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Notes from the Cracks: Histories, Trauma and the Ethics of Fiction in Michael Chabon's *Moonglow*

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0. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, the advent of postmodernism as the new cultural paradigm in the Western world brought to the fore the inextricable relations existing between reality, language and power. Poststructuralist scholars had insisted on the impossibility to fully comprehend the real, understood as an inaccessible realm lying beyond the mediation of language. Influenced by them or sometimes precluding their views, postmodernism applied a deconstructivist approach to discourse, warning about its power to organize society through a totalizing narrative that creates an illusion of reality structured in terms of opposite categories which ultimately privileged a restricted hegemonic group. In contrast, Derrida's conception of the world in *Of Grammatology* (1967), as an entangled web of signifiers whose meanings were ultimately arbitrary, and thus susceptible to continuous variations and multiple processes of appropriation and renegotiation, eventually had an echo in the understanding of social relations in the practice of everyday life. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the successive revolts in favor of the rights of minority groups allowed those who had once been marginalized to represent themselves, thus contesting to the diminishing claims stated against them from the dominant discourse through the set of ancient myths or ideological paradigms that Lyotard called "grands récits"—frequently translated as "master narratives—(Lyotard 1979). The problem with postmodernist practices and their correlative poststructuralist theory was that such deconstructive move did not eventually propose any new encompassing alternative to the western, white, male humanism that it had previously disempowered. Skepticism about reality and cultural relativism seemed to be the ultimate results provided by the 1980s and, eventually, the forces of late capitalism and globalization seemed to impose their practical and economic rules over the ethical remains of the past time (see Jameson 1991).

The postmodern shift ran parallel to a reformulation in the methodology and objectives of history, considered as a discourse which traditionally had claimed authority on the basis of its veracity while implicitly privileging certain positions over others. Hayden White, one of the precursors of the New Historicism, stated that historical accounts had the same status as fictional ones, being both composed through a process which he called "emplotment," consisting of applying a certain plot structure to a series of facts chronologically arranged as a chronicle (82). It follows that history can never reflect the past exactly as it happened, but simply provide an account of it through a series of narrative mechanisms which work in the same way as they do in a novel. Arguing against the categorical distinction between fiction and history, as the imaginable and the actual respectively, White states that "it does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same" (98). For this reason, he insists that his view on the limitations of historiography does not aim to invalidate the discipline, but rather to identify the processes that have operated in the human mind and throughout history and critically consider the cultural and ideological background behind each discourse (99).

In a critical commentary of White's seminal book *Metahistory*, Ewa Domanska (180) contends that his work, although deeply informed by the postmodernist understanding of reality as always-already filtered through language, is ultimately concerned with transcending the stage of skepticism and radical relativism in humans' consciousness of history (178). This movement "beyond irony" consists of the realization of a dialectical relationship between world and word. In consequence, the mediation of narrative in our understanding of the past can actually confer us an agency to engage with it by reading and writing. It follows that the research in historiography that contemporary scholars like White defend also seek to provide an account of human

imagination, however distant from preconceived notions of the historical truth, which may deal with the human ability to comprehend and narrate the past as an attempt to integrate it in their lives, even if conscious of the gaps left by time and culture. This precision is important for my following discussion, concerned with moving beyond the postmodernist stage of rupture towards the possible construction of new values.

Since the decade of the 1960s, literary fiction has also explored the problematic dynamics between the past and its narratives. In her 1987 essay "Beginning to Theorize the Postmodern,"[1] Linda Hutcheon coined the notion "historiographic metafiction" to refer to those works of fiction which problematize their historical referentiality asserted through the allusion of documented events and characters (6), by consciously assuming their constructive character through metafictional strategies or, very often, incursions in the non-realistic mode. The basic premise of historiographic metafictions is that the past is real and undeniably present, but it is only accessible from its texts, whether these are literary or historical –Hutcheon calls these texts the "traces" of the past (4). This assumption implies that "[t]he ontological line between historical past and literature is not effaced but underlined" (10). However, in line with White's claim on the narrative tissue which connects history and fiction, historiographic metafiction imagines the remains of history as an intertextual infrastructure which, while enclosing our knowledge of the past, also broadens its scope to an infinite range of voices (11). Many of the works listed by Hutcheon (i.e. Gabriel García Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude*, Umberto Ecco's *The Name of the Rose* or E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*) subvert the realist relationship existing between the world and the text and thus, the presupposed accuracy or authority of certain representations. In textually realizing this leveling, historiographic metafictions allow for a constant revision of the past—

[1] Hutcheon further developed the notion in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988).

especially relevant when the events represent a gap in collective memory—and the interaction of multiple voices, most of which had been silenced for a long time.

In their attempt to challenge traditional master narratives, historiographic metafictions often presented stories as more valuable than histories, due to their awareness of the previous ideological encoding of the text itself as much as of its susceptibility to be decoded and recoded. Through an account that is open to multiple possibilities and narrative perspectives, these texts propose a multifocal and polyphonic view of History as a site of conflict and encounter between different stories. Through this subversive operation, these authors—significantly, many of them related to minority groups or counter-hegemonic political positions—placed emphasis on the *petit récits* or small stories, opposed to the official versions of those events presented as central in traditional human history (Lyotard's *grand récits* or master narratives). The contemporary success of narratives of subordinate histories, told by minor agents and filtered through the lens of personal experience has led scholars to situate historical narratives in the realm of memory. This turn to subjectivity in historical fiction operates in the borders between fact and invention and allows for a study of the individual's relationship with others as well as with their own social and cultural background.

In addition, history's new interest in subjectivity and multiplicity broadened the scope of the discipline beyond the simple record of events. By the early 1990s, in the field of theory the suspicion of traditional historiography also became linked to the turn to ethics in the humanities (among whose major representatives stand Emmanuel Levinas and J. Hillis Miller), which aimed to transcend the non-constructive attitude of late postmodernism while also, in a sense, anticipating the development of trauma and memory studies. From these new theoretical frames, the study of historical fiction shifted its focus from the supposed accuracy of what is remembered in the story to the

ways it is remembered, along with the ethical and political implications of the recording and transmission of memories.

In criticism, the study of trauma[2] opened a debate on the representation of extreme experiences and the therapeutic possibilities of writing. Early theories, heavily influenced by Freud and psychoanalytic criticism, described trauma as originating on an extreme event which cannot be assimilated at the moment it occurs and is experienced belatedly, returning to haunt the victim in a non-chronological succession of nightmares, visions or sudden reminisces triggered by similar circumstances (Caruth 4). These acting-out episodes, experienced at an unintentional level and located beyond sociolinguistic structures, constitute what has been known as traumatic memory. Susan Brison explains trauma's disruptive effect on human consciousness as the "undoing of the self," arguing that for the victim to reconstitute her sense of unity and continuity in life, she needs to retell her story, imposing a narrative structure over the scattered fragments of memory (40).

More recently, previous theories about the nature of psychological trauma have been contested by some scholars who argue that trauma should not be regarded as a universal pathological condition, but as a culturally mediated process operating within a specific context that prefigures a set of values and power relationships (Alexander 2; Balaev 152). Thus, Jeffrey C. Alexander contends that narratives of trauma precede trauma itself, endorsing it with meaning within the legal, moral, and socio-cultural limits of the society from which they occur (1). All things said, an approach to cultural trauma is not in conflict with earlier formulations of psychological trauma but illuminates a new area that earlier trauma theory may have failed to consider. When

[2] The field of Trauma Studies in literary and cultural criticism emerged soon after 1980, when Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was first officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association.

trauma is constructed within the codes of the official discourse, as an event embedded in the dominant history, it follows a process that involves the attribution of the roles of victim and perpetrator, as well as a prescribed protocol aimed at the community's recovery (Smelser 36). In his study of the Government's mass media construction of the 9/11 attacks, Sven Cvek argues that such process involves the appropriation of the victim's individual suffering under a totalizing narrative which is at the service of a monolithic construction of identity (43).

In search for an ethical dialogue between the different parts associated to a traumatic event, critic Richard Gray has proposed a transnational approach to trauma, based on the "deterritorialization" of the event, that is to say, the problematization of those discourses informed by one-sided positions and essentialist misrepresentations (146). When a traumatic event affects a collectivity, the problem of representation strives to restore the sense of unity among the people without ignoring the diversity between the experiences of each individual victim. In the particular case of the Holocaust, when the traumatic experience crosses multiple areas of victimhood—e.g. survivors or perpetrators, Jews or non-Jews, direct witnesses or members of the following generations—and overlaps with other traumatic experiences, such as xenophobia, exile, displacement, or sexual abuse, it is important to find a framework that identifies the intersections between the public and the personal and respects the notion of identity without enclosing it in categorical formulations informed by ideology and power.

It should also be noticed that in recent years the growing relevance of trauma in literary and cultural scholarship has had a direct influence on the production of trauma narratives. Cathy Caruth has argued on trauma's avoidance of the ordinary linguistic structures, in favor of "a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding,"

which she locates next to the literary (5). In this sense, in some recent cases of trauma narratives, the debate on trauma representation returns to the uncertain distinction between fact and fiction and the postmodern revision of the historical truth. This is the case particularly when dealing with the Holocaust, where the void left by the number of victims and the immeasurable dimensions of the collective trauma emphasize the presence of gaps in historical records. Thus, fiction emerges as a mode to represent not the event itself as much as our engagement with the memory of the victims (Horowitz 30).

In line with the previous theoretical presentation, the aim of this dissertation is to analyze Michael Chabon's recent novel *Moonglow* (2016) as exemplary of a late phase of postmodern narrative that explores the possibilities of fiction to bridge the gap between past and present and reach a deeper understanding of the Other. Through a fictional narrative that takes the form of the memoir of his grandfather, Chabon defends fiction as a legitimate response to the consciousness of the failure of History and the inconsistencies of memory. Even though the novel does not deal with the Holocaust as much as with 20th-century American history, a considerable part of my approach to the book focuses on the implications that the massacre of Jews by the Nazis had on collective trauma and identity formation. In line with Hutcheon's theory, Chabon's metafictional treatment of history—noticed in his intertwining of factual and fictional events, the description of the process of documentation he followed, intertextual references to fictional and non-fictional works, and his recurrence to the storytelling mode—supports his defense of fiction as an important key to access the past, one which allows people to experience a closer connection with their ancestors due to the ethical possibilities that imagination provides.

In the first section, I introduce the narrative frame of the novel, discussing the ethical implications of its structure and Chabon's fictionalization of his grandfather's memories in the context of Hayden White's reformulation of the purposes of historiography and the author's reliance on genre fiction both to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and remap his own national and cultural identity in the exercise of creativity. The second section extends on the novel's approach to trauma through the examination of the characters' traumatic experience. Although my focus is on the cultural construction and subsequent nationalization of trauma, I look at other elements from psychological trauma theory, arguing for a common language based on the exercise of creativity as a capacity that goes beyond linguistic representation and implicitly works to enable human connectivity. Adding up to the previous discussion, the last section applies some notions of border theory to examine the cultural, national, and sexual categories that operate in the novel and condition in different ways the characters' trauma. The work concludes with a defense of fiction's capacity to deconstruct myths that inform real experiences of trauma, in this way cutting through the geographical, cultural, and generational lines in search for a common history of imagination as the motor for regeneration.

1. "This is How I heard the Story": Metafiction and fabulation in Michael Chabon's fiction

1.1. Fiction and other truths: On Chabon's literary tricks

Michael Chabon's fiction has been studied from multiple theoretical perspectives that overlap at a crucial moment of the literary history of the United States: the turn-of-the-millennium as a period of revision of cultural categories beyond the postmodernist work of deconstruction, in search for the possibility of a reconciliation which starts at a dialectical revision of the past. Born in 1963 in a secular Jewish household, Chabon began his career in the late 1980s, along with a generation of authors who, trained at university creative-writing programs, wrote from a profound consciousness of the American narrative tradition, as well as the changes that culture and literature had undergone since the aftermaths of the Second World War. In different studies of turn-of-the-millennium American fiction, Chabon has been included, along with others such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan or George Saunders, in a group denominated as the New Sincerity writing. This notion, far from referring to a return to the ideals of veracity and honesty of more realistic periods, suggests a more complex conception of the notion of truth. As Adam Kelly explains, what the writers included in this group attempt to transmit in their fiction is the experience of everyday communication, in contrast to the excessive preoccupation with aesthetic perfection and artistic autonomy of their modernism and postmodernism predecessors (200). However, as Kelly also argues, this reaction implied a form of continuation of the movements above mentioned—especially of the latter:

> Among the things that [postmodern] theory has taught contemporary writers is that sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation. (201)

In this sense, a result of the complex, often inseparable relationship between truth and deceit in a post-capitalist society, in which "impurity and deception are endemic not only to language but to the corporate landscape of the present" (202), the New Sincerity authors have mastered the technique of representing reality as already intertwined with fiction.

According to the same critic, when it comes to deal with traumatic events, the ironic rhetoric of the New Sincerity authors may entail the risk of trivializing a reality which resists and challenges representation. To illustrate this argument, Kelly refers to Chabon's novella *The Final Solution*, whose playful plot of detection simultaneously masks and underlines the tragic reality that it alludes to in its title. However, this work has often been read as a trauma narrative, due to the central presence of the motifs of muteness and orphanhood[3] (Sánchez-Canales par. 9, Craps and Buelens 585), and the absence of a "final solution," that is to say, of a sense of closure that suggests that the wounds remain open, in the same way as silence ultimately imposes itself over any attempt to make sense of the Shoa. In the context of Holocaust fiction, the implications of these decisions point to a reflection on the notion of the void left by all those missing generations: namely, to what extent can we conciliate the memory of the victims with our present-day worldview?

