Interrogating History or Making History? Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, DeLillo's Libra, and the Shaping of Collective Memory

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INTERROGATING HISTORY OR MAKING HISTORY? VONNEGUT’S
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, DELILLO’S LIBRA, AND THE SHAPING OF
COLLECTIVE MEMORY

by

Mark Spencer Mills

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
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December 2006
of a thesis submitted by

Mark Spencer Mills

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by a majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

INTERROGATING HISTORY OR MAKING HISTORY? VONNEGUT’S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, DELILLO’S LIBRA, AND THE SHAPING OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Mark Spencer Mills

Department of English

Master of Arts

In the wake of the post-structuralist skepticism of language and language’s ability to represent reality, the philosophy of history has likewise been questioned, since we gain our knowledge and understanding of the past primarily through language—through written and spoken testimony, and through subsequent historiography. Various post-structuralist critics have pointed out that history is never entirely recoverable, but accessible only indirectly through what is written and documented about it. What is written and documented is in turn determined by the contents and the nature of the archive.

What we know about history is largely mediated and limited by the problems inherent in the archive. In my thesis, I point out and examine three separate problems that collectively comprise the overall problem of the archive: the problem of linguistic representation, the problem of memory, and the problem of narrative. I examine these
problems as they relate to literature. Much postmodern literature dealing with history is self-consciously aware of itself and history as human constructs, and it uses this ironical self-awareness as a means of exploring the nature of historiography. In my thesis, I examine two works in particular: *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *Libra* by Don DeLillo. I use my examination of these two novels as a means of analyzing the relationship between fiction and the epistemology of history. In my analysis, I point out the tendency of much postmodern fiction to paradoxically question supposedly veridical accounts of history while simultaneously asserting the truthfulness of certain aspects of their own historical accounts. Ultimately, I examine the role of fiction in creating our collective memory of the past.
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Chapter 1
History, Literature, and the Shaping of Collective Memory

I.

“In order that history may be possible, language has been given to
man.”—Martin Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”

In his introduction to *A New Philosophy of History*, Hans Kellner observes,

“During the last twenty years, the nature of reflection about history has changed in ways
that are both obvious and subtle. The primary philosophical emphasis upon historical
explanation which had relied heavily on models that were either logical or sociological
has broadened to include a far wider range of literary devices” (1). History as a discipline
has struggled for decades to assert itself as a legitimate scientific discipline whose
methodology results in a truthful, veridical account of the past. In the past, as Kellner
points out, historians have employed logical and sociological models—or, at the very
least, the terminology of such models—to conduct and talk about their research. Their
reason for doing so was clear: they hoped that just as the scientific empiricism and
experimentation of disciplines in the “hard sciences” result in scientific truths, so too
could studies in history result in a truthful representation of the past. This approach to the
study of history can be traced to the work of the influential 19th century German historian
Leopold von Ranke, who embraced and propagated a scientific approach to the study of
history. Ranke believed that archival research was paramount and that primary sources
should be consulted whenever possible. He believed that history is in fact accessible, but
only if it can be revealed through the close and objective scrutiny of documents. As historian Elizabeth Clark writes of Ranke, “[W]here there are no documents, he claimed, there can be no history. A philosophical approach to history was anathema to him” (10). Ranke believed that by analyzing documents, and the attendant facts and clues contained therein, historians could uncover and present an accurate, factual, and objective account of history. In fact, Ranke is famously quoted as arguing that a historian’s objective is to present history “as it actually happened” (quoted in Clark 9). In addition to establishing a formal methodology for conducting historical research, Ranke also introduced a format and forum for propagating his method of research by instituting the seminar-style teaching arrangement in German universities. Both his approach to conducting historical research as well as his approach to teaching it began to gain transatlantic acceptance as German university-trained professors began teaching in prominent U.S. universities in the late 1800s. The idea that a history-as-science approach to historical inquiry could uncover objective and factual truth about the past was thus fairly common among turn of the century American scholars.

The emergence of post-structuralism in the 1960s, however, questioned the legitimacy of traditional historical methods, ideas, and philosophies. Interestingly, it has been the work of theorists outside the discipline of history that has effected this shift in our perception of the legitimacy of historical representation. The work of philosophers and cultural critics such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Paul Ricoeur has highlighted some of the problems inherent in any attempt at historical representation. Many of these problems stem from the literary aspects of historiography¹.

¹ The term “historiography” has multiple meanings when used in critical discourse. Historiography is in one sense a study of the history of the way history has been written about. In another sense, the term simply
Kellner observes that historical practices have expanded to include a “wider range of literary devices” (1). While this is probably true, what some of the aforementioned theorists point out is that this isn’t merely a recent trend—literary devices have to some extent always characterized historiographies. As influential American historian Carl Becker points out, early literary works—Homer’s *Iliad*, for example—were considered meaningful representations of history: “For the Greeks the *Iliad*...was history, story, and scripture all in one. Such differentiating terms are of course misleading, since we may be fairly sure that the early Greeks made no such distinctions” (“Historiography” 27). The Greeks clearly saw no problem with employing literary devices in their representations of history; they seemed to recognize intuitively that it’s nearly impossible to engage in historiographical writing without using the methods of fiction. The post-modern critics likewise recognize the literary aspects of historiography, but they are more critical of this style of historiography, pointing out the problems in employing literary devices in the representation of history.

It should be noted that technically there are some types of historical writing that don’t use literary devices. Hayden White, who has written extensively on the relationship between literature and history, identifies three types of historical representation, the first two of which are less prone to using literary devices in their representation of history: the annals, the chronicle, and the history proper (4). The annals type of representation is simply a list of events in chronological order; the chronicle approximates a narrative form but lacks closure; and the history proper is narrative historiography, complete with a narrative plot structure that has closure. Of the three forms of historical representation,

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denotes (as the etymology of the word would suggest) the writing of history. It is this latter definition that I intend whenever I deploy the term in this project.
this third form is most likely to employ literary techniques. Though the annals form of representation used to be a typical form of historical documentation—White gives an actual example from 8th century A.D.—the history proper is currently the most prevalent form of historical representation. When a student picks up a history book, she sees more than a mere list of events—she beholds a story rife with plot developments, descriptive prose, and antagonists and protagonists. The line between historical fiction and historiography is thus blurred, and the historiography becomes an aesthetic object akin to literature. Scholars and writers have, to an extent, always recognized the literary nature of historiography. But only in recent decades have critics, scholars, and writers of fiction alike self-consciously addressed the epistemological problems inherent in such a model of history.

In order to understand some of the deeper implications of this proposition, it is important to understand the process of creating a historiography. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur identifies and succinctly explains three phases in the process of producing a historiography: “The epistemological course embraces the three phases of the historiographical operation; from the stage of witnessing and of the archives, it passes through the usages of ‘because’ in the figures of explanation and understanding; it ends on the scriptural level of the historian’s representation of the past” (Memory xvi). The first phase, which he sometimes refers to as the “documenting phase,” is the initial phase in which information is gathered and compiled. Witnesses testify, testimonies are written down, and the written documents are archived and interpreted. This archival process, which has drawn much critical attention, is an issue of such import that I will discuss it in detail in the next section of this introductory chapter. The second phase of the
historiographical operation is the phase in which causality is ascribed to events documented in the archive. Identifying cause/effect relationships in history is one of the most difficult and problematic tasks of the historiographer, especially when the cause of an event is not known. When a historiographer says, for example, “Oswald shot Kennedy because…” he is on very shaky epistemological ground indeed. The simple word “because” carries with it an authority and power that is capable of shaping cultural perception of a historical event. Admittedly, it must be acknowledged that assigning causality is not restricted to Ricoeur’s second phase, since such assigning of causality also occurs in the documenting phase in the way witnesses choose to interpret and assign meaning to their experiences. The potential for ascribing inaccurate causality is increased, however, when the causality is determined by someone who did not directly witness the event being explained. The third phase, which overlaps some with the second, is the phase in which the event is put into words and the historiography is actually created. The latter two phases of the historiographical process suggest various problems, foremost of which is the problem of linguistic representation, which is the problem of trying to get a present signifier to perfectly represent an absent thing. At a fundamental linguistic level, as de Saussure observed, there is never an exact correspondence between signifier and signified, i.e. it is never possible to exactly represent something with language (Saussure 647). That misrepresentations should result from this lack of correspondence between signifier and signified is inevitable and inescapable.

Ironically, it is the ability of language to give the impression of fixed meaning that makes it so dangerous and vulnerable to misuse. Heidegger, perhaps influenced by
structuralism but writing before the height of deconstruction and post-structuralism, gives this prescient observation about language:

> It is language which first creates the manifest conditions for menace and confusion to existence, that is to say—danger [. . .] Language has the task of making manifest in its work the existent, and of preserving it as such. In it, what is purest and what is most concealed, and likewise what is complex and ordinary, can be expressed in words. (760)

Though not directly addressing the issue of historical representation in this passage, Heidegger nonetheless effectively articulates one of the primary post-modern concerns of historians, literary theorists, and philosophers: the power of representation that inheres in language, a power to fix meaning and give the impression of verisimilitude. Language, argues Heidegger, is so dangerous because it creates the possibility of existence, and, by implication, the possibility of non-existence. Reality is ephemeral, existing only in the present; once passed, an event exists (in Baudrillardian terms) in simulacrum only—it becomes an approximation, a copy of the event, but not the event itself (Baudrillard 2). Such simulacra assume various forms, all of them based in representation by means of image or language—memory, testimony or historiography. An event, once passed, exists only in the memories of those who beheld it, or in some sort of written account of the event. It is language which persists and gives access to the past and mediates our relationship with the past. It is language which determines what is remembered and what is forgotten, and, furthermore, how what is selected for remembrance is remembered. It is in this sense that language constitutes a “menace and confusion to existence.” Language is dangerous indeed. Imagine the historical distortions and erasures that would result if all
documented accounts of the Holocaust were destroyed, or had never been written. It is language which determines the existence, and the manner of existence, of historical events.

Given the power of language to fix perception and knowledge of past events, participants in historical discourse have a responsibility to represent, as accurately as possible, the reality of the past. This can be difficult to do, however, since historiographers frequently deal with limited, incomplete, or ambiguous archival material. The inconclusive nature of archival material allows historiographers dangerous latitude in their interpretation and presentation of historical data. This becomes problematic because an individual historiographer’s personal opinions, biases, and ideologies shape the way he reconstructs and represents historical events. The historiographical project thus takes a rhetorical turn. In fact, Hans Kellner argues that historical writing is inescapably persuasive in nature: “[H]istory can be redescribed as a discourse that is fundamentally rhetorical, and that representing the past takes place through the creation of powerful, persuasive images which can be best understood as created objects, models, metaphors, or proposals about reality” (2). Kellner points out that all historical discourse exerts a rhetorical influence. Aristotle defined rhetoric simply as “the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation” (qtd. in Corbett and Connors 1). When a historiographer reconstructs a historical account, he does so with an eye to which images and which pieces of information will best persuade his audience to assume his view of the historical event. There is a rhetorical power inherent in the ability to wield language and information. This power resides also in the ability to access, control, manipulate, and assimilate archival material. It is therefore necessary to examine the
nature and significance of the concept of the archive, which has increasingly become a subject of critical inquiry in recent years.

II.

Postmodern scholar Linda Hutcheon poses the key concern of historiographers thus: “How can the present know the past it tells?” (Politics 69). The answer to this question leads to a discussion of the archive, which involves all of the raw materials out of which history is constructed. The French historian Pierre Nora comments on the obsessive need to document and archive that is in his view one of the distinguishing features of our time:

Specialists estimate that in the public archives alone, in just a few decades, the quantitative revolution has multiplied the number of records by one thousand. No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own, not only by volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal of history. The sacred is invested in the trace that is at the same time its negation. It becomes impossible to predict what should be remembered [. . .] (13-14)

Nora argues that amidst this proliferation of archival materials, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between major and minor events, to determine what is
essential, what needs to be remembered. But archives are nonetheless important, for Ranke-influenced historians have simply assumed that archival evidence represents a sound and valid means of accessing the past. But employing a phrase such as “accessing the past” is misleading, since the past is not directly accessible. Rather, it is indirectly accessible through the textual traces and artifacts that comprise the archive. Archival artifacts take many forms—public documents, newspapers, eyewitness accounts, photographs and, more recently, video footage—but one of the key characteristics of much archival material (with the exception of photographs and video footage) is that it relies heavily upon language to represent historical truth.

Language here takes two forms: spoken language, in the form of verbal eyewitness accounts; and textual language, in the form of written depictions of events. First hand accounts, though more reliable than secondary written accounts, are nevertheless problematic for two reasons. First, they rely upon memory, which itself has come under question. Recent empirical research has revealed the reliability of human memory to be dubious at best, with recall of an event becoming less accurate the more temporally distanced from the event the individual becomes². Second—and this is the larger problem with eyewitness accounts—the eyewitnesses die and their testimonies, unless preserved, are lost. Primary access to a historical event, mediated by those individuals who personally witnessed the event, cannot exist forever—can only exist, in fact, until the last remaining witness is dead. Thus arises the necessity of textualizing the event before the eyewitness is gone. The written documentation of an event is the attempt to preserve in concrete form something that is inherently abstract: the past.

Writing about history is an act of reification, and therefore an act of preservation. Writing

² See, for example, the work Elizabeth Loftus, especially Eyewitness Testimony
makes concrete that which is abstract—it makes memory and testimony tangible and capable of being preserved. Paul Ricoeur defines the archive strictly in terms of that which is written. He refers to the transition from verbal testimony to written document “the moment of the inscription of testimony” (*Memory* 146). This moment is, in Ricoeur’s mind, the moment when words become part of the archive. He writes, “The moment of the archive is the moment of the entry into writing of the historiographical operation. Testimony is by origin oral. It is listened to, heard. The archive is written. It is read, consulted. In archives, the professional historian is a reader” (*Memory* 166). The archive, then, consists of written documents and artifacts, as opposed to oral testimonies. Once something is written down, it can be preserved and can be remembered, though it of course is preserved in a form separate from the original context.

