Dynamic Future : Movements Beyond Postmodernism in Three Contemporary American Novels

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Abstract

This thesis explores the criticism of and attempts to move beyond postmodernism in three contemporary American novels. Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* offers a view in which shared experience, and specifically traumatic experience, necessitates the creation of metanarrative communities. Chuck Palahniuk in *Fight Club* navigates the difficulty of addressing postmodern concerns without accepting the conclusions of postmodern thinkers. Karen Tei Yamashita in *Tropic of Orange* posits an ever expanding world which can only be truly understood through metanarrative.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

DYNAMIC FUTURE:
MOVEMENTS BEYOND POSTMODERNISM IN THREE
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELS

by

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Introduction

Postmodernism is a term that in significant ways represents a set of beliefs too diverse to truly exist under a single banner. Somewhat paradoxically though the tenet which most unifies postmodern theorists is the rejection of universalizing, of totalizing, and of metanarratives. In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard writes, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). This incredulity takes many forms, and takes on different specificities to various thinkers, which will be discussed, but fundamentally it is this central tenet which I will examine.

For Lyotard, metanarratives represent a means by which modernists “legitimate foundationalist claims”, including legitimation through appeals to the metanarrative of “progress and emancipation, the dialectics of or spirit, or the inscription of meaning and truth” (Best 165). Postmodernism can be at least in part understood as the product on a new epoch, one in which the modes of the modernist epoch no longer function or have legitimacy. He writes:

> In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (Lyotard, *Condition 37*)

He argues that a diverse set of changes, including technological, economical, and social, altered that status of knowledge and narrative in society (Lyotard, *Condition 37-38*). All discourse is narrative in Lyotard’s configuration. As such, he strips previous
metanarratives, such Marxism or Enlightenment rationalism, of all foundationalist agency (Best 160). These no longer stand as fundamental truths or bases of historical understanding, but are rather one of many narratives with no claim of deserving privilege.

Lyotard argues that metanarrative lead to a tyrannical over-simplification and imposition of totalizing discourses (Woods 20). Metanarrative, in particular the Marxist metanarrative presented by the French Communist Party, was seen as being “too dogmatic and narrow a framework to adequately theorize contemporary society and its diverse modes of power” (Best 24). While discussing how language games operate within the metanarrative of scientific progress, Lyotard posits that the primary purpose is legitimation of power. As example he points to scientists who have had their work “ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because it too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions” (Lyotard, *Condition* 63). He goes on to describe how this person it forced to adhere to the metanarrative:

Such behavior is terrorist, as is the behavior of the system...By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game...He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened. (Lyotard, *Condition* 63-64)

Metanarrative in this understanding becomes a weapon to wield in order to assure the control of those in power.

The totalizing of modernist metanarrative obscured heterogeneity in favor of unifying characteristics. Through the functioning of such simplifying, Lyotard argues that the metanarratives are revealed as modes of power instead of the objective realities they
are sometimes taken for. Central to his assertions is the idea that “the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just” (Lyotard, *Condition 8*). That is to say that metanarratives such as Enlightenment rationalism serve to underwrite power structures. He describes these metanarratives as similar to myth in that “they have the goal of legitimating social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, and ways of thinking” (Lyotard, *Explained* 18). There is an important distinction here in that Lyotard does not believe that all narratives have lost credibility, only metanarratives which he defines as “Narrations with a legitimating function” (Lyotard, *Explained* 19). Fundamentally though, for Lyotard, metanarratives should be understood as modes of domination and not as the foundations of objective realities.

Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, similarly argued that while metanarratives have provided some “useful tools,” ultimately “the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research” (Foucault 81). The prevalence of Marxism in midcentury France made the Marxist metanarrative a frequent target for French postmodern thinkers. For Foucault, “evolutionary history such as written by Hegel or Marx attains its narrative totalization in an illegitimate way, through the construction of abstractions that obscure more than they reveal” (Best 43). Metanarratives for him are not based in reality, but rather a fiction which he sees as counterproductive to any real understanding.

Foucault more specifically concerns himself with rejection of “idealist and humanist modes of writing which traces a continuous evolution of thought” (Best 40). For him discontinuity is no longer something to be stigmatized (Best 40). In his
estimation, discontinuity offers a counter to the detrimental simplification of homogeneous metanarrative. He writes:

We are concerned, rather, with the insurrection of knowledges that are opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of a science, but to the effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and function of an organized scientific discourse within a society as ours. (Foucault 84)

Again, we can see a concern with the role that metanarratives play in legitimating existing institution of power. Through the use of a term like “insurrection,” Foucault defines his project as being concerned with the overturning of existing modes of totality, namely legitimating metanarratives.

In opposition to the universalizing and totalizing modes of modernist metanarratives, postmodernists embrace multiple perspectives and “valorize incommensurability, difference, and fragmentation as the antidotes to repressive modern modes” (Best 38). Lyotard speaks of replacing metanarratives with what he calls “little narratives” when he writes, “We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives...But as we have just seen, the little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention” (Lyotard, Condition 60). He sees these “little narratives” as having access to a well of creative agency that metanarratives prevent subjects from tapping into because of their legitimating role. Foucault favors what he describes as the “local character” of postmodern criticism referring to a “non-centralized kind of theoretical production, one that is to say whose validity is not dependent on the approval of established régimes of thought” (Foucault 81). While their perspective is complicated
slightly by a refusal to maintain a firm distinction between macro and micro as Foucault or Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, also stress the importance of understanding segmentation (Deleuze 208) and micropolitics (Deleuze 212).

It is easy then to imagine how these ideological principals might be reflected within literature. Texts which embrace multiple perspectives, or accept fragmentation and incompleteness often represent an embrace of the postmodern rejection of universalizing metanarratives. Contemporary American authors however, have offered up several texts which while at first glance appear to fit this mold, upon closer examination are shown to problematize and in some ways outright reject the postmodern incredulity that Lyotard talks about. It is these texts that this thesis sets out to explore.

In the first chapter I will examine Jonathan Safran Foer’s sophomore novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. This is a novel that in many ways embraces the postmodern call to celebrate multiple perspectives and incompleteness. While it retains a primary protagonist (Oskar), several sections of the novel are presented as texts written from a different character’s perspective. Incomplete stories are both thematically important and at times reflected in the physical form the text itself. At one point in the text the reader is presented with several blank pages (Foer 121-23) and at another, the text runs together becoming completely unreadable (Foer 281-84). While searching for one person, the protagonist is confronted with multiple characters named Black, and through this, the novel seems to reject metanarrative on the most individual level. Even a name is subject to multiple perspectives. Here however, we can begin to see that more is going on in this narrative than just a simple embrace of postmodernism.
Over the course of the novel, Oskar discovers that both his mother (Foer 291) and his grandfather (Foer 278) met all the people named Black that Oskar met also, meaning that these are no longer fractured narratives presenting multiple perspectives, but rather a unifying narrative for this family, and in turn, this family becomes a unifying narrative for all the characters named Black. Fundamentally, this calls into question the limitations and potential impossibilities of micro-perspectives. The novel suggests that little narratives may be linked in more ways than they initially appear. Furthermore, by linking these little narratives to very large public narratives like the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the events of the Holocaust, Foer suggests that metanarratives are in some ways inevitably and irreparably part of any micro-narrative.

In the second chapter, I examine Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club. Here we have a text in which the narrator is seduced by an extreme and nihilistic form of postmodernism reflecting Jean Baudrillard’s assertions regarding the collapse of meaning and replacing of reality with simulation (Baudrillard passim). Through the character of Tyler, Palahniuk gives a voice to a postmodern perspective which rejects the metanarratives of progress and seeks the destruction of existing modes of power. Ultimately, Tyler is revealed as crazed and callous, a criticism which can only be read as being pointed at the ideology which serves as his foundation.

Finally, in the third chapter I will explore Karen Tei Yamashita’s Tropic of Orange. Here we have a text that seemingly embraces multiple perspectives to an extreme. It employs eight different narrators to tell its story. Key to the text though, is an understanding that is not celebrating the incompleteness or fragmented nature of each perspective, but rather it foregrounds the need to understand how each perspective
interacts with each other. As the novel progresses we find that much like Foer’s text, Yamashita’s characters are far more interconnected than they initially appear. This is not a mere oddity, but rather a fundamental statement about the scale required for understanding and action. In an increasingly globalized world, Yamashita posits that Foucault’s “local character” is insufficient.

Taken together, these three texts offer a glimpse into what literature might look like after postmodernism. While they do not represent outright rejections, as they embrace much of its playfulness and experimentation, it is important to understand that they also represent bold expressions of some of its possible flaws. And furthermore, they posit some possible solutions.
Chapter 1: Foer and the Creation of Communities

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* displays many of the key characteristics which have come to identify postmodern literature. Some of those markers include a concern with the capability of systems of representation, fragmented narratives, and a narrative reflexivity often foregrounded through a play with formal devices (Woods 82). In his review of the novel for *The Atlantic*, which he tellingly titled “A Bag of Tired Tricks: Blank pages? Photos of mating tortoises? The death throes of the postmodern novel,” B. R. Myer regards the use of these techniques as a major flaw of the novel. He writes of them, “After a while the gimmickry starts to remind one of a clown frantically yanking toys out of his sack” (Myer 120). While Myer’s dismissal of the non-textual elements of the novel, and refusal to engage with them critically is hardly a new development (Gibbons 16), this dismissal is notable in that it is foundationally flawed in its insistence that *Extremely* can be understood solely or even primarily as a postmodern novel. The use of postmodern technique should not be conflated with postmodern intent or effect. What Foer does is repurpose those techniques to serve his own end of questioning postmodernism.

Foer’s use of postmodern techniques without intending to reinforce postmodern ideology is hardly new. Tim Woods argues that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is “best seen as a difference in mood or attitude” (9). That is to say that while they may share specific aesthetics their intents are wildly different. He writes, “Postmodernism does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than repentant way. Thus instead of lamenting the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, postmodernism embraces these characteristics as a new form of
social existence and behavior” (Woods 8-9). This is perhaps the best way to describe the difference between *Extremely* and a purely postmodern text. In a 2005 interview Foer responded specifically to a question about the possibility that critics will interpret some of the techniques in the book as a “gimmick” saying, “It felt to me like the most honest way to express what it was like, or what it feels like. I had no interest in doing something experimental. I had no interest in doing something... I wasn’t playing any games, you know. I really just wanted to tell the story as forcefully as I could” (Whitney). Foer’s use of fragmentation and his examination of the capability for representation are not a maker of celebration or gaming, but rather the result of the traumatic events which frame the story. When the very text of the novel starts running into itself, so as to become unreadable, it is not a postmodern celebration of incompleteness, but rather the character being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of their traumatic experiences (Foer 281-84). Understanding that trauma is motivational to the novel both technically and thematically is critical in that it reveals an attempt to do that which postmodern thinkers are most suspect of; namely the creation of a unifying metanarrative.