All things said, *The Final Solution* is yet another "ethical experiment" typical of Chabon's fiction (Kelly 203). Indeed, both the author's approach to the past and its

[3] Set in a provincial town in England soon after the Second World War, *The Final Solution* works within the conventions of Sherlock Holmes's "tales of detection"—the protagonist may well have been an octogenarian Holmes—to present the story of an old retired detective who runs into a mute German-Jewish child who has survived the Holocaust leaving his parents behind, accompanied by an African parrot which constantly utters a mysterious combination of numbers in German. The story, which involves the meaning of the numbers as much as the disappearance of the parrot, followed by the death of a neighbor, advances until there is no way to reach any resolution.

implications in the present have frequently been judged as too sentimental or nostalgic. Notably, in his Pulitzer-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000, henceforth *Kavalier and Clay*), Chabon has been accused of trivializing the Holocaust by projecting the protagonists' response to the event through an American fantasy of superheroes (Podhoretz par. 22; Berger 88). Conversely, the author's alleged evasive approach has also been read as a conscious defense of the escapist power of fiction (Belhman 68), which can activate human creativity and turn it into a regenerative capacity. In this sense, his reliance on metafiction and his dealing with reality through the lens of genre fiction can also be taken as a way to revise and reinterpret Jewish and American identity both in the past and in the present.

As a descendant of European Jews, Chabon has often expressed the same feeling of rootlessness experienced by many people of Jewish stock and the impression that they have missed the connection with their most ancient tradition. In many of his novels, fiction plays a speculative role, aiming to imagine both the implications of this loss for the present generation and how their memory can be recovered and integrated in the ongoing history of Judaism. This enterprise explains the existing inseparability between past and fiction in his work, which in line with Hutcheon's theory on the paradoxical dynamics of historiographic metafiction, emphasizes the presence of gaps in history precisely by filling them through a narrative which, though openly fictional, also lies on a historical basis. In a recent speech at the Jewish Book Council,[4] Chabon explained his understanding of the notion of nostalgia as:

> [T]he emotional experience—always momentary, always fragile—of having what you lost or never had, of seeing what you missed seeing, of meeting the people you missed knowing […]. It's the feeling that overcomes you when some minor vanished beauty of the world is momentarily restored. (par. 11)

[4] Adapted and published by *The New Yorker* on 25th March 2017.

In sum, the author's view of the Jews' past is that of an absence permanently present in memory, an erased story which depends for its meaning on the way it is told and retold by those who once heard it.

As I have already argued in previous research, Chabon's perception of his Judaism is inseparable from his national consciousness, since for him both marks of identity stand at the borders, conveying a fundamental sense of hybridity based on a history of exile and intercultural exchange (Marqués 7). For Chabon himself, it is the practice of genre fiction that he finds the vehicle language to move along these borders (157 *Maps and Legends*). While he has associated his interest in fantasy, adventure, and detective plots with his own experience as a modern Jew, longing for a home that feels irretrievable, "a remote birthplace that he sets in—lands that can be found only in imagination" (175 *Maps and Legends*), he has also recognized the strong influence of American popular culture which, he argues, springs from a widespread consciousness of the nation's eclectic character, both in terms of its ethnic diversity and of its convoluted collective imaginary which for years constituted the tradition of the American romance:

> Maybe everybody feels the sense of blinking disorientation […]. Maybe that strangeness is a universal condition among Americans, if not in fact a prerequisite for citizenship. At any rate it is impossible to live intelligently as a member of a minority group in a nation that was founded every bit as firmly on enslavement and butchery as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood and not feel, at least every once in a while, that you can no more take for granted the continued tolerance of your existence here than you ought to take the prosperity or freedom you enjoy. (159 *Maps and Legends*)

In this context of plurality, Chabon has argued that the American narrative is, however "horrific" at times, "unable to rid itself, ultimately, of a final underlying tinge of romance" (ibid.). Concerned with the reconciliation of his own ethnic background in the complex frame of the nation, Chabon has underlined the value of genre fiction as an

agent of connectivity, enabling people to realize that identity is an active, dialectical process that depends on the recognition of the other to dissolve hierarchies and engage in a relationship with a wider perception of the world which also demands a renegotiation of the past.

1.2. Stuck to narrative: *Moonglow* as the meeting point between life and fiction

In *Moonglow* (2016), Chabon conceives this blurring of boundaries as the starting point of the narrative. In a review published by Amazon, the book is praised as "[a] lie that tells the truth, a work of fictional nonfiction, an autobiography wrapped in a novel disguised as a memoir". In the novel, the relationship between fact and fiction is not conflicting but dialectical, since it is through fiction that the narrative's factual basis is completed and acquires a new significance. The story is narrated by a first-person narrator named Michael Chabon (henceforth, to distinguish him from the real author, I refer to him as Mike, as he is often called by his family), who remembers the time when, as a young man and aspiring writer, his grandfather, dying of bone cancer and under the influence of painkillers, told him the stories that constituted his life.

Moonglow includes both the memoir itself and the account of the [fictional] author's writing process, in this way distinguishing two main sections: 1) The narrative of the grandfather's story, from his childhood in the Jewish quarters of Philadelphia to his retirement home in Florida, which focuses on his adult life, particularly on his experiences in the Second World War and on his marriage to a French Jewish refugee with a daughter (the narrator's mother). 2) A series of memories that help Mike towards the composition of the memoir; they are mainly conversations with his grandfather and mother about the past and some of the narrator's own childhood recollections; of these,

the former present an intergenerational dialogue concerning how to remember and come to terms with the past, while the latter convey those issues which have, in one way or another, haunted the history of the family. I will go back to these parts in the next sections of the dissertation to discuss how the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma works in *Moonglow*, but at this point I will focus on the novel's metafictional mechanisms in relation to Chabon's understanding of storytelling as a method to research into the past.

Chabon has often defended the potential of fiction and, by extension, of fantasy to create autonomous open-ended worlds that continue existing as alternative realities in the mind of readers even after they have finished their reading (30 *Maps and Legends*; 86 *Manhood for Amateurs*). In this sense, Chabon's use of history and biography in *Moonglow* is aimed to a revision and reconstruction of the past through a story that constitutes a reality on its own. On the one hand, the interaction between fictional and historical characters in the novel contributes to the leveling of historical accounts theorized by Hutcheon, gradually illuminating new understandings of the past. On the other hand, in line with Hutcheon's theories, I contend that in *Moonglow* the focus on the life of an apparently marginal character destabilizes the hierarchies that privilege official accounts of history. Indeed, Chabon has described his novel as "a secret history" imagining the events concerning the man who captured Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun (in Kachka par. 22).

Even though, as indicated in the cover of its US edition,[5] *Moonglow* is strictly "a novel," Chabon has declared that his original idea is based on certain biographical facts which he includes in the plot—namely his own grandfather's deathbed storytelling, also motivated by medication, and the anecdote concerning the dismissal of one of his uncles

[5] Although not in the British one.

to relocate the former prisoner Alger Hiss, which opens the narrative as the first of the protagonist's memories. In the manner of a foreword, Chabon includes an author's note, ironically warning the reader that:

> In preparing this *memoir*, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with *memory*, *narrative purpose* or the truth *as I prefer to understand it*. Whenever liberties have been taken with names, places, dates and conversations or with the motifs, motivations and interrelations between family members and historical personages, the reader is assured that they have been taken with due abandon. (Preface *Moonglow*, my italics)

Even if it is supposed to act as a warning against the possible ingenuity of some readers, Chabon is still treating the novel as a "memoir," while simultaneously opposing the alleged veracity of such genre to his priorities as a novelist. In including this Author's Note and presenting his work as if it was initially factual, the author's persona enters the frame of the novel, which adds to a few details that correspond with Chabon's actual biography—mainly allusions to the places where he lived as a child, his parents' professions, his divorce, and his present family life in Berkeley.

This strategy offers an example of what Patricia Waugh, in her study of metafiction in early postmodernist fiction, calls a "major framebreak", or a disruption of the ontological scheme of the novel that, contrary to its "minor" counterpart—aimed to ensure the reader's willing suspension of disbelief through the author's reference to the narrative's autonomy and the work's similitude to the real world—problematizes the analogy between the two worlds by dissolving the line between them (30). In so doing, the author points out the idea that what we know as reality is informed by previous fictional constructions, which convey cultural and ideological notions. Chabon had already explored this idea in *Kavalier and Clay* through characters that produce their own antifascist superhero fictions with the purpose of having a cathartic effect in their

readers, but at the same their work is deeply influenced by the textual (cultural) frame of a patriarchal American narrative. This conflict concerning humans' submission or authorship over the reality they experience through textual or artistic channels, is basic in my analysis of *Moonglow* as a search for *a* truth about the past that, in the words of Chabon, "convey [our] understanding of, [our] own bit of information on […] Life" ("Golems" 210).

Since *Moonglow* is still a novel, the real author cannot be mistaken for his fictional namesake.[6] However, it is through his metafictional game that the novel asserts the same idea that Chabon implies in the Author's Note: that memory and "truth" do not have to do with fact as much as with human imagination. In a sense, recalling Chabon's definition of nostalgia as "the consciousness of a loss connection", his introductory statement assumes the impossibility to recover an absolute factual truth about the past. Conversely, it aims to validate his alternative vision as equally distant and thus speculative from any other possible account. This idea finds echo in Derrida's attack of traditional metaphysics which meant his rejection of the belief in any unitary, transcendental signified holding an arbitrary relationship with a signifier. For Derrida, it is basically the signifier, or rather, the sign, which organizes our apprehension of reality through a play of differences. As the influential French thinker contends in one of his most quoted works:

> [T]he appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity. Such would be the originary trace […]. Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do

[6] Chabon has explained also that that fact that his characters have no name is mostly a technical solution to the dilemma of involving his own biography in the novel while respecting the identity of his family: while intending to appear that he is telling the "true" story of his grandfather, he did not want to appropriate or trivialize his relatives' lives by including their real names (in Katchka par. 13).

> its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the pure movement which produces differences. The pure trace is differ*a*nce. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it does not exist, although it is never a being-present outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign. (62)

The notion of the trace, which shapes reality through the play of differences, is central to my analysis of *Moonglow*, where the story acquires meaning in the act of its transmission and constant recreation, proving that where the historian, the writer, or whoever person who aims to approach the past intervenes, they can only find an absence, which they end up supplanting with the *different* cultural information which they possess. In this manner, history, like memory, remains open to multiple revisions and dialogues.

Humans' authority to (re)imagine the past is recalled by the illustration that follows the Author's Note, representing the reproduction of what seems to be a real advert for a model rocket built by a "Chabon Scientific Company," published in the October 1958 issue of *Squire*. As Chabon has told in several interviews (in Walton par. 51; in Woodruff and Brown par. 14), he came across it some years before he started to write the novel and, after doing some research and asking his relatives, he could not find any information on that company, let alone the evidence of a connection with his family. However, in *Moonglow* he includes the name of the company as belonging to a paternal uncle of Mike's who hires his grandfather as a designer. In some anticipatory manner, the picture acts as another major framebreak, introducing what seems to be a historical document which later will become part of the novel's plot. In addition, the

story behind it, concerning Chabon's unsuccessful search for a possible connection with the real (?) scientific company adds up to the implication that fiction can be an instrument of research and speculation about the past and allows for alternative truths departing from mere fact.

Furthermore, a similar idea is emphasized in the recurrence of lists of things and remembrances which, while underlining the dubious and fragile character of memory, prove more accurate at implying our relation with the past. Lists are seen as a method to organize reality under a certain category. In *Moonglow*, however, they mostly emphasize the chaotic and frail nature of memory and the difficulty to render it to a single structure, including details concerning memory rather than fact, and in them elements follow a logic connected to the characters' emotions. The first list that appears is probably the best to illustrate this dynamics, since it refers to Mike's remembrances of his grandmother, a character whose life is surrounded by secrets concerning her past in Europe (26). Rather than by coherent, linear anecdotes, this list is constituted by a series of images and sounds (including the tattoo which recalls her internment in a Nazi concentration camp and a French song about a horse that anticipates the story of her trauma) which conform an incomplete picture of her and introduce the obscure, fragmented character whose life remains a mystery in the chapters to follow. Other lists that readers find throughout the novel include recollections and thoughts concerning the grandfather, such as the objects that he takes with him to his daughter's house in Oakland, where he retires to die (48-51) and the possible explanations that he considers for her wife's disappearance (198-99). In exploring the memories of a different character through a list, the narrator reinforces the idea of fiction as essential in the reconstruction of the past, capable not only of providing a view of its absence, but also an insight into different perspectives.

In a similar way, footnotes—which Chabon had already used extensively in *Kavalier and Clay*—include both historical and fictional information, in this way parodying the alleged omniscience of historians and situating the narrative in the crossroad between fact and invention. The very precise and sometimes trivial content of the footnotes points to multiple layers of added meaning beyond the main plot of the novel, inviting the reader to think of history as something which is never finished, never unquestionable and especially, never monolithic. Since, unlike *Kavalier and Clay*, *Moonglow* has a homodiegetic narrator, many of these footnotes contain Mike's own personal memories, thus insisting on the idea of memory as a legitimate site of history (46, 202, 315, 372, 375...). In line with Chabon's multiple, always provisional view of history, this idea points to the narrator's mission to write his the history of his family to the collective memory of all his dead ancestors.

The recurrence of these textual resources in the novel not only underlines the historian's (or in this case, the memoirist's) inevitable reliance on fiction, but it also points to the impossibility to convey the past in one single (hi)story. In telling his own fictional version of the past, Chabon's narrator problematizes the traditional distinction between fact and fiction and the idea of the past as a single objective referent about which we can obtain a single truth, showing that these texts can be multiple, conflicting and equally valid. In this sense, to acknowledge the presence of gaps that we can never access means to open a space for reconstruction in which official accounts coexist with other versions emerging from different voices. In the next point of this section, I aim to probe deeper in Chabon's reliance on invention in the novel as a way to convey both the conflicts and convergences among people. In this way, it will serve as an introduction to the following chapter, concerning the novel's reflection on trauma and on its psychological and cultural dimensions.

