New Voices in Jewish-American Literature

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NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Michael Chabon in a Queer Time and Place

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Pursuing the congruency between his preoccupation with portrayals of modulating sexuality on one hand, and hybridising of literary and genre fiction on the other, this article elucidates a speculative point of contact between Michael Chabon's work and contemporary queer thought on temporality. Exploring formations of development, hope, and utopia in his novels and essays, this article argues that analysing how gender and genre are troubled in Chabon's work affords a new perspective on our understanding of him as a Jewish-American author.

It's rather a pleasing quirk of recent literary history that Michael Chabon was labelled a gay American writer before he was labelled a Jewish-American writer. Following the success of his debut novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988), a bildungsroman-ish tale of a young man's summer of sexual experimentation, *Newsweek* placed Chabon at the head of a pack of up-and-coming young gay authors who had recently emerged, the article's title suggested, 'Out of the Closet and Onto the Shelves' (Clemons, 1988: 72). In subsequent interviews, Chabon has said that he felt forced to clarify that he was, in fact, heterosexual, for two reasons: he didn't want to give the impression that he was 'pretending to be gay', as a kind of marketing ploy to 'sell books'; and nor did he want to be 'pigeonholed' as a gay writer and therefore 'possibly confined to a section of the bookstore from which it can be very hard to get out of once you're in' (Bugg, 2002: n. pag.). And ironically, Chabon suggests, such labelling would in any case run counter to *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*'s message of plurality and fluidity in relation to questions of sexual identity and orientation – its suggestion that 'people can't be put into categories all that easily' (Bugg, 2002: n. pag.).

Chabon's work has also been difficult to categorise. Often discussed as part of a group of 'post-postmodern' writers whose work is characterised not only by the

ironising formal experimentation of a previous generation of authors, but by a more 'sincere' investment in plot and character (Huber, 2014; Petrie, 2008; Kelly, 2016), the trajectory of Chabon's career over eight novels has also amounted to 'a veritable allegory' of the 'return to genre fiction' evidenced more broadly in contemporary American fiction (Hoberek, 2011: 485). As Jesse Kavaldo notes, Chabon's work seems to be 'gleefully' drawn to 'the intersections between genres' (Kavadlo, 2014: 14) and intent upon dissolving the divide, critical and commercial, between mainstream 'literary fiction', and the novel's pulpier incarnations. This has resulted in a number of eclectic innovations in form and genre: from the 'comic book realism' (Hoberek, 2014: 174) of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) that won Chabon the Pulitzer Prize; to the medley of hard-boiled detective fiction and alternate history served up in *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007); to the restitution of the picaresque adventure yarn in *Gentlemen of the Road* (2008).

Almost as frequently noted as Chabon's explorations of genre fiction has been the prevalence of gay characters in his novels, and, in particular, depictions of relationships between straight and gay men (Meyers, 2010: 72; Dewey, 2014: 13; Hitchings, 2012). As Chabon has himself observed – in an annotation to his 'wrecked' novel, *Fountain City* (2010), discussed later in this article – the question of 'the apparently inordinate presence of gay characters in my fiction continues to be the one I am most reliably asked by professional question-askers' (Chabon, 2010: 34). Asking himself why 'the friendship or partnership between a straight man and a gay man' appears 'at the center of every single one of [his] books, even this mangled and unfinished one', Chabon somewhat slyly pleads ignorance: 'The truth, or some part of the truth, is that I have no idea why' (2010: 36).

There is a congruency between Chabon's preoccupation with portrayals of modulating, fluid sexuality on one hand, and his hybridising of literary and genre fiction on the other. Just as he is drawn to what he calls 'the spaces between genres' (2008: 25), so too is he interested in narratives and characters that challenge fixed categories of sexual identity. In the essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Chabon makes this link between sexuality and genre explicit. He recalls that as a student he was taught

that any writer who employed genre fiction tropes while claiming to be a 'serious' author was 'transgressive', the literary equivalent of 'a transvestite cousin at a family Thanksgiving' whose 'fabulous hat' should be 'studiously ignored'; Chabon describes his own early forays into genre fictions as a kind of literary 'cross-dress[ing]' (2008: 188). In his essay, Chabon suggests that portraying such writers as 'transgressive' is the result of a false and staid distinction between 'literary' and 'genre' fiction; yet at the same time, he seems invested in this kind of narrative experimentation precisely because of its disruptive potential and marginal status – its resistance to easy categorisation. Throughout his nonfiction, in fact, Chabon portrays himself as occupying a liminal authorial position: someone writing from 'along the borderlands', as the subtitle to *Maps and Legends* suggests; a 'Trickster', a figure 'always associated with borders, no man's lands'; or a 'hermaphrodite' who 'haunts the boundary lines, the margins' (Chabon, 2008: 24–6). What emerges in these essays and across his fiction is a sense of Chabon not as a gay writer, as *Newsweek* inaccurately labelled him, but as a queer writer; that is, a writer attuned to what Lee Edelman calls 'the zone of possibilities' that becomes imaginable from a queer positionality (Edelman, 1994: 114). And in the ways in which it has conceptualised notions of development, utopia, failure, and hope, the 'temporal turn' in contemporary queer theory offers a vocabulary with which to think about how both gender and genre are troubled in Chabon's work and how this shapes his exploration of Jewish identity, particularly as it intersects with ideas of nationhood, homeland, and belonging.

