Introduction
Security and the Uncertain Worlds of Fiction

If we had to predict the label that will serve as a shorthand description for the early twenty-first century, "The Age of Security" would seem like a safe choice. Not that the political, social, and cultural prevalence of "security" is new. During the Cold War era, security was one of the instrumental concepts in the attempt to subsume life in its entirety under a bipolar geopolitical conflict. But since the late twentieth century, security has increasingly emancipated itself from its geopolitical frame. While "the terrorist" has to some extent been placed in the ideological position of "the communist," the worry about security goes beyond the fear of terrorism. Security has come to seem of existential importance because all aspects of life appear to be fundamentally insecure.[1]

Clearly, the ramifications of the contemporary reign of security are deeply troublesome. These concerns, it should be admitted openly at the outset, form the initial motivation for this book. Security, particularly in the United States, has earned its bad reputation: it serves as a catch-all legitimation for state violence and the abrogation of human and civil rights; the private sector exploits its profitability, providing security services for a wide variety of state and nonstate costumers; finally, we, the people: private consumers of security goods, who turn our homes into high-tech fortresses, fret about computer viruses, credit card fraud, and identity theft, try to ensure our children's safety, and monitor each of our steps to optimize our well-being. Who could blame us? We can't let anything happen to our lives.

This book, however, is not an exploration of the politically disconcerting realities of the Age of Security. Rather, it takes a step back and asks: How can the prevalence of the category of security be explained? How could security become so influential in modern culture? How do we account for the apparent appeal of security? To address these questions, *The Poetics of Insecurity* undertakes a series of close readings of more or less canonical works of American literature from roughly the past two hundred years.

Literary criticism, I maintain, has a significant contribution to make to the study of security. Literature turns our attention to aspects of security that remain difficult to perceive as long as it is analyzed, the way it is usually done, within the parameters of political and social theory. As I will make clear in the course of this introductory chapter, my larger argument contends that it is these aspects revealed by literature that help explain the pervasiveness of the category of security in America's cultural and political life.

1.1   Aiming for Insecurity

In much of U.S. literature, security appears remarkably different from the way we have come to think of it. Political theorists, social scientists, critical humanists, and journalists largely agree that people begin to worry about, and care for, security whenever they feel threatened. Facing insecurity, the argument goes, people are willing to stomach all kinds of odious measures if only these measures promise to make them feel secure once more. The concern with security, from this vantage point, is all about the effort to undo insecurity.[2]

An important strand in American literature, I argue in this book, makes the opposite point. Across different genres and periods, American writers from the early republic to the present have shared an unspoken conviction: the concern with security allows us to explore, experience, make use of, and even take pleasure in insecurity. In the worlds created by this literature, insecurity is much more than a fearful encounter with threat. Being insecure creates new possibilities and opens up spaces. The writings of Charles Brockden Brown, Harriet Jacobs, Willa Cather, Flannery O'Connor, and Don DeLillo suggest a broad (if necessarily incomplete) range of such emerging possibilities.

To be sure, there are plenty of other writers who would have allowed me to explore the reevaluation of insecurity equally well. James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Henry James, Jack London, and Thomas Pynchon are only a few of the alternatives I have considered as suitable focal points for a chapter. All of them share a double-edged attitude toward security that runs through American fiction: on the one hand, they are acute to the magnitude of threats that beleaguer life in modern America. On the other hand, they are deeply skeptical, if not averse, to the very idea of creating a life around security so long as security is defined as safety, predictability, and orderliness. In the literature I consider in this study, this ambivalence leads to alternative articulations of security and insecurity. "Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit,"

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in "Circles" (189) – a Transcendentalist and proto-pragmatist credo that is remarkable in that it does not outright reject the ideal of security, but rather strives to identify security with the unsettling forces that are usually understood as the very essence of insecurity. Without wanting to subsume the authors discussed in this book under the umbrella of an Emersonian tradition, all of my chapters bring to light literary strategies that unsettle the meaning of security by re-valorizing insecurity in one way or another.

