diaspora, its discontinuous history and fragmented tradition are fundamental in the book, even though they are not addressed directly. Instead, Krauss evokes the diaspora in bits and pieces while focusing on the characters' individual experiences and uses it as a metaphor for the delicate balance between individual memory and the historical account that the characters are negotiating. Just as the Jews have been trying for centuries to gather and preserve the fragments of their history of displacement in order to construct a unitary identity, so the characters Krauss portrays react to personal loss – of one's parents, spouses, children, but also of opportunities – by reorganizing the pieces of their lives into a cohesive tale about the self.

### **2.5 *The desk: narrative agent and historical heritage***

The five narrations that make up *Great House* are connected not only thematically, but also structurally through an object, the desk that belonged to Weisz's father, which sets the plot in motion and provides the links between the characters. The desk is the element whose story determines the coherence between the narratives and signifies the tension towards the story's wholeness. Following the movements of the desk and its trajectory across time, readers are guided in and out of the characters' lives. The desk, which Arthur describes as a "grotesque, threatening monster [...] made of dark wood" has nineteen drawers, one of which is mysteriously locked (83). It was stolen in Budapest in 1944 when the Nazis ransacked Weisz's family home before deporting his parents to the concentration camps. According to the *discourse*, the desk first appears in New York in 1999, when it is owned by Nadia, a writer in her fifties who has had it since 1972, when a young Chilean poet, Daniel Varsky, gave it to her so that she could keep it in New York while he went back to Chile to visit his girlfriend. But Daniel never came back, as he fell victim to Pinochet's tortures and eventually disappeared. Daniel had got the desk in 1970 as a gift from Lotte

Berg, a Jewish woman who, after escaping her home in Nuremberg, came to England as a chaperone on the Kindertransport. When Leah Weisz, George Weisz's daughter, visits Nadia in 1999 pretending to be Daniel's daughter, she tricks the woman into giving her the desk. Once Nadia learns that Daniel never had any children, she travels to Israel hoping to find Leah and retrieve the desk, but does not succeed. While driving through Jerusalem at night, Nadia runs over Aaron's son Dov, who had come back to Israel for his mother's funeral. In the meantime, Leah has secured the desk in a storage unit in New York, where Weisz will eventually secretly see the desk again for the last time before committing suicide. Like the fragments of Jewish memory that are brought together into the Talmud to keep Jewish tradition alive despite the dispersion of the people, the stories in *Great House*, although being dislocated around Europe, South America, the United States and Israel, converge into a bigger narrative, held together through the desk and its intersections with the characters' lives. In other words, it is the expectation concerning the whereabouts of the desk that signifies the web of relations behind the novel.

Thematically, the desk functions as a repository of the past. It represents a link between personal, cultural and historical experience, evoking the novel's crucial concern with memory. In *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown reflects on the materiality of objects, and on "how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies" (4).<sup>78</sup> Our fascination with things, Brown argues, goes beyond their commodification as mere "objects of consumption" (6). The subject-object relation can actually also be "overwhelmingly aesthetic, deeply affective" (29-30). The presence of objects in everyday

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<sup>78</sup> Brown's study belongs to what is known as "thing theory," a multidisciplinary field that investigates the status, significance and power of objects and the value, economic or symbolic, that we attribute them. It also studies how inanimate objects shape and inform human beings. In his essay "Thing Theory," Brown notices at the end of the twentieth century, a "new urgency" in our concern with things, which is possibly determined by the advance of digitization (16). When objects cease to perform their habitual function, that is, "when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested," we start noticing objects as things, which, according to Brown, determines a change in our relation with them (4).

life and our routine exchange with them becomes a way, according to Brown, to give our life and our time an ordered structure, as habits “create the illusion of sameness and continuity over and against the facts of disorder and change” (64). Brown ascribes a “narrativity” to inanimate objects, a “capacity to evoke the history of their possession, and thus to transform artifact into history.” What is more, their “legibility” allows objects to be translated into memory (104). In *Great House*, narrativity and legibility can be detected in Weisz’s relationship with the desk. His story is paradigmatic of the symbolic value the desk embodies. Heavy and imposing, the desk attests Weisz’s Jewish heritage; it is a reminder of his father’s legacy, and in its movements across the world and in time, it represents history. Born in Hungary into a Jewish family, Weisz was able to escape Budapest, while his parents died in the concentration camps. His personal memories, inseparable from the cumbersome legacy of Jewish past, never abandoned him. In fact, Weisz decided to become an antiques dealer, a profession chosen to conceal a greater purpose: by specializing in retrieving the furniture stolen by the Nazis he could travel the world looking for his own family’s lost possessions. In particular, his goal is to reconstruct in Jerusalem an exact copy of his father’s studio in Budapest, “as if,” his daughter Leah writes, “by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret” (116). This view stands in contrast to Weisz’s own vision of his mission: “I produce a solution” (275), he states, “Out of the ruins of history I produced a chair, a table, a chest of drawers” (285). According to Bill Brown, “the past seems to reside in objects; historical insight seems to be graspable from inside the material record, from the way a *genius rei* seems to animate objects with the presence of the past” (112). This observation resonates with Weisz’s relationship with material possessions. Convinced that “unlike people [...] the inanimate doesn’t simply disappear” (114), Weisz has spent his life travelling and displacing his children from city to city in an attempt to recover his family’s belongings. In particular he is moved by a desire to recover the writing desk, which is almost an obsession to

reconstruct the material of his father's life and to reconstruct history. Behind this effort lies the longing for a personal unity that the experience of the Holocaust has denied him. Weisz cannot escape the "imperative to remember," and is unable to forget the collective cultural and religious heritage of Jewish tradition: "I wanted to be in two places at the same time. [...] my father, who carried two thousand years with him wherever he went [...] In my childish desire [...] saw the symptom of a hereditary disease" (286). This is one of the central issues in the novel, what Krauss has called "the burden of inheritance" or "the idea of what it is that is passed down to us from our parents [...] moods, grief, sadness, an angle at which we face the world, and I thought about what we pass on to our children" ("David Grossman"). Weisz believes that Jews are never free from this burden: the memory of their own history of uprootedness is like a genetic disorder being passed down from father to son.<sup>79</sup> His experience is exemplary, and the responsibility of this legacy – Jewish history, but also his father's scholarly work – is something Weisz knows from a very young age, when his father gave him the key for one of the drawers of the desk, which Weisz left empty and locked, unable to find something worthy of matching "the two thousand years [...] stored in those drawers" (284). Later in life, it is the memory of his parents' death during the war that threatens not only Weisz's own stability, but his own children's as well: "They were prisoners of their father's" Isabel recalls, "locked within the walls of their own family and in the end it wasn't possible for them to belong to anyone else" (113). Leah and Yoav grow up moving from one city to the next, living in houses that their father uses as

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<sup>79</sup> Hoffman argues that for the second generation, this legacy is an imperceptible entity: "the anxieties, the symptoms, no matter how genuine in themselves, no longer correspond to actual experience or external realities. They do not even correspond to anything that could be called 'memory.' [...] And yet, at the same time, this is exactly the crux of the second generation's difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows" (410-411). This is why, according to Hoffman, for the second generation an effective way to come to terms with the suffering is not memory, but "a full imaginative confrontation with the past" that "can bring the haunting to an end" (414)."

depositories to keep the furniture he has retrieved from before the war, material reminders that narrate the tragedy of the Holocaust.<sup>80</sup>

## **2.6 *Inheritance and generational disruption***

The “burden of inheritance” the desk embodies suggests how events affect personal experience and in particular the relationship between generations. The desk can be interpreted both as nurturing the characters’ intellectual disposition – Weisz’s father was a historian, Daniel a poet, Lotte and Nadia are writers – and as undermining their ability to generate life due to its historical significance. Also, unconventional representations of childhood thrive in the stories, from orphans, murdered or unborn children, to imagined or invented offspring, to troubling relationships between parents and children. Lotte, for instance, is never free from the memory of the Holocaust. In fact, she is mystified and eternally saddened by it. She cries in her sleep, screaming for her father whom she had to leave behind in Poland in order to save herself. Arriving in England from the devastation of Europe and having escaped the brutality of Nazism, Lotte has chosen the solitary life of writing, accepting a marriage that her husband Arthur describes as barren: “the years passed [...] with almost nothing in our lives that grew and changed” (85). And the marriage is also literally sterile, for Lotte and Arthur did not have children, Lotte having “made clear that it wasn’t a possibility” (84). Before she dies however, Arthur discovers that his wife had in fact become a mother before they met, but had given her child away, the experience of motherhood being crushed by the affliction of her past. This torment reflects on Lotte’s writing, and the only insight to her literary production reveals a grim story of murdered children being buried under a park’s foundations by the regime police. Nadia also has never had children, and has gradually given up her relationships, preferring a reclusive life

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<sup>80</sup> Weisz’s obsessive quest for the desk reiterates the ‘burden of inheritance’ until his daughter Leah’s decision to separate her father from the object of his obsession, securing the desk in New York without revealing its location. For Yoav, Isabel suggests in her story, the weight was lifted once he became a father. Yoav and Isabel name their son David. Claire E. Sufrin suggests that the name “invokes the rabbinic hope of a messianic redeemer descended from the biblical king and suggests the redemptive power of his fourth generation” (144).



of writing. However, she is a restless, tormented woman: one of the stories she publishes is about the murder of two small children by their mother, and she is often haunted by a child's cry that exists only in her imagination. The desk constantly reminds her of Daniel Varsky, the Chilean poet who gave her the desk, and of the torture he suffered before his death, eventually making it impossible for Nadia to write. Even though indirectly, Pinochet's military dictatorship violently intrudes on Nadia's life affecting her creative imagination. Other instances in the novel hint at the way the "burden of inheritance," historical and personal, can complicate and problematize generational relationships. Leah intrudes upon Nadia's life pretending to be Daniel Varsky's daughter, Nadia is upset when the young man she is infatuated with rejects her by scornfully telling her that she could be his mother, and Arthur melancholically fantasizes about Daniel Varsky being his and Lotte's son.

### **2.7 The desk as 'lieu de mémoire'**

History is a burden that all the characters in *Great House* confront. Yet, for those who come into contact with the desk, the object intensifies the emotional weight of the past. For Weisz and Lotte this burden is represented by the Holocaust, which marks a fundamental break between their past and their life after the war. Weisz has lost a sense of continuity between past and present, and the intention of reconstructing his father's room in Jerusalem becomes an attempt to bridge the divide between history and personal memory.<sup>81</sup> The desk is also the only object Lotte has preserved from her past, and the only thing she is attached to. In her bare apartment, Nadia clung to the desk despite the memories of Daniel Varsky's death and the tortures of Pinochet's regime it evokes. The desk is situated at the intersection between memory and history, and it emerges as a "lieu de mémoire," a term the French historian Pierre Nora has used to indicate specific sites

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<sup>81</sup> In his 1989 essay "Between Memory and History" Pierre Nora has identified as "materialization of memory" the contemporary compulsion to record and preserve traces of the past without distinction (14).

where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” and where “a sense of historical continuity persists” (7).<sup>82</sup> Nora claims that modern Western societies have increasingly become “forgetful” because they have organized the past through history at the expense of a collectively shared memory (8). He identifies the emergence in the 1970s of a “historiographical consciousness” that caused a shift in the perception of the past, which was at that time starting to be connected to the present through historiography and no longer through memory (9).<sup>83</sup> Nora locates the emergence of “lieux de mémoire” as memory stopped being “true” and started being transformed and threatened by history. The desk in *Great House* carries out a function similar to that of a “lieu de mémoire,” as the characters reject the chronological unfolding of history, preferring a personal reconstruction of their past based on palpable experiences. “Memory,” Nora claims, “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects” (9). Moreover, the desk holds a collective memory that connects the characters to each other. According to Nora, modern memory is historicized and it has become archival because “it relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (13). We have become obsessed with conserving and preserving the present and the past, substituting the act of remembering with the archive (13). This obsession is the consequence of an anxiety that derives from a perceived discontinuity between past and present, with the past becoming “invisible” and “fractured” (17) and from a sense of having lost a collective memorial tradition. The construction of archives as a form of memory has marked a shift from memory to history, and because this form of memory has ceased to be

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<sup>82</sup> *Les lieux de mémoire*, written collaboratively with the contribution of French historians and scholars, aims at exploring French national past through the analysis of sites of memory – monuments, places, events, personalities, symbols – that have become significant in the construction of France’s national identity. In his introduction to the work, Nora argues that we are living in a time when “milieux de mémoire” have disappeared because there is no longer a sense of collective “spontaneous memory” (12). Instead, the creation of “lieux de mémoire” is an attempt to preserve “a memorial consciousness” against the sweeping force of history (12).

<sup>83</sup> “The study of *lieux de mémoire*,” writes Nora, “lies at the intersection of two developments that in France today give it meaning: one a purely historiographical movement, the reflexive turn of history upon itself, the other a movement that is [...] historical: the end of a tradition of memory” (11).

a social practice – everybody, Nora notices, has become “his own historian” and feels the compulsion to record and preserve traces of their existence – it has been “interiorize[d] as an individual constraint” (14-15).<sup>84</sup> The consequence of memory not being experienced collectively is that “[memory] will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals” and at this point Nora provides the example of Jewish culture, “which has no other history than its own memory” and for whom “to be Jewish is to remember that one is such”(16). Such is the case of Weisz’s personal history: precisely because his history has been scattered, the repossession of the desk becomes an imperative, an attempt to materialize memory into an object invested with symbolic meaning.

## **2.8 Narrating memory**

According to Nora, sites of memory emerge from “a play between memory and history” (19), where memory “is life [...] in permanent evolution,” while history is seen as “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). Memory, Nora writes, is “collective, plural, and yet individual” and “absolute” (9). It is this approach to the past that guides the narrations in *Great House*, and it is significant that the desk is so often associated with the creative power of writing and of the imagination. Rewriting their stories, the characters give in to a desire of introspection and renewal. They rearrange time through associations between the most significant memories of their past, making sense of their personal and historical heritage and using that legacy to create a structure for themselves. This conception of history resonates with that argued for by Pierre Nora: it is a practice of history that should distance itself from a linear historical narrative, and rather take shape through the combination of different “lieux de mémoire.” This is why Weisz’s experience seems to clash when compared to the other characters’, for

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<sup>84</sup> Modern memory, Nora argues, has become psychological rather than social and it has undergone an individualist turn, so that the shift from “a general memory into a private one has given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion” (15-16).

his obsession to reconstruct his father's studio deprives the desk of its intellectual and imaginative potential, while seemingly reducing it to a fetishized commodity. Weisz has misunderstood for a long time the lesson his father has passed down to him: "[...] my father, a scholar of history, taught me that the absence of things is more useful than their presence. [...] Useful for what?" (287). He did not understand that the "great house" could exist only in the theoretical form of shared tradition, and instead of building his life around an intellectual pursuit, he has devoted it to the mission of physically retrieving his father's desk. And yet, Weisz's epilogue is the most radical, as he eventually embraces the necessity of a clear-cut rupture between his generation, the ones before him, and his children's, in order to break with a tradition of melancholy, despair and sadness. Confronted with his daughter's overt defiance – Leah has hidden the desk and disobeyed her father's orders – Weisz finally realizes that his quest was a failure. When he sees the desk again, he recognizes he should have known that to retrieve it would not have given him any sense of peace: "How often had I witnessed it in others, and yet now it almost surprised me: the disappointment, then the relief, of something at last sinking away" (289). In the end however, Weisz recovers the meaning of his father words – "the absence of things is more useful than their presence" – and realizes that in order to try and recreate the "great house" of Jewish and familiar tradition, one needs to retrieve and preserve his memories. Moreover, Weisz is able at last to envision continuity for his family, and before committing suicide he imagines a story – the only instance in the novel of an opening toward the future – about Leah donating Yoav's son the desk, which has finally come to represent an idea – of creative imagination, family, tradition, history and culture – rather than an oppressive material possession.