September 11th represents not only the cornerstone of the novel’s story, but also an important context for understanding the circumstances under which the novel was produced. In *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, Richard Gray notes that in response to the attacks many authors found themselves confronted with the limits of their profession. He writes:

If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd. ‘I have nothing to say,’ Toni Morrison told what SHE called ‘the
dead of September,' ‘-no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become’. (Gray 1)

The profound sense that novelists had no role in the aftermath of the tragedy was indeed widespread. Ian McEwan, in the days that followed said he had nothing he could do except “watch television, read the paper, turn the radio on again” (Baleo-Allué 185). Lynn Sharon Schwartz wrote in the following months, “We will do what is needed; we will write the next sentence. Only not yet, not here on the bleak brink of November” (Baleo-Allué 185). According to Gray they were forced to ask “if literature could or should survive the end of their world” (16). The event was significant as to seemingly mark it as the end of everything which had come before, including the very idea of narrative.

Gray goes on to argue that in the space after the tragedy, with their new found awareness of their profession, writers were presented with an opportunity to bring about new forms and in doing so revolutionize the capacity of their representational systems: “Through their work, by means of a mixture of voices, a free play of language, and even genres, they can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex and internally antagonistic” (Gray 19). David Wyatt similarly argues that 9/11 represents a point of fundamental change for literature. He writes, “On September 11, any reign of irony ended. The events of that day and the imaginings arising out them mark a turn toward ‘seriousness,’ a turn away from modern irony and the lightness of the postmodern turn” (Wyatt 140). Alison Gibbons too writes, “the turn of the millennium as well as the events of September 11, 2001, are the impetus for a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in the
way we see the world and our place within it. As such, literature...reflects such a change” (Gibbons 17-18). It is in this moment of profound change then that this novel comes about.

_Extremely_ is inextricably linked to the prevailing refrain following the attacks that everything had changed. Beyond just this general and somewhat ambiguous sense that there had been a foundational shift however, the novel can be seen as directly responding to the events of 9/11 in two ways. Firstly, the traumatic nature of the event inspired not only the narrative and thematic elements of the text which will be explored in depth shortly, but also influenced the fundamental structure of the novel. As Sien Uytterschout puts it, “The disruptive character of trauma, in other words, is omnipresent in the narrative and at the same time it manifests itself in the formal structure of the book” (61). Understanding what trauma entails then, how it functions and what victims of it respond, is crucial then to a full understanding of the novel.

Aaron Mauro summarizes Cathy Caruth’s theorization of trauma thusly, “narrative and memory is fractured by a shock to the perceptual system of consciousness” (588). This would seem to reflect quite perfectly the silent response that authors had in the aftermath of 9/11. Narrative was shattered not only in the theoretical sense, but quite literally in the sense that writers of narrative simply ceased their work for a period of time. This silence is mirrored by the protagonist Oskar Schell’s reaction to hearing the last messages his father leaves on their answering machine. Foer writes:

> I thought of about calling Mom. I thought about grabbing my walkie-talkie and paging Grandma. I went back to the first message and listened to them all again. I looked at my watch. It was 10:26:41. I thought about running
away and never talking to anyone again. I thought about hiding under my bed. I thought about rushing downtown to see if I could somehow rescue him myself. And then the phone rang. I looked at my watch. It was 10:26:47. I knew I could never let Mom hear the messages... (Foer 68)

His first reaction is to attempt to relay what he has heard to his Mother or Grandmother, but the immediacy of the trauma prevents him from telling the story. Following his inability to relay the narrative he has to re-listen to the messages as he no longer trust in his own memories as representing something real. Ultimately his decision is that he can never tell the story of hearing these messages. He has no access to narrative following his experience of trauma.

Caruth herself speaks of trauma as offering the possibility for fundamental changes in theoretical understanding; much in the way others would note the actual event of 9/11 as marking a paradigm shift. In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, she argues that trauma offers a way to rethink the epistemological problems of the possible indirect nature of reference raised by poststructuralist thinkers. She writes:

Through the notion of trauma, I will argue we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (Caruth11)

The importance of this in relation to Extremely lies in the repeated, and not always successful, attempts of characters to move past the immediacy of their experience, because in that immediacy they cannot truly understand it.
As Gray writes, “Trauma, a word whose origins lie in the Greek word for wound, was famously defined by Freud and his disciples in terms of an event the full horror of which is not and cannot be assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly” (30). As Caruth puts it, trauma “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors” (4). This necessity for distance as part of understanding is interestingly reflected in one of the patterns that David Wyatt notes in fiction following and about 9/11, what he terms a “strategic deferral, where something a character or a reader wants to know is withheld from the narrative until such time as it can serve his emotional education” (140).

The problem with being restricted to the immediacy of trauma lies not only in the fact that it limits the scope of understanding, but also in that it limits the scope of those who understand. Jeffery C. Alexander argues in Trauma: A Social Theory that trauma should not be understood as a natural occurrence. He writes, “First and foremost, I maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (13). For trauma to have meaning, it needs not only the understanding granted by distance that Caruth speaks of, but it also must be transmitted. This is the central motivation for Oskar in the novel. He needs to find a way to transmit his trauma so that it does not consume him.

Alexander argues, “Collective trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves and indelible mark upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity.
in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (6). Critically though, for this to occur there has to be the performance of trauma so that it enters the collective consciousness. He writes:

At the level of the social system, societies can experience massive disruptions which do not become traumatic....Events are one thing; representations of these events are quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.

Collective actors “decide” to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go (Alexander 15).

This then is essential to a full understanding of Extremely. The novel is not solely reflecting on or suffering from traumatic experience, but rather it is taking part in the expression of that trauma. This is clear in the repeated attempts of characters to express their experiences, but functions also on a broader level as an attempt to transmit and make sense of the tragedy for the public. As Alexander states, “For the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaning making work” (17).

This then is a critical part of the novel’s raison d'être. It is only through the successful expression of trauma that the meaninglessness and silence can be overcome. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the slow way the messages which Oskar’s father leaves for him are revealed to the reader. One of Oskar’s central motivations throughout the novel is the expression of this trauma. The first message is given to the reader on page fourteen, but the last one is not revealed until page three hundred and one.
Each time one of the messages is presented in the text both Oskar and the reader can do nothing but live in the moment of that specific message. Foer is even gives precise times for each individual message (68). It is not until the last message is revealed however, and the reader discovers that Oskar believes that he heard the exact moment his father died (302) that the reader gains the full understanding of the importance of these messages. That moment of revelation as to what the final message actually entails comes at the point in which Oskar is ready to express the full extent of his trauma, and is withheld from the reader until that moment to implicate the reader as a receiver of Oskar’s pain.

Uyttershout writes, “A crucial step in the complex process of learning how to manage trauma is sharing one’s experiences with an empathic audience” (63). When Schwartz talks of “writing that next sentence” there is no choice but for that sentence to attempt express what has happened. As Gray describes it, “The transformation of the traumatic event into what Cathy Caruth has called ‘a narrative memory’ (Explorations in Memory, 153) allows the story not only to be verbalized and communicated but assimilated” (24). Foer with Extremely is attempting what Alexander calls “the creation of a new master narrative” (17). One which address the trauma of September 11th head on, but with enough critical distance to make sense of it, and in doing so to help both his characters and his readers start to heal. Sonia Baelo-Allué for her part argues that Foer in fact succeeds at his project writing, “By combining fiction and real images Foer creates an illusion that can help us work through trauma” (189). This communication is literalized in Oskar’s communication of the messages.

The second direct impact that 9/11 has on the novel which it is important to understand is what Alison Gibbons has termed its “multimodality.” By this she is
referring to its visual elements including its use of photographs, unusual layout, use of color, and the employing of several images into the creation of a flipbook effect (Gibbons 17). This multimodality received strong negative reaction from those who reviewed the book. Harry Siegel in his review described these aspects as “pointless illustrations,” and was particularly harsh in regards to the flipbook aspect writing, “don’t write a book culminating with a flipbook and then complain that your words aren’t taken seriously.” John Updike also thought little of Foer’s multimodality writing in his review, “the book’s hyperactive visual surface covers up a certain hollow monotony in its verbal drama.” These reactions hold true to Gibbon’s assertion that literary criticism lacks a history of engaging with multimodality because it has favored the word (Gibbons 16), but they also in their refusal to take these elements seriously misses a crucial aspect for understanding the novel.

The use of imagery as well as language to express 9/11 is a direct result of the highly visual nature of the tragedy itself. When asked about the decision to use multimodal components for the novel Foer said:

September 11 had such a strong visual component, the most visually documented event in human history. Nothing’s ever been seen by as many people as that was. Our experiences of the day, our memories of the day are just so tied up in images of buildings falling and bodies falling.

(Whitney)

The use of photos do not in and of themselves show a failure of language to communicate what Foer wants to say, nor do they represent tricks or distractions to simply be glanced at and ignored in critical analysis as Siegel suggests. Rather, any attempt like the one that
Foer undertakes, to make sense of and truly express the trauma of 9/11, has no choice but to attempt to do so on the visual level, because the event itself was so undeniably visual in nature.

Baleo-Allué states, “The attack has become one of the most represented disasters in history since it produced an unprecedented visual impact on those around the world who watched the second plane crash into the South Tower live on television” (184). Mauro describes Foer as being “influence by the profoundly visual record of the attack” (585). Gray notes that the visual nature of the event gave writers access to a powerful set of visuals. After noting how widely viewed the event was in real time he writes, “What is certainly the case is that this immediacy –an immediacy that was above all visual---was something new in the experience of crisis. And it offered writers and other artists a powerful series of symbols for an otherwise unendurable and perhaps unknowable event” (Gray 8). When Foer uses an image of a man having jumped from one of the towers (59), it is because he believes this to be an image that people will recall. This will trigger their memory in a visceral way.

What is clear is that the images used in the novel are a direct response to the way in which the initial trauma was experienced. Foer described the process of constructing the multimodal elements of the book in a 2005 interview. He said:

A book is a little sculpture. The choice of fonts, the size of the margins, the typography all influence the way the book is read. I consciously wanted to think about that, wanted to have the book really be something you hold in your hands, not just a vehicle for words. So I was involved in
every step of the design, right down to how the book is stamped
underneath the dust jacket. (Mudge)

There is no way to separate the multimodal aspects from the language of the novel. They were carefully designed to be taken together and to express a complete text. Elisabeth Siegel argues for the importance of understanding the novel's multimodal elements when she argues “that it is precisely the use of images... that allow for a reading of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as a critical contribution to the discourse on 9/11 and the role images play in the construction of a collective memory of this event.” What Siegel identifies as the “construction of collective memory” if the type of trauma transmission that Alexander describes. The novel’s attempt to express and explain is fully integrated with its use of multimodal techniques. You cannot have a full understanding of the former without engaging critically with the latter.

The use of multimodal techniques can be seen from the first page. When opening the novel, the very first thing the reader is presented with is three, full page, black and white images which form a visual epigraph. The first is a close up on the keyhole below and old-fashioned doorknob. The second is a somewhat blurry image of what appears to be pigeons taking off into flight against a blank sky. The third is the exterior wall of an apartment building at night. No information is given beyond the images themselves. The reader is left to interpret the images on their own. Ross Watkins points out that a reader, when presented with a series of images, will attempt to find connections between them (12). Uyttershout points out the symbolic importance of lock imagery for the novel. She writes, “Finding the matching lock to his key is a symbolic search and points to the child’s inner need to ‘unlock’ the trauma he is experiencing” (69). The significance of the
first image seems quite simple given that Oskar is in fact looking for a lock to open. This type of lock and key imagery will in fact be repeated several times.