Throughout this study I inquire into the philosophical and aesthetic implications of the logic of security, and I reconstruct the different imaginative appeals of security and insecurity as they take shape in literature of different periods and genres. This is an agenda that is decidedly not historicist: though I embed each literary text in its historical context, the reason I do so is not that the texts I have chosen are meant to stand in for the time period of American (literary) history from which they emerged. In other words, I have not settled on Brown, Jacobs, Cather, O'Connor, and DeLillo because they are the most representative authors for their respective moment. Rather, in my readings, historical contextualization matters for an understanding of what made the imagination of security and insecurity in these literary texts possible. I inquire into the specific literary strategies my authors use for turning insecurity and threat into openings for new possibilities, and I explore the nuances and details that define and structure the imagination of those new possibilities.

For the most part, what it is that emerges in the face of threat is not self-evident but needs to be teased out of the texts, precisely by paying close attention to each author's poetics of insecurity. This is also the reason why I devote my chapters to one text each, rather than showing how the texts I analyze illuminate others. Unfolding how threat is put to use in literature requires slowing down, developing a sensibility for the finely wrought texture of each of the imaginary engagements with scenarios of insecurity, and tracing out the temporal trajectory of each of the narrative responses to threat. What hopefully emerges from this book, then, is not a linear history of security through literature, not a coherent narrative of the development of the literary appropriation of (in)security, say, through the lens of a particular genre such as melodrama or the jeremiad, but rather an account of how over the course of two hundred years the logic of security has brought forth widely diverging variations of imaginary uses of threat.

Because I am convinced that in the cultural imagination security and insecurity are multifaceted in ways that go far beyond today's political discourse of security, I have refrained from putting at the center of my study

literary works that are primarily concerned with such topics as terrorism, international conflict, or war. As I already suggested, the logic of security has come to pervade virtually all areas of life. To get to the varieties of how this logic plays out in the literary imagination, it is helpful not to linger on topics that are prestructured by how we have come to talk about security habitually. For this reason, the reader will not find chapters on such novels as William Dean Howells's *The Hazards of New Fortune*, Henry James's *Princess Casamassima*, Jack London's *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*, or other literary treatments of terrorism from the high tide of turn-of-the-century anarchist violence or from the rich body of the so-called 9/11 novel.[3]

Each of the texts on which I focus engages at least one security threat of its time. Arising from historically specific conditions, these security threats differ significantly from each other. But they are all equally formidable in that they ultimately point back to macro-level transformations that endanger a whole way of life. Not all of the writers use the language of "security" and "insecurity," and a glance at the history of the concept tells us that they indeed could not: Although the term *securitas* reaches back all the way to Cicero, and "security" has stood at the center of modern political thought since Hobbes, in the United States, as in other Western countries, it was not until the 1930s that "security" became a word used self-reflexively, as a value-laden term with an ideological ring to it, akin to "freedom," "liberty," and "prosperity." But the idea of security is not intrinsically tied to the word, even if the appearance of the word in a given text necessarily shapes the idea.[4]

In Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799/1800), no less than the future of the young republic is at stake. It is threatened by the corruption encapsulated by fraudulent transnational merchants and, more immediately, by a yellow fever epidemic raging in Philadelphia. In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), insecurity becomes a most pressing issue for the runaway slave who is threatened with recapture, but insecurity moreover arises from slavery's "reign of terror" (as Jacobs puts it; see *Incidents* 933) that threatens to tear down civilization in its entirety. In *The Professor's House* (1925) – as well as in her other works – Willa Cather takes up the great modernist topos of modernity's melting all that is solid into air; a melting pot so hot that one can only join what Cather called "the backward" and seek refuge in a nostalgic past. For Flannery O'Connor, too, modernity is the cause of insecurity, but in her fictional works, the good life is not threatened by the evaporation of tradition so much as by the blind belief in secular rationality. Don DeLillo, finally, thematizes the terror threats directed at the nation's – and indeed, as the title of his

novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) suggests, the world's – power elite, specifically at finance capitalists. But the insecurity is so grave that it hardly stops at a few powerful individuals: it endangers the entire edifice that makes up what postmodern novelists like to describe as "the system." And not only is the system the target; it is also, simultaneously, the source of threat.

