

KENNEDICIDE IN THE “HEARTLAND OF THE REAL”: CONSPIRACY,
COINCIDENCE, AND NARRATIVE INSTABILITY IN DON DELILLO’S *LIBRA*

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Abstract

*This paper explores the cultural work of Don DeLillo’s *Libra* as an effort of testing the stability of modernist narrative pillars such as objectivity, narrative cohesion, and historical truth. Interweaving an analysis of official documents regarding Lee Harvey Oswald’s biography, the paper identifies two main vectors of the novel that point towards coincidence and randomness as driving forces behind the Warren Report and the plethora of conspiracy theories that surround the Kennedy assassination: First, the novel’s tripartite structure and its symbolic excesses, and second *Libra*’s unstable renditions of Oswald’s life that blurs the line between facts and fiction.*

Key words: modernist, historical truth, coincidence, conspiracy etc.

Introduction: Dead Presidents

*The day they blew out the brains of the king
Thousands were watchin’, no one saw a thing
It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise
Right there in front of everyone’s eyes
Greatest magic trick ever under the sun
Perfectly executed, skillfully done
Wolfman, oh Wolfman, oh Wolfman, howl
Rub-a-dub-dub, it’s a murder most foul*

— Bob Dylan, “Murder Most Foul”

*Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one’s own
personal world, and the world in general.*

— Lee Harvey Oswald, letter to his brother (qtd. in Warren Commission 391)

The twenty-second of November 1963 was a sunny day in Dallas, before the clear blue sky became a morbid backdrop for one of the twentieth century's most disturbing and impervious moments. At 12:30 PM, multiple shots rang out in the direction of president John Fitzgerald Kennedy's motorcade. The bullets transformed this day's cheerful mood into a scene of national trauma, social disruption, and alleged conspiracy that deeply permeated the roots of the postmodern era. In his novel *Libra* (1988), Don DeLillo suggests that the president's public assassination triggered an "aberration in the heartland of the real" (DeLillo 15). The present paper expands upon this impulse by discussing, through the lens of *Libra*, how JFK's death undermined a nation's sense of a comprehensible reality. The epistemological fallout of the president's death, it is argued, fragmented in its wake a clear-cut framework of historical cohesion by creating numerous and elusive vectors of reality and causation that disrupted expectation of a "future [that] make[s] as much sense as the past" (DeLillo 23). In attempts to reassemble an erstwhile semantic and narrative stability, a plethora of actors and theories tried to make sense of the "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (DeLillo 181). These include, on one hand, the official version of events chronicled by the Warren Commission, the unofficial name of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, established by Lyndon B. Johnson through Executive Order 11130 and chaired by Chief Justice Earl Warren.

On the other hand, narrative strands involve a plethora of conspiracy theories that lay blame at the feet of the FBI, CIA, the military-industrial complex, Cuban hitmen, the mafia, and various other shadowy actors. Each theory contests the authorized historical reality compiled in the 888-page Warren Report made public in September 1964, which solely blames a lone Marxist gunman by the name of Lee Harvey Oswald. Returning to the sites of these multiple realities through the lens of *Libra*, the paper traces how DeLillo concurrently reconstructs and deconstructs the deep epistemic background behind the Kennedy assassination by confronting readers with the unviable task of choosing between contingency and conspiracy, as well as between objectivity and superstition. The novel utilizes liminal epistemes such as coincidence, subjectivity, and randomness as alternative and thoroughly postmodern devices to test the narrative stability of both the official version of events and the excess of alternative theories that surround what cultural commentator Bill Millard termed the "Kennedicide" (Millard 3). *Libra*, the paper proposes, exemplifies the—often perplexing—outcomes of these oppositions through its tripartite structure of its plot and excessive symbolism, as well as Lee Harvey Oswald's convoluted and contradictory Cold War biography that dissolves the modernist divide between reality and fiction.

Undoing History: Three Plotlines and a Secret Room

To begin with, *Libra's* tripartite narrative structure itself becomes an agent in the novel's calculated disbanding of truth and historical reality. Throughout the book, the story oscillates between two main plotlines that structure the narrative. The first consists of chapters named after significant stations of Oswald's biography, whereas the second traces the key dates alongside which the conspiracy against Kennedy unfolds. In the parts that cover Oswald's life, the future assassin can be seen in a variety of situations, personas, and roles: As a thrill-riding youth on trains in the Bronx, as a student in his hometown of New Orleans, an epicenter for socially marginal and othered social elements, as a Marine stationed in Japan at a secret military base for U-2 spy plane missions into Soviet territory, as a defector in Moscow and Minsk, troubled father in Fort Worth and Dallas, and finally as a political activist and assassin after his repatriation to the United States. DeLillo portrays Oswald as a historical figure whose biography is pieced together from the Warren Report's eclectic and somewhat random assortment of facts and factoids.