## CHAPTER 3

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### Pauses: Fragments of Time in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

You know what the problem is... Rachel?

Without realizing it, we go from an age where we say:

"My life will be that" to an age where we say: "That's life."

(Cheyenne – *This Must Be the Place*)

#### 3.1 1970s nostalgia

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) Jennifer Egan curiously goes back to themes that she had explored fifteen years before in her first book.<sup>85</sup> In *The Invisible Circus* (1995) Egan had told the story of a girl who, in 1978, leaves San Francisco for Europe trying to make sense of the death of her older sister, an idealistic, bohemian child of the sixties.<sup>86</sup> The novel was imbued with a sense of nostalgia for the decade that Egan's generation had missed out on, which, the author explained, was inspired by her impression of coming of age in the years that followed. Born in Chicago in 1962, Egan grew up in San Francisco, where the troubled 1970s felt to her like "an in-between moment," as if the city was experiencing "a 60s hangover" ("Jennifer Egan on Growing Up"). The "sense of hope and possibility" of the 1960s had a strong appeal for Egan, and contrasted with the darker tone

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<sup>85</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'goon' refers to "a person hired (esp. by racketeers) to terrorize workers; a thug." In popular culture the title of Egan's novel may evoke Elvis Costello's song "Goon Squad," from his 1979 album *Armed Forces*. The song is about a young soldier who writes to his parents from the war, and in the context of the political scene of the late seventies the song can be seen as an antimilitary stance. However, when asked about the possible connection to Costello's album, Egan answered that the title she chose was not a reference to the song ("A Visit"). Instead, the title is to be understood in association with the violent connotation of the expression 'goon squad,' as Egan explained: "The book is certainly full of people who feel beaten up in one way or another—disappointed, out of luck, gypped of what they once expected and still feel they deserve—but these hardships aren't the work of particular enemies so much as life's vicissitudes" ("Author Q&A").

<sup>86</sup> Egan has also published a collection of short fiction, *Emerald City and Other Stories* (1996), and two novels, *Look at Me* (2001) and *The Keep* (2006).

of the seventies: “I grew up feeling like I wanted to grow up ten years earlier, and I wanted to reconstruct every sense of what that moment was like” (ibid.). In *Goon Squad*, Egan returned to the investigation of the past, but moved her focus to the seventies and their repercussions on the decades that followed. What emerged was a sense of nostalgia *sui generis*, that encompasses both the bleak character of a period marked by the circulation of drugs, casual sexuality, and emotional isolation, and the longing for the idealized years of youth, free from the responsibility of adulthood and full of opportunities.

When *Goon Squad* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2011, the jury praised Egan’s “inventive investigation of growing up and growing old in the digital age” (“Pulitzer”).<sup>87</sup> However, fairly enough, one could also say that the book is an investigation of *the refusal* to grow up and grow old. The protagonists were mostly born in the early 1960s – Egan’s generation – and share an ambivalent fascination for the years of their youth. But it is a fascination that sits at the crossroads of the longing for a life that had just begun and was filled with possibilities and the regret of lost opportunities.<sup>88</sup> What emerges from their recollections is the turbulent atmosphere of the seventies, where drug addiction and confusing sexual relations reveal deep insecurities.

### **3.2 The story**

Reconstructing the story the novel is a complex process due to the many chronological detours. For this reason a brief account of the plot will follow, including the years in which each story is set. The first chapter, “Found Objects,” is set in New York around 2007 and has Sasha as its protagonist. A woman in her mid-thirties who pretends to be younger, Sasha describes her latest Internet date with a younger man named Alex. Sasha, who is seeing a therapist to contrast her shoplifting habit, used to work as Bennie

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<sup>87</sup> The book also won the 2010 National Book Critics Award for Fiction and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize.

<sup>88</sup> In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, nostalgia is defined as a “sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of a period of the past, especially one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past” (“Nostalgia”).

Salazar's assistant, a record producer who at this point is only mentioned tangentially, but who turns out to be the protagonist of the second story, "The Gold Cure." Set a couple of years earlier, chapter two depicts Bennie, now divorced and in his mid-forties, trying to contrast the loss of his "sex *drive*" by putting gold-flakes in his coffee (25). The next story goes back in time, to the late 1970s in San Francisco, where a seventeen-year-old Bennie is portrayed in his school years with a group of friends, which includes Scotty, Jocelyn and Rhea (chapter three). "Safari" goes even further back, to 1973, and focuses on a safari trip in Kenya that Lou Kline, a wealthy record producer in his late thirties who will become Bennie's mentor, takes with two of his children, Charlie and Rolph. In chapter five, set in San Francisco in 2005, Lou is dying and reunites with Rhea and Jocelyn, who tells the story: she is an ex-addict who is slowly trying to regain control over her life. At the end of the 1990s Scotty visits Bennie in his New York office. The two used to play together in a punk band, but while Bennie is happily married and a successful producer, Scotty is living a modest life and working as a janitor in a school (chapter six).

The transition to the second part of the text is marked by a chapter called "A to B," set in the early 2000s, which describes the years of Bennie's marriage from his wife Stephanie's perspective. Stephanie, who is dealing with her brother's life after prison, discovers Bennie's infidelity.<sup>89</sup> Chapter eight forwards to 2009 and introduces Dolly, a former publicist and Stephanie's ex-boss, whose career was ruined after she organized a disastrous party where people got burned after overhead oil displays melted. Dolly travels to the Middle East with her daughter Lulu and Kitty Jackson, an actress who is supposed to help Dolly rehabilitate a dictator's public image. The narrative then goes again back in time and describes the 2000 interview between Stephanie's brother Jules Jones and the

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<sup>89</sup> The chapter takes its name from the album that one of the minor characters, a former punk singer named Bosco, is about to publish. Famous during the 1980s, Bosco has become unrecognizable twenty years later: he is sick, fat and shabby, and has decided to go on one last "Suicide Tour" during which his end can be documented exploiting the fascination and voyeurism of reality television. Emblematic of the passing of time, Bosco's question behind his new *A to B* album is: "how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (145).

actress Kitty Jackson. The interview ends with Jules assaulting Kitty, which is the reason he will serve time in jail (chapter nine). Chapter ten takes readers back to 1994 and describes Sasha's college years at NYU from the perspective of her friend Rob, who drowns in the East River after an attempted suicide. The narrative then moves to Italy in the early 1990s, when Sasha's uncle Ted travels to Naples to look for his niece (chapter eleven). The final chapters jump ahead to the future: "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is the Power-point diary written sometime in the early 2020s by Sasha's teenage daughter Alison (chapter twelve). At this point Sasha is married to her college boyfriend Drew and they live in the California desert. They also have an older son, Lincoln, who is "slightly autistic" (267). In the end, chapter thirteen takes readers back to New York, where Scotty reconnects with Bennie, who, helped by Alex and by Dolly's daughter Lulu, organizes a huge concert in Lower Manhattan where an aged Scotty finally performs.<sup>90</sup>

### **3.3 Essential fragments of life**

The book resists categorization into any specific genre because of its unique structure and stylistic innovations. More fragmented than Krauss's and McCann's novels because of its peculiar treatment of time, *Goon Squad* is not exactly a novel in the traditional sense, nor a collection of stories, and Egan has referred to it as "entangled" stories ("The Book").<sup>91</sup> The thirteen chapters are told from distinctive perspectives, each developed through different narrative techniques: the book shifts between first person,

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<sup>90</sup> Several generations interact in the story: Lou, the music producer, and Sasha's uncle Ted were born respectively in the late 1930s and the early 1940s; Bennie, Scotty, Jocelyn, Rhea and Lou's son Rolph were born in 1962 (as was Egan); to the same generation also belong Stephanie, her brother Jules, and her boss Dolly; Sasha, her husband Drew and their friend Rob were born in 1972; Alex was born in 1983; Bennie's son Chris was born in 1998, two years before Dolly's daughter Lulu, while Sasha's children were born in the early 2010s.

<sup>91</sup> The narrative's fragmentary effect in Egan's novel is similar to *Great House* and *Let the Great World Spin*, but the techniques used to achieve it are different. In Krauss' novel the temporal point of view is the same for all the characters, the late 1990s (except for Isabel's chapter, where we learn that the present of narration is 2008). In *Let the Great World Spin*, all the characters narrate the same day in 1974, but the present of narration changes in every chapter, and is rarely clearly detectable. In *Goon Squad*, the temporal perspective always changes, according to which year the chapters are set.



singular and plural, second person singular, third person accounts with a focalization on the protagonists, and omniscient narration. The story moves in and out of the characters lives, following their trajectories across different locations around New York City and San Francisco, where most of the novel is set, but also shifting to the California desert, Kenya, the Middle East and Italy. Contributing to the novel's fragmentary structure is the way chronological time has been reshuffled: each chapter randomly jumps back and forth across the story's timeline, and repeated flashbacks and flash-forwards characterize the individual stories. Egan has explained in many interviews that the idea behind this book was that each story had to be independent and stand on its own, but that at the same time she wanted the overall result to be a composite that was more than just the sum of the single parts ("The Book"). Further explaining her choice, Egan pointed out: "You might say that discontinuity is the book's organizing principle [...] I wanted something that felt lateral and polyphonic [...]" ("Goon Squad").<sup>92</sup> Despite the fragmentation of linear progression, voice, and space, the book does nonetheless come together as a cohesive story in the end. Readers are challenged to engage with the reconstructive possibilities offered by the plot in the form of anticipations and references to events and characters that will be defined at a later time.<sup>93</sup>

Egan offers a panoramic view of America in the last forty years that unfolds against the backdrop of the evolution of the American music industry from the 1970s to the 2020s.

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<sup>92</sup> As mentioned earlier, Egan's 'lateral' treatment of time was influenced by her experience of watching *The Sopranos* (cfr. p. 22). Another major influence was reading Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which encouraged Egan to write a book on time that could be epic in aspiration but concise in form. The author's instinct was to turn to seriality, a technique that was gaining popularity as Egan was writing, and which had originated in the writers of the nineteenth century, such as Dickens. Egan's goal was to create a cast of characters that moved in and out of focus and that emphasized the 'lateral' movements of the plot, while the narrative nevertheless pushes the reader forward ("Intervista").

<sup>93</sup> In this respect, *Goon Squad* is closer to *Let the Great World Spin*, as the stories are more closely interlocked than in Krauss' novel. <sup>93</sup> Indeed, in *Goon Squad* time is treated "laterally" rather than chronologically: as it can be inferred, the narrative proceeds so that every new chapter focuses on someone who was only a minor character in the previous story. Readers may learn of turning points in the characters' lives before they get to meet them, or zoom in on a particular moment in their lives, only to have their story summed up briefly in a later chapter, or sometimes even to be left in the dark about what happens to them afterwards.

The music business provides a unifying setting, and the characters' individual stories add up to a collective account of how the historical and cultural spirit of the 1970s evolved, shaping and informing the decades that followed with a final reflection that extends to a not-so-distant future. Navigating the interconnected lives of the thirteen protagonists, the novel investigates how different generations are equally driven to confront the passing of time. Indeed, the goon of the title is time itself: approximately around the moment they turn forty, the characters tend to look back and try to understand how and when the passing of time has affected their lives.<sup>94</sup> Trying to make sense of the effects of time, the characters navigate it following transversal trajectories that intersect their lives. What emerges in each chapter are the juxtaposed crucial knots of the characters' experiences; significant, defining moments - of revelation, crisis, change - that are seen as particularly meaningful. In the process of remembering, the characters retrieve essential fragments from their memories, "moments of authenticity" that are buried somewhere under the layers of their past selves. (Funk 52).<sup>95</sup>

### **3.4 Reflective nostalgia: "everything is ending, but not yet"**

In the book's final chapter, Bennie Salazar, now a music producer in his sixties, has managed to organize a big concert in Manhattan for Scotty, with whom he used to play in a band when they were in high school more than forty years earlier. Scotty however, starts having second thoughts. He is troubled by the realization of his old age and panicking at the idea of playing live in front of all the people who have showed up. So Bennie asks, provokingly: "Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?" (370).

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<sup>94</sup> The only notable exception is Alison's section (chapter 12), which is a journal she writes when she is twelve years old.

<sup>95</sup> Wolfgang Funk points out a scene in chapter nine where Jules Jones describes the actress he is interviewing and the waiter who is attending her table comparing them to the layers of a sandwich. In Jules' comparison, the "bottom bread" presumably corresponds to their authentic self, but is obscured by how their behavior changes with time and according to the circumstances they find themselves in. According to Funk, the passage is a metaphor that signifies Egan's "fragmented (re)construction of her characters" as stratified individuals, where the authentic self only resurfaces when objects accidentally interrupt the "apparent consistency and discipline of the narrated identity of the self" (52).

And eventually, the goon *does* push everyone around, for all the characters experience the passage of time like a sudden shock. It happens as a sort of revelation, making them realize almost in disbelief that their youth is hopelessly behind them, and forcing them to come to terms with the consequences of their choices. Looking back at their past, real or idealized, personal or collective, many characters mature a feeling of longing that can be identified with what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia.” Reflective nostalgia, Boym explains, is highly ambivalent, and embraces the “contradictions of modernity,” following “ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones,” and generally refer to a plural collective memory (xviii). In *Goon Squad* this feeling thrives on the fragmentation of the book, as the pieces of memory each character evokes present different selves emerging from multiple pasts, and set them in opposition one against the other. Exploring reflective nostalgia, Boym argues that it inhabits a place between “longing and loss,” aware of “the irrevocability of the past and human finitude” (49). This is especially true for the characters of *Goon Squad*, for whom the longing for the past blends with the awareness of lost opportunities. Such an analysis of the past is quickly abandoned because their youth was too bleak for them to want to restore its conditions. Instead, the past can become a catalyst to reform oneself. Rather than aiming at restoring a symbolic past, Boym claims, reflective nostalgia “can foster a creative self” (354). “Nostalgia was the end – Everyone knew that,” Bennie tells himself, when, at forty, he looks back on his youth. And when his assistant Sasha reads out loud the list of haunting “shame memories” that he had been scribbling on a piece of paper, she believes they are ideas for song titles, “and now they sounded like titles to him too” (42-43).