The second image is slightly harder to interpret. The quantity of the birds together with the fact that they seem to be pigeons would seem to suggest an urban setting, a location associated with collectivity. More importantly though is perhaps the upward motions of the bird suggesting lightness and release. This image becomes even more clear once the reader discovers that Oskar primarily expresses feelings of sadness through the metaphor of “wearing heavy boots” (Foer 9, passim) suggesting being stuck to the ground. Furthermore, the opposite image, an image of falling, is most present in the novel in the image of a man jumping to his death from one of the Twin Towers (Foer 59, 205). Clearly then the first two images would seem to point to an unlocking of trauma. The third image appears quite tranquil. The hint of the sky visible in the upper right corner, as well as the fact that lights are on several of the apartment windows, suggests that the picture was taken at dusk. The image of the apartments themselves is interesting in that they are clearly domestic images, but unlike a singular house, they represent also a collective image. They invoke the space of “home” and “family,” but do so while acknowledging that the family is also part of a larger community. This is further highlighted by the fact the photo is centered on the point at which two different apartment building touch. Taken together then, this photographic epigraph prompts the reader for a story about finding community through the unlocking of traumatic experience.

This then is the story which unfolds throughout the novel. As a means of expressing his trauma Oskar partakes on a grand quest. While playing with his father’s things in an attempt to refresh his memory of him, Oskar finds a key in an
envelope with “Black” written on it. Thinking the key could be part of an extensive scavenger hunt like the one that his father used to set up for him before he died, Oskar sets out to find what the key opens. As soon as he finds it Oskar says the key is “obviously something very important” (Foer 37). The significance he gives it would clearly suggest an importance which comes internally, and not from any actual external importance. This is the literal representation of the trauma that Oskar cannot express.

Oskar eventually, with a little help from the manager of an art-supply store, eventually comes to the realization that “Black” is in fact most likely a name, and so he sets about on a journey to find everyone with the surname Black in New York. Through his quest he is slowly able to transmit his trauma to each person he encounters, fulfilling Alexander’s requirement that the trauma must enter “the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander 15). Consider the encounter that Oskar has when he visits the first Black, Aaron Black. After the man initially rebuffs his attempts to ask him about the key, Oskar regains his attention through the declaration that his father is dead (Foer 90). Recognizing Oskar as a victim of trauma, Aaron Black no longer attempts to dismiss him, but rather engages with him and invites him to share that trauma. Aaron asks, “Can I ask how he died?” to which Oskar first narrates “I didn’t want to talk about it, but I remembered the promise I made to myself about my search, so I told him everything” (Foer 90). The promise he refers to is a promise he made to himself that despite explicitly not telling his mother about his quest, he would answer any questions asked of him by the Blacks. Oskar’s initial resistance to answering the question shows the difficulty of communicating his trauma, but ultimately his quest and Aaron Black allow him to fulfill the expression.
Oskar continues his search and with each person he meets he continues to transmit his trauma, and in fact slowly reveals more and more of his trauma. Eventually he comes to meet the person he believes to be his Grandmother’s tenant, but who he importantly does not yet know to actually be his estranged Grandfather Thomas Schell. Once again he reveals the fact that his father died and the effect it has had on him. This time he goes even further however, in that he plays for his Grandfather the earlier messages that his father had left on their answering machine before Oskar had gotten home that day. He tells him “No one else has ever heard that,” to which Thomas Schell asks “What about your mother?” and he responds “Especially not her” (Foer 255). This moment is important to the extent that it both allows Oskar to further express his trauma, while also highlighting his inability to fully do so. Having Oskar express himself to his Grandfather invokes the close family, safety, and tight knit bonds normally associated with the domestic family, but by denying him the knowledge of Thomas Schell’s true identity it does not privilege the domestic family over the more general community. Thus the expression becomes a statement by which community is inscribed with the attributes of family. Trauma is bringing the community together. This is an act that can also be seen when the various Blacks that Oskar meets all come to see his school play (Foer 143), and act normally associated with parents.

Oskar’s quest comes to an end by chance, when he finds that his key belongs to the husband of one of the first few Blacks that he meets, Abby Black. The information failed to get communicated during their initial meeting because Abby and her husband were getting divorced at the time. Oskar does, in the end, though go to meet William Black and bring on end to his search. The end of the quest though has nothing to do with
what the key actually opens, which just further underscores the key’s symbolic and nonliteral nature. It turns out that Oskar’s father obtained the key by accident (Foer 296). The true end to the quest comes when Oskar is finally able to reveal the totality of his traumatic experience and repeat the final message his father left that only he heard (Foer 301). And having transmitted his trauma, Oskar asks for forgiveness though not for the reason the reader initially thinks. The exchange goes as follows:

I ask him, “Do you forgive me?”

“Do I forgive you?”

“Yeah.”

“For not being able to pick up?”

“For not being able to tell anyone?”

He said, “I do.” (Foer 302)

What Oskar wants to be forgiven for is his inability to fully communicate his trauma. There is a recognition of the importance the act has, and importantly William Black does in fact grant him absolution, not only by responding in the affirmative, but by receiving the narrative of Oskar’s trauma. He has allowed Oskar to final fully communicate. Oskar’s final act then is to remove the key, which he has been wearing around his neck, and to hand over his burden.

An equally important revelation takes place just before Oskar meets William Black. Oskar realizes that his mother had been aware of his quest all along. She has in fact met all of the Blacks he has met (Foer 291). In doing so, without even realizing it at the time, Oskar and his mother have shared a common metanarrative represented by the people they met. They in turn have represented a metanarrative which has brought all of
the people they met together. The transmission of trauma has both repaired the broken domestic family, and at the same time created a narrative which helped form a collective identity. Oskar even comes to accept his mother’s new romantic interest, whom he had previously completely rejected, through the knowledge that he too has suffered the traumatic loss of his loved ones (Foer 315).

Oskar’s expression of his trauma may be the primary one for the novel, but it is importantly not the only one. The text also deals with two other important traumatic events explicitly, namely the bombings of Dresden, Germany and Hiroshima, Japan during World War II. Philippe Codde also argues that in invoking Germany during World War II, that Foer also inevitable invokes the horrors of the Holocaust. He argues that the text is “haunted” by traces of the Holocaust because Foer is what he identifies as a third generation descendent of Holocaust survivor (Codde 674). Ilka Saal agrees, writing, “In fact, while evoked only indirectly and in spectral form, the Holocaust serves as a key traumatic reference, haunting and complicating Foer’s text.” Through connecting multiple traumas Foer makes an argument in favor of metanarrative understanding.

The bombing of Dresden enters the text through the chapters in the novel narrated by Oskar’s grandparents, both of whom survived the bombings. His Grandfather describes the horror of what he saw writing:

there was a silver explosion, all of us tried to leave the cellar at once, dead and dying people were trampled, I walked overran old man, I walked over children, everyone was losing everyone, the bombs were like a waterfall, I ran through the streets from cellar to cellar, and saw terrible things: legs
and necks, I saw a woman whose blond hair and green dress were on fire, running with a silent baby in her arms, I saw humans melted into thick pools of liquid, three or four feet deep in places, I saw bodies crackling like embers, laughing, and the remains of masses of people who had tried to escape the firestorm by jumping head first into lakes and ponds... (Foer 211)

Where Foer uses multimodality to attempt to fully express Oskar’s experience of September 11th, here he relies wholly on evocative language. Like Oskar’s experience though he experience the trauma in the moment. Any sense of a single sentence is lost to the seemingly simultaneous experience of all the horror of what is being witnessed.

The bombing of Hiroshima is in the text in the form of a recorded interview with a survivor that Oskar plays for his class as part of a show and tell. The survivor named Tomoyasu recounts the events with similar horrors such as, “His skin was peeling off all over his body,” and “There were maggots in her wounds and a sticky yellow liquid” (Foer 187-89). These visceral descriptions are of particular interest to Oskar because they are exactly the kind of things he cannot express about his own trauma. By using this for his show and tell once again we have Oskar trying to express trauma, but doing so using someone else’s trauma. The same thing can be said about the connection between Oskar and his Grandfather, connecting their traumas. All of these traumas are linked in a metanarrative of trauma, suggesting once again the ability of trauma to create communities.

The importance of including these other traumas in the text is a matter of scale which the book is trying to represent. Gray argues that Extremely ultimately fails to live
up to the possibility he sees for more multiplicity in representation because as he sees it the novel, “locates crisis in terms of opposition---them and us, the personal and the political, and private and the public, the oppressor and the victim” (Gray 65). Gray’s reading however misses the importance that the various other traumas play as part of the novel.

Additionally Matthew Mullins outlines the importance of the inclusion of Dresden and Hiroshima in his essay “Boroughs and Neighbors: Traumatic Solidarity in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredible Close*”. Mullins argues that Foer uses reference to other traumas to “investigate notions of traumatic solidarity immediately following the events of 9/11” (300). He is interested in the extent to which trauma can help form Alexander’s collective identity. He argues that “*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* posits an unbreakable bond between identity collectives based on common experience of trauma” (Mullins 301). Specifically about the inclusion of Dresden and Hiroshima, Mullins contends the inclusion of these references “complicates this sense of America’s uniqueness as victim by returning to the atrocities of Hiroshima and Dresden enacted by the United States on Japan and Germany” (Mullins 304). By acknowledging the United States as both victim and aggressor and various points in history, Foer destabilizes and simplistic “us vs them” understanding that Gray is so concerned about.

And as Mullins also points out, the link between the traumas of the past and the trauma of September 11th, a link which Oskar is so acutely aware of, creates an expansion of the community that the novel attempts to create through the sharing of trauma. Saal argues:
we can surmise that for Foer Dresden plays a crucial role in the narrative framing of 9/11. Possibly, it might serve to fulfill the role of a "successful" trauma transfer—that is, of establishing an analogical reference that brings the events of New York into dialogic exchange with a previous trauma so that the global links between various vulnerabilities become apparent.

(Saal 464-65)

That is to say that the inclusion of references to Dresden and Hiroshima do not just magnify the novel’s attempt to create community through the transmission of trauma, but rather they are essential to it. They prove the community building capacity of trauma is not limited. The transmission of trauma narratives can link desperate peoples, even ones who have at various times been both victim and aggressor. As Codde describes it, to sympathize with those who can also be aggressors, in his example meaning to sympathize with German citizens during World War II, is a “remarkable empathy for the radical Other” (681). Foer shows that trauma has the possibility to forge commonalities without erasing individualities. The existence of a metanarrative does not necessarily have to lead to the tyranny and erasure that postmodern thinkers are so concerned with.
Chapter 2: Palahniuk and Finding the Middle Ground

The critical reaction to Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* is perhaps most charitably characterized as “sharply divided” (Matthews 81). Robert Bennett contends, “Few works of contemporary literature have provoked the level of critical controversy sparked by the publication of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel” (65). He writes, “Aptly summarizing the critical reception of both the novel and the film, Gary Crowdus argues that most people react to *Fight Club* on one ‘side of a love/hate divide’” (66). More than simply being divided, critical discourse around the novel, and often as well around David Fincher’s film adaption of the same name, seems confused and cacophonous in both approach and conclusion.

