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**“The End of a Bright and Tranquil Summer”:
Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* and the
Refusal of 9/11 Representations**

Brian Jansen
Department of English
University of Maine, USA

Abstract

This paper reads Joshua Ferris’s best-selling 2007 novel *Then We Came to the End* as an unconventional entry into the canon of 9/11 fiction. The novel, best-known for its extended use of the first-person plural “we” narrator, deploys a number of plot echoes and strategic elisions to draw attention to events that are—nevertheless—left unstated. Drawing on narratology and Freud’s sense of the uncanny (particularly critic Mark Fisher’s supplemental ideas of the “weird” and “eerie”), this paper connects the use of “we” and narrative absences to larger cultural anxieties around the events of 9/11, ultimately arguing that the novel’s attempt to avoid “re-enacting the ‘terrorism of spectacle’” (Däwes 3) by foregrounding representational challenges runs into an alternate problem: turning readers away from the genuine historical complexities of those events. The paper closes with a discussion of how other 9/11 novels have navigated this same double-bind.

Keywords

Joshua Ferris, 9/11, narrative, narratology, uncanny, Mark Fisher, *Then We Came to the End*

In his 2016 collection *But What If We're Wrong*, popular culture critic and essayist Chuck Klosterman parenthetically insists that “[t]he defining 9/11 novel” may very well end up being David Foster Wallace’s mammoth *Infinite Jest*, “even though it was written five years before the actual event and has very little to do with New York or terrorism or global politics” (48). How Klosterman imagines this state of affairs coming about is through a confluence of factors, but they hinge on the premise that “the events of September 11, 2001, will be the singular social touchstone for all creative American works that happened within the general vicinity of that date” (48n7). Klosterman goes on to argue that eventually, “there will be a college literature class connected to the events of 9/11, *Infinite Jest* will be included on the reading list, and there will be an inordinate amount of emphasis on the passages about militant Quebecois” (48n7). Klosterman may not be aware of this fact, but his argument offers one more entry on a list of seemingly prescient 9/11 novels that in fact predate the events of September 11th, 2001: Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991), Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997), and Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* (2001) have each been variously proclaimed by scholars and journalists as novels that prefigure or foretell the events of 9/11.¹

This paper does not wish to argue the plausibility of Klosterman’s hypothetical, but instead uses it as a jumping off point. It should not surprise readers that 9/11, given its historic importance, emerged as literary subject matter in a general sense, or that it should lurk in the background, unacknowledged, in so many more novels of the contemporary moment; as Klosterman suggests, one of the “important” (45) topics of literature in our current cultural moment has been “the intermittent rebooting of normalcy in the years following 9/11” (46). But why would *Infinite Jest*, which predates the terrorist attacks, have such importance in our collective understanding of 9/11? Klosterman has a theory that the measure of a great book is “mostly about what isn’t there” (45).

In Winter 2014, I was called on to teach a Topics in Literature class whose subject was “Literature at Work”—using texts (from Melville’s “Bartleby” to George Saunders) to explore how literature addresses the problems of labor. Key to the syllabus that semester was American novelist Joshua Ferris’s 2007 debut, *Then We Came to the End*, a deeply comic account of life at a Chicago advertising agency in the late 90s Internet bubble, told from an unconventional first-person plural “we” narrator. In teaching *Then We Came to the End* to a class of unusually keen

¹ In a review, *Esquire* writer Tom Junod argues that *White Noise* and *Mao II* are better 9/11 novels than DeLillo’s actual 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*; Ruth Franklin has argued much the same of *American Pastoral* and DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997).

undergraduates, I made an interesting discovery: for my students, this was no novel of work—it was, in no uncertain terms, a 9/11 novel. This did not come as a total surprise; it was a theory I had secretly harbored for years before getting the opportunity to teach the book. But the fact that it should be so quickly confirmed by my students, unprompted, was a tremendous shock.

Nor is it only I or my students who have come to this conclusion. *Then We Came to the End* is under-discussed in the critical literature, but when it is referenced, the same conclusion seems to be treated as self-evident. Ruth Maxey, for example, is careful to describe the setting as a “pre-9/11” advertising agency (“National Stories” 208), argues that the novel’s we-voice is a “national narrative” (“National Stories” 212), and ultimately suggests that the titular “end” of *Then We Came to the End* “is historical, and can be read as the destruction and loss of certainty wrought by the terrorist attacks of 9/11” (“National Stories” 212).² Maxey characterizes the novel’s 9/11-shaped emptiness as a bit of “circumlocution,” and theorizes that the events of 9/11 ultimately “lie . . . outside the purview of the particular national story Ferris wishes to tell” (“National Stories” 213).

I agree with Maxey’s assessment of the “we” as a national narrative of sorts, agreeing as well with her claim elsewhere that the “we” voice effectively calls attention to whose voices (in terms of race, gender, and class) are left out (“Rise” 12)—and yet I disagree with her assessment that the actual events of September 11th are outside the novel’s purview; in that sense, my interest in Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* is in some ways a corrective to the problems that Georgiana Banita notes of much scholarship on 9/11 literature, particularly its “extreme focus on explicit, generally descriptive fictions about the attacks at the expense of more oblique works addressing the post-9/11 era” (14-15), and this paper, then, is interested in three related questions: in the first place, I explore the link between the “we” voice and the attempt to engage with this kind of historical event.

In the second place, I seek an explanation of *how* this kind of narrative gap works—how readers sense the presence of 9/11 here, despite its absence. In answering this second question, I draw on Freud’s sense of the uncanny and recent refinements of Freud’s work proposed by Mark Fisher, particularly his sense of the “eerie” as the question of existence or non-existence: “*Why is there nothing here when there should be something*” (12; emphasis in original).

² See also Russell, who argues that the novel engages with the trauma, violence, and loss engendered by the events of September 11th, 2001.