Even though the novel's chapters appear clearly labeled and/or dated, hence suggesting a clearly discernible order of events, it quickly becomes clear that these stitched-together and arbitrary snapshots of Oswald's contradictory character do not congeal into a cohesive narrative that could support the traditional dramaturgical framework of a novel. Instead, DeLillo transmutes the future assassin into a speculative and fictional character who thinks and acts on his own according to *Libra's* sprawling psychogram of himself. This non-fiction (or, alternatively, 'factional') characterization, however, does not compromise the plot's cohesion. Rather, it confronts readers with a manifestation of its very goal: To reveal the 'panic' among the epistemic categories of historical facts and literary fiction via Oswald's messy biography, which will be discussed in more detail below. This narrative weakening of categorical stability also works towards the novel's central premise of making perceptible another, deeper dimension of the tragic event that forever altered the nation's political and cultural landscape. In a thoroughly postmodern move, the novel presents fact and fiction not as conflicting but as complementary forces whose literary reconfiguration might disentangle alleged truths, falsehoods, and conspiracy theories. According to Sebastian M. Herrmann, this cultural work of the non-fiction novel puts a spotlight on the postmodern period's "delicate epistemic status" because the truth's "being known and not known at the same time [...] impacts the historical and political moment [...] readers live in" (Herrmann 136). This penchant for the rearrangement of the known and knowable then becomes visible in *Libra's* endeavor "to establish a different kind of relationship between the historical material and the fictions that surround it and give it form," unravelling during this process "the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared" (Johnston 325; DeLillo 23).

The second strand of the plot (both the book's and the assassination's) follows the retired and/or clandestine CIA operatives Win Everett, Larry Parmenter, as well as T.J. Mackey and their elaborate schemes to change the nation's foreign policy. In part deliberately and sometimes by sheer coincidence, the three men conspire against Lancer—Kennedy's codename in intelligence circles. Their goal is to reverse the US government's, in their opinion, indulgent foreign policy towards Cuba, especially after the discovery of Soviet military advisors and nuclear missile silos on the island. To reach the goal of pressuring the administration into renewed efforts to overthrow Fidel Castro's post-revolutionary regime, the shadow brokers shower intelligence services and media outlets with a flood of facts, factoids, and entirely fabricated data, among which are carefully hidden clues that identify Castro and other Socialist leaders as the architects behind the attack on the most powerful man on Earth. Additionally, the conspirators seek to legitimize the illegal activities of clandestine anticommunist groups such as the Intercontinental Penetration Force (Interpen), Minutemen, and the anti-Castro exiles of Alpha 66. With the support of the CIA and right-wing organizations like the John Birch Society, they had established covert training camps across the southern US where paramilitary commandos prepared a second invasion and forced regime change in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs disaster of April 1961.

To accelerate these plans, Everett, the mastermind behind this carefully arranged but hopelessly complex conspiracy, designs a staged attack on Kennedy's motorcade as it parades through the streets of Dallas. However, according to Everett's envisioned dramaturgical plot, the attack would result in a failure to kill the president. Instead, the near-death experience would supposedly shock Kennedy into shedding his softness towards Socialist aggression in America's backyard and restore the United States' role as the sole hegemonic power in the Americas. Coincidentally, Everett meets Oswald and almost instantaneously identifies him as the perfect decoy that would allow the conspirators to reach their goals undetected. The ex-defector's unpatriotic biography, incoherent personality, and theoretically complex ideology, Everett deliberates, would "require a massive decipherment" and lead "linguists, photo analysts, fingerprint experts, handwriting experts, experts in hair and fiber, smudges and blurs [...] to basement rooms in windy industrial slums [and] lost town in the Tropics" (DeLillo 78). But *Libra's* narrative structure never permits Everett and his co-conspirators to gain actual control of their hush-hush operation. In turn, they only get more and more entangled in the perplexing limbo of their own doctrines of compulsive secrecy and doublethink as "[t]his is the nature of the business. [...] The deeper the ambiguity, the more we believe" (DeLillo 259). No longer convinced that their own actions follow the basic rules of cause and effect, they resort to increasingly absurd measures. While planning to simulate the president's botched assassination, the conspirators turn into participants of a simulacrum of conspiracy by "performing according to a script whose composition [...] is not under their control" (Millard 13). On the one hand, their plot is a complete product of their

imagination; based entirely in fiction, it also aims at the creation of historical fiction. On the other hand, their scheme has profound effects on historical reality because it eventually, through the seemingly random correlation of otherwise unrelated events, results in the actual assassination of the president.

