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Schoene, BJ (2017) Contemporary American Literature as World Literature: Cruel Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopoetics, and the Search for a Worldlier American Novel. *Anglia: Zeitschrift fuer Englische Philologie*, 135 (1). pp. 86-104. ISSN 1865-8938

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2017-0006>

**Publisher:** De Gruyter

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/617404/>

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# Contemporary American Literature as World Literature: Cruel Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopoetics, and the Search for a Worldlier American Novel

DOI 10.1515/anglia-2017-0006

**Abstract:** With reference to Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) and Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), the first two parts of the article attempt a reappraisal of contemporary American literature’s world-literary potential by problematizing cosmopolitanism and neoliberal globalization in close relation to 9/11, the ideal of American multiculturalism and non-American assertions of alterity. Introducing Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Mitchum Huehls’ *After Critique* (2016), the third part then shifts its focus onto the crisis of the neoliberal condition as lived in America today. Rather than insisting merely on thematic and demographic reprioritization, Berlant and Huehls are shown to strike at the very core of the literary and the human, exposing the ‘cruelty’ of both the novel and cosmopolitanism as residual expressions of a now anachronistic and ultimately harmful optimism regarding national cohesion and global understanding. The article concludes its search for a worldlier, more cosmopoetic American novel with an analysis of George Saunders’ short story collection *Tenth of December* (2013).

## 1 *E pluribus unum*: Conviviality and Worldliness in Post-9/11 America

The emergence of a worldlier American novel, prepared to review its domestic standards and traditional preconceptions in order to accommodate the newness and unfamiliarity of the world, continues to be delayed in the aftermath of 9/11, which has been weighing heavily on the American imagination and warped its outlook for the best part of the twenty-first century. Symptomatically, Richard Gray’s rejuvenating call in 2009 for “some kind of alteration of imaginative

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structures [...] to register the contemporary crisis” (2009: 134) coincided with Kristiaan Versluys’ melodramatic encapsulation of 9/11 as “a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning-making and semiosis,” concluding that “in the instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions, 9/11 is unpossessable” (2009: 1). Unlike Versluys, who insists that “there is no way to wrap one’s mind around what happened that day” (2009: 2), Gray asserts his faith in literature’s restorative power while simultaneously cautioning against a “retreat into domestic detail” (2009: 134), urging contemporary novelists not to resort to a simple reassertion of America’s traditional comfort genres, such as tales of muscular individual heroism or the back-to-basics family saga. Keen for the contemporary novel not so much to stage a critique of neoliberal globalization as to capture and celebrate those elements of America’s original multiculturalism that continue to elude nationalist homogenisation – its polyglot diversity and lived histories of dissent, Gray calls upon American writers to engage in rigorous analysis and self-reflection, “to insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders” (2009: 147) – in other words, to re-imagine America not only after, but in light of, its fall.

Unfortunately, Versluys’ reading of the impact of 9/11 as ineffable national trauma that unhinged America has proved as popular and enduring as it is disingenuous. We all know – while continually being told otherwise – that America’s response to 9/11 was not speechless shock and paralysis induced by trauma, but vociferous rage and fury. The devastating loss and injury suffered by a few thousand citizens directly affected by the atrocity was channelled into a nationalist call for revenge and retaliation, even before the perpetrators had been anywhere near unmistakably identified. The event was hijacked by neoconservative politics keen to resurrect the image of the American nation as the world’s rightful hegemon whose sacrifice for the wealth and wellbeing of the world rendered Americans exceptionally equipped and entitled to act once again (as in the aftermath of the Second World War) as “the owners of the future” (Shor 2010: 65). As Francis Shor explains, “the ruling elite in Washington continues to believe in its right to determine the fate of others” (2010: 66) – post-9/11 even more so than before. The nation’s embrace of a narrative of woundedness and trauma has also considerably exacerbated America’s “inability to recognize the reality of what shapes the lives of others” by perpetuating “a self-image of U.S. benevolence or innocence, even in the face of the realities spawned by U.S. intervention and occupation” (2010: 76). According to Shor, it is the meaning of global community that continues to elude America, policing every other nation’s conduct while its own assumption of hegemony remains uncontested. Since minders do not make great minglers, this does not augur well for the promulgation of a

cosmopolitan sensibility in literature either. The development of a sense of worldly conviviality requires more than gauging the world exclusively in relation to its impact on one's own domesticity.

Michael Rothberg has taken Gray's imperative for a new American novel a significant step further by pointing to the need for a genuine cosmopolitan vision in contemporary American fiction – a cosmopolitan vision that would not so much complement the nation's own multicultural diversity as help to expose contemporary America's 'provincial' failure to acknowledge the radical cultural alterity of the rest of the world. Such writing would facilitate a genuine deconstruction of the hegemonies that have governed peoples' lives for centuries by engaging in a cosmopoetic recasting of our ever-increasingly globalized contemporary condition. Without such a radical re-envisioning, the American novel cannot claim membership of a truly cosmopolitan world literature. In other words, as memorably argued by Timothy Brennan in his influential essay on "Cosmo-Theory" (2001), America's multiculturalism is no reliable (and certainly not the one and only) model for how difference and diversity manifest and express themselves in the world. The view of the United States as the original rainbow nation attests to America's ongoing disavowal of the disproportionate asymmetry of its global influence and power. According to Rothberg, "the most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculturalism, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (2009: 153). Gray and Rothberg's main challenge to the new American novel, then, is for it to retrieve and fully rehabilitate the actual plurality contained in the nation's self-constitutive multicultural motto of *e pluribus unum* as it manifests both within the nation and globally.