Finally, this paper seeks, using *Then We Came to the End* as a case study, and drawing on 9/11 scholarship by Richard Gray, Michael Rothberg, Bimbisar Irom, Birgit Däwes, and others, to contribute to the myriad discussions surrounding 9/11 as a representational problem in literature. I want to explore the double-bind proposed by scholar Ewa Kowal: writers respond to 9/11 because (she argues) it was such a part of our reality, and because they felt a responsibility to do so. But, on the other hand, in doing so, they have been accused of exploiting it—“not giving justice to the problem, or even of trivialising it, [being guilty] of excessive artistic self-indulgence” (17). Richard Gray’s monograph *After the Fall* similarly addresses the difficulty of the 9/11 novel, which, he says, “tell[s] a tale that cannot yet must be told” (14).

The strategy of Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End*, I argue, is to (as Birgit Däwes puts it in her comprehensive account of what she calls “Ground Zero Fiction”) translate the singular imagery of 9/11 into narrative without merely “re-enacting the ‘terrorism of spectacle’” (Däwes 3). I argue that to do so, *Then We Came to the End* in particular “foreground[s] the narrator’s refusal to narrate” (Warhol 221, qtd. in Däwes 105-06) and “the representational challenge rather than the events themselves” (Däwes 105). Yet in doing so, Ferris encounters a parallel problem, because refusing to narrate the attacks may itself be read as a deliberate decision, a suggestion that these events may well *be* unrepresentable—a problem not only because the language of cultural trauma that often surrounds events like 9/11 and is used to suggest their unspeakability is derived more from the meaning we attribute to events *after-the-fact* than the events themselves (Däwes 61-68),³ but because the refusal to narrate tacitly promotes a reading of 9/11 as “ahistorical,” “unprecedented,” and “unfathomable” rather than forcing us to acknowledge the genuine “historical complexities” involved (Däwes 76). *Then We Came to the End*’s discontinuity elides the fact that, as David Holloway puts it, “9/11 was long in the making, . . . however much it suited politicians to claim that the attacks came out of the blue” (qtd. in Keeble 8); it risks propagating the attitude that, as George W. Bush pronounced, “[a]ll of this was brought upon us in a single day—and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack” (qtd. in Keeble 9).

I conclude, ultimately, by returning to the first-person plural, suggesting that while Ferris’s corporate-*cum*-national “we” (as well as his veiled evocations of 9/11) successfully links domestic and public spheres and likewise undercuts notions of American invulnerability in the long 1990s (that is, in the time between the end of

³ Däwes suggests that “each new assertion that the terrorist attacks caused a collective trauma . . . serves as a tool to verify itself” (64)

the Cold War and the events of September 11th, 2001), its failure to grapple with otherness—given the exclusivity of its “we” and its allegiances to corporate capital, a failure both local and transnational—ultimately problematizes the novel’s attempts to make sense of this historical moment.

The “We”: Out of Many, One

Brian Richardson’s 2006 monograph *Unnatural Voices* offers a survey of the history of the first-person plural narrative voice; in contradiction to narratologist Uri Margolin’s largely structuralist argument that “we” narratives were historically and will continue for a number of reasons to be rare (115; Marcus, “Contextual View” 46; Richardson 55-57), Richardson argues that first-person plural narration is a surprisingly common strategy with a relatively long—though little known—history (37). Acknowledging first a number of historical instances where an “I” narrator uses “we” to denote the action of a plural group, as well as Susan S. Lanser’s “prehistory” of “we” narration via texts that use the “I” narrator but express “collective subjectivity” (Richardson 39), Richardson goes on to name what he considers the first sustained use of the first-person plural narrator, in Joseph Conrad’s 1897 novel *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (39-41), where the “we” becomes a stand-in for the crew of the titular ship. Richardson then runs through appearances of the mode in history, including Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and perhaps the conceit’s most well-known English-language example, William Faulkner’s “A Rose For Emily” (1930), where the “synechdochic ‘we’” stands in for a collective of well-off members of a Reconstruction Era Southern community (Richardson 47). In tracing the lineage of the “we” narrator, Richardson argues for a spectrum in which they occur—from, on the one hand, the “Conventional” proto-“we” of a first person singular narration that describes events experienced by him/herself and others (59), to a “Standard” “we” which is “largely realistic narration that nevertheless stretches verisimilitude at key points” (59); other first-person narratives, he argues, fall under the category of “non-realistic,” which flagrantly violates the parameters of realistic representation, while others still are outright “anti-mimetic,” eschewing realism altogether (60).⁴ Regardless of the extremity of its position, however, Richardson contends that the “we” ultimately

⁴ Richardson explores these categorizations in more depth elsewhere; see his essay “Plural Focalization, Singular Voices: Wandering Perspectives in ‘We’-Narration” (especially pp. 148-50) in the collection *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*.

“straddles the line between first and third person” (59); as homodiegetic character narrators who disclose that which could only be known by an “external heterodiegetic intelligence,” they curiously occupy *both* “first and third person” (60). Amit Marcus has gone further by noting the possibility that “we” might additionally encapsulate a second-person, a “you,” as well (“*We Are You*” 1).

But to what end, this slippage between first, second, and third-person? Richardson has argued that “the vast majority of ‘we’ texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms” (50), and he outlines its frequent use in postcolonial (49) and gynocentric (50) contexts;⁵ as he contends, the “we” often has an “insistent political agenda” (58). Marcus agrees, pointing out that

the frequency of first person plural narration depends on a variety of norms: philosophical (what beliefs about consciousness operate in the writer’s community?), social-political (what are the social and political conditions under which the narrative is being composed and how might the narrative be addressing them?), and literary (should the form and the ideology of the narrative represent the hegemonic system of values or subvert it? what counts as a deviation from the literary norm?). (“Contextual View” 46)

In examining *Then We Came to the End*, it is with Marcus’s second point in particular, regarding social-political context, that I want to engage.

Then We Came to the End employs first-person plural “we” narration (though the novel does not sustain this “we” voice throughout, opting for a third-person interlude midway through the novel, discussed below); indeed, it is arguably one of the two best-known English-language examples of the form of the past quarter-century (the other being Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Virgin Suicides* [1993]); it is perhaps best slotted into Richardson’s categorization of “Standard” we-narration, though not

⁵ Despite Richardson’s myriad examples with regard to these contexts, it’s nevertheless worth pointing out that the most widely cited examples of the first-person plural (Faulkner, *Then We Came to the End*, *The Virgin Suicides*) are by white American men. It is beyond the scope of my overarching argument, but nevertheless worth noting one of the cultural responses to 9/11, which saw the proliferation of “traditional” ideas around gender roles; see Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream* (2007).

neatly.⁶ And it is noteworthy for the gap I have already mentioned. It is noteworthy for the historical framing it *does not* include.