I. Growing Up Adolescent

Josef Benson's essay, 'Queer Masculinities', published in *Michael Chabon's America* (2014), exemplifies the rather circumscribed way in which Chabon's queerness has been raised thus far in critical responses to his work. Benson argues that Chabon presents a 'queer instead of normative' iteration of masculinity in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and his much more recent essay collections, *Maps and Legends* and *Manhood for Amateurs* (2009), by contrasting traditional, 'hegemonic' models of masculinity, with a sense of a male identity described as 'an acknowledgement and embracement of multiple gendered and sexual selves' (Benson, 2014: 195). Yet

despite this emphasis on multiplicity, Benson's conception of Chabon's queerness is decidedly narrow. He writes that Chabon argues for:

> A redefinition of positive masculinity as feminine and queer instead of normative and hypermasculine. Chabon posits that queerness does not necessarily have to do with whom one decides to have sex. A queer identity or queer masculinity simply means that one has decided to eschew old tired and destructive sexist, homophobic, and patriarchal notions of masculinity in favor of new ones that embrace those attitudes traditionally linked with femininity, such as emotional openness, generosity, and humility. (Benson, 2014: 188)

What is striking in this passage is how quickly queerness' 'zone of possibilities' is foreclosed. In Benson's essay, 'queer' is equated to 'traditional' female qualities; as such, the essay reinscribes a gender binary it had purported to disrupt, with the alternatives to 'hypermasculinity' being reduced to an (equally tired) iteration of 'femininity'. This conceptual slippage, in which the nonbinarism of queerness is obfuscated, is, in part, explained by the fact that Benson's piece is informed less by recent queer theory than by debates surrounding masculinity prevalent in America and Britain through the 1980s and '90s. Benson indicates as much by drawing his model of 'hypermasculinity' from Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990), a book that was itself something of a macho rearguard action against the reformulation of male sexuality already underway in the USA, one that played out in the broader culture as a 'crisis in masculinity' and theorisations of 'the new man' (Malin, 2005: 1–20; Benyon, 2002: 75–95). Benson is right to suggest that there is indeed something new man-ish about Chabon's descriptions of his experience of fatherhood in *Manhood for Amateurs*, especially in his rather pat call for greater displays of physical affection between fathers and sons (Chabon, 2009). However, Benson seems less sure of how this conception of masculinity is relevant to Chabon's fiction. His solution is to suggest that 'Chabon's feelings about gender and sexuality are dramatically more certain [in *Manhood for Amateurs*] than they were when he was writing *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*', in so far as the essay collection, unlike the novel, portrays a 'good

man' embracing 'traditionally feminine qualities' (Benson, 2014: 196). Benson, in other words, falls back upon the 'dramatically more certain' idea of what he calls 'a feminine masculinity', rather than explore the concomitant dramatic uncertainties – that is to say, the queerness – he recognises, but cannot theorise in Chabon's fiction.

In response, I want to put Chabon's work in contact with a strand of contemporary queer thought on temporality, as a way into thinking about the intersection of gender and genre in his fiction more broadly, turning first to *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, the novel Benson also discusses. In both its narrative structure and tone, the book clearly, and at times parodically, recalls *The Great Gatsby*, an influence Chabon has since acknowledged (2008: 150–2);[1] and the novel is also in dialogue with the form of the bildungsroman, appearing to adhere to the genre's developmental narrative, especially in its conventional focus on the transitional time of adolescence. The novel tells the story of Art Bechstein, a young man spending his first summer after graduating college in the grip of a number of infatuations: with his father's shady business ventures as a gangster; with his unpredictable, on – off girlfriend, Phlox; but most of all with the glamorous and exotic Arthur Lecomte. This other Arthur seems to embody everything to which the naive and romantic Bechstein aspires: sophisticated, wealthy, and confident in his sexuality, his relationship with Art is the novel's defining love affair. Picaresque entanglements are of course the very stuff of the bildungsroman, and yet the novel never moves beyond them to the expected point of Art's 'maturity', lingering instead in its perpetual youthful summer. The 'mysteries' surrounding Art are left unsolved: his relationship with his father, for example, remains conflicted, while the question of Art's sexuality is far from settled. He shirks a showdown with Phlox and instead flees to Europe with Arthur; but in the novel's final pages we learn that the two have separated, at least for now, and that Art is not sure when, or if, he will return to America.

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[1] The essay in which Chabon discusses the influences behind *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* is entitled 'My Back Pages', an allusion to Bob Dylan's song of the same name. The song's refrain – 'Ah but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now' – might be thought of as a kind of shorthand for the reformulation of ideas of youth and maturity I'm discussing in Chabon's work.

Consequently, as Joseph Dewey has suggested, the novel resembles something of an 'antibildungsroman', resistant to 'the traditional epiphany' that operates as the genre's usual point of closure (Dewey, 2014: 26).[2] The bildungsroman has, after all, conventionally served as the paradigmatic genre of normative development, one that dramatises and produces a certain version of growing up – what Jed Esty calls a 'historically specific notion of *becoming*' (Esty, 2012: 5, emphasis in original) – which has adulthood as its 'natural' ending and resolution. As Mark Wollaeger and Kevin Dettmar write, the 'ideal of adulthood' reified in the bildungsroman 'was deeply entwined […] with the notion of national destiny', with the protagonist moving from the 'ungroundedness' of youth into 'citizenship, or full integration into the national community' (Esty, 2002: ix). As such, the bildungsroman showed the individual 'growing in national-historical time' (Bakhtin, 1986: 25). 'In its original form', Esty explains, 'the bildungsroman stabilises the protagonist's ageing process within and against the backdrop of the modern state'; 'adulthood and nationhood', he goes on, serve as 'mutually reinforcing versions of stable identity […] of fixed stable being' (Esty, 2002: 39). Franco Moretti similarly claims that, '[a] Bildung is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as *concluded*: only if youth passes into maturity, and comes to a stop there' (Moretti 1987: 26, emphasis in original); it is this 'teleological process', Kenneth Millard suggests, 'that is the proper focus of the coming of age narrative' (Millard, 2007: 5).[3]

The temporal logic of the bildungsroman, as Esty notes, 'has always been more stable in theory than in practice', its conception of the individual's orderly progress to stable adulthood and recognisably national subjectivity, 'fragile at best' (Esty, 2002: 7, 39). In Esty's reading of the modernist bildungsroman, the logic of this movement into 'national-historical' time begins to unspool when the nation-state itself loses coherence as a structure of belonging under the conceptual pressure of colonialism. His reading is thus aligned with a number of responses to Benedict Anderson's influential

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[2] Dewey's account of the novel as resisting the bildungsroman's moment of 'epiphany' recalls Chabon's own criticism of the contemporary short story as 'plotless and sparkling with epiphanic dew' (Chabon, 2008: 18).