What passes for diversity in America bears little comparison to the diversity of the world as a whole; to identify multiculturally in America does not necessarily make one a cosmopolite or citizen of the world. As I will argue, the form and texture of the contemporary American realist novel must undergo significant cosmopoetic transformation in order to rise to cosmopolitanism's world-literary challenge of imagining humanity (and its neoliberal condition) in its shared planetary interconnectedness. As Rothberg explains, "what we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others" (2009: 158). Yet even over a decade after the terrorist attacks, it is clear that 9/11 figures as a profound perplexity in the American imagination. Even the seemingly effortless articulation of a novel that otherwise excels at portraying complex existential relativity, flux and disorientation, such as Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), stops dead on catching sight of "the empty space where the Twin Towers had been" (*Goon Squad*: 37). "There

should be *something*, you know?” (*Goon Squad*: 37) Sasha, one of Egan’s protagonists, insists inconclusively. “Like an echo. Or an outline” (*Goon Squad*: 37). There simply are no suitable measures for comparison; 9/11 remains resolutely unspeakable. Even in Egan’s final chapter – set in the 2020s, following “two generations of war and surveillance” (*Goon Squad*: 331), when global warming has become a climate-changing reality, both ‘America’ and ‘democracy’ are terms that have “come to be used in an arch, mocking way” (*Goon Squad*: 320), and “the price of safety” (*Goon Squad*: 327) is constant police surveillance – 9/11 retains the spectral intangibility of a national revenant. Its impact continues to be felt at a visceral, purely intuitive level; it has not been rationally processed into anything resembling insight or worldly comprehension, let alone a meaningful degree of geopolitical understanding. Describing the response of Alex, another one of her characters, Egan writes that “the weight of what had happened here more than twenty years ago was still faintly present for Alex, as it always was when he came to the Footprint. He perceived it as a sound just out of earshot, the vibration of an old disturbance [...] a low, deep thrum that felt primally familiar” (*Goon Squad*: 327). 9/11 has become inscribed in the memory of the nation as an unspeakable act of breaking and entering wreaking irreparable violation and trauma for many generations to come. “Remember[ing] a tourist who once asked me how he could get to 9/11: not the site of the events of 9/11 but to 9/11 itself” (*Open City*: 52), Julius, the hero of Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), comes to apprehend 9/11 as an intriguing conundrum of time-place compression, a “date petrified into broken stones” (*Open City*: 52), situated at the very heart of contemporary America, yet inconsistently and inconclusively mapped and thus perpetually lost from view all the same.

Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) imagines an attempt by the nation to unite, move on and heal the wound inflicted by 9/11 by deciding on a memorial for the site of the attacks. As the fault lines in America’s multicultural self-image erupt in a spectacular repudiation of the nation’s actual multicultural make-up, Waldman’s novel shows how quickly all good intentions unravel to expose an indelible sore spot in the national unconscious. The nation’s trauma is not the result of an individual unforeseeable assault but rather a permanent condition of anxiety about its own origin, identity and trajectory. Mohammad Khan, a Virginian-born Muslim of Indian descent, wins the anonymous design competition by submitting the model of a garden, swiftly denounced by the media as a representation of an Islamic martyr’s paradise – a despicable and perverse attempt to mock the American people with a memorial that glamorizes the perpetrators rather than cherishing the memory of the victims. Echoing the racially-motivated controversy that surrounded the selection of Ohio-born Chinese-American Maya Lin in 1981 to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the

tragic commotion depicted by Waldman's novel quickly culminates in the assertion that "this is no time for multicultural pandering" (*Submission*: 17), begging the question when is, or whether so far 'pandering' has been all multicultural life and politics in America ever amounted to. In the futuristic coda of her novel, reminiscent of Egan's, Waldman identifies the nature of her project by introducing a young film student who hopes to make a documentary "for the twentieth anniversary of the memorial competition [by] exploring the 'politics of memorial,' 'America in argument with itself' [and] 'the plight of Muslims after the attack'" (*Submission*: 286). The project is inspired by the idea "that the process of creating a memorial was itself part of the memorial" (*Submission*: 286). In this light, *The Submission* can be seen to understand 9/11 as an event that continues to have too much of a hold on the present, and which delivers far too much compromising information about the foundational make-up of America, as to be successfully consigned to memory. In Waldman's portrayal, America crystallizes as a nation suffering from acute proprioceptive failure, unable to acknowledge its own internal diversity and multicultural composition, which are categorically disowned as inimical insertions of a hostile and threatening exteriority. What is at stake in Waldman's novel, then, is the very feasibility of post-9/11 American literature as cosmopolitan world literature. Instead of representing an ongoing, open-ended dynamic of convivial nation-making, *e pluribus unum* shows itself to be an anachronism signifying an irretrievable one-off moment of definitive communal aggregation.