But who determines what is remembered and what isn’t? Which events are worthy of preservation? Who controls the archive? In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin argues that *everything* must be remembered. He writes, “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (254). In theory Benjamin may be correct, but in practice much of what has happened in this world is passed over by historians and is therefore “lost for history” (254). Pierre Nora once proclaimed in exasperation, “Archive as much as you like: something will always be left out” (qtd. in Ricoeur, *Memory* 169). A key issue involves who is granted the power to leave things out.

In order to understand the power structures inherent in the concept of the archive, we need to broaden the conventional definition of the archive in order to include some of
the theoretical conceptualizations of the term. It is important to analyze this term because, as historian Francis Blouin argues, “what constitutes the archive has become a question fundamental to how our knowledge of the past is acquired and shaped” (296). Any analysis of how history is constructed reveals the systems of power inherent in societal structures.

I have already discussed conventional notions of the archive— notions that situate the archive in an actual place involving actual documents. But in recent decades the notion of the archive has come to signify much more than simply file rooms in which written documents are stored. The concept of the archive includes not merely the information stored in such file rooms, but the sociopolitical forces that allow the archive to exist and determine what form of expression the archive can assume. In short, these forces control the epistemology of history— our understanding of what has happened in this world, and why. Foucault gives this description of the archive:

> The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events [. . .] The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as an escapee; it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the system of enunciability. (129, Foucault’s emphasis)

For Foucault, the archive is an abstract law, a social force, that dictates what can be said and what can’t. He situates his definition squarely in the realm of the abstract, arguing
that the archive doesn’t exist in institutions. It is not a physical location or document; it is the law which dictates what can be enunciated.

Unlike Foucault, who views the archive entirely as an abstract law of enunciation, other theorists concede that the archive is an actual physical place as well as a power. Ricoeur writes, “The archive thus presents itself as a physical place that shelters the destiny of that kind of trace I have so carefully distinguished from the cerebral trace and the affective trace, namely, the documentary trace. But the archive is not just a physical or spatial place, it is also a social one” (167). Ricoeur wisely defines the archive as consisting of both an actual physical location (after all, archival documents have to exist somewhere) and the attendant sociopolitical forces that determine who can access and interpret the archive.

Jacques Derrida, in a recent study on the concept of the archive, locates the archive’s power in its etymological origins. Through an etymological analysis of the word “archive,” Derrida points out that the term originally carried a duel denotation: it referred to a place where things commence, as well a place where some sort of authority commands. In the Greek, the archive referred to:

a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home [. . .] that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded
Derrida’s analysis of the archive stresses location and hermeneutic power. In other words, the archive refers to the actual place where official documents are stored, as well as the individuals (called archons) who, due to a privileged political status in society, wield the power to control, protect and, most important, interpret the archive. This power to guard and interpret the archive constitutes what Derrida calls the archontic power. Subsequent chapters of this study will look at the ways certain novelists have analyzed the concept of archive, while at the same time contributing to the archive and exercising their own form of archontic power.

III.

In order to more fully understand the implications of the archontic power, one additional problem relative to historical representation needs to be addressed: the problem of narrative. This problem manifests itself especially in the second and third phases of the historiographical operation. In the second phase, in which causality is ascribed to historical events, this linking of events together with cause/effect relationships imposes a narrative explanation on them. The third phase, the scriptural phase in which history is forced into words, deals even more directly with the issue of narrative. Ricoeur, in his extended study of the relationship between temporality and narrative representation, argues that history is based in narrative, and that history cannot even exist without narrative. He writes, “[I]f history were to break every connection to our basic competence for following a story and to the cognitive operations constitutive of our narrative understanding [. . .] it would lose its distinctive place in the chorus of social
sciences. It would cease to be historical” (*Time* 91). Narrative, then, for Ricoeur, is essential to history, and not necessarily a problem. Hayden White agrees, arguing that narrative is so inextricably interwoven into the fabric of our lives—so imbedded in the way we perceive, construct and talk about our world—that it is inescapable. White explains, “Far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling” (1). White is correct in asserting that narrative is inevitable and inescapable, but I am reluctant to accept his argument that narrative is not at all problematic. While White defends narrative as a means of making sense of unordered knowledge, he overlooks the distortions that result from selectively shoe-horning information into a rigid narrative structure.

Many theorists are not as supportive of narrative as White and Ricoeur. The cultural historian Walter Ong, for example, argues that there is nothing natural about narrative structures: “You do not find climactic linear plots ready-formed in people’s lives, although real lives may provide material out of which such a plot may be constructed by ruthless elimination of all but a few carefully highlighted incidents” (140). He goes on to point out that “real life is more like a string of episodes than it is like a Freytag pyramid” (145). Ong argues that a contrived plot following this pattern is not reflective of real life. This raises the issue, explored in some detail by Hayden White in *The Content of the Form*, of whether plot structures occur naturally in real life. In other words, to use White’s terminology, are narratives found or constructed? To some extent, the legitimacy of historical representation is contingent upon the answer to this question.

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3 The Freytag pyramid, of course, is the model which illustrates the dramatic plot structure (including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement) outlined by Gustav Freytag, based on his analysis of Greek and Shakespearean drama.
If narratives are constructed, then the truths and realities they convey are to some extent constructed as well. Hutcheon, like Ong, is critical of narrative, arguing that it is unnatural and “totalizing.” She writes, “[W]e have seen that narrative has come to be acknowledged as, above all, a human-made structure—never as natural or given” (*Politics* 59). She argues that imposing a narrative structure has a “totalizing” effect on the event being represented in narrative form. She explains what she means by the term “totalizing”: “The function of the term totalizing, as I understand it, is to point to the process (hence the awkward ‘ing’ from) by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified—but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them” (59).

One of the common themes put forth by these theorists, regardless of whether they support or condemn narrative, is the power of narrative to establish meaning, to make an otherwise unintelligible mass of information intelligible. Narrative is a universal means of “render[ing] [. . .] materials coherent,” and is employed by historians and novelists alike. In fact, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, narrative is the primary means that novelists have of legitimizing their historical accounts, since their narratives give their accounts meaning that is in some cases lacking in the historical record.

IV.

One of the key trends in postmodern literature is the persistent questioning of conventional notions of how historical knowledge is constructed. Drawing upon the work of Foucault and others, many literary theorists have felt compelled to examine the relationship of literature to history and vice versa. Linda Hutcheon in particular has explored the ways in which postmodern theory and historical fiction have altered our
understanding of how history is constructed and raised serious epistemological concerns regarding our ability to accurately know and understand the past. She articulates some of the key questions raised by postmodern theory and literature: “How can the present know the past it tells? [ . . . ] Must a historical account acknowledge where it does not know for sure or is it allowed to guess? Do we know the past only through the present?” (Politics 69). The types of postmodern novels that self-referentially examine their own role in the construction of history constitute what Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. This distinctly postmodern genre of literature, Hutcheon explains, is literature whose “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human construct [ . . . ] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (Poetics 5). If history as well as fiction has come to be considered a human construct, then how do we distinguish between the two?

Although the lines between fiction and non-fiction, between historiography and historical novel, and between signifier and signified have blurred, novelists and historians still perform distinct roles in society. The question becomes which role we esteem more, and which enterprise contributes more to our collective memory. It goes for most people without saying that a historian’s account of the past should reflect the reality of that past more accurately than that of a novelist. But does a historian’s work actually do more to shape collective memory of an event? Aristotle, commenting on the different roles of historians and poets, makes an interesting distinction: “The difference [between the historian and the poet] is that one tells of what has happened, and the other of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths,
history treats the particular facts” (qtd. in Malpas 61). Aristotle, writing before the advent
of either the historiography or the novel, compares history with the prominent creative
literary genre of his time: poetry. His argument still holds when history is contrasted with
literature in general. History supposedly deals with particular facts, while literature is
“concerned with universal truths.” The implication is that a work of literature—say, a
historiographic novel—doesn’t need to get its particular facts right, as long as it deals
with universal truth. Aristotle’s quote thus raises a discussion of actual truth vs. literary
truth. Is it ethical for a work of historiographical metafiction to deliberately fudge
historical details in order to accomplish a noble rhetorical purpose? Given the tendency
of the general public to accept historical fiction as a legitimate means of learning about
history “as it actually happened,” and given the role of popular fiction in shaping
collective memory, novelists must exercise great caution in representing history.

Historians have less latitude than novelists in terms of being able to deliberately
fudge facts, and some critics have argued that shifts in a philosophy of history haven’t
really influenced the methodology of historians. Nancy Partner, for example, argues:

The theoretical destabilizing of history achieved by language-based modes
of criticism has had no practical effect on academic practice because
academics have had nothing to gain and everything to lose by dismantling
their special visible code of evidence-grounded reasoning and opening
themselves to the inevitable charges of fraud, dishonesty and shoddiness.

(22)

Partner is quite possibly correct in arguing that, in general, credible historians have
emerged fundamentally and methodologically unaffected from the post-structuralist
questioning of history. She asserts that, regardless of agenda or theoretical orientation, “all historians—Marxist, feminist, old historicist, new historicist, empiricist—still speak the same basic language of evidentiary syntax, logical grammar and referential semantics” (22). Nevertheless, this “same basic language” spoken by historians in order for the discipline to retain its academic credibility, is not a language spoken by novelists. Obviously, a novelist is not held to the same standards of historical accuracy as an academic. If a historian, concerned with the accurate presentation of “facts,” deliberately misconstrues, misrepresents, or changes those facts, he indeed finds himself subject to, in Partner’s words, the “inevitable charges of fraud, dishonesty, and shoddiness.” A novelist is less prone to having such charges levied against him, because, in that eventuality, he can always claim novelistic immunity. He can say, in essence, “But I write fiction. I don’t have to give an accurate representation of things.”

While historians hold themselves to a higher level of academic integrity than novelists, their work is somewhat less accessible than that of novelists. The general public is more likely to read a historical novel than a scholarly monograph. The work of artists, more so than that of historians, ends up shaping our collective memory of history. Since this project will ultimately explore the relationship between historical fiction and collective memory, it is important to consider a number of issues regarding collective memory—what it is and, perhaps most important, which entities or institutions possess the ability to create and perpetuate collective memory in a society.

V.

In order to advance my discussion of collective memory and its relationship to fiction, and in light of the somewhat fuzzy and imprecise connotations the term
sometimes calls to mind, I will give a brief overview of the origin of the term as well as an explanation of how the term is generally used in contemporary critical discourse. I will then make clear how I mean to deploy the term in relation to historical fiction.

The concept of a collective memory is usually traced back to the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who first explored the concept in detail in *The Collective Memory* (1925). In this pioneering work on the nature of human memory, Halbwachs argued, contrary to the Freudian psychology prevalent during his time, that memory occurs not on an individual level but within the context of a larger social framework. According to Halbwachs, we need the help of others in order to remember the key events of our lives. The recollection of an event is a collective endeavor; in order to recall an event, we must do so with the aid of others who witnessed the event. In *On the Collective Memory*, a follow-up to *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs argues that such frameworks are essential to the process of memory: “No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections” (43). He goes on to discuss the various social frameworks that shape our memory, giving the most attention to families and religious organizations. For the most part, his theory was mostly confined to the field of social psychology, and was simple enough: we need others, in the context of a social framework, in order to remember. His theory applied first and foremost to memory of events experienced first-hand—events usually experienced in the presence of others who could provide the social framework for subsequent recollection of the events. According to Halbwachs, the very act of discussing the events with other witnesses enables the reconstruction and preservation of the experiences.
Collective memory, then, initially represented something that occurred on a very personal level involving only those individuals who directly experienced an event. The concept had broader implications, however, and has since been expanded to denote not just the way we rely on other people and social networks to help us remember the significant events of our own lives, but the way we as a culture or society collectively remember the significant events of our nation or world. This sort of collective memory is sometimes interchangeably referred to as cultural memory, social memory, public memory, or historical memory. In his introduction to *On Collective Memory*, editor and translator Lewis A. Coser comments on this broader category of memory:

> When it comes to historical memory, the person does not remember events directly; it can only be stimulated in indirect ways through reading or listening or in commemoration and festive occasions when people gathered together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members of the group. In this case, the past is stored and interpreted through social institutions. (24)

It is this broader category of collective memory that is germane to the present discussion, since I am concerned with the role of novelists in shaping the way historical events are preserved and remembered on a broad cultural level by people who for the most part were not physically present for the events but privy to them through linguistic representation. Barbie Zelizer, who conducted an in-depth study of the media's shaping of our nation's collective memory of the Kennedy assassination, describes the importance of this type of collective memory thus: “Collective memory reflects a group’s codified

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4 For the sake of consistency, and out of deference to Hawlbachs, I will employ the term collective memory throughout my thesis.
knowledge over time about what is important, preferred, and appropriate” (3). According to Zelizer, collective memory consists essentially of an organized arrangement of knowledge that is deemed relevant by a culture. That such a body of codified knowledge exists is somewhat self-evident; the question is one of determining who, or what societal entity or power, is responsible for the arrangement of the codified knowledge that is transmitted from generation to another and eventually coalesces into a unified collective memory. Certainly government organizations, academia, and the news media all shoulder some of the responsibility for the shaping of collective memory. This knowledge is additionally, and perhaps principally, arranged and codified by a society’s aesthetic producers. A study by social psychologists examining the relationship between art and collective memory concludes the following: “Works of art act as ‘external containers’ of emotions, beliefs, and attitudes toward the collective events of the past” (Igartua and Paez 99). These researchers argue that aesthetic artifacts contribute to the shaping of collective memory through their capacity to reflect the present ideas and feelings about the past, suggesting that “emotions, beliefs, and attitudes” have just as much to do with our understanding of the past as facts do. Indeed, the feeling and belief with which aesthetic works such as historical novels imbue their historical subjects shapes a reader’s perception of those historical subjects. In this way historical novels do indeed function as “external containers” of our feelings regarding past events.