In Sasha’s story, which is set around 2007, when she is no longer Bennie’s assistant, this feeling of nostalgia emerges especially in connection with her experience of New York after 9/11. It is not the event itself that is significant for Sasha, but rather its impact on the space that she inhabits. Going around Tribeca, Sasha is not able to deal with the absence of

the Towers: “she hated the neighborhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing freeways of light had always filled her with hope” (13). In Bennie’s chapter, set two years earlier, Sasha goes back to this subject in a conversation with her boss. The absence of the two buildings, which used to provide familiarity and a sense of centrality that defined the space around Sasha, now mirrors the sense of hopelessness and emptiness that she is experiencing in the city that feels broken to her. At the same time, confronting the past inspires a desire for reconstruction: “It’s incredible [...] how there’s just nothing there. [...] There should be something, you know? [...] Like an echo. Or an outline” (42).

9/11 also represents a turning point for Jules Jones, the reporter protagonist of chapter nine, “Forty-Minute Lunch,” who was sent to jail from 2000 to 2004 for the assault of a starlet during an interview. In “A to B,” the central chapter of the book, Jules is portrayed after his release, when he lives with his sister Stephanie and her husband Bennie, the music producer. The years Jules spent in prison are perceived like a deep interruption during which he has lost all familiar references, geographical, social, and emotional:

‘I go away for a few years and the whole fucking world is upside down,’ Jules said angrily. ‘Buildings are missing. You get strip-searched every time you go to someone’s office. Everybody sounds stoned, because they’re e-mailing people the whole time they’re talking to you. Tom and Nicole are with different people. And now my rock-and-roll sister and her husband are hanging around with Republicans. What the fuck!’ (141)

Straightforwardly confronted by his sister, Jules then drops the sarcasm and admits his disorientation:

‘What are your plans, Jules?’ [...] ‘I mean what are you going to do.’  
There was a long pause. Finally Jules said, ‘I have no idea.’

Stephanie glanced at him. They'd turned onto the Henry Hudson Parkway, and Jules was looking at the river, his face devoid of energy or hope. [...] 'I don't get it, Jules,' Stephanie said. 'I don't get what happened to you.'

Jules stared at the glittering skyline of Lower Manhattan without recognition. 'I'm like America,' he said. [...] 'Our hands are dirty,' Jules said. (141-142)

Exactly like Sasha, the way New York has changed while Jules was away produces a sense of displacement. Looking toward Lower Manhattan, the skyline is no longer as he remembered it, without the Towers. This lack of familiar references in the space around him results not only in the recollection of a past when he was younger and "full of ideas" (141), but also in a sense of hopelessness before the difficulty to adjust to a world that has rapidly evolved, socially and technologically, while he was isolated from it. His sister Stephanie shares similar emotions, longing for a time free of responsibility that, in her idealized version of the past, corresponds to the years of her dissolute youth in New York.<sup>96</sup> When an overwhelmed Stephanie exclaims that she feels that "everything is ending," Jules replies that "Sure, everything is ending [...] but not yet" (151). Commenting on this passage, Egan explained: "In retrospect, I think I wanted to design a book that consciously occupied and explored that very small, yet vividly powerful, "not yet" ("Author Q&A"). And it is precisely the "not yet" that is represented by the interruptions between the fragments of narrative, and it is that temporal space that the characters are led to investigate.

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<sup>96</sup> Stephanie's feelings represent once again the ambiguous nostalgia towards youth in the 1970s, which idealizes a moment that was actually dark and bleak: "She was thinking of the old days [...] premarriage, preparenthood, premoney, pre-hard drug renunciation, prerresponsibility of any kind, when they were still kicking around the Lower East Side with Bosco, going to bed after sunrise, turning up at strangers' apartments, having sex in quasi public, engaging in daring acts that had more than once included (for her) shooting heroin, because none of it was serious. They were young and lucky and strong—what did they have to worry about? If they didn't like the result, they could go back and start again" (150).

### **3.5 Temporal pauses: visits from the goon squad**

The characters in *Goon Squad*, similarly to those in *Great House* and *Let the Great World Spin*, are concerned with making sense of their past. The difference is that the characters in *Goon Squad* seem to be particularly disturbed by the shocking effect of confronting their past selves. In other words, they are drawn to investigate how exactly they went from one point in time to the other, and are confused – sometimes upset – by the “pause” between those moments. The enigma of time, for them, is the void that results between the fragments of memory. It is precisely in that space that time, the goon, has silently visited them. The concept of the pause is central in *Goon Squad*: on the one hand it defines the structural organization of the plot, complicating the reader’s response to the text, while on the other it signifies the novel’s general concern with time as it emerges both in the characters’ attitude towards the past and in the reflection on technology that closes the book.

Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading* explains that “comprehension does not take place only through what is said, but also through what is implied,” and, he continues, “as what is meant can never totally be translated into what is said, the utterance is bound to contain implications which in turn necessitate interpretation” (59). Iser refers to these implications as “indeterminacies” which need to be checked through “conventions, procedures, and rules” (59), through what he calls the “repertoire” (69) of the text, namely, the conventions which are familiar to both text and reader. The repertoire may include “references to earlier literary works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (69). The “blanks” (182) that are present in the text are precisely what allows the communication between text and readers, because it is exactly what is missing that pushes readers to action, so that they will be able to construct the meaning of the text. In *Goon Squad* the structural “blanks” concern the leaping proceeding of chronology, which leaves significant voids in the plot, limiting readers to a

rather incomplete access. The pauses happen in the interruptions between the chapters, when the plot of a story is abandoned in favor of a new one, but also in the time that separates the episodes through the many chronological deviations dictated by memory or omniscient narrators.

One of the major effects of the gaps in the story is to destabilize the reader by showing the characters at moments in their lives that are very far apart, without providing any explanation that could prepare the reader for the outcome of the storyline. This technique mirrors the shock the characters themselves experience when confronting the passing of time. One of the most poignant examples is Lou's storyline. A famous music producer in the 1970s and 1980s, Lou is depicted in chapters three and four as an extremely attractive character: a strong man, powerful, successful and wealthy. In chapter five, when we see him again after twenty years, Lou has recently had a stroke and is dying in his San Francisco home. What was once the location of crazy parties is now empty save for the nurse and Lou, who is relegated to a hospital bed and almost unable to speak. It is 2005 and the narrator is Jocelyn, one of the girls in Bennie's gang, who was Lou's lover when she was a teenager. In the present, when she and her college friend Rhea visit Lou, the distance is shocking, both in terms of time – Jocelyn was seventeen when she met Lou in the late Seventies– and in terms of the context. The experience is devastating for Jocelyn, as Lou now represents sickness and decline, an image that stands in complete opposition with the man she knew. His condition also forces Jocelyn to confront her own failures: her story of twenty-six years emerges in pieces: "I'm back at my mother's again, trying to finish my B.A. at UCLA Extension after some long, confusing detours. [...] Every night, my mother ticks off another day I've been clean. It's more than a year, my longest yet" (98-104). Jocelyn's portrait is fragile and fragmentary: in the present she is a recovering drug addict who lives with her mother, while in the past she comes across as a bold teenager and a lost junkie. The image of herself she has built in her mind reflects an

idealized past, where her adolescence is constructed as a romanticized moment of glory, energy and vitality, opposed to her empty and meaningless present, where the sight of Lou as an old, sick man is resisted to the point that Jocelyn imagines drowning him into his pool. Reflecting on the passage of time, regretting the wasted opportunities, Jocelyn concedes: “It’s finished. Everything went past, without me” (98). The time gap in Jocelyn’s storyline is a long hiatus and is not described in the book. This is because, to Jocelyn, those twenty-six years are irrelevant compared to the time of her youth, and because to narrate them would require her to come to terms with them.<sup>97</sup>

Another significant series of “pauses” in the book is represented by the time leaps that appear in “Safari.” Here time is organized in a way that is unique compared to the other sections, but that mirrors the general effect achieved in the book: an unsettling mix of past, present and future. This story, told by an omniscient narrator, is set in 1973 in Kenya. The protagonist is Lou, the music producer who has already been mentioned in previous chapters as Jocelyn’s lover and Bennie’s mentor. Here he is on a safari with his girlfriend Mindy, and two of his children, Charlie and Rolph. A lot is at stake in the narrative: Lou’s rough upbringing of his son through stereotyped and misogynist notions about women; sexual tension between Lou and his girlfriend Mindy, and between Mindy and another man in the group; Rolph’s awareness of this tension and his struggle between the love for his father and the craving for Mindy’s motherly attention. The narration of these days in Africa proceeds chronologically, except for some crucial interventions from the narrator, where he comments on the action by providing flash-forwards that inform readers on the future of the characters.<sup>98</sup> Two of these flash-forwards are about Lou’s

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<sup>97</sup> About the question of time and subjectivity, Egan explained that there is “tension [...] between the incremental and inexorable passage of time and the leaping, stuttering quality of consciousness. The two do not match up. One result of that is that time is passing gradually, but we experience its effect as very sudden. Our perception of time is full of all these gaps” (“The Rumpus”).

<sup>98</sup> DeRosa argues that there are two kinds of nostalgia at play in the chapter. On the one hand, Rolph’s nostalgia for the time of his childhood, and on the other a “proleptic nostalgia” on the narrator’s part, for a future that is repeatedly anticipated (98). The flash-forwards in this chapter,



children and reveal Rolph's suicide in 1990 and Charlie's troubled life, which includes her joining a cult, a cocaine addiction and difficult relationships with men. These details turn out to be extremely disturbing especially because they are juxtaposed with the children's present experience and their childhood memories. The revelation of Rolph's suicide, for example, is casually inserted between the scene in the present of him and Charlie dancing in Africa, and Charlie's future memory of the scene itself: "In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return too again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight: her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance" (95).<sup>99</sup> The broken timeline in Charlie's and Rolph's plots deprives them of their childhood innocence, stressing the nostalgic tone that dominates the chapter.<sup>100</sup>

### **3.6 Musical pauses: the book as an LP and Alison's journal**

By disorienting the linear progression of the plot, the treatment of time in the novel mimics the sequential irregularity of music, as if listening to a sequence of songs representative of different times and styles. Egan has explained that the fragmented chronological structure of *Goon Squad* was conceived to follow a musical organization: "I don't experience time as linear. I experience it in layers that seem to coexist. I feel like 20 years ago was really recent even though I was much younger and had a different kind of life. Yet at the same time I feel like I'm still kind of there. One thing that facilitates that

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DeRosa points out, "create a doubleness in which the reader occupies both a godlike position, having access to the narrative's future, and the suspension of that knowledge" as readers follow the developing action in the present of narration (98). The effect of this particular form of prolepsis is to "treat[...] the reader's future as if it were already lived" (101).

<sup>99</sup> Except for these quick flash-forwards, Rolph is only portrayed as a child and as an adolescent, leaving a large void between the present of narration and what readers know of his future. Significantly, the most poignant image of Rolph in the novel is emblematic of his immaculate youth. Jocelyn remembers him at seventeen, his naked body reflected in a mirror: "In the mirror, Rolph's chest was smooth. There was no mark. The mark was everywhere. The mark was youth" (101). At this point, the reader is aware that Rolph will die young, and Egan has revealed that the effect of this awareness and the pathos it creates was inspired by the altered timeline in the movie *Pulp Fiction* ("Intervista").

<sup>100</sup> Significantly, as DeRosa notices, the chapter opens with Rolph's insistent appeals to his sister to "remember" (99).

kind of time travel is music” (“Jennifer Egan”). The temporal logic of the text is connected to the central role music plays in the text, which two main parts, “A” and “B,” are actually designed to mirror the sides of an LP record:

I conceived of this book [...] as an LP: a narrative that unfolds in segments that contrast a great deal with one another, but contain a range of styles and tell a story over time. Like any LP, it has an A side and a B side, organized on the same principles of evolution and contrast. In our era of atomized song-buying, the LP is not just a physical relic, but a conceptual one—which is partly why I wanted to honor and exploit it as a structural model in this book. But given that the book’s subject, to a large extent, is change over time, “A to B” is also a kind of shorthand for that change. If *Goon Squad* is about pauses, then “A to B” is the space inside of which the pauses take place. (“Author Q&A”)

“Music is timeless,” Egan explains, “it transports us instantly back to periods of our lives that are long gone, and makes us feel like we’re fully back in their midst” (“Author Q&A”). Similarly in the text, the reader crisscrosses through different periods of time, exploring each story as if listening to a song from a particular epoch. “Yet in a cultural sense,” Egan continues, “music marks the passage of time like almost nothing else [...] in fact, it’s an indelible reminder that the cultural movements that produced it are ancient history” (“Author Q&A”). And indeed, the evolution of the music industry traces the passing of time in the text, signifying not only the cultural and social changes, but also the different stages in the characters’ lives, marking their transition from youth into adulthood and old age.

The musical metaphor is most evident in chapter twelve, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” which makes an interesting detour from the general path of the novel. The chapter jumps forward to the early 2020s, and is narrated by Sasha’s twelve-year-old

daughter Alison.<sup>101</sup> Regarded as the most experimental part of the book, the chapter is a journal in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, consisting of a series of slides made of text, charts, tables, and graphics. Alison describes her family, with particular attention to her autistic brother Lincoln's fascination with pauses in rock songs. Each slide is filled with concise impressions about Alison's family life, concentrating on very ordinary things, like her mother's "annoying habits," or her brother's dinnertime conversations with his parents. The slides depict domestic moments, still-frames such as Sasha waiting for her husband to come home after work at night, Lincoln's baseball game, or Drew, the father, grilling meat for dinner. Alison describes the day of Lincoln's game and the day after, but her narrative is occasionally interrupted by flashbacks or references to her family's past. The past transpires both to indicate Alison's childhood memories and to investigate her mother's story.<sup>102</sup> Through Alison's perspective, Sasha's familiar past is constructed as a distant universe, something her mother refuses to discuss because "it feels like another life" and because that time is "so imbued with [her] own struggles" (293). The tone in Alison's chapter however, is typical of a preadolescent girl – filled with innocent sarcasm, funny remarks, sensitivity and strong emotions – and adds lightness to her mother's painful memories, gently incorporated into the family's present. Differently from elsewhere in the book, Alison's narrative offers a counterpart to the prevailing nostalgic tendency. While in the previous chapters the protagonists confront the inevitability of the

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<sup>101</sup> On her website ([jenniferegan.com](http://jenniferegan.com)), Egan has included a PowerPoint-like version of the chapter "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," with color slides and the sound reproduction of the songs – and, notably, the pauses – included in Alison's journal. Similarly to Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, Egan plays with the materiality of the novel, creating a physical version of the chapter that the reader can interact with, extending the borders of the actual text. Differently from Ware however, Egan's digital chapter provides additional features that do not fit the medium she originally chose to represent Alison's journal. The PowerPoint is not the only digital extension of *Goon Squad*: Egan has included short descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the genesis of each chapter, with precise references to the time and place of her writing, and explained that she wanted her website to be a "shadow experience of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* [...]. The goal was to suggest, via patches of context around each chapter, the shape of a city – and life – that formed the book in question over many years" (McDonald).