[3] On the question of endings in fictions more broadly, see Kermode (1966).

suggestion that 'the old-fashioned novel' – by which he broadly means the realist novel – is a 'device' for the presentation and production of the 'empty, homogeneous time' of the nation (Anderson, 2006: 26); that is to say, that the form of the realist novel itself can be seen as a 'condition of possibility of imagining the nation' (Culler, 1999: 37).[4] As Homi Bhabha among others has suggested, this conceptualisation of temporality does not adequately account for the lived experience of time as 'disjunctive' (Bhabha, 1994: 177), fractured and multiple – nor in fact the realist novel's ability and propensity to register 'competing orders of time' (Pratt, 2010: 8). Recent queer theory has contributed to this critique of temporality by analysing the 'linear, ordered, and teleological' (Luciano, 2007: 2) way that time is institutionalised in the broader culture, and revealing the ways in which it inscribes a certain heteronormativity – what Valerie Rohy calls 'the "straight time" of linear history' (Rohy, 2009: xii), or what Jack Halberstam calls 'repro-time' (Halberstam, 2005: 5), and Lee Edelman 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman, 2004: 4) – in which the structures of marriage, child rearing, and generational inheritance are taken as 'natural', and folded into the time of the nation.[5] In response, queer thought has gestured toward other temporal arrangements and logics that do not cohere to the progressivist and normative teleological constraints of 'national-historical time'. 'Queer time' is the name Halberstam gives to these 'models of temporality that emerge […] once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family' (Halberstam, 2005: 6). Rohy elucidates a mode of 'anachronism' as one form of queer time, whilst Elizabeth Freeman explores what she calls 'wayward temporalities' (Freeman, 2010: xiii).

Part of this work has specifically challenged the developmental narrative in which the bildungsroman is invested: the movement from uncertain adolescence

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[4] Anderson's conception of 'empty, homogeneous time' is based on Walter Benjamin's theorisation of the time of the 'historical progress of mankind' in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. The temporality of the novel is thus, in Anderson's formulation, one of perpetual progress as well as what he calls 'simultaneity' (Anderson, 2006: 26).

[5] Rohy's work draws out the ways in which, 'theories of queer backwardness conceived what we now call homophobia in the image of racist discourses, particularly those concerned with African Americans, who were paradigmatic figure for racial alterity in the US. national imaginary and most closely linked with temporal rhetoric' (Rohy, 2009: ix). For a full account that links racist temporalisations of African–Americans to the trope of failure, see Scott (2010: 95–125).

to 'mature' adulthood. Halberstam has asked that we 'rethink the adult/youth binary', in order to 'disrupt conventional accounts of [...] adulthood and maturity' (Halberstam, 2005: 2). In this schema, adolescence becomes privileged as a site in which the apparent certainties of growing up – the seemingly structural, inevitable progress toward adulthood – might be called into question. Pamela Thurschwell has written of adolescence as a 'strange and uncanny temporal state' of suspension, an 'insecure cultural space', that is marked not only by an 'anticipatory relation to the future and a haunted relationship to the past, but also something less assimilable to teleological notions of time and progress' (Thurschwell, 2010: 239–40). As the temporal logic of the bildungsroman began to falter, Esty similarly argues, 'the trope of adolescence, once conceived of as entailing the telos of maturity [...], comes to refer both to that developmental process *and* its multiple sites of failure and incompleteness' (Esty, 2002: 36, emphasis in original). In queer theory, these 'sites of failure and incompleteness' have also been read as sites of hope, as grounds for a particular kind of utopianism. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam suggests that 'failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods' (Halberstam, 2011: 3). Not growing up in the expected ways, failing to fall into step with 'national' time, might be an opportunity for others kinds of futurity, and other kinds of belonging.

Art's father – a gangster and, Art tells us, 'amateur psychologist' – diagnoses him as a 'devout narcissist', one 'doomed to terminal adolescence' (Chabon, 1987: 11). This constellation of 'psychologist', 'narcissist', and 'adolescence' all point, of course, to Freud's theory of homosexuality, and to his suggestion that same-sex desire is a kind of narcissistic object choice, a 'regressive' developmental pathology.[6] However, the novel is framed by quite another psychoanalytic theory of sexual development. As the narrative opens, Art is working on his final college paper, a study of Freud's correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess. With a predictable dose of undergraduate humour, Art is particularly taken with Freud and Fliess' 'entertaining' discussion

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[6] For a good overview of psychoanalysis's theorisations of homosexuality, see Dean and Lane (2001).

of 'the near-cosmic interaction of the human nose with matters of sexual health' (Chabon, 1987: 11);[7] but their partnership is best remembered for its pioneering work on the universality of bisexuality. Just as the novel discursively invokes its engagement with the conventions of the bildungsroman's developmental narrative, so too does it underscore its dialogue with psychoanalysis's theorisation of sexuality, even if the connection remains opaque to Art himself. Queer temporalities, too, are shaped by psychoanalysis, their articulation of 'retroactivity and anticipation' and of 'queer backwardness' a response to and re-appropriation of psychoanalysis's figuring of homosexuality as a kind of 'arrested development' (Rohy, 2009: xi–5). And what Chabon's work has in common with this strain of queer thought – and what he just begins to explore in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* – is a sense of the imaginative and narrative opportunities afforded by these varieties of alternate time, of temporal strangeness and otherworldliness.