Bennett for his part argues that the novel is “essentially existentialist” (67). Andrew Hock Soon Ng agrees writing, “For someone familiar even with the basic tenets of existentialist philosophy, it is not difficult to elicit strains of it in Chuck Palahniuk’s controversial 1997 novel” (116). He points to statements like “you are not a beautiful unique snowflake” (Palahniuk 134) which he describes as, “self-conscious axioms which reiterate the protagonist’s desperate humanness, [which] clearly recall Sartre’s view of the Nothingness that characterizes the human subject” (Ng 116). Cynthia Kuhn agrees calling the novel a “veritable catalog of Gothic conventions” and expresses surprise that its Gothic roots have not been recognized further (*Wound* 36). Jesse Kavadlo however, contends that while there is some existentialism “on the surface”, Palahniuk is better understood as “an American ironist in the tradition of Mark Twain, Nathanael West, Flannery O’Conner, Vladimir Nabokov, and Don DeLillo”, comparing a desire to find meaning in “futile and absurd” (7) world and describes Palahniuk as a “closet moralist”
(passim). Peter Matthews similarly wonders why more attention has not been paid to the novel’s religious aspects (84), such as imagined discussions with god (Palahniuk 207). Eduardo Mendieta argues that the best way to read Palahniuk’s work is as a “mortician’s report on American culture” (394). Palahniuk for his part contends, “My novels are all romantic comedies…my characters are still playing in a very classic sort of boy-gets-girl scenario,” an assertion to which his interviewer responds “And if there was a boy-gets-girl story that drove the plot, it eluded most critics” (Straus). This is a fair statement considering how few critics have really focused on the romantic thread of the plot.

How then can all of these approaches and understandings, each of which seemingly make well thought out and researched points, be synthesized? How can the work that Kavadlo equates with having broken glass rubbed in your eyes and then being punched (3) be the same work that the author describes in an interview with CNN as a “buddy movie”? How can the protagonist that Palahniuk describes as an “everyman” (CNN) be the same character that Kavadlo describes when he writes “they’re nameless dual personality sadomasochistic anarchist neo-fascists turn rescuers” (3)? Such a description does not seem to be even internally consistent let alone consistent with any description external to it. How then can all of this take place within the same book, let alone the same protagonist? The answer lies in understanding Palahniuk’s complex critique of the celebration of fragmentation inherent to the postmodern rejection of metanarratives, and understanding the way in which *Fight Club* ask the reader to decipher its narrative.

*Fight Club* centers around two distinct personalities of a single protagonist. The reader is initially believes that the sole protagonist is the meek, unnamed narrator who
finds himself befriended and confronted by the radical Tyler Durden. After a little more than two-thirds of the narrative has passed however, the narrator along with the reader both discover that Tyler and the narrator have been a singular protagonist the entire time. Tyler explains it to the narrator personality saying, “We’re not two separate men. Long story short, when you’re awake, you have control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk 167). This is crucial because Tyler makes no distinction between the two personalities here. He explicitly states “We’re not two separate men.” The reader in this moment realizes that everything they have read in the previous hundred and sixty plus pages has been wrong. They have only understood part of the narrative, and being presented with the entirety of the narrative fundamentally shifts their understanding from confused outsider to enlightened insider.

Properly understanding the relationship between the narrator personality and the Tyler Durden personality is crucial. Matthews contends that, “The bulk of the criticism has thus centered on whether Tyler Durden is a positive or negative role model” (82). The problem with this is that it posits Tyler as wholly separate from the narrator. It attempts to measure the impact that Tyler has on the narrator while ignoring the impact the narrator has on Tyler.

Lars Bernaerts in his article, “Fight Club and the Embedding of Delirium in Narrative,” examines these dual personalities from the position that Tyler is a delusion experienced by the narrator. He writes, “In Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club (1996) the delirium of the anonymous protagonist assumes vast proportions. Tyler Durden, the other main character of the novel, turns out to be his projected alter ego” (373). The problem
with this interpretation is that it privileges the narrator personality over the Tyler personality. It sets up Tyler as an aberration, something needing to be cured. This framework would rob the personal growth the narrator receives through the fight club of any significance as it is achieve under the influence of Tyler (Palahniuk 51). In doing so, it undermines any critique offered by the narrator because he is now sick, rendering him unreliable and thus incapable of passing judgment.

There is an attempt on Bernaerts to avoid this problem. He writes, “Even when the protagonist finally realizes he has been splitting up his personality into two separately acting subjects, the delusional figure is still pulling the strings” (373). By arguing that what he labels the delusional personality has control over the protagonist, Bernaerts attempts to avoid reducing Tyler to a simple medical condition. He points to a section of the novel in which the narrator and struggle try to reconcile their dual state. The narrator says, “Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination,” a charge to which Tyler responds “Fuck You. Maybe you’re my schizophrenic hallucination [emphasis in the original]” (Palahniuk 168). Bernaerts says of this passage:

In spite of all the insights into his situation the experiencing self fails to get rid of his delusion. His delirium still monopolizes his perception and cognition. And so in a context of literary postmodernism, the delirium, is explicitly resisting reduction to a separate state. It might be more actual than the supposed real world, as it motivates the thoughts, utterances, and actions of the protagonist. In Fight Club, the products of the protagonist’s sick mind are constitutive to the narrative. (Bernaerts 373-74)
The problem here is that while maintaining the agency of the Tyler persona, it also maintains this false separation between the narrator and Tyler. By medicalizing Tyler, no matter how much you still recognize his ability to affect the narrative, he remains the "products of the protagonist’s sick mind." He remains something to be fixed and written off.

Palahniuk in his chat with CNN (1999), when asked about the role he thinks psychological disorders play in the film version of his narrative responded, “This film is about regular people under regular stress, not demented people under extraordinary circumstances.” When asked about the exact functioning of the dual personalities in the same chat he said, “Please don't try to take a metaphor too literally. This is allegory, this is not something you can dissect in a physical way.” The point is not to diagnose the protagonist. When Tyler responds “Maybe you’re my schizophrenic hallucination” (Palahniuk 168), this is not an attempt to highlight a medical condition, or even to confuse the reader as to which personality is real, but rather a dismissal of the whole concern. The reader is not meant to figure out which one of the personalities they should privilege, but rather to accept both personalities as part of the protagonist.

While comprehensibility requires us to distinguish between the narrator and Tyler, and to speak of them separately, what must always be fundamentally understood is that their actions, words, thoughts, and beliefs are never in reality separate from each other, even when in opposition to each other. Jeffrey A. Sartain in his article, “‘Even the Mona Lisa’s falling apart’: The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk’s Fiction,” argues that writers in the latter half of the 20th century incorporated the paradoxical reasoning of contemporary scientific advances into their writings. Sartain
explains the nature of the relationship between the dual personalities of Tyler and the narrator (whom he calls Joe) with an analogy to the paradoxical understanding quantum physics has regarding the nature of light, writing:

The most fundamental and problematic binary paradox encountered through experimental science is the contradictory evidence supporting the dual nature of light. Light, depending on how it is measured, demonstrates the characteristics of both particles and waves, phenomena that were previously considered mutually exclusive. As quantum physics has shown, though, light seems to be equally observable as both a particle and a wave, and cannot exist solely as one or the other because either phenomenon cannot independently explain all the properties of light...Much like the paradoxical nature of light, Fight Club’s characters Tyler and Joe represent a mutually exclusive binary that seems illogical, impossible and paradoxical to combine...When Palahniuk reveals the true nature of Joe/Tyler near the end of the novel the reader must reconcile these two diametrically opposed personalities, realizing they result from the same origin. (Sartain 28-29).

This is the first crucial step to understanding the relationship between the narrator and Tyler. They are inherently both part of the protagonist at the same time. Any attempt to separate them, or to judge them independently, or to view one personality as an aberration or as being suppressed by the other, misses the point. The reader is told this through the reveal. By withholding the truth for such a large portion of the novel, Palahniuk highlights the reader’s lack of understanding when considering only one
personality. The function of the twist reveal is not to make the reader attempt to figure out the physical functioning of such a condition, but rather to shock the reader into considering what it means that diametrically opposed personalities were in fact a single person. Palahniuk challenges his readers to understand a narrative beyond a single point of view.

So for instance, when the narrator is first conscience of Tyler he describes him in a state of perfection saying, “The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of perfection he’d created for himself” (Palahniuk 33). At this point in the narrative the reader believes Tyler to be a separate person, so they interpret them as someone for the narrator to look up to, perhaps to emulate. The perspective switch wherein the reader is given access to the knowledge that Tyler and the narrator are in fact the same person necessitates reevaluation of this encounter. Now both the narrator’s motivation and agency are internal. When the narrator says “he’d created for himself,” he is in fact talking about himself. The scene is no longer about the finding of an outsider mentor figure, but rather about the discovering of the narrator’s own internal agency.

This theme of needing to move beyond narrow understandings is repeatedly highlighted and mocked throughout the text. Partial understandings are repeatedly shown to be problematic. For example, when then narrator initially goes to a doctor complaining that he cannot sleep the doctor responds, “Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what’s actually wrong. Listen to your body” (Palahniuk 19). The larger understanding that the doctor hints at, is of course the as of yet unrealized reality that Tyler is taking over the protagonist’s body every night leading to his feelings
of exhaustion. As of this point in the narrative (Palahniuk 19), the narrator has yet to even meet the Tyler personality, and it is this partial understanding of the narrative that leads an inability to identify the reality of the situation.

The failure to understand a larger context is further dramatized and mocked in the form of a series of articles that the narrator finds in old *Reader’s Digest* magazines. He describes the articles saying, “In the oldest magazines, there’s a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane’s Uterus. I am Joe’s Prostate” (Palahniuk 58). The narrator then adopts this way of speaking to describe his reaction to finding out that Tyler slept with his romantic interest Marla. He describes his anger through absurd statements such as, “Hearing this, I am totally Joe’s Gallbladder” and “I am Joe’s Raging Bile Duct” (Palahniuk 58-59). The absurdity of the limited perspectives here functions both on the level of personification of individual organs outside of the larger body, but also on the level of the narrator’s anger and jealousy in the first place. Though neither the reader nor the narrator knows it yet, he and Tyler are the same person, meaning jealousy that Tyler slept with Marla is a meaningless act based on limited understanding. Both personalities have in fact slept with her.

This mocking of incomplete understanding can again be seen when narrator realizes that his actions are being dictated by Tyler’s wishes, though not that he is Tyler yet. He says, “I am Tyler’s mouth. I am Tyler’s hands. Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa” (Palahniuk 155). The narrator calls back to the absurdity of the personified organs and links that to his relationship with Tyler. He casts himself a puppet doing whatever Tyler commands. After all, he is the “mouth” and the “hands” in this construction no the brain. On one level this is mocking blind allegiance to
someone like Tyler, but once the reveal is made it can also be understood as mocking the idea that the narrator was ever doing something he did not want to. He was in fact the brain all along.

Perhaps the ultimate indictment of incomplete understandings in the text however is the way it allows the functioning of Project Mayhem, the extremist group which develops out of the fight cubs. It is actions of this group that turn the narrator personality against Tyler. Describing how it functions, Tyler says: “They all know what to do. It’s part of Project Mayhem. No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly” (Palahniuk 130). It is the purposeful compartmentalizing of information that allows the worst excesses of the Tyler personality. Only by understanding the larger context, including the true nature of his relationship to Tyler, can the narrator attempt to stop Project Mayhem.

If we understand the narrator and Tyler as inherently a singular protagonist, neither privileging one over the other, nor dismissing one as an affliction, how are we to understand their interaction within the text? What does their internal struggle amount to? To start we have to understand what each personality represents.

