

## Introduction: From Sweet Home to Homeland

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“Home is a failed idea.”

– Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (1991)

Bill Gray, the reclusive writer who utters these words in Don DeLillo’s novel, knows whereof he speaks. His ex-wives want nothing to do with him. His adult children mock him as mythical. Yet his remark about the failure of home does not refer to the upstate New York abode that houses his decades-in-the-making third novel and makeshift family of amanuensis who cooks and Moonie who cleans that live there with him as the book opens. On the contrary, the presence of a guest at dinner inspires Bill to toast the place as “feel[ing] like home” (67). What prompts Bill’s more anguished words about home is the fact that he is forced to leave them on an answering machine, a device that severs all personal connection between speaker and listener. More to the point, as he goes on to say, the same device that generates a whole new kind of loneliness can also be accessed in Brussels to blow up a building in Madrid, thus replacing the idea of home as a zone of comfortable boundaries by the reality of a homeland that needs to be secured. This in a book published ten years before 9/11.

I open my description of what constitutes contemporary American fiction with reference to DeLillo’s 1991 work because of how well it recapitulates the concerns of fiction written in the previous decades and how much it anticipates those that fiction in the two decades to come will explore. A “new communist element” and specifically not a “new fundamentalist element” (123), the Beirut terrorists in *Mao II* are political and historical throwbacks to Cold War binarism, the most recent form of that Us/Them dynamic that, as scholars have argued, has long been at the heart of American exceptionalism. Culturally, however, they testify to what a spokesperson terms the “many things Beirut has learned from the West” (129). Glued to VCRs, on which they watch footage of themselves in scuffed khakis shooting at local militia and, later, shooting at blown-up photographs of the local militia’s leaders, the terrorists occupy a war-torn city that functions as a “millennial image mill” (229), a postmodern paradise in which all national differences have collapsed. Movie posters advertise films everywhere even though nowhere can there be

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found anything that remotely resembles a movie theater. Signs for a Western soft drink – Coke II – resemble signs for China’s Cultural Revolution. Boys stationed at checkpoints wear uniforms pieced together from Syrian, American, Lebanese, French, and Israeli garments. Indeed, more than just having learned from the West, DeLillo implies, Beirut is indistinguishable from the West – and from the US in particular. Introduced as having “sunk to the status of less developed country” (5), the US in this book is “just like Beirut,” as the novel’s refrain asserts (146, 173, 176), what with tent cities in Tompkins Square Park recalling refugee camps and cabdrivers sporting licenses that confound the “normal sequence” of given name and surname (148). And not just Beirut, as the portrayal of Times Square and Trafalgar Square and Tiananmen Square as interchangeable locales confirms.

In refusing to state explicitly that the year in which his novel is set is 1989, DeLillo recognizes the idiosyncratic element behind all attempts to date contemporary American literature with respect to the history of globalization. As Paul Giles argues, many different years can be, and have been, used to define the beginning of the contemporary period: the 1971 announcement of Richard Nixon that the United States would no longer redeem currency for gold, which ushered in an era of fluctuating exchange rates; the 1981 inauguration of Ronald Reagan, whose free-market philosophies increasingly drew the country into the global marketplace; the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall; and the end of the Cold War (13–14). Nevertheless, from a postmillennial perspective, the connection between globalization and what he terms the current “detritorialization of American literature” is beyond dispute (1). Such certainty in the impact of the political/historical on the cultural differs markedly from the hesitance shown by Amy Hungerford when commenting in 2008 upon “the period formerly known as contemporary”: “Political watersheds are one thing, but cultural or aesthetic ones quite another, and it was not immediately clear – nor is it clear now – that, to borrow a turn of phrase from Virginia Woolf, literature changed, even if the world did, on or about 9 November 1989” (410). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, that impact is much more clear. The loss of American confidence that Dave Eggers addresses by way of an IT supplier sent to Saudi Arabia in *A Hologram for the King* (2012) is the same loss queried by John Updike in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) after the bipolar politics of the Cold War have given way to an economics of “Japan, and technology, and the profit motive” (272): “what’s the point of being an American?” (442–43).