Issues of ethnicity and race continue to be unresolved in President Barack Obama's allegedly post-racial America. All the more surprising, then, to find in an otherwise illuminating work like Egan's a facile and naïve rendition of global cultural difference as something that is all too easily – and quite seamlessly, it appears – assimilated into a universal Americanism. In a flashback chapter that shows Charlie, one of her characters, as a young teenager on safari in Africa in the early 1970s, Egan depicts the tourist entertainment of a native warrior dance to allow for an exchange of amorous glances between Charlie and one of the young African warriors. Egan then swiftly turns this scene into an opportunity for sketching out an entire family history of successful Americanization, transporting us from the wild and sexually alluring African savannah to mixed-race married life in a fashionable loft apartment in upper-middle-class Tribeca. We learn that the warrior's sixty-three grandchildren include a boy (improbably, yet conveniently) named 'Joe' who somehow finds himself catapulted to postgraduate student life at Columbia University where he studies engineering and eventually becomes "an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions)" (*Goon Squad*: 62). Egan's portrayal is not only breathtakingly stereotyped

and clichéd, but also fantastically patronizing and multiculturally inept, skipping the kind of detail that Gray and Rothberg would most certainly insist she say more about, such as her decision to picture African progress and self-fulfilment purely in terms of unstoppable Americanization. Egan's snapshot of perfect American Dream respectability evolving miraculously out of abject African exploitation within just three generations entirely eschews any engagement with questions of class and culture, privilege and precarity, within a globalized and increasingly Americanized context.

## 2 Belatedly Reconnecting with the World: Contemporary American Literature as World Literature

Over recent years we have witnessed a revived interest in cosmopolitanism and its impact on the concept of 'world literature', in both creative and critical practice, examining how expressions of empathy, tolerance, understanding and self-reflection across traditional internationalist demarcations might bring about a sense of greater equality and social justice in the world. Unfortunately, within the U.S. academy, cosmopolitanism is now widely perceived as always already profoundly compromised. Brennan's categorical deconstruction of cosmopolitanism into 'cosmo-theory', ancillary to the project of American imperialism and hopelessly enmeshed in the U.S.-led enterprise of world-wide neoliberalization, has doubtless contributed to this loss of innocence of an originally charismatic and entirely well-intentioned discourse. Within American intellectual circles, 'cosmopolitanism' is no longer regarded as constitutive of a politically acceptable outlook or attitude. Consequently, it should not surprise us to find newly emergent critical voices attempting to launch conceptually alternative projects, mostly under the already well-established, supposedly more neutral and less ideologically fraught rubric of 'world literature'. As such projects tend to resolutely distance themselves from the suspect *telos* of cosmopolitan aspirations. They very often also remain dishearteningly oblivious to, and uninterested in, literature's potential for cosmopoetic transformation.

In her study *Towards the Geopolitical Novel* (2014) Caren Irr opts for a 'distant reading' approach, which prefers a systematic categorization of vast literary corpora to the in-depth close reading of individual texts. The result is a quantitatively impressive work of data aggregation and analysis, in which each text is allocated its place within a universal taxonomy of literary signification, value and belonging. What such a display of scholarly competence barely contrives to

conceal is the nonchalance of its implicit Americanism, marked by a latent failure to imagine, let alone recognize, non-American difference. ‘The world’ is invariably understood as always already familiar to the American reader (and critic). Getting us all excited by hailing the emergence of “a new type of U.S. fiction [...] which we can call the geopolitical novel” (Irr 2014: 9), what Irr then presents us with is worldwide literary Americanization as a *fait accompli*. In Irr’s analysis, all ‘other’ works are either assimilated into one unicentric canon, trumpeting U.S. reception as its systematizing be-all and end-all, or wholly eclipsed and consigned to obscurity by precisely such canon-making. “More important than biographical markers for my purposes is an explicit effort to address a North American audience” Irr (2014: 11) explains. “I view internal evidence such as voice, style, and narrative frame as more reliable indicators of a particular work’s having an American reference point than authorial biography” (Irr 2014: 11). Accordingly, what Irr calls ‘geopolitical’ writing is invariably U.S.-centric writing; by contrast, any writing that does not engage (with) America in one way or another suffers categorical exclusion from Irr’s literary geopolitics. Showing little interest in exploring cultural difference *per se*, Irr instead describes what is already recognizable to her, namely “the use and revision of historically American narratives for making sense of the rest of the world” (Irr 2014: 11). What this suggests is that the only literary tradition whose development counts is American. Anything resembling a counterdiscursive challenge to America’s literary hegemony is rewarded (and immediately defused) by canonization, while any intelligible canon formation beyond the reach of spontaneous Americanization becomes inconceivable. In effect, Irr’s approach extinguishes any hope for the emergence of a new, cosmopoetic American/world literature, which, by definition, would seek to reach out and open up to, as well as in itself become, an expression of unassimilable alterity within the world.