Art, for his part, remains a 'man-child', as Dewey puts it, eschewing the bildungsroman's 'traditional mixed reward of maturity', and 'slip[ping] free from […] reality' (Dewey, 2014: 23). Instead, Art occupies a 'comic book world' of fantasy, representing 'the first in what will be a long line of Chabon's escape artists' (Dewey, 2014: 26). Dewey – with a nod to Kavalier and Clay's comic book hero creation, 'The Escapist' – deftly links Art's refusal of maturity to Chabon's broader refutation of generic convention, and thus connects *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* to the later, more explicitly hybrid novels, in which Chabon experiments with 'less serious', more adolescent genres: the adventure tale, the detective story, and fantasy narrative – in the 'YA' novel, *Summerland* (2002), for example. Art's escape from maturity is of a piece with his fleeing America – unlike Nick Carraway, who returns to the Midwest – and his refusal of a fixed sexual identity. Together, these enact an escape from the temporal logic of the bildungsroman, with its conception of heteronormative

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[7] Noses, in fact, feature throughout the novel, and the Freud-Fliess correspondence is clearly alluded to when Art has a nosebleed after he has sex with Arthur for the first time. Arthur takes the blood stained pillowcase to the open bedroom window, 'grinning with the wondrous news he had just published to the neighborhood' (Chabon, 1987: 216) – a parody of the (usually Catholic) custom of displaying the wedding night sheets as proof that the bride went to bed a virgin.

adulthood twinned to nationhood, an escape that prefigures Chabon's own flight from the realist novel later in his career.

II. Jewish Time in Queer Diasporas

This schematic association of the realist novel with a conception of 'straight' and 'national' time provides a way into thinking about the interplay of genre, queerness, and Jewishness in Chabon's later work. After the publication of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and *Wonder Boys* (1995) – another take on the bildungsroman, with another crop of queer characters and a perpetually immature protagonist – Chabon's status within the 'canon' of Jewish-American fiction was far from clear; as Cynthia Ozick put it following the publication of Chabon's second novel, 'he may be Jewish and he may be a writer, but he's not a Jewish writer' (qtd in Costello [2015]). With *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Chabon made his bid to 'enter the tradition' (Myers, 2008: 578), insofar as the novel dealt with recognisably Jewish themes, most prominently the Holocaust and the Jewish immigrant experience in America. Set in New York City, the novel centres on the creative partnership of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay, Jewish cousins of the Old and New World respectively, who team up to make a quick buck in the comic book boom of the 1940s. The novel speculates upon the fact that many of the artists and writers behind this 'Golden Age' were Jewish, and suggests that comic books became a medium for specifically Jewish concerns. The metaphor of escape is a varied one in the novel, but it principally resonates with regards to Joe's experience of fleeing Europe, and his guilt over having left his family in Prague. The brute strength and unfailing courage of Joe's most successful creation, 'The Escapist', is an obvious kind of wish-fulfilment in response to his own sense of political powerlessness: one cover illustration has The Escapist socking Hitler on the jaw.[8] This association of political and physical strength is one instance of the way in which the novel 'plays with a range of Jewish and goyishe masculinities' (Kaplan, 2012: 978), exploring and problematising 'stereotypes of the weak male Jewish body', whilst also revealing 'the hyperphysical, heteronormative [traits] often associated with the white American male

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[8] This is one of many homages in the novel to cartoonist Jack Kirby, the man behind Captain America and a host of other Marvel characters.

body' (Moscowitz, 2007: 307). This is indicative of the way the novel aligns Jewish and queer bodies more generally, Louis Colbran argues, hinting at an 'alternate history' of 'silenced poor, Jewish and homosexual voices' that fail to cohere to a 'masculine, white, heterosexual subject position' (Colbran, 2010: 119). In particular, this parallel is highlighted by Sammy's inability to articulate his sexuality. Eventually 'outed' publicly by a Senate inquiry into the effects of comic books on 'delinquent children', Sammy's homosexuality reveals itself to the authorities because of his unconscious habit of depicting his comic book heroes with young male sidekicks (Chabon, 2000: 561).

Comic books, then, are imagined as a medium for Jewish and queer fantasies of futurity, transformation and escape. This association of Jewishness and queerness is, of course, nothing new. In the nineteenth century, Sander Gilman explains, Jewish men were thought of as an essentialised 'third sex' that troubled the boundary not only between masculinity and femininity, but also between heterosexuality and homosexuality (Gilman, 1995: 176). In Gilman's analysis, this perception of Jewish masculinity centres on the symbolic bodily difference of circumcision; by contrast, Daniel Boyarin emphasises the social dimension of the gendering of Jews, arguing that 'the situation of the European Diaspora male Jew [...] as politically disempowered produced a sexualized interpretation of him as queer' (Boyarin, 2000: 78). Put another way, the stereotype of the bodily weakness of the Jewish man aligned with, but was also in part created by, the political reality of Jewish men being weak members of the body politic. As such, Boyarin reads the first political attempts to create a Jewish nation state as being of a piece with a broader, anxious cultural effort to reimagine an iteration of Jewish masculinity that more closely cohered to the prevailing conception of European, heteronormative manhood. That is to say, by making Jews more recognisably 'national' subjects, they would, in turn, be more recognisably 'masculine' subjects. Zionism, Boyarin argues, thus amounted to 'a heterosexualizing project' that aimed to rationalise the sexualised ambiguities and indeterminacies of exile: if the Diaspora was imagined as queer, then 'an end to Diaspora would be the equivalent of becoming straight' (Boyarin, 2000: 78). What is reproduced here is an alignment of nationhood and heterosexuality familiar from the (contemporaneous) genre of the bildungsroman, and, more broadly, by the realist novel.