Renee D. Lockwood identifies the narrator, whom he refers to as Jack, as representing an extreme form of individualism. He writes:

Indeed, the central character of Jack epitomizes individualism…maintain an effectively solitary profession which essentially gives nothing to a group collective…constantly flying around the country on business, living on ‘single-serving’ meals, using single-sample toiletries, and staying in single hotel rooms. (Lockwood 325)
The job which Lockwood refers to is one where the narrator works for a car company to determine whether or not to initiate in the event that a defect causes a fatal accident. The way that he speaks about his job though is completely devoid of any connection to the human aspect or the loss of life. He describes it as a simplistic equation: “$A \times B \times C = X$. This is what it will cost if we don’t initiate a recall. If $X$ is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If $X$ is less than the cost of a recall, then we don’t recall” (Palahniuk 30). While Lockwood is correct that the narrator is highly individualistic, the connotation of that description is not quite right. This individualism is not meant to be celebrated, but rather is meant to be the unfulfilling state the narrator finds himself in at the beginning of the novel.

Mendieta argues that “Palahniuk’s writing is motivated by an Emersonian romanticism that celebrates and idolizes the undiminishable capacity of individuals” (407). A close look at the narrator shows quite the opposite however. The narrator is not simply self-sufficient by choice, but rather he is extremely isolated. As Amirhossein Vafa and Rosli Talif point out:

In fact, while the narrator enjoys the patriarchal privileges of manhood as a white collar employee in a major American corporate company, the tone of individual dissatisfaction permeates the novel. The narrator is isolated, lives alone, cannot healthily connect with others, and does not even bear a novel throughout the novel. (Vafa 452)

He has become wholly disconnected from the larger society. His solitary state is not some absurd Emersonian picture of an ideal individual, but rather the broken condition which prompts the narrative action.
The description of the narrator’s profession comes in the middle of a chapter in which the narrator is describing his numerous travels around the country (Palahniuk 28). The way he describes it purposefully highlights his isolation and again foregrounds fragmentation and partial information. The narrator announces significant changes in location with simple, rapid-fire declarations: “You wake up at Air Harbor International...You wake up at O’Hare. You Wake up at La Guardia. You wake up at Logan” (Palahniuk 25). Each time a new location is announced it is underlined through the layout of the text because each sentence is given its own line, not made part of a larger paragraph. There are brief descriptions between most of locations, but never anything that allows the reader to get situated.

This constant dislocation continues throughout the chapter however, “You wake up at Dullas...You wake up at SeaTac...You wake up at O’Hare, again” (Palahniuk 26-31). This sentence pattern is used nineteen times over just eight pages. Eventually it dissolves from even give a specific location and becomes simply, “You wake up at the beach...You wake up, and you’re nowhere...You wake up, and that’s enough” (Palahniuk 32-33). The effect is to completely remove the narrator from any community. It serves to acknowledge his existence but to remove that existence from any time or place. He is isolated from the larger context of a neighborhood. Even his fellow travelers are nameless, being described as “single-use friend” (Palahniuk 31).

Even the place he does live is a described in a way to emphasize the narrator’s isolation. Two chapters after the description of his traveling his residence is described as:

Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-
rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air conditioning, you couldn’t open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom. (Palahniuk 41)

The use of the word “Home” here seems at best ironic, if not something spit with outright contempt. Nothing about this description is homely. The emphasis is on being separated entirely from the outside world. Matthews describes it as being “Squeezed into a space designed to inhibit rather than enhance communication” (83). This is not something that is being celebrated, but rather lamented. He echoes the coldness of his job by comparing the place to a “filing cabinet,” and rejects any possibility of redeeming the location by tainting it with the smell of his own waste.

This then is the state we find the narrator personality in before he recognizes and begins to interact with the Tyler personality. He is completely fragmented, and cut off from the rest of society, unable to overcome this. The causes of his isolations are complex and multifaceted, and made even more difficult to exactly decipher by the frequent use of irony and satire. Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin in their introduction to their collection Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem argues that Palahniuk’s characters are “struggling to find fulfillment in a postmodern world where the Orwellian power of mass media and the crushing weight of the past make doing so all but impossible” (1). Krister Friday, along with many others, points to
the narrator reacting to a perceived “crisis of masculinity in contemporary American culture,” which Alex Tuss links to the frequent discussion in the text of absent fathers (99). This can definitely be seen in moments like when Tyler identifies his father as the thing he is fighting against (Palahniuk 53). Olivia Burgess points to an emptiness caused by a consumerist society (270), and Matthews concurs describing what Palahniuk depicts as a “recurring mainstream pattern of passive consumption” (83). Their arguments are support by moments like the narrator saying, “The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (Palahniuk 43). The linking of consumerism to sexual gratification clearly points to a problematic level of consumption.

All of these interpretations are important, and certainly supported by the text. Understanding them is definitely a necessary component of reading the text. It is important though not to allow a legitimate debate over the validity and nature of causes to inhibit an understanding of the effect. Christina Angel argues that it is important not to simplify Fight Club by solely understanding it as a critique of its time period. She writes:

The genius if his novels, however, does not necessarily lie in their contemporaneity, but rather in his ability to connect with a jaded, post-Generation X ennui while invoking a rich sense of literary tradition. So engrossed are his audiences in his literary tricks of diversion and obfuscation that it is easy to forget his novels are equally successful in terms of their link in a literary chain of psychological development.

(Angel 49)
This is an important point. *Fight Club* certainly offers a fascinating critique of the culture of which it is a product, but the true heart of the text is a lonely, isolated individual. As Angel puts it, “The unnamed narrator in *Fight Club*, for example, may have as much or more in common with an Everyman figure than he does with the Angry White Male of the late twentieth century [emphasis in the original]”(49). Sartain quotes Palahniuk as writing is the introduction to a non-fiction collection “all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people” (27). The fundamental nature of that should not be lost.

The narrator initially attempts to overcome his fragmentation from the rest of society by attending support groups for various fatal diseases that he does not actually have. He believes at this point that he is suffering from insomnia, and describes his isolation from society through an invocation of Baudrillardian simulacra saying, “This is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you” (Palahniuk 21). Through the support group he believes that he can gain access to a more authentic experience. He says:

This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention. If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you. Everything else about their checkbook balance and radio songs and messy hair went out the window. You had their full attention. People listened instead of just waiting for their turn to speak. And when they spoke, they weren’t telling you a story. When the
two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before. (Palahniuk 107)

The narrator attends these groups because he sees it as a way of bypassing the baggage and complexities of contemporary life and having an authentic experience with another person. Lockwood describes his visits to these support groups by saying “Here he finds respite from the indifferent and hard-hearted modern world of individualism, fighting against the emotional attachment” (325). This is a place where people are able to express themselves without fear of judgment. The narrator can move past a façade to touch a more authentic experience.

The problem with this is of course that the narrator is lying. He does not actually have any of the disease that the other group members suffer. He is attempting to base his authentic interaction on an inherently inauthentic claim which thus of course ultimately leads to failure. The narrator recounts interactions with three different people within these support groups, and through those different interactions, he reveals his desire to find completeness by giving up his fragmented existence, and embrace the kind of metanarrative communities that Foer posits. Ultimately however, all three will fail, at least initially, because he attempts to achieve connection through inauthenticity and without addressing the true nature of his fragmentation.

He describes his experience at the first group he attends when he meets a woman named Chloe and she propositions him for sex. He says:

The first group I went to, there were introductions... The little skeleton of a woman named Chloe with the seat of her pants hanging down sad and empty, Chloe tells me the worst thing about her brain parasites was no one
would have sex with her. Here she was, so close to death...and all Chloe wanted was to get laid for the last time. Not intimacy, sex. (Palahniuk 20)

Chloe’s desire for a physical relationship is met with confusion by the narrator. He finds himself initially unable to even participate saying, “Normal times, I’d be sporting an erection. Our Chloe, however, is a skeleton dipped in yello wax” (Palahniuk 20). Faced with the obviousness of pure physicality that Chloe desires, he finds himself unable to perform. What follows is purposely confusing section in which two scenes, one of Chloe leads a guided meditation, and one in which Chloe and the narrator seemingly have sex, are described simultaneously so that the reader has trouble knowing where one experience starts and the other begins. Directions related to the meditation such as “We close our eyes” and “This was therapeutic physical contact” are interspersed with declarations such as “She had strapless underwear at home” and “Chloe had oils and handcuffs” (Palahniuk 20). The sexual activity is in effect authorized by explicitly linking it to healing, as that is part of the authenticity the narrator is seeking. Importantly though the narrator declares this experience a failure saying, “So I didn’t cry at my first support group” (20). Without an emotional connection the narrator has not fulfilled his desire. He remains unsatisfyingly fragmented and disconnected from others.

This interaction takes on a highly gendered orientation, as will two more encounters he has early on in the narrative. Lauren M. E. Goodlad argues that *Fight Club* takes part in a gothic literary tradition that helps explain some of the gender dynamics of the novel. She writes, “The gothic narratives I describe in this essay obsessively rehearse a male desire for completion, dramatized by a male experience of pain. Such narratives I suggest are motivated by a desire for androgyny [emphasis in the original]” (Goodlad
104). Essentially, the gendered separation between the narrator and those he wishes to connect with serves to highlight another form of fragmentation and incompleteness which Palahniuk is trying to look at critically.

The second significant interaction that the narrator has is with Bob, and here he is able to cry (Palahniuk 21). He meets Bob at a support group for survivors of testicular cancer. Bob offers him the emotional release that he craves. He says, “I’ve been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob wraps him arms around me, and I cry” (Palahniuk 17). Bob even gives him explicit permission say, “You cry...Go on a now and cry” (Palahniuk 17). The emotional release is explicitly tied an escape from traditional gender expectations: “Bob cries because six months ago, his testicles were removed...Bob has tits because his testosterone radiation is too high” (Palahniuk 17). Kavadlo goes so far as to describe Bob as a maternal figure writing, “Like a mother, Bob uses his enormous breasts, hugs, and love to give the narrator his release” (9). The problem is that Bob cannot truly provide the gendered completion that Goodlad describes the narrator as seeking. Bob’s status as imitation woman is both echoed and mirrored by the narrator’s status as imitation survivor. The narrator acknowledges this when he says, “Bob loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too” (Palahniuk 17). Here the narrator is getting the emotional release that Chloe failed to provide, but the inherently inauthentic nature of achieving it, renders the exchange incapable of truly providing an authentic connection. This is why the release fails to be available to the narrator through the appearance of the cisgender female Marla.

Marla represents the opportunity for the authentic connection that the narrator is seeking, but such authenticity cannot function within the inauthentic context of
pretending to be a part of these support groups. Marla, mirroring the narrator’s attempts to find fulfillment by deceiving her way into support groups, shows up at the testicular cancer support group where the narrator had been able to cry with Bob, but now he says, “I can’t cry with this woman watching me...With her watching, I’m a liar. She’s a fake. She’s the liar...To Marla I’m a fake...In this one moment, Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies” (Palahniuk 22-23). With the appearance of Marla, especially in a support group she so clearly has not even the possibility of belonging to, the inauthenticity of the experience becomes so overwhelming as to prevent even the narrator from pretending otherwise. He must finally admit that he cannot escape his isolating postmodern fragmentation through deception. This drives him to seek another means of connection with others and thus to Tyler Durden.