Maria Lauret’s *Wanderwords* (2014), her detailed study of what she so neatly refers to as “barbarolexis” (2014: 4) in contemporary American writing, provides a refreshing outsider’s perspective on current critical debates about American literature as world literature. Among world literatures (and the use of the plural is of course of immense significance here), Lauret chooses to cast American writing not in the role of hegemonic trailblazer but instead perceives it as lagging behind, only “belatedly reconnecting with the world” (2014: 31). In Lauret’s view, contemporary American literature relies on its migrant writers to bring it out of its provincial comfort zone and “create an American literature that makes transnational, global connections” (2014: 8). Unlike Irr (whose chosen corpus is Anglophone, focused entirely around what other traditions have in common with America’s in order to facilitate the development of a world system of literary comparison and aggregation, thus making mutual familiarity and easy access the



basis for transnational communication and understanding), Lauret is interested in the inalienable unintelligibility of non-American difference. This is what underpins her unapologetic defence of multilingualism, even and indeed especially when it is found within one and the same national tradition. Accordingly, rather than championing translation as world literature's key to invoking a sense of multicultural globality, Lauret cautions against translation's tendency to portray multilingualism as an impediment to global understanding. According to Lauret, "translation on its own, without awareness of what we might be missing, can [...] inhibit cross-cultural understanding *precisely* because it diminishes difference and mis-educates the monolingual reader into a false sense of multicultural security and democracy" (2014: 63). We are asked to understand that there is nothing smoothly classifiable about the world as global multicultural; the world does not necessarily speak the same language, or express itself in similar, easily comparable ways, wherever we go. Rather than rejoice, then, as we detect familiar narrative tropes and shared genre conventions, we had perhaps better learn to cultivate and treasure our consternation at their absence.

The search for a worldlier American novel, capable of delivering a fitting portrayal of twenty-first-century America and its place within the world, continues. One would expect this new cosmopoetic novel to be noticeably different from its predecessors; one might also expect some kind of radical innovation, a self-conscious thematic shift accompanied by an element of formal experimentation. The new novel would initiate a break with tradition – a break clearly legible also as an effort to make it new. American multiculturalism would no longer be the chief model for dealing with difference encountered elsewhere in the world. Putting an end to America's global monologue, the new novel would engage, rather than merely project, the lives of others. It would embrace the concept of global conviviality as impervious to neat literary encapsulation, bidding farewell to the American imagination as finding harmony exclusively in assimilation and homogenization. 'America' deserves to be rendered as lived experience in the immediate here and now rather than in terms of allegorical emplotment, as in Jonathan Franzen's grand family sagas, or – alternatively – Jennifer Egan's formidable experimental virtuosity.

Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) has been feted as heralding the emergence of a ground-breaking new voice in contemporary American literature. Comprising a mobile interior monologue unfolding seemingly spontaneously as its German-Nigerian hero embarks upon leisurely, if perhaps somewhat compulsive, itineraries across New York City (and later also Brussels), the novel is steeped in the quotidian uneventfulness of metropolitan life while at the same time revealing America's first city as a transcultural, 'worldly' palimpsest of both indigenous and imported tragedy, moving beyond the exceptional terror of 9/11 to encompass

Native American genocide and the legacy of slavery via the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War Two to ongoing domestic repercussions from the Iraq War. As demonstrated by critical responses from Pieter Vermeulen (2013) and Katherine Hallemeier (2013), the novel courts a cosmopolitan reading, yet curiously it does so not by signposting a course of convivial harmony but by transporting us into largely uncharted territory, illustrating just how successfully the world continues to resist coming together. Throughout, the novel's title rings deeply ironic: New York City – “this strangest of islands [...] that turned in on itself, and from which water had been banished” (*Open City*: 54) – is not ‘open’ but inward-looking to a degree of acute self-encapsulating paranoia. “The shore was a carapace, permeable only at certain selected points” (*Open City*: 54). Against its highly touted image as one of the most cosmopolitan places on earth, Julius, Cole's junior-doctor hero, diagnoses New York with a severe case of isolationism. Whatever fluidity the city may once have possessed has hardened into inhospitable rock. Its citizens are no citizens of the world, but xenophobes in inveterate denial of their city's global embeddedness, their hydrophobia symbolic of their inward-looking unworldliness: “Everything was built up, in concrete and stone, and the millions who lived on the tiny interior had scant sense about what flowed around them” (*Open City*: 54). As far as Julius is concerned, New York City is one of the most provincial cities in the world, sabotaging architecturally as well as dispositionally the emergence of a cosmopolitan worldview.

In Cole's representation, the spirit of cosmopolitanism is most memorably captured *in absentia*, although its apparent failure to actualize ought not to make us doubt its value as an idealistic guiding principle in both everyday life and world politics. Cole's novel derives its title from Brussels' war-time capitulation: “Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble. It might have been another Dresden” (*Open City*: 97). Accordingly, Brussels as Europe's cosmopolitan center and capital of the European Union owes its survival to an act of complicity. It appears tempting, however, to read this betrayal perhaps also as an act of immense, only seemingly self-defeatist, courage. In order to stand any chance of survival, a humanist ideal like cosmopolitanism must be sufficiently resilient to brave and overcome even history's darkest, most extreme and fundamentally cataclysmic moments.