I argued above that Chabon's essay, 'Imaginary Homelands', sketches a link between queerness and genre; but as its title suggests, the essay is also preoccupied with notions of belonging, sovereignty, and nationhood, and of how they relate to the practice of fiction-making.[9] Chabon begins by stating that his recent work has been predominately concerned with a 'pair of ongoing, overlapping investigations' into two facets of his identity: 'a Jew, and a teller of Jewish stories', and 'a lover of genre fiction' (Chabon, 2008: 170). In writing about these aspects of his identity and the connections between them, Chabon suggests he has been writing from a position of 'exile' (Chabon, 2008: 169), a term that, on one hand, is of a piece with the raft of marginal authorial positionalities discussed above – 'Trickster', 'hermaphrodite', and so on – but that, on the other, also has a specifically Jewish resonance. Indeed, Chabon writes that this sense of himself as a writer in exile comes not only from the fact that his explorations in genre have led him away from the 'mainstream' of literary fiction, but also because of his feeling of disconnect from the Jewish state: 'the question of belonging', he writes, 'brings me inevitably to the question of Israel' (Chabon, 2008: 172). Chabon suggests that, even though he is an American, he 'knows' that Israel is 'supposed to be my home', and that he 'should want to live there' (Chabon, 2008: 172), but in fact feels no desire to. Refuting Judaism's Biblical claims to the Holy Land, Chabon instead, like Boyarin, understands Israel as 'calculated and calibrated with nineteenth-century European logarithms of nation' (Chabon, 2008: 173).[10] Like the realist novel, the nation-state seems to Chabon a narrow, old-fashioned and limiting concept – overly precise, as 'logarithms' suggests. If we follow Boyarin's suggestion that, by the nationalist logic of Zionism, the Diaspora was rendered queer, we can see Chabon's embracing of an exilic, diasporic positionality as of a piece with his genre 'cross-dress[ing]', as movements in the same queer gesture.

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[9] The title 'Imaginary Homelands' is borrowed from Salman Rushdie. For a discussion of the relationship between the two essays, see Kavadlo (2014: 13).

[10] Chabon has recently been publicly critical of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and is currently editing a volume of essays by contemporary authors on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in conjunction with the NGO, Breaking the Silence (see Cain [2016]).

Following on from the discussion of his attitude towards Israel, the next section of 'Imaginary Homelands' consists in large part of a version of Chabon's 1997 essay, 'Guidebook to a Land of Ghosts', in addition to a discussion of the reaction to the piece when it was first published. The essay focuses on Chabon's encounter, in 1993 – 'soon after [he] returned from [a] trip to Israel' (Chabon, 2008: 175) – with *Say It in Yiddish*, a 1958 phrasebook edited by Uriel and Beatrice Weinrich. The book seems to Chabon 'heartbreakingly implausible' (Chabon, 2008: 177), and he is taken with the 'absurd poignan[cy]' of it (Chabon, 2008: 176). *Say It in Yiddish*, he writes, appears to have 'been edited with a particular kind of reader in mind, the reader who was travelling […] to a place where one could expect to find both "ahn OON-tehr-bahn" (subway) and "geh-FIL-teh FISH"' (Chabon, 2008: 176); and yet, he wonders, '[a]t what time in the history of the world had there been a place of the kind that the Weinrichs' work implied?' (Chabon, 2008: 177). Given that the book was published in 1958 – 'a full ten years after the founding of the country that turned its back once and for all on the Yiddish language' – the book, Chabon suggests, appears as 'a gesture of embittered hope […] of a utopian impulse turned cruel' (Chabon, 2008: 177). *Say It in Yiddish* evokes, 'with numerical precision', a 'fantastic land' that does not exist: Chabon dwells on one particular phrase in the book, 'Can I go by boat/ferry to _____?', and is 'tantalized', he writes, by 'the blank' that is 'impossible to fill in' (177–8). By way of response, he dreams up two possible 'destinations', alternative worlds where the book might be useful: a Jewish homeland established not in Israel, but in Alaska – an idea that would, a decade later, be the premise of *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007) – and another, seemingly more likely option: that the book 'unwittingly' beckons its reader back to the 'old county. To Europe' (Chabon, 2008: 180), to a world where a 'Jewish homeland' never came into existence – a world, that is, of perpetual diaspora.

Chabon's reaction to *Say It in Yiddish* is marked by what we might call a sense of its 'potentiality', Giorgio Agamben's term, as Jose Esteban Muñoz glosses, for 'a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense' (Muñoz, 2009: 9). 'Potentiality' is central to Muñoz's theorisation of 'critical utopianism', a mode of reading and critical practice that aims

to discern and conceptualise a valence of hope, a sense of political and personal futurity, that nonetheless resists the teleological pull of 'straight' time. Describing this 'utopian impulse' as it is encountered in a work of art, Muñoz writes: 'I see the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the way it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but is nonetheless an opening' (Muñoz, 2009: 9). In this encounter, 'the utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here […] an anticipatory illumination' (Muñoz, 2009: 7). Reading for potentiality means being attuned to those moments of temporal uncanniness – to that which is 'present but not […] of the present tense' – wherein a work of literature might hint at a futurity unarticulated, unrealised, possibly unrealisable. All utopias by their nature, of course, are destined to fail, and so our attachment to and investment in them will often be shadowed by disappointment: 'elegy', Chabon remarks in an interview, 'is the inevitable outcome of utopia' (Derbyshire, 2012: n. pag.). But this form of critical utopianism finds value and hope in failure itself, in that which didn't and perhaps couldn't come to pass. This, then, is a precarious kind of hope, one that finds a future not just by looking back, but by undermining the temporal logic that makes such a distinction possible. At once proleptic and elegiac, it outlines a peculiar temporality that does not progress unambiguously from past to future, but dwells unevenly between the two.