1.3. The Truth as I Prefer to Understand it: Fabulation and Speculation

In an influential book published in 1967, Robert Scholes examined the characteristics of a series of contemporary authors who, in the wake of postmodernist fiction, turned to a form of narrative that used and abused the conventions of traditions previous to the realist novel. Under the name of "fabulators," these writers shared a concern with the aesthetic possibilities of language beyond the mere attempt of mimesis (12), also intending to perfect the experience of storytelling by turning to history, myth, satire, and allegory. This distinction set the basis for the exploration of new novelistic modes in the context of the shift towards a postmodern understanding of reality and humanity. I would like to point out that, although the focus of Scholes's theory of fabulation is on the use that these authors made of certain narrative formulae and especially on their departure from the purpose of representation, in my approach to *Moonglow*, Chabon's fabulist narration is examined also as a mode which incorporates and transcends the aims of realist fiction.

Characterized by his inventive plots and his plastic narrative style, abundant in metaphors, description, wordplay and humor, Chabon has argued that his novelistic approach to life and history responds to the human search for meaning in life beyond what we have always known as real:

> We turn to a novel because fiction persuades us. All art persuades us that there is a pattern to life, that there is meaning to life […]. It might not be true. […] Maybe that's like the greatest illusion of the magic act of literature, but I don't care. That's what is good about it. That's what we turn to it for. (in Woodruff and Brown, par. 34)

This argument leads to two ideas that I intend to develop throughout this part of the dissertation: on the one hand, the readers' search for a kind of *meaningful* truth that they cannot find in their ordinary reality and, on the other hand, the implied agreement

among readers that the text is a successful way of communication. When talking about his own experience listening to his grandfather's deathbed recollections, Chabon has said that it was the realization of the difficulty implied in "try[ing] to see the whole of a person […] and [even more] the whole of a time" what gradually widened the scope of the novel (in Tuttle par. 11). In this sense, fabulation in *Moonglow* emerges as an active, creative response to the evidence of gaps in memory and voids in the records of history.

The phrase "[t]his is how I heard the story," which opens (1) and recurs (43, 357) throughout the novel, implicitly points to the distance existing from the historical referent, emphasizing the inevitable mediation of language and culture in the transmission of the (hi)story. In keeping with Derrida's notion of the "trace" as an absent mark in the linguistic sign that defines it in terms of what it is not, the previous statement assumes the idea of an original true story while alluding to the possibility that the present account may not correspond to it.[7] Also in line with Linda Hutcheon's statement that the past is only accessible through its *traces*, this is, through its archival stories, Mike's account illustrates Chabon's definition of nostalgia as the feeling that emerges from the consciousness of a lost connection at the sight of such remains. In indicating his distance to the event, his account continuously acknowledges this loss. At the same time, Mike's fabulist and lyrical style openly denies his statement of loyalty to his sources. In this way, he problematizes the differences imposed not only between fact and fiction, but also between two different reported versions of the same events. This premise ultimately emphasizes the fact that history is not absolute, let alone univocal, which lies behind Chabon's use of the fabulist mode.

[7] In the same way, later in the novel the grandfather replies with a similar statement to Mike's claim for reassurance: "It's all the way I remember it happening […]. Beyond that I make no guarantees" (357). This answer reinstates the dubious character of memory within the scheme of intergenerational transmission.

As the reader may soon notice, the narrator's reliability is frequently at stake due to his excessive inclusion of detail and to his constant incursions in the mind of his characters, which evidence his autonomy towards the history of his family. While sometimes referring to certain sources that he asked or researched about his grandfather's life (e.g. the anonymous witness of his grandfather's attack to his boss, 2; the director of the television station where his grandmother once worked, 216; the daughter of the psychiatrist which assisted his grandmother, 353), unlike a conventional biographer, Mike explicitly bases his narrative on speculation. Unrecorded conversations about trivial matters are recreated with a novelistic, proverbial resonance. For instance, a dialogue between the grandfather's family when he is not present in the room, serves the author to a point about his rebellious, yet determined, character as a child (9). Similarly, Mike's construction of apparently everyday scenes conveys the particularities of his grandfather's most significant relationships, like his instructive comradeship with his partner Alvin Augenbaugh (120-27), and his overwhelming, always tense, attraction towards his wife (66-69). In addition, although most of the time, he sticks to his grandfather's focalization, but his punctual shift to other points of view, such as his great-uncle's (chapter 28) and his mother's (342-47) reveals his creative freedom in his treatment of history.

Taking into consideration, together with Scholes's, also Hayden White's neo-historiographic notions, I argue that the collection of stories that constitute the life of Mike's grandfather are "emplotted" in a sort of serial picaresque narrative which conceives the grandfather as a mock heroic character in search for adventure, trouble and women waiting to be saved. Mike's fabulist recreation of the alleged past provides a

mere succession of events with a narrative structure[8] and certain generic patterns—adventure, war, horror, romance—which fit into Mike's understanding of American life in the 20thCentury. Chabon's characteristic reliance on popular culture and classical generic forms very often conveys a historical and sociological intent to explore the country's collective imaginary through its intersection with the individual lives of his characters. For instance, in adopting the typical discourse of war narratives (e.g. the extended description of planned strategies, the unpredicted inclusion of gory detail, the surprise in the event of a sudden attack, or the suspense when narrating the long confrontation between enemy parts), the narrator enters the traditional American perspective about the Second World War, evoking the values of sacrifice and patriotism, as well as the antagonistic relationship between the USA and Germany. Similarly, the detailed recreation of the programs in the Baltimore local television that his grandmother hosts—one about French cuisine and the other about horror histories—provides an insight into the dualities that configured gender relations in the 1950s suburban America, especially concerning domesticity and sexuality. In line with White's interest in the mechanisms working behind the emplotment of historical events, Chabon's interest in American culture, expressed through a language that departs from traditional realism, reveals a truth beyond the reach of the mere account of fact concerning the country's political and cultural discourse. In this line, Chabon's fabulation of history involves subversive imitation: in appropriating the rhetoric and figures of popular American culture, he can undermine its message from within, while keeping the necessary critical distance to account for its effects.

The turn to fiction and fantasy in search for a pattern of meaning in life manifests also within the frame of the novel. Even before deciding on the writing of his

[8] I am mostly referring to the episodic arrangement of the narrative and its advance towards an end rather than to the lack of chronology of the events.

grandfather's memoir, Mike finds connections between the grandfather's story and various works of fiction such as J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* (1953), which he was reading during the months previous to his grandfather's death. Mike first mentions the volume when he realizes that he had lost his copy, containing a list of the projects which his grandfather developed at the T-Force unit during the Second World War, of which he can only remember a few (118). Such an apparently trivial occurrence, as well as the formal parallelism existing between Salinger's short story collection and the grandfather's deathbed saga, recalls the Borgesian game that suggests that the search for the truth is always trapped in en-abymic layers of fictions, since it is fiction that ultimately informs our understanding of the world and constitute the material of memory. Later in the novel Mike refers again to Salinger's book, particularly to the story "For Esmé, With Love and Squalor," (315) whose protagonist, a WWII veteran and victim of shell shock, reminds him of his grandfather when he talks about his experience during the conflict. Similarly, his grandfather's writing the word "HUMANISM" under his name and the date of 1938 on the flyleaf of his favorite novel (136), Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1927), illustrates the way in which humans interact with fiction in search for a pattern of meaning in life, or something to believe in or to be "persuaded" by.

As Mike supposes, after the war humanism is no longer a valid option for his grandfather. In this sense, it is not surprising that the source Mike first looks up so as to understand his grandfather's silence after his shocking discovery of the Mittelwerk factory at Peenemünde[9] is Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow* (1973), a landmark novel in American postmodern fiction. Set in the context of the Germans'

[9] The Mittelwerk was a factory destined to the production of V2 ballistic missiles and other kinds of weaponry, using the designs of German rocket engineer Wernher Von Braun and slave labor from prisoners at the nearby Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp.

development of the V-2 rocket missiles and featuring different Nazi characters who evoke the figure of von Braun, Pynchon's novel conveys the postwar crisis of values in the Western world and the shift towards a new scientific paradigm that departed from the Newtonian premise of a creative principle in favor of conceited political tyranny, chaos, and indeterminacy (Collado Rodríguez 121-22). Mike develops this perspective in his account of the grandfather's life, particularly in those episodes concerning his experience at the war, with a focus on the protagonist's scaling nihilism, his moral ambiguity when it comes to confront the enemy and his belief in a chaotic, meaningless world. The narrator projects the Pynchonian view of a universe not ruled anymore by Newtonian chronology in the account of his grandfather's life. Previous to the close explosion of a V-2 rocket during the grandfather's war mission in London, his friend Augenbaugh exposes an understanding of the world according to post-Newtonian physics, where chaos and probability have superseded the old natural laws of classic science (125). Right after the bomb falls, a volunteer woman in manly clothes emerges from an ambulance and challenges the two men's military labor while suggesting a supranational alliance between the British and the Germans for the protection of civilians[10] (127). This encounter, which reinstates the notion of indeterminacy and the destabilizing of opposite pairs (male/female, Allies/Germans, soldier/civilian, or rather, hero/non-hero) is followed by Aughenbaugh's implication that there is probably a hidden order within chaos.[11] This turn of events around the impact of the V-2 rocket

[10] "She told him and Aughenbaugh that the spirit of volunteerism was commendable, but it would be best for them just to get out of the way and let her mates and her do the job that the ARP [Air Raid Precautions, a department for the protection of British civilians from the danger of air raids] and the Jerries [the Germans, as known by the Allies during the conflict] had trained them to do".

[11] After describing the universe as a convoluted allotment of "probabilities and contingencies, wriggling around like cats in a bag" (125), an allusion to the coexistence of two opposite principles implied in the Schrödinger's cat hypothesis, he adds a further point: "the bag is Newtonian physics" (127), in this way implying the idea of a hidden order underlying the apparent chaotic state of contemporary life.

illustrates one of the main premises of Pynchon's novel. As Collado-Rodríguez explains:

> [O]rder and chaos are the same [and] the organizing principle traditionally male that must impose on the female magmatic energy is not but that one, both elements united in a symbolic image obtained from the fusion of the old myth with the new science, the image of gravity's rainbow. (122)

Contrary to his grandfather's belief that fiction cannot provide any valuable knowledge about reality (217), Mike assumes a relation of continuity between reality and fiction through a narrative which deeply problematizes traditional ontological categories. Throughout the next chapter, I will consider the transformative role of fiction in relation to the novel's reflection on trauma, focusing on the capacity of narrative to provide victims with an opportunity to assimilate past events while also reaching for a deeper understanding of the Other, which, as Emanuel Lévinas argued, was the purpose which contemporary philosophy should undertake at a time of collective trauma.

2. Rewording Wounds: The Ethical and Political Dimensions of Trauma Fiction

2.1. A Wounding Tale: On the Problems of Writing about Trauma

In exposing the plotting mechanisms in the writing of history, Chabon undermines the claims of objectivity and reveals the ideological discourse underlying traditional historiography, in defense of fiction as a legitimate means to reorganize the past and uncover alternative versions to the official history. According to these premises, the truth "as Chabon understands it" lies more in the narrator's implications in telling the story than in its supposed correspondence to the factual. It is important to notice that postmodern theories of history do not end in uncommitted relativism, but aim to open a space for further perspectives and renegotiate new means for the transmission of historical accounts. Particularly when dealing with a historical event which has been registered as traumatic, there is an ethical debate regarding the implications of certain representations. Since, as Dori Laub has claimed, trauma is constituted as such only through language (in Gilmore 132), there is a general interest in the victim's articulation of trauma towards the working-through process, as represented in the testimonial mode of narrative.

However, one of the problems with testimonial narratives of trauma, whether these refer to an individual or to a collective event, is that the victim is often supposed to speak in relation to a community, as representative within a certain social, cultural and historical situation (Gilmore 134). In the words of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman,

> [t]o testify is […] not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal in having general (non-personal) validity and consequences. (204, emphasis in the original)

In this sense, there is a demand for the truth, based on an ethical responsibility not only towards other victims, but also to all those who are to become recipients of the narrative. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the event of trauma that the notion of truth must be interrogated both in terms of form and content.

On the one hand, due to the often obscure, evasive nature of the traumatic experience, it defies understanding and distorts the victim's notions of temporality, as well as the distinction between memories and fears. In addition, as Dominick LaCapra has argued, working through does not imply closure, since the victim must learn to live with the memory of the event, in the same way as a community feels the need to memorialize a collective trauma (in Goldberg 3). For this reason, some critics (see Friedlander 1978, Rothberg 2000) have argued that neither narrative coherence nor accuracy to the facts can transmit the truth about trauma. On the other hand, regarding the events that account for a trauma testimony, there is widespread agreement on factuality as an ethical imperative in trauma testimony. As Ellie Wiesel has claimed, in the context of Holocaust trauma "not to tell, or to tell another story, is […] to commit perjury" (in Adamis 32). Yet taking back a postmodern deconstructivist approach, the truth about in a testimonial narrative is always to be negotiated between the individual's agency to speak and the social context in which the trauma emerges.

As Leigh Gilmore has observed, certain protocols, such as realism, coherence and factuality, are imposed by the conventions of the testimonial genre. In this line, Wiesel's demands to speak and to stick to fact relate testimony to the Western tradition of confession, translating into a series of expectations that limit the subject's autonomy over his or her account. In her study of what she calls limit-case autobiographies, Gilmore analyses recent examples of experimental texts which, standing in between fiction and autobiography, interrogate the limits of conventional modes of self-

representation, so as to "explore representations of personhood that are skeptical of dominant constructions of the individual and the nation." In this line, even though *Moonglow* is strictly a novel, its approach to the conventions of life-writing within the frame of the narrative reveals similar concerns with the social conditions that constraints and enable individual accounts of the Holocaust. Throughout the rest of this section, I aim to consider fiction and silence as alternative responses that the novel offers to the demands for a Holocaust narrative, produced in relation to a character's specific situation and opening a new ethical space for trauma transmission.