VI.

This study then will examine the ways in which historiographic metafiction problematizes the issue of collective memory by becoming part of the archive. In order to highlight some of the principal theoretical issues plaguing postmodern studies of the
philosophy of history, I will look specifically at two novels: *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *Libra* by Don DeLillo. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a fictionalized but nonetheless highly autobiographical account of Vonnegut’s experience as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany towards the end of WWII, when allied forces fire-bombed Dresden into oblivion over the course of two days. At the time, Vonnegut and other POWs were being held in the underground meat locker of a slaughterhouse, and so survived the bombing. After the bombing, Vonnegut and the other prisoners emerged to behold a city in ruins. Some fifteen years later, Vonnegut sat down to write an account of the bombing of Dresden, a project that resulted in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Like *Libra*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* deals primarily with a historical event, though *Slaughterhouse-Five* is much more fictionalized than *Libra*, as evidenced by the outrageous science-fiction elements present in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Even though both novels are historical novels in the sense that they deal with an actual historical event, they differ in important ways that allow the books to illuminate different facets of the historiographical process. The biggest difference is the autobiographical element of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut experienced directly the event on which his book centers; DeLillo, on the other hand, wasn’t present at the Kennedy assassination. Due to this difference, *Slaughterhouse-Five* lends itself more to an examination of the problem of memory in historical representation, and my discussion of *Slaughterhouse-Five* will therefore focus primarily on issues of memory and testimony, though I will consider other issues as well.

The second novel I will examine is Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, a fictionalization of the Kennedy assassination. For various reasons, this event provides the perfect subject for an
examination of the archive. First, the Kennedy assassination is considered an event of major historical significance, an event that remains lodged the collective memory of our culture. It is, to use Foucauldian terminology, an event that constitutes a rupture or discontinuity in the American historical narrative, inasmuch as it changed and shaped the way Americans viewed their world and gave them a sense of the hidden forces at work behind the scenes of American politics. From that point on, Americans would associate politics and power with conspiracy. The second reason the Kennedy assassination is an ideal subject for an examination of the archive is that the investigation of the assassination produced a tremendous quantity of archival material, which resulted in the Warren Commission.

Third, paradoxically, despite the enormous quantity of archival material, many aspects of the assassination remain a mystery, open to speculation. Any narrative reconstruction of this event is plagued by either conflicting evidence or a lack of evidence, resulting in obvious and frustrating gaps in our knowledge of the event, its participants, and its causes. Any attempt to fill in the gaps, be it by speculative historians, Oliver Stone, or Don DeLillo, reveals the epistemological process historiographers employ to create historical knowledge.

Together, *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* highlight some of the key problems of the archive: the problem of linguistic representation, the problem of memory, and the problem of narrative. Like all works of historiographic metafiction, these novels are self-consciously aware of the problems inherent in the historiographic process. The self-conscious irony of these novels, however, is to some extent compromised by the decidedly sincere intents of the novels, since the novels clearly have vested interest in not

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5 I am referring, of course, to Stone’s own filmed fictionalization of the Kennedy assassination, *JFK*. 
just telling stories about history, but telling credible and persuasive stories about history. *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* present compelling and credible accounts of the bombing of Dresden and the assassination of Kennedy. Furthermore, given the willingness of the American public to cede archontic authority to historical novelists, these novels possess a great power to shape collective memory of these events. The novels represent the use of the archontic power to alter history by altering and solidifying our collective memory of it. They end up shaping our collective memory of these events by becoming part of the archive itself—part of that entity to which we turn for historical knowledge and understanding.
Chapter 2

*Slaughterhouse-Five*: Guardian and Enemy of the Archive

I.

In some ways, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be regarded as an embodiment of the postmodern preoccupation with memory. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, authors of *Literatures of Memory*, write, “Postmodernism is haunted by memory: memories of disaster, genocide, war, the Holocaust and [. . .] by the unrepresentable excess of these memories; and by the memory of memory itself” (81). Our collective memory of the bombing of Dresden, the central event of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, certainly constitutes the sort of haunting memory described by Middleton and Woods. And postmodern theory and literature do indeed seem preoccupied with the concept of memory and its relationship to history. Vonnegut’s novel deals with memory both on an individual level and on a collective level—it self-consciously reveals Vonnegut’s own struggles to remember his war experience, and it demonstrates how a written representation of history can inscribe itself into the fabric of collective memory.

In his recent work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur explores the relationship between memory and historical knowledge, arguing that memory is really the only means we have of recovering and preserving the past. Problematically, however, memory is imprecise and sometimes indistinguishable from the imagined details of our minds. Ricoeur writes:

> The constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of
faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory [. . .] And yet, we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it. Historiography itself, let us already say, will not succeed in setting aside the continually derided and continually reasserted conviction that the final referent of memory remains the past, whatever the pastness of the past may signify. (7)

Though incomplete and imperfect, memory is the only means we have besides physical artifacts to verify the existence of the past. Ricoeur further argues that memory, when documented, takes the form of history: “[T]estimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history” (21). Testimony is essentially shared memory. If memory is kept silent, it will become non-existent as soon as the memory-bearer dies; if, however, the memory is shared through oral or written testimony, it will be preserved. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel read by millions of Americans, Vonnegut has given written testimony of the bombing of Dresden, thus preserving the event the collective memory of our culture.

In his study, Ricoeur asks essentially the same question Maurice Hawlbachs asked: which pronoun should we use when we speak of memory? In other words, who is it that remembers, “I” or “We”? The answer is that memory occurs on both an individual level and a collective level, with individual memory being transformed into collective memory. *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrates the shift from “I” to “We” as it shows Vonnegut’s struggle to remember his war experience. Vonnegut ultimately overcomes this difficulty and is able to write his war novel, at which point his account of the bombing of Dresden helps shape our collective memory of that event.
In discussing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I would like to distinguish between two types of historical fiction: 1) fiction dealing with a historical event that draws directly from the memory of the author—that is, the event is directly observed by the author, and 2) fiction dealing with a historical event that is indirectly accessible because the author did not personally witness the event and is therefore distanced from it not only by time, but also by space, since the author didn’t experience the event first-hand. This second type of historical fiction is exemplified by *Libra*, the subject of the next chapter.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is an interesting example of a novelist writing about a historical event about which the author is able provide a first hand account. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which centers on the firebombing of Dresden towards the end of World War II, is Vonnegut’s fictionalization of his own war experience. Vonnegut was being held prisoner in Dresden at the time of its bombing and survived unscathed as a result of having taken cover in an underground slaughterhouse that protected him and other prisoners from the firebombing aboveground. Vonnegut tells his story by means of a fictional protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, who like Vonnegut witnesses the destruction of Dresden.

One of the more intriguing features of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is its choice in genre and narrative strategy: Why does Vonnegut choose to “fictionalize” his story by telling it primarily from the point of view of a third person protagonist, as opposed to telling the story himself, in the first person, in memoir form? The first chapter of the novel helps answer this question, since it is the only chapter told from Vonnegut’s perspective. The opening chapter is written in the first person, and the first person voice is Vonnegut’s (or at least the voice of a characterization of himself). The narrative voice switches to the
third person in chapter two and maintains that voice throughout the rest of the book. The interesting thing about chapter one is precisely that it is presented as a chapter of the novel proper, as opposed to an introduction or prologue. In a novel containing a protagonist whose name differs from that of the author, one might expect a section like the one Vonnegut labels chapter one to come in the form of an introduction. By telling the first chapter from his own point of view as opposed to Billy Pilgrim’s, Vonnegut effaces the distinction between fact and fiction and reveals one of the paradoxical conditions of much postmodern fiction: it simultaneously interrogates and asserts truth. Even while Vonnegut calls into question the validity of memory and historical representation, he attempts to assert some sort of claim to a truthful representation of the past. Vonnegut begins his novel with such an assertion:

> All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn’t his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I’ve changed all the names. (1)

Vonnegut asserts that the war parts of his novel are generally true in order to validate those parts of the novel, since other parts of the novel (i.e. the science fiction elements) are obviously not true and might otherwise call into question the authenticity of the war parts. In asserting the facticity of the war sections of the novel, Vonnegut suggests that he wants the reader to take his novel seriously, as a sincere and accurate depiction of what really happened in Dresden.
While Vonnegut does assert the facticity of his text, he also acknowledges the limitations of his memory when tells his friend, “I’m writing this book about Dresden. I’d like some help remembering stuff” (5). Vonnegut and his O’Hare sit down and together try to remember everything they can about the war. Vonnegut writes that “neither one of us could remember anything good,” just a mishmash of disconnected, random images of a guy with some wine and some Russian soldiers looting a clock factory. After reminiscing about these random, patchy memories, Vonnegut and O’Hare conclude, “That was about it for memories [. . .]” (17).

Even though Vonnegut admits the deficiencies of his memory, he nevertheless goes on to write his story, which calls into question the account’s veracity. We know, because he can’t accurately and comprehensively recall the entirety of his war experience, that he is forced to fill in gaps. He understands this and is honest about it, which may be the reason why he chooses to write his story as a novel rather than memoir. Nevertheless, he does assert that while specific details may be fictional, the broad outline of the story is accurate, true, and worth telling.

Vonnegut deems the story to be worth telling because it’s been marginalized. He writes of the bombing of Dresden, “It wasn’t a famous raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn’t know that, either. There hadn’t been much publicity” (12). Vonnegut recognizes that the bombing of Dresden, which he claims resulted in the deaths of 135,000 Germans (the exact number of casualties is a point of debate), has been marginalized, contained and, to an extent, prevented from entering society’s collective memory. This is in distinct contrast to the way society has chosen to remember the bombing of Hiroshima, which is
considered a turning point in human history, though (arguably) fewer people were killed in this bombing than in the bombing of Dresden. The difference, of course, is that Dresden was destroyed with conventional artillery, while Hiroshima was destroyed with the atom bomb, which constituted what Foucault might call a rupture or break in history—an event that causes discontinuity. In *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault discusses the totalizing function of imposing continuity on the past, and suggests that history should be viewed in terms of break, ruptures, and discontinuities. He writes, “The problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations” (5). In these terms, it clear that the introduction of the atom bomb constitutes a transformation in the way war is conducted, and in the way people view the state of the world.

II.

If indeed the fire-bombing of Dresden has been repressed and erased from our cultural memory, then by whom or what has this event been marginalized? A consideration of the concept of the archive, as outlined in the previous chapter, helps illuminate this question. Derrida’s etymological analysis of the word archive reveals an archontic power inherent in the concept of the archive—a power to control, guard, and interpret archival materials. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, inasmuch as it explores the way the bombing of Dresden has been interpreted, can be viewed as an examination of the archontic power.

Vonnegut first becomes aware of archontic power when, after the war, he is working on his book on Dresden (which becomes *Slaughterhouse-Five*) and contacts the
Air Force for information about the bombing. Vonnegut describes the response of the U.S. government to his inquiry:

I wrote the Air Force back then, asking for details about the raid on Dresden, who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on. I was answered by a man who, like myself, was in public relations. He said that he was sorry, but that the information was top secret still. I read the letter out loud to my wife, and I said, “Secret? My God—from whom?” (13-14)

It is clear from Vonnegut’s correspondence with the Air Force that the U.S. government is attempting to wield its archontic power, for the government is the entity that has access to important documents that might answer the questions posed by Vonnegut, and reveal the true circumstances of the bombing. As the guardian of this particular archive—the archive containing U.S. documents concerning the bombing of Dresden—the U.S. government has the power to reveal, conceal, and interpret archival material, and thus has power to construct and shape U.S. perception of history. The existence of other, separate archives calls into question the account of Dresden’s destruction (or lack thereof) given by the U.S. government, for other national archives exist. Germany has its own account of Dresden. Furthermore, eyewitness accounts like Vonnegut’s give yet another perspective. Vonnegut, when informed that information regarding the bombing of Dresden is top secret, is surprised, because to him (and to thousands of Germans) the whole thing is not a secret at all. To him, the event is real: he saw it happen.

One of the most heated debates surrounding the bombing of Dresden is the debate regarding the dubious motives behind the bombing. Reports from allied forces indicate
that they considered Dresden a strategically important military location, while others, including Vonnegut, see it differently. Vonnegut, for example, argues, “Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the allies bombed it until it burned and melted” (95). Frederick Taylor, in his recent work on the Dresden bombing, arrives at this conclusion:

The picture that emerged for me was not by any means one of an “innocent” city but of a normal functioning city (both in the universal sense and in the context of Nazi Germany), made extraordinary by its beauty. This is not to go to the other extreme and say that it “deserved” to be destroyed, but that it was by the standards of the time a legitimate military target. The question is whether enemy cities, necessarily containing large numbers civilians and fine buildings but also many vital sites of manufacturing, communications and services of great importance to that nation’s war effort, should be bombed despite the probability of high casualties among noncombatants. (xiii)

Taylor’s view is more nuanced than Vonnegut’s, considering both sides of the issue. Taylor hardly endorses the bombing of Dresden, but does acknowledge some of the reasons why the allied forces may have bombed Dresden. Vonnegut, on the other hand, argues that there existed no militarily justified reason for bombing Dresden.