Precisely no naming of 9/11 takes place in *Then We Came to the End*. Nor is the novel mere allegory. The novel does not choose New York City for its setting, opting instead for Chicago; any connections to 9/11 *seem*, at first glance, inconsequential: the novel's action takes place largely in a skyscraper and features a climactic, quasi-comic set-piece in which a slighted ex-employee, Tom Mota, returns to the office in clown make-up to "terrorize" (330) his former peers with a paintball gun. Mota's name, if readers squint, *might* mirror the name of one of the ringleaders of the 9/11 attacks, Mohammad Atta (perhaps an interpretive leap, but one made more plausible by Ferris's self-acknowledged affection for the George Saunders short story "Adams," whose titular character is an allegorical stand-in for Saddam Hussein⁷). Mota goes on to redeem himself by enlisting in the military (a desire propelled obliquely by "all that had happened, you know" [380]), where he is killed in Afghanistan by friendly fire (381)—a fact mentioned only in passing. Even the phrasing of Mota's justification for enlisting is left ambiguous, however: "all that had happened" could refer to penance for his earlier crime as well as September 11th. Finally, one of the novel's subsections is titled, in a near rhyme of the evocative language of airlines, "Returns and Departures" (231), but these terms could apply just as easily to the clownish, paintball-bearing return of Mota and the "departures" of the novel's downsized employees.

The closest the novel gives readers to a direct reference to September 11th comes in the second-to-last chapter, when, just before a five-year leap forward in time, the we-narrator writes that "In the last week of August 2001, and in the first ten days of September, there were more layoffs than in all the months preceding them. But by the grace of god, the rest of us hung on, hating each other more than we ever thought possible." "Then," the narrator concludes, "we came to the end of another bright and tranquil summer" (357). The phrasing here echoes the novel's title (itself lifted from the opening sentence of Don DeLillo's 1971 *Americana*), as well as the significant date left unstated, and between this evocative phrasing and the novel's

⁶ As Adams has noted, *Then We Came to the End* is "a more defamiliarizing experience than [*Virgin Suicides*]" (57); its we-narrator periodically, seemingly deliberately, violates the principle of mimesis, describing as it does collective epiphanies, collective daydreams, and somehow knowing things that have not been discussed out loud.

⁷ The story's first-person narrator conducts a pre-emptive strike against his next-door neighbor, Adams, after a relatively minor confrontation; as Ferris delights in explaining in the *New Yorker Fiction podcast*, readers are meant to shift the "s" to the beginning of the name and add another "d" to arrive at "Saddam."

subsequent five-year fast-forward, there can be no doubt that the gap here is one the reader is intended to flesh out. If these parallels strike audiences as tenuous or only trivia, I suggest their importance can be better appreciated given what David Simpson has pointed out as the “odd and troubling sensation” (5) that we have seen something *like* 9/11 before in American media, in countless images of terrorist attack, of burning buildings—that we have been in some way primed for this framing.

It is worth pausing, if only briefly, to note a precedent for this kind of elliptical we-voiced project; Jeffrey Eugenides’s aforementioned *Virgin Suicides*—about a chorus of suburban boys struggling to understand the titular suicides of five neighborhood sisters—has generally been viewed by scholars (see Jansen 104) as employing its we-narration in the service of a commensurate sort of unknowability, articulating the novel’s narrators’ inability to understand the Lisbon sisters or their suicides; “despite years of investigation and speculation,” Richardson suggests, the boys “never begin to understand the motives of the girls” (52). The “we” works with a series of other motifs to make this point explicit, from the novel’s focus on fences and barriers to its rich descriptions of physical decay commensurate with the decay of memory or surety. But, as I have noted elsewhere, it’s not only the unknowability of the novel’s titular “virgins” that’s at stake, because there’s another dimension of un-knowing, an elision where history—politics, the social—ought to be (Jansen 104). And this is true in *Then We Came to the End* as well; both texts self-consciously write *around* important moments of cultural, historical importance, almost ostentatiously foregrounding their significance by the very fact of their absence. In the case of Eugenides’s *Virgin Suicides*, those absent events are, as I have argued, the Detroit Race Riots of 1967 and their role in the suburbanizing project (Jansen 104, 106); for Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End*, I suggest, the lacunae in question are the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.⁸

⁸ Nor is *Then We Came to the End* the only novel to employ this conceit. Ed Park’s *Personal Days* (2008) similarly tells the story of a group of employees at a creative firm. Like Ferris’s novel, *Personal Days* also uses the first-person plural voice to capture corporate ennui (“There was a time when we all dressed crisply” [3], it begins). And like *Then We Came to the End*, it, too, shifts in and out of that narrative mode (one third-person section bears the subclausal structure and indentation of a legal document; another takes the form of an error-ridden e-mail touch-typed in a dark elevator). Where Ferris’s novel describes the lead-up to the dot-com crisis, however, *Personal Days* takes place in its mid-2000s aftermath. Yet, strikingly, the specter of September 11th looms here, too—not only in its post-9/11 New York high-rise setting, but in a number of passing references. A character is “fired on 9/11” but “not *the* 9/11” (49; emphasis in original); the plural narrator explains that “[w]e don’t even like when we look at the clocks on our computers and they

Narratologically speaking, *Then We Came to the End* is both *paraleptic*—the “we” has a greater knowledge than the narrator could presumably have—and *paralyptic*—for the narratives fail to disclose relevant information regarding September 11th. And the novel is also caught in a bind between knowing and unknowing. “We knew everything,” the narrator of *Then We Came to the End* observes (4), before immediately admitting “We didn’t know who was stealing things from other people’s workstations” (4). I suggest that the best description of what’s going on in these novels is James Phelan’s conception of elliptical narration—“telling that leaves a gap that the narrator and the implied author expect their respective audiences to be able to fill” (52). In reading elliptical narration, Phelan argues that “we compare what the narrator reports with some external standard of what such a narrator should say on such an occasion” (138), and as my students asked, how could the narrator(s) not mention the events of September 11th, 2001? After all, these events are, in Richard Gray’s words, “part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” (“Open Doors” 129).