2.2. Voicing the Ghost: Understanding the Unknown Legacy of the Past

Moonglow can be analyzed as a three-level autobiography, which starts with Mike's memories of his childhood and youth, then continues with the narrative of the grandfather's life, and finally extends to explore the past of the grandmother. Although the novel's focus is initially on the transmission of the grandfather's account, the figure of the grandmother and the mysteries regarding her past pervade the narrative from the very start as the center of its traumatic structure. Indeed, it is mostly through his memories of her, narrated already in the third chapter, that Mike gets involved in his tale as an active character, aiming to cope with the trauma that prevails as some type of family legacy:

> I came to my patrimony of secrets in the late 1960s, in Flushing, Queens. At that time, my parents were still living in the Bronx and generally, if my parents wanted to be free for a few hours, I would be deposited in Riverdale. […] [T]hough later [my grandfather] became a strong presence in my life, in those days my clearest memory of him is that he wasn't seldom around. […] Left to ourselves, my grandmother and I might go to see a movie. […] There were days, however, when being left with my grandmother was not very different from being left alone. (18)

As it turns, Mike's impression that his family keeps a "patrimony of secrets" follows his involvement as an indirect witness and inheritor of his grandmother's trauma. In this sense, Mike's account is a case of transgenerational trauma narrative, as Marianne Hirsch has studied in her theory of *postmemory*. This notion refers to the subject's response to a traumatic event which he or she has not experienced, but with which is somehow related through family or community bounds. As Hirsch argues, "[t]o grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors (Hirsch and Spitzer par. 2)."

In most cases, postmemory is not transmitted through a direct account, but through silences which evidence gaps and discontinuities in history, suggesting an event which challenges comprehension or has been consciously omitted from collective memory (Hirsch 112). Recalling Derrida's notions on the absence/presence duality, inherited trauma unfolds as the experience of being haunted by a ghost which occupies the subject's consciousness. Taking back Mike's list of "five earliest memories of [his] grandmother," mentioned in the previous section, the narrator's earliest perception of his ancestor is organized around gaps and questions concerning her inconstant and unusual character. Throughout the novel's third chapter, his account is driven by a tension between a general tone of uncertainty and the statement of very fond recollections: "[s]he looked at me and reached for the cigarillo she had put aside. She lit it, shook out the match. She shuffled the cards a few times with her long pale fingers. She set the deck on the table between us (21)."

At one particular instance, Mike clearly diverts from his presupposed aims of verisimilitude when, after recalling the grandmother's story about King Solomon and the djinn, he affirms having seen a djinn inside a bottle of perfume on the

grandmother's vanity. Mike's sudden drift to the fabulist mode precedes the most graphic, sensitive reminiscences of her:

> [A] djinn kindled in the bottle. It was the very color of the way my grandmother smelled; the color of the warmth of her lap and enfolding arms; the color of her husky voice resounding in her ribcage when she pulled me close. […] Sometimes her arms would be iron bands encircling my neck, and the scrape of her laughter sounded embittered and hungry, the laughter of a wolf in a cartoon. (25, 26)

As I have argued in the previous section, in abandoning objectivity for fabulation, Mike shifts the focus of his narrative from the alleged factuality of the events that he narrates to how he engaged with them as a child. The resources of synesthesia and metaphor in the previous description emphasize the narrator's emotional involvement in his narrative, in particular how the story of his grandmother, however vague, once affected him and still does – as if preserved, both real and unreal, like a djinn in a bottle. As Hirsch has argued, "[p]ostmemory's connection to the past is […] actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107). In *Moonglow*, Mike's account presents transgenerational trauma as the site of conflict between the subject and the ghost, an experience whose effects depend on how he or she manages to reshape it through language and imagination.

The idea of the ghost in the novel is epitomized in the haunting figure of the Skinless Horse, which returns to the grandmother's mind on two occasions, causing her internment in a mental institution. As the central enigma concerning the grandmother's experience during the Holocaust, the Skinless Horse cannot be physically described or located in the past either by the grandmother or by anyone in her family. Like a Derridean sign, a presence without essence or origin, the horse assumes distinct roles in the respective memories of Mike and his mother, pointing to differences in how they

project and interact with it in their minds. In the case of the mother, horses evoke a radical, forceful rupture with the imaginative appeal of childhood. The presence of Midnight, a blue "flying" specimen among her large old collection of equine figures, translates to Mike into an element of fantasy which her mother repressed as a child:

> [W]hen I heard about Midnight, it made me wonder if she had been sand bagging all this time, pretending to be ignorant of a language in which she was conversant if not fluent. Concealing her origins, safely assimilated into a daylight country of earthbound horses. (178)

As she herself suggests, her fixation for horses as a child may have been a response to a vague feeling that her mother "was afraid of something [she] couldn't see" (180). In this context, Midnight stands as the feeble assertion of the child's imagination to give shape to the ghost that haunts her family. However, unlike Mike, his mother cannot manage to control it, probably after she gets overwhelmed by the vision of a horse skull which her mother had decorated, supposedly for her Halloween costume. After that moment in which she "*sees* [the Skinless Horse]" (181, my emphasis), she decides to pack her horse toys and stops liking horses. Preceding the grandmother's first breakdown in 1952, this episode represents for Mike's mother a macabre materialization of the ghost which completely annuls her capacity to produce an imaginative response.

In her book *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Cathy Caruth relies on Freud's notions of the "life drive," the will to move forward and create, thus related to the working-through process, and its opposite, the "death drive", the impulse to return back to that state previous to birth, evoking the compulsive nature of acting-out. Caruth proposes a depart from traditional trauma theory by arguing that what she calls "the language of the death drive" can actually prompt the "language of the life drive" by presenting the reenactment of the trauma as an opportunity for the subject to reckon it

and create a new story within the structure of compulsion-repetition, in an intermediate mode of narrative that Caruth calls "language of departure towards survival" (in Xinwei 102). This theory may throw some light to explain the grandmother's alternative acts of resistance against trauma. In this sense, decorating a horse skull may represent her own way to mediate with her trauma through a creative performance. In the mother's opinion more than thirty years later, through this act, her mother was trying to conjure the Skinless Horse so as to protect herself and her family from it (*Moonglow* 197).

Significantly, the grandmother's first breakdown on the night of Halloween 1952 originates in the miscarriage of the first child she expects with her husband, involving her failure in her attempt to resume her life after the death of her family by creating a new life in her foster country. As a result, she tries to retrieve the roots of the trauma through a literal representation of the Skinless Horse and her escape to a convent (a reminder for her of the period when she took refuge with Carmel sisters during the war) where she reportedly experiences the reenactment of the trauma, "[s]aying that she had […] been violated by a *horse* with no *skin*" (222). Later in the 1950s, she tells various stories to the different psychiatrists that treat her condition, basing the origins of the Skinless Horse on illustrations from books or memories of her family's tannery – in the words of her husband "she cooked up all kinds of theories" (84). But these supposedly rational attempts to trace back the story of her tormentor alternate with vivid acting-out episodes in which she is being raped by a horse or a man with a horse head. According to Mike's account, "there was a timelessness in these ravings that made it seem as if the childhood violation were still ongoing, happening still" (ibid.). It follows that the traditional working through process does not work for her, since whenever she tries to impose a narrative structure, she does not manage to get to one single truth about

the origin of her trauma and it is only in its reenacting where she is, if unreliable, coherent with the same account.

Nevertheless, I propose that the grandmother's behavior represents a dialectic relationship between narrative and performance, truth and fiction. Significantly, her role as a narrator of stories is inseparable from her role as an actress. As Mike already observes as a child, "when she told a story, the actress in her came out. Her storytelling was a performance undertaken with ardor and panache" (24). As the host of a program for the Baltimore local television called *The Crypt of Nevermore*, her work combines acting as "Nevermore, the Night Witch" and reading horror stories out loud. This duality narrator/actress mediates in her response to the trauma, since both activities involve for her the blurring of boundaries between experience and memory, fiction and reality. Following the same dynamics of metafictional texts, this state of ontological uncertainty sets the ground for her constant negotiation with trauma, making her both patient and agent; this is, both a victim, tormented at her inability to trace the origins of trauma, and a survivor, capable of taking control over the story by creating her own versions of the past.

On the one hand, in line with traditional trauma theory, the grandmother's incapacity to distinguish the real and confront the origin of the trauma apparently perpetuates the acting-out process and with it, her traumatized state. For instance, her first breakdown occurs on the night that she was supposed to host a Halloween special program reading Poe's "Metzengerstein," a story in which the protagonist is also haunted by the figure of a horse which stands both for his archenemy and for his own corrupted self (183). Although barely mentioned in the novel, this intertext illuminates the grandmother's first traumatic response. Similarly to Poe's hero, she experiences a displacement between herself and the character she plays when she calls herself "a

Night Witch" before the prioress. On the other hand, according to Caruth, the "the language of departure towards survival" starts to occur when the traumatized subject engages in exploring the different languages that he or she possesses, coming both from individual and collective memory (thus, identified by Caruth with the static, preexisting character of the death drive) so as to make sense of the unspeakable. This engagement points to the subject's active performance of these texts, allowing for the creation and narration a new history that helps him or her to move towards the future (in Xinwei 102-03).

The grandmother may have failed in engaging with Poe's story due to the context of her miscarriage and the striking similarity of motifs with respect to her own experience. However, the fact that the stories that she performs are based on preexisting texts[12] implies that her struggle with the past continues throughout her life. Similarly, her attitude in real life is sometimes described in comparison to film actresses such as Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, evoking the glamorized appearance of a self-contained but confident European refugee (65, 96), or Simone Simon, for her French accent, petite complexion and sexualized introversion (57). In line with Caruth's previous idea, in engaging with different sources from the past, the grandmother demonstrates her agency over her trauma through performance and reinvention.[13] Right before leaving Greystone Park, she stars as the Queen of the Moon, in a makeshift incomprehensible pantomime written by the mother out of the instructions of dumb playwright Mr. Casamonaca, who

[12] For instance, the stories that she tells Mike as a child, based on the figures on the Tarot, the Bible, Tod Browning's *The Unknown* and possibly John Collier's "Bottle Party" (23-25).

[13] Her husband himself identifies the Skinless Horse as the result of her imagination's active struggle with some kind of remorse, something that according to him, exists as a voice in all people's heads, but is accentuated and sublimated in her case, evidencing her "defiance, [her] refusal to surrender, involuntary but implicit in the act of moving that reproachful whisperer to a shadowy corner of a room" (84).

has probably been inspired by a series of literary sources. Importantly, Mike's narration of her performance is focalized through his mother's words, who tells him about her sublime experience when she saw her mother after many years:

> Looking into the radiant mouth of the stage, my mother felt a strong sense of recognition, as if she had visited this world in a dream. As if, when she was a child, the fog of her mother's dreams had rolled through the house every night and left this sparkling residue on her memory. […] This was not the Moon at all. It was some other world – some other mother – uncharted and hitherto unknown. (345)

The awakening of the mother's repressed imagination through the grandmother's voiceless, obscure performance emphasizes the latter's success in departing from realism and language itself and creating a story so as to convey the unspeakable truth about herself. She does so by embodying the Moon, a central sign in the novel—let us not forget here Derrida's definition of sign as the absence of an absolute signified — which, as I will further develop in the next section, stands for a connective element precisely because it calls for the imagination of individual and collective agents.

2.3. Acts of Resistance: Defining the Self against Social Constructions of Trauma

Probably the grandmother's most significant act of resistance against trauma is her forging of a survivor identity, which implies her invention of a story about her past and her coherent performance within such role. As Mike discovers many years later through the notes of the psychiatrist who treated her after the second breakdown, his grandmother had been abandoned as a child at a Carmel convent and raped by a local SS captain, later giving birth to his mother, to finally manage to leave Europe by impersonating a friend who had died in Auschwitz (355). The survivor's testimony that she gives throughout her adult life faces important ethical problems: not only has she

lied about her family background, her motherhood and her own name, she has also appropriated the life, and subsequently, the trauma of another "real" victim.

However, in line with Gilmore's theory about self-representation in the event of trauma, her departure from realism and historical accuracy inaugurates a more complex frame for the transmission of trauma that underlines the unbridgeable distance between the two participants regarding their cultural background (Europeans vs. Americans) and their experience of the catastrophe (victims/survivors vs. indirect witnesses). On the one hand, her account challenges traditional categorical distinctions of the self in relation to trauma: she is a survivor, but also a victim—of rape, war, starvation, abuse and loss in many senses. On the other hand, it interrogates Western assumptions of the individual as the representative of a nation or a culture. The rape by a Nazi officer implies that in her traumatized condition, political and sexual abuse cannot be separated. In this sense, the fact that she must lie to be publicly taken into consideration as a Holocaust victim, and not as the sexually-abused victim of a Nazi, problematizes preexisting distinctions between cultural and individual trauma and underlines the overlapping of different traditional and subordinate identities such as a Jew, a woman, or the mother of a bastard child. It follows that, in lying, in inventing, she is also telling the truth.

Similarly, the grandmother's appropriation of her friend's story can be read as a way of expanding the limits of the individual to the other, which points to the ethical possibilities of traumatic narratives. According to the psychiatrist's notes, it was this friend, an orphaned girl hidden from the Nazis, who produced vivid descriptions of the process of horse slaughter and skinning at her family's tannery. But previous to this friendship which "saved [her] life at a time of suicidal ideation" (355), the grandmother had already experienced visual hallucinations involving a skinless horse while she was raped. In this sense, the significance of the Skinless Horse extends to cover two

traumatic experiences: the first one would correspond to the grandmother's life before the war; and the second one would have been transmitted through her friend – possibly related to the loss of the girl's family. Eventually, especially after the latter's death, this second-degree experience may have acquired a larger significance for the grandmother, related to her condition as a witness of the massacre. The permeable character of traumatic experience informs Jana Evans Braziel's notion of "alterbiography," as a textual mode that challenges the hierarchical logic of power relationships by redefining the self in terms of his or her relations with the other, thus transcending traditional ties to the family, community or nation (13-14).