Both Vermeulen and Hallemeier have picked up on the odd, intrinsically contradictory representation of cosmopolitanism in *Open City*. Reading Julius' metropolitan wanderings with reference to the detached modernist figure of the *flâneur*, Vermeulen finds his posture “shadowed by the contours of a more sinister, and mostly forgotten, nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the *fugueur*” (2013: 42). Vermeulen's shrewd comparison evokes the sense of a cosmo-

polititan perspective that is not just broken and slightly disoriented, but psychopathologically flawed by amnesia and self-dispersal. As a result, Julius' experiences fail to amount to a credible expression of cosmopolitan America; as it turns out, his ramblings are propelled by profound self-delusion, adding up not so much to a progressive itinerary as an aimlessly recursive loop that testifies only to its own traumatic compulsion. The novel culminates in a shocking anti-epiphany which unmask Julius as the perpetrator of a rape he committed as a teenager, an incident he has repressed and still will not confront even on coming face to face with his victim. In a highly problematic reversal of readerly expectation, we are given to understand that there is a possibility he might be more enduringly traumatized by what happened back home so many years ago than the woman he harmed. It is this outrageous intimation at the dark center of the novel that appears once and for all, categorically, to disqualify Julius as a reliable focalizer for cosmopolitanism. Notably also, Julius fails to acknowledge his free movement through the city as a manifestation of male privilege: quite early on in the novel, in evident irritation, he shuts his window on noisy chanting coming from a feminist protest march outside his building: "We have the power, we have the night" (*Open City*: 23), the women chant. "The streets are ours, take back the night" (*Open City*: 23). Vermeulen rightly asserts that "throughout, *Open City* engages in a self-conscious struggle to decenter the single narrative perspective to which it confines itself" (2013: 45). The novel's cosmopolitan potential appears in the end unable to break through its multicultural hero's paranoid self-centeredness, thus problematically and provocatively allegorizing wounded America's post-9/11 male-chauvinist solipsism.

Hallemeier argues that, if *Open City* has a cosmopolitan hero at all, then it is not Julius, but Farouq, a North African Muslim and part-time postgraduate student in Translation Studies who – fluent in French, English, Arabic and Spanish – works at an internet café frequented by Julius during his visit to Brussels. In stark contrast to Julius who cultivates cosmopolitanism as a sophisticated, yet non-committal pose, Farouq incorporates a lived everyday cosmopolitanism, a working, grassroots cosmopolitanism that requires a constant effort in contradistinction to Julius' cosmopolitanism which manifests as a solitary after-hours pastime. Hallemeier takes care to emphasize the significance of Farouq's multilingualism in this context, which, in her view, "foreground[s] the fact that *Open City* is an Anglophone work and, as such, limited in terms of the conversations in which it participates" (2013: 246). Once again *Open City* is identified as a work of world literature whose greatest cosmopolitan feat resides in exposing its own shortcomings, challenging the credibility, authenticity and legitimacy of its own cosmopolitan pretensions. The fact that it so clearly knows it is compromised by the exceptionalist stance of its hegemonic position is what in the end constitu-

tes the new cosmopoetic worldliness of Cole's novel. Resolutely extricating itself from Irr's efforts at U.S.-centric categorization, it is not the aspirational Americanism of *Open City* that delivers the novel's geopolitical vision. Rather, it is its cosmopoetic recording of how that Americanism causes Julius' would-be cosmopolitan itinerary to lose its footing despite – or, quite possibly, because of – its apparent freedom and seemingly effortless mobility.

### 3 Born Complicit: Cruel Cosmopolitanism, Cosmopoetic World Literature and the New Human

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) is an attempt to link the kind of identity-bearing narratives we choose to tell each other about ourselves to the contemporary not as a condition of trauma, but a condition of 'permanent crisis' and 'impasse'. Due to an unshakeable anachronistic commitment to "fantasies of a good life" that have begun to "fray" in the neoliberal age – including "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy [as well as] meritocracy" (Berlant 2011: 3) – we now find ourselves at once stuck and affectively suspended, unable to grasp the fundamental shifts in our conditions of living. Impasse is more complicated than a momentary tragic disorientation between two periods of historical development. Impasse, as envisaged by Berlant, cannot be worked through or overcome; the only viable option is to embrace and adapt to it as our new way of life. In Berlant's definition, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project" (2011: 1). As she goes on to explain, "these kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (2011: 1). To understand the implications of Berlant's analysis for literary representation, we must understand genre as a structural assortment of variable patterns synthesized from a coalescence of popular fantasies. "One of optimism's ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality," Berlant writes, "that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate" (2011: 2). Traditionally underpinning our anxieties concerning national cohesion in particular, the genre of the novel, then, acts as an optimistic safeguard against communal dispersal, inducing harmony where there is discord by bringing about a realization of the fantasy of the American multiculturalism as *e pluribus unum*. By contrast, under

neoliberalism, the novel is required to conceive of plurality as fractious, intrinsically multitudinous and ‘inoperative’, or, put differently, as not necessarily finding resolution in holistic self-completion as ‘the nation’ or ‘the global community’. Instead, it must yield to the axiomatic individualism of men and women, and their families, as declared by neoliberal doctrine (see Thatcher 1987), and get a grip on the social fragmentation and disharmony that ensue.