Silences and Gaps, Absences and Returns

Silence speaks, and the way moments of history have been excised from this text tells us something. The absence of 9/11 from Ferris’s novel, I argue, is a kind of absence made presence, and I speculate that the reason for their absence may tie into the lingering uncertainty of those historical events themselves—the uncertainty, that is to say, about how to represent them. It is telling, the collective silence of the otherwise sassy, vocal ad agency employees of *Then We Came to the End* (employees who are paid to know what to say) when it comes to broaching the topic of 9/11.

Ultimately, this present-absence in Ferris’s novel—the way that the events of 9/11 loom, left unsaid and yet always at the front of our minds—recalls Sigmund

say 9:11” (49); much later, after a “companywide e-mail [is] sent out at 9:11 a.m.” (160) employees begin to “suspect that a virus was shifting e-mails so that they registered that ominous time stamp” (160). These references pepper the text despite the fact that the events of September 11th take place four years before the main action of the novel and—as in *Then We Came to the End*—have no direct bearing on its plot.

Freud's theory of the uncanny or the *unheimlich*, that "class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). Freud's use of the term is derived from a gloss of the German *heimlich* and its doubled meanings: simultaneously "that which is familiar" and "that which is concealed or kept out of sight" (4).⁹

Key to the unnerving sense of 9/11 as specter in Ferris's debut novel is a kind of doubling we have seen in his work more broadly: "doubling, dividing, and interchanging" in Freud's words, hinging on a "constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character trait, or twist of fortune" (9). Tom Mota's name mimics "Atta;" Mota's crimes portend the 9/11 attacks (in, albeit, absurdist fashion); even the language of "Returns" and "Departures" in chapter headings strikes astute audiences as echoes. For readers, the novel perhaps represents a kind of "involuntary return to the same situation" (Freud 11)—in the same way that Freud, lost, returns unconsciously to the same disreputable quarter of an Italian town, readers are returned to the historical events that the novel assiduously avoids mentioning. The source of this return, for Freud, is uncanny, "nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old" (13)—something we've tried to repress, and I augment that reading of the uncanny with Mark Fisher's more recent, Marxist-inflected clarification of Freud in *The Weird and the Eerie*. Unsatisfied with Freud's reduction of the uncanny to castration anxiety (Fisher 9), Fisher refines the critical concept by further categorizing the uncanny as either "weird" or "eerie." The *weird*, for Fisher, is "*that which does not belong*" (10; emphasis in original)—something brought to us from the outside, from beyond. The *eerie*, in contrast, invites the question of existence or non-existence: "*Why is there nothing here when there should be something*" (12; emphasis in original). Fisher develops these ideas predominantly with reference to science fiction, but the classic example of the eerie is for Fisher ruins, landscapes emptied or partially emptied of human life (11). *Then We Came to the End's* absence strikes me as eerie, even if we are not explicitly looking at ruins (in fact, in some ways, audiences are *avoiding* looking at the literal ruins of 9/11). The effect of Ferris's circumlocution is not unlike the effect of Art Spiegelman's famous *New Yorker* cover, which later became the cover for his graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004)—a simple scene described by Ewa Kowal as only "black-on-black

⁹ Indeed, Ferris's subsequent work leans heavily on that sense of the familiar-unfamiliar, the sense of involuntary return, doubling, helplessness. *The Unnamed* (2010) follows a trial lawyer struck with a kind of nameless disorder that compels him to walk—to keep walking. His most recent novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014) stars a neo-Luddite dentist who discovers, rather unnervingly, that someone is impersonating him on social media.

‘phantom towers’” (14), like (as another critic put it) “phantom limb[s]” (Burns n. pag.; qtd. in Kowal 14). Yet there is something eerie, too, about a skyscraper in even corporeal, non-phantom form; Fisher calls on readers to imagine how the physical spaces of our culture might appear to audiences when semiotic frames have been stripped away—the way we today view ruins like Stonehenge or Easter Island’s *moai*. A skyscraper, then, is a kind of relic too, a reminder of the present-absent forces of capital “not fully available to our sensory apprehension” (Fisher 64), its towering presence casting a shadow, visible from all vantages, like a painting whose eyes seem to follow its viewers.¹⁰ It is a reminder, as Fisher writes of the eerie, of “the forces that govern our lives and the world” (64), going so far as to ask whether we are “being watched by an entity that has not yet revealed itself” (64).¹¹

Thus, perhaps worth considering here is the novel’s historical, office setting—the possibility that we might, after Phillip Wegner’s arguments about the long 1990s as a period between “two deaths” (37), read the novel’s late 1990s/early 2000s dot-com boom and bust context as another kind of repetition or resonance. Consonant with Fisher’s revisions of the uncanny, Wegner, in *Life between Two Deaths*, reads the events of 9/11 in the fashion of Freudian repetition (filtered through Lacan) not as an Event or an interruption of the Real, but as a repeat of an earlier “fall”—the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989 (8-9; 24-25). To describe 9/11 as a repetition, however, does not for Wegner minimize its significance. Rather, what Wegner means by this claim is that it is only with September 11th that the “symbolic universe” of the Cold War can be finally, fully swept away (25), more than a decade late, clearly marking a beginning of a new global order—the “peaceful and collective mobilization that emerged spontaneously within the Cold War situation” overwritten by the “violent, premeditated action” of 9/11 that comes about, Wegner suggests, as a consequence of the unprecedented concentration of wealth in private hands, to such an extent that individuals (of whom Osama bin Laden is only one example) are effectively stateless, possessing their own political and military autonomy (24). To read the 1990s as a “between” or “non-historical” (28) moment, for Wegner, is to

¹⁰ Architectural historian Carol Willis has shown, for example, both how skyscrapers were physically shaped (even down to their floor plans) by economic forces and how their growth was fueled by speculative capital. In *The Black Skyscraper*, Adrienne Brown has argued, relatedly, that the historical development of the skyscraper had important effects on the perception of race in American culture.

¹¹ See Wegner (49-51) for a discussion of the Twin Towers and their figuration through a similar lens.

understand it as a place “wherein history might move in a number of very different directions” (29).