The stark manner in which the revelation of the grandmother's past is introduced, directly transcribed by Mike from the scarce notes which the psychiatrist kept, suggests not only the presence of irretrievable gaps in history, but also the relative importance of fact in the constitution of the truth. In contrast to the vivid and adorned prose that he has employed in recounting his grandfather's life, Mike's presentation of fact as a schematic succession of events, dates, and characters without any given meaning, underlines the lack of human involvement in the story. Not only is the chronicle full of gaps, but also fails to provide any information about the grandmother's motifs or thoughts; in other words, she has been unvoiced, denied the capacity of speaking for herself.

Even if the true story of his ancestors initially shocks Mike, leading him to abandon for a while his "novelistic approach" to his family history and turn to fact ("I needed to work out, if I could, the relationship between the things I had heard and learned about my family and its history while growing up, and the things I now knew to be true," 356), the final implication is that it does not make a difference for his genealogy, in the same way as he understands his grandfather's decision not to hear the

true story at his meeting with the psychiatrist, accepting that his wife may probably have lied to him about who she really was (351-352). In sum, the account about the grandmother follows Hutcheon's premise that stories are ultimately more valuable than facts, since the former reveal a secret history about agency in their own construction against social expectations and dominant discourses of victimhood. In the context of trauma, according to Caruth's idea, in constructing her own version of the past out of the traces from her traumatic history and her own invention, the grandmother elaborates a discourse of departure "towards survival" that helps her not only to physically escape death and poverty, but also to heal her trauma by integrating the facts about her past (the death drive understood as the wound, everything which cannot be undone) with a fiction about her future self (the life drive as a creative impulse). In addition, the inseparability between fact and imagination in her account expresses a limitless, always provisional and self-regenerative conception of the self. From this perspective, in reconstructing her own self through the story of a deceased friend implies an ethical move toward the reconciliation between the past and the present, the creation of a new self out the reconstruction of what she has lost.

Shockingly, the psychiatrist's supposedly factual account, according to which she grew up as an orphan at a convent, does not coincide with Mike's mother's memory of her old family pictures showing her grandparents. The disappearance of these pictures, to her own surprise, points to the possibility that she has been relying on her own fabricated memory, based on her mother's fiction about the past. Having been asked by her son to describe the photographs, the mother produces a detail account not only about the images, but also about her impressions while looking at them as a child. The lack of correspondence between the two stories destabilizes the hierarchy between what is supposed to be fact and what turns out to be as a fiction, insisting on the role of

human imagination in coming to terms with loss. On the other hand, the mother confesses to a feeling of guilt towards her aversion and fear to the people in the photographs:

> Neither of them looked very nice or very warm. They scared me. But I was ashamed to feel that […].It was like if I didn't love them, or even feel like I wished I had known them […] then somehow that had something to do with why they died. (324)

This guilt is the result of a conflict between the subjectivity of the contemporary individual and the institutionalized forms of memorializing. Mike connects this tension to Walter Benjamin's distinction between the assumed linearity of historical time and the disruptive, redemptive force of what he calls Messianic time. For Benjamin, by presenting history as a cumulative succession of events, historical time privileges the universalizing of dominant accounts of history, because it obscures the inescapable mediation of our contemporary perspective in evaluating the weight of such events:

> History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty rime, but time filled by, the presence of the now […] Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago […] however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. (261)

The mother's sense of responsibility towards her ancestors originates from her assumption of an unbreakable bond of continuity between the past and the present. As critics (Alexander, Smelser) have argued, official forms of public remembrance understood within a mediated process of collective trauma often aim to reinforce essentialist definitions of cultural identity that interfere with individuals' complex sense of self.

The narrator further problematizes the totalizing notion of a collective traumatic history when he interrogates social assumptions concerning the ethical imperative to

give testimony in his defense of his grandfather's silence towards his experience at the sight of the Nazi slave labor camp at Nordhausen:

> I believed […] that silence was darkness, and that naming shone a light. I believed it was good […] to "get it all out." Then I heard the bitterness of defeat in my grandfather's voice when he said he had gone to Nordhausen. […] When it came to things that needed to be said, speech was always preferable to silence, but it was no use at all in the presence of the unspeakable. (243)

As Sara Horowitz argues in her book *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction,* self-conscious references to muteness in Holocaust fiction make visible not only the inevitable failure of realism and of language itself in conveying the extremity of the event, but also the rupture – or the unspeakable void – that it produces both in history and in memory: "[t]o write the Holocaust into the continuum of world history, Jewish history, and literary history disrupts the continuum; it effaces, shatters, or alters our interpretation of what comes before and after" (38). In this sense, Mike sees the grandfather's silence as the site for articulating the post-Holocaust rupture within the family sphere:

> I thought about how, when I was a kid, as my big-talking […] father was in and out […] the constancy of my grandfather's silence had been just that: a constant. It was, like him, something I could always rely on. And really, where was the proof that two decades of national yammering, of getting it all out, had brought about an increase of collective national happiness? (243)

Mike's emphasis on the constancy of the grandfather's silence brings back to mind Horowitz's argument. Even if it surges as an effect of trauma, muteness comes as a deliberate decision for the grandfather, a turn from the continuum of personal and collective memory to an underlying narrative line constituted by omissions. In addition, Horowitz has argued on the interest of postcolonial studies in Holocaust fiction as a result of "the desire to confront—and sometimes to occlude—the implications of the

Holocaust for Western civilization, for Jewish culture, and for Western notions about Jewish culture" (44). In this sense, the grandfather's silence may represent an act of resistance against the simplification and appropriation of an individual traumatic experience into dominant narratives aimed to legitimize certain powers within a nation or a cultural community. For instance, his deliberate muteness aligns with his condition as a victim and a subordinate, rather than with his public status as a war hero. Thus, it reacts against the nationalistic view of the Holocaust as yet another proof of America's exceptionalism as the saviors of the weak European Jews—a message which the novel further problematizes through the narrative they construct to justify the American alliance with an Nazi scientist and the allusions to the country's underlying anti-Semitism.

Understood as a cultural trauma, the Holocaust stands for an unspeakable and, for the most part, still unassimilated event that shattered the bonds conforming the Jewish community in postwar and contemporary America. Throughout his work, Chabon's approach to the *Shoa*, always indirect, through silence, memory and speculation, articulates the ever-present consciousness of this loss, while also engaging with it towards a point of transition.[14] In so doing, it illustrates Derrida's notion of "hauntology" (a playful portmanteau of the word "ontology"), referring to a situation of disjointed temporality in which the present moment is deferred or replaced by an absent

[14]In *Kavalier and Clay*, a character's exile from his native Prague in the years previous to the genocide serves as an excuse for the narrative's drifting towards an American setting in which the Holocaust projects itself as the remembrance of that lost connection with the native culture. This sense of uprooting is responded by the protagonists through their collaboration in a comic book series which helps them renegotiate both their individual and cultural identity against essentialist constructions of Jewish tradition and American citizenship. Similarly, in *The Yiddish Policemen Union*, Chabon reanimates the European *shtetl* tradition through an alternative history concerning the settling of a Yiddish-speaking colony in Alaska. For that purpose, he creates a hybrid version of Yiddish and American slang, an imaginary language whose difference with respect to the original—recalling Derrida's idea of the difference that constitutes the trace in the sign—both reveals and covers the loss of the original Jewish culture, not only invoking the ghost but also giving it the possibility of a new life.

one whose origin cannot be clearly traced or envisioned (Derrida xviii-xix). Critics such as Gallix (par. 2) have argued that hauntology expresses a feeling of nostalgia for a lost future, presented as the ghost of a history which was truncated. Following Derrida's notion, in *Moonglow* the past returns and is projected towards the future, through a family structure of trauma transmission which parallels the collective memory of Jewish Americans: starting with Mike, as a third generation Jewish American in search for a connection with his native tradition, it continues with the grandfather, as representative of earlier immigrant families in the United States, and finishes in the grandmother, as one of the last survivors of the old European community.

Being the main focus of the narrative, the grandfather becomes the embodiment of this rupture, standing in between two historical moments in universal and Jewish history; his reluctance to remember and narrate what he saw at Nordhausen underlines a consciousness of this radical shift, an irretrievable loss. Having grown up with European immigrants and witnessed the catastrophe that would destroy his people, his deathbed narrative is spontaneous but becomes a vanishing picture that evokes that lost connection with the past. In addition, the grandmother's contradictory and inventive responses to trauma emphasize the certainty of this loss as well as the impossibility to get a single objective truth about the past, while presenting this epistemological rupture as an act of resistance against oblivion and possible misrepresentations. Finally, Mike's intervention in the transmission of his family's history works as a connective force between these conflicting voices; his empathetic approach to both positions, together with his own speculative reinvention of history, in line with personal experiences and his mother's remembrances, seek for the continuity of the Jewish tradition—largely based on the practice of reading and storytelling—in a dialogue between different cultural and historical perspectives. In so doing, he defies self-contained ideas of culture

and nationality through the recognition of the other in the community. In the next section, I will explore the novel's discourse on borders in a geopolitical and socio-cultural context defined by the restrictive values enforced in an allegedly democratic postwar America. In this way, I will conclude my dissertation by pointing to Chabon's defense of fiction as an ethical move towards the subversion of the old myths which inform power structures, and the restoration of the community through a dynamic and all-encompassing form of identity.

3. Rewording Borders: On the Connective Possibilities of Fiction

3.1. Rethinking the Frontier: Conflicts and Encounters across the Lunar Border

As I expect to have shown in the previous section, creativity provides the subject with an opportunity to articulate its experience beyond the social structures within which trauma is inscribed. In so doing, the individual defines the scope of her or his condition against restrictive views of the self and the community. This idea is especially relevant when considering cultural trauma as the official memorialization of collective and historical tragedies. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, official representations of some event have often served the interests of a dominant power, usually consolidating the legitimacy of the nation by dictating a process of recovery that implies standing against a common enemy (Alexander 622; Cvek 30, 43). Such argument relies on Benedict Anderson's definition of nations as "imagined communities," that is to say, as social constructions that presuppose a sense of communality between various distant people (6). For Anderson, a nation is conceived, through official narratives and ritualized practices, as limited in the sense that it is confined to a certain territorial unit and measures its power against other nations (7); and, most importantly, as a community, since it transcends inner economic hierarchies so as to perpetuate itself as a "fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7).

Covering an important part of the so-called American Century, *Moonglow* reflects about the country's promotion of its own national myths during the Second World War and the Cold War. In his celebrated 1960 speech, President Kennedy called for the pursuit of a New Frontier, based on the country's self-improvement and the

development of space science (par. 33). In the context of America's competition against Russia for global supremacy, the President's call perpetuated Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the American Frontier, which justified the progressive westward movement by the first European settlers and celebrated the spirit of conquest as essential for the foundation of America's individualist and democratic character.[15] However, ignoring the settler's involvement in the annihilation of the natives, the subordinate role allotted to women, and the many inner conflicts and divisions previous to the establishment of a central government, Turner's thesis actually endorsed the discourse of male chauvinism, imperialism, and American exceptionalism, presupposing not only the nation's supremacy over others, but also an inner structure privileging the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male as the representative American hero.

In her review of *Moonglow* for the *New York Times,* Michiko Kakutani has argued that Mike's grandfather stands out as a personification of the American character: "proud, romantic, naïve, impulsive. He's a roughneck and a dreamer, a pool hustler and a soldier, a jailbird and an engineer enraptured by the space race and the moon shot" (par. 5). This observation accurately describes the synecdochical relationship between the protagonist and his country. However, it is important to note that such correspondence has two different implications throughout the novel: one is informed by the dominant nationalist ideology while the other revaluates the idea of the nation. On the one hand, in the cultural imaginary of a triumphalist postwar America,

[15]"The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics […] that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier […] Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. [...] Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." (Turner, par. 43.)

the grandfather stands as a New Frontier Hero, a brave soldier in the war that would turn the country into the world's leading power and an engineer involved in the space race, a key project aimed at affirming the country's geopolitical position in the Cold War. On the other hand, in embodying America's traditionally adventurous and imaginative spirit, the protagonist contests the one-sided discourse of the Frontier myth, which sustains the conception of the nation as a unitary formation at the expense of obscuring internal conflicts and power hierarchies. First, his itinerant, troubled life is conveyed in a dialogic narrative in which his individualism is continuously challenged by other characters' views; and second, his portrayal subverts the heroic masculine prototype that he initially embraces, since he simultaneously witnesses, suffers and sometimes participates in the country's practice of inequality and power abuse.

As argued in the first section of this work, Chabon relies on genre fiction to examine the polyphonic, romantic and at times self-mythologizing character of American history. In *Moonglow*, he employs the adventure genre as a vehicle to contest the dominant narrative of national heroism by observing America from multiple minority perspectives. From his early life, the grandfather represents an unconventional type of hero: as a child, he is an obedient Yiddish learner (7) and synagogue attendant (17), but also a trouble-seeker, a misfit, a border-crosser: "[h]is absences and injuries caused consternation to his parents, who made efforts to curtail them. Bounds were set, borders established; my father subverted them" (9). Later, he grows to become a pool hustler, an unemployed engineer and finally a disenchanted, rebellious, yet strangely fitful soldier:

> His hustler's instinct was to underplay and advertise nothing, but among the raw recruits of Camp Clairborne and the bohunks and golems[16] of Camp Ellis he

[16] Here Chabon's narrator deliberately employs North American slang with racist connotations. "Bohunk" is an informal, often offensive, term to refer to a working-class

> could not conceal the caliber of his game as a soldier and an engineer. He was strong and durable. His frugality with words got interpreted variously but to his advantage as manliness, self-possession, imperviousness. (28)

Throughout his life, the grandfather refuses to conform to national ideals or moral standards: his first operation at Fort Belvoir turns to be a secret plan to "conquer Washington" with his roommate Orland Buck—another misfit from a genteel family of military engineers. As a result, they are recruited by the Office of Strategic Services, set to develop secret projects to undermine the enemy through deceitful strategies of espionage; in combat he survives bombings and enemy raids out of pure chance rather than courage (126-27, 133), he is led to kill civilians (134-35) and profane corpses (235-36) without deliberation[17]; and most importantly, he develops a personal, hubristic hatred towards von Braun which transcends the frame of national affiliations.