Another hotly debated issue involves the exact number of civilians who were actually killed in the bombing. Casualty estimates vary widely, with reports ranging anywhere from 35,000 to 200,000. Such significant variation in these figures results from the dramatic influx of German civilian refugees in Dresden immediately prior to its
destruction. As Soviet troops marched towards Dresden, refugees fled before them, and many of them relocated in Dresden. David Irving, author of *The Destruction of Dresden*, acknowledges the difficulty in determining the death toll wrought by the bombing of Dresden, but suggests that the most reliable figure has been provided by the Dresden Bureau of Missing Persons, which indicates that the casualties numbered somewhere around 135,000 and included, in addition to German civilians, non-German refugees, foreign laborers, and prisoners of war (14).

Irving’s account of the bombing and the resulting casualties has been called into question by various critics. One historian, John Rossi, recently published an article impugning Irving’s account of the bombing of Dresden. He calls Irving’s casualty count a “careless calculation” and writes that “the real figure of 35,000 is terrible enough but far less than Irving had insisted upon” (165). Frederick Taylor gives in his book a detailed explanation of the dubious manner in which Irving arrived at his figure of 135,000, and Taylor’s research reveals that the true figure is indeed probably closer to 35,000 than 135,000. Taylor writes of the decades-long caustic dispute over the Dresden casualty count:

The macabre argument over the death toll at Dresden still continues. Evidence comes and goes, but there is a basic divide between those who agree that the figures were between twenty-five thousand and forty thousand, and those—still including Irving—who insist in the face of the documentary evidence that the deaths went into six figures, in some cases into several hundreds of thousands. (446)
My purpose in discussing the ongoing debates regarding the Dresden bombing is not to add my voice to the debates themselves. It is not my place or purpose in this thesis to submit an argument regarding the ethics of the allied bombing of Dresden or the bombing’s ultimate casualty count. I merely raise these issues because they reveal the complexities and ambiguities of the archive. The aforementioned debates result from differing interpretations of archival material, and in some instances the absence of archival material, which cause estimates regarding the real number of casualties to vary. As a result of this variation, the various documenters of the event liberally choose whichever estimate best serves their purpose. Irving and Vonnegut speak of the 135,000 figure as if it were indisputable fact. Others, such as Rossi and Taylor, choose the 35,000 low-end figure. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut cites the portion from Irving’s book containing the 135,000 figure, which is regarded in the cited passage not as a rough and uncertain estimate, but as verified fact. Vonnegut, a writer of fiction, gains added credibility by citing the work of Irving in his novel. This is significant because *Slaughterhouse-Five*—a novel—has become one of the definitive accounts of the bombing of Dresden, reaching a wider audience than non-fiction accounts by historians. Even Frederick Taylor acknowledges that for many years he “knew only the legend of Dresden,” having “learned of the city’s destruction principally through a work of fiction: Kurt Vonnegut’s acidly surreal masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five*” (xi). By propagating Irving’s possibly spurious figure of 135,000 casualties, *Slaughterhouse-Five* inscribes this figure into the fabric of our collective memory of the bombing of Dresden.

III.
I have discussed up to this point some of the problems associated with the archive, including the problem of memory and the problem of contradictory and ambiguous archival material. This latter problem will be explored in much greater detail in the next chapter’s examination of *Libra*. It is important to consider one last aspect of the archive in order to understand how Vonnegut distorts his account of his war experience.

Archival material exists as a conglomeration of documents, memories, and testimonies. In order to reconstruct an event, it is necessary to assemble archival material in such a way that a cohesive, continuous account is constructed. In other words, it is necessary to fit the archival material into a narrative structure. Linda Hutcheon writes, “Whether it be in historical or fictional representation, the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle, and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order” (*Politics* 59). She speaks of narrative as a mechanism of totalization, by which she means “the process [. . .] by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified—but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them” (*Politics* 59).

Vonnegut self-consciously struggles with this totalizing process in the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He knows what material he has to work with, and he understands the narrative conventions that will shape the telling of his experience. This understanding becomes apparent in Vonnegut’s discussion with Bernard O’Hare, a friend from the war, when he tells O’Hare that he thinks the climax of the novel should be the execution of Edgar Derby. O’Hare replies that Vonnegut, who is a writer by profession, is the one who should decide. In other words, O’Hare agrees that retelling their war experience would involve formulating the experience in terms of a narrative structure,
which is something he doesn’t feel qualified to do—so he defers to Vonnegut. Vonnegut agrees that this sort of thing is his trade. He comments, “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterizations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times” (6). Vonnegut readily admits to imposing narrative structure on his experience. Indeed, his choice of genre justifies his narrative structure. Nevertheless, despite the distortions to his experience wrought by the totalizing effect of narrative, Vonnegut continues to assert the authenticity of his account.

IV.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut continually interrogates the notion of the archive by acknowledging his own complicity in the fudging of historical truth. As we have seen, this fudging of historical truth and accuracy results from the reconstruction of the bombing of Dresden based on Vonnegut’s own admittedly faulty memory, and through the imposition of a narrative structure (which itself is necessarily selective) on his experience. Yet despite this interrogation of the archive, Vonnegut problematically contributes to the archive; in other words, his book actually becomes part of the historical archive and part of our collective national memory of the bombing of Dresden.

Vonnegut gives tacit acknowledgement and consent to the inclusion of his work in the archive when he expresses his desire for his work to effect some sort of political or cultural change. This is, according to Vonnegut, the primary function of a writer. Vonnegut has commented, “My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to how writers should serve. Mainly, I think they should be—and biologically have to be—agents of change. For the better, we hope” (Interview with Allen 76). Given Vonnegut’s
characterization of himself as an agent of change, and given his subject matter, his objectives become clear. He intends to shape public perception of the bombing of Dresden, in order to change human behavior. In the first chapter, Vonnegut writes, “I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that” (24-25). Vonnegut’s counsel to his sons reveals the overall project of the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is to bring to the forefront of collective memory an event that might otherwise be forgotten. Through the narrativization of his experience, through the authenticity and ethos he derives from being an eyewitness, and through his ability to reach a large readership, Vonnegut is able to inscribe his version of the bombing of Dresden in our collective memory. By solidifying Dresden’s place in our collective cultural/historical memory, Vonnegut hopes to effect positive change in the way we view war. And if this type of change is possible, then Vonnegut is willing to tell a story he can’t quite remember and impose a totalizing narrative structure on it. For him, the end justifies the means.
Chapter 3

A Traveler in the Kennedy Mythology: Libra’s Philosophy of History

I.

Published in 1987, Libra represents the culmination of Don DeLillo’s continued preoccupation with the Kennedy assassination. Earlier DeLillo novels⁶ make reference to the assassination, and DeLillo has previously published a non-fiction piece on the Kennedy assassination for Rolling Stone⁷. DeLillo regards the Kennedy assassination as one of the formative events of twentieth century American history, an event that forever changed the way Americans think and feel about reality. The event is, as one of DeLillo’s fictional characters in Libra observes, “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (181). DeLillo himself has commented, “[The JFK assassination] had an effect on Americans that we’ll probably never recover from. The fact that it could happen. The fact that it was on film. The fact that two days later the assassin himself was killed on live television. All of these were psychological shockwaves that are still rolling” (Interview with Arensberg 42). DeLillo here points to some of the reasons why the Kennedy assassination left an indelible mark on the American psyche. An additional reason is the unresolved nature of the event—the ambiguity, uncertainty and mystery in which it is shrouded.

Libra, DeLillo’s novelization of the assassination, can be regarded as historiographic metafiction. Libra is historiographical in nature in general terms, inasmuch as it is writing about history. The term “historiography” originally applied exclusively to narrative historical writing occurring within the discipline of history—

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⁶ See, for example, DeLillo’s Americana, which ends with the protagonist driving through Dealey Plaza.
writing typically carried out by scholars employing an academically credible research methodology, usually typified by the Rankean methodology I described earlier. In the wake of the postmodern questioning of the epistemology of history, the term has been broadened to include fiction as well, as evidenced by the introduction of the term “historiographic metafiction” into critical discourse.

*Libra* is an example of historiographic metafiction because, in addition to simply being about a historical event, it demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of itself as a work of fiction. Unlike *Slaughterhouse-Five, Libra* contains no overt authorial intrusions that reveal the novel’s self-conscious examination of historical fiction. But despite the absence of such obvious devices, *Libra* nevertheless reveals itself as a work of metafiction in more subtle ways, particularly in the manner in which the novel regards history not as a naturally occurring and easily accessible sequence of self-contained and self-evident events, but as a human linguistic construct. As will be seen later, this self-referential questioning of the epistemology of history is carried out primarily through DeLillo’s fictional CIA archivist, Nicholas Branch.

Complex in structure, *Libra* weaves together the stories of various assassination participants, both real and imagined. The principal figures in the Kennedy assassination—with particular attention of course given to Oswald—are convincingly fleshed out, while DeLillo fills in the narrative gaps with a variety of fictional characters, all of whom are plausible and necessary inclusions in the story DeLillo chooses to tell about the Kennedy assassination.

I argue that while DeLillo does in fact effectively examine and question the problems of historical representation, he presents an account of the Kennedy
assassination that is speculative yet convincing—the account that DeLillo considers most likely. Despite his insistence that readers understand that *Libra* is a novel, not to be regarded as history, DeLillo’s novel presents such a credible and well-researched account of the Kennedy assassination that many readers will no doubt disregard his disclaimer and embrace, if not the book’s details, then portions of the overall narrative structure of the novel, especially its conspiratorial elements. The persuasive appeal of *Libra* is undeniable; regardless of what DeLillo might claim, his account of the Kennedy assassination is convincing and persuasive—the narrative structure of the novel, as well as the obvious research from which it is constructed, create a believable account of the assassination. In addition, *Libra*’s genre and relative commercial success heighten its power to persuade. In short, this novel about the archive has become a part of the archive itself—it has become a source to which someone might turn for an understanding of the past. Furthermore, *Libra*’s account of the Kennedy assassination has shaped our collective memory of this monumental historical event.

II.

One of the most intriguing and significant fictional characters to inhabit the pages of *Libra* is that of the aforementioned Nicholas Branch, a retired senior analyst for the CIA who is given the undesirable and impossible job of analyzing, interpreting, and assimilating the archival material relating to the Kennedy assassination. Compared to other characters in the novel, Branch is given relatively little attention. Six short sections of the novel, totaling about twenty-four pages (out of 456), describe Branch’s impossible task and detail his ruminations on history. These sections exist as interludes amidst the larger narratives of Lee Harvey Oswald’s life (including his childhood, his enlistment in
the Marines, his interest in Marxism, his defection to the Soviet Union, and his ultimate involvement in the Kennedy assassination) and the conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy. While the Branch interludes are sparse and infrequent, they are perhaps some of the most important sections in the novel, since they deal directly and insightfully with the problem of the archive and the ways in which historical knowledge is created.

DeLillo has said, “In a way, *Libra* is about history. But it certainly is not history itself” (Connolly 32). Though DeLillo obviously shuns the idea of his novel being mistaken for history proper, he does acknowledge that the novel examines issues of historical knowledge. If *Libra* explores the epistemology of history, which it most certainly does, then one feels compelled to closely examine the role of Nicholas Branch in DeLillo’s epistemological project. This is because Branch’s project parallels DeLillo’s. DeLillo comments on the duel purpose of including Branch in the novel:

> [W]hat I was trying to express with Branch was, I guess, two main things. One was the enormous amount of material that the assassination generated, material which eventually makes Branch almost impotent. He simply cannot keep up with it: the path changes as he writes. The material itself becomes, after a while, the subject. The other thing I wanted to do with Branch was to suggest the ways the American consciousness has changed since the assassination. (Interview with Connolly 28)

Including the fictional Branch in his narrative allows DeLillo the opportunity to directly explore the problem of the archive. As DeLillo suggests in this quote, the sheer quantity of archival material becomes so overwhelming that Branch is rendered ineffectual in his ability to make sense of it, to find the connections and links between key pieces of
archival information that will allow him to construct an accurate and cohesive account of the Kennedy assassination. Consequently, as DeLillo argues, “the material itself becomes the subject.” According to DeLillo, *Libra* concerns itself less with presenting a definitive account of the Kennedy assassination than with examining the nature of historical knowledge and representation. *Libra*, DeLillo would argue, is less about the Kennedy assassination than it is about the epistemology of history. I would argue that it is about both, since it simultaneously questions the way historical knowledge is constructed while at the same time presenting a convincing, credible account of the Kennedy assassination.

But *Libra* does in fact function as an examination of the questions of the archive—an examination of how and by whom our knowledge of the past is constructed. And DeLillo never lets us forget that “true” knowledge of the past is slippery and elusive, obscured by human linguistic representations. Nicholas Branch understands this principle all too well, and the character of Branch enables *Libra* to explore questions of the archive.

We first encounter Branch sitting in a room piled from floor to ceiling with archival material. A curator continually and interminably delivers more archival material, to the point where Branch is overwhelmed by the insurmountable task of making sense of the prodigious quantity of information:

Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams [. . .] [H]e knows where everything is. From a stack of folders that reaches halfway up a wall, he smartly plucks the one he wants. The stacks are everywhere. The legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere. The books fill tall shelves along three walls and cover the desk, a table and much of the floor. There is a massive file cabinet stuffed
with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. Heat and light. There is no formal system to help him track the material in the room [. . .] Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There is no end in sight. (14-15)

Branch finds himself smothered in a mountain of information, with no formal means of keeping track of the information. Yet despite a lack of a systematic means of organizing the information, Branch knows where everything is. He is much like the archon, the omniscient force/authority who sees all of the information and seeks to give it structure and form and meaning. But he questions his ability to do so. He is “horrified by the weight of it all,” the “data-spew of hundreds of lives.” Yet despite the tremendous quantity of this archival material, he claims to have a working knowledge of the available information. He knows what each document in the room contains, can pluck a desired document out of a stack at will. So why is it that he feels horrified by the data-spew of information? DeLillo’s text seems to be suggesting that it’s not enough to merely possess the documents. The documents themselves don’t automatically or naturally tell a cohesive story—they must be given meaning and structure, which is not a simple thing to do. Branch is horrified by the task of assigning meaning to the “data-spew.” Assigning meaning involves making connections, identifying causal relationships, positing theories, and identifying the dreams that shape history. The room in which Branch works is not merely a room of documents, but a room of theories and dreams as well. The theories are inferred by Branch based on the dreams that lay hidden amidst the documents—dreams of individuals such as Win Everett and Lee Harvey Oswald, dreams that are, to a certain
extent, never wholly attainable. This is especially the case with Oswald, who is deceased and whose motives, dreams and ambitions must therefore be inferred from the data-spew of information about him.