Though conventionally conceived as a moment of triumph for financialization and American supremacy, the long 1990s are, if only by their placement alongside an absent-present 9/11, instead figured in Ferris’s novel as ominous, though it is unclear whether the novel is willing to go so far as to suggest a causal link between American corporate capitalism and the events of 9/11—even if we understand, in an abstract sense, those events as a result of what Martin Randall (after Baudrillard) identifies as the “globalisation of American economic, cultural and military power” (14). *Then We Came to the End*’s irreverence makes it difficult to assess precisely the novel’s view of this decade. The novel ironizes its narrators’ unease with poverty by way of references to “lit oil drums” (17) and the putative dot.com-era obsolescence of layoffs (18), but this language might be framed variously as, on the one hand a critique of an economic regime of post-industrial/post-Fordist work marked by stagnant wages, piece-work employment, and the reorganization of social space that reached new heights in an era of neoliberal commonsense (Wegner 111-12; see also Fraser and Jaeggi 194); it might just as straightforwardly be understood as a kind of moralistic critique of a culture crying out for unity and mission (a “vision of . . . post-Cold War U.S. global hegemony” [Wegner 160] that 9/11 makes possible). To wit: “It was a shrill carping, frenzied time, and as poisonous an atmosphere as anyone had ever known,” the narrators observe, “and we wanted nothing more than to stay in it forever” (356). Tom Mota’s enlistment and death in the US military, in this latter reading, becomes a “necessary sacrifice . . . for our redemption, mediator . . . between an earlier state of decadent complacency and a new sense of global moral duty” (Wegner 26-27). The same ambiguity is evident in the line from which the novel (and my paper, in turn) takes its title: “then we came to the end of another bright and tranquil summer” (357), a sentence whose aforementioned revision of DeLillo’s *Americana* is worth considering.

Where Ferris’s novel uses the line to mark an end (the novel immediately jumps five years forward), DeLillo’s original marks his own novel’s beginning: “Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year” (1). Yet Ferris’s revision, too, marks a kind of beginning, certainly in the Wegnerian sense, of 9/11’s second death and a “new period in global history” (Wegner 9). Significant also, however, is the framing; given *Americana*’s publication at the tail-end of a post-World War II cultural consensus, it seems possible to read the narrator’s dullness and luridness at relative face value—that it is followed by a description of Christmas lights, roasted chestnuts, and Santa’s ringing bells suggests a certain nostalgia, or at least the possibility of or

hope for cleaving work from public life;¹² no such possibility exists, however, for *Then We Came to the End*, whose “bright and tranquil summer” literally includes myriad layoffs, a paintball attack, and the total imbrication of private and public spheres. Is this the irony at work here, though, or is the irony—rather—that the summer *does* qualify as “bright and tranquil” given the elided events of September 11th? Or, as a third possibility, are readers meant to recognize the “summer” in question more broadly, as the “moment” of the 1990s, a period of relative peace and prosperity? And if the latter, is the framing of this period *as* “bright and tranquil” itself ironic or sincere—a retreat into a kind of Fukuyaman “end of history” view of the 1990s as the triumph of Western liberalism ruptured by an unforeseeable event, or a point about American corporatism’s complicity in flows of global capital and conflict (as Alison Russell has pointed out in her own reading of *Then We Came to the End*, it may well be significant that Mota’s paintball attack happens precisely as upper management is meeting about the need for new business—“more commerce, more money” [325])? Does it understand, to borrow a phrase from Samuel Cohen, “the American past’s inextricable connections to the present” (12)?

My suggestion is that the novel *does*, at least intellectually, make this connection; at the same time as it does so, however, its studied avoidance of the events of 9/11 themselves and the slippery nature of its “we” voice—the disingenuousness of its identification with a “national voice” and the shades of corporate speak embedded in the “we,” both problems discussed at-length below—means that the novel cannot fully or clearly articulate the critique it wishes to make. They feed, instead, into a language of what Simpson, in his account of the culture of commemoration around 9/11 calls “nihilism and nothingness” (6) that creates an emptiness to be filled by potentially any motive or explanation (6-7).

¹² It is beyond the scope of this paper to weigh in fully on critical debates around DeLillo (see Laist 50-51); however, I am broadly sympathetic to the argument that DeLillo’s procedurally postmodern body of work nevertheless retains a transcendentalist, even individualistic spirit. Significantly, *Americana* splits its time relatively neatly between its star’s career as a television executive and a kind of side-quest as an avant-garde film-maker and road-tripper—a division between spheres of public and private that is not possible for the late-twentieth-century characters of *Then We Came to the End*, whose home lives become tied up in their work.

Rehashing the Problems of Representation

Novelist Jonathan Lethem asked soon after the September 11th attacks “*Can I bear to narrate this into normality?*” (qtd. in Franklin n. pag.), and his hesitancy was echoed by a number of great American writers—Toni Morrison’s “The Dead of September 11,” for example, observes “I have nothing to say—no words / stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself” (26-27). W. S. Merwin’s “To the Words” apostrophizes the very words that escape him: “When it happens you are not there” (1).¹³ As Randall asks, “How can a writer put into words what had already been watched by millions? What could language add to those images that they don’t already articulate? Indeed, *why* write at all given the staggering enormity of the visual symbolism?” (5). Yet for all three abovementioned writers, the task of putting the events into words, through whatever lens, was ultimately necessary: Morrison, for example, claims she has nothing to say in a poem in which she says something: that she can give nothing but a “gesture” (30)—the poem itself functioning *as* that gesture; in whatever roundabout fashion, these authors *could* represent what had happened. But *should* they have?

The problem of representation is not unique to 9/11 narratives, of course. As Kate McLoughlin notes in *Authoring War*, herself drawing on trauma theory, war literature encounters much the same concern—“war,” she notes, “resists depiction, and does so in multifarious ways” (6-7). And (taking matters further) as one critic of McLoughlin’s argument notes, “reality itself ‘resists depiction.’ Translating lived experience, material being, and sense data into nouns, verbs, and syntactical relations is a vexingly difficult task. . . . If it is true that war resists depiction, war is no different from countless other aspects of human existence, such as ‘the self,’ Spain, going to the grocery store, society, consciousness, eating an apple, swimming, and love” (Scranton 351). Nor are debates around representation anything new: Philip Roth declared in a 1960 lecture that “[t]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination” (qtd. in Cohen 16).¹⁴

¹³ Fascinatingly, given the way readers expect poets to cut through the language of everyday usage (to *find* the words lost to so many others), these poets actually echo—quite distinctly—the famous on-air reaction of CNN anchor Aaron Brown: “Good Lord. . . . There are no words” (qtd. in Stelter n. pag.).