But most importantly, throughout his ramblings the grandfather becomes inevitably involved with others; his mobility shapes his life as an episodic narrative that allows for the single-protagonist plot to be occupied by multiple voices. Relying on the adventure mode, Mike reimagines his grandfather's America as a borderland territory, thus contesting the individualistic vision of the Frontier myth in favor of a decentered identity that propitiates an ethical dialogue between individuals at different points of the world and of history. Already at the beginning of the story, Mike's recreation of the Philadelphia of his grandfather's childhood evokes the dynamics of the Frontier, as

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immigrant from central or South Eastern Europe, while "golem" means just stupid and clumsy person, but originates from the Jewish myth of the golem, as a clay human-shaped figure—quite literally a "blockhead." Mike's choice of these words clearly problematizes his position as a neutral and self-effacing narrator. However, in so doing he is also pointing to an existing racial conflict in American society, particularly concerning what a national war hero should be like. In opting for a connotative everyday language, he reveals a situation of inequality that official discourse, supposedly impartial, always obscured and underwrote through the promotion of a specific heroic ideal.

[17] Mike's detailed, sometimes gore descriptions of such actions add a naturalistic tone that opposes the blind triumphalism of traditional war propagandistic narratives.

mostly a Jewish settlement placed at a blurred divide between multiple communities. As a result, the young boy's advance through his hometown is guided by his different encounters with others:

> South Philadelphia was broadcast with Moonblatts and Newmans, those cousins who one day would people the weddings and funerals of my mother's and my childhoods. Their homes served as my grandfather's way stations. In threading his routes from one to the next, past blocks controlled by Irish and Italians, my grandfather laid the foundation of his wartime work. He cultivated secret contacts among the Italian bakers and grocers, running errands or working a broom in exchange for payment in pennies, lemon ice, or a twist of warm bread. […] Even Christian Street bravos squealed like babies if you hooked your thumbs in their eye sockets. Every so often, on the slope of a train embankment, behind the breast-shaped silos of the fertilizer plant, a battle would be pitched […] My grandfather lost a tooth, broke an arm, took uncountable stitches. On his left buttock he bore a pouty scar, the work of a beer bottle he sat on during a fight in a vacant lot behind the McCahan sugar refinery. Sixty years later the scar was visible whenever he used the bedpan, a silvery pucker, the kiss of violence. (8-9)

As a sort of parody of the Frontier myth, the hero's adventure, triggered by his youthful wish to explore and his readiness to find as many allies as enemies destabilizes the hierarchical order involved in the national myth, since the outcome of his progress is not conquest but mostly conflict, whether it results in trouble or in alliances. If the Frontier has been defined in relation to the settler—the experienced white traveler—as the place where civilization is to encounter savagery, the grandfather's South Philly, devoid of these binary dynamics, is merely a borderland territory, a meeting point between multiple peoples, where the hero finds both the safety, however provisional, of a home at his relatives' house, and the warlike spirit of comradeship and violence while exploring the great outside.

A similar view of the Frontier can be applied to the Moon as a symbolic and spatial axis of action. Conceived as a utopian land by the protagonist and as a symbolic

political summit for postwar America, the Moon is presented as an imaginary space projecting the characters' subjectivity concerning their relationship with their physical and social environment. This relationship reflects a tension between conflict and reunion, exclusion and inclusion, which reproduces the movement towards openness and enclosing, of inclusion and segregation informing the problematic nature of American identity. In their study of spatial and psychological borders in contemporary American literature and culture, Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito bring up the notion of "chiastic spaces" to refer to those locations which reinforce the geographical or political borders of the nation by determining who can stay and who must leave. Citing the custom house and the detention center as two paradigmatic spaces controlling legal citizenship in the United States, the authors argue that these locations describe symmetrical relationships at both sides, pointing to the arbitrary logic that distinguishes between the citizen and the non-citizen, the hero and the non-hero, the invader and the invaded. In this sense, while drawing the limits of the nation, these spaces also emphasize the permeability of such limits and their capacity to connect individuals, this way opposing fixed, essentializing definitions of community (13-28). In line with the New Frontier narrative, the Moon, in the context of postwar America, stands as a border separating what is counted as American from what is not, resulting in the estrangement and abuse of the Other.

Chabon had explored the influence of this logic in *Kavalier and Clay*, where the immigrant protagonist's assimilation of the categorical nation-bound constructions of comic book superheroes leads him to take revenge for the loss of his family during the Holocaust by killing a German civilian (Colbran 123-25). In *Moonglow*, the Moon is at the center of the relationship between the grandfather and Wernher Von Braun, both sharing the same ambition of reaching the Earth's satellite. During the war, Von

Braun's V2 rocket—an army missile developed by the Germans, later tracked by the Allies—becomes the focus of this conflict. Although their aspirations stand beyond the agenda of their respective countries, during the war they respond to their geopolitical alliances. Having worked for the Nazis in the development of the V2 project while knowing about the massacre of Jews at the Mittelwerk factory, Von Braun is finally captured, and the grandfather opts for doing his "duty" and save the rocket plans for the sake of his country (279), rather than getting his personal revenge on the scientist after learning about his involvement in Nazi policies. The chiastic work of the Moon as a symbolic national border resembles the dynamics described by Manzanas and Benito, "approximat[ing] the alien at the same time that it defamiliarizes the immediate" (26): after the war, it is von Braun, once a Nazi enemy, who in the end becomes a national hero through his contribution to the space mission, while the protagonist fails to fulfill his aspirations and experiences a "genteel anti-Semitism" (85) that prevents him from joining the aerospace industry. This fact reveals not only the easy adaptability of national myths, according to the demands of a dominant power (Chabon's reference to a real[18]*New Yorker* piece revering von Braun and redeeming him of responsibilities, is an example of America's emplotment of the war, 214-15), but also the other dimensions which define identity and community within—and beyond—the limits of the nation.

Understood as a dividing line, the Moon parallels the antagonistic relations between imagined communities. In his personal mission to kill von Braun as a form of retaliation for the latter's participation in the massive killing of Jewish prisoners, the grandfather abuses the authority granted by a special pass signed by President Eisenhower to harass civilians (258, 262-69). In this sense, even though his hostility towards von Braun transcends the limits of the nation, he assumes a conception of

[18] Lang 1951. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1951/04/21/a-romantic-urge)

heroism that equals personal revenge to social justice. The nation-bound discourse of revenge and segregation is perpetuated in the postwar rivalries between ordinary people, as noticed in the unjustified harassment that German Dr. Alfred Storch suffers from local Hub Gorman (291) and sometimes by the guards (290) during the grandfather's stay at Wallkill prison.

At the same time, ever since his childhood, the grandfather's complexity as a hero strives for his alliances with multiple people and, hence, his understanding of the arbitrary nature of the war. As Mike explains, his skepticism towards most Jewish festivities and the emphasis of his religion on God's good will accounts for the fact that he "had lost the taste or the capacity to celebrate the enemy's defeat" (92). His decision not to kill von Braun when he has the opportunity,[19] like his decision to act as a hero again (300) and protect Dr. Storch against Gorman (resulting in the latter's semi-accidental death at the explosion that the grandfather originates), suggests a view of the Moon as a connective border, a point of juncture rather than of suture, since it originates a hybrid border identity which enables an ethical look towards the Other (Cooper and Rumford 265).

The significance of the Moon in the novel relies on its universality, as a space that is accessible to everybody through imagination. It is typical of Chabon's work to explore the ethical possibilities of imagination through situations in which the subjects' investment in memory, storytelling, and creativity moves them to pursue the Levinasian imperative of looking at the Other beyond categorical views of identity and community. Notably, the grandfather's strong bond with Alvin Augenbaugh grows around Glen Miller's song "Moonglow," after which the novel is entitled (120), and the impact of a

[19]I argue that the emphasis on doing his "duty" implies not only his responsibility towards the nation, but also towards the Other.

V2 rocket a few blocks next to their house, an episode that, as I have already explained, leads him to reshape his understanding of the world (125). Also during the war, his unexpected alliance with German priest and amateur astronomer Johannes Nickel is consolidated after the latter takes him to a model of the V2 rocket abandoned in a field (165). At its sight, the protagonist is able to see from the eyes of the old humanist priest and condemn the military enterprise for which the rocket was conceived while recognizing in von Braun's design the pursuit of a common benefit:

> Between him and Father Johannes Nickel, as between two stars, lay unbridgeable gulfs of space-time. And yet across the sweep of that desolation each had swum, for a moment, into the other's lens. Poor von Braun! He needed to know – my grandfather felt that he must find him and tell him – that such a thing was possible. Scattered in the void were minds capable of understanding, of reaching one another. […] He would transmit von Braun the only message lonely slaves of gravity might send: *We see you – we are here*. (167, italics in the original)

This call to gather and react against the corruptive power of society, evoked by the (Pynchonian) allusion to the inescapable force of gravity, is a response against those narratives supportive of national or cultural supremacy. In contrast, the grandfather's vision of the rocket implies a reformulation of the moon as a transnational site of connectivity allowing for multiple encounters that lead the individual towards an all-inclusive view of humanity.

Mike's description of Father Nickel's fabrication of a model rocket at his garage, as a means to retrieve his youthful dream and to escape—through his imagination—the oppressive Nazi regime which had banned amateur rocketry, mirrors, in an anticipatory manner, the grandfather's mission of protecting his family by constructing a lunar base model: "Like a group of exiles re-creating a lost homeland in a few city blocks, the old priest had been able to recreate his lost hope in miniature, to build the scale model of his dream" (159). Through their humanist approach to rocketry, these characters, initially

opposed in national affiliations are equated in their condition of exiles. In Chabon's work, the issue of exile implies detachment from the motherland, but also the ability to respond to a fixed, self-contained idea of identity. Recalling Chabon's self-proclaimed location as both a Jewish American subject and a writer of genre fiction in "Imaginary Homelands" (157), the notion of exile is linked to a creative impulse which emerges from the individual's desire to create his own place beyond national boundaries and historical rivalries. In evoking the exiled individual's way home, the moon stands for a common homeland, a *deterritorialized*, thus global site of creativity. Throughout the rest of this work, I aim to further examine Chabon's ambiguous representation of the Moon as a divisive and a connective agent, centering on the role of imagination as essential in the transition towards forgiveness. The next section focuses on the novel's deconstruction of the dominant discourse of gender by problematizing the grandfather's binary view of femininity through the development of his relationships with women. The centrality of gender in this final section is due to the fact that, in dealing directly with the grandparents' love story, it introduces my last observation on the equalizing effects of creativity as an ethical element enabling for forgiveness and reconciliation.

3.2. Yet Another Magical Language: Creative Acts of Female Resistance

The dominant discourse of the nation turns out to be equally divisive in its conception of gender relationships. As a young romantic child, the protagonist imagines the female body as separated by "a further border where silk stocking meets white thigh" (11). This impulse to *otherize* women via sexual objectification corresponds to the discourse of femininity that he acquires during his youth through popular fiction. This is the case of a story that he reads about an earthman arriving in the dark side of the Moon and falling in love with a "pale and willing lunar princess" who "require[s] frequent salvation" from him (12). The reference to this science-fiction pulp introduces the grandfather's fascination for the Moon as a distant world imbued by a female energy: "My grandfather regarded the Moon. He thought about the noble girl in the story with her '*graceful, undulating body*' and felt the swell of an inner tide reaching toward her […]. He would be there for her. He was coming to her rescue" (12). In the mind of the grandfather, the symbolic conquest of the Moon requires the rescue of the native woman, perceived as a frail, helpless prisoner in her own planet. Not far from the Frontier thesis, this image recalls the colonial representation of the newfound land as a female body (Dean 31), exuberant, baffling, and sometimes hostile, but thought to be possessed and tamed by the white male settler. This view aligns with the conception of the rocket as a male vehicle of war, a hostile invader, whose phallic resemblance horrifies the grandfather's last partner, Sally Sichel, when she first catches sight of his model collection (410). In contrast, the novel's discourse of the Moon as a misleading utopia, always unreachable yet strongly evocative for the protagonist, parallels the magnetic, if impenetrable character of all the women that he meets, desires, and loves during his life.

Following the previous passage, the protagonist's early encounter with a bearded girl at the house of his violent neighbor Creasey parodies the fantasy of the American popular hero to which the young protagonist aspires while unveiling the socioeconomic dimensions of patriarchy. First marginalized for her abundance of facial hair ("[b]ody is being goofing with me all my life," 15) and forced to join a circus which eventually abandons her after deeming her useless, the bearded girl ends up depending for her survival on a man who abuses her while resigning to succumb to her fatal illness. At her refusal to be "rescued" by Mike's grandfather, the still young boy—who understands gender relationships from the binary lenses of popular fiction—feels not only powerless, but also somehow challenged: "[m]y grandfather contemplated the ashes of his plan. He felt she was telling him she was going to die, and that she planned on doing it here, in this room that jumped in the candlelight" (ibid.). Expressed in a mixture of scorn and self-pity ("[a]ren't you funny […] trying to rescue me […]. Your pal Creasey already rescued me […]. He could have left me lying there where he found me, half dead with my face in a pile of cinders." 14-15), the bearded girl's negative can be read as an act of resistance against patriarchal constructions of femininity, suggesting that women do not need to be saved but simply recognized as sexually and economically independent from males.