The first time that the narrator acknowledges the Tyler personality comes the end of Chapter Three in which he includes his rapid fire description of waking up in different airports. The repetition is suddenly shifted with the declaration “You wake up at the beach” (Palahniuk 32). The already confusing chapter is only made more so by the dream-like nature of their first interaction. He describes the meeting saying:

Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringing, hanging in his face...We were the only people on the beach. With a stick, Tyler drew a straight line in the sand several feet away...I was the only person watching this. Tyler called over, “Do You know what time it is?”...I had to know what Tyler was doing while I was asleep. If you could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?... Tyler had created was the shadow of a giant
hand... The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one
perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of a perfection he created himself.
(Palahniuk 32-33)

Right from the begging, Tyler’s immediacy is highlighted by the physicality of his
nudity. All of the adjectives that Palahniuk uses are tactile: “sweating,” “gritty,” and
“wet.” This is important because remember the narrator associates immediacy, being in
the moment, with authenticity. Furthermore, Tyler has ability the narrator has never
shown, the ability to create. The narrator is living as a “copy of a copy of a copy”
(Palahniuk 21), but Tyler creates something that is not only original but puts him in a
temporary state of “perfection.” This shows that Tyler has the agency to overcome the
inertia of postmodern isolation. He can bring the narrator to a more perfect state of
existence. He can give him the connection to others that he has been seeking.

Tyler is meant to be an enticing figure. That is why the reader is presented him in
this moment of perfection, because he is supposed to be seductive. He is a powerful
figure. Ng describes him as being out to rescue the disaffected generation of men that the
narrator sees himself as belonging to (116). Matthews describes him as having
“messianic aspirations” (92). Joshua Parker, in “‘Where you’re supposed to be’
Apostrophe and Apocalypse in Chuck Palahniuk,” explains how Palahniuk uses the
second person pronoun “You” extensively to insert the reader directly into the narrative.
Palahniuk wants the readers to identify with the narrator, wants them feel his isolation
and powerlessness in a viscerally personal way, because this leaves the reader more open
to be wooed by Tyler.
Through the Tyler personality, the narrator is given access to an exponentially increasing series of anarchic activities that allow the narrator to rebel against the oppressive status quo of his isolation. It starts fairly small with the splicing of a single frame of pornography into a family friendly film (Palahniuk 30), and an act which is not even really recognized by its victims, but gives the narrator some sense that he has agency in the world. These acts continue to grow however and get to the point where Tyler declares, “I want you to hit me as hard as you can” (Palahniuk 46) and the titular fight club is born.

Fight club gives the narrator access to the same kind of immediacy that he describes the support group as having when he talks about other people really paying attention. He says:

You aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club. When it’s you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching. Fight club isn’t about winning or losing. Fight club isn’t about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. There’s grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn’t about looking good. There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. (Palahniuk 51)

Palahniuk, in this paragraphs, interweaves multiple layers of interconnectedness. Two fighters are linked through the description that they are both under a singular light. They are further linked to larger community by being recognized by the spectators. Given the
later description of fight club as a church the coupling of two individuals being
recognized by the larger community takes on an almost marriage like quality. The sense
of community is further enhanced by the notion that progress can be observed in a single
individual over six months. While the immediacy of the action provides them a sense of
authenticity which the narrator craves, Palahniuk is careful to establish this as a long term
bond. The invocation of the church itself, more than being about invoking a specific
religious experience, is about invoking the tradition of communities being organized
around churches.

The project here is the same one that the narrator was trying to achieve through
the support groups. He wants to overcome the inauthenticity of his everyday life in an
attempt to really feel like he is connecting with a larger community. It represents the
same kind of desire for completeness that Goodlad described earlier. While pointing out
ways that *Fight Club* deviates somewhat from the classic literary tradition she discusses,
she also stresses that the effect of the narrative is to “spectacularize male pain and, in
doing so...articulate desire to escape normative gender constraints” (110). Burgess
describes the effects of the fight club writing, “The body ravaged by pain, cuts, and blood
catapults the individual into a new reality that is not necessarily ‘spiritual’—but it *is*
different, and it is difference that kindles renewal [emphasis in the orginial]” (273). The
immediacy and shock of fight club offers a transformative escape from the isolation the
narrator experiences. Ultimately though, fight club proves problematic as a means to
achieve the authenticity the narrator seeks because its inherently destructive nature
prevents it from serving as a long term sustainably solution.
Tyler is not a static figure and he continues to push toward more anarchic actions eventually morphing fight clubs into a destructive cult called Project Mayhem. There ultimately goal is the terrorist bombing of a skyscraper so that it collapses destroying the national history museum (Palahniuk 14). Project Mayhem is both an extension of fight club in the sense that it continues its formation being predicated on destructive energy, but also different in crucial ways.

The difference can be seen in the distinction between the first rules of each. With fight club, “The rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club” (Palahniuk 48). This rule however, is clearly meant to be broken as throughout the novel new members constantly join fight club. The rule exists to allow members to break a rule. On the other hand the first rule of Project Mayhem is described by the narrator saying, “Nobody asked anything. You don’t ask questions is the first rule in Project Mayhem” (Palahniuk 122). Both rules demand silence, but the crucial distinction is that the second one is actually enforced. Very few people have a full understanding of what Project Mayhem is, and they do not ask because they cannot break the rule.

Members are no longer gaining anything, or growing personally like they were in fight club. Project Mayhem represents a shift in which things begin to be taken away from them. Where fight clubs channeled destructive energy as a means of creating community, Project Mayhem is simply destruction for the sake of destruction. Lockwood describes Tyler as a “fundamentalist” seeking “to induce a premature Armageddon” (329-20). As Burgess points out, “While fight club uses consensual violence to gain an immediate sense of liberation, Project Mayhem directs violence outward to nonconsenting others” (268). Where the participants within fight club are improved the
members of Project are completely dehumanized and are called not by their names but by the insult “space monkeys” (Palahniuk 168).

The drastic difference between the two is most clearly realized by the narrator with the death of Bob. He had joined fight club and had found himself transformed by the experience, but while on assignment for Project Mayhem he get shot by the police (Palahniuk 177). Burgess describes the event writing, “Bob, who represented the transforming potential of fight club before joining Project Mayhem, has now become a dead, lifeless body” (276). The loss of Bob crystalizes for the narrator just how dangerous the Tyler personality is. Paul Kennett writes, “The price of the Narrator’s relationship with Tyler is death, real death, the oppression of millions of people” (60). It is then that the narrator decides that he must stop Tyler, which he accomplishes by pulling the trigger on the gun in their shared mouth.

What then is the ultimate purpose of the relationship and struggle between these two personalities? Kavadlo argues that the reader must ultimately dismiss Tyler: “Some readers may relate to or find truth in Tyler Durden’s sarcasm and pop-hip existentialism... but like the unnamed narrator, the reader must ultimately banish him if he is to survive” (14). Palahniuk himself admits in his chat with CNN that “Tyler’s way ultimately doesn’t work.” Just dismissing Tyler though undercuts the growth that the protagonist experiences over the course of the novel. Certainly, Tyler with his cult and penchant for destruction does not represent any kind of ideal, but neither does the completely isolated narrator at the beginning of the novel. How then can the reader acknowledge the growth of the narrator, which is intrinsically linked to Tyler’s actions,
while at the same time ultimately condemning Tyler’s final goal? The answer lies in remembering that they represent a singular unified protagonist.

In discussing what he sees as the undercurrent of scientific epistemologies in the novel, Sartain brings up the concept of entropy. He describes it writing, “In a closed system, heat will tend to seek a level of homeostasis making the heat uniform across the system” (30). This concept solves the dilemma by allowing the narrator to learn from Tyler without having to accept his ideology completely. Sartain describes this dynamic saying, “the two main characters of *Fight Club* represent the different polarities of entropy: Joe as order and Tyler as disorder” (33). The narrator represents order in the sense that he plays by the rules of his culture leading to his isolation. Tyler represents disorder because of his willingness to advocate anarchy and destruction. Neither state represents a healthy point from which the protagonist can act to form connections within a community. What the narrative depicts then is the transfer of energy and ideas between two poles of a single system so as to achieve a healthy homeostasis, or balance, from which to connect with others. The narrator personality must take parts of the Tyler personality in order to form one unified self which can escape postmodern fragmentation without succumbing to metanarrative tyranny.

Remember that the Tyler personality was active long before he was recognized by the narrator. He says so when they first meet, long before the reader understand what he really means: “Tyler had been around a long time before we met” (Palahnuik 34). What the narrator recounts when he talks about Tyler is not the first time an action is committed, but rather the first time he is made aware of it. This is why the narrator keeps
repeating, “I know this because Tyler knows this” (Palahniuk 12, *passim*). He is bringing attention to the path and thus the transfer of the information.

The transfer of physical energy serves as a metaphor for the transfer of ideas. This is why the most focused upon action that Tyler takes is the titular fight club. Fighting at its core is the mobilization and transfer of physical energy. The narrator exchanges his physical energy, representing his perfectly ordered and fragmented life, in order to take on a little bit of Tyler’s chaos and ability to connect with other. Tyler even dictates the direction of transfer so that it follows the rules of Entropy and flows from the more ordered to the less ordered when he declares “I want *you* to hit *me* as hard as you can [emphasis added]” (Palahniuk 52). The narrator acknowledges this relationship when he says, “At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (Palahniuk 52). He recognizes that to be ready for the authentic connection he wants, he has to give up the ordered state represented by his “filing cabinet” apartment.

That desire to overcome his isolation of course remains the central motivation of the narrative. Kavadlo argues, “Within his ostensible inclination to subvert literary and social mores…Palahniuk places the romantic desire for connection” (6). This is why Marla is present at violent unification of the personalities. Kuhn is correct when she argues that “Marla is far more important than has been generally acknowledged” (Wound 36). The narrator himself admits at the very beginning of the novel just how important Marla is. He says, “I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer…We have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (Palahniuk 14). The arc of the novel then can be understood as
the process by which the protagonist overcomes his desire to fully embrace the destructive Tyler personality and thus becomes mature enough to pursue an authentic connection with Marla. She personifies the sweet spot between postmodern fragmentation and metanarrative tyranny.

Importantly though this is not done through the destruction of Tyler. Despite the protagonists declaration that “Tyler died” (Palahniuk 206), former members continue to recognize him as “Mr. Durden” (Palahniuk 208) at the very end of the novel. This is the final recognition that Tyler cannot be destroyed. He is inherently and essentially part of the protagonist, just as the narrator is. The unified protagonist cannot obscure or ignore any part of the metanarrative which is represented by his being, and nor can he simply fragment them into separate existences. It is only when he understands both, in their entirety, that he achieves his growth. Palahniuk in essence foregrounds his understanding of the concerns that postmodern thinkers have about metanarrative, but posits that there is a middle ground.
Chapter 3: Yamashita and the Necessity of Global Perspectives

Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* is prefaced with a map of sorts, which lays out how each chapter in the novel fits into one of the seven protagonist’s perspectives and on one of each of the seven weekdays. The chart, which is labeled “HyperContexts,” simultaneously offers a completely accurate and yet completely inadequate way to understand how the narrative will unfold. The story which appears on that double page spread as a neatly organized grid comes across as messily overlapping and interconnected. Foregrounded here is the paradoxical nature of the narrative which can be honestly expressed as forty-nine distinct fragments; and yet looking at it in that scale fails to truly appreciate or express it. This idea is at the heart of the novel in which borders both physical and metaphorical are disrupted in order to reveal the ways in which those borders represent impediments to complete understanding, including the use of the prefatory map.