Libra follows some of these random yet also path-dependent plotlines and their generation by what some might call coincidence and others fate. Accordingly, the structural dynamics of the conspirators' plotline become subjected to Jean Baudrillard's postmodern notion of "Simulacra and Simulation" that results in the permanent "instability of the historical referent" (Thomas 121). Even more than violent transgressions, Baudrillard argues, ruling powers fear the loss of their monopoly on simulation, because it might convey the insight "that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation*" (Baudrillard 177). This results in the notion that America's political system would more effortlessly absorb a violent transgression against Kennedy than an unsanctioned simulation of his assassination because the latter would equate to a violation of its simulation-monopoly. Therefore, when by substituting the simulated near-miss in the conspirators' plotline with the fatal bullet to the president's head from Oswald's plotline, *Libra* traces a very thin red line between reality and fiction, constantly probing the stability of either one. "Thus with the American presidents," Baudrillard remarks accordingly, "the Kennedys are murdered because they still have a political dimension. Others—Johnson, Nixon, Ford—only had a right to puppet attempts, to simulated murders" (Baudrillard 177).

Finally, the ominously named room of secrets occupies the space in between the two main plotlines. Its sole occupant is the retired CIA archivist Nicholas Branch who has been commissioned by official powers to write the comprehensive secret history of the events that took place at Dealey Plaza on 22/11/63. To accomplish this daring task, Branch was given far-reaching access to almost all the myriad documents and casefiles that surround the Kennedicide. From a solely structural standpoint, his secret history links together the two main threads of *Libra's* narrative, thus making it "a metacommentary on the narrative of the assassination itself" (Thomas 121). Struggling through mountains of materials, Branch becomes the embodiment of the modern (i.e., pre-postmodern) desire to create stable, straightforward, and truthful narratives through an objective reconstruction of history and the rational alignment of facts. Thinking it "essential to master the data" and approach Oswald's dendritic personality as a "technical diagram," he simply "wants a thing to be what it is" (DeLillo 442, 377, 379). For Bill Millard, Branch therefore personifies "*Homo documentarius*, [the] linear-thinking, Gutenbergian Man" (Millard 16). His attempts to unravel the hopeless tangle of data into something that might amount to comprehensible, universal, and objective reality represent the very antithesis of the conspirators' determination to replace any semblance of the real with a mirror cabinet of simulations and thereby warp

reality into hyperreality and a lone, subaltern shooter into an enormous conspiracy headed by the ringleaders of the Socialist bloc.

However, the constant stream of information which Branch receives from the mysterious Curator includes not only historical evidence such as the infamous Zapruder film. Conversely, Branch is relentlessly inundated with heaps of ambiguous data including, for example, “results of ballistic tests carried out on human skulls and goat carcasses, on blocks of gelatin mixed with horsemeat” (DeLillo 299). Forced to abandon his detached position of power as the all-seeing observer placed at the center of a modernist panopticon, Branch instead must wet his feet in the murky waters of ambiguity and half-truth. He is forced “to *touch* and *smell*” and thus contaminate the evidence, destroying any illusion of objective detachment in the sequestered room of secrets (DeLillo 299). As a result, he himself becomes a ‘branch’ of the assassination-complex. Instead of acting as an arbitrator who weaves the novel’s plotlines into a logical and meaningful whole—and possibly even solves the mystery of Kennedy’s murder—Branch merely amplifies the resonance effects produced by the text’s negotiation between the supposedly contrary epistemologies of reality and fiction. In the light of its function as a kind of mediator, the room of secrets reifies obscured or disavowed overlaps between postwar modernism’s and postmodern constructivism’s conceptions of reality and its narrative conventions. The lonely room and its sole occupant then visualize the ‘secret’ intersections that sprout in the fertile soil of their narrative collisions, fueled by the conspiracy-savvy reader’s heightened suspension of disbelief.