The inferred theories and dreams provide the guiding framework—the structural glue—that will allow Branch to link pieces of information. In making such connections and establishing causal relationships among pieces of archival evidence, Branch must identify which documents are relevant and which ones aren’t. He is confronted with an immense variety and quantity of documents. DeLillo describes the assortment of documents that Branch must consider and out of which Branch must make meaning:

The documents are stacked everywhere. Branch has homicide reports and autopsy diagrams. He has the results of spectrographic tests on bullet fragments. He has reports by acoustical consultants and experts in blur analysis [. . .] [He] has unpublished state documents, polygraph reports. Dictabelt recordings from the police radio net on November 22. He has hot enhancements, floor plans, home movies, biographies, letters, rumors, mirages, dreams. This is the room of dreams, the room where it has taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms. Frustrated, stuck, self-watching, looking for means of connection, a way to break out. (59, 181)

As this passage suggests, one of the distinguishing features of the Branch interludes is the examination of archival materials. Amidst Branch’s thoughts and reflections on the nature of his task and the problems of the archive, DeLillo describes in enormous lists the documents that comprise the archive and, in particular, the specific archive from which
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Branch must draw in order to create a definitive account of the Kennedy assassination. DeLillo’s interminable lists reveal the difficulty of the task at hand for Branch. So many different types of documents are included that Branch is overwhelmed by infinite possibility and suggestion—the archival material suggests an endless number of possible narratives. Simple math dictates that the more documents that must be considered, the more possible connections between documents arise, and the more complicated and difficult the task becomes to identify such connections. This passage emphasizes the fact that historiographies are created, not found, and that their creation inevitably requires human judgment and discretion. By implication, this passage draws attention to *Libra* as a work having been constructed in a similar manner.

At first, DeLillo lists documents that seem—and indeed, probably are—highly relevant. These “relevant” documents include ballistic reports and autopsy diagrams—materials that should reveal valuable insight into the nature of the assassination. These reports and diagrams should, for example, reveal such important facts as the number of guns fired, the direction from which the guns were fired, the number of shooters, which bullets struck the president where. What these considerations ultimately should reveal is whether Oswald fired the shot that killed the president. In other words, shouldn’t simple ballistic and autopsy reports provide information about what caliber bullet entered Kennedy’s head, and from what direction? Oswald was behind the president, so if the bullet that killed Kennedy entered his head from behind and at a downward angle, then it is conceivable that Oswald pulled the trigger. If, on the other hand, the bullet entered Kennedy’s head from any other direction, this would provide conclusive evidence of a second shooter. This seems simple and straightforward enough, yet the dilemma of the
second shooter is still unresolved. Nevertheless, Branch, availing himself of such relevant
documents as ballistic reports and autopsy diagrams, should be able to make a fairly
credible assertion as to whether Oswald acted alone or not, and as to whether the bullet
that killed the president came from Oswald’s gun. That Branch can’t—or won’t—make
sense of the data reveals the difficulty of creating a historiography, especially a
historiography of an event involving so many elusive and ultimately unknowable

While DeLillo includes in his list of Branch’s archival materials relevant
documents such as ballistic reports, he also suggests the historiographical difficulty of
Branch’s task by including in his list such intangible items as “rumor,” “mirage,” and
“dreams” (181). The defining feature of these items is that they are substanceless, lacking
form and definition. A rumor is a dubious and shaky foundation on which to construct a
definitive account of a historical event. The archival evidence with which Branch is
confronted is elusive and open to interpretation, appearing to tell any of a number of
stories—depending upon how the archival materials are shuffled and interpreted—while
the real or “true” story may remain hidden and never accurately told. Indeed, the archival
material appears as a mirage to the historiographer, and yet the material becomes fixed in
language and in collective memory once the historiographer determines the story he is
going to tell and writes it down, which gives it the substance of actuality.

DeLillo writes that the subject of the historiographer becomes, not “politics or
violent crime,” but “men in small rooms” (41). In other words, the subject of history is
not events, which are self-evident and easily verifiable, but the underlying causes of
events, which sometimes have their provenance in the inaccessible, scheming minds of
men in small rooms. Branch’s subject is not the mere occurrence of the “violent crime”—in this case, the Kennedy assassination—an event which indisputably happened, but the underlying causes of the event. The underlying causes of the Kennedy assassination, *Libra* speculates, can be traced back to certain men laboring in small rooms. A glance inside these small rooms would reveal Win Everett and Larry Parmenter scheming away behind the scenes of history, orchestrating a “spectacular miss”—a deliberate failed attempt on Kennedy’s life that would foment public anti-Castro sentiment (51). It would also reveal Lee Harvey Oswald, a dyslexic and disturbed Marxist and former military man, bent on writing himself into history through some resonant, important, spectacular event. The small rooms might also contain Jack Ruby and other mafiosos. And last of all, a glance into the small rooms would reveal Branch himself, laboring to piece together a definitive account of an unknowable subject.

The significance of these men laboring in small rooms is that they labor in the dark. Their activities are covert within the context of the novel—they are not visible, not subject to public scrutiny. And yet these men and their schemes are the cause of spectacular events, the reason for violent crimes. This is what makes the cause of an event such as the Kennedy assassination inaccessible to the historiographer. If part of a historian’s job is to ascribe causality to an event, what does the historian do when the cause lies hidden within the hearts and minds of men operating in small rooms? As Larry Parmenter, one of DeLillo’s fictional CIA schemers, notes, “[N]othing can be finally known that involves human motive and need. There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth” (260). If the motives of the key players in a historical
event remain unknown, then the historiographer must either concede he doesn’t know the answer to that particular historical mystery, or else ascribe causality to events by convincing himself that the “mysterious and complex deception” is in fact a historical verity. In this latter case, the historian functions much like a writer of fiction.

What additionally complicates things for Branch is the problem of determining which archival material is relevant. As DeLillo writes, everything is included, and if Walter Benjamin is to be believed, then nothing should be lost to history because everything is relevant (254). DeLillo explores the implications of this point of view by listing the more bizarre and obscure pieces of archival material with which Branch is forced to contend:

Everything is here. Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily timesheets, tax returns, property lists, postoperative x-rays, photos of knotted string, thousands of pages of testimony, of voices droning in hearing rooms in old courthouse buildings, an incredible haul of human utterance. It lies so flat on the page, hangs so still in the lazy air, lost to syntax and other arrangement, that it resembles a kind of mind splatter, a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language. (181)

Branch’s ultimate task is to assimilate and construct a “secret history” of the Kennedy assassination from this material. As a construction of DeLillo’s imagination, Branch is a fictional embodiment of the problem of the archive. It has been suggested that Branch represents DeLillo, inasmuch as they both face the task of writing about the JFK assassination and making sense of a mountain of information. But DeLillo balks at such a
comparison, arguing that Branch’s task is more demanding than DeLillo’s. He says, “[Nicholas Branch] had a tougher time than I did. Of course he was writing history and I was writing fiction” (Interview with Connolly 27). The tasks are not comparable in DeLillo’s eyes—the task of writing history is much more difficult and cumbersome than writing fiction, due to the historian’s stricter devotion to historical truth and critical inquiry. DeLillo is correct here—to an extent. It is true that fiction writers have more freedom and latitude to fill in gaps where the historical record is uncertain, but historians ultimately have to fill in gaps as well.

A historian such as Branch feels more of an obligation, however, to consider every piece of information available. This obligation becomes overwhelming when the amount of available information exceeds the capacity of the historian to process and interpret it. Branch is overwhelmed because he seems to agree with Benjamin’s dictum: history should be completely comprehensive and all-inclusive. It should not distinguish between important and unimportant events and details, because everything is important and necessary. DeLillo writes in Libra, “Branch must study everything. He is in too deep to be selective…There is nothing in this room he can discard as irrelevant or out-of-date. It all matters on one level or another” (59, 378). In Branch, Libra presents a character who follows Benjamin’s dictum, and in doing so DeLillo’s novel may be questioning the validity or feasibility of such an approach to history. Is everything really relevant? Can and should everything be included in the telling of history? Is this approach to history even possible?

Let us consider, as a means of illustration, some of the items from the list of archival items listed above. Baptismal records might reveal something about the religious
upbringing and background of Oswald, but they would probably be useless for
determining Oswald’s role in the assassination, unless, of course, Oswald’s motive for
killing Kennedy were in any way influenced or shaped by Oswald’s religious background
and ideology. The inclusion of Oswald’s report cards in the archive could be justified on
similar grounds: an understanding of Oswald’s intellect and academic aptitudes might
shed some light on his motivations for killing Kennedy. Canceled checks could also be
considered relevant. A canceled check to the local supermarket might be meaningless,
while a canceled check to David Ferrie might provide a crucial connection, an
illuminating understanding. A photograph of knotted string seems less relevant, but given
the potential relevancy of other seemingly irrelevant pieces of information, Branch feels
obligated to consider virtually every piece of information as important. Even if he can’t
readily see the relevance of some of these obscure items, he cannot discount the
possibility that they are relevant. An extreme example of Branch’s difficulty in
processing seemingly irrelevant items is illustrated in the following passage:

There is a microphotograph of three strands of Lee H. Oswald’s pubic hair.
Elsewhere (everything in the Warren Report is elsewhere) there is a
detailed description of this hair. It is smooth, not knobby. The scales are
medium-size. The root area is rather clear of pigment. Branch doesn’t
know how to approach this kind of data. He wants to believe the hair
belongs in the record. It is vital to his sense of responsible obsession that
everything in this room warrants careful study. Everything belongs,
everything adheres [. . .] It is all one thing, a ruined city of trivia where
people feel real pain. This is the Joycean Book of America, remember—
the novel in which nothing is left out. (pp. 182-183)

Branch is confronted here with an item so random and irrelevant that the epistemological
underpinnings of his project are called into question. Up to this point, he has approached
each and every piece of archival information as if it can contribute in some meaningful
way to the creation of a true and accurate narrative of the Kennedy assassination. Having
labored under the assumption that every item in the archive has value—that every item
plays a key role in telling the true story of Kennedy’s assassination—Branch is perplexed,
therefore, when confronted with an item that seemingly has no place in the story. Instead
of dismissing the pubic hair, Branch struggles to make it relevant. He “wants to believe
that [it] belongs in the record.” Dismissing this piece of evidence, given its obvious
irrelevance, would seem like the reasonable thing to do for someone operating under the
assumption that everything shouldn’t be included or considered in the historical record—
that some things just aren’t important. Dwelling on the pubic hair, given the sheer
quantity of information through which Branch must wade, seems like an irresponsible
waste of time. Yet he can’t dismiss it. He does dwell on it. He demonstrates a
“responsible obsession” to Benjamin’s notion that nothing should be lost to history. But
what exactly makes such an obsession responsible? One is compelled to ask why Branch
is so painstakingly selective—why he feels obligated to analyze everything.

Branch seems to be driven by a genuine desire to give an unbiased and truthful
account of the Kennedy assassination. This desire, due to its unattainability, proves
paralyzing. His reconstruction of the assassination does not appear to be driven by
ideology, politics, or meta-narrative; it is clear that he is not trying to make the
information fit a preconceived notion of what he thinks happened, or to conceive of the event within the framework of some preexisting metanarrative. Ironically, Branch’s apparent objectivity may actually hinder his ability to create a coherent narrative, since having a preconceived narrative in mind would help Branch be more selective. His project would be simplified, since he would only give attention to those pieces of archival data that fit within the framework of the story he wants to tell. If the historiographer has no preconceived story to tell—and if the story doesn’t tell itself by emerging on its own—then it can be difficult for him to create a narrative, since the historiographer’s own bias and worldview determines the type of narrative he intends to create. This raises the issue of whether narratives occur naturally in history, or whether they are imposed by historiographers on discontinuous events. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White raises the question of whether narratives are found or constructed (27). Branch believes narratives are found, and it is this project of finding the underlying story amidst a mountain of information that so overwhelms him. Ultimately, he is unable to find cohesion, clarity and continuity in the archive. As he labors to make sense of the vast data-spew of information, no naturally occurring narrative emerges from the mountain of archival data. He does not find a narrative, but neither does he allow a political agenda or ideology to govern the fabrication of a narrative. He neither finds nor constructs a narrative. And without narrative he is lost, for it is narrative which gives cohesion, continuity, and causality to an otherwise jumbled array of archival material. It is narrative that would allow Branch to be selective, but without any sort of unifying narrative (either found or created) to give the archival data shape, Branch feels compelled to include everything. He can’t afford to overlook any item in the archive, for fear that the item
overlooked may turn out to be the key to revealing the underlying narrative structure of
the archival mass. So he labors obsessively to analyze and include everything, a task
which ultimately proves impossible.