<sup>102</sup> For instance, Alison tells the story of Sasha's friend Rob, who drowned when they were teenagers, and she describes a picture of young Sasha in Bosco's memoir about his career.

passing of time and the realization that their youth is gone forever, Alison's story is strongly concentrated on the present.

Peter Brooks in *Reading For the Plot* writes that “narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality” and that “plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality (11). Of all the chapters in *Goon Squad*, which revolve around the characters' traumas that originate from their awareness of the finitude of things, Alison's is the least time-bounded. Brooks writes that “plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality” and precisely because plot is essentially absent from Alison's narration, her chapter reveals an original attitude toward time (22). Alison's narrative is not rooted in temporality. She inserts a date at the beginning of the PowerPoint – “May 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup>, 202-” – but the year is crucially omitted, as if stressing her independence from time. Rather than depending on temporal causality, her narration is based on the juxtaposition of essential episodes of ordinary life.

Fragmentation for Alison becomes the most accurate way to depict the dynamics and tensions of her family, to represent a collage of domestic moments. The pauses are the fundamental unit of the journal: not only do they signify the structural interruptions between the slides, but also the breaks between the elements within the individual slides. Thematically, the pauses represent the gap between Alison and her parents and the silences between them. Crucially, the pauses in rock songs that her brother Lincoln is so obsessed with suggest what the members in Alison's family are unable to communicate. The misinterpretations that trouble family relationships are mainly generational conflicts. For example, Sasha cannot understand why her daughter prefers digital writing to writing on paper (287), while Alison tries to make sense of her mother's material artifacts using

“found objects” (289, fig. 1). Also, Alison’s familiarity with new media contrasts with her mother’s attitude towards problematic family matters: while Sasha’s response to a violent father was realized in her physical movements to Tokyo, China, Italy and finally New York and California, Alison confronts her brother’s autism by navigating virtual space. A similar tension characterizes Alison’s father and his son Lincoln. Drew, a doctor, has troubles understanding Lincoln’s fascination with pauses in songs, and ends up shouting and making the boy cry (312-314, fig. 2). Alison’s deliberate use of a fragmented narrative technique, which she draws from technology, is the most fitting way to describe her reality and it is an active, lively approach that offers a vigilant gaze on the present, demonstrating how technology may provide the instruments for a clear analysis of contemporary matters.

### **3.7 Technology and new media: “an aesthetic holocaust”?**

*Goon Squad* has more than once been praised for its ability to represent connections and social relations in the time of social media.<sup>103</sup> Egan however, reported that even though the text reveals an “Internet quality” in the way she plays with chronology, she “wasn’t thinking of that consciously” as she was devising the structure of the book (“Proust”). Nonetheless, the book is intrinsically defined by the contemporary taste for multiplicity and its structure inevitably reflects the way technology has shaped social experiences in modern life. Moving back and forth in time and across a global geography, the text evokes the boundless virtual space users explore as they navigate the Web. Egan has confirmed that the book resonates with her ongoing “investigation [...] of the evolution of technology and its impact on people’s lives” (“Author Q&A”). In the case of *Goon Squad*, “the music industry – so ravaged by digitization – became another lens through which to look, even peripherally, at some ramifications of technological change” (“Author Q&A”). The music business is seen spanning roughly four decades, during which it has evolved but

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<sup>103</sup> Jennie Yabroff in *Newsweek* compared Egan’s novel to “a Facebook page” and wrote that it “mimics the narcissism and fragmentation of social networks” (“Jennifer Egan Likes This”).

at the same time succumbed to the technological changes that the Internet and digitization have brought along. In 2006, reflecting on the impact of technology on art, Bennie notices: “the problem [is] *digitization*, which suck[s] the life out of everything that [gets] smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. *An aesthetic holocaust!*” (26). Digitized music has no quality according to Bennie, and he admits that even the music he produces is flat and lacks authenticity, because it is produced merely to make profit and keep happy the people at the oil-company to whom Bennie has sold his label.

Egan’s question behind her examination of the impact of technology on music originates from a bigger concern about the future of art: “will language and literary creation be debased by texting shorthand and the plagiaristic ‘sampling’ mentality of Web culture, as the music industry has been?) Culturally and humanistically, these are vast, gaping questions. [...] “Pure Language”—and in some sense all of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*—is my attempt to answer them” (“Author Q&A”). The book’s last chapter, “Pure Language” presents a not-so-distant future – approximately 2022 – where technology has surpassed oral interaction, and people communicate through abbreviated text messages. Bennie’s friend Alex and his younger assistant Lulu usually chat back and forth:

*only Ets chInEs*

!

...

87

*tel me hEs betr in prsn*

*nevr met*

*4 rEl??*

*shy*

*#@&\* (363)*

These exchanges lead Alex to realize that Lulu “was a person who lived in his pocket” (363). New York in the 2020s is a world where children, known as “preverbal,” own a handset through which they can download songs, affecting the music market (347), where words like “identity,” “real,” and “story” only make sense if used in quotation marks (360), and where live music is a relic from the past. However, the book ends on a positive note: Bennie and Scotty reconnect, and Scotty finally has the chance to play live before the thousands of people who have gathered at the World Trade Center site to attend his concert. Also, there is a sort of resolution in the evolution of Bennie’s character: he is no longer the forty-year-old obsessed with sex and haunted by “shame memories” (22). As he is approaching maturity, Bennie has become a wiser mentor than Lou ever was to him, and during the exchange that closes the book, to Alex’s critical self-doubt – “I don’t know what happened to me,” – Bennie calmly replies: “You grew up Alex, just like the rest of us,” apparently accepting the passing of time (378).

Following the questions the last two chapters raise concerning the impact of technology on society and on culture in particular, it is possible to argue that the characters’ fragmented narratives originate from the desire to resist the abundance of data available in the digital age.<sup>104</sup> Contrasting the idea of the Web as an infinite archive for people’s personal memories as well as for society’s collective past, Egan’s novel takes a stand in favor of authentic storytelling, only recovering and narrating the moments that are essential to the individual. It is in these interruptions of time, these gaps in the narrative, that things happen and help create meaning. Time acts as the goon, changing

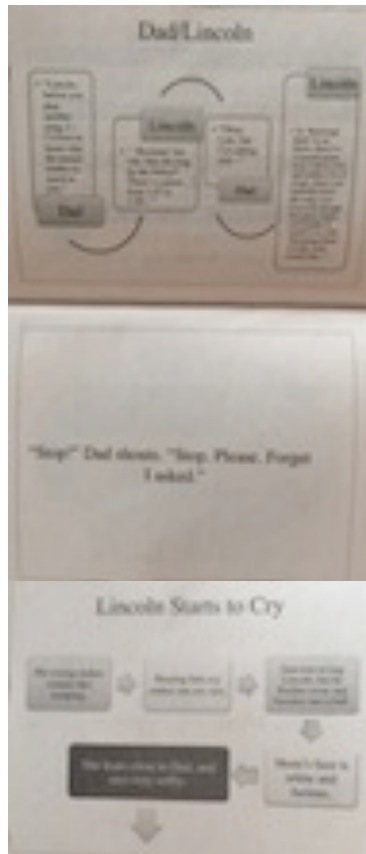
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<sup>104</sup> Music critic Simon Reynolds argued in his 2011 book *Retromania* that one can identify in twenty-first century pop music a nostalgic tendency of repeatedly recur to its past: “Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade” (x-xi). Similarly to Egan’s point in *Goon Squad*, Reynolds traces this tendency to the impact of technology: “We’ve become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organize, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is able to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously” (xxi).

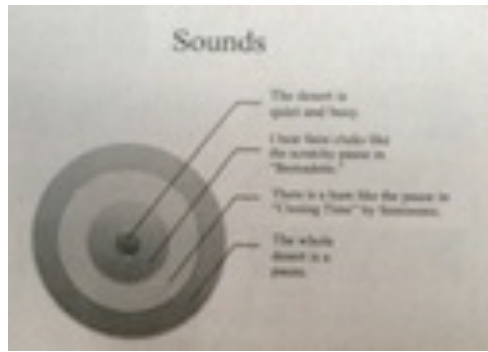
characters and circumstances with its ellipses. The drive to scarcity and to the essential nature of the fragment, are crucially mirrored at the end of the novel by the desert landscape where Alison lives with her family. In the desert, a metaphorical blank space that Alison perceives as a “pause” in itself (321, fig. 3), the sculptures her mother makes out of trash, “eventually fall apart.” But that, Alison explains, “is part of the process” (276, fig. 4).







**Fig. 2. The sequence of slides showing Lincoln’s fascination with pauses in songs and the conflict with his father. © Jennifer Egan. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010).**



**Fig. 3. Alison compares the desert to a “pause.” © Jennifer Egan. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010).**



**Fig. 4. Alison’s memories of the desert include the transitory nature of Sasha’s sculptures. © Jennifer Egan. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010).**

## CHAPTER 4

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### A World in a Box: Remembering the Self Across Time in *Building Stories*

“Time, as cut into minute sausage slices and laid out on the page in an array from which larger connections and patterns may be sensed, is the cartoonist’s ‘paint’ or ‘clay’.”

(Chris Ware, “Why I Love Comics”)

#### 4.1 Ware’s comics: intricate machines

Chris Ware is one of the most appreciated American cartoonists of this time.<sup>105</sup> Born in 1967 in Omaha, Nebraska, he has been based in Chicago since the 1990s. He began to publish his work in *RAW*, a comics magazine edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly from 1980 to 1991.<sup>106</sup> His work later appeared in some Chicago newspapers, until he created an ongoing comics series *Acme Novelty Library* in 1993. Alongside his comics featuring characters like Quimby the Mouse and Rusty Brown, one of Ware’s most popular comics is the story of Jimmy Corrigan, which was serialized in *Acme Novelty* as well as in other publications before it became Ware’s first graphic novel, the critically celebrated *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000).<sup>107</sup> A book that explores serious themes such as familial legacy, the relationship between fathers and sons, and the weight of emotional connections, the seriousness of *Jimmy Corrigan* is, like all Ware’s work,

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<sup>105</sup> Two major studies exist on the work of Chris Ware. One is the monograph *Chris Ware* (2004) by Daniel Raeburn, and the other is the collection of essays *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking* (2010). A study of Ware’s first graphic novel can be found in D.J. Dycus *Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: Honing the Hybridity of the Graphic Novel* (2012).

<sup>106</sup> Ware’s first comic piece, a wordless strip called “Waking Up Blind” was published in *RAW* 2.2 in 1990 and featured a potato-like character that resembled its creator. One can already start to notice the “clean, bold pen line” that will distinguish his drawing” (Chute 218).

<sup>107</sup> The success of *Jimmy Corrigan* was confirmed by two Eisner awards, the American Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award. Assessing the status of graphic novels as the new trend in literary fiction, McGrath called *Jimmy Corrigan* “easily the most beautiful and most complicated of all the new graphic novels.”

counterbalanced by a clean and plain drawing style. Also, Ware is particularly talented at describing his characters' tragic stories, their inner complexity and existential questions in a humorous, light tone. The main story is quite modest: Jimmy is a lonely, simple man who briefly meets his father as an adult, shortly before the old man dies.<sup>108</sup> As is typical of Ware's work, several other storylines intertwine in the text. The plot frequently moves into the past to explore the history of Jimmy's family, set in Chicago in the 1890s. Jimmy comes from a family of Irish immigrants. The backstory focuses on the relationship between Jimmy's grandfather James and his abusive and racist father William, who abandoned James when he was a child at the Chicago World Exhibition of 1893. There is also the story of Jimmy's stepsister Amy, an African-American woman whose story allows Ware to trace her history back to her slave ancestors. Also, many of the parallel stories consist of Jimmy's imaginative dream sequences. What characterizes Ware's work is experimentation with form that contrasts with his simple drawing style. The reader is challenged to make sense of complex diagrams, maps, impossibly small texts, cut-outs with instructions, multiple-choice tests and non-chronological sequences. The result is what critic Peter Schjeldahl called an "intricate machine." In the *New Yorker* Schjeldahl pointed to the "difficulty" of Ware's work and drew a parallel between his comics and the avant-garde work of Modernist artists such as Picasso and Eliot. More than ten years later, Ware published his second graphic novel, *Building Stories* (2012), parts of which had been serialized in different magazines and newspapers over the years.<sup>109</sup> *Building Stories* is also a challenging text, where formal devices like nonlinear chronology and diagrams are used

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<sup>108</sup> *Jimmy Corrigan* is a highly autobiographical work: Ware himself grew up without a father, and met him only once, when he was an adult. Ware's father died shortly before *Jimmy Corrigan* was completed (Ware "Interview").

<sup>109</sup> During the creative process that led to the publication of the novel, portions of the book were serialized in *Acme Novelty Library*, as well as in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *The Chicago Reader* and *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Also, a section of the story that became the "September 23rd, 2000" book in the published work was serialized in *The New York Times Magazine* between 2005 and 2006.

to represent the complex temporal architecture of the story and to describe the characters' convoluted mental processes. These features have now become a staple of Ware's comics adding to his reputation as a "difficult" writer.<sup>110</sup> Ware's latest publication is "The Last Saturday," a graphic novella that was serialized on *The Guardian* website between 2014 and 2015. His work also regularly appears in publications such as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.

#### **4.2 A fragmented world in a box**

*Building Stories* is an ambitious work, with which Ware has tried to achieve "something that compels the reader in some way [...], that's inviting," in the same way he perceived "the Internet and TV and movies" to be doing (Burns 160). Indeed, Ware's attempt was extremely successful and resulted in the creation of a graphic novel *sui generis* that reached instant popularity. An extremely dense work, the peculiarity of *Building Stories* is its fragmented form. The story is contained in a colorful 12x17-inch cardboard box and it is physically divided into fourteen "distinctively discreet Books, Booklets, Magazines, Newspapers, and Pamphlets": two hardcover books, a newspaper, a poster, four comic books, two broadsheets, a booklet, two foldouts and a board, which can be read in any order ("Box").<sup>111</sup> Combined together, the items tell the story of a brownstone walk-up in Chicago, where the paths of a group of four unnamed residents cross around the late 1990s. The landlady who lives on the first floor is a reclusive old woman who has spent almost her entire life in the building, while the second floor is home to a middle-aged couple whose relationship is on the rocks. On the third floor is a lonely young woman with a prosthetic leg who works at a flowers shop. Having given up her artistic dreams, the

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<sup>110</sup> Cfr. "Chris Ware and the 'Cult of Difficulty'" in Ball and Kuhlman's introduction to *The Comics of Chris Ware*.