As a result, the novel is not so much interested in conveying a “strictly logical, empirically governed account, and its incapacity” to function properly within a postmodern system of “substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Johnston 324; Baudrillard 167). On the contrary, it becomes clear that it is not solely hyperreality but a thicket of apparently random events and exponential escalation of possible explanations that prevent Branch from constructing a wholesome narrative. This becomes especially obvious when he is seen debating with himself about some very basic and knowable facts about the assassin’s appearance and concludes:

Facts are lonely things. [...] 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. [...] He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened. [...] 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. (DeLillo 300)

Condemned to peel away endless layers of facts and fiction that overlap at random intervals in an ever-escalating excess of meaningful and redundant information, Branch's Sisyphean task ultimately exemplifies the epistemic death zone at the fault lines between modernist penchant for coherent narratives to postmodern (de)constructivism. Revealing the unsalvageable position of the modernist narrative and its reliance on symbols as markers of narrative cohesion, *Libra* lays out an almost inflationary spectrum of symbolism in front of both skeptical and conspiracy-savvy readers that ranges from vapid factoids to a layer of hidden "message[s] buried in the text" (DeLillo 272). These buried messages include such furtive circumstances as JFK's death car being a Lincoln, or a "Welcome Mr. Kennedy to Dallas" newspaper ad bordered in black and placed by the "American Fact-Finding Committee" (DeLillo 392-93). The text moreover provides readers with a never-ending stream of conspiracism and Hellerian paranoia vis-à-vis subjects such as government fluoridation of the water supply, an invisible "Real Control Apparatus," and in general "things that are truer than true" (DeLillo 286, 266). Of DeLillo's extensive cast of characters, it is mainly David Ferrie—a former army comrade of Oswald with contacts to the underworld—who acts as the text's symbolic oracle. In partly rational, partly arcane propositions, Ferrie muses about the existence of a third force which subverts the reality/fiction divide and is "not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines" (DeLillo 339). The exact nature of this force, however, remains unclear as "[w]e don't know what to call it, so we say coincidence" (DeLillo 172).

The novel's title, however, already contains the key to deciphering the "dark power [of] the number three" (DeLillo 390). As Oswald's zodiac sign, the Libra hints at an inbuilt sense of ambiguity. In addition, it transmits an assurance that perfect balance between weighted scales is achievable, hence proposing equilibrium as the resolution for the narrative and representative crises surrounding the fuzzy boundaries of reality and fiction. Moving within predetermined orbits and alongside unchanging constellations, zodiac signs promise predictability and a sense of conciliation with higher, celestial powers. This simple but powerful promise, however, proves insufficient in the case of the Kennedicide. Oswald is what the New Orleans businessman and possible conspirator Clay Shaw calls a "negative Libran who is, let's say, somewhat unsteady and impulsive. Easily, easily, easily influenced. Poised to make the dangerous leap" between the scales, thus upending their finely tuned balance (DeLillo 315). By suggesting a tripartite configuration of reality that is undermined by its own narrative liminality, the Libra symbol and Oswald as its destructive real-world herald subvert the moral dualism and epistemic straightforwardness that ostensibly defined

the height of the Cold War. The ensuing uncertainty of the status quo emerges through Oswald's tripartite scales. Encumbered with the random mass of his precarious relation to reality, the figurative scales may at any time reverse their polarity and lead to entirely unexpected measurements. Historical truth, narrative stability, conspiracy theories, and obvious falsities regarding JFK's assassination by Lee Harvey Oswald (or anyone else) accordingly all turn into possible outcomes of weightings and deflections on *Libra's* symbolic scales.

To counter the scales' fickle nature and randomness, the novel proposes astrology as a corrective narrative. In "Art after Dealey Plaza," literary scholar Skip Willman explicates that astrology offers comprehensible systems and structures. But it also functions as an arbitrator between epistemic contingency and doubts about an uncertain future, deriving order and meaning from celestial alignment and transmitting a comforting sense of deterministic predictability to believers (Willman 635). For its proponents, the pseudoscience provides an ethereal safe space that promises to attach meaning to human affairs and structure a globalized world order increasingly consumed by "fears of anarchy, terrorism, scarcity, crime, and overpopulation" (Stewart and Harding 292). Like many conspiracy theorists, astrologers perceive personal fate and historical reality as being determined by opaque but ultimately knowable systems and predictable outcomes. Unlike most wearers of a tin foil hat, astrologers do not usually suspect dark schemes and evil intentions behind these overarching mechanisms.