Part of the urgency behind that question stems from the fact that the collapse of the very physical boundary between East and West in 1989 was followed by later events and phenomena that lent themselves – rightly or wrongly – to interpretations of other forms of collapse: the 2001 destruction

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of the World Trade Center (another collapsed boundary); the 2000 dot-com bust and 2008 economic meltdown (collapsed economy); the 2008 election and 2012 reelection of Barack Obama as president (collapsed racial binaries); global warming and climate change (collapsed ecosystem). Part is a function of earlier demographic shifts that collapsed the boundary between center and periphery and complicated all assumptions about the Eurocentric character of the nation: according to recent statistics cited by Richard Gray, 7.5 million foreign-born individuals entered the US legally between 1990 and 1997, many from outside Europe, accounting for 29.2 percent of the population growth; by the middle of the twenty-first century, nonwhite and Third World ethnic groups will outnumber whites (22). Writing in 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa described the US-Mexico border as “*una herida abierta*” (an open wound) where “the lifeblood of two worlds merg[es] to form a third country – a border culture” (3); addressing the American Studies Association in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin quoted Paul Lauter depicting the entirety of America as part of a “world system, in which the exchange of commodities, the flow of capital, and the iterations of cultures know no borders” (21).

If literature is conceived as one such iteration of culture, the question to which such interrogating of America as a distinct entity leads is what constitutes an American author. Asking “What’s in a Name?” in her own ASA presidential address, Janice Radway proposed doing away with the adjective entirely, based on the belief that the “perpetuation of the particular name, ‘American,’” supports the notion of an “imaginary unity” that should be prevented “from asserting itself in the end, again and again, as a form of containment” (2–3). Focusing more specifically on the question of “[w]hat exactly is ‘American literature?’” Wai Chee Dimock followed with two more: “Is it a sovereign domain, self-sustained and self-governing, integral as a body of evidence? Or is it . . . more like a municipality: a second-tier phenomenon, resting on a platform preceding it and encompassing it, and dependent on the latter for its infrastructure, its support network, its very existence as a subsidiary unit?” (1).

Still in the making, contemporary American fiction does not constitute the kind of “sovereign domain” alluded to above, as the wide range of established and less established authors included in this study makes clear. It resists categorization by way of authorial birthplace or citizenship or residence: too many writers have been born in one place and raised in or emigrated to another. Indeed, the older model of immigrant writers leaving one nation and settling in another – whether by intent (the Havana-born Cristina García and St. Petersburg-born Gary Shteyngart brought by their parents to the US as children) or accident (Ha Jin already in the US on a student visa when the

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Tiananmen Square protests occurred in 1989, Aleksandar Hemon stranded in Chicago when the siege of Sarajevo began in 1992) – has been complicated by other kinds of geographical movement. Some writers born in the US have been raised elsewhere only to return to the US. One thinks, for instance, of Julia Alvarez moving between New York and the Dominican Republic, Teju Cole between the US and Lagos, and Claire Messud between Connecticut, Australia, and Toronto. Others roam more peripatetically. Jonathan Littell, born in New York City, raised in France, currently resides in Barcelona while holding dual American and French citizenship. Mohsin Hamid, born in Lahore, bouncing between the US and Pakistan from the age of three through his twenties, becoming a naturalized British citizen in his thirties, now lives in Lahore. Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London, raised in Rhode Island, moving from Brooklyn to Rome, recently returned to the US to teach at Princeton. As a result, the earlier narrative that traced the struggling immigrant's journey from old to new land, what Bruce Robbins calls the "immigration as redemption" pattern (1100), has been joined by the triangulated narrative that, as Caren Irr argues, exposes the slender lines that separate expatriate, émigré, and migrant (179–81).