In describing Branch’s devotion to each and every piece of archival material,
DeLillo compares Branch’s project to the writing of Joyce. DeLillo’s reference to Joyce
is appropriate and telling, since Joyce’s novels (particularly *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*)
demonstrate this same sort of devotion to the notion of all-inclusiveness. Branch refers to
the Warren Report as the “Joycean Book of America—the novel in which nothing is left
out… the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and
lived to be a hundred” (182-83, 181). Joyce’s novels are noticeably comprehensive and
all-inclusive, characterized by pastiche. This all-inclusive tendency towards pastiche
results in works that are somewhat incoherent and lacking in traditional narrative order.
Plot structure in such works, if at all present, is somewhat arbitrary and confusing.

*Finnegans Wake* in particular exhibits these characteristics. This novel is comprehensive
indeed, giving a history of Ireland and the world. It is highly eclectic, incorporating vast
amounts of information gathered from a variety of sources, including newspapers, books,
and magazines. The eclectic pastiche of sources and influences that comprise *Finnegans
Wake* shows no preference for one source over another—DeLillo’s comment regarding
Branch’s archival mass could as well be used to describe *Finnegans Wake*: “It is the
novel in which nothing is left out” (182). The problem with Joyce’s construction of
*Finnegans Wake* as an all-inclusive pastiche is, of course, that this strategy arguably
renders his masterwork nonsensical, incomprehensible, and impenetrable to many readers.
Lacking coherence and narrative structure, the novel represents what happens when
nothing is left out. By comparing Branch’s project to a Joyce novel, DeLillo suggests that Branch’s account of the Kennedy assassination, by leaving nothing out, could attain a degree of incoherence as pronounced as Joyce at his most obscure. The comparison is apt.

The all-inclusive nature of the archive is just one problem with which Branch is confronted in his epistemological project, for the archival material is not only comprehensive, but also contradictory. In the process of reviewing the archival information, Branch doesn’t know how to deal with the contradictory evidence he inevitably encounters. One of the reasons Branch struggles to piece together a single, coherent narrative is that the contradictory information won’t allow a single, coherent narrative. Instead, a multiplicity of narratives emerges, complicating Branch’s task of constructing a definitive and accurate narrative of the Kennedy assassination. The collection of archival materials available to Branch doesn’t even agree on minor details, much less the major plot points of the assassination narrative. At one point, Branch becomes frustrated with the contradictory information he is given:

In one sentence the weapon is described as 45-caliber. In the next sentence it is 22-caliber [. . .] Oswald’s eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud.

Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits. (300)

This passage demonstrates the epistemological instability of the archive by pointing out the dilemma raised when the historiographer is confronted with conflicting and contradictory pieces of archival material. If something that seems as patently and
empirically verifiable as the color of Oswald’s eyes—a detail that many would view as offering essentially no room for speculation, interpretation, or equivocation—is shown to be epistemologically unstable, then the entire historiographic project is called into question. If historians can’t agree on the color of Oswald’s eyes or the caliber of his gun, then how can they possibly begin to agree on the complexities of his motives or the inner recesses of his psyche—things that are empirically less verifiable than an external, physical feature such as eye color? Branch sums up the problem of archival confusion like this: “Powerful events breed their own network of inconsistencies. The simple facts elude authentication” (300). Powerful events are usually complex events, and complex events usually have complex origins. It is not a simple task to “correctly” identify the exact causes of such events, especially when even basic details cannot be verified.

DeLillo imbues his novel with added power and plausibility by suggesting various convincing explanations for the “network of inconsistencies” observed by Banch. Because DeLillo frames his work as fiction, he has considerable freedom go to behind the scenes of the assassination and posit explanations that a historian in good conscience could never defend. He makes the reader privy to the inherently unknowable thoughts and motives of the characters, both real and fictional, operating behind the scenes of the assassination. DeLillo’s depictions of such characters offer insight into why Branch is confronted with so much conflicting data. Early on in the novel, DeLillo describes Win Everett’s meticulously thought-out plan to fabricate a fictional malefactor to which he could link the assassination. Everett’s mind contemplates the elaborate setup:

He would put someone together, build an identity, a skein of persuasion and habit, ever so subtle. He wanted a man with believable quirks. He
would create a shadowed room, the gunman’s room, which investigators would eventually find, exposing each fact to relentless scrutiny [. . .] An address book with ambiguous leads. Photographs expertly altered (or crudely altered). Letters, travel documents, counterfeit signatures, a history of false names. It would all require a massive decipherment, a conversion to plain text. He envisioned teams of linguists, photo analysts, fingerprint experts, handwriting experts, experts of hairs and fibers, smudges and blur. Investigators building up chronologies. He would give them the makings of deep chronos, lead them to basement rooms in windy industrial slums, to lost towns in the tropics. (78)

This passage is unsettling in its convincing depiction of Everett’s clandestine, deliberate and carefully orchestrated plan to leave a false trail of documents that he knows will eventually form the underpinnings of a counterfeit history. Everett of course evinces no qualms about fabricating a deliberately false history, for he believes that his righteous objective ultimately transcends any concerns raised by his deceptive and ethically dubious means of achieving his objective. He envisions teams of analysts poring over the data, and he is correct in his prediction: Branch is indeed confronted with mountains of documented analyses, and is sent on wild goose-chases by the misleading data. DeLillo’s text seems to be suggesting that any attempt to recreate an accurate account of the Kennedy assassination is doomed from the beginning, since an accurate account cannot be created from spurious archival data.

DeLillo gives another example of deliberately false and misleading archival material in his depiction of Oswald’s obsession with keeping a historical diary. DeLillo
writes that Oswald, “in the rush of filling these pages [. . .] was careful to leave out
certain things that could be used in legal argument against his return to the U.S.” (212).
By citing Oswald’s understandable concerns about leaving traceable incriminating
evidence, DeLillo provides a logical explanation for some of Oswald’s omissions. But
conspicuous omissions in Oswald’s account are only half the problem; in addition to
conspicuous omissions, Oswald also includes information that he knows to be false: “He
knew there were discrepancies, messed-up dates. No one could expect him to get the
dates right after all this time, no one cared about the dates, no one is reading this for
names and dates and spellings” (212). Oswald is aware of the discrepancies and
inaccuracies in his record, yet he dismisses them as insignificant details that will be of
little interest to anyone who might read his diary. According to Oswald, the significance
of his diary derives not from its details, but from its fundamental, essential truth. Oswald
thus explains away the omissions and discrepancies: “Yes, the diary was self-serving to a
degree but still the basic truth […]” (212). The authenticity of minor details do not
concern Oswald; he is concerned more with a devotion to a certain “basic truth.” What,
effectively, is this truth to which Oswald demonstrates such devotion? Apparently, he wants,
more than anything, for “them to see the struggle,” and identify “the voice of
disappointment and loss” in his record (212). Oswald demonstrates a grandiose,
narcissistic desire to make the world aware of his struggle, pain, and disappointment. He
understands that the underlying banality of his existence will attract the interest of no one
unless he can make his existence historical and meaningful in some way; he therefore
realizes that the only way to make the world notice and care about his existence is to
involve himself in an electrifying spectacle. Oswald “believed religiously that his life
would turn in such a way that people would one day study the Historic Diary for clues to the heart and mind of the man who wrote it” (212). Oswald knows that killing Kennedy will attract the interest of the world, thus making him the focus of worldwide attention. Experts, analysts, historiographers will pore over his diary, searching for some indication of motive, a glimpse into the soul of a person who would assassinate the president. Unfortunately, Oswald shows more devotion to his own narcissistic pain and suffering than he does to the actual facts of his record. Thus analysts and historiographers—typified by Branch—are misled and baffled by Oswald’s discrepancies. DeLillo’s status as writer of fiction gives him license to construct the character of Oswald in a way that illustrates DeLillo’s ideas about the problems of historiography. The characters of Oswald and Everett provide DeLillo with the opportunity to explain the contradictory data contained in Branch’s archive. In the hands of DeLillo, Oswald and Everett are rendered in such a way as to be completely believable, which in turn makes DeLillo’s explanation of the contradictory archival material believable as well.

Ultimately, the sheer quantity of archival material and its constant proliferation—combined with the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the archival contents—render Branch inert. He becomes incapable of moving beyond the first phase of the historiographical process; rather, he remains stuck in the first phase which, according to Ricoeur, is restricted to documenting and archiving. The next phase in the historiographical process would require Branch to make connections and identify cause/effect relationships among events. Such relationships do not automatically emerge on their own, and he is unwilling to make dubious connections of his own construction in order to tell a coherent story. Branch’s frustration is evident: “He wants a thing to be
what it is. Can’t a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links?” (379). Unfortunately for Branch, who must extract meaning from a brutal act of violence, a thing cannot simply be what it is. In this case, the thing is of course the assassination of Kennedy, and Kennedy’s actual death is really the only conclusive fact that can be substantiated. But this one known observable fact is unacceptable on its own terms—there has to be an explanation for the glaring fact of Kennedy’s assassination. The Zapruder tape captures on immortal film what happened (John F. Kennedy being killed by a gunshot to the head), but it is up to Branch to explain why Kennedy was killed, and this proves to be no simple task, due to a constantly proliferating yet paradoxically incomplete archive. Thus Branch flounders endlessly and hopelessly about within the boundless, unfathomable sea of archival material, ever searching for the key connections and links, and never gaining illumination or understanding. Having failed to make the causal connections that define Ricoeur’s second phase of the historiographical process, Branch finds himself stymied, and it goes without saying that he never even commences the third phase by putting his history into words. DeLillo describes Branch’s unwillingness to prematurely force the assassination history into words:

[Branch] sits under a lap robe and worries. The truth is he hasn’t written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes—notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose there is precious little. It is impossible to stop assembling data. The stuff keeps coming. There are theories to evaluate, lives to ponder and mourn. No one at CIA has asked to see the work in progress. Not a chapter, a page, a word of it. (59)
Perhaps Branch feels reluctant to write his history because he knows that by representing the event with language he will perforce be ascribing meaning to the event, and he is not yet ready to do that. He cannot merely list the information available, because the information is an incomprehensible, enormous data-spew. And, as we have seen, the sheer quantity and ambiguity of the data prevents him from making sense of it.

Another reason for Branch’s reluctance to write the history is the unceasing proliferation of the material he has to work with. His task would be immeasurably easier if he were working with a static, finite archive, since he could then labor under the assumption that he would not in the future be presented with new and contradictory archival information; unfortunately, Branch’s archive is dynamic and seemingly infinite—there is no end in sight to the curator’s deliveries. Branch ultimately concludes that he is not yet in a position to construct his secret history. DeLillo writes, “Branch has decided it is premature to make a serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history. Maybe it will always be premature. Because the data keeps coming. Because new lives enter the record all the time. The past is changing as he writes” (301). Branch cannot create his history because his source material is in a constant state of flux. If he puts his narrative to paper, he risks the eventual appearance of new archival material contradictory to his record. And even if the archive were static, history would still change every time someone new wrote about it.

Ultimately, Branch represents the historiographical project run amok—he is the embodiment of the problems of the archive. Faced with archival data that is ambiguous, contradictory, and endlessly proliferating, Branch is incapable of creating an accurate and coherent narrative. Though Branch is a fictional character, he represents a very real
dilemma faced by any actual historiographer. DeLillo uses Branch to illustrate the difficulty of writing a truly accurate account of a historical event. The implication is that historiographers—faced with contradictory, ambiguous, and incomplete records—write their histories anyway (unlike Branch, who in the face of such inconclusive records refuses to write his history). Such an implication seemingly undermines the credibility of the historiographical project. Yet despite DeLillo’s questioning of the ability of historiography to accurately represent the past, he clearly believes that history can—and should—be written about, as evidenced by his attempt to “do justice to historical likelihood” (Interview with DeCurtis 58). Additionally, he believes that novelists can play an important role in the writing of history, as Libra itself demonstrates. Unlike Branch, DeLillo is able to move beyond the first phase of the historiographical process. He makes connections, creates a cohesive narrative, and writes it down. His status as a writer of fiction gives him the courage to do what Branch can’t: interpret the data, make tenuous connections, and construct a narrative based on incomplete information. Libra, the culmination of DeLillo’s own historiographical operation, succeeds at giving a convincing representation of the Kennedy assassination. In doing so, it raises a question that deserves serious consideration: What role does fiction play in our understanding of history?

III.

Throughout most of the novel, Nicholas Branch details the types of materials delivered to him by the curator, and until the novel’s last Branch-centered scene all of these materials are ostensibly non-fiction, factual documents. Towards the end of the novel, however, Branch describes an interesting change in the nature of the documents
brought to him by the curator: he observes that the curator, having exhausted all of the traditionally non-fiction archival materials, has resorted to bringing Branch fictional items such as novels, plays, and movies. DeLillo describes Branch’s reaction to receiving these new forms of archival material:

The curator begins to send fiction, twenty-five years of novels and plays about the assassination. He sends feature films and documentaries. He sends transcripts of panel discussions and radio debates. Branch has no choice but to study this material. There are important things he has yet to learn. There are lives he must examine. It is essential to master the data.