By referencing astrology, *Libra* reaches deep into the realms of metaphysics and establishes a sharp contrast to its chiefly postmodern motifs and deconstructive narratology. Astrology in this sense hints at the ineffability of an objective, singular truth, suggesting that everything—like the alignment of the stars—can be subject to interpretation, and inherit a deeper level of truth that cannot be deciphered by such means as causality, rationality, and objectivism. Stephen Bernstein in analogy to Kant's mathematical sublime advances the notion that "the resultant effect is that of the [historical] sublime" (Bernstein 13). According to Kant, the thought "of ever arriving at absolute totality by progressive measurement of things of the sensible world in time and space was cognized as an objective impossibility" (Kant 108). In a similar narrative operation, the idea of a stable historical referent thus turns into nothing less than an impossibility or, translated into David Ferrie's conspiracist vocabulary, history becomes "the sum of all the things they aren't telling us" (DeLillo 321). In sum, the novel employs the largely vacuous astrology metaphor to point towards the futility of narratively approaching the Kennedicide through modernist conceptions of reality. Like the idle task of interpreting celestial constellation in the night sky, the facts, documents, case-files, and fanciful theories about 11/22/63, *Libra* implies, are also destined to become arbitrary

constellations inside a historical vacuum, endowed with only superficial significance and fated “to oscillate between the poles of contingency and conspiracy” (Willman 635).

This becomes clear because, as will be shown below, Oswald’s biography lacks the basic coordinates that mark either personal or historical narratives as meaningful. Neither in the US, Japan, the Philippines, nor in the Soviet Union is he able to adjust himself to the social and political realities. As DeLillo puts it, wherever he moves, “the system floats right through him”(DeLillo 357). This systemic floating-through often creates resonance effects in one of his personas that randomly connects to the outside world, resulting in an excess of symbolic connections and a plethora of strange coincidences. The most striking of which are perhaps Oswald’s uncanny biographical resemblances to John F. Kennedy, some of which DeLillo recounts in the novel: “Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert” (DeLillo 336). In the end, after both are assassinated, Oswald “and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history” (DeLillo 435).

“The id is hell”: Disassembling and Reassembling Lee Harvey Oswald

Next to its plot structure, *Libra’s* account of Lee Harvey Oswald’s biography represents a second main narrative vector that exposes the workings of chance and coincidence at the epistemic intersection between fact and fiction. Constantly striving to charge his life with meaning as he works to overcome his deep-felt alienation and impossible position in the bipartite world of the Cold War, either by fighting against Marxism or by internalizing Marxist propaganda and defecting to the Soviet Union to “take part in the struggle,” Oswald appears as a willing participant of his own de(con)struction, as DeLillo notes in his preface. As his widow Marina Nikolayevna Oswald Porter (née Prusakova) notes during an interview that she gave shortly after her husband’s assassination, Oswald “was never fully there” and that “[h]e is someone you see from a distance” (DeLillo 241). This distorted, profoundly ambiguous personality becomes evident in the novel’s elaborate yet illogical portrait of his political alignment. On the surface, his Marxist beliefs obviously make Oswald a Castro supporter. However, like in a pulpy detective fiction, things are more complicated and full of twists, turns, and *coups de théâtre*. It begins with Oswald posing as a militant anti-Castro activist with the goal of infiltrating the New Orleans office of Guy Bannister, a private eye, covert CIA agent, and militant anticommunist. To gain Bannister’s trust and to complete this triple-crossing web of deception, Oswald in turn agrees to pose as pro-Castro in public—and thus to again reveal his supposedly true political colors, making him at least a triple agent—with the goal of infiltrating leftist campus groups.

The Warren Report as the authorized but regularly criticized historiography of the assassination mentions that the shooter's "commitment to Marxism was an important factor influencing his conduct during his adult years"(DeLillo 376). At the same time, it fails to provide further details about the actual substance of his political motivation(Willman 625). This surprising omission also hints at yet another, perhaps even more fundamental quirk of Oswald's character as it is portrayed in *Libra*. The seeming disinterest of the Warren Commission in the assassin's politics could be attributed either to the protection of the truth monopoly or to the "awkward problems of representation [...] for the culture at large" caused by ascribing a major historical event to random and convoluted causes (Green 587). Simply put, his political motivations did not jive with the black and white narratives of the Cold War. As demonstrated by CIA archivist Nicholas Branch, any empirical attempt to reveal a single logic behind the assassin's actions only produces ever more bewildering dissonances that shake not only the JFK murder but threaten to undermine the straightforward narrative of the United States as leader of the free world in a righteous struggle against the evil forces of communism.