At the same time, the contemporary American fiction included in this study avoids the limitless horizons that hemispheric denotes. While it expands the definition of "US" beyond the contiguous states, it still adheres to the historical particularities and politics of the nation that is comprised by those states. Such specificities explain the inclusion of Junot Díaz and Jessica Hagedorn, to take two examples. When Díaz opens *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by tracing the "[f]ukú americanus" back to its port of entry, Santo Domingo (1), he refers to the intertwined histories of the US and the Dominican Republic, from the settlements established by Columbus in 1492 to the fiscal control exercised by the US between 1905 and 1941, from the Spanish soldiers left there in 1493 to the US Marines dispatched there from 1916 to 1924 and, again, in 1965. Likewise, when Jessica Hagedorn quotes William McKinley's justification-by-God's-grace speech of 1898 in a novel that opens in 1956, she recalls in *Dogeaters* (1990) the history of the Philippines as a US protectorate, an imperialist past that lives on as cultural imperialism long after the islands' 1946 independence, as emblemized in *Dream Jungle* (2003) by the making of *Napalm Sunset*, a fictionalized Vietnam War movie based on the actual Vietnam War movie, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), that was filmed in the Philippines. By contrast, such specificities do not characterize a writer such as Caryl Phillips, born in St. Kitts and raised in Leeds, whose fiction focuses much more on the connections between the West Indies and England, despite the fact that a novel such as *Dancing in the Dark*

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(2005), which portrays the life of Bert Williams, a Broadway entertainer born in the Bahamas, would seem to qualify him as relevant.

In examining the fiction of writers who expand the notion of what constitutes contemporary American fiction beyond those with indisputable Americanist pedigrees (Joan Didion descended from a member of the Donner-Reed party, Thomas Pynchon from a patentee and treasurer of the Massachusetts Bay Colony) or those born in the US to immigrant parents (such as Gish Jen and Oscar Hijuelos), this study takes heed of an important point that David Cowart makes when querying the applicability of those postcolonial paradigms that scholars so often employ: “Though not necessarily inclined to sacrifice separateness and difference on the altar of cultural osmosis, these [immigrant] writers seldom dwell on a perceived marginalization” (*Trailing* 3). Many, as he goes on to say, deliberately resurrect the oldest American tropes or rewrite the most canonical American texts, as evidenced by Chang-rae Lee’s appropriation of *All the King’s Men* (1946) in *Native Speaker* (1995), to which one might add *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008). A similar recognition, I would argue, must be maintained when dealing with American fiction written during the period of contemporary globalization. For all the adjectives proposed by scholars to denote the cultural artifacts produced over the last quarter of a century (“cosmopolitan,” “planetary,” and, appropriating a term coined by Randolph Bourne in 1916, “transnational”), and for all the different models used to replace a US nation conceived as a container (intertwined networks for Radway, set and subset modules for Dimock), the novelists who actually compose American literature do not always follow suit.

For regionalist writers, this can mean subordinating the global to the local, as occurs in a novel such as Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* (2001), its suggestive title and origins in the closing of a Maine textile mill and shirt factory by a multinational corporation notwithstanding. It also can mean extrapolating from the local to the national, as occurs in Frederick Busch’s *Girls* (1997) and *North* (2005), in which the upstate New York act of rescue, typically the return of a lost body, functions as an act of citizenship, a function of the body politic. For immigrant writers, it even can mean affirming the act of becoming a legal citizen, as happens in Shteyngart’s *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002), in which no amount of theme-park simulation can dispel the hero’s sensation of being the “Live Jew of Birkenau” during a trip to an Auschwitz turned into a tourist attraction (429), and Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* (2002), in which the authorial alter ego from a Yugoslavia that no longer exists remains a “Nobody” forever aspiring to be “Someone Else” (180), in effect a country

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of one, “the Bosnian,” as Jozef Pronek’s habitual difficulty with articles attests (146, 156). Fully aware of what the actuality of the United States as nation is, many writers still are reluctant to dismiss the ideal of what America represents. Nothing suggests more succinctly the US as fallen nation than the two cones of a nuclear plant and the floating detritus of “Eden’s waste” that greet the eponymous narrator of Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) upon her illegal entry into Florida (96). Yet nothing more celebrates “the promise of America” than the pregnant character’s departure for California on the book’s last page to give birth – in an appropriation of one of the oldest American literary tropes – to what will be the latest incarnation of herself (214). Likewise, nothing conveys more clearly the current status of the United States as sovereign state than the scene near the end of O’Neill’s *Netherland*, in which Hans van den Broek, a Dutchman living in London after a sojourn in New York City, goes to Google Maps to look for a cricket field he has helped to carve out in Brooklyn a few years earlier, only to find no trace of his labors and, once he veers upward into the atmosphere on his laptop, “no trace of nations, no sense of the work of man. The USA as such is nowhere to be seen” (252). That being said, nothing establishes more joyously Hans’s status as a “naturalized” American than the scene in which this analyst so resistant to all things “fantastical” (103), so fearful of batting “the American way” (50), finally slams a cricket ball into the air much like a baseball, and does so “without injury to my sense of myself” (176).