(442)

As in the previous passages detailing obscure and seemingly irrelevant items and artifacts, in this passage Branch again finds himself bound to Benjamin’s pronouncement that nothing should be considered lost to history. But Branch finds himself in a different realm here: the realm of mass media representations of the Kennedy assassination, including plays, novels, documentaries, radio debates, and panel discussions. What is Branch to do with such materials? He evidently believes that he should regard these materials as seriously as he regards primary evidence. DeLillo writes that “Branch has no choice but to study this material” (442). One wonders why he has no choice. Why doesn’t he just dismiss the material outright, in order to focus on more credible sources? Branch apparently believes that such sources are credible and capable of shedding further light on his investigation. In fact, Branch believes that “there are important things he has yet to learn” (442). The implication here is that Branch can learn these “important things” from novels, plays, and other media of dubious historiographical authority. The inclusion of
novels in the list of items analyzed by Branch is ironic; by depicting Branch’s refusal to
discount “fictional” sources, DeLillo authenticates his own project of writing a novel
about the assassination. DeLillo believes that he has something important to say about the
Kennedy assassination, yet he clearly recognizes the problems inherent in attempting to
accurately represent a complex historical event. This concern is evidenced in the
“Author’s Note” presented at the conclusion of *Libra*. In the note, DeLillo includes this
disclaimer, perhaps as a preemptive response to critics who would inevitably find fault
with the history depicted in his book:

This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record,
I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by
the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire
to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve
altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space
and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. (no page number)

This disclaimer, seemingly designed to avoid some of the complications involved in
writing about a well-known historical event, actually further confuses the issue by
making a claim that is not entirely true. The claim in question is DeLillo’s assertion that
*Libra* does not attempt to provide answers to the unresolved questions raised by the
Kennedy assassination. DeLillo draws upon the historical record in order to be as
historically accurate as he can, and he fills in the gaps in the record with his fiction. The
fictionalized parts can be read as DeLillo’s possible answers to the questions raised by
the assassination. DeLillo’s novel certainly contains fictional characters and speculative
theories, but it also demonstrates a thorough knowledge of all of the real-life people,
events, and theories related to the assassination. It is clear to even the most casual reader that DeLillo has done his homework. His thorough research lends his narrative credibility, for the fact-based portions of the novel make the fictionalized portions more plausible. DeLillo’s disclaimer is somewhat misleading, then, since *Libra* presents logical, plausible (though not necessarily definitive) answers to the unresolved questions raised by the assassination. Historian David Courtwright observes: “[A] certain kind of reader will find DeLillo’s disclaimer overly modest. Those who are familiar with the assassination literature cannot help but see in *Libra* something more than a polished work of fiction. They immediately recognize DeLillo as a fellow traveler in the assassination labyrinth” (78).

How then should we DeLillo’s disclaimer? The disclaimer might be viewed by some readers as “overly modest,” as Courtwright puts it; other readers might be tempted to regard the disclaimer as somewhat disingenuous, since DeLillo himself directly contradicts it in other statements. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, for example, DeLillo revealed his commitment to known facts in writing *Libra*: “I had to do justice to historical likelihood [. . .] I didn’t want novelistic invention to become the heart of the book. I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my fictional variations” (DeCurtis 58). Even given the historiographical latitude afforded him by his status as a novelist, DeLillo nonetheless feels a strict obligation to what he calls “historical likelihood.” His terminology here seems measured, careful and deliberate; he apparently feels uncomfortable using phrases such as “historical actuality” or “historical truth,” and prefers the more honest and accurate phrase “historical likelihood.” Yet he also wants his novel to possess “a clear historical center.” As one reads the novel, the extent of
DeLillo’s research is obvious, and such careful research lends his account legitimacy and plausibility.

In writing *Libra*, DeLillo openly acknowledges that he conducted an enormous amount of research to find out everything that is publicly known about the Kennedy assassination. To do so, DeLillo availed himself primarily of the Warren Commission Report. In addition to the single-volume comprehensive report, DeLillo spent a great deal of time wading through the sixteen volumes of appendices that accompany the report. DeLillo comments, “I thought it was important to allow the enormous documentation of the case to seep into the texture of the novel [. . .] Because the Warren Report is crucial to most meditations on the case, it becomes the book’s background radiation, the echo of central events” (“The Fictional Man” 91). DeLillo is what Courtwright calls “a close reader and critic of the Warren Report” (78). As much as DeLillo draws from and adheres to the Warren Report, it is clear that he also disputes some of its claims. While many of the Warren Report’s conclusions have been called into question, none of them has drawn more criticism than the report’s claim that Oswald acted alone. The Warren Report sates emphatically that “there is no question in the mind of any member of the Commission that all the shots which caused the President’s and Governor Connally’s wounds were fired from the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository” and that “[t]he commission has found no evidence that anyone assisted Oswald in planning or carrying out the assassination” (19, 21). If the tone of the Warren Report seems overly emphatic, it is because the commission wanted summarily to dispel any notion of conspiracy. The commission simply found it convenient to pin the entire assassination on Oswald, regardless of whether the forensic evidence actually supported that conclusion. Many
critics, including DeLillo, have come to question the Warren Report’s theory of the lone assassin. DeLillo has commented, “The reason so many people think Oswald was not the lone gunman is that the physical evidence, as we know it, argues against it in many respects” (Goldstein 51). Again, DeLillo’s novel demonstrates a devotion to what he calls historical likelihood. Libra of course challenges the Warren Report’s principal conclusion by constructing a thoroughly convincing narrative of conspiracy revolving around Kennedy’s diplomatic relations with Cuba. In DeLillo’s scenario, Oswald is certainly deeply implicated, but he does not act alone. He fires shots from the Texas book depository warehouse, but he is not the lone gunman—Frank Vasquez and Raymo, working for the covert organization of renegade ex-CIA agents, fire the fatal shot.  

Inasmuch as Libra draws on the Warren Report for its framework, it differs from the Warren Report on this critical point. Given the evidence against the Warren Report’s conclusion regarding the lone gunman, DeLillo feels wholly justified in providing an alternative explanation. Ultimately, Libra ends up performing the sort of historiographical operation it seems to be critiquing. For inasmuch as the character of Branch seems to illustrate the difficulty of making sense of an event shrouded in mystery, suggestion, and ambiguity, DeLillo constructs a narrative that in fact does make sense of the event. And it does so convincingly. Scholar Christopher Mott comments on this contradiction: “On the one hand…Libra is a Foucauldian impossibility, an investigation of our own episteme, carried out much in the spirit…of Foucauldian historiography. On the other hand, Libra is a narrative, an attempt to give meaningful structure to an event that admittedly defies coherence and clarity” (132). In the end, DeLillo is unable to escape the power of narrative to convincingly imbue events with meaning. His earnest
request that his novel be strictly regarded as a “work of the imagination” goes largely unheeded, because he has succeeded so completely in structuring the known facts of the assassination around a plausible narrative. Ultimately, Libra is, as Mott argues, a “Foucauldian impossibility”: a critique of historiography and, simultaneously, a convincing attempt at historiography.
Chapter 4

The Sites of Memory: Historical Fiction and the Shaping of Collective Memory

I.

“I think fiction rescues history from its confusions.”—Don DeLillo, interview with Rolling Stone, 1988

In the previous chapter, I discussed DeLillo’s assertion that Branch’s subject is “not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms” (181). When one considers that Branch’s subject (and DeLillo’s) is the epistemology of history, it becomes clear that DeLillo does not equate historical knowledge with overt, observable events, but with covert, scheming men operating behind the closed doors of small rooms. I mentioned several examples from Libra of such men, including Oswald, Everett, Parmenter and, of course, Branch himself. Branch must be distinguished from the others in this list of men laboring in small rooms, since his role in history is starkly different from the role of the others. Oswald, Everett, and Parmenter scheme away behind the scenes of history, planning an event so astonishing that it will in no way escape the clutches of history. In Foucauldian terms, the event they plan causes a distinct rupture or discontinuity in the fabric of history, becoming what Foucault calls a “transformation that serve[s] as a new foundation” (5). They are the agents who actually bring about the monumental, historic event. Branch, on the other hand, fills the role of the historiographer; in essence, he has nothing to do with the original events as they actually occurred. He did not, in fact, plan the assassination of Kennedy, nor did he fire the shot that killed him. But he has
everything to do with how the events are interpreted and remembered—at least by those
who will actually read his account, which may in fact be very few, since he refers at one
to point to his work as a “secret history of the assassination” and comments that his history
of the assassination may actually turn out to be “the history no one will read” (60).

In addition to Branch and the others, *Libra* implies the existence of one last man
in a small room who must be given consideration: DeLillo himself. Several critics have
drawn comparisons between Branch and DeLillo, pointing out that Branch’s
historiographical task mirrors DeLillo’s. DeLillo is quick to dismiss the comparison,
however, commenting that “[B]ranch had a tougher time than I did” and pointing out the
obvious difference that “[B]ranch was writing history and I was writing fiction”
(Connolly 27). DeLillo rightly points out that historians have a more difficult time
writing history than fiction writers do, since they are held to higher scholarly standards.
Because DeLillo isn’t paralyzed by a devotion to historical veracity, as are historians, he
is able to properly construct a narrative that draws from the historical record as well as
his own imagination. As Timothy Parrish observes, DeLillo’s status as fiction writer
allows him the latitude to fill the gaps in the historical record:

> If Branch is paralyzed by the sense of proliferating information the event
> seems to generate, DeLillo is not because, as a novelist, he is able to
> invent his history precisely because his is not subject to the same narrative
> assumptions. Ironically, DeLillo’s fiction gains a purchase on the
> assassination precisely because it surrenders claims to historical veracity.

(10)
Parrish correctly points out the advantage that fiction writers may actually have over traditional historiographers: they have the narrative license to use their imaginations to provide explanations for the unresolved issues raised by the historical record.

Thus DeLillo the novelist has a crucial advantage over Branch the historian. Yet despite this difference, Branch and DeLillo nevertheless share an essential similarity: they both attempt to give meaning to the assassination by representing it with language and narrative. Like Branch, DeLillo had nothing to do with the Kennedy assassination per se, but he has a lot to do with how it is remembered. The same holds true for Vonnegut, whose depiction of the bombing of Dresden has shaped public perception of that event for decades. For better or for worse, novelists can in fact influence public perception and memory of historical events.

DeLillo and Vonnegut both understand this relationship between language and memory—they understand that through their writing they can influence how history is preserved and remembered. They are, despite their irony, nonetheless committed to their respective interpretations of history, and are willing to accept the attendant responsibility that goes along with writing about history. But despite their willingness to engage in the historiographical process, both DeLillo and Vonnegut recognize the problems inherent in writing about a historical event. Their discomfort in writing about history manifests itself in several ways, foremost of which is their exploitation of some of the conventions of historiographic metafiction. One of these conventions is the novel’s self-referential awareness of itself as a work of fiction, as demonstrated by *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which seek to circumvent and exempt themselves from the demands of historiography by openly acknowledging the fictive nature of their narratives and by
continually calling attention to themselves as works of fiction. Their ostensible status as fiction absolves their authors of the strict adherence to historical accuracy embraced by historians. And yet, paradoxically, as we have seen, both DeLillo and Vonnegut lay claim to historical truth by presenting persuasive versions of their respective historical narratives. Because both authors have a vested interest in their respective historical accounts, it behooves them to think about their accounts rhetorically. Furthermore, they both possess a keen understanding of the power of fiction to influence public perception of historical events. In the following excerpt from the *Rolling Stone* interview, DeLillo openly acknowledges the power of his work to persuade his audience to believe his variations of history:

> If I make an extended argument in the book it’s not that the assassination necessarily happened this way. The argument is that this is an interesting way to write fiction about a significant event that happens to have these general contours and these agreed-upon characters. It’s my feeling that readers will accept or reject my own variations on the story based on whether these things work as fiction, not whether they coincide with the reader’s own theories or the reader’s own memories. (Interview with DeCurtis 58)

While emphasizing the speculative nature of the overall argument put forth in *Libra*, DeLillo also acknowledges the power of his fiction to convince readers to believe his version of the story. He argues that the persuasiveness of his text is contingent upon the aesthetics of the text; in other words, the extent to which the text succeeds at convincing readers of the soundness of its arguments is determined by the extent to which the text
succeeds as a novel. In the Author’s Note at the end of Libra, as I previously discussed, DeLillo claims that he’s “made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination” (No Page Number). Yet he clearly reveals in the Rolling Stone interview not only an acknowledgement of making an argument in the novel, but an obvious devotion to the credibility and persuasiveness of the argument. Despite DeLillo’s disclaimer, Libra does in fact make and defend an argument that convincingly provides answers to the unresolved questions introduced by the assassination. In Libra, DeLillo is not interested in merely telling a good story; he is concerned as well with legitimizing his “variations” on the widely accepted “general contours” of the well-worn story. He perceives that by telling a good story—by succeeding first as a novelist—he will succeed at telling a persuasive story.

DeLillo’s attitude regarding the relationship between a novel’s aesthetics and its rhetoric is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s, who in his influential essay “The Author as Producer” argues that the politics of a work of fiction are inseparable from its literary properties. He writes of this inseparable connection, “You can declare: a work that shows the correct political tendency need show no other quality. You can also declare: a work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other quality. This second formulation is not uninteresting, and, moreover, it is correct” (221).

Walter Benjamin was of course writing within the Marxist tradition, and writing was for him a political act. When he speaks of “the correct political tendency,” he is referring to the choice a writer makes to employ his talents in the service of the proletariat. A writer should, in Benjamin’s eyes, write about “what is useful to the proletariat in the class struggle” (220). A writer’s subject should be based on
considerations of class struggle, and the political or rhetorical success of a writer’s work is inextricably linked to its literary quality. Benjamin goes on to assert,

I should like to show you that the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. And, I would add straightaway, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency. (221, Benjamin’s emphasis)

What exactly is this literary tendency of which Benjamin speaks? And what is its relationship to the political tendency of a work? When one thinks of literariness, one typically thinks of such fictional devices as plot, characterization and vividly rendered description. If Benjamin’s (and, by extension, DeLillo’s) argument is true, then the persuasiveness of a novel is in some respects contingent upon fully developed and realistic characters and a believable plot.