<sup>111</sup> For a detailed list of all the items that make up the graphic novel, see the "Note" at the end of the chapter. The sections do not have page numbers, and only some of the booklets are given a title in the original, which I have maintained when possible for identification. In order to make the cataloguing easier, I have provided the rest of the elements with a title of my invention and I have included a short description of the contents.

woman wonders if she will ever accomplish something in her life. She will eventually marry and become a mother, and move to Oak Park, where she will deal with the ups and downs of family life, while still confronting the anxiety of unfulfilled ambitions. The novel also includes two less conventional “characters”: the building itself, which is occasionally anthropomorphized and given a voice of its own, and Branford, a bee who lives outside the building.<sup>112</sup> Every item in the box follows the storyline of a different character, even though in a few occasions the stories intertwine.<sup>113</sup> The tenants’ lives unfold in the present, but the stories are frequently interrupted as the protagonists recall significant moments in their past, so that in every story the present narrative is braided together with resurfacing memories. In exactly the same manner as the novels analyzed so far, there is rarely occasion for linear storytelling in *Building Stories*. In fact, past and present episodes are juxtaposed as if they were happening simultaneously, reproducing the effect of the process of remembering. The stories are connected by the presence of the building, which has the same role as the desk in *Great House* or the music business in *Goon Squad*. This connection works for readers despite the fact that *Building Stories* is fragmented on the level of plot, temporal progression, space and voice. Also, the stories are related thematically through the characters’ common experiences of loss, loneliness, melancholia, unfulfilled ambitions, and the search for emotional connection. Similarly to the novels analyzed so far, *Building Stories* investigates how the characters interpret the passing of time. Specifically in Ware’s text, the main focus is to tell a story that aims to reflect the intricate paths of memory when the characters re-imagine the stories of their lives.

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<sup>112</sup> Branford is the protagonist of two elements in the box, the newspaper “The Daily Bee” and the comic book “Branford: The Best Bee in the World.” An omniscient narrator tells his story in the third person. Branford is also the protagonist of the bedtime stories that the woman from the third floor tells her daughter in the episodes that feature her family life.

<sup>113</sup> The items where the storylines cross are “September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000,” which chronicles one day in the life of the residents and the building, “My Life,” where the woman’s story is sometimes interrupted by the building’s narration, and the “Board,” where the residents’ lives and thoughts are told from the building’s perspective.

On first glance Ware's comics appear simple and straightforward. The box resembles that of a board game, and is decorated with drawings and strips inspired by the world of novel (fig. 5). The front cover is organized in panels of different shapes and sizes that combine the colored letters of the title with some drawings taken from the story, such as of the old building in Chicago and of the woman who lives on the third floor. The playful graphic organization anticipates the fragmentary style that characterizes the novel and its various pieces. Separate objects and body parts are represented on the cover: a shutter and a window, as well as a finger, an eye and an eyelash are scattered across the page. The drawing style conveys an almost child-like atmosphere: a nickel is as big as a sleeping baby; the world, the United States and a bee are all of the same size; the building seems to be floating in the air, over a panel depicting a pastel-blue sky, and everything is drawn in vivid colors and simple, almost stylized shapes. Isaac Cates has said of Ware's style that "the uniformity of [his] line, the openness of his visual forms, his flat fields of color, and the simplification of organic background elements like trees and bushes until they resemble symbols on an architect's plan [...] are engineered to approach [...] immediacy, a kind of stylistic transparency" ("Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams" 97). Explaining this dichotomy, Ware maintained: "I try to draw comics that are both simple and complex; that is, the drawing is simple, but the stories and visual structures that tell the stories are detailed and intertwined. However awkward it may be, such an approach reflects the way I see and understand the world" ("A Sense of There-ness" 9). The minimalism and clarity of Ware's drawings are counterbalanced not only by the intricacy of the plot, but also by the layout configurations he uses to represent episodes, thoughts and events. The thick texts and referential lettering that complement the images and the thematic density of his stories also contribute to the complexity of the work. Ware's novel should be read keeping in mind the claim set forth by Will Eisner in his 1985 seminal work *Comics and Sequential Art*, where the author argued for a legitimization of comics as "an art and literary form"



that deserves to receive scholarly attention (5), and those made more recently by Charles Hatfield, who has argued against the widespread view of comics as “easy” and against the “persistent claims for the form’s simplicity and transparency” (36). It is only in the interplay of the artistic and literary elements in the novel that readers can fully grasp its complexity.

#### **4.3 Readers negotiate the story/discourse relation**

Readers are given no instructions as to the order in which to read *Building Stories*: each of the fourteen pieces can serve as the beginning, middle, or end of the story. “There is no correct order” to experience the different elements, Ware has explained (“Chris Ware”). The text can be read in “87,178,291,200 different ways,” and “the point was to make a book with no beginning or end” (“The Art of Comics”). Because the structure Ware has devised resists linearity, readers are forced to actively “build” the story (and stories) themselves, establishing a connection between the different elements while at the same time combining them into a single narrative.<sup>114</sup> One of the most challenging aspects of the novel, in other words, concerns the way readers are called to negotiate the delicate relationship between story and discourse.<sup>115</sup> This process is similar to the reconstruction of plot required by the novels analyzed so far, especially a highly fragmented text such as Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In *Building Stories*, readers are not simply required to reconstruct the story. They must build it themselves, physically assembling the different

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<sup>114</sup> Husárová and Montfort have called this particular genre “shuffle literature,” defining it as “the form of literary expression that invites the reader to choose her own way of progressing the story while still belonging to the traditions of paper-based formats and print publishing.” According to the authors, this kind of literature is often concerned with “fragmented memory, the reconstruction of the past, and painful and sometimes traumatic experiences.” Their analysis confirms the goal of the fragmentary structure of *Building Stories*, whose major concern is the role of the characters’ memory in the reconstruction of their past. The authors identify shuffle literature as characteristic of “20<sup>th</sup>-century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century concern for cognition and memory, a drive to see [...] the one consistently random way that a mind brings up slices of the past.”

<sup>115</sup> In narratology, the distinction between story and discourse refers respectively to the actual chronological sequence of events that take place in the narrative and the way that sequence is presented in the text. For a more exhaustive definition, see “Story-Discourse Distinction” in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (566-568).

elements, a process that has to happen simultaneously on multiple levels. It begins anew with each book, because the narration always starts in *medias res* and because the present of narration is constantly meshed with analeptic narratives, and demands that readers position each episode within the general economy of the story. Also, the reader's ability to negotiate the story/discourse distinction is usually challenged within a single page. It is the very medium of comics that allows for events to be presented and experienced simultaneously, often in a fragmented and non-linear fashion. As Gene Kannenberg notes, "comics allows for the simultaneous presentation of convergent or divergent information via the arrangement of various visual elements within the unifying space of the comics page" (176). The complexity of *Building Stories* is inseparable from the experience of reading comics. Even though readers can reconstruct the *story* of the narrative, its *discourse* is not fixed because it always partially changes according to how each reader makes sense of it.<sup>116</sup> As a consequence, the plot of *Building Stories* depends inexorably on the reader, resonating with Peter Brooks' definition of plot as a "structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession" (*Reading From the Plot* 37). In order to understand how the different books/booklets/posters/foldouts reflect thematically on the story, readers need to navigate the alternative routes that characterize each element by constructing and

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<sup>116</sup> As Charles Hatfield has argued in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, reading comics is a complex task because of the tensions that are intrinsic to the medium and that manifest themselves at different levels of interaction with the text. Hatfield's analysis proves extremely helpful in order to understand how readers negotiate the balance between story and discourse in *Building Stories*. In particular, he acknowledges four main tensions in comics. The most evident is the one between "codes of signification," which originates in the coexistence of text and image. Comics, Hatfield argues, try to overcome rather than emphasize the text/image distinction (36-37). Another kind of tension, which Hatfield names "sequence vs. surface," is at play within the page considered as a "design unit". It may work both as a sequence of images and as an object to be experienced in a "holistic fashion" (48). This tension also determines two different ways of perceiving time while reading comics: a serial and a synchronistic timing experience (58). Hatfield also notices a tension that concerns comic art as an "experience over time" as opposed to the "text as object," where the emphasis falls on the materiality of the text (58). Finally, there is a complementary tension between the "image-in-series" and the "single image" of which the series is composed, which mirror respectively the authorial process of "breaking down" the narrative into a chain of images and the reverse process of "closure" carried out by readers when they try to translate the series into a temporal sequence (41).

reconstructing their own version of the narrative. The reader of *Building Stories* is the perfect example of what Scott McCloud has defined as the artist's "silent accomplice" and "equal partner in crime" (68).

The single page can be seen as a basic unit that represents the narrative architecture of *Building Stories*. Some pages are like labyrinths where readers can get lost among interweaving texts and panels of different shapes and sizes that represent the coexistence of different layers of time. The text and the graphic elements are often organized around a central image and they may represent sequential or scattered events, a single episode, an idea or a thought process. Lines and arrows may run through the page without necessarily illustrating a progressive order, but instead suggest a background connection that ties the pieces together. It is up to the reader to determine the nature of that connection and decide the order in which to experience the different parts. As Cates has argued in his analysis of diagrams in Ware's comics, "Ware's diagrams and diagram-like passages short-circuit time, making connections of meaning instead of narrative chronology" ("The Diagram of a Life"). One such example is the two-page representation of the story of the building at the beginning of the "My Life" book (fig. 6). Readers are encouraged to experience the composition by following the white arrows that connect the title "Once upon a time" to the strips, drawings, texts and panels. A description of the history of the building from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present in the early 2000s is connected to a vertical series of panels that shows the landlady's face as it changes from childhood to old age. At the center of the page, a big drawing of the building depicts the landlady in the present staring out of the window accompanied by her bitter considerations about the tenants. A chain of blue circles winds across the page, taking readers back in time. Each blue circle represents a year and contains the marching legs of the previous residents. The chain describes a figurative walk through time, from the late 1940s to the present, where a woman – possibly the woman with the prosthetic leg – is drying her hair. The woman is

linked to a series of affectionate memories that the building evokes about the women who had lived there over the years, each with their own eccentricities. Once again readers are taken back in time and are eventually fast forwarded to the future, as the anthropomorphized building ironically comments on the landlady's final "brand-new home" six feet under ("My Life"). While the arrows are supposed to indicate temporal development, they simply suggest one possible order in which to experience the juxtaposed elements. Ironically, the composition is a reflection on the passing of time. Using different techniques and combining multiple storylines, readers are repeatedly guided back and forth in time. The nonlinear arrangement of the pages has multiple meanings: the evolution of the building and the transformation of a neighborhood, the solitary condition of the landlady, and the uniformity of human experiences.

#### **4.4 Representing/reading memory**

Most of the storylines in *Building Stories* are framed within definite boundaries. The story of the elderly landlady and the unhappy couple are told each in their own comic book, where the present action – in both books corresponding to the end of the 1990s – unfolds chronologically but is interrupted by the protagonists' memories. In the couple's book, their story portrays a fight that extends over a couple of days, but the narrative is constantly interrupted by flashbacks from the early nineties as well as from a recent past that correspond to both the man's and the woman's memories about their relationship. Similarly, in the landlady's book, the present of narration covers one day when she is sitting in her apartment staring out of the window while her maid does the housework and keeps her company. In this book as well, present meets past. The two pages that portray the present action are the book's first and last pages, while those in-between tell the landlady's story since her teenage years, which roughly correspond to the early 1920s. Eight of the fourteen elements in the box focus on the woman with the prosthetic leg, and the boundaries of her story are less clear-cut, making the narration of her life more

fragmentary than the landlady's and the couple's. Some of these elements depict the woman during her life in Chicago at the end of the 1990s when she is living in the apartment on the third floor of the building where the landlady and the couple also reside. Other items tell her story before she moved into the apartment on the third floor. In other episodes, she has moved out of the brownstone, has got married and moved to Oak Park with her family. The elements that contain her story may focus on either the narration of a short sequence of actions or on a longer period of time. When a longer period is described, the story always intersects with superimposed memories that break up the main narrative.<sup>117</sup> Finally, in the book called "September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000," the storylines of the landlady, the couple, and the woman with the prosthetic leg are woven together. The book represents an hourly chronicle of the day, switching between the characters' different perspectives. Here as well, panels depicting episodes from the characters' past frequently interrupt the course of the present action, representing the process of remembering on the page.

Commenting on the complex structure of the novel, Ware has explained that it represents "the closest way [he] could think of coming to the real experience of losing oneself so deeply in one's own memories that one forgets, just for a second, when and

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<sup>117</sup> After piecing the episodes together, it is possible to combine them into a chronological narrative. The woman is an only child born in the early seventies and has lost the lower part of her left leg in a boating accident. A few scenes about her childhood in Michigan portray her as a lonely child who tries to cope with her loss. At eighteen she moves to study art in Chicago, where she dates a much older man named Lance, who abandons her after she gets pregnant and has an abortion. After college, clueless about what to do with her life and unable to afford graduate school, the woman works as an au pair for a wealthy family, but she is fired after the couple's young son develops a sexual interest in her. After this disheartening experience, she starts renting the apartment on the third floor of the building where the old landlady and the couple also live. It is the late 1990s, and the woman is in her late twenties and is working at a flower shop while attending creative writing classes. On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000, she goes on a date with Phil, an ex-classmate from college, who will become her husband. Sometime after she has got married, her father dies of cancer. A page dated April 20<sup>th</sup> 2005 shows the woman, now mother of a toddler, driving by her old building to learn that it is being sold and inserted into a new housing complex. After her daughter Lucy is born, the family moves into a house in the suburbs in Oak Park. Sometime around 2010 the woman's best friend Stephanie dies and on the day of her service, her cat dies too. The year after, the woman meets her ex-boyfriend Lance at a theatre performance. Finally, in what is the latest moment in the chronology of the woman's life, she has a conversation with her daughter, an adolescent at this point, during which they discuss Lucy's decision to go to art school.

where one actually is in one's life" ("Chris Ware"). Ware's intention is that "the reader will read one story or the other and then, based on whichever came first, the story they read next will cast itself as a memory, or the book they just read would become the memory" ("Chris Ware"). This structure is an attempt to render on the page the fluidity with which different layers of time coexist in our minds. The structure also describes the passing of time as we experience it in the present, the time of our past as we remember it, and the imaginary reconstructed time that we envision in the process of remembering:

The format is both an attempt to get at that non-beginning/non-end of every story that we have within our minds, and also at the notion of immersing oneself in a memory to the point that one can almost lose all sense of the present. I wanted readers to experience something as if it were happening right in front of them, but then discover later that the story actually happened in the character's distant past, with all the uncertainty that suggests. I hope for the inverse of this experience as well. This possibly too-rarefied approach nonetheless seemed like a fresh bet on how to treat memories on the page, to break them apart and allow for more of the multiple connections and overlaps that happen naturally within us [...] ("The Color and the Shape of Memories")

Depending on the order in which readers experience the different books and booklets, a turning point in reading *Building Stories* occurs when they come across the "Disconnect" comic book. "Disconnect" is set approximately around 2020 and portrays the family life of the woman with the prosthetic leg. At this point in the story, she has quit her job at the flower shop, has moved out of her apartment in Chicago and has got married to Phil, a former classmate and an architect. The couple has settled down in a house in Oak Park, in the suburbs of Chicago, with their daughter Lucy, who was born in 2005. At the end of "Disconnect," in a series of panels titled "Browsing," Lucy is depicted as a teenager,

telling her mother about her decision to go to art school. Only once readers have gone through all the books and booklets in the box will they realize that this is the latest occurrence in the woman's story. It is a fundamental moment in the text, as it unveils the *mise en abyme* device around which the plot is constructed. The woman explains to Lucy one of her dreams, during which, looking at a bookshelf in a store, she finds a book she realizes is her own:

... Someone had published my book! Wow... And it had everything in it... my diaries, the stories from my writing classes, even stuff I didn't know I'd written... everything I'd forgotten, abandoned or thrown out was there... everything... and you know, it wasn't so bad... in fact, it was kind of good... interesting... all of the illustrations (and there were a lot of them – there seemed to be more and more the more I looked) were so precise and clean it was like an architect had drawn them... they were so colorful and intricate... [...] And it wasn't – I dunno – it wasn't really a book, either... it was in pieces, like books falling apart out of a carton, maybe... but it was beautiful... it made sense... (“Disconnect”)

The woman dreaming of finding a book similar to *Building Stories* is a narrative device that suggests that the story – even the sections that depict the other characters – is meant to be her own rendering of past memories. In other words, the different books, posters, and foldouts correspond to her personal reconstruction of a timeline of her life, which appears to match Ware's notion of the woman with the prosthetic leg as the novel's implied author. Commenting on the connection between the structure of the book and the representation of memory, Ware hinted has more than once at this narrative device: “Finally, and I don't want to give too much away here, but the book itself is supposed to be an entirely imaginary object, which, hopefully, syncs up with a strange experience pretty

much everyone has at one point or another (“The Color and the Shape of Memories”).<sup>118</sup> This expedient invites readers to reflect on the nature of storytelling in relation to memory. When the act of remembering produces a story, the results are artificial constructs not dissimilar to a fictional creation. As anticipated on the back of the box, the woman is characterized by her tendency to “wonder” about the meaning and the direction of her life. *Building Stories* is the “imaginary object” where narration and remembering meet and cooperate. By breaking up the story into episodes of memory that are at the same time independent and interconnected, Ware has represented graphically what authors like Krauss, McCann and Egan have described in their novels: a character’s attempt at reconstructing her story, manipulating time to create a narrative where the self is reimagined in order to come to terms with the traumas of life.<sup>119</sup>

#### **4.5 Telling a coherent story: overcoming the traumas of a fragmented life**

The episodes recalled by the woman with the prosthetic leg reveal a life marked by traumatic experiences that are reflected in the fragmented form of her narrative. The major issues she confronts and which repeatedly come back in her story are the boating

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<sup>118</sup> The selective tendency of memory and its potential to deceive explain the temporal and thematic gaps in the text, and the general feeling of “uncertainty” Ware refers to. Indeed, it is not rare to run into different versions of the same event, or to find details that do not add up, precisely because they indicate the occasional unreliability of the woman’s memory and emphasize the artificiality of the story she tells. Commenting on the woman’s unreliability, Ware has observed that “[...] insofar as the book is a snapshot of the protagonist’s dream-imagining of the book she wanted to write but never did, everything in it is real” and that “there are deliberate contradictions and uncertainties of detail that [...] reflect the way we all change our recollections depending on what we’re trying to recall or prove to ourselves” (“The Art of Comics”). The inconsistencies in the text, Ware explains, reveal the woman’s desire to construct a brand-new narrative of her life that fits the image that she wants to promote of herself. A major example is the representation of the day of the service for the woman’s best friend Stephanie, who has passed away. On the same day, the woman’s cat dies. In one episode the woman describes taking the cat to a veterinary hospital and having to put her down, which causes her to miss Stephanie’s memorial service, while in another section she recalls delivering a eulogy that her friends said they appreciated. There are also discrepancies concerning dates and names, or awkward details such as the woman’s daughter Lucy wearing the same Halloween costume at different ages and in different occasions.

<sup>119</sup> Hints about the woman’s inclination for creativity are easily recognizable in the book. When she looks back at her childhood, for instance, she describes herself as “a lonely kid with an over-active fantasy life” (“Broadsheet”). She is an art student in college and in her late twenties she tries to cultivate her writing skills by attending a creative writing class. Moreover, the cover of the “September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000” book and other panels in the novel portray the woman writing in a notebook and thus suggesting her role as author.



accident she had as a child, which turned her into an introspective and lonely girl, and the artistic aspirations she was not able to pursue, which determined a sense of failure that accompanied her into adulthood. Also, her romantic dreams were shattered when her college boyfriend left her after she had an abortion, leaving the woman with persistent doubts about her ability to establish a fulfilling loving relationship. The years she spends renting the apartment in Chicago are portrayed as particularly gloomy and depressing times, during which the woman reflects on her loneliness and on her unexceptional life. Later, when she gets married and becomes a mother, she often has contrasting feelings about motherhood and marriage as opposed to the artistic realization she has never achieved. The woman usually ponders over missed opportunities, the tediousness of her days as a mother, and the frustrating lack of communication in the relationship with her husband, with whom she rarely shares romantic moments. Quite the contrary, their interactions are often prevented by their mutual indulgence in the use of cell phones and computers.

Even though the episodes in the woman's story do not progress chronologically, and there is no apparent cause-effect relation between them, they are linked by associations triggered by memory. One example is found in the "Repetition" section of the "Disconnect" book (fig. 7). On the left, a series of scattered panels shows the woman thinking about how Lucy's birth changed her relationship with her cat, whose "applied personality [...] evaporated, and we saw her for what she was – an animal" ("Disconnect"). Other panels portray the woman first in a supermarket, where Lucy asks which heaven cats go to, and if they can get a new cat, and then at the church delivering the eulogy for the death of a friend whose service coincided with the day the cat died. On the opposite page, one big panel shows the woman and her husband naked in the bedroom. The woman is standing and sadly staring at Phil, who is on the bed looking at his tablet screen. The different moments lack any temporal logic, until the reader realizes that the panels are framed

within a larger reflection on how the woman's life has changed after she became a mother. The cat's death seems to mark the end of a phase in her life (the cat had been her companion since her lonely years in Chicago), and time has affected the woman's body as well as her relationship with her husband. Similarly to the novel in her dream, which "made sense" despite being "in pieces, like books falling apart," the sum of the woman's recollections produces a cohesive story despite its fragmentary nature ("Disconnect").

The character of the woman develops as a superimposition of many selves, which interact with one another creating different narrative layers that nonetheless produce in the reader "feelings of sequential selfhood" (Sattler 218). The woman's memory functions to signify both the recollection of the past and the creation of a new narrative about herself. This method evokes Marcel Proust's famous distinction between voluntary memory, the one we consciously control in order to recall past events, and involuntary memory, which originates in a sensorial experience in the present through which we recreate not the past, but our impressions of it. One example in Ware's novel is a series of panels that depicts the woman's perception of the physical space of her bedroom at her parents' house, a space within which she inscribes the traumas of her life (fig. 8). Two complementary panels show the empty room in the present and the same bedroom where four versions of the woman's memory coexist: when she came home as a child after having had her leg amputated, when she slept with her boyfriend before he left her, and when she visited her parents after her boyfriend had broken up with her and when she slept on the floor, because her bed reminded her of her boyfriend. The memories are evoked when, during a visit to her parents' house, the woman has to sleep on the couch because her bedroom has been turned into an office. Talking to herself, she thinks: "I don't mind, though... because it helps me keep all the pieces in place" ("My Life). In the transition between remembering and telling her story, a new narrative emerges: no more a collection of fragmented memories, the

episodes converge into a story where the woman imagines herself as being in control of the major losses that have characterized her life.

The internal turmoil that is at the base of the narrative's fragmentation is expressed and reinforced not only through the treatment of chronology in the novel, but also by the page layout. Some of the episodes are represented as a chaotic juxtaposition of graphic and written elements, as if underlying the personal and emotional divisions of the woman's experience. One example is a passage where she is shown connecting her body to a reflection on her sense of self (fig. 9). A big, grey skeleton with a visible red heart is portrayed without frame at the center of the page, while arrows and lines depart from and lead to the heart. This is done without indicating a valid sequential order to experience the text and pictures, but rather connecting the skeleton to small panels, single or in sequences, where the woman is portrayed in different situations and at different moments of her life. Her body is divided into four areas connected respectively to the head, heart, pelvis, and legs. Related to the woman's head are four panels that show her resting on a couch in her apartment, on the bed with her boyfriend from college and lying on the grass as a child. Connected to her heart, there is a panel depicting the woman sitting alone in the kitchen and the word "broken" written in red capital letters. The panels next to her pelvis show her lying in bed with her college boyfriend and masturbating next to him, whereas two empty panels are placed where her missing leg is supposed to be. The perception of her heartbeat activates the woman's mental journey through her body and produces a series of temporal, spatial and emotional explorations about her condition and her history that are rendered on the page as isolated, unconnected episodes. Readers therefore simultaneously experience the episodic narrative progression of the woman's life and the page as a global reflection about her body. Chunks of written text accompany the panels and images dispersed on the page around the skeleton, expressing the woman's thoughts as she tries to locate her "self" in a precise point in her body: "Lately, whenever I'm laying

around, waiting for my heart to calm down [...] I play a dumb game, where, simply by concentrating as hard as I can, I try to find just exactly where it is ‘I’ am in my body... (“My Life”). Readers need to connect the parts and build a narrative out of them, just as the woman is shown struggling to combine the multiple memories of her past around the centrality of the self she is trying to reconstruct and which she ultimately locates in a precise point: “[...] when I really think about it [...] I feel... the most me... in the... tingling... between my eyebrows, just behind my eyes... right at the top of my nose... [...] And by ‘me,’ I mean me... the me who makes it all happen, who watches herself make decisions, and make mistakes... ” (“My Life”).<sup>120</sup>

#### **4.6 Comics and memory: the text as object**

Ware is not the first artist to break up a work of art into separate parts and confine it within the boundaries of a closed space. His idea boasts illustrious predecessors, among whom the most famous is probably the example of Marcel Duchamp’s “Bôîtes-en-Valise,” a series of leather suitcases and boxes created between the 1930s and the 1960s. The French artist meticulously filled the boxes with miniature reproductions of his own work in an attempt to question the originality of artistic creation by drawing attention to issues of repetition and imitation. Together with Duchamp, Ware has claimed the work of Joseph Cornell as another source of inspiration for his work in *Building Stories* (“Telling and Retelling Stories”). Cornell experimented with the random assemblage of objects that he would collect while wandering the streets of New York, establishing connections between apparently unrelated pieces and materials, combining them in small wooden boxes protected by a glass cover, and transforming them into the representation of an idea such as an exotic place or a dreamy landscape. Literature as well has challenged the materiality of the written text, especially the novel, by playing with discursive practices in what is

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<sup>120</sup> This passage reinforces the argument of the woman’s role as the mastermind behind the book: she “makes it all happen” as she creates her story, which gives her the opportunity to “watch herself” in the past.

known as “aleatory narrative”<sup>121</sup> (O’Neill 370) or “multi-path narrative,”<sup>122</sup> texts in which readers are in charge of choosing the reading order, which requires that they “construct narrative meaning as best they can” (Aarseth 323).<sup>123</sup> While these works shun cohesive wholeness and tend to employ disjointed structures to highlight the fragmentary nature of the narratives, Ware’s formal breakup has the opposite goal: the episodes in *Building Stories* do not compete against one another, nor do they function to alter or manipulate the plot. Instead, they are part of a continuous temporal sequence that has been broken up in order to offer multiple perspectives on the same story. Like the pieces of a puzzle, the memories in each episode eventually contribute to the totality of the story that the woman and the characters she depicts are trying to tell.<sup>124</sup>

Ware provides memories with a physical existence, and *Building Stories* is indeed a text that reflects on its own materiality. In order to show the process of remembering, the sequential chronology of the story is not only disrupted, but also multiplied and extended to occupy the physical space of the elements and the box that contains it. In the

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<sup>121</sup> “Aleatory sequencing” is described in the *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology* as referring to “texts with arrangements that are randomly assembled” (Alber). Patrick O’Neill talks about “aleatory narrative” to describe the works of B. S. Johnson and Julio Cortázar, where the narrative chunks may be “read in any order the reader chooses” thus prompting readers to “devise their own individual strategies of reading” (370).

<sup>122</sup> Espen Aarseth describes “multipath narrative” as “a work of fiction or video/film where the audience or reader at specific points has to choose between branching alternatives in the text” (323). He distinguishes between three subcategories. Ware’s novel could fit in what Aarseth names “the fragmented work,” a narrative “where there is no right or wrong path, but where readers, lost in the labyrinth, have to construct narrative meaning as best they can” (323).

<sup>123</sup> A couple of examples include Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1963), and the fictional memoir *The Unfortunates*, published in 1969 by the English author B. S. Johnson. *Hopscotch* is a novel divided into one hundred fifty-five sections, accompanied by a “Table of Instructions” where the author laid out two paths for reading the book, as well as suggesting the possibility for readers to choose their own reading order, dismissing reading instructions as inadequate. *The Unfortunates* is a novel in a box, made up of twenty-seven unbound chapters that could be read in any random order, except for the first and last, which are identified as such. Johnson’s intention in dismembering the story both physically and chronologically was to replicate the nature of memory, in which episodes from the past surface and interweave with present experiences.

<sup>124</sup> The tension between the part and the whole is actually an intrinsic feature of the medium of comics itself, and Charles Hatfield has identified it as “single image vs. image-in-series” (41). Daniel Worden has also pointed out that, “formally, comics rely on dialectical relationships between the fragment and the whole” (108).

construction of comics, memory has a fundamental role according to Ware. For him, “a cartoon is not an image taken from life [...] A cartoon is taken from memory” (Heer). When creating comics, he explains, “you’re trying to distill the memory of an experience, not the experience itself” (Heer). In the process of rendering an experience on the page, a memory has to be physically created. Ware describes this construction process with a parallel between text and architecture, which originates in his vision of comics:

What you do with comics, essentially, is take pieces of experience and freeze them in time [...]. The moments are inert, lying there on the page in the same way that sheet music lies on the printed page. In music you breathe life into the composition by playing it. In comics you make the strip come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat by beat as you would playing music. So that's one way to aesthetically experience comics. Another way is to pull back and consider the composition all at once, as you would the façade of a building. You can look at a comic as you would look at a structure that you could turn around in your mind and see all sides of at once. (Raeburn 25)

Here, Ware comments on the composite nature of comics, which he associates to the interaction between text and images: the “pieces of experience” need to be read and examined “beat by beat.”<sup>125</sup> At the same time, reading comics is a visual activity, similar to the experience of looking at a building façade. The architectural metaphor that exploits the connection between building and narrative is everywhere in *Building Stories*, and it draws attention to the space the text occupies as the object of the novel’s reflection. On the back cover of the box for instance, arrows and lines guide readers through the rooms of a house where the box and books are scattered. The caption explains that these are “suggestions made as to appropriate places to set down, forget or completely lose any number of [the

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<sup>125</sup> Hatfield has identified the coexistence of text and image in comics as a tension of “code vs. code” (36).

book's] contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home" ("Box"). The text is an object designed to be dissected and manipulated. The title itself suggests the materiality of the novel. Readers "build" the stories assembling the episodes following a different sequence every time. But the title indicates as well that those contained in the box are stories about/that take place in a building, therefore extending the connection between story and architecture to the level of content. Ware goes as far as to describe the narrative arc of his novel as a temporal progression that happens across space, summarizing the plot as the story of "a protagonist wondering if she'll ever move from the rented close quarters of lonely young adulthood to the mortgaged expanse of love and marriage" ("Box"). Stages of life are described through spatial ("close quarters," "expanse") and economic ("rented," "mortgaged") metaphors, which establish a parallel between personal development and the home people inhabit. Ware's emphasis on the materiality of *Building Stories* is a critique against the "increasing electronic incorporeality of existence," and against the digital presence of texts in contemporary times ("Box"). Supporting physical and sensorial experiences, Ware enters the discussion about contemporary media and challenges the idea of technology as a virtual network that favors connections between people. In the novel, smartphones and electronic devices in general are represented as promoting contacts more than connections. Even though they can capture personal memories, the characters run the risk of neglecting living in the present. In one episode, the woman looks at a friend's Facebook page trying to make sense of her recent death, but also admits not having talked to her in a year. Somewhere else she is depicted staring at the bright screen of her phone, while ignoring Lucy's enthusiasm as she approaches holding a lightning bug, and missing out on her daughter's experiencing a special 'natural' moment. There is a divide, Ware seems to suggest, between the connections that are rooted in the material certainty of existence and the fragmentation we inevitably experience in our technology-driven contemporary life.