¹⁴ For a lucid, abbreviated discussion of the twentieth-century history surrounding problems of representing reality, see Cohen (15-23).

Indeed, Debra Shostak has noted the deliberate irony in that *other* we-narrative, *Virgin Suicides*, pointing out that the authority or unity of the novel's "we" actually disguises the plurality that the "we" is ostensibly trying to represent (the same way that the novel depicts the efforts of the Parks Department, whose denuding of trees reveals the sameness of suburbia, the conformity of American white middle-class ideology). The same is true of *Then We Came to the End*; the novel's gap suggests "our" collective inability to understand, yet two significant problems occur: one, as Gray notes in *After the Fall*, 9/11 is in fact another in a series of "falls" in the history of American literature—moments of crisis marking "a descent from innocence to experience" (2); two, if Maxey is correct and the "we" chorus represents a "national voice" in the wake of 9/11, it's an awfully white, upper-middle class voice, a voice whose particular members have no practical, first-hand immediate investment—the stakes for this group seem low; 9/11 seems, at best, a chance to gaze inward. As the collective narrator suggests, "It was fun imagining our eventual despair. . . . We didn't really believe we would be honked at from the Lexuses of our former colleagues. . . . We didn't think we would be forced to wave at them from our lit oil drums. But that we might have to fill out an unemployment form over the Internet was not out of the question" (17). In other words, as Gray suggests of many 9/11 novels, *Then We Came to the End* potentially "register[s] that *something* traumatic . . . has happened" ("Open Doors" 132; emphasis in original), but its silence suggests that it does not know what to do with this information; like those other novels, it "retreat[s] into domestic detail" and thereby reduces "a turning point in national and international history to . . . a stage in a sentimental education" ("Open Doors" 134).

To Ferris's credit, *Then We Came to the End* seeks to circumvent this critique by ensuring the cast of characters and sideplots is multicultural and multiethnic—there's Benny Shassburger, the "dough-faced Jewish guy" (9), the Korean-American Karen Woo, and a subplot involving a Native American totem pole. Indeed, the novel concludes with a bit of sleight-of-hand suggesting that the "we" narrator was actually an "I" all along (or, at any rate, a "you and me" [385]), the voice of the novel belonging to the gay, African American employee Hank Neary.

Maxey, for her part, notes the "we" as an embodiment of the "quintessentially American motto" *e pluribus unum*—"out of the many, one" ("National Stories" 210). And yet the attempt ultimately rings hollow, given the way Neary is noted as one of the company's few black employees, the way that the "we" voice differentiates him only by superficial qualities (he is black, wears corduroy suits, and reads a lot), and the way—perhaps most importantly—reviewers have generally read Neary straightforwardly and unproblematically as Ferris's authorial stand-in (Mason 70) on

the grounds that they are both, as Maxey notes, “highly literate men and would-be writers employed by Chicago advertising agencies (the author’s lived experience that inspired this novel)” (“National Stories” 213).¹⁵

Also problematic are the numerous jokes in the novel by which Karen Woo’s ethnicity is misidentified as Chinese rather than Korean, while another character, Donald Sato, is mentioned exactly once, identified only as “Asian of some kind” (111); there is even a bit of jealousy stemming from the observation that layoffs might at least provide the opportunity to sue—“if you were black, aged, female, Catholic, Jewish, gay, obese, or physically handicapped” (15)—and a set piece during which the “we” (for the moment retracting to exclude Karen Woo) worries that hating Karen makes “us” racists (111). Even the symbolism of the totem pole that Shassburger returns to its rightful owner¹⁶ is undercut by a series of escalating racist jokes (a fake scalping, the designation of a fake tribe, jokes about “firewater” [173]) that Shassburger’s ostensibly noble gesture cannot shake, to say nothing of the fact that (as Russell has pointed out, though her own reading of these scenes are more ambivalent than my own) the totem pole seems (for important cultural, historical, and regional reasons) unlikely to be the work of the tribe to which it is credited (see 330n1). Curiously, despite the revelation of Neary as narrator, Maxey argues, in the language of Hamilton Carroll’s *Affirmative Reaction*, that the novel “place[s] responsibility for a broad series of shifts in labour opportunity at the feet of the women and people of colour who have displaced them” (3; qtd. in Maxey, “National Stories” 211).¹⁷

The novel’s “we”-voice, moreover, makes no real attempt to reclaim anyone outside of a white-collar upper-middle class sphere (head of building security Mike

¹⁵ Maxey, for her part, offers a more optimistic reading of Neary’s “authorship” of the novel, positing that his “vantage point as multiply Other” is ideal, given the way he is the “me” positioned against the “we”—caught on the outside of even the group he narrates from within (“National Stories” 213).

¹⁶ Benny Shassburger does return it to the tribe to whom it originally belonged (285-86); uninterested in its financial worth, Shassburger instead sees in the pole a kind of ineffable, inarticulable something, though the best he can muster in defending his preoccupation with the piece is that “[i]t meant something to me, I guess” (368).

¹⁷ Clare, for his part, contends that the novel’s metafictional conceit is a ruse, and that the “we” is not so much the voice of a community or the voice of a nation, but the voice of corporate capitalism itself. He asks: “In the decentered, no-place of corporate capitalism, on what stable ground can such a communal ‘we’ be based outside the advertising and ‘corporate we’ that Ferris mentions?” (192).