Against this background, *Open City* can be seen as contending with the implicit cruelty of cosmopolitan fantasy as the novel lapses into self-interrogation, doubtful of the authenticity and sustainability of its attempt at encapsulating the world. As Berlant asserts, “instead of the vision of the everyday *organized* by capitalism [she is] interested in the overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by it, and by many other forces besides” (2011: 8). Instead of homogenizing the nation or the world, then, we ought to expect the universe of the neoliberal novel to be riven by the dynamics of greed and individual self-advancement. As a genre, the contemporary American novel appears stuck because both writers and readers continue to be invested in the fundamentally pacific and edifying nature of literature, and its largely consensual and cohesive world-capture, which is particularly appealing in the aftermath of an experience of national trauma. An interesting intervention in this context comes from Adam Haslett’s *Union Atlantic* (2009), which shows contemporary America torn between a fickle banking sector grounded in greed and self-aggrandisement and a waning national heritage of liberty and self-determination. The central pair of characters – muscle-bound and taciturn, commitment-phobic homosexual-in-his-prime Douglas Fanning and ranting elderly spinster Charlotte Graves – represent neoliberalism and liberalism respectively, both of which turn out to be equally barren and futureless. Clearly ‘Graves’ and ‘Fanning’ are deliberately chosen names, Graves signalling the moribund anachronism of Charlotte’s kind while Fanning suggests the fluffed-up make-believe ostentatiousness and transient artifice of Douglas’s prominence. What justifies counting Haslett’s text as a work of American world literature is the author’s choice to embed his relentless, unflinching tale of New England strife and corruption in a frame narrative designed to expose America’s belligerent investment in the Middle East. The novel’s prologue implicates Douglas in the tragic shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in July 1988 after mistaking it for a military aircraft, killing all 290 passengers on board, while the conclusion shows Douglas escaping persecution for fraud at home by finding employment with a U. S. private military-security provision company in Kuwait.

Novels have traditionally taken it upon themselves not only to represent but also to address, in one way or another, whatever is wrong with contemporary society, identifying problems in order to critique and hopefully resolve them. This work that novels do becomes a wholly impossible, self-contradictory absurdity

when what is in need of such critique is in fact the very matrix of our existence in society, which provides also the condition of possibility for any literature as self-expression and creative world-capture. This fundamental impasse is compounded by the fact that, in America, neoliberalism crystallizes at once as the chief obstacle to (communal, national) cohesion and wellbeing and the pinnacle of free (individual) self-fulfilment, both of which quintessentially define ‘America’. “Two overriding paradigms have long competed in defining who we are”, avers William Chafe: “The first imagines America as a community that places the good of the whole first; the second envisions the country as a gathering of individuals who [...] value more than anything else each person’s ability to determine his own fate” (2012: 11). In *After Critique* (2016) Mitchum Huehls tackles the question of literary value under neoliberalism, the all-pervading ideological totality of which instantly renders any conventional resistance futile. “In a world where neoliberalism touches everything but the barest of life, you can certainly make critiques, challenge norms, and offer competing representations of the world,” Huehls writes, “but given neoliberalism’s omnipresence, the position you hold will be just as neoliberal as the position you’re against” (2016: 5). Boldly hailing an “ontological turn in contemporary US fiction,” Huehls declares himself interested in “a literature that refuses ideological critique” (2016: xiv), yet which successfully retains (humanist) value as it “inhabit[s] the world neoliberalism has produced in an effort to reconfigure the positions, relations, and connections that it establishes among the beings and objects of the world” (2016: xii). As far as Huehls is concerned, Margaret Thatcher’s infamous declaration of 1981 that “economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul” has indeed been realized. Accordingly, there is no longer much point in denying that “neoliberalism as a way of thinking about the world [has become] a way of being in the world” (2016: 3). Contemporary literature has no other option than to accommodate this new mode of (human) being, identified by Huehls as a twenty-first-century realization of Michel Foucault’s concept of *homo oeconomicus* from *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008). Crucially, this particular appearance of *homo oeconomicus* must not be misinterpreted as the subjugation of an ‘old’ humanity squashed and battered into neoliberal subjection; rather, Huehls asks us to understand that neoliberalism is the (new) human. On that premise (described by Huehls as ‘post-normative’) neoliberalism does allow us to freely be, and “what sometimes feels like a soul-sucking, brain-consuming zombie plague is actually just an ad hoc and ever-shifting assemblage of being, a perpetually improvised (re)configuring of the connections and contradictions that define life in the twenty-first century” (2016: 6). In other words, “what we so typically see as an ideological agenda [...] is actually just the ongoing reconfiguration of the world” (2016: 18).