The tremendous productivity of the novelists discussed in the chapters to follow proves their resistance to the affliction that plagues Bill Gray – to return to *Mao II* for a moment – an author as demoralized by terrorism’s usurpation of writers’ ability to “alter the inner life of the culture” and commercialism’s wholesale “incorporat[ion]” of writers as he is paralyzed by the modernist weight of Joyce and Beckett (41). The variety of position statements composed by today’s novelists, in fact, signals an equally varied range of concerns when addressing what many specifically identify as American in nature: from the “billion-footed beast” stalked by Tom Wolfe in his “Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel” (45) to the hypertext advanced by Robert Coover as an “inevitab[le]” medium for future narrative (9), from the single entendres David Foster Wallace dared US fictionists to adopt to extricate themselves from the “deep doo” of a postmodernism mired in televisual self-reference (“E Unibus” 184) to a maximalism that transcends identity politics Bharati Mukherjee sought from immigrant writers barred from a nativist minimalism (“Immigrant” 28–29), from the “empathizing” prescribed by William T. Vollmann when diagnosing the “disease” of “American Writing Today” (330) to the “plagiarizi[ng]” redefined by Jonathan Lethem as forming “the

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actual and valuable material of all human utterances” (including his own, as the appended key to every source he “stole, warped, and cobbled together” to make his essay proves) (“Ecstasy” 68). No longer dwelling on the question of what is left to write in the manner of John Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) – which never was really about actual creative exhaustion but the perceived threat of it, a feeling that the “Literature of Replenishment” (1980) portrayed as hardly unique to the twentieth century – these novelists write, whatever doubts they may harbor about the current state of the novel. No longer bemoaning an anxiety of influence, they affirm what Lethem termed the “*ecstasy of influence*” (67). Some do more than that. Tim O’Brien asserts “story-truth” as “truer sometimes than happening-truth” (203). Carole Maso offers writing that provides not just a model “for how to live” but a model that can “teach us how to better live.”

It is with the aim of exposing readers – specialists and nonspecialists alike – to that wide range of American fiction that this study, in turn, is offered. In so doing, I am aware that comprehensive can never be exhaustive, that determining what for practical purposes must be left out and what kept in has been part of the balancing of depth and coverage that has informed this project from the start. To that end, my focus has been on the novel rather than the short story collection, my emphasis typically on an author’s exemplary work (or works) rather than list of works. That some of those authors appear in more than one chapter testifies not just to my admiration of their talents but to the diversity of their talents and the fact that the sensibilities of writers can change over time. For every author such as Gore Vidal, whose seven-part chronicling of a nation evolving from republic to empire is as consistent in *The Golden Age* (2000) as it is in *Washington, D.C.* (1967) – the path of Burr not taken as unlikely to have been much different from the path that was taken – there is an author such as Susan Sontag, whose early eliding of history through dreamscape frames in *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967) is completely upset when *The Volcano Lover* (1992) presents the 1799 Neapolitan Revolution as proof of the nightmare that is history. The same applies to those authors approached in ways deliberately meant to unsettle expectations, as illustrated, for example, by my consideration of Jonathan Lethem and Paul Auster as political novelists and Ann Beattie and Stephen King (yes, that Stephen King) as writers of historical metafiction.

And, to state the obvious, I also recognize the inherently self-defeating element of any study that includes the word “contemporary” in its title: today’s contemporary is, after all, tomorrow’s antediluvian. That being said, it is not with any view toward supplanting the work that precedes this study that I add my voice to a conversation initiated by Tony Tanner’s *City of*