Boroshansky, a “South Side Pole” [115], for example, is never included¹⁸). Indeed, the narration drips with a certain amount of classist scorn; the “we” assumes “that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy” (18) and that “[w]e were corporate citizens, buttressed by advanced degrees and padded by corporate fat. We were above fickle market forces of overproduction and mismanaged inventory” (19). As Maxey suggests, for all its gestures toward inclusivity,

[the novel] implies a particular norm. That norm is unracialized and ungendered, secularized and sexually specific. It is the physically fit, young to middle-aged, heterosexual white man who practices no particular religion. Such men, who bear some resemblance to Ferris himself, make up the bulk of the collective narrator: Tom Mota, Jim Jackers, Larry Novotny, Dan Wisdom, Carl Garbedian, Don Blattner, Chris Yop, and . . . Joe Pope. (“National Stories” 211)

Similarly, as Ralph Clare has suggested, for all of the attempts that *Then We Came to the End* makes to wake up its cast of “comfortable ‘corporate citizens’” (188), the impact of any such wisdom is undercut by the cushioned class position of those involved.

In Richard Gray’s words, there are no “encounters with strangeness” (“Open Doors” 135) to be found here. Looming finally is the troubling fact that (as Ferris himself notes in the reading guide accompanying the paperback edition) the novel’s “emotional heart” (5) resides in a brief third-person interlude about a corporate executive, Lynn Mason, who is treated in her role as boss as a paragon of integrity admired by all. The “we” tells readers that Mason is “scrupulous as hell” (48) with a fine “moral principle that . . . she abided by with strict authority” (50). At a glance, Mason’s exclusion from the “we” positions her against it—an upper-management equivalent to the working-class characters (Boroshansky and others) similarly held at arm’s length. But the we’s admiration for Lynn, and the significance of this section to the novel’s project problematizes this simple binary, its placement in the novel a kind of illustration of the narratological instability of a “we” voice, its uneasy oscillation between first, second, and the third person. As Neary explains of his attempts to write this passage (as, in the novel’s metafictional conceit, he has

¹⁸ At least two other characters are described as South Siders, and these characters are similarly held at arm’s length: the overweight, chain-smoking Brizz dies before the main action of the novel, while Marcia is noted for her accent and outrageously anachronistic fashion sense (101).

ostensibly done), he had originally depicted Mason as “a tyrant . . . because anyone who was a boss . . . *had* to be a tyrant. Anyone who believed in the merits of capitalism, and soul-destroying corporations, and work work work—all that—naturally that person wasn’t deserving of any sympathy” (377, emphasis in original); meeting with her, during the novel’s unnarrated fast-forward, changes this assessment. His revision seeks instead to “know her” (377), even if he does not “get the half of it” (378). The cumulative effect of the Lynn Mason passage, then, is to place her in relation to the we—to, if not fully rescue her into it, then to frame the we’s existence as underwritten or necessitated by her. It is this troubling of categories, of *we* and *she*, that links the novel’s narratological choices and Fisher’s revisions of the Freudian uncanny discussed above: the instability of categories of conscious/unconscious, subject/object, inside/outside, us/them. Mason and the we are separate and yet not, imbricated in the same flows of global capital, a problem made even more complex by the Mason section’s echoes of a kind of corporate intentionality whereby multinationals adopt the language of individual agency and identity in service of the American legal fiction of corporate personhood (see Siraganian 113-14).

Again, to Ferris’s credit, it is worth pointing out that this third-person interlude offers its own resonance with the novel’s careful avoidance of 9/11, given the way it captures Mason’s evasion of her own personal crises: a breast cancer diagnosis, a looming operation (which she simply skips, opting to return to the office instead), and her uncertainty regarding whether her love for her sometimes-partner Martin is genuine or merely “circumstantial” (225)—dependent, that is, on her diagnosis and her sudden awareness of her mortality. Mason’s parallel plot echoes an observation made by a character in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, another 9/11 novel, that “all life had become public” (182).¹⁹ And, as Ferris himself points out in the novel’s reading guide, the point of this third-person interruption is its call to confront death: “Lynn,” he suggests, “is forced to look at the possibility of death, . . . and in turn so is the reader. After the interlude it becomes clear that death qualifies everything that came before it and everything that follows” (5). Even her refusal to face the reality of her diagnosis is metaphorically rich, recalling President George W. Bush’s “call for continued participation and confidence in the American economy” (qtd. in Pellegrini n. pag.)—Lynn suffers a telling breakdown in a department store fitting room while trying on bras, crying “I don’t want any of them! I just want out of here!” (211)—as

¹⁹ Or, claims a character in Deborah Eisenberg’s *Twilight of the Superheroes*, “Private life shrank to nothing” (36). Gray offers both of these lines as examples in “Open Doors, Closed Minds,” discussing the limitations of the 9/11 novel.

well as mirroring what Gray has identified as the challenge of “[f]acing the other, in all its difference and danger” (“Open Doors” 135), even if the Other (in this instance), a kind of abject, is in fact growing within her: another troubling of the categories of us and them, self and other. The suggestion here of Lynn’s tumour as a kind of terrorist Other is a tacit understanding of the outward-rippling effects of a host of cultural and economic factors; Lynn recognizes a lump in her breast in the same way that we might *cognitively* recognize the consequences of American domestic and foreign policy, but absent medical intervention, her tumour remains largely invisible, or at least disavowable; it is enough for her to simply tell her partner “not to touch there” (204-05) knowing that he will not ask why. Yet its effects are still noticeable, its return inevitable—it is no coincidence that Lynn finds herself, reflexively on the evening of her surgery, in the lingerie section of a department store (209).