It is this strange utopian tenor, this sense of 'potentiality', that Chabon finds so imaginatively arresting about the phrasebook. 'Imaginary Homelands' goes on to survey the rather hostile reception his original essay received, and quotes a number of rebukes from Yiddish speakers and scholars who pointed out to Chabon that the phrasebook would in fact be useful in a number of 'real-world' places where the language was still spoken: certain Brooklyn neighbourhoods and particular ultra-orthodox communities in Israel itself. But these responses missed the point, Chabon writes, of why he found the book 'wondrous, provocative, sad, and funny': the fact that 'even if Yiddish is taken to be alive and well, *Say It in Yiddish* still proposes a world that never was and might have been' (Chabon, 2008: 184). Reading it for its potentiality, Chabon finds the phrasebook evocative of and nostalgic for an untimely

world: fantastic, utopian, yet also marked by a sense of failure and disappointment. As Jeffrey Shandler neatly summarises, responses to the essay failed to grasp that 'what Chabon challenges, ultimately, is not the language's legitimacy or popularity, but rather the ability to conjure a homeland for Yiddish, with its implications of indigenousness, territoriality, and even sovereignty' (Shandler, 2006: 33). What draws Chabon to the phrasebook is the tension between this conventional discourse of nationalism that appears to underwrite it, and what Shandler calls Yiddish's 'widespread association with marginality, mutability, or obsolescence' (Shandler, 2006: 33).

As Shandler's study explicates, Yiddish has long been 'indelibly marked' as 'the traditional Jewish language of diaspora' (Shandler, 2006: 9). During the Haskalah, German Jews denigrated the language as impure and uncivilised, and Yiddish 'became synonymous with *Unbildung*, [the] counter-example of what the new German Jews had become' (Aschheim, 1982: 8). Translated as 'uncultured' or 'uncultivated', we can see how *Unbildung* also denotes a set of characteristics that failed to cohere – or mature – to a 'national', masculine standard. 'Abandoning Yiddish for German', Shandler writes, 'soon stood as a hallmark of enlightened, integrationist German Jews' (Shandler, 2006: 7). A similar story evolved in Israel, where Yiddish was quickly 'juxtaposed against modern Hebrew, the official national language', and thus became 'emblematic of a way of life rejected and superseded by Zionism' (9). As the language of diaspora, Yiddish articulated an iteration of Jewish identity that Hebrew sought to render untranslatable, and that the new Jewish state sought to leave behind in the Old World.

Shandler recounts a Yiddish joke told in Israel, which offers the translation of the Hebrew word *b'diyuk* ('precisely', as in *b'sheva v'hetsi b'diyuk*, 'at precisely 7:30') as really an acronym for *biz di yidn veln kumen* (Yiddish for 'until the Jews come'). 'In this bit of comic wordplay', Shandler suggests, 'Yiddish offers a linguistic undoing of Hebrew meaning and signifies the cultural subversion of a precise, standard time by a subjective, alternative "Jewish time"' (Shandler, 2006: 11). Like queer temporalities, this 'Jewish time' found in Yiddish enunciates varieties of untimeliness – of waiting, of delay – for which the 'precise, standard time' of 'modernised' Hebrew and the

nation state has no room. This recalcitrantly diasporic sensibility recalls the 'messianic time' of religious Judaism – with its mode of perpetual anticipation and deferral – rather than the 'empty' time of the nation; and thus it evokes a different sense of belonging, of a Jewish identity not associated with the 'indigenousness, territoriality, and [...] sovereignty' of Zionism, but rather characterised by a state of suspension, a sense both of utopian longing and failure – a peculiar kind of hopefulness marked by what we might call, to borrow a term from Jean-Luc Nancy's work on the idea of community, 'inoperativeness' (Nancy, 1991).

III. Broken Utopias

In *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* – the novel that emerged, a decade later, from the *Say It in Yiddish* episode – Chabon further explores the interplay of nationalism, genre, and temporality. A deft experiment in genre, the narrative alloys alternate history with detective fiction. The premise of the novel is that after WWII, the State of Israel never quite took off: the 1948 War of Independence was lost, and instead a Jewish community was, with the help of the American government, established in Sitka, Alaska, on a temporary basis. The story begins in the month before the 'Reversion', when Sitka's 'interim status' (Chabon, 2007: 29) will expire, and the land will revert to a USA territory, forcing its Jewish population once more into diaspora.

The book starts, then, in a strange state of suspension – the clock ticking down on Sitka's already precarious status as a temporary homeland – with its residents about to be displaced. This timeframe is paralleled with two other temporalities that structure the narrative – the time of detective fiction and the apocalyptic time of Jewish religious fundamentalism. Meyer Landsman is our hard-boiled, hard-drinking detective set on the task of solving a mysterious murder, with his name confirming not only his 'everyman' status, but also a link between the detective plot and the novel's broader interest in ideas of nationhood and territoriality. The victim, it transpires, is Mendel Shpilman, son of Sitka's influential rebbe and believed by some to be the messiah. However, the question of who killed Mendel and why is quickly engulfed by the much bigger political plot his murder reveals. Led by Rabbi Shpilman, and supported by the US government, Sitka's orthodox Jews plan to bomb the Islamic holy site on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, rebuild the Jewish temple, and

thus 'basically *force* Messiah to come' (Chabon, 2007: 295, emphasis in original). The apocalyptic fervour of their religious fundamentalism is a perversion, as well as an amplification, of the dynamics of the messianic time of orthodox Judaism, a temporality also seemingly characterised by a desire for end times, but in fact marked more by a perpetual back and forth of anticipation and deferral. 'Do you really feel like you're waiting for Messiah?', Landsman asks his partner Berko. '"It's Messiah", he replies, "What else can you do but wait?"' (Chabon, 2007: 127). In contrast, those behind the terrorist plot are men without, 'a talent for waiting' (Chabon, 2007: 339), intent on 'hasten[ing] the coming of Messiah' (Chabon, 2007: 344).