Staggering as these types of insecurity are, they by no means induce stifling fear or even the wish to return to the order of normalcy. Threat, instead, becomes an enabling condition. Entering Philadelphia in the midst of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, Brown's hero Arthur Mervyn believes he is meeting his personal disaster. He is convinced – wrongly, as it will turn out – that he has contracted the disease and will imminently perish. In this situation of extreme insecurity, Arthur suddenly experiences a liberating burst of energy: "This incident, instead of appalling me, tended rather to invigorate my courage. The danger which I feared had come. I might enter with indifference, on this theater of pestilence" (*Arthur Mervyn* 111). Arthur presents himself as driven by desperate courage: having been doomed to death, he has nothing to lose. Insecurity, he implies, has given way to the certainty of death. In truth, however, neither is Arthur sick (at least not at this point in the novel), nor is he less determined to act once he realizes that he is in perfect health and the future is once again open. Insecurity sets him free as an agent. Moreover, the hero who thought his fate had been sealed finds with relief that he remains vulnerable to the raging plague. Insecurity, it suddenly appears, is the essence of life.

In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* – the autobiographical rendition of a female slave's ordeal – it would seem that there can be no tolerance of, and certainly no gain from, insecurity. And indeed, Jacobs sets up a happy ending that promises the conversion of insecurity into freedom: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (*Incidents* 944). But what follows is a significant qualification: "We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people at the north. And though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition" (944–945). Former slaves and whites, Jacobs insists, are equally insecure vis-à-vis slaveholders, who seem to be gaining the upper hand in national politics. As the North seems to fall under the rule of slavocracy, freedom – the foundation of everything the North stood for – is diminished to relative improvement. Over the course of *Incidents*, a new community is imagined into existence. Its common trait is insecurity, and no one is in a better position to certify its existence than the former slave herself. If insecurity cannot be removed, at

least Jacobs finds a way to put it to use for a new political imaginary of a
North transracially united in threat.

Whereas a good number of "fictions of security" follow Brown's and
Jacobs's template of aspiring to security and, in doing so, discovering
unexpected advantages slumbering in insecurity, Willa Cather's char-
acters nostalgically recreate a time-space of security in the ruins of the
past. Surrounded by the forgotten relics of what was once a safe haven for
a people of Southwestern pueblo dwellers, Cather's youthful hero Tom
Outland for a brief moment experiences the "unalloyed" happiness of per-
fect security (*Professor's House* 253). But what is it that turns the fulfillment
of security into, what he calls, a "religious emotion"? (253). Like an heir
of Thoreau's, Tom Outland "simplifies" his surroundings until, "a close
neighbour to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way"
(253). What happens in this moment of perfect security is in fact similar to
what other texts describe as *insecurity*: bathing in sunlight, freed from any
material and social clutter, the world opens up to him in its radical contin-
gency. Nothing actual has restricted the range of the possible; all options of
the future are open. Perfect security becomes perfect potentiality.

In Flannery O'Connor's work we encounter a religiously oriented varia-
tion of Cather's association of security with radical uncertainty. As she
phrased it in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country," "the nov-
elist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which
are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as
distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he
may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across
to this hostile audience" (805). The violent destruction of her characters
becomes her preferred means of shocking her readers out of their danger-
ous complacency induced by the secular Enlightenment. The only way to
handle the insecurity arising from modernity's catastrophic commitment
to instrumental rationality is to up the ante and create a state of physical
insecurity of the most brutal kind. Ideally, her characters and readers end
up like the chastened farm owner of "The Displaced Person," who becomes
a stranger on her land and to her own body and who ends her days dis-
placed in isolation: "She felt she was in some foreign country" ("Displaced
Person" 326). In O'Connor's apocalyptic imagination, violent insecurity
has become the only imaginable form of security.