In Huehls' reading of a range of contemporary American memoirs and novels, ideological *laissez-faire* opens up to ontological *laissez-être* as neoliberalism pervades contemporary humanity. Meanwhile, humanity continues to display and exercise its usual unpredictable variations in desire and demand, and it is in the end these variations that will determine the future make-up of the world. All this is fine by neoliberalism – which has never been much interested in who we *are*, but solely in what propels us as consumers – as long as the human life-world continues to be lucratively marketable. Accordingly, “we should no longer think of ourselves as discursively normativized constructs of the system” (Huehls 2016: 17). We never choose to embrace and internalize neoliberalist structures; rather, they are our lifeworld from the beginning. We are born complicit, but this does not detract from our creativity or ethical capacity as humans. Change, then – including change in literature resulting in the emergence of new genres – “requires an intervention in ontology's conditions of possibility, its configuration and arrangement, not in its already existing features and characteristics” (Huehls 2016: 19). Berlant and Huehls are united in their call for substantial innovation in both creative literary practice and critical analysis. In their view, the chief challenge is the authentic capture of impasse and precarity as humanity's twin conditions under twenty-first-century neoliberalism. Unlike Gray and Rothberg, whose call for a new American novel does not extend much beyond questions of thematic priority and demographic focus, Berlant's and Huehls' interventions strike at the very core of both the literary and the human. Thus, Huehls advises that “stories can play a vital role in figuring humanity, but only if we abandon the idea that we already know what the human is and should be” (2016: 51). Equally, we are well-advised to heed Berlant's caveat regarding the impending decline of “older realist genres [...] whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life” (2011: 6). Against this background, I am taking the liberty to introduce as my best example of a new, ‘worldlier’ American novel a text that is not even a novel at all, but a collection of short stories, George Saunders' *Tenth of December* (2013), focusing on one story in particular, “The Semplica Girl Diaries” (109–167). Devoid of any investment in the progress, resolution and entitative closure traditionally pursued by the novel, *Tenth of December* is perhaps most aptly designated as a short story cycle. Yet whereas traditionally such works would aim to evoke a sense of community through the cumulative effect of concatenating variations on the same theme, Saunders' focus remains strictly on atomization, impasse and precarity which, according to Berlant and Huehls, define the new human.

*Tenth of December* invokes the hopeless atomization of contemporary American society as it strings together a loose line of momentary snapshots portraying

different degrees of despair and precarity, creating – in combination – a haunting sense of human disconnect, cruelty, abjection and inconsequentiality. As most of the stories concentrate on American life within America, it is astounding how regularly questions of globalization and cosmopolitanism intrude upon Saunders' portrayals of contemporary white suburban domesticity. Saunders' main interest throughout the collection, as in most of his other work, resides with the representation of America's working class. Prominent, center-stage appearances of this particular demographic have remained conspicuously few and far between in American/world literature. Incompatible with the American Dream genre, writers find it hard to accommodate "the losers of American history", as David Rando calls them, "the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history's winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth" (2012: 437). Notably, most of Saunders' working-class writing falls into a new genre category, identified by Berlant as 'situation tragedy'. Whereas "in the situation comedy, the subject whose world is not *too* destabilized by a 'situation' that arises performs a slapstick maladjustment that turns out absurdly and laughably, without destroying very much," Berlant explains, "in the situation tragedy, the subject's world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unravelling" (2011: 6).

Exceeding conventional satire, Saunders' "The Semplica Girl Diaries" is set in a slightly-futuristic variant of contemporary America, where it has become *de rigueur* to display groups of beautiful young women from destitute Third World backgrounds (in this particular case, they are from Laos, Moldova, Somalia and the Philippines) as suburban lawn ornaments, strung up by their foreheads on a kind of washing line whilst clothed in immaculate white apparel signalling innocence and carefree luxuriousness. These 'SG arrangements' are named after one Lawrence Semplica, now feted as a cultural hero, who "found way to route microline through brain that does no damage, causes no pain" ("Diaries": 142). Clearly, Saunders' short story belongs to what Berlant describes as "the genre of crisis [which] can distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional" (2011: 7). Perhaps even more pertinently in the light of Berlant's and Huehls' exposure of the futility of traditional literary conventions when it comes to representing our contemporary condition marked by impasse and precarity, "The Semplica Girl Diaries" appears to be delivering the same kind of 'ontological rupture' that David Rando finds at work in an earlier Saunders story, "Sea Oak" from *Pastoralia* (2000), in which the sudden appearance of "a working-class zombie [...] throws the satirical and realist modes into relief and questions their efficacy for depicting the lived conditions of the class they purport to represent" ("Sea Oak": 451). In "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the full horror and cruelty of the global market are seamlessly incorpo-



rated into everyday life and indeed put on show for all to see; yet they are beheld as quite their opposite and come to be cherished as a much-coveted expression of beauty and luxurious wealth. Citizens leasing the girls (the arrangements, which include a maintenance contract, do not come cheap) are provided with colourfully detailed portfolios featuring melodramatic tales of the girls overcoming child prostitution, AIDS and abject poverty before their arrival in America. Rather than inducing shock and acute revulsion, however, the popular response to the girls' radical commodification into an ornamental garden display is a smooth neoliberal mantra assuring everyone that "it does not hurt, they are not sad, but actually happy, given what their prior conditions were like: they chose, are glad etc" ("Diaries": 119). The girls are in America to work, supporting their families back home, and America, in its generosity and cosmopolitan worldliness, creates opportunities for them to do so.