One consequence of employing literary devices in the representation of history is that the aesthetic effect of the work can be transformed into a rhetorical effect. If the story is told realistically enough, with enough authentic details, the reader will in some cases confuse the story with reality. Furthermore, a novel’s formal features can influence the way a reader receives the content of the novel—the reader may become so affected by the artistry of the form that he is persuaded to accept the content. Thus theory and speculation become confused with fact, and the line between empirical reality and gap-filling speculation becomes blurred.
Novelists attempting to construct historically persuasive texts must employ some means of convincing readers to take them seriously, not just as novelists but as purveyors of historically meaningful narratives. The use of realistic detail is one means of obtaining the rhetorical legitimization historical novelists seek. A comment by Marshall McLuhan, in reference to the newspaper medium, could as well apply to fiction: “The reader of the newspaper accepts the newspaper not so much as a highly artificial image having some correspondence to reality as he tends to accept it as reality itself. Perhaps the effect is for the media to substitute for reality just in the degree to which they become virtuosos of realistic detail” (272). McLuhan rightly argues that a journalist’s use of realistic detail can persuade the reader to mistake a simulacrum for the reality that it masks, a signifier for its signified. The representation becomes confused with the thing it purports to represent. This same sort of representational confusion is even more commonplace in the realm of fiction, where a representation not even purporting to reflect reality can become confused with reality. But in order for fiction to be mistaken for reality, its author must become, to use the words of McLuhan, a “virtuoso of realistic detail” (272). The more realistic the detail of the novel, the more persuasive it will be. DeLillo understands this principle well. In interviews, he openly proclaims his fascination with the Warren Report, acknowledging that he spent an enormous amount of time poring over every detail of its sixteen appendices, observing the nuances of speech in transcribed interviews, letting the specific details of his research shape the fully developed characters who inhabit Libra. DeLillo’s meticulous research, as evidenced by his thorough examination of the Warren Report, allowed him to construct thoroughly believable characterizations of Oswald, Oswald’s mother, Marguerite, Jack Ruby, and others. Through his meticulous research
and astonishing attention to detail, DeLillo establishes a knowledgeable and trustworthy ethos.

Vonnegut, on the other hand, doesn’t need to build a credible ethos through research—his ethos is automatically authenticated through personal experience. Vonnegut stands in different relation to the bombing of Dresden than DeLillo does to the Kennedy assassination. Vonnegut derives instant ethos and credibility from his status as witness of the bombing of Dresden. His account of the bombing is first-hand, unmediated by second-hand documents or archival material. His account is the archive. The bizarre science fiction elements of *Slaughterhouse-Five* could potentially undermine the veracity of Vonnegut’s account of the bombing of Dresden. Yet the Tralfamadorian interludes, juxtaposed alongside Vonnegut’s account of Dresden’s destruction, seem merely to highlight the absurdity of war.

Thus, while DeLillo writes from research, Vonnegut writes from memory. But he nevertheless employs the same literary techniques to legitimize his account. Thorough research (in DeLillo’s case) and personal experience (in Vonnegut’s) provide these authors with the means of becoming “virtuosos of realistic detail,” which enables them to obtain the rhetorical legitimization they seek.

Realistic description is just one literary feature that makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Libra* so convincing; in addition to realistic detail, both novels employ compelling narrative structures that help to rhetorically legitimize the novels. Several scholars have examined the relationship between narrative and rhetorical legitimization.

In particular, communications scholar Barbie Zelizer’s exploration of the relationship between narrative and rhetorical legitimization is germane to the present
discussion of historical fiction. In Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory, Zelizer examines the role of journalists in determining how the Kennedy assassination, as one of a few defining events that have come to shape our national identity, has been collectively remembered. Even though Zelizer’s study focuses on journalism and the Kennedy assassination, many of her points apply as well to writers of historical fiction like DeLillo and Vonnegut, since she argues that journalists, lacking the credibility afforded most trustworthy historians (and even their work is not immune to scrutiny), seek alternative means of achieving rhetorical legitimization. Novelists such as DeLillo and Vonnegut likewise struggle to authenticate their accounts of historical events. Zelizer contends that the primary means through which journalists achieve rhetorical legitimization is through the use of narrative. She argues:

Narrative becomes an effective tool for maintaining collective codes of knowledge, functioning much like a meta-code for speakers [. . .] Within the meta-code of narrative, reality becomes accountable in view of stories told about it [. . .] Questions of narrative have thus come to be regarded as at least partly entwined with questions of authority and legitimation. (33)

Narrative is a powerful means of rhetorically legitimizing an account because to narrate is to give coherence and meaning to the event being represented. It is through narrative that difficult and discontinuous ruptures in the fabric of American history—such as the Kennedy assassination and the bombing of Dresden—are given meaning, coherence and, above all, explanation. Delillo’s and Vonnegut’s accounts, by virtue of utilizing narrative, imbue their subjects with meaning and explanation. Some might argue that this is not the
case with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel which could be read as an argument *against* finding any sort of meaning in an event like the bombing of Dresden. As depicted by Vonnegut, this event exists utterly without explanation. But this depiction of the bombing of Dresden does instill the event with meaning: the meaning is simply that such events have no meaning, i.e. the bombing of Dresden occurred without any morally justifiable motivation. This interpretation of the bombing of Dresden is suggested by Vonnegut’s account, but is by no means self-evident and irrefutable. As has been demonstrated, some scholars (most notably Frederick Taylor) have offered explanations for the city’s bombing other than Vonnegut’s explanation that the bombing has no explanation. In the case of *Libra*, the issue is more straightforward, since the novel’s narrative structure clearly provides answers and explanations to the incomplete historical record.

Paul Ricoeur also connects rhetorical legitimization with narrative. He notes, “Historians address themselves to distrustful readers who expect from them not only that they narrate but that they authenticate their narrative” (*Time* 176). He is discussing actual historians here, not journalists or novelists. And he argues that even historians face “distrustful readers” and grapple with the challenge of authenticating their historiographies. If historians are distrusted, then surely second and third-tier purveyors of history—such as journalists and novelists—are to be distrusted to a greater extent. But the one thing they all have in common is their reliance upon narrative to represent their versions of history. The effective use of narrative allows historiographers to overcome the distrust of their readers. Ricoeur offers an explanation for the rhetorical power of narrative when he notes that “to narrate is already to explain” (*Time* 177). To narrate history in any way is to give meaning to history, and to give meaning to history is to
establish a believable ethos vis-à-vis the subject of history. Narrative is a device that historians, journalists, and novelists alike avail themselves of to gain credibility—it is the great leveling tool that places historians, journalists, and novelists on equal ground, for it enables all of them to authenticate and legitimize their respective accounts of history in the eyes of their readers.

The effective use of narrative has allowed individuals with an inherent lack of scholarly credibility—fiction writers and filmmakers, for example—to convince the general public to overcome their distrust of these dubious purveyors of historical truth. Zelizer points to Oliver Stone’s *JFK* as an example of just how believable and trusted supposed non-experts can become. Zelizer writes, “In making the assassination a topic of popular discourse, Stone’s movie also made explicit a second issue—the degree of authority that the American public was willing to cede to popular culture in retelling the story of Kennedy’s death” (210). Historian Michael Kammen echoes Zelizer’s observation, “For better or for worse, the media convey a fair amount of what passes for history and memory. In so doing, they frequently mediate between people and historical events, sites, and situations” (667). Zelizer and Kammen correctly affirm that the general public is willing to grant authority and credibility to entities who haven’t necessarily earned it—be it Michael Moore, Oliver Stone, or Dan Brown, readers and filmgoers do indeed seem willing to accept as fact that which should be disregarded as fiction. If the product is rhetorically authenticated through narrative, realistic detail, and the appearance of research, then people seem to be willing to accept it as accurate and reliable.

Some writers and directors not only understand their ability to persuade their audience of the truthfulness of their historical fiction, but feel ethically justified in doing
so. In discussing Stone’s feelings about interpreting the controversial evidence surrounding the Kennedy assassination, Zelizer quotes Stone as commenting that he had “a right, and, possibly, even an obligation, to step in and reinterpret [. . .] events” (qtd. in Zelizer 211). Stone additionally comments that JFK is “a lot closer to the truth than the Warren Commission was” (qtd. in Zelizer 212).

Like Stone, DeLillo also believes in the power of fiction to cast light on history. He comments:

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it—correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere. (Interview with DePietro 64)

DeLillo here asserts that fiction can actually correct historical inaccuracies. Whether this dubious assertion is true is debatable—what is true is that whether or not the historical account presented in a work of fiction is entirely true, there exists a distinct possibility that readers will interpret it as being true. If, collectively, enough people in a society begin to believe a certain variation of history, it runs the possibility of becoming part of their collectively remembered past. Thus novelists share in the responsibility of determining what is remembered and what isn’t.

Given the rhetorical legitimization achieved through narrative, as well as the general public’s willingness to accept fiction as fact, historical novelists find themselves
empowered with the ability to create memory. That is, they are capable of determining which historical events are worth remembering, and how they are remembered. They bear some of the responsibility for the formation of their society’s collective memory.

II.

Historical fiction becomes then what Pierre Nora would call sites of memory—those cultural locations that help to preserve history. In his influential essay “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Nora refers to the modern preoccupation of creating what he calls “les lieux de mémoire,” or sites of memory, which he claims have replaced “les milieux de mémoire,” or environments of memory (7). Sites of memory are the artificial resources that society has created to help us “access” the past: museums, festivals, archives, monuments, etc. Certainly historical fiction is one of the sites of memory that inform collective knowledge and memory of the past. These sites of memory impart the stories that make our past intelligible.

I have already discussed at length the way in which narrative is used in historiography. It functions in much the same way on the broader level of collective memory. Just as individual accounts of specific events, such as those accounts found in *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Libra*, use narrative to discuss their respective historical subjects, so too is collective memory comprised of broader, more expansive narratives that help create meaning and coherence out of the jumbled and infinitely interpretable past. Novels like *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* function as sites of memory in the way they provide the texts for national narratives that are deeply imbedded in the national consciousness. Much of what we remember about the Kennedy assassination and the bombing of Dresden is shaped by our narratives propagated by these novels.
These broader, more encompassing narratives that comprise collective memory bear some resemblance to Lyotard’s metanarratives. In his seminal work on postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard defined post-modernism as simply a distrust towards the metanarratives of the past, of the epistemological narratives inherent in our collective cultural memory—narratives that help us define and make sense of the past (xxiv). While he argues that certain metanarratives have disappeared—the metanarrative of the enlightenment, for example—he nevertheless acknowledges that “recourse to narrative is inevitable,” pointing out that even non-narrative based scientific disciplines need narrative to represent and, above all, authenticate their work (28). Following Lyotard, I would argue that even the sort of metanarratives discussed by Lyotard have not died out altogether, but have merely been replaced. DeLillo and Vonnegut deconstruct the old narratives, but in doing so establish new narratives to take the place of the old ones. The new narratives (revolving around the concept of conspiracy and distrust of government bureaucracy) offer an epistemological prism through which we perceive the world.

These grand narratives, as they are sometimes called, are the building blocks of collective memory, and function—on a grand scale—as myths in society. When I use the term myth here, I use it not in its colloquial sense—i.e., something that is “not factual”—but in its anthropological sense. Anthropologists commonly define myth as a story—its essential truth being irrelevant—that is important, even sacred, to a culture because it provides a prism through which understanding and meaning can be obtained. One historian defines myth as “a set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-community and that serves to found or affirm
its self-conception” (Heehs 3). Another scholar observed this relationship between history and myth: “Myth and history are close kin inasmuch as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story” (McNeill 1).

The structuralist Roland Barthes argued that myth is above all a semiological system, “a system of communication [. . .] a mode of signification, a form” (109). According to Barthes, myth can be found anywhere that a structuralist sign system occurs—even in the most unlikely and obscure places and objects: a strip club, plastic, toys, and so forth. Barthes’ mode of structuralism, drawing upon de Saussure’s linguistic structuralism and Levi-Strauss’ anthropological structuralism, reveals the predominance of sign systems in society. These broader, cultural sign systems constitute the fabric of myth. Historical events such as the Kennedy assassination and the bombing of Dresden operate after the manner of these sign systems. These events coalesce in the minds of the American public in such a way that they come to signify much more than the events themselves—they signify a powerful collective feeling of distrust toward a deceitful and conspiratorial government.

The seminal historian Carl Becker also understood the relationship between history and myth: “The history that does work in the world, the history that influences the course of history, is living history, that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective specious present, the specious present of Mr. Everyman” (234). Becker’s comment suggests the mythic nature of collective memory. Collective memory is mythic in the sense that it is comprised of collectively remembered and shared memories of the past that are meaningful to the present in some way. And as Becker points out, the remembered events may or may not be true. Events
merely believed to be true but which are not true can exert the same influence as events that really are true. Such is the power and the danger of linguistic representation of history.

III.

The power wielded by these writers is an example of the archontic power described by Derrida. *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* represent the attempts of their authors to usurp the archontic power from the entities in which the archontic power usually resides: the government, academia, etc. They understand that fiction writers are not an impotent force in society; authors can, in fact, powerfully influence a society’s understanding of history by constructing the metanarratives that undergird the fabric of a society’s collective memory. The most effective fiction writers—i.e. those writers who establish credibility through thorough research (or even through the mere appearance of it), and those whose work is commercially successful and therefore reaches a large audience—become the most effectual archons. In a sense, fiction writers have the power to become the ultimate archons, usurping the archontic power from those entities who have traditionally held it—namely, government agencies and academic institutions.

Interestingly, the very historical events that are the topics of *Libra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are events which contributed to the public’s skepticism of government-constructed narratives of history. The conspiracy narratives propagated by these novels engender the sort of distrust in government agencies that makes them that much more convincing.

Ultimately, DeLillo and Vonnegut recognize the power of language to fix meaning and create knowledge. Language has the power, as Heidegger argues, to bring historical
events into existence or erase them from existence. And that is a power that should not be taken lightly.
Works Cited


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