From the perspective of feminist theory, the bearded girl's victimization follows her visible transgression of the patriarchal system, as the epitome of gender duality. Her masculine appearance is perceived as monstrous and relegated to the freakdom of society and to the most marginal sector of popular culture. Eventually, she is also rejected at the circus, since, as she herself suggests, she does not fit in any mythical category, not even in that of the hermaphrodite ("a hermaphrodite […] has a little *poetry*. There is just no poetry in a bearded girl." 15; my italics). As argued by Sandra

M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the mythical image of the monster has been historically constructed as a misogynist fantasy: "Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, [monstrous] women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts" (606). As these authors argue, the monster, defined in opposition to the submissive figure of the angel of the house, unveils men's fear of female creativity by informing any "deviant" attitude as unnatural and impure. It follows that the bearded girl's monstrosity, defined by a masculine feature, manifests her capacity to identify the discourse of patriarchy and destabilize the structure of male privilege. Similarly, her ambiguous sexual attitude also transgresses female stereotypes. Both her feeble condition, as a result of her illness, and her readiness to expose her nakedness to the young visitor are completely devoid of mythical associations, but they are conveyed in a naturalistic style that reflects the circumstances of her everyday life. To the eyes of the grandfather, she combines traits of the damsel in distress and the temptress, but her realist characterization escapes the protagonist's focalization to express her humanity beyond any pre-established category.

Among other novels by Chabon,[20] *Moonglow* is perhaps the one which best develops women's subjectivity as independent from male perspectives. Like the bearded girl, the grandmother is initially seen by the protagonist as a woman in need to be rescued. Her appeal, just after they meet, is connected to her victimhood and to the enigma of her personal tragedy:

[20] Although in *Kavalier and Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen Union* Chabon presented strong, self-reliant female characters in feminist philanthropic artist Rosa Luxemburg Saks and hard-boiled police officer Bina Gelbfish, they are most of the time characterized in relation to the influence that they exert on the male protagonist, to a point that their characterization appears to be subordinated to a male focalizer.

> From the first that was a part of his attraction to her: not her brokenness but her potential for being mended and, even more, the challenge that mending her would pose. He thought that if he took on the job of loving this broken woman, some measure of sense or purpose might be returned to his life. He thought that in mending her, he might also be mended. […] He had been assured many times by experts and authorities that his wartime actions had served a larger purpose and, furthermore, that some new purpose would be found for him in the after-war. Until the night he met my grandmother, he had put no credit in such assurances. (93)

Even though his war experience has made him critical about the discourse of heroism, he adheres to a heroic role in the task of rescuing the "broken woman" so as to recover a sense of purpose which helps him cope with his own traumatic condition. From this perspective, the victimized woman is essentially selfless and subordinated to the man's development as a hero. As happened in his previous experience, the protagonist's assumption of the woman's need to be saved prevents him from seeing beyond her vulnerable appearance. But in their second encounter, he understands the impossibility to reduce her personality to a set of fixed preconceived notions:

> My grandfather was troubled and fascinated by this alteration from the girl of ten days before. Had the flirtatious gamine in the Ingrid Bergman sunglasses been a pose adopted for the evening, while this shapely vessel leaking sadness approximated something closer to the truth of herself? Or was it the other way around? Maybe neither version was the "truth." Maybe "self" was a free variable with no bounded value. Maybe every time you met her, she would be somebody else. (95-96)

Recalling the bearded girl's duality, the grandmother's changing behavior defies binary categories concerning women's social and sexual attitude. Later in her life, her two most important roles for the local television reflect the dichotomy between the virgin and the whore, or rather, the angel and the monster. Her appearance as the radiant devoted housewife in several cooking programs (46, 181), which she sometimes resembles in her family life (46-47), contrasts to the magnetic, if obscure aura surrounding the Night Witch in *The Crypt of Nevermore*. As argued in the previous section, as an actress the grandmother creates a character out of her personal trauma as a manner to renegotiate the restrictive socio-cultural frame of testimonial narratives. In so

doing, she is bringing to the fore her marginal perspective as a woman. The grandmother's victimization, as a result of sexual and racial abuse during the Nazi regime, recurs later in her life through the repressive gender politics of suburban America, which still holds binary conceptions concerning female sexuality.

Kristin J. Sollée has studied the figure of the witch as a myth reflecting power struggles within a patriarchal context in American society. She argues that the misogynistic construction of the witch as a hideous, morally, and sexually corrupted woman reflects males' anxieties towards particularly powerful women, as well as towards the gradual advance of feminism in the field of political rights and sexual liberties. Sollée draws on a relationship between the witch and the slut, but her focus is not on the historical demonization of sexually uninhibited women, but rather on feminist re-appropriations of the myth through an unapologetic, sometimes threatening, vindication of women's sexual, political, and creative power (20). As Sollée argues "[t]he witch is at once female divinity, female ferocity and female transgression. She is all and she is one." (24) In the same way as the bearded girl deeply humanizes her monstrosity by appropriating traditional discourses of femininity, it can be argued that in performing the witch, the grandmother has the opportunity to renegotiate the terms under which female sexuality is inscribed. In line with my previous argument on the therapeutic power of performance, playing the Night Witch she insufflates life and feeling into an otherwise inert body informed by patriarchal narratives, in this way stating her independence from the feminine mystique that informs her domestic life and, to some extent, her marriage.

As Mike puts it to the grandfather, his wife's Night Witch persona conjures not only her strangely devious sexual attitude, but also his own anxiety towards such attitude: "[t]he weird sexuality of the Night Witch […] reflected a little too closely the

nature of my grandmother's sexuality as he experienced it and, worse, the importance of that weirdness, that *witchiness*, to the hold that she had over him" (184, italics in the original).

Considering the grandmother's performance as a response to the impossibility to communicate the trauma of a previous rape in a society which still restricts female sexuality, the husband's anxiety emphasizes this impossibility; identifying the nature of his desire (her "hold") with her "weird," impenetrable sexuality, the grandfather still sees his wife as an enigma instead of an equal. From the very beginning, he imagines the task of rescuing his wife as a sexual conquest. After they first meet, he comes to the conclusion that "getting into her panties [is] the necessary first step to [save her]" (93). Bringing back the associations with the moon, for the grandfather his wife's lunar-like "gravity" (97) lies on her dark sides, attracting him as an enigma to be solved or a land to be conquered. This unstable sexual hierarchy recurs anytime that the protagonist's desire towards his wife manifests when he sees her as frail or docile, such as while cooking in the kitchen (47) or right before leaving the mental hospital after her second breakdown (352). The grandfather's sexual and social anxieties of dominant masculinity are ultimately contested by his last partner Sally, with whom, after an episode of premature ejaculation (174), he starts a six-month relationship based on an equal understanding of companionship and desire.

In expressing her resistance to fit into the myths of patriarchal America through her Night Witch performance, the grandmother reacts against the assumption of male domination. Her rebellion, if silent, is still purely creative; while taking place in the realm of fantasy, it can be read as a struggle against a structure which she has consciously embraced in her daily life, assuming certain attitudes and condemning others—significantly, for a long time past her first breakdown she attempts to be the

perfect housewife, having deemed herself "a witch" and "a whore" right after her failure to be a mother again (222). In this sense, although her transgression does not aim to have a long-term effect in society, not even in herself, it does evidence an absence, an unspeakable gap that accounts for what has been prohibited to women. Recalling Derrida's notion of the trace, the grandmother's obscure performance and the disturbing effects that it has on her and on her family, voices an absence in the official discourse that informs patriarchal society. In a Derridean understanding of language as organized through opposites, I contend that this absence exposes the narrative of dominant masculinity, denouncing women's exclusion as subjects from the structure of discourse and society. The grandmother's silent search for an alternative language beyond social categories of femininity equals Mike's mother's reaction against Uncle Ray's abuse when she was underage: "To be honest, I don't really remember much. But I guess I must not have been too happy about it, because the next day I shot him in the eye […] with a bow and an arrow" (328). Although she does not tell anybody about the event until much later—and even then she does not even acknowledge its legal implications—she supposes that everybody, including probably her adoptive father, must have known about it (329). In this sense, her violent response can be read as a creative, if knowingly hopeless rebellion against a male-ruled system in which she cannot articulate her wish for sexual and social autonomy. The fact that the mother—who will grow to become a feminist activist—is sitting on a horse when she shoots Uncle Ray strongly evokes the symbolic image of her mother's victimizer, and through this, her fight against the structures that secretly allow for sexual abuse.

For their realistic characterization and their careful contextualization in their respective periods—and specially, the grandfather's difficulty to understand their motivations—Mike's grandmother and mother stand against mere categories of

femininity as independent and changing individuals. The novel's emphasis on their complex, manifold personalities brings back the question of the two meanings of the moon in the novel. As argued at the beginning of this point, both the grandfather's anxieties of sexual domination and the women's impenetrability and natural resistance point to a view of the moon as a dividing line between two elements, one inevitably subdued—and silenced—by the other. Women, according to this view, are ultimately alienated and excluded because they are only regarded as a potential conquest, whether initially submissive or hostile, required for the man's development as a hero. On the other hand, a feminist reading of the novel supports a view of the moon as a border territory constantly recreated through the interaction of multiple agents among which no one prevails. Present in the world's collective imaginary, beyond the geopolitical implications of the space race and the hierarchical structure informing the Frontier thesis, the moon can be seen as a point of connectivity, allowing for a moment of recognition and an ethical dialogue between different individuals. In this sense, the grandparents' love story, marked by their respective experiences of trauma, represents this movement towards a provisional, dialectic definition of society in which individuals, equally vulnerable to suffering and capable of self-regeneration, are inevitably bounded to each other and rely on each other for their own survival. In this way, Chabon's ideal America and, by extension, his ideal world, seem to reflect Lévinas's ethics. Considering both the eradication of Jewish European culture and the successive international and national conflicts which America faced throughout the 20th Century as two intersecting points of departure in the novel, Chabon argues over the possibility of regeneration that depends on forgiving and embracing the presence of the other. In the next point, I finally aim to consider the movement towards forgiveness and reconciliation at different levels of the narrative, arguing that the characters' creative

capacity allows them to negotiate a more ethical framework of human relationships and reimagine national and cultural communities according to their capacity to regenerate themselves by adapting their narratives to a constantly changing reality.

3.3. Remapping our Homelands: Creative Ways towards Empathy

Standing at the center of the narrative, the grandparents' love story illustrates the role of creativity in inspiring empathy and forgiveness. Initially the grandfather assumes the purpose of "rescuing" his refugee wife as a heroic task but in so doing, he fails to fully empathize with her. Thus, after her second breakdown, resulting in her burning of the tree in their yard, he interprets "[t]he persistence of his wife's madness [as] an insult, an act of defiance, a repudiation of the past two years in their marriage" (87). Even not long before her death, he distrusts her taste for card games which, as Mike soon learns, recalls her past as the Night Witch via her practice of fortune-telling (376). The novel's insistence on the impenetrable character of both grandparents and their difficulty to reach mutual understanding suggests that their marriage ultimately failed to provide them with the mutual release and the refuge they looked for.

However, Mike seems to see their union as exemplary of the triumph of love and forgiveness beyond the persistent, threatening presence of the past: "[m]y grandparents forgave each other with the pragmatism of lovers in a plummeting airplane. There would be ample time for reproach in the event of failure." (46) As Mike argues, discussing with his mother after the grandfather's death, despite their constant misadventures ("She went crazy. His business failed. They couldn't have children of their own. He went to prison. HRT gave her cancer"), his grandparents actually were happy "[i]n the cracks" (426). Mike's reference to the cracks recalls the idea of borders,

understood as points of suture which become points of juncture once the individual learns to look through them, embracing a hybrid, dialectical identity that includes the perspective of the Other. In this sense, the grandparents' love story illustrates a constant, however hopeless, movement towards the Other that transgresses fixed, categorical definitions of personal and collective identity.

As argued earlier, according to Chabon creativity plays a central role in this process. In the case of the grandmother, it is through creative investment that she constructs a new identity that shows her determination to rebuild herself towards the future, despite the persistent reenactment of the past. In acting she plays out her troubled subjectivity against the social implications of all the "roles" that she must play in her new life and, in this way, tries to understand the world where she lives from now on, soon making her husband aware of her complexity beyond his expectations. But it is in her fabulist storytelling that she manages to invoke her haunting past, and even if she does not overcome trauma, she conveys the direct experience of horror to her grandson, who will later absorb these elements for his own stories, in this way carrying her ancestors' lost tradition as part of his legacy.

Similarly, the grandfather's practice of designing space models connects him with the Other at different levels. Although, during most of his adult age, he fails to accomplish his major aspiration of joining the NASA and contribute to the mission to the moon, he succeeds—perhaps contrary to his rather more practical mindset—in developing rocket models for the entertainment industry. Significantly, the narrator's family is founded on the union of two minds working for the country's collective imagination. After the grandfather builds his first model in prison, the ceremonial rocket launch is inadvertently attended by Sam Chabon, the uncle of his future son-in-law, who predicts the market benefits of the model and invites the grandfather to join Chabon

Scientific Co. But significantly among his late life creations, the one which, in many senses, takes him *further* is not a rocket, but a "moon garden" built on a coffee cup lid, just a section of an extended lunar complex that he will call the LAV One. Conceived when he was mourning his late wife, the grandfather places on this design his desire to "rescue" her, fulfilling the promise that he made her soon after they met (100). Having worked on the LAV One for more than a decade, he finishes it six months before his death, including miniature-scale figures of himself with his wife, daughter and two grandchildren in the moon garden (70-71), which will be one of the five items that he takes with him to his last retirement place in Oakland (50). The LAV One constitutes the grandfather's creative move towards the reconciliation between the past and the future, both a tribute to his late wife and a wish set to keep his family united.