Oswald's Socialist philosophy betray contempt for the injustices of a capitalist "system that builds up hate" and has made Oswald, who dwelled with his wife in a Dallas rooming house and worked as a shipping clerk at the Texas School Book Depository, "a zero in the system" (DeLillo 110, 357). Forged during his exile in the Soviet Union, his ideology seems theoretically profound and rhetorically polished, as demonstrated during an interview he gave to the New Orleans station WDSU. This talk aired in August 1963, following Oswald's arrest for disturbing the peace by distributing leaflets of the New York City-based Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Ironically, for reasons explained below Oswald was merely posing as a member of the FPCC, whose actual affiliates included Truman Capote who in 1965 published *In Cold Blood*, one of the first American non-fiction novels. Interrogated in a McCarthyistic "reds under the beds" tone about his political affiliations, he called the allegations against him a "red herring" and explained to the puzzled interviewer: "I would definitely say that I am a Marxist [...] but that does not mean, however, that I'm a Communist"(DeLillo 39; WDSU News). According to *Libra's* literary interrogation of these abstract distinctions of dialectical materialist philosophy, however, Oswald's theoretically sophisticated politics in praxis amount to little more than conspicuous consumption.

His publicly expressed admiration for Leon Trotsky and Josef Stalin, however, comes across as not much more than an act of teenage rebellion; a troubled man's bittersweet fantasies and joining of the ranks of the dreaded political Other as revenge on a society that had left him in the dust. During his time in New York City in the early 1950s, he was arrested because of his persistent truancy. To social worker John Carro, Oswald said that his staying out of school was because education "was a waste of time" and that his schoolmates "made fun of him

because of his Texas drawl and his blue jeans”(qtd. in Commission 805). A report of psychiatrist Dr. Hartogs diagnosed the thirteen-year-old Oswald with “personality pattern disturbance with schizoid features and passive aggressive tendencies,” describing him as an emotionally “disturbed youngster who suffers under the impact of really existing emotional isolation and deprivation, lack of affection, absence of family life and rejection by a self involved and conflicted mother” (qtd in Warren Commission 380). Oswald’s biological father Robert had died of a heart attack before his birth and his mother Marguerite was a grandiose narcissist who was prone to indulge every conspiracy theory she came upon. By the age of seventeen, Oswald had already moved twenty-one times and attended twelve different schools before dropping out of tenth grade. At the age of twenty-four, he had failed at almost everything and was looking for revenge and a place in history. Following his disillusionment with the Soviet Union and return to New Orleans, he harbored a deep-felt rage together with delusions of grandeur, indicating to his wife that he was on the way to becoming the first prime minister of the United States—a new office that would be established for him. The Warren Report states that

[w]hile Oswald appeared to most of those who knew him as a meek and harmless person, he sometimes imagined himself as “the Commander” and, apparently seriously, as a political prophet—a man who said that after 20 years he would be prime minister. His wife testified that he compared himself with great leaders of history. Such ideas of grandeur were apparently accompanied by notions of oppression. He had a great hostility toward his environment, whatever it happened to be, which he expressed in striking and sometimes violent acts long before the assassination. (Warren Commission 376)

Against this background, Oswald’s idolization of Stalin and Trotsky appears even more paradoxical, given the two Soviet leaders’ personal hatred for each other which culminated in the latter’s violent death. Ruth Paine, a family friend of the Oswalds, mentioned during an FBI interview that “during a visit [...] Oswald had said that he was a ‘Trotskyite Communist,’ and that she found this and similar statements illogical and somewhat amusing”(Warren Commission 439). In yet another strange coincidence relating to Trotsky, Oswald boarded a bus in late September 1963 and traveled from Houston to Mexico City, the disgraced revolutionary’s chosen exile. Once there, he visited the Cuban embassy to apply for a visa. While he awaited the processing of his application (which was eventually denied) he planned—but ultimately forgot—to visit the house where Trotsky stayed in 1940 before being assassinated with an ice axe by NKVD agent Ramón Mercader who for his actions received the honorary title Hero of the Soviet Union from Stalin himself. Despite his uncritical and somewhat confused admiration of Socialism, even during his defection Oswald never officially renounced his American citizenship, likely because he became disillusioned

after witnessing what Socialism looked like in reality. After his initial unsuccessfully application for Soviet citizenship, he noted in his diary that his Russian case officer told him that the