None of the novelists studied in this book is as adamant about the invig-
orating and thrilling effect of confronting insecurity as Don DeLillo. In
Cosmopolis, the financial tycoon Eric Packer has become numbed by the
abstractions of the virtual world of speculation. Only when he focuses on

the prospects of losing his enormous fortune and on the security threats to his person does he momentarily feel that he is returning to the real. Watching "prices spiral into lubricious plunge," he registers an effect that "was sexual, cunnilingual in particular" (106). This orgiastic "joy at all misfortune, in the swift pitch of markets down," is only topped by the sensation of physical insecurity: "it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he'd always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living" (107). For DeLillo's characters, really living one's life requires a keen sense of one's mortality, and this sense of personal finitude is made available by insecurity. Whereas O'Connor identifies security with a type of insecurity that can be fully realized only in death, for DeLillo the concern with security stages an encounter with threat that recovers a sense of being alive.

Eric Packer's invigoration caused by "the threat of death," in fact, comes closest to Arthur Mervyn's emancipation through pestilential dangers. From the perspective of security, the gothic novel of the early republic and the late postmodern novel of the early twenty-first century meet as two ends of a long arch that spans some two hundred years. Along the way, insecurity enables individual action and self-development; it allows people to sharpen their sensibilities about the counterfactual and merely potential; it provides an arena for the cultivation of aggressive impulses; it permits reflection about our existential condition regarding mortality, finitude, and survival; it equips the most vulnerable subjects with resources for generating social and political authority; and it mobilizes political solidarity among emerging communities unified by no more than threat.

These imaginary experiences triggered by the confrontation with insecurity are principally of two kinds: they either foster the imaginary construction of worlds that differ from present reality, or they facilitate the sense of recovering an aspect of existence that is perceived as having become unavailable. To put it succinctly, security generates stories of discovery and recovery. Brown and Jacobs embody the first case: here the emphasis is on the openness and uncertainty of the future, which allows for imagined scenarios in which individuals forage into unknown realms or modes of existence, or in which new communities take shape. In the second category we find the works of Cather, O'Connor, and DeLillo: acts of recovery in which the imminence of existential threat allows individuals to regain an awareness of their own embeddedness in history, of the prevalence of the otherworldly, or of their existential finitude; in theses cases, security – meaning, again, the confrontation with insecurity – enables the individual

to reconstruct a greater depth of meaning for his or her life by putting the self in perspective.

1.2   The Concept of Security

This brief overview begins to suggest how I employ the term "security" throughout this book. Security becomes a matter of concern when, first of all, there is a perception of a malevolent threat that creates a sense of insecurity. The threat may appear as imminent or removed, concrete or vague, but in any case it exists as a potential of a future that has yet to arrive. All threats are in this sense merely possible threats, however dangerous they may appear.

On this level, the concern with security is deeply bound up with fear. But in the critical literature on security, the role of fear is most often conceptualized in a one-dimensional way. Most of the security theories that emphasize the role of fear hold that the political class has teamed up with the news media and the entertainment industry to create a "culture of fear."[5] In such a culture, the population is constantly afraid. It isn't so much that everyone is incessantly ready to run from an immediate threat, but, according to the argument, low-intensity fear has come to structure the habitual orientation to the world.[6] The immediate connection with security seems irrefutable: a population that constantly experiences the world through the lens of fear will crave security in all realms of life. Individuals will organize their lives around the eradication of contingency. And in their roles as political subjects, people will welcome authoritarian regimes or truncated forms of liberal democracy, in which an inflated executive branch and a legislative ruled by lobbyists obstructs collective will formation. According to the culture-of-fear thesis, these types of government manage to garner consent because they make the most persuasive claims for answering the population's fears. We find at work here a political mechanism that is as ingenious as it is pernicious, for the fear that makes people desire protective leadership is the result of the fearmongering by the political class.[7]

From a theoretical perspective, however, the culture-of-fear thesis rests on problematic assumptions that can best be shown by taking a closer look at the work of Brian Massumi, a leading proponent of affect theory, who has written on the politics of fear in a series of essays and books going back to the early 1990s. In his article "Fear (the Spectrum Said)," from 2005, Massumi argues that threat and fear are not situated on the level of ideas but need to be regarded as affects. After September 11, 2001, the Bush

administration found ways of directing the population affectively through such means as the color alert system, which comprised five threat levels, ranging from green (threat level "low") to red ("severe"). The US government, Massumi effectively claims, created a remote control for the body politic: "Addressing bodies from the dispositional angle of their affectivity, instead of addressing subjects from the positional angle of their ideations, shunts government function away from the mediations of adherence or belief and toward direct activation" (34). To bolster his theory of "direct activation," Massumi enlists the support of William James. James famously insisted, in his essay "What is an Emotion?," that we do not act in response to an emotion, but rather feel an emotion as a consequence of our action. Thus, according to James, we do not start to run because we feel fear, but we feel fear because we start to run. James's larger argument is that the process in which an emotion arises must be reconstructed in three steps: first, we have a sense perception (e.g., we see a bear), next we react bodily (we run), and finally we sense the emotion (we feel fear).