On the other hand, Lynn is comfortably well-off (that there is never a discussion of how Lynn will pay for medical treatment is telling); she’s upper management; it’s difficult to see how her specific traumas (or even the traumas of the “we” with whom she is in tension) are generalizable to a larger American public (even if the section *does* generate legitimate *pathos*). Lynn’s story is another domestication of crisis, what Gray calls the “assimilat[ion of] the unfamiliar into familiar structures” (“Open Doors” 134). Even in the absence of direct mention, the resonances with 9/11 are clearly framed: “all life here is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists” (“Open Doors” 134). If there is a critique being levelled here, it is found in the way Lynn uses work to turn her gaze away and avoid confronting her (and if we accept her link to the “we,” *our*) problems, further suggesting 9/11’s imbrication in the flow of American global economic power. The third-person passage, which is titled “The Thing to Do and the Place to Be,” concludes with Lynn deciding that the “place to be” is, for her, the office—labor is the entire framework for “[h]er pursuit of happiness” (230; emphasis in original). “[B]ecause of . . . new business opportunities,” Lynn decides, “death, she’s afraid, will have to wait” (230). Death does not wait for Lynn, of course—Neary explains in the final pages that she has died off-stage during the course of the novel’s five-year gap (377).²⁰ And the “we” voice picks up on this anxiety, particularly in the wake of Tom Mota’s paintball terror

²⁰ Neary also mentions that the death is actually caused by ovarian—rather than breast—cancer (377); in other words, either the cancer spread to the rest of Lynn’s body or the “we” voice’s knowledge of Lynn is more limited than it would like to suppose. In this same passage, Neary speaks to the problem of representation, confessing: “what did I know about her? Nothing, really. I didn’t know her—not in any meaningful way” (377).

campaign, realizing how “relieved [they are] not to have died at work” (327). There is in this relief a glimpse at something larger, the sense that “[m]aybe there was an alternative to wealth and success as the fulfillment of the American dream” (326); the “we” even feels “for a split second the ambiguous, foreign, confounding certainty that maybe we were getting what we deserved” (326). But the feeling is short-lived, and Ferris targets those who turn away, even as his own novel (in its fashion) likewise turns away: “that feeling soon passed, and when we rose up alive and returned to our desks and, later, to our lofts and condos and suburban sprawls, the feeling was that of course we deserved all that we had, we had worked long, hard hours for it all, and how dare that fucker even pretend to take it away?” (326). After all, the narrator(s) ask(s), “What were we but sheep . . . ?” (235). Ferris’s novel, in other words, suggests a certain self-awareness regarding the problems of its narrative strategy, but it cannot find a way out.

Domestic/Public, Ought-To/Is

The question becomes *is there a way out?* Gray and Rothberg have argued that there is, through a body of 9/11 literature that turns outward, deterritorializing, “grappling with otherness” and hybridizing American culture, in addition to accounts of “extraterritorial citizenship” (Rothberg, “Failure” 153).²¹ But the danger of this call lies in its prescriptivism, and the politicization or depoliticization of 9/11 literature is deeply contested territory (see Keeble 11-13). John Duvall and Robert Marzec, for instance, have argued that “Gray and Rothberg are both unwilling to look very closely at what 9/11 fiction sets out to do because they are both sure that they know what 9/11 fiction ought to be doing” (384; qtd. in Keeble 12). They suggest, in fact, that domestic settings have historically been the lens through which authors have addressed political concerns,²² and Aliko Varvogli (broadly sympathetic to Gray and Rothberg, herself critical of the “short-sighted, self-obsessed” response of many 9/11 novels [181]) has convincingly argued that certain “domestic” post-9/11 novels can

²¹ A number of critics have suggested Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) as 9/11 novels embodying these principles (see Rothberg, “Failure” 156-57; Keeble 115-64). To this list I would add Karan Mahajan’s *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016), which explores the short-and long-term fallout from a terrorist attack in Delhi, India—from the perspectives of both the victims and the perpetrators.

²² See Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” on the social and political implications of the domestic—the “breakdown of the boundaries between internal and external spaces, between the domestic and the foreign” (600)

succeed, by ironizing “the stories that a country in crisis tells itself about its innocence, its racial relations, and its idea of freedom” (178).

In his prescription for a literary response to the events of September 11th, Don DeLillo wrote in a December 2001 *Harper's* essay of the need for a “counternarrative” to the unification and simplifications of the media and government response (a response that, as Keeble writes, “tried to map America’s grief on to a particular agenda” [10]). For DeLillo, that counternarrative is to be found in the

100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, who we know, what we’ve seen or heard. There are the doctors’ appointments that saved lives, the cellphones that were used to report the hijackings. Stories generating others and people running north out of the rumbling smoke and ash. Men running in suits and ties, women who’d lost their shoes, cops running from the skydive of all that towering steel. (“In the Ruins” 34)

Then We Came to the End’s clever use of the “we” gestures toward the proliferation of these kinds of individual stories—out of the many, one; *e pluribus unum*. But in eluding the events of 9/11 themselves, problems arise for its first-person plural. The link between the “we” narrative and the absence of 9/11 from *Then We Came to the End*, knowingly or not, tacitly expresses an argument: that for whatever else we are, this is something we cannot wrap our heads around, cannot put into words, cannot do justice. It is too big—so big that it looms even in absence. It need not, according to this logic, even be mentioned to be identified: an eeriness, in Fisher’s terms, an absence where there should be something. According to journalist Hillel Italie, 9/11 outpaces our attempts to imagine it. But, as critics discussed above have pointed out, acknowledging the failure of words also serves an ideological function, turning us away from trying to explain, to understand. To think of 9/11 as an aberration is to make it ahistorical. Ruth Franklin suggests as much, writing in the *The New Republic* that “we still helplessly regard 9/11 as an ‘unimaginable fact,’ a *deus ex machina* of indeterminable cause, rather than the product of a toxic swirl of historical, religious, and political forces” (n. pag.). It depoliticizes and thereby runs the risk of, in the words of Michael Rothberg, “reinforcing the repressive liberal-conservative consensus in the United States that attempting to explain the events amounts to explaining them away or excusing them” (“No Poetry” 151).

For all its creativity in addressing the problem of representation (by self-consciously *not* addressing the problem), and for all the useful critiques it does level,

it seems, perhaps, that Ferris's novel is—despite its chorus of “we”—stubborn in its inward gaze. I do not disagree with DeLillo, who notes the necessity of individual stories, “to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (“In the Ruins” 35). However, I suggest *Then We Came to the End*'s attempt to synthesize these voices into a singular-collective “we” both flattens those individual stories, highlights who and who does not get to speak, and, ultimately, suggests a kind of cubicle-dwelling community that retreats into nostalgia—and into complacency and complicity.

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About the Author

Brian Jansen is a Lecturer in the Department of English and Communications Specialist for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Maine, Orono. He holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, where his Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded dissertation explored creative agency in popular series fiction. His work on contemporary American literatures and cultures has appeared in the *Canadian Review of American Studies*, *Comparative American Studies*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, and other venues.

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