#### **4.7 Buildings as archives: space and time in Building Stories**

The walk-up in Chicago connects the stories of its residents by providing them with a common setting. It also signifies the passing of time both by experiencing it – the building becomes old and unadorned as years go by, until it is eventually put up for sale – and by connecting the lives of the landlady, the married couple, and the woman with the prosthetic leg to the stories of all the tenants that preceded them. A character itself, the building is an omniscient presence that guides readers in and out of its rooms, allowing them to peek at the residents’ private moments and offering a panoramic view both in space and across time. Similarly to the people who are presently occupying its three apartments, the building melancholically looks back in time, from its early days in the early twentieth century to the present in the late 1990s, establishing connections between past and present and inserting its residents’ stories within a temporal continuum that defines the stages of its life. A three-page sequence in the "September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000" book for instance, shows the building in the present, gradually moving from its external façade to the interior of the apartments, revealing the tenants in their daily occupations. In cursive, elegant lettering, the text reports the building’s nostalgic considerations about his early days: “My new copper cornice gleaming bright, jaunty awnings lazily half-lidded, sheltering my sculptured stone stairway [...]” (“September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000”). The handwritten-like style also gives the text a certain intimacy that reflects the melancholic tone of the building’s personal recollections. The third panel (fig. 10) juxtaposes the representation of the current residents to a text that minutely chronicles how the previous tenants’ daily existences have unfolded through the years: “[...] 301 tenants 3 births 2 deaths 29 marriages 22 pregnancies [...] 6 moon landings [...] 5 wars” (“September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000”). The building becomes a physical archive of people’s lives, a repository of both personal and historical events, connecting generations across time. It represents a fixed point, a safe bulwark that persists through time against the characters’ transitory and fragmented lives.



Similarly to the characters in Egan's novel, the tenants are haunted by a sense of things ending – the landlady is approaching her death, and the couple is on the brink of separation, – while the building is projected towards the future, “grateful for the arrival each day of 24 more hours yet to come” (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000). However, similarly to the residents – the landlady remembers her youth as a hopeful time where romantic love was still a possibility; the couple reminisces about the exciting beginning of their relationship – the building's memories express nostalgia for a better past. Two complementary pages in the “My Life” book oppose two representations of the building, the first in the early 1900s, and the second in the present (fig. 11). In the first drawing, a boy on the third floor “dreams of the future, and how he might win the heart – and the body – of the girl downstairs” (“My Life”). A sequence of circular panels shows his reveries: he becomes a pilot, travels around the world, proposes to the girl and marries her. In the meantime, the girl on the ground floor, whom readers recognize as the landlady in her youth, wakes up to the “gentle sound” of milk bottles being delivered by a horse-drawn cart. On the second page, the “girl” is now an old landlady who is remembering the sound of the milk-cart of her youth, while the noise that awakens her is a disturbing “klinktink of a bottle, smashing on the pavement” that someone has thrown out of a car. On the third floor, the boy has been substituted with the woman with the prosthetic leg, who is thinking about the “original” use of a hook on the ceiling. While at the beginning of the century the boy's dreams were oriented towards a hopeful and enthusiastic future, the characters in the 1990s melancholically look back in time.

As the building's evolution crosses the characters' stories, it chronicles the social changes that have accompanied the transformation of the neighborhood. Not only does it preserve the residents' personal recollections, it testifies to the city's past. Ware uses buildings to underline the significance of places charged with social and cultural value as opposed to the contemporary vision of space in the city, considered in merely economic

terms. At the turn of the century, the building is indeed worried about its future: “[...] recently, the long-burning lamp of my long-yearning landlady seems to fray, falter, and fizzle right about the same time. So then – what? The thought of such utter vacancy fills me with a dread unlike any other” (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000).<sup>126</sup> Once beautiful and elegant in the early 1900s, when the woman with the prosthetic leg drives by in 2005, the building is bare and empty and has a “for sale” sign on it. A residential urban complex is about to be built next-to it, while one of the nearby stores has been turned into a Starbucks, underlying the area’s loss of authenticity and the ongoing process of gentrification. Although she feels “nostalgic” when seeing the building again after she has moved out, the woman does not seem to appreciate architecture’s historical and cultural significance. Once she moves to Oak Park, while surrounded by beautiful buildings, the tourists annoy her and, complaining that “half the men who live [there] have the same late-Hemingway white beards and stupid safari jackets,” she exclaims: “...sometimes I really hate it here...” (“God”).<sup>127</sup> Unhappy with her husband’s decision to move to the suburbs, the woman is obsessively checking the value of her house on an online real estate website, emphasizing her view of buildings as commodities (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2000). On the contrary, the Chicago brownstone’s characterization suggests a different vision of architecture and city life. Its reminiscences of the tenants are wistful and affectionate, almost protective. The building points out its tenants’ idiosyncrasies while at the same time suggesting the correspondences that connect them. By giving the walk-up a voice, Ware establishes an emotional connection to the history of the neighborhood, acknowledging architecture as a bridge between past and present and between historical, cultural, and personal memories.

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<sup>126</sup> By personifying the building and attributing feelings and thoughts to it, Matt Godbey has argued, “Ware’s keen interest in the experiential power of architectural space” is to be seen “in the context of ongoing debates about Chicago’s gentrification” (122). According to Godbey, *Building Stories* “resists a system of renewal that values buildings for their power to generate profit and promotes a perspective that recognizes their social function in an urban economy” (126).

<sup>127</sup> In the broadsheet “God,” as the woman jogs one can see Frank Lloyd Wright’s home, the Arthur Heurtley House, and Unity Temple Church in the background. The mentioning of Hemingway also refers to a historic building, his childhood home.

#### 4.8 Why a world in a box?

Why has Ware decided to put a work of art in a box? *Building Stories* celebrates the materiality of the book in a time dominated by distinctively immaterial media. “When it comes to art,” Ware has claimed, “books offer a sort of reassuring physical certainty for the ineffable uncertainties of life” (Burchby). Mimicking the way we obtain and distribute information online, jumping between hyperlinks and multiple screens, Ware has created a text where the territory that readers explore occupies the tangible space of a distinct life with all its connections.<sup>128</sup> Quoting Conrad, who wrote about Henry James that, “his books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on,” Peter Brooks claims that this reflection is suggestive of the self “refusing to let its extinction mute its strident claim to selfhood and self-recreation in the madness of art” (*Enigmas* 195-196). In *Building Stories*, not only do the narratives and the episodes they contain avoid closure and therefore create in the reader the impression of “life still going on,” but they also seem to resist inception because their source is always located somewhere else or connected to another story. The novel celebrates this connectedness by conceiving the story as a set of memories the woman navigates and narrates avoiding linearity, but preferring to grasp only the crucial nodes of her experience, in the attempt to “build” a new image of herself that goes beyond the traumas of the past. The critique behind this process seems to

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<sup>128</sup> It is possible that the success of Ware’s novel is related to the particular appeal that the fragmentary aesthetics of works like *Building Stories* has on contemporary readers. This hypothesis finds confirmation in the growth and achievements in terms of audience of fields such as Interactive Digital Narrative. IDN refers to digital narratives that can be changed based on users interaction, and it includes phenomena as diverse as digital games, hypertext novels, interactive cinema, and many other hybrid forms. Among its aims are the desire to “enter the narrative, to participate and experience what will unfold;” in short, to create “fully interactive narrative environments” (Koenitz 1). Although comics cannot be considered part of IDN because their content cannot really be altered, there are basic similarities between a text like *Building Stories* and an interactive practice such as video games. In “video game narratives,” which combine elements from both disciplines, the narrative proceeds based on the ability of the user to solve certain puzzles or tasks (16). Different narrative paths are available, and they depend on each interactor’s unique experience of “patch[ing] together the narrative” (16). This and other experimental forms are dynamic examples of interactive narrative that are developing and reaching ever more complex levels. Alternate reality games for instance, combine game and storytelling, aiming to recreate a story piecing together clues that “are located in the real world or on the internet” (113). Participants are allowed a high level of agency to the point that they can experience the virtual reality “both strategically and emotionally” (Ryan 114).

confront once again the digital age. Even though memories can easily be archived online and the past can be effortlessly accessed at any time, does this help us make sense of who we are in the present? In *Building Stories*, by allowing both the reader and the woman to “build” their own stories, Ware defends the originality of narrating one’s own time.

According to Ware, the decision to elude temporal connections in favor of associations of memory is located in the very act of fiction writing: “the one thing I don’t want to be is a storyteller, which to me is more or less the skill of relating events and plots [...]. Writing, to me, places events in a fabric that knits them all together with the feelings, sensations and textures of real experience, and follows, whether directly or poetically, the development of life at which it seems or seemed to unfold.” (“A Sense of There-ness” 8).

## Note

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- "Box," the cardboard box that contains the fourteen items that compose the novel; it constitutes the paratext of the book;
- "Landlady," a comic book featuring the old landlady from the first floor;
- "Couple," a comic book featuring the couple living on the second floor;
- "The Daily Bee," a foldout newspaper that deals with Branford's dilemma about his obsession with the queen;
- "Branford: The Best Bee in the World," a twenty-four-page comic book that focuses on Branford's life;
- "September 23rd, 2000," a thirty-two-page hardcover that resembles a Little Golden Book, which chronicles one day hour by hour, following the lives of five characters: the landlady, the couple from the second floor, the woman with the prosthetic leg and an anthropomorphized version of the building;
- "Board," a four-panel folded board that features isometric representations of the building and panels about its tenants' lives.
- "My Life," a fifty-two-page cloth-bound hardcover book that mainly portrays the woman's life after art school when she works as an au pair and later when she is renting the apartment and working at the flower shop. The book also includes a few episodes from the building's history.
- "Booklet," a fifty-two-page wordless booklet centered on the woman's life as a mother.
- "Disconnect," a twenty-page comic book that portrays the woman's married life and her meeting with Lance, her ex-boyfriend in college;
- "God," a twenty-page broadsheet that revolves around the woman's everyday family life and that features the episode of her friend Stephanie's death;

- “Broadsheet,” a four-page broadsheet that includes mixed episodes in the woman’s life, such as her father’s illness and her childhood;
- “Poster,” a single-page poster portraying the woman’s relationship with the men in her life;
- “Snow,” a foldout of the woman as she walks in the snow outside of her building;
- “Lucy,” a foldout of the woman with her daughter Lucy.

List of Illustrations

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Fig. 5. Front and back box covers. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).



**Fig. 6. The building tells its own story through mixed sequences of panels and different graphic elements. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).**





**Fig. 7. Panels are connected by thematic associations rather than chronologically. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).**





**Fig. 9.** The panel shows the woman's fragmented vision of herself as she connects parts of her body to different memories. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).



**Fig. 10. The building lists the sum of its tenants' experiences over the years. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).**



**Fig. 11. Past and present are juxtaposed showing the building and characters' memories. © Chris Ware. *Building Stories* (2012).**

## CONCLUSION

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The book ends, but life is open-ended.

To make a narrative of one's own life is... to posit a beginning, or several beginnings, a middle, with its highs and lows, and also an ending...

But at the same time, we are always in the process of revising the text, the narrative of our lives.

(Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*)

We're in crisis in the sense that we're longing for another form.

It's just on the tip of my tongue, at the edge of my consciousness.

Because the novel in the end is without definition,

except it's a long story with a beginning and an end.

(Nicole Krauss, "Meet the writer")

This study has investigated what I argue is a new desire for narrativity in contemporary American fiction. While experimenting with the possibilities offered by the usage of broken form, the novels considered here rely on formal fragmentation to tell a coherent story, confirming in the reader a sense of narrative wholeness. The three novels by McCann, Krauss and Egan represent critically appreciated texts whose relevance has been determined by the recognition they have received and by their popularity among readers. More significantly, they have followed in the tradition established by a landmark text in contemporary American fiction, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. A reading experience that requires readers to find their way through a labyrinth of multiple, scattered narratives, is an essential step to grasp the unified picture of the cultural moment these novels depict.

The first three novels are similar in structure, in that they present a host of characters whose stories are told separately in what appear to be autonomous short narratives. Moving from one chapter to the next, their interconnectedness is revealed by the presence of a general motif that crosses the overall story, signifying the tension between the fragments, and towards the novel as a unified work. To connect the stories, in Krauss' *Great House* readers follow the trajectory of a writing desk stolen by the Nazis during the war and later possessed by different people, revealing the protagonists of the individual episodes. Colum McCann uses Philippe Petit's 1974 walk across the Twin Towers to collate the characters of *Let the Great World Spin*, and similarly, the music industry is the theme that traverses the stories in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Readers can follow and reconstruct the plot through references to events and characters that anticipate what will happen in the rest of the novel, slowly piecing together the disconnected fragments to form a new story.

The fourth text, Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, is an example of how the tendency of telling a cohesive story by juxtaposing fragmented narratives has been taken to the extreme. A graphic novel, the text has been physically broken into fourteen distinct pieces. Ware's intent is to represent how, living in a present constantly influenced by different pasts, the characters make sense of their experience of time. Interacting with the novel, which involves unfolding boards and spreading newspaper-like posters, readers are in charge of the narrative sequence and are free to choose the order in which to assemble the fragments. By not framing the story within the boundaries of a fixed plot, the past episodes included in each element can be re-read and repositioned, each time bringing to light new correspondences and 'building' new stories. This process mirrors the characters' experience of re-constructing their past by shuffling memories, so that an original mode of what Ricoeur calls "emplotment" always offers new possibilities for the re-presentation of the self.