During an interview about her work Yamashita said, “I don’t believe that there is any one voice that can represent that city; I wanted to experiment with multiple voices…I wanted all these visions to intersect in some way [emphasis in the original]” (Gier and Tejeda). This focuses on multiple perspectives would seem to mark the novel as classically postmodern. Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak argues as much writing, “*Tropic of Orange* is a postmodern, multiple-voiced, fragmented, and hybrid text whose hyperbolic plot defies order, stability, and homogeneity” (2). Much like with Foer’s work however, while Yamashita may employ techniques associated with postmodernism, her emphasis is different in very important ways. She does not celebrate fragmentation, but rather seeks to highlight its problematic nature.
The novel neither celebrates fragmentation nor posits it as inescapable reality. Rather Yamashita highlights the ways in which borders between fragments are porous, malleable, and erasable. In essence she turns the postmodern critique of metanarrative on its head by contending that fragmented perspectives are oversimplified. Perhaps the best example of this in the novel comes in the form of protagonist Bobby Ngu. Yamashita introduces Bobby writing:


The description starts off by suggesting that Bobby’s racial identity can be determined by physical characteristics. This idea is quickly dismissed however by the proposed answer, a nationality to which Bobby has no genetic connection. Even with the additional piece of information that Bobby speaks Spanish, the proposed answers continue to be wrong. One
so much so, that the answer does not even make sense given the information, as Brazil is a country which speaks Portuguese not Spanish. The whole point of formulating the description in this question/proposed answer pattern is not to actually find the answer, but rather to highlight the absurdity of the premise. No amount “know[ing] your Asians” or fragment of information will allow you to guess the truth of Bobby’s identity. The fragments of information the answers are coming from are too oversimplified to really capture the totality of Bobby’s identity.

Kosaka Eliko argues that because of his complex background, “determining Bobby’s identity by his racial origin alone would be insufficient” and furthermore that the blurred lines represented by Bobby, “not only at the level of society but at the individual level racial identity has become much more heterogeneous so that the applicability of the concept of homogenous racial identity is inevitably challenged” (65). Bobby’s identity is so hybridized as to render traditional categorization meaningless. Importantly though the solution to this is not further fragmentation. Further understanding of Bobby comes through explaining his relation to broader contexts including communities displaced by the Vietnam War (Yamashita 15) and economic globalization (Yamashita 18). Bobby builds his hybrid identity from so many fragments, that those fragments no longer make sense in their original context without him, or as isolated parts within him. The suggestion here being that borders between fragments can never be stable, and as such attempting to understand a fragment without understanding the metanarrative body it is a part of becomes impossible. It would be analogous to attempting to study a single globule of wax within a lava lamp. In Yamashita’s
construction the valorizing of fragmentation advocated by postmodern thinkers becomes not only short-sighted, but ultimately futile.

Much of the criticism around Tropic of Orange then has focused on attempting to understand how Yamashita is broadening prospective. Julie Sze in her article offers a reading of the novel which links it to the environmental justice movement and broadened understandings of environment and nature. Kandice Chuh offers hemispheric studies and better scaled for understanding Yamashita’s work, describing the author as “a writer for whom nation and, to some extent, hemisphere are categories utterly inadequate for the task of capturing the geographies of her imagination” (620-21). Claudio Sadowski-Smith discusses the novel as producing “new modes of cross-cultural and transnational mythmaking (92). Rachel Adams goes so far as to describe the novel as “an afterword to literary postmodernism that I will call the globalization of American literature (249). Ramón Saldívar posits the novel as part of a whole new “post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights era in American fiction” (1) that he self-consciously and “under erasure and with full ironic force” (2) refers to as “postrace.” What binds all of these approaches together is their recognition that limited or fragmented perspectives are inadequate to understanding Tropic of Orange. While none of these critics discuss their expansion of perspective explicitly in terms of metanarrative, it would seem to be the best umbrella term to describe the book’s cross-cultural, transnational, globalized, and postrace impulses.

Yamashita’s endorsement of metanarrative is perhaps best articulated by the character of Manzanar, a homeless man who stands on a freeway overpass and attempts to conduct the city as if it were a symphony. His are actions are described as:
Those in vehicles who hurried past under Manzanar’s concrete podium most likely never noticed him. Perhaps there were those who happened to see the arching movements of a man’s arm, the lion’s head of white hair flailing this way and that, the silver glint of the baton or a figure of strange command outlined starkly between skyscrapers in the afternoon sunlight. And perhaps they thought themselves disconnected from a sooty homeless man on an overpass. Perhaps and perhaps not. And yet, standing there, he bore and raised each note, joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound. The great flow of humanity ran below and beyond his feet in every direction, pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city.

(Yamashita 35)

Manzanar is able to participate in and recognize the ways in which Los Angeles and the rest of the world are interconnected. The progression of the description starts on the smallest scale of the family, but then moves outward in every expanding circles, to community, and then society, and then civilization, suggesting both the fundamental nature of the connections between them, but also the need to expand understandings to larger scales. The explicitly human ways that the city is described in, through the invocation of blood and heartbeats, serves to remove the city from the abstracts of buildings and commerce, and locate the metanarrative of Los Angeles firmly within the actual people who inhabit the spaces.

This becomes particularly poignant when considering where the character comes from. Manzanar is not his original name but rather one he adopted. Yamashita describes
it writing, “He had created his name out of his birthplace, Manzanar Concentration Camp in Owens Valley. He claimed he was born there during the war” (110). Chiyo Crawford describes this created identity saying:

This blurring of identity does not suggest ambiguity, however. On the contrary, it grounds Manzanar’s identity in the material truths of historical injustice for Japanese Americans. Whether or not Manzanar was born in Manzanar Relocation Camp, he nevertheless was born out of the injustices of that place’s history, which comprises nearly two centuries of displacement for three groups of people: Paiute Indians during the mid- to late nineteenth century; poor white ranchers, farmers, and miners in the early twentieth century; and Japanese Americans during World War II. (89)

His chosen name explicitly links him to several histories to several histories of marginalized groups. These are the very groups which postmodernists fear get erased by metanarratives. His connections to those groups are even further cemented by his own status as a homeless individual. And yet, it is exactly through his embrace of metanarrative that Manzanar is able to overcome that displacement and erasure and to locate himself squarely in the middle of Los Angeles’s metanarrative. Crawford says, “Yamashita’s novel demonstrates that through conducting, not homelessness, Manzanar is able to claim rightful ownership of the city in which he was born and thus transform his dispossession, challenging and transcending the history of race-based dislocation” (92). Manzanar gains the agency to challenge the metanarrative which had dislocated both him and the people he represents, not through further fragmentation, but rather
through participation within it. His conducting represents an authorial agency in which he writes himself into the story of the city.

While it may be tempting to understand Manzanar’s actions as merely beautiful metaphors, the frequent invoking of magical realism in the text would seem to force the question as to whether or not this is not meant more literally. If an abstract concept like the tropic can become a literalized line in the text, why should Manzanar’s symphony not represent a more literal connection? In asserting the possibility that the unification represented by Manzanar’s symphony is literal, the text refutes the postmodern assertion that metanarrative has lost all credibility. Furthermore, Yamashita makes it clear that the realities of Manzanar’s action are not dependent on recognition. Even if people do not recognize or care about his actions, the metanarrative he witnesses exists, and is offered as a productive alternative to the failing fragmented understandings of postmodernism.

Yamashita describes his conducting saying, “Manzanar’s work is a celebration of the City. He can see the traffic and turn it into a romantic vision. This is life: to celebrate the traffic and the people, and the humanity and all of those layers of the geography. He would celebrate it all” (Gier and Tejada). Manzanar takes traffic, arguably the most literal an immediate representation of how the whole can oppresses or obscure the individual, and he reorients it to connote something beautiful. This is more than just a rejection of postmodernism, it is a celebration of an alternative idea.

What is perhaps the ultimate endorsement of Manzanar’s metanarrative though, is the fact that by the end of the text, he is joined by the rest of the city. Yamashita writes:

Little by little, Manzanar began to sense a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself
and others like him. He found himself at the heart of an expanding symphony of which he was not the only conductor. On a distant overpass, he could make out the odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton. And beyond that, another homeless person had also taken up the baton. And across the city, on overpasses and street corners, from balconies and park benches, people held branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks, and conducted. (Yamashita 238)

Manzanar’s romantic vision is taken up by an untold number of people in the city which in essence validates it by preventing any reading of it as simply the delusion of one person. Sue-Im Lee describes the event saying, “each of the conductors begins to personify, as Manzanar had done, the immensity of humanity as a single totality” (518). Or to put it in other words, each embraces, and contributes to, the metanarrative which Manzanar represents.

While Yamashita ultimately does not accept the postmodern rejection of metanarrative, it is important to note that she does not simply dismiss the concerns those thinkers put forward. *Tropic of Orange* shows that she has carefully considered the possibly problematic aspects of what she is articulating. While characters like Bobby and Manzanar offer clear endorsements of a move toward metanarrative, several characters in the novel serve to illustrate counterpoints. Buzzworm, the Vietnam War veteran trying to save his community which is threatened by gentrification, and Arcangel the metaphorical representative of oppressed Latin American laborers, both primarily concern themselves with communities which are normally not represented, communities which get erased in
the most traditional metanarrative of progress. Ultimately though, each of these characters comes to reinforce the novel’s move toward metanarrative perspectives.

Buzzworm’s primary concern throughout the text is with how the metanarrative development of the city often overlooks and outright disenfranchises disempowered communities. He carries the burden of remembering those who have been erased from the neighborhood. The text describes this as:

Buzzworm remembered conversations he had with people saying they used to live here or there. Now here or there is a shopping mall, locate the old house somewhere between Mrs. Field’s and the Footlocker, Or here or there is now the Dorth Chandler Pavilion or Union Station, or the Bank of America, Arco Towers, New Otani, or the freeway. People saying they coulda owned the property, if the property had been worth anything at the time, if they’d known. And then Buzzworm thinking about before that. About Mexican rancheros and before that, about Chumash and the Yangna. If they’d known. (Yamashita 81-82)

Here the intimate and humanistic “old house” is juxtaposed against the cold and economic brand names to express the sense of loss that he perceives in the neighborhood. The sheer number of brand names in quick succession serves to illustrate the seeming powerlessness of the single homeowner against the tide of metanarrative capitalist development. However, Buzzworm notes not only the recent displacement of homeowners by capitalist development but also the history of displacement for all the communities that used to reside on the land. Mermann-Jozwiak describes this connection arguing:
He thus puts the more recent displacements such as that of the homeowners in the wake of the freeway-widening project into a broader historical context. If development companies and corporations have replaced the former regimes of colonization, their displacement of individual owners and institutions of collective management of spaces parallels former forms of dispossession of social groups. (11-12)

By casting the corporations who displace residents as the inheritors of a colonial legacy Buzzworm foregrounds the need for a proper understanding of the historical metanarrative. This is not just the displacement of one family, or one neighborhood now, but rather one more displacement in a very long line of displacements. Mermann-Jozwiak contends that “Buzzworm demonstrates that the emotional/psychological cost of development of urban spaces is disproportionately carried the poor and the working class” (12). The real weight of that idea comes from the inherent “always” that Buzzworm adds through his linking of multiple displacements in a coherent narrative of those classes.