The grandparents' creative performances allow them to construct a community despite the boundaries imposed by culture, society and trauma. Their relationship, constantly challenged by the grandmother's difficulty to assimilate the past and find a new meaning to her life in America, mirrors the eternal longing of the Jewish immigrants in search for a homeland, throughout a reiterative history of genocide and exile. Chabon's position towards the question of the Jewish homeland, which he has often explained in the context of the debates over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, contests essentialist definitions of cultural identity and historical narratives determining its problematic territoriality. In his novel *The Yiddish Policemen Union* (2007), often read as an optimistic answer to "the Jewish question" via a critique of the Zionist movement, there is no point in pursuing the way back to the Jewish homeland—even if such a thing was possible—since it can be recreated in exile. For Meier Landsman, the protagonist of *The Yiddish Policemen Union*, exile is inextricable from his people's identity and there is no hope for those who plan to found an all-Jewish colony in the

Holy Land. Still, in the end he sets his own community together with his wife and his half-Jewish-half-native-American brother (Coulouma 186). Similarly, in *Moonglow*, Chabon proposes the reconstitution of his own cultural community within the limits of his family. Skeptical about the religious doctrines and practices, the grandfather finds a new connection with his tradition in his family, in particular in his marriage. After the loss of his wife, he turns to the Jewish traditions of mourning, saying *kaddish* for her every Saturday during the first year following her death (384) and commemorating her *yarzheits* every year (51), until he decides to finally move on ("[n]ow there was only the daily scutwork of missing her. He wanted to rest. He wanted, like all the mourners in Zion, to be left in peace", 392). It is at that moment when he conceives the original idea for the "moon garden," initially occupied by the figures of two lovers representing himself and his wife (53). His decision to work through the loss in his own particular manner suggests not only a more proactive and dynamic relationship with Judaism, but also the active role of imagination in making this relationship possible.

To Chabon, his cultural identity lies precisely on his consciousness of being the product of his ancestors' displacement. As he claims in "Imaginary Homelands," he writes from the place where he lives, "in exile" (157 *Maps and Legends*). As I have explained at the beginning of this section, exile has positive connotations in the writer's work, since it implies movement, the possibility of multiple encounters, and a dynamic process of recreation after loss. As he argues, the longing for the lost homeland is responsible for the formation of a special Jewish imagination, creating a repository of myths and figures, according to Chabon, "our false but certain collective human memory of a Golden Age, a time when doors had no locks and a man's word was his bond and giants walked the earth" (175). It is in his consciousness of a Jewish fabulist sensibility where the writer traces his own reliance on genre fiction: "when you are

talking […] about lands that can be found only in the imagination, you are really speaking my language – my *mamaloshen*[21]" (ibid.). The grandfather observes the Moon in a similar light, as both a symbolic family home set to restore his wife's—and his own—lost legacy and, in this way, a deterritorialized and still profoundly local Jewish settlement affirming the value of his people's creativity.

It follows that the only thing which seems to be essential to Chabon's understanding of Judaism is its capacity to use imagination to interrogate self-contained notions of tradition and recreate the homeland in exile, considering the Other as an active participant. Significantly, the LAV One also enables the grandfather's reconciliation with Von Braun when they finally meet years after the war at the NASA's Space Congress. At Von Braun's interest in his creation, he aims to provoke him, telling him that the LAV One is a project for a Jewish settlement in the Moon, at which Von Braun, understanding the joke, reacts with a similarly challenging reply: "just the perfect place for them" (404). The evident remaining tension, resulting from their ongoing alliances, is resolved when Von Braun offers the grandfather to join the NASA as part of the research and development project, resulting in a last occupation, which indirectly helps him in the process of mourning his wife (405). This denouement insists on the connective power of imagination. Short before meeting him, the grandfather feels disgust at Von Braun when he sees him urinating publicly at the Congress and realizes that "his dream had killed itself, a victim of its own success [after] the Moon had been abandoned" (402). In this context, the LAV One acts as a conciliatory symbol, since it encapsulates the two men's hopeless fascination towards the Moon long after it loses its political significance. Recalling the moment of epiphany when Father Nickel took him to see the rocket, this encounter, though brief and contained and inextricable from their

[21] Yiddish for "mother tongue."

deeds in the past, presents the two men as ultimately equal, united by their hopeless belief in the possibilities of spacecrafts to liberate humans from the weight of gravity, which Mike equates to the divisive logic of society, the never-ending history of human evil, and the traumatic nature of life on Earth.

The ultimate act of creative reconciliation takes the form of Mike's novelized memoir, resulting from his grandfather's deathbed stories. Mike's narration of his incursions into his family's legacy and his experience of the world during his childhood and youth allow an understanding of the novel as an exchange between two distant worldviews. Between Mike and his grandfather there is not only a series of gaps in memory, the haunting presence of an absence that must be voiced, but also a huge generational distance, in terms of values and attitudes towards life, that must be bridged. As Chabon has said in an interview, the centrality of the Second World War in his fiction responds to his interest in the experience of the people of his generation (those born in America around the 1960s) in accepting the failures and misdeeds of the "Greatest generation"[22] of their grandparents, and by extension, of the dark, for long silenced history of their country (in Bernstein par. 25). During their conversation, the grandfather's cynicism and his disillusionment with his own life, which he feels unfulfilled ("[a]ll my life, everything I tried, I only got halfway there […] I'm ashamed of myself", 241), stands out against Mike's reverence ("I'm not ashamed of you […] I'm proud", ibid.). As Chabon suggests, this conflict is partly the result of the influence of the official narrative of the nation on each generation; while the grandfather feels that he has not achieved what America once promised him, Mike still reads his relative's life under the light of such triumphalist narrative. In this sense, their narrative encounter

[22] This phrase has been used to refer to those people historically remembered for having brought glory to America in the 20th century, especially those men who, like Mike's grandfather, were raised during the Great Depression and fought in World War II. (Brokaw par. 1)

means a transition from admiration towards disappointment towards the older generation, which concludes in recognition and forgiveness. Eventually, Mike accepts his grandfather's skepticism by concluding that "anyway [his] is a pretty good story" (ibid.). In saying so, however, he is pointing to the narrative nature of history and anticipating his decision to transform such narrative into his own novel. Even though he is still enthusiastic about his ancestor's adventures, his point deconstructs the illusion of the truth in official national narratives about World War II. Significantly, this self-reflective episode precedes the grandfather's account of his discovery of the Mittelwerk factory, which follows the allusion to his involvement in the American space program. Being the novel's central secret history—and finally silenced—Von Braun's fall and ascent destabilizes the official version of the country's triumph at the war and thus, as Chabon himself has claimed (in Bernstein par. 28), imposes the task of acceptance and forgiveness upon the younger generation. I argue that this task is achieved in the form of a multi-vocal memoir that integrates the acknowledgement of the past into the vision of the present, a move towards the integration of America's secret history in the country's collective memory. On the other hand, from an intergenerational approach, Mike's rewriting of his grandfather's life constitutes an exercise of forgiveness for his failure to act as the hero, to constantly fail in his professional ambitions and in his attempt to understand his wife and protect his family. At the same time, in his grandson's fabulist sensibility, the protagonist is dignified as an adventurous, romantic anti-hero, or rather, an ordinary man who inhabited the borders between the real and the imaginary, as he approached the Other. Like the Trickster in the Native American tradition, who later became a central figure in the country's popular culture and in Chabon's writing, the grandfather, with his failed heroism, his inherent rage, his late-life nihilism and his creative vision "is looking to stir things up" (14 *Maps and*

Legends), transgressing the social order and all kinds of moral, racial and sexual boundaries. However, his transgression is needed to regenerate society by reminding readers of the importance of imagination as the engine that, across boundaries and generations, elevates all humans.

4. Conclusion: Writing from a Broken World

This dissertation started as an attempt to locate Michael Chabon's work within the stage of contemporary fiction in the United States, focusing on his latest novel *Moonglow*. Chabon belongs to a generation of American authors who aimed to transcend the deconstructivist purpose of postmodern culture through a reformulation of the truth, and with it, of the notions of history and identity, as not merely provisional but always involved in a dialectical relationship with fiction(s). By fiction(s) I understand both the dominant narratives that inform the values and practices of a certain community, and the subject's own individual ability to interpret and respond to them. This distinction is crucial since it means a turning point from the dead-end skepticism of postmodernism to a more hopeful view of contemporary society as capable of recreating itself. In Chabon's work, however, these two dimensions of fiction stay in a constant conflict which the individual does not always manage to conciliate. For Chabon, humans can be both subjects and authors of fiction, since while they live in a society which is always already informed by narrative—and very often ideological—constructions, they also have the creative capacity to see beyond such narrow frames and rewrite reality in their own terms. As I expect to have shown, the novel shows that it is this capacity that, in pointing to connection rather than separation, guides its main characters through the understanding of the Other.

Like the writers of Chabon's generation, many critics have attempted to move towards a theoretical frame in cultural studies set to the reconciliation of diverse perspectives. To do so, they have reformulated the purpose of fiction as not merely deconstructive but connective, enabling not only the questioning of preconceived notions, but the leveling of all possible versions of the truth under the human common condition of story-telling. In this context, the ideas of Hayden White and the New Historicist School set one of the bases for this dissertation. White insisted on the inevitable mediation of narrative structures in any human attempt to represent history. He stated that every "history" is always just one version of the past, since it is always the product of a process of "emplotment," which often reveals the writer's position concerning to the facts. Although his ideas contributed to the skeptical ethos of postmodern culture, ultimately White's main concern was not to destroy the illusion of history as absolute and univocal, but to shift the focus to the story itself as a legitimate source for the study of history, as an account of our relationship with the past and with society. Similarly, some writers and literary critics embraced a vision of history as part of an unending body of fictions. This allowed them to transgress the divisive structure of hegemonic narratives and give voice to those minor participants of what Hegel denominated World history, but also to locate those areas of conflict and separation and renegotiate their relationship with the Other.

In this sense, Chabon's latest novel constitutes both a speculative act of rewriting history and a move towards reconciliation between the different participants of history. In the first section I have focused on the author's use of metafictional strategies and his fabulist style of narration as a way to point out the pervasiveness of fiction in the way humans remember, reinterpret, and represent the past. Chabon's inclusion of autobiographical details—even in the narrator's name—in a story which is mostly

fictional, and his illusory leaps—or major framebreaks—from paper to "life" and back (see his playful Author's Note), emphasize human freedom to cross ontological boundaries, based on the assumption that fiction, like memory and imagination, already constitutes an extension, if not an inherent piece, of our reality. Similarly, the textual resources that he includes, such as lists and footnotes, undermine the historian's documentary purpose by suggesting that no account of the past can ever be complete, permanent, or absolute. On the contrary, the past, whether it is preserved in memory or in written documents, always presents unbridgeable gaps, secrets, and multiple mismatches with fact. In this sense, Chabon's narrator seems to argue that his retelling of his grandfather's life, consciously "emplotted" through constant metaphors and episodes which cannot have possibly been recalled or recorded, is as flawed and, thus, as valid as any possible account of it. Relying on Derrida's notion of the "trace," I have argued that in the novel no story is essentially different from another, because they have no essence, but only a "sign," they are essentially fictional. It follows that Chabon's nostalgic perception of the past as the presence of an absence, the "consciousness of a loss connection," legitimates his speculative approach to history as a vehicle to reconnect with his own history. In so doing, his imagination illuminates alternative perspectives, attempting to bring to the forth fiction's capacity to invoke the presence of the Other.

Since the late 1980s, the emphasis on the presence of the Other in cultural studies and philosophy has become a reaction against the excess of postmodern irony as much as a consequence of the unequal character of 20th-century history, made up by silent accounts of tragic, unspeakable events as much as by triumphalist narratives that mask social inequality under a message of national glory. Levinas's proposal of a turn to ethics in modern philosophy addressed our responsibility to see the Other as an equal,

beyond dominant histories informing categorical and, by extension, oppressive constructions of difference. In this context, trauma studies combined with the turn to ethics. In its origin, trauma critics focused on the victims' psychological process towards the assimilation of the event and the reconstitution of their consciousness as a social being. Traditional trauma theory—Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytical approach being its main representative—argued on the victim's capacity to overcome trauma by imposing narrative coherence and sharing her experience with an empathetic listener. At a second stage of development, trauma has been read mostly as part of a social narrative which monitors the victim's process within a limited frame of representation informed by dominant narratives. Within such frame, the community reinforces categorical notions concerning not only who is the victim and who the perpetrator, but also the form and content that testimonial narratives must take.

Chabon's approach to trauma in *Moonglow* is informed by this recent emphasis on its constructivity. His intention does not seem to be to undermine psychological theories of trauma, but rather to examine and broaden the frame within which trauma can be transmitted in such a way that it is ethics, rather than national or cultural interests, that govern this process. His belief in the reconstructive power of human creativity is central in his representation of trauma, since the main characters' experiences are not processed in a conventional way, but often expressed as a creative response against the real. While Mike and his mother go through a different emotional and creative process in dealing with the latent presence of their family's tragic past, it is the grandmother who most explicitly illustrates the process of recreating—by storytelling and performing trauma—as an act of resistance against the social frame that does not recognize her personal tragedy, including an episode of rape, the loss of a friend and a period of poverty and prostitution, as representative of the experience of a Holocaust survivor.

The narrator's emphasis on the grandmother's secrets and the evasive nature of her true story brings her to the center of the narrative as a character who speaks with the silent, sometimes incoherent voice of a subordinate. I have extended on my feminist reading of *Moonglow* since I consider the role of women central in the novel's double move towards subversion and reconciliation with the Other. On the one hand, their actions, while informing historical situations of gender inequality, contest the mythical constructions aimed to control female social and sexual attitude. In so doing, they also defy the protagonist's assumed sense of masculinity until he ends up considering, via his impenetrable wife, that women are as complex as any other individual.

Women also participate in the dual conception of the Moon as a central site of conflict and reunion, a liminal space that is symbolically portrayed as having two faces, one corresponding to human ambitions for power, legitimized in the novel by the categorical dominant discourse of the Frontier hero—the white Anglo-Protestant man who approaches the borders as a conqueror—and the other to the universal character of human imagination which, as a global borderland, keeps people united through their capacity to imagine a better version, more dynamic, and inclusive story of the world. Even if for himself, and probably for society, the grandfather represents a failed attempt of a classical hero, it is his grandson's representation the one that prevails, vindicating the creative character of the Jewish tradition, as a member of an ethnic minority who, in failing to reach the Moon—an honor notoriously assigned to Wernher von Braun—, eventually gets to inhabit it through his imagination. In this way, the same that allows his grandson to reconnect with his long-lost past, allows the protagonist to cross the cultural and ideological borders that stand between the self and the Other, between himself and the Moon.

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