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*Words: American Fiction, 1950–1970* (1971), Frederick R. Karl's *American Fictions, 1940–1980* (1983), and Marc Chénétier's *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction since 1960* (1989), and continued in single-authored texts by Kathryn Hume, Kenneth Millard, and Patrick O'Donnell and essay collections edited by scholars such as Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, Jay Prosser, and John N. Duvall. Chénétier, who replaced the idea of a mainstream perpetually reconstituting itself by absorbing eruptions into its wake with a mainstream consistently pulling away from expected currents, abjured the idea of looking at literary history in terms of forward progress. “‘Revolutions’ in the novel,” he wrote, “are often just as much a ‘return to’ as a ‘breaking away from’” (13). In situating this study as part of what, at this point in time, can be deemed a history of contemporary American literary histories, I see myself engaged in a similar endeavor, of pushing what follows the “since” in the subtitles of earlier scholarship – 1960 for Chénétier and Hume, 1970 for Millard, 1980 for O'Donnell – further along chronologically so as to explore the changes and continuities, additions and alterations, displayed by American fiction. I thus begin with chapters that focus on the contemporary novel's updating of genres that occupy a prominent place in the American literary canon, notably the historical novel, regional realism, and the political novel. The next chapters focus on the contemporary novel in the context of recent history, in particular on its interrogating of what is (and is not) specific to those events or phenomena – such as 9/11 and globalization – said to distinguish that history. The last chapters focus on the contemporary novel's depiction of American identity, from the role played by border and race to the role played by documents and mere happenstance in the determination of subjectivity. A conclusion turns to aesthetics to explore the future of the contemporary American novel – as postscript hypertext or digitally designed novel, as genre novel, as post-postmodern novel.

All of which brings me to the title of an introduction – which takes a text rather than a year as its rough starting point and ends with a term attributed new meaning in the US after 9/11 – that might serve as a subtitle to my entire book. “It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home,” says the last of the Sweet Home men in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), to which Sethe, who has suffered every form of brutalization and humiliation on the plantation of that name, responds, “But it's where we were . . . Comes back whether we want it to or not” (14). Much as the idea of home has for centuries. Bridget Bennett, in fact, traces the ability of the imagination to create or re-create a home out of the most unlikely conditions back to the earliest settlers for whom the transformation of a previously unfamiliar landscape into a home was a crucial element of colonization and ultimately nation building, as her



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discussion of one of the foundational texts of American literature, Mary Rowlandson's 1682 captivity narrative, makes clear (328–33). It is that legacy that the young soldier of Kevin Power's *The Yellow Birds* (2012), returned from Iraq to "the emptiness [he] still called home" in Virginia (111), invokes when recalling the "early English settlers [who] took it as the farthest point they'd go upstream, the geology of the place preventing them from having any choice other than the one wherein they said, 'We are lost; therefore we will call this home'" (133). The word "homeland," however, has no such lineage. A term never used by presidents prior to George W. Bush when referring to the US in times of world crisis and hence recent to the American lexicon, as Amy Kaplan argues, its Old World assumptions about fixed origins, common bloodlines, and shared mythic past are as antithetical to the exceptionalist notion of America as New World as are its diasporic connotations of a deeply rooted past from which one is severed (84–90). Bracketing an introduction to an introduction to contemporary American fiction with reference to home and homeland, then, expresses the contextualizing of that fiction as both of a specific time and of a specific set of traditions that informs the whole study.

It also expresses the vexed nature of what home, broadly defined, has come to signify in so much of that fiction – a Kentucky plantation on which boys hang from the most beautiful sycamore trees in Morrison's book, a Fifth Avenue mansion within which brothers try to barricade themselves in E. L. Doctorow's *Homer & Langley* (2009), a temporary shelter with attached mortgage to the realtor in Richard Ford's *Independence Day* (1995), a crumbling wreck from which the narrator in Mat Johnson's *Loving Day* (2015) seeks to liberate himself – and the resilience the idea of home displays. When the mixed-race protagonist of Johnson's novel opts to burn down the Philadelphia ruin he has inherited at the book's opening – an eighteenth-century estate haunted by ghosts that literally sits upon a hill in the text's Americanist characterization – he discovers that the building consistently referred to as his "father's house" is impervious to flames. When he makes inquiries about moving it elsewhere, he is told that, for all its rotting foundation and cracked walls, the house could be taken "halfway around the world and it would hold" (256). But when it finally is removed to Malaga in the book's conclusion to serve as home for a mixed-race community whose members wish to "keep it safe" (285), he learns that the "house [that] is still there" that also is a "house [that] will always be here" might be an edifice worth preserving (275). And left with the land on which that property sat, he remains with a place on which to build.