Importantly though this is not simply an abstract idea for Buzzworm, observing merely as an outsider. He cast the problem in very personal terms when he describes the process occurring to his grandmother. He says:

Situations change, bureaucrats don’t. So they said it wasn’t going to affect her. They’d be around to make sure. Make sure it too five years to clear out the house. Make sure the houses left to be broken into and tagged. Let the houses be there for everyone to see. Use for illegal purposes. Pass drugs. House homeless. Make sure the ramp took another five years. Slow
down the foot traffic and the flow. Break down the overpass crossing the freeway. Make it impossible for the people to pass. Stop people from using the shops that used to be convenient. Stop people from coming to her dress shop. Used to be a respectable shop. Anybody who’s anybody, she did it custom. Haute couture. Entire wedding line-ups. Now homeless, dope dealers, prostitutes only ones passing her shop. No master plan. No ma’am. Wasn’t gonna affect her no way. (Yamashita 83)

Buzzworm carefully highlights the slow loss of the neighborhood that is grandmother faced to highlight the callous nature in which it happens. Not only are these neighborhoods being displaced, but there being displaced in a way that lacks all regards for them. They are allowed to slowly suffocate and yet no one really takes notice. At best they get platitudes about how they will not be affected. This description then serves as a stark reminder of what kind of damage can be done through the erasure of minority groups. How then can we understand Buzzworm within a text arguing for metanarrative perspectives? The answer lies in differentiating between Buzzworm articulating problems within an existing metanarrative and the postmodern idea of rejecting all metanarrative outright.

Buzzworm acts as something of a last man standing in the neighborhood. Vint describes him saying, “His house serves as a precarious final refuge of human life in a neighborhood turned over to the inhumanity of poverty, drugs, prostitution, and other signs of despair” (409). His project is to prevent the erasure of the neighborhood from ever being completed. His presence fundamentally challenges it. But more than just acting as a last line of defense, Buzzworm seeks to reverse the erasure entirely. And his
plan is fairly similar to the interconnectedness that Manzanar represents in the text.

Buzzworm does not want to fragment the communities he represents to give them their own completely separate story, but rather he wants to weave them into the metanarrative of the rest of the city.

Yamashita describes his solution writing:


By using the gentrification, the term normally associated with the kind of destruction he is concerned with, Buzzworm makes it clear that his project is not separate from the rest of the city. He shares the same goal the many of the gentrifies claim, in that he wants to unify his neighborhood with the other parts of the city, to take away it’s taboo status as a minority neighborhood. But he changes the focus slightly, he borrows the Spanish word *gente*, to hybridize the idea. His united will not come by dislocating the residents of the neighborhood so that new residents who more easily fit into the cities metanarrative can move in, but rather it with come by the countering of their erasure. It was the erasures which lead to the decay of their environment, so they plan to fight back, and through this action find visibility in the mainstream. The reference to Bob Villa’s repair program shows that what Buzzworm wants is for his neighborhood to be seen.
Gabriel describes his motivations in the novel saying, "Buzzworm had a stake in my stories, deeper and hungrier than that of the most competitive reporter. He wanted desperately to see in print the stories of the light surrounding him, to see the wretched truth, the dignity despite the indignity" (Yamashita 43). Just like Manzanar, Buzzworm seeks to write himself and his community into the metanarrative, not to reject the idea of metanarrative.

Sarah Wald points out that it is exactly this plan that is played out when the homeless of Los Angeles take over the freeway at the climax of the novel. She writes:

> The novel enacts a fantasy in which homeless Angelenos reclaim the abstract space of capitalism and transform it back to live embodied space by taking over and inhabiting the freeway...The homeless’ claim to the freeway and Buzzworm’s fantasy of gente-fication are transformations of social relations through changed relations to the land. The emphasis on the freeway’s history encourages us to read this transformation as ongoing and a continuation of older struggles over the meaning of place and the use of space. (Wald 85)

It is precisely through the breaking down of boundaries, both in the physical sense and the theoretical sense of what space is for, of what spaces get privileged for certain groups, these communities avoid being erased. This is perhaps most clearly represented by the fact that the act allows the homeless to broadcast and tell their stories in exactly the way Buzzworm wanted from Gabriel. They get to show everyone the “Lifestyles of the poor and forgotten” (Yamashita 192). And this act of visibility is validated by the fact that it
leads to greater compassion in the sense that it shows people changing their opinions of the homeless communities (Yamashita 215).

Now while it is true that this moment in the narrative ultimately fails in the sense that the homeless in the end massacred and forced back off the freeway, I would argue that this failure is not meant as a rejection of the premise, but rather recognition of the fragile and difficult nature of the idea. The idea does not fail, it simply requires constant struggle. Yamashita proves that she is not simply casually tossing aside the concerns of postmodernism. She casts them in the most humanizing and sympathetic ways that she can. Her willingness to engage with the best forms of the argument instead straw men however, only strengthens her own critiques.

The character though which perhaps offers the clearest critique of metanarrative however is that of Archangel. Lee describes Archangel saying, “Archangel is a prophet and a messiah who masquerades as a bawdy performance artist and street vagrant…He literally bears, on his body, the scars of slavery and colonialism, as is the self-identified voice of the consciousness of the colonized and the Third World” (502). Archangel is positioned in the novel as the literal champion of the Third World workers erased in the conventional metanarratives of globalization, traveling north to fight the embodiment of the globalization, NAFTA. At the climax of the novel Archangel takes on the persona of El Gran Mojado and fights the personified SUPERNAFTA in a wrestling match. At the start of the fight he addresses the crowd and seems to articulate clearly a postmodern, fragmented version of history and the failings of the metanarrative of progress saying:

*Noble people, I speak to you from the heart.*

*There is no future or past.*
You all know that I am witness to this.

There is no aging. There is only changing.

What can this progress my challenger speaks of really be?

You who live in the declining and abandoned places of great cities, called barrios, ghettos, and favelas:

What is archaic? What is modern? We are both.

The myth of the first world is that development is wealth and technological progress.

It is all rubbish. (Yamashita 258-259)

It is important to understand however that Archangel is rooted in the nature of his role as agent of prophecy. His views are articulated as, “He predicted doomsday based on the ancient belief that doom comes in fifty-two year cycles” (Yamashita 48). His role is to stand in as the people’s champion and to oppose what threatens them. The current threat is the globalized metanarrative of progress, and so criticism of that metanarrative becomes his weapon. Even more than that though, he understands time in a way completely separate from the conceptions postmodernists are reacting to. Adams contends:

Based on indigenous American understandings of temporality, the circular conception of history expressed by Archangel, in which the angry and dispossessed people of the South periodically rise up against their Northern oppressors, contrasts with the linearity of the Western calendar and the weakened sense of historicity posited by Jameson as a feature of
the postmodern moment Yamashita’s engagement with multiple literary precursors points to a more historically engaged and geographically expansive American archive than that of the high postmodernists, whose preoccupation with the Cold War often leads them to conflate America with the United States. (Adams 264)

Archangel’s questions of “What is archaic? What is modern?” come not from postmodernism’s weakened and fragmented sense of history, but rather to an entirely new approach in which history is circular. Archangel himself is shown to have an excellent sense of history as he decries the cycles of doom starting “from the time Christopher Columbus / discovered San Salvador, Cuba, Haiti / and the Dominican Republic in 1492” (Yamashita 49) and recounts that doom as successive colonial explorers arrive in various southern countries. The emphasis of the argument he is making then is not the repudiation of temporal progress but rather the idea that certain groups have not benefited from it. He explicitly addresses his speech to the “Noble people” who live in the “declining and abandoned places”. He addresses the people for whom Buzzworm is concerned.

Archangel goes on to use the terminology with which the First World has presented visions of a unified globe as mockery against both them and the idea. He says:

*I do not defend my title for the rainbow children of the world.*

*This is not a benefit for UNESCO.*

*We are not the world.*

*This is not a rock concert.*
This is not about getting a piece of action, about dividing into tiny pieces what is always less and less.

How will ninety-five percent of us divide twelve percent? (Yamashita 259)

His argument specifically appropriates the terminology the first world uses to describe metanarrative because Archangel's critique is not directed at the idea of metanarrative itself but rather toward the ways it has been used by the powerful against the poor and disenfranchised. Lee argues:

The globalist critique, I argue, is fundamentally a universalist “we”, and Tropic’s denunciation of global village celebration is an indictment of the imperialist nature of the few who presume to speak for all, whose particularity presumes the status of the universal. In Tropic, the First World’s deployment of a global intimacy is the latest rendition of imperialist—that is, unidirectional—universalism. In its stead, the novel postulates another model of global collectivity, a different rational for a globalist “we” that can express the transnational, transcontinental nature of human existence without imperialist dimensions. Simultaneously, this new model of global collectivity bears the seeds of its own negation, demonstrating the fragility, and indeed, the impossibility, of achieving an absolute universalism. Tropic’s dueling tension, in essence, simultaneously declares that “We are not the world” and that “We are the world.” (Lee 503)
Archangel’s very nature as champion brings visibility to the communities he is fighting to prevent from being erased. His journey from the south to the north draws a crowd along the way. The fight he has with SUPERNAFTA is broadcast much in the same way the homeless who take over the freeway broadcast their stories. His visibility writes all the history he represents, and all the people he fights for, into the mainstream metanarrative. While the fight does not end in victory for Archangel, it importantly ends in mutual destruction. Both the erased peoples and the dominant metanarrative are too interlinked to not destroy each other. Lee states, “Yamashita suggests that coming together is inexorable” (505). What is in contention for Yamashita then, is not whether or not new metanarratives will be created, that cannot be avoided, but rather what interest her is how they are shaped. Archangel may fail but his journey and fight reunited Bobby with his wife and son. It brings together the family which is the first step in Manzanar’s interconnected civilization.

With both Buzzworm and Archangel, Yamashita understands a fundamental tension between their critical approach to the idea of a unifying metanarrative and the unsustainability of resisting it. Their presence serves not to undermine metanarrative, but rather to strengthen it through an adversarial process. Their voices work in concert with Bobby and Manzanar so that their multiple perspectives synthesize in a realization of Manzanar’s symphony. By using multiple perspectives Yamashita hopes to create a metanarrative, self-conscious enough to correct the pitfalls posited by postmodernists without having to mirror their outright rejection of metanarratives.
Conclusion

Taken together these three novels offer a complex critique of postmodernism’s rejection of metanarrative. Beyond just that though, they make an affirmative case for the necessity of metanarrative. Foer’s characters access metanarrative as way to heal from the trauma they have experienced. Palahniuk’s characters need metanarrative to be able to find fulfillment in their lives. Yamashita’s characters actively shape metanarrative as the only means of fighting back against its failings. If Lyotard thought of metanarrative as too narrow an understanding for an increasingly diverse world, these novels now contend the same thing about postmodernism. All three portray worlds which are too interconnected for postmodern fragmentation. They may have learned from postmodernist, they may even take many of their concerns seriously, but they have no choice but to move beyond them.
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