These apocalyptic and messianic temporalities, and the uneasy similarities between them, work in parallel to detective fiction's own brand of delayed revelation.[11] Detective novels can often seem similarly directed towards, as Theodore Martin puts it, 'a well-nigh utopian moment of absolute closure', their narrative twists and turns nothing but a means to an end (Martin, 2012: 166). 'Detective fiction's ending', Franco Moretti writes, 'is its end indeed, its solution in the true sense' (Moretti, 1983: 148). Like the bildungsroman, the detective novel has a telos hardwired. Once the case is solved, the novel is over: 'only the name of the murderer counts', Moretti writes (Moretti, 1983: 148). Yet in response, Martin argues that the detective novel is not so straightforwardly 'organized around the uncomplicated pleasures of the end', but rather is animated by 'the uncertain distance between expectation and fulfillment' (Martin, 2012: 167–8). Instead of the narrative being a mere means to a point of closure, it is precisely 'the affect of anticipation' and the 'specter of interminable delay' (Martin, 2012: 168) rendered acute by the 'waiting' for the case's solution that is the point of the genre. This waiting, Martin writes, 'situates meaning in time', and 'in the lag between reading and revelation', one 'feels not only the anticipation of narrative fulfillment but also the anguish of unfolding time' (Martin, 2012: 168). In *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, 'the wait' of the detective novel, and the reader's eagerness to skip beyond it, is shown in parallel to the messianic time of Judaism and the impatience of religious fundamentalists

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[11] On apocalyptic time in fiction, see Kermode (1966: 93–127).

who misunderstand its characteristic delay and deferral; their utopianism instead resembles a kind of nihilism, apocalyptic in its anxiety and fervour. More interested in forms of waiting than ending, and more concerned with complex longings than absolute resolutions, the points of closure the novel does offer are deliberate disappointments, and feel like failures: Landsman solves the case, for instance, but its significance already seems long superseded by the political events unfolding beyond his control. Instead, the novel veers away from the detective novel genre altogether, and ends, awkwardly, with the resolution of a marriage-plot, Landsman reuniting with his estranged wife. So off-key is the ending that it serves only to highlight where the novel's true interest lies: not in the simplistic utopianism of case-closed and happily ever after, but in the unpredictable and evocative time of suspension and anticipation that has led us there.

By shifting our focus from the detective novel's ending to the 'waiting' that precedes it, Martin argues, Chabon draws our attention to the time of reading itself, a time in which the categories of '"now", "then", and "later" become uncannily intertwined, when the easy identification of beginnings and ends is unceremoniously undone' (Martin, 2012: 180). This compound temporality – 'neither proleptic nor periodizable' (Martin, 2012: 180) – does not nullify the sense of anticipation upon which the detective novel had seemed to be constructed, so much as reconfigure our understanding of that anticipation, giving rise to what Martin calls, quoting Walter Benjamin, an 'altered form of […] expectation' (Martin, 2012: 182). 'Waiting', Martin writes, 'need not mark […] a refusal of all hopes for the future' (Martin, 2012: 179), but it does call for a different understanding of hope, one open, like Muñoz's sense of 'potentiality', to failure and disappointment, and to the unpredictability of the future.

In exploring the form of the novel through generic experimentation, Chabon elaborates the novel's potential to evoke these disparately elegiac and anticipatory temporalities. Failure has been one of the ways in which Chabon has approached this idea: Art's failure to grow up in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*; Landsman's failure to satisfactorily solve his case in *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*; and the sense of failure limning the strangely utopian project of *Say It in Yiddish*. Each of these failures, to differing degrees, has opened up an unconventional horizon of hope,

in which an alternative futurity is gestured toward, a sense of possibility beyond 'generic' expectations hinted at. Chabon's fullest exploration of failure is to be found in *Fountain City,* a novel he failed to finish. Begun in 1987, Chabon worked solidly on *Fountain City* for five years, amassing some 1500 pages of draft material, but was unable to complete it. Some years later, he began annotating the most recent draft, in the hope of 'extract[ing] some valuable lesson' from his mistakes; but this project, too, ended in failure, with Chabon only completing annotations to four chapters, themselves incomplete. These chapters were eventually published as a stand-alone 93-page booklet in an issue of the journal *McSweeney's* in 2010, along with Chabon's annotations on facing pages, and accompanied by a new preface, two appendices, and a 'partial postscript' (Chabon, 2010: 78).

I detail *Fountain City*'s convoluted composition and publication because the critical dilemmas that arise from it are instructive. When we write of *Fountain City*, for instance, are we referring to the abandoned novel written by Chabon between 1987–1992, or to the draft material from that time contained in the *McSweeney's* text from 2010, or to the *McSweeney's* text in its entirety, inclusive of the preface, and other textual apparatus, or to a shifting amalgam of all of the above? That is to say, to what extent do we treat the *McSweeney's* booklet as a textual artifact in and of itself, belonging both to 1992 and 2010, a 'new' text, as well as an 'old' one? What is dramatised in this formal ambiguity is something like Martin's sense of the compound and fractured time of reading itself; and these questions seem important, given the text's thematic interest in delay, incompleteness, and failure. The title page of the booklet leaves the issue deliberately opaque: 'Fountain City, a novel, wrecked by Michael Chabon' announces the novelty of Chabon's project, and perhaps cautions those who expect simply extracts from an old manuscript. A 'wrecker', as Chabon glosses the term in a footnote, is not only 'one who causes a wreck', but also 'one who […] works upon' a wrecked vessel, either 'for the purpose for plunder', or to 'save' the vessel or its property (Chabon, 2010). 'Wrecker' therefore denotes a more contested creative role than, say, 'author' or 'editor':[12] the designation refers not only

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[12] Chabon edited a volume of short genre stories for *McSweeney's* (see Chabon [2003]).

to Chabon's writing of the original novel – the 'vessel' he wrecked by never finishing it – but also to his subsequent failed project of annotation – an attempt, perhaps, both to 'plunder' and 'save' the vessel – and positions the text's current iteration as another kind of 'wreck', one that incorporates both of the above. What Chabon draws attention to in his definition of 'wrecker', then, is the interplay of destruction and salvaging the term carries: rather than moving steadily towards a defined telos – a completed novel, say – to wreck is both to ruin and to save, and it thus offers an idea of failure itself as a kind of creative act. *Fountain City* is also the text in which Chabon most directly addresses the question of the prominence of queer characters in his fiction. Like all of his published novels, Chabon realises, *Fountain City* also depicts a kind of friendship between a gay and a straight man. Chabon devotes two long footnotes to the topic, and yet he fails to offer any kind of real explanation, and ultimately, as I indicated at the start of the essay, feigns ignorance as to why gay characters should be so prevalent in his fiction. This failure to resolve the question of his characters' queerness seems to echo back to the structural incompleteness and formal open-endedness of the text itself.