In Massumi's reading, the Jamesian model provides the basis for the argument that emotions like fear can be externally triggered in a controlled manner by devices like the color alert system. All we need is the trigger for fear, and that trigger is threat: "Threat is the cause of fear in the sense that it triggers and conditions fear's occurrence" (36). James, however, is far from insinuating that his theory opens the door to calculable manipulation. (The exception is self-manipulation: smile, James suggests, and you really will feel happy.) The relation between the initial sense perception and the ensuing corporeal and mental reactions cannot be fixed. It is for this reason that emotions like fear and pride take on significance in social life. As James explains, "the most important part of my environment is my fellow-man. The consciousness of his attitude towards me is the perception that normally unlocks most of my shames and indignations and fears.... What the action itself may be [James here means: whether someone scolds me, ignores me, etc.] is quite insignificant, so long as I can perceive in it intent or *animus*. *That* is the emotion-arousing perception" ("What" 195–196). For James, then, in everyday life, the three-step sequence leading to the experience of emotions does not begin with an unmediated external impulse that can be reproduced at will, but with the processes of consciousness of our social embeddedness. Fear is usually not triggered by color codes. What elicits our fear is rather our mental construction of what others may think of us. Jamesian emotions, including the "emotion-arousing perception," are thus part of humans' intersubjective relationality.

Massumi's theorization of "direct activation" in fact has been belied by his very example. The advisory system soon turned out to serve as an excellent case study for the failure of generalized, unmediated affect management. Even the Department of Homeland Security had to concede this. In its 2009 report, the "Homeland Security Advisory System Task Force" came to the conclusion that "at its best, there is currently indifference to the Homeland Security Advisory System and, at worst, there is a disturbing lack of public confidence in the system" (1). The color-coding system was consequently phased out in 2011.

Besides the fact that the affect theory approach to the culture of fear problematically minimizes the intersubjective dimension of the affective life of security, a further problem arises from the way in which this approach theorizes fear itself (or fails to). In particular, proponents of the culture-of-fear thesis tend to neglect fear's temporal structure. The Swedish philosopher Lars Svendsen makes the useful observation that "fear always contains a protention, a future projection, concerning pain, injury or death.... The core of fear is the assumption of a negative future situation. Although not every negative future situation gives rise to fear, something has to be at stake" (39). Svendsen (here implicitly echoing Heidegger) points our attention away from the sheer feeling of fear (imagined as a bodily, non-cognitive state) to the cognitive operations at work in it. Whether we are dealing with an imminent danger (say, by a car coming straight at us) or a remote situation (say, the spread of a contagious disease in a different part of the world), fear is always future-oriented and can thus be described as a varying set of attitudes toward a future that is seen as harmful.[8] But fear is also inherently dialectic. Time is not merely structured around a future of loss, but also by the wish or desire to retain whatever is threatened. Fear is thus an essentially temporal emotion, a way of relating to the future torn between the possibility of loss and the wish to retain what might be lost – a struggle over whose outcome we are not in control.

To slightly rephrase this idea, we can think of fear as bound up with desire; both fear and desire are reliant on time and, in turn, help structure time. Recently, philosopher and literary critic Martin Hägglund has sharpened this thought by coining a pair of terms – *chronophilia* and *chronophobia* – that give expression to the dialectic entanglement of fear and desire against the horizon of time:

> The key argument here concerns the co-implication of *chronophobia* and *chronophilia*. The fear of time and death does not stem from a metaphysical desire to transcend temporal life. On the contrary, it is generated by the investment in a life that can be lost. It is because one is attached to a