"The *Semplica Girl Diaries*" is a perfect picture-book rendition of one of Berlant's "scenarios of living on in the ordinary, where subjectivity is depicted as overwhelmed, forced to change, and yet also stuck" (2011: 21). A "sophisticated college grad" ("Diaries": 110), compelled to keep up with the Joneses in order not to fail his "three sweet kids" ("Diaries": 111) and "my wife, very sweet, love of life" ("Diaries": 113), Saunders' anonymous anti-hero finds himself suspended in perpetual lower middle-class precarity while continuing to have faith that one day his life will magically lock into alignment with the genre of the American Dream. "Do not really like rich people, as they make us poor people feel dopey and inadequate", he reflects, but then immediately corrects himself: "Not that we are poor. I would say we are middle. We are very very lucky [...] I do not hate the rich. I aspire to be rich myself" ("Diaries": 118). The fact that his story is presented to us in the form of a diary reveals a self-reflexive subjectivity at work, or rather a subjectivity hungry for self-reflection, which has become yet another unattainable luxury. The story is recounted in hectic shorthand, breathlessly efficient at the expense of self-expressive articulacy and eloquence. The "ten grand" he wins in the lottery is hastily invested in a four-SG arrangement, which in the end ruins him financially when Eva, his eight-year-old daughter, emboldened by her father's faith in the American Dream – "if they have dream, they must do" ("Diaries": 149), sets the girls free. Eva's rationale – perfectly reasonable from a humanist perspective, yet outrageously wasteful and unproductive within a worldview dominated by neoliberal economics – is that "if we want to help them, why can't we just give them the money" ("Diaries": 135)?

Eva's transgression is clearly intended to open a window on the possibility of escape (in the case of the girls) and expulsion (in the case of her father) from neoliberal globalization's bogus paradise: with regard to impasse and precarity, her father and the *Semplica Girls* have everything, and yet nothing, in common.

The story concludes with the anonymous narrator's promising "note to self: call Greenway, have them take ugly thing [i. e. what remains of the SG arrangement] away" ("Diaries": 167). One wonders if this might signal a breakthrough into a future less defeated by self-harming optimism and a permanent sense of crisis, a future potentially brightened even by the incipience of a certain level of cosmopolitical awareness. Let us remember, however, that this is a short story, and hence to contemplate what might happen next is irrelevant. Perhaps this is what constitutes the cruelty of the novel and the cosmopolitan novel in particular? As a genre, it finds it impossible to let scenarios be. Unlike the short story, which senses the world to be a stranger, more fleeting and piecemeal affair, the novel is compelled always at least to *try* envisioning the world as a whole.

#### 4 Coda: Populist Cosmopolitanism, or What the Very Word 'Citizenship' Means

2016 – the year of Brexit and Donald Trump's ascendancy to the American presidency – will enter into the history books as one of the cruellest watersheds for any 'citizen of the world' but especially those who had assumed that the demise of global neoliberalism would be a complicated, difficult and long-winded affair. The neoliberal age has ended, but it was not put to death by the careful analytical expertise of cultural theorists, or the cosmopoetic efforts of creative writers; rather, it succumbed to an upsurge of neo-nationalist fantasy and extremely muddled wishful thinking from among the silent and increasingly impatient majority. Thatcher's neoliberal abolition of society has collapsed into Trump's gleefully isolationist, wall-erecting white populism that loves to present itself as a revolutionary reassertion of the will of the people despite being so clearly orchestrated by the most egregious post-truth mendacity and calculated demagoguery of a few entirely reckless right-wing politicians. It seems as if, in populism, post-9/11 trauma has now found its very own political talking cure. Cosmopolitanism, meanwhile, is disparaged and swiftly dispatched, as in Theresa May's closing speech to her first Conservative Party conference as British Prime Minister, where she declared that "if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means" (May 2016b). Cosmopolitanism is superseded by a curious populist cosmopolitanism that sees no contradiction in celebrating, on the one hand, "our vision of a truly Global Britain" (May 2016a) while, on the other, disavowing and vociferously extirpating globalization at home. Cosmopolitanism, then, on both sides of the Atlantic, must be seen as the new condition of contemporary Anglo-American civilization, keen to

resurrect its indisputable hegemonic greatness in the world, yet without finding itself encumbered by any of the challenges or responsibilities that ensue from such an elevated role, such as the provision of diplomatic leadership, an acknowledgement of neighbourly interdependence, or the expression of compassionate human fellowship across national boundaries. Cosmopolitanism is a bit like refusing to touch globalization with a barge pole whilst wanting to navigate and turn it to (solely) one's own advantage.

As an expression of optimism and hope for the future of humanity and the planet, post-2016 cosmopolitanism promises to crystallize into an even crueler affliction. This is reflected in the painfully confused cluelessness of Saunders' deeply sympathetic anti-hero, who – we are left to assume – belongs to precisely the white middle-class American demographic most likely to have cast their vote for Trump. Future studies of American/world literature will need to engage with the ideological fallout of populist cosmopolitanism, which will – one hopes – give birth also to its own counterintuitive cosmopoetics.

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