“USSR [is] only great in Literature [and] wants me to go back home” [...] I am shocked!! My dreams! I retire to my room. I have \$100 left. [...] I decide to end it. Soak rist in cold water to numb the pain. Than slash my leftwrist. Thanplaug wrist into bathtum of hot water. [...] Somewhere, a violin plays, as I wacth my life whirl away. I think to myself, “How easy to Die” and “A Sweet Death, (to violins) [...]”. Diary entry dated October 21, 1959, (qtd. in Commission 94-95; see Warren Commission 392)

After being found and brought to a hospital, he is sent to Minsk, Belarus to work at the Gorizont Electronics Factory. Living well above the standards of his fellow workers, he was provided with a luxurious studio apartment and received additional pay. Still, one year later, Oswald asks permission to return to the US, noting “I have have [sic] enough” and complaining that “[t]he work is drab the money I get has nowhere to be spent. No nightclubs or bowling all[e]ys no places of recreation accept [sic] the trade union dances”Diary entry dated January 4-31, 1961, (qtd. in Commission 102). In turn, Oswald’s Soviet role models appear hollow and easily replaceable with American ones. While shooting *The Barbarian and the Geisha* in the Philippines, actor John Wayne boarded a helicopter and landed at a military base on the Island of Corregidor for a surprise visit in January 1958. By chance, Oswald had mess duty on that day and waited on Wayne while the American icon enjoyed his lunch with a group of Marine Corps officers. DeLillo contemplates that Oswald basked in Wayne’s patriotic and virile aura, experiencing him as “doubly real”(DeLillo 93). However, like he would during his stint in the Soviet Union and many other instances, Oswald finds himself relegated to only being half there, unable to grasp his own positionality in a storyline that unfolds around him: “He wants to get close to John Wayne, say something authentic” but cannot (DeLillo 93).

In a blurry and rare photograph published in the March 6, 1978 issue of *People Magazine*, he can be seen standing in the background of the dining hall, gazing at Wayne who eats roast beef and gravy with his back turned to Oswald (Dalton). His random appearance in the snapshot coincidentally but forcefully captures his transformation into a kind of conspicuous bystander, a detached interloper who is thrown into a historical non-place and unable to attach his existence to either the realms of reality or fantasy. Whether he attaches his identity to the United States or the Soviet Union, the results remain the same. In both worlds—that according to historically authoritative narratives denoted opposites—he experiences the same condition: a postmodern limbo between reality and fiction as he falls through the cracks of

the systems and lives at the factional fault lines that are opened by fate, chance, and happenstance. Unlike the novel, the Warren Report with its allegiance to facts and desire to construct a cohesive narrative overlooks this crucial aspect of the assassin's personality, noticing only "some quality about him that led him to act with an apparent disregard for possible consequences" (Warren Commission 376).

Oswald's ambiguous identity moreover materializes in his many aliases such as Alek James Hidell, O.H. Lee, and Aleksei Oswald. He used the pseudonyms for several practical purposes such as forging membership cards for the FPCC and famously to mail-order a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver (serial no. V510210) and a secondhand Italian Mannlicher-Carcano Model 91/38 rifle (serial no. C2766) for \$29.95 (Warren Commission 511-12). Unlike the Warren Report, *Libra* uses Oswald's aliases to demonstrate the protagonist's progressive removal from the (supposed) cores of his identity, which culminates in the creation of multiple narrative personas. As linguist Jose Noya explains, the "cryptonymic constitution of Oswald's linguistic identity" is only to a lesser degree the expression of pragmatic considerations and rather a "mode of conscious self-interpellation, where ideological effects disturbingly take on physical substance" (Noya 267). In other words, viewing the pseudonyms merely as a part of Oswald's plot to kill Kennedy requires the existence of a 'real' Lee Harvey Oswald, including an intelligible biography and coherent identity on whose basis any alternate personalities are produced.

Because the notion of one 'original Oswald' appears untenable both in the narrative confines of the novel and the official report, his (non)identity functions as a dramaturgical device that at random intervals "connects to a different configuration of forces [producing] a double or copy without an original" (DeLillo 164, 13). This enables the deviant Oswald to live in "curved space" by inhabiting "a world inside the world" (DeLillo 440, 101). For his narrative ego, the membrane between subjective and objective constructions of the world is highly permeable and constantly (re)constructed by narrative elements that fill in gaps with random elements and simulacra of the either version of the world. The result is a mirror cabinet that shatters during Oswald's own assassination by nightclub owner Jack Ruby as the point where his pseudonym A.J. Hidell reveals its true meaning as a cryptonym consisting of die and hell: "Hidell means don't tell. The id is hell" (DeLillo 164, 13). During the novel's final scene at Oswald's strange funeral, the disintegrating of his personality emerges in a particularly arresting manner. The first oddity occurred when members of the press had to act as pallbearers because only Oswald's mother and his widow Marina showed up at the funeral (Ross). The resulting scene seems unreal and turns into a postmodern allegory: As the print and photo journalists carry Oswald's body to the grave, they symbolically bury the modernist notion of truth as the complete body of evidence, while perhaps at the same time dreaming up the words that would resurrect Oswald in one form or another. As DeLillo puts it when the