According to Ricoeur, the plot of a narrative is “a work of synthesis,” a way to combine “the heterogeneous” of life in a single temporal whole (*TN 1 ix*). In this sense, Ricoeur argues, narrative is “close to metaphor”:

[...] the new thing - the as yet unsaid, the unwritten - springs up in language. Here a living metaphor, that is, a new pertinence in the predication, there a feigned plot, that is, a new congruence in the organization of events.

In both cases the semantic innovation can be carried back to the productive imagination and, more precisely, to the schematism that is its signifying matrix. (ix)

Nicole Krauss has also used the concept of the metaphor to explain the work she and other writers are doing to probe the new narrative possibilities of the contemporary novel.<sup>129</sup> As in the metaphor, where a new entity is created by drawing together two discrete elements that have apparently no relationship, the juxtaposition of different stories – of characters, but also of temporal and geographical perspectives – always attempts to “confirm in us a sense that we have some underlying unity in the world, [...] this coherence the human brain wants and that you’re always trying to uncover (“Meet the writer”).

The fragmentary aesthetics of the texts considered in this study reveals their deep concern with temporality. Not only are stories arranged in non-chronological sequences, but temporal linearity is also avoided within the individual chapters. This structural disruption reflects the novels’ investigation of time as an implicit theme. For some characters the past signifies loss – of a friend, a spouse, but also of more abstract entities, like the idea of home, or the loss of an opportunity. This is the case of *Great House*, where some characters confront the death of a family member, while others respond to the

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<sup>129</sup> Krauss has referred to the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard, author of the multivolume fictional memoir *My Struggle* (2009-2011), as an example of how the contemporary novel is looking for a new form as a reaction to literature having been emptied of its “monopoly” on narrative by television and online content (“Meet the writer”).



archetypal loss rooted in the legacy of Jewish culture and history. The parents in McCann's novel face the death of their sons in the war, while other characters react to the absence of home intrinsic to the experience of immigration. For other characters – think of the protagonists of *Goon Squad* or *Building Stories* – the past corresponds to the enigmatic effects of time on their lives, which encourage them to try and locate when and how the change happened. Wondering about her husband's indifference, the woman in Ware's novel asks: "When did he start leaving without kissing me goodbye? When did he start walking by without touching my head?" ("September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000"). In Egan's book, Bosco, a decrepit punk singer famous in the eighties, expresses the same preoccupation when, in the mid 2000s, he exclaims: "that's the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (145). All the stories are personal investigations of the characters' lives, triggered by the compulsion to make sense of the past and to understand how our lives change without us paying attention. Narrating their lives according to a personal temporal logic allows the characters to re-construct their story, and offers new possibilities to re-present themselves in relation to their past while establishing correspondences with their present experience. As Ricoeur has pointed out, "the repetition of a story [...] constitutes an alternative to the representation of time as flowing from the past toward the future" (*TN 1* 67). And when memory works as a narrative engine, as is the case of these narratives, most of which are first-person accounts, "it is as though the recollection inverted the so-called 'natural' order of time" (*ibid.*).

In this reconstructive process, the characters' personal stories intersect with the historical past that has shaped their experience. Slavery, the Holocaust, World War Two, Pinochet's regime, the Arab-Israeli wars, Vietnam and 9/11 are some of the events the characters recall and that are used to portray the cultural history of a particular moment. The past depicted in the four selected novels thus emerges through layers of different, usually opposite, perspectives. In Krauss' book we look at the Arab-Israeli conflict from

within a broken family. If on the one hand the old Israeli father proudly recalls fighting in the wars of 1948 and 1956, on the other his son's life has been devastated by the experience of the Yom Kippur War. Similarly in *Let the Great World Spin*, the social decay of 1974 New York leads a Jewish judge to unashamedly refer to the people he tries every day at the courthouse as "scum" (254). At the same time an African-American prostitute in the Bronx declares that "It's no less love if you're a hooker, it's no less love at all" (213). The intertwining of the personal and historical functions as the foundation for an interpretation of the present, as all the novels jump forward in time in the last chapters, to depict a near future that is really a present in disguise.

While the novels refer to fundamental moments in American and global history – McCann for instance hints at slavery and the Vietnam War, as well as at the Troubles in Ireland, Krauss reconstructs a millennial Jewish tradition, Egan confronts the legacy of 9/11, and Ware the process of urbanization and gentrification of Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century – they seem to be particularly drawn to the 1970s. This is more palpable in the novels of Egan and McCann, both largely set in the seventies, and mostly in New York. In Krauss' and Ware's books the references are more opaque, but equally present.<sup>130</sup> It is possible that the fascination for this particular moment is generational, drawing the authors – who were born between 1962 and 1974 – to explore the years of their childhood and youth. This fascination is, however, ambiguous, and Egan's novel is a case in point, for the representation of the seventies in *Goon Squad* offers at the same time a gritty look at the years of excess, moral and social decline, and an idealized version of the time of the unlimited possibilities of youth. Egan acknowledges that the seventies lacked an "exalted sense of hope and possibility" and that they felt like "an in-between moment, a sleepy

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<sup>130</sup> In *Great House* the seventies correspond to the time Nadia, the New York writer, receives the desk from Daniel Varsky, who is then killed by Pinochet's police in 1974; 1973 is the year of the Yom Kippur War, when Aaron's life is forever changed by a terrible experience. The 1970s are also the years when the Yoav and Leah were born. The twins represent the Jewish "third-generation," the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, to which Krauss also belongs. In Ware's graphic novel the connection is perhaps more nuanced, but all of the characters – except, obviously, the old landlady – are children of the 1970s.

moment” (“Jennifer Egan on Growing Up”), and her reflections echo McCann’s comments when he says that the seventies were a “time when we had excess before excess became tragic with AIDS and drugs coming home to roost. We were wild without being overly romantic like in the mid-sixties, which was a time of dreaming” (“A Conversation”). Edmund White has recently observed that there is a persisting wave of nostalgia about the 1970s in New York, detectable in literature and television as well as in the arts. Despite the bleakness, danger, crime and social decay of the city at the time, the art world of the seventies forever changed the culture that followed, and White writes that the fascination derives from the realization that New York in that moment was “more democratic: a place and a time in which, rich or poor, you were stuck together in the misery (and the freedom) of the place” (“Love Among the Ruins”).

The sort of ambivalent longing that White describes can help explain the interest for this time that clearly transpires from the novels of Egan and McCann, where the seventies are central. It is also noticeable in Krauss, where the longing for the past concerns itself with its inevitability but also with individual memory, and in Ware, where the lure of the past comes from the characters’ realization of how distant they are from their past selves.<sup>131</sup> This longing finds expression in the concept that Svetlana Boym has identified as “reflective nostalgia”: “A modern nostalgic,” she explains, “can be homesick and sick of home, at once” (50).<sup>132</sup> This kind of nostalgia, “inconclusive and fragmentary,” makes the nostalgics conscious of a fracture between “identity and resemblance” and it “drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future” (50).

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<sup>131</sup> The woman in *Building Stories*, when driving by her old building in 2005, crucially exclaims: “God, I was so wretched and miserable when I lived here [...] so why do I feel nostalgic about it?” (“September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000”).

<sup>132</sup> Boym distinguishes between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. While the first aims at restoring a previous moment of stasis and understands the past as “a perfect snapshot,” reflective nostalgia does not aim at recovering the past, but is “more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude” and “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space” (49).

It could also be possible, like music critic Simon Reynolds has suggested in *Retromania* (2011), that the preoccupation for the past that has marked the twenty-first century is due to a “crisis of overdocumentation” brought about by technological forms of archiving memory (54). Digital technology, – which Egan and Ware explore in the final episodes of their stories – has made available unprecedented amounts of data, expanding the possibility to archive and memorize information, so that “the presence of the past in our lives has increased immeasurably and insidiously” (Reynolds 55). How does one tell a story when the Internet has already “remembered” it for us and has rendered it available at the push of a button? It is possible that these novels are responding to this over-abundance of data and to how it is influencing contemporary storytelling, by moving towards an aesthetics that aims at retrieving only the fragments that are essential to the individual.

Moving back and forth across time, the texts considered in this dissertation find their narrative coherence in the tension of combining the fragments within the wholeness of the overall story. What is negotiated is the juxtaposition of past episodes as well as their interpenetration with the present. While Krauss and McCann seem perhaps to be looking more attentively at the country’s historical past in order to make sense of the change, Egan and Ware appear more conscious about locating and investigating the moment and the dynamics of that change. All of them, however, are equally drawn to reflect on the gaps within time. And it is in the pauses, in the space between the stories and in the blanks between the fragments, that they call to the reader to engage in a more active and authentic exchange.

## CODA

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The developments that I have tried to delineate in this dissertation continue to be confirmed in very recent fictions. Colum McCann's latest book *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, published in October 2015, is a hybrid that includes a novella and three short stories. The book opens with the novella that gives its name to the collection, which in turn is named after Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The thirteen parts that make up the opening story – each introduced by a stanza from Stevens' poem – correspond to different perspectives from which to observe the life of Peter Mendelssohn, a retired New York judge of Jewish heritage.<sup>133</sup> Mendelssohn is an eighty-two-year-old widower who suffers from memory loss and is looked after by a caregiver. The novella recounts Mendelssohn's last day, a snowy January morning when he meets his son Elliot at his favorite restaurant in Manhattan. Set as a sort of mystery story – Mendelssohn dies after being attacked outside the restaurant by an unknown person – "Thirteen Ways of Looking" is told from many interweaving perspectives: the security cameras Elliot has secretly installed in his father's house to keep a look on Sally, Mendelssohn's caregiver, the security cameras on the street, which the police investigate while looking for clues, and Mendelssohn's own point of view on his life. The different perspectives move the narrative back and forth in time. Often, following Mendelssohn's memory, the narrative goes as far back as to his childhood or to the early years of his relationship with his wife. Other times the voice of an omniscient third-person narrator anticipates future events. The way perspectives interweave in "Thirteen Ways" resembles the multiple points of view of *Let the Great World Spin*, although in the novella they are not clearly separated. "Thirteen Ways of Looking" is concerned with themes that characterize McCann's fiction, in

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<sup>133</sup> To readers familiar with McCann's fiction, Mendelssohn evokes the character of Solomon Soderberg from *Let the Great World Spin*, also a retired Jewish judge in New York.

particular the passing of time, the role of memory in the reconstruction of events and the creative power of storytelling. In the novella these themes are supported by the fragmented organization of the plot, which requires the reader to reconstruct the story by observing it from different perspectives that ultimately converge towards unity and concordance.

The fall of 2015 also saw the publication of Jonathan Franzen's fifth novel, *Purity*. Close in structure to Franzen's first success, *The Corrections*, *Purity* follows the lives of five main characters: Pip, alias Purity, a young woman trying to find her direction in life; Pip's mother, a complicated woman who will not disclose her past to her daughter; Andreas Wolf, the charismatic leader of the Sunlight Project, an organization that leaks news on the Internet; Tom Aberant, the editor of a Denver newspaper; and Leila Helou, a successful journalist at the *Denver Independent* and Tom's partner. The book is divided into a non-chronological sequence of chapters that read almost like micro-novels, each told from the perspective of one of the main characters. In *Purity*, Franzen plays with temporality, building a complex narrative architecture that does not advance organically. Instead, the natural unfolding of events is disrupted, and the present of narration is often interrupted by backstories that investigate the characters' past and reveal the connections that tie them to the rest of the cast. Continuing in the "tradition" of the novels examined in this research, *Purity* demonstrates how the tendency of doing away with linear narratives has advanced to the point that it possibly runs the risk of becoming counterproductive. As the present study argues, contemporary writers like Krauss and Ware are trying to retrieve narrativity in their novels, following the impulse to tell a cohesive, meaningful story, even though they are aware that such a task is no longer achievable through linear narration. In the contemporary "composite" novels analyzed here, the single parts converge into a coherent whole through the presence of a strong symbolic element – the missing desk in Krauss' story, or the funambulist's walk in McCann's text. In *Purity*, this role is assigned to the supposedly main character, Pip, but she ultimately fails to strengthen the plot and keep

its elements together. Because of the gaps in its development, the function of Pip's character in providing the necessary connectivity between the stories – and the overall plot of the novel – is diminished. Pip turns out to be a tenuous character, who lacks the force to validate the relation between her being a young girl in search of her father, her origins, her identity, and her being a complete, consistent character. Pip fails to fully reveal the symbolic potential that the concept associated to her real name, Purity, is supposed to represent in the universe of the novel. Finally, Pip's character is clouded by the ambiguity of her position towards the many issues at play in the story – the demise of traditional journalism, the weakening of privacy online, the free circulation of information in the era of whistleblowers – which prevent the novel from achieving the thematic coherence typical of the composite novels analyzed in this dissertation.

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**Dissertation title:** “Keep all the pieces in place” – Narrativity in four Contemporary American Novels

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines what I argue are four significant texts of American contemporary literature published between 2009 and 2012. Three of them are novels, Nicole Krauss’ *Great House*, Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and one is the graphic novel *Building Stories* by Chris Ware. The texts are characterized by the presence of multiple narrators who look back on the experiences of loss and trauma in their lives, and are divided into sub-stories that are at the same time independent and interlocked, connected by a major common element that gives them a coherent structure. Through the device of memory, the single stories shift back and forth in time, combining the characters’ personal and historical past, and giving life to narratives that are coherent despite the fragmentation of the temporal progression. Indeed, the single chapters complete one another to create a larger story, and through the intersection of past and present the characters try to re-construct a meaningful narrative about the self. Analyzing how time is treated and manipulated in the texts, I argue that these novels signify a new inclination towards narrativity in part of contemporary American fiction. Concerned with time as structural as well as thematic device, these texts depend on the tension between fragment and unity, experimenting with form while striving for narrative coherence.

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**ESTRATTO:** Questo lavoro si occupa di quattro testi significativi della letteratura americana contemporanea, pubblicati tra il 2009 e il 2012. Si tratta dei romanzi *Great House* di Nicole Krauss, *Let the Great World Spin* di Colum McCann, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, di Jennifer Egan, e *Building Stories*, una graphic novel di Chris Ware. Accumunati dalla presenza di narratori multipli che guardano alle esperienze traumatiche e di perdita della propria vita, i romanzi si compongono di blocchi narrativi allo stesso tempo autonomi e interconnessi, tenuti insieme da un elemento chiave che ne attraversa le vicende. Le singole narrazioni prendono forma combinando, attraverso la memoria, presente e passato personale e storico dei personaggi. Ne risultano narrazioni che, pur scomponendo la linearità del racconto, tendono all'unità. Non solo i blocchi narrativi si completano a vicenda a formare il romanzo, ma attraverso la permeabilità tra passato e presente, i personaggi identificano l'immaginazione di sé. Attraverso l'analisi della trattazione del tempo nei testi, lo studio sostiene che in parte della letteratura americana contemporanea sia rintracciabile una corrente caratterizzata da un nuovo desiderio di narratività che, pur sperimentando con la forma e utilizzando la navigazione del tempo come tecnica narrativa e come tematica, mirano alla costruzione di un racconto coeso.