In his preface, Chabon suggests two twinned points of origin for the idea of the novel back in 1987, both of which suggest that the book was destined to fail from the start. The first is an encounter with a watercolour by Leon Krier, an architect 'famed for his unrealized visions of ideal cities' (Chabon, 2010: ii). Chabon comes across Krier's imaginary cityscape – which envisions an alternate Washington D.C. – in a copy of Charles Jenks's *What is Post-Modernism?*, and the feeling that the painting engenders is, Chabon suggests, quintessentially postmodern: 'a sense of longing for a place that never quite came into being' (Chabon, 2010: iii). For Chabon, Krier's 'idealized, impossible' vision of Washington was 'linked in [his] mind' to his hometown, the 'planned community' of Columbia, Maryland, a 'Broken Utopia' founded upon a 'dream of racial equality and ecumenical existence' (Chabon, 2010: ii–iii). As with Krier's vision of Washington, however,' Columbia was never to know completion, at least in the form its original planners so fervently imagined' (Chabon, 2010: iii). Like, *Fountain City*, Chabon implies, it exists only as a kind of evocative failure.

Chabon's postmodern sense of loss over a city that 'never quite came into being' recalls Svetlana Boym's theorisation of a nostalgia that is 'prospective rather than retrospective, a kind of future perfect with a twist', a nostalgia not 'for the idealized past, but only for its many potentialities that have not been realized' (Boym, 2001: 167–8). Looking forward by looking back, Boym recovers a valence of utopianism from nostalgia that renders it as much about the future as the past.[13] The draft chapters of *Fountain City* also play with variations of utopianism. The protagonist Harry Klezmer grows up in a town much like Columbia, and invents imaginary cities much like those dreamt up by Krier, writing novels about, and drawing maps of, the planet 'Palindrome' (Chabon, 2010: 27). Klezmer's father, a rabbi, travels to Israel as part of an effort to rebuild the temple, a precursor to the terrorist plot in *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, and one which again figures the messianic time of Judaism as a kind of shadow utopianism. A clear comparison is drawn between the elusive city of Krier's watercolor and the incomplete Jewish temple, but it is also clear that the former is more appealing to Chabon than the latter. Harry's feelings toward Israel, in fact, closely resemble Chabon's own. Harry knows that 'as a Jew his feeling ought to be commensurate and deep', but in fact 'Israel was the [country] he had never felt the slightest desire to see', 'far less interesting' to him that the imaginary topography of 'Palindrome' (Chabon, 2010: 37), just as Chabon is more interested in the failed utopianism of Columbia, Maryland.

In the preface, Chabon tries to pin down some concrete 'lessons' that can be taken from his inability to finish the novel – such as, 'write smaller books' (Chabon, 2010: v) – suggesting that this is the proper response to failure. 'Our greatest duty as artists and as human beings', he writes, 'is to pay attention to our failures […] to learn from our mistakes' (Chabon, 2010: v). The unusual portentousness of Chabon's phrasing and the banality of the sentiment should alert us to the fact that his tongue is very much in his cheek, and that his 'sincerity' is equivocal.

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[13] Matt Kavanagh's excellent essay also draws upon Boym's theorisation of nostalgia, and delineates a similar utopian affect at play in *Telegraph Avenue* (2012) to that which I discuss. Kavanagh also sketches a connection between *Fountain City* and *Telegraph Avenue*, and as such my discussion might be read as an addition to his analysis (see Kavanagh [2014]).

Chabon's checklist of lessons soon unravels – writing shorter books turns out to be bad advice, given the sizeable length (and success) of *Kavalier & Clay* – and he reports that his attempt to annotate the novel, 'in the hope that others might learn from […] my mistakes', has been waylaid: 'more pressing obligations intruded', he writes, 'and so in that effort, too […] I failed' (Chabon, 2010: viii). Rather than neat resolutions, the novel stands as an open-ended failure, existing in a suspended state of wreckage, evoking, to recall Boym's phrase 'many potentialities that have not been realized'. This feeling is what the text, as it appears in *McSweeney's*, attempts to evoke formally. As such, Chabon suggests in his 'partial postscript', the novel may finally, in its 'fruitful incompletion', have been 'steered to its intended destination' (Chabon, 2010: 79).[14] As he writes in the preface, 'nothing succeeds like failure' (Chabon, 2010: viii).

   Failure might seem like an odd concept with which to end a discussion of such a critically and commercially successful novelist; but throughout his work Chabon has been interested in unconventional endings.[15] Thinking about the endings Chabon's books reach and fail to reach offers one way in which we can see how his work has concerned itself with what a novel can resolve, and in imagining what a novel might offer other than resolution. In troubling gender, genre, and indeed Jewishness, Chabon cultivates a creative liminality as a means by which to test and reconfigure notions of belonging and identity, and to refute the critical predilection for clear-cut categorisation. In exploring the peculiar and unsteady temporalities to which the novel might be stretched – temporalities, I have suggested, that we can think of as variously marked as queer and Jewish – Chabon's fiction experiments in what kind of futures the novel can evoke, futures beyond the bounds of heteronormativity, nationalism, religion, and, often, possibility.

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14 It should be noted that Chabon does in fact offer a final piece of advice: 'Marry a strong, talented, vocal articulate, and above all persuasive reader' (Chabon, 2010: 80). This no doubt sincere but rather pat ending recalls the awkward romantic curtain call to *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. It feels an equally unconvincing point of closure.

15 Mike Witcombe is the first to note the prominence of failure as an idea in Chabon's work (see Witcombe [2014]).

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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