still alive Oswald is paraded to the world at the press conference shortly before his murder: “A word is a magic wish. [...] With a word they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together”(DeLillo 414). Finally, Oswald’s interment under the alias William Bobo (“for security reasons”) represents a final act of defacement and the ultimate split between Oswald’s certifiable historical existence and the notion of a complementary narrative that corresponds to this existence (DeLillo 454).

In *Libra*’s last sentence, Marguerite—who demanded her son be buried as a national hero at Arlington Cemetery—finds consolation in the thought that her son’s real name “was the one thing they could not take away [...] It belonged to her now, and to history” (DeLillo 456). However, she fails to recognize that meaningful historical remembrance of Oswald has become impossible since his name and personality have long-since been invalidated as conveyors of either fact or fiction. As DeLillo expresses this conundrum almost poetically: “It’s like the shadow of his own name falling across his path” (DeLillo 133). In his final months, even to Oswald himself his name “sounded extremely strange” and as if “[t]hey were talking about somebody else”(DeLillo 416). As he is “shot, and shot, and shot” in seemingly endless repetition, “Oswald’s televisual death [...] marks the dissolution of the final boundary of the self” (DeLillo 447; Thomas 116). The division between his conscious self and its medial representation becomes evident when he watches himself getting shot on television in the novel. Fatally struck by Jack Ruby’s bullet, he feels a “mocking pain” and simultaneously, from the camera’s point of view, sees himself turn into a “picture of the twisted face on TV” (DeLillo 440). At the same time and quite ironically, his assassination on live TV and the subsequent assembly of his historical image in the Warren Report as if it was real also restore parts of the agency that Oswald had previously surrendered to the forces of fate and chance as he obtains both an official (i.e., the emotionally disturbed killer) and conspiratorial (i.e., the patsy) narrative identity.

Oswald’s death becomes the apex of his twofold Baudrillardian coming-apart: On the one hand brought about by the separation between his body, mind, thoughts, and actions. On the other hand, his demise escalates the clash between his self-image and his outside representation by the media, Warren Report, and by the cultural work of texts such as *Libra* (Green 590). Through this—partially self-inflicted, partially external—transcendence of the reality-fiction dichotomy and his entering “the territory of no-choice” where “[d]estiny is larger than facts and events,” Oswald posthumously fulfills his ambition to matter on a historical scale (DeLillo 100, 204). This scale, however, is permanently askew because of the profound coming-apart of his contradictory and factional personality. In the case of the novel, this disjointed outcome is exemplified by Oswald’s gradual detachment from both reality and fiction: As he was during the days as a teenager in the Bronx, his whole life the would-be assassin is “riding just to ride” while “stand[ing] at the front of the first car, hands flat against

the glass.” As the train smashed through the dark,” Oswald is haphazardly balancing “on the edge of no-control” (DeLillo 3, 13). It is this gloomy underworld where he discovers a more sensible order. From down there, he can muster up enough agency to study and understand the inner workings of the world above from which he finds himself excluded. For Oswald, the underground represents a “purer form” of the Kafkaesque human geographies overhead, and an access to a “world inside the world” (DeLillo 4, 13). In contrast to the chaos above, the subterranean microcosm is clearly organized into stops, zones, gaps, and timetables that he can readily comprehend and predict.

Throughout *Libra*'s depiction of his adult life, Oswald seeks to rediscover an equivalent to this structural pre-configuration that enables him to enter the framework of historical significance. His thrill-seeking subway excursions then signify a conjunction between the concepts of reality and fiction by alluding to “the immobile tracks of a preordained reality and the utter tracklessness produced by a derailment from the paths of the expected” (Noya 249). Riding the subway and thus going beyond the limits of the familiar order for Oswald becomes a rite of initiation, as well as a foreshadowing of *Libra*'s literary encounter with the narrative tensions between consensual historical reality and its hidden, fictional, and sometimes deadly substitutes. A decade after these youthful antics and his subsequent defection to the USSR, the novel infers that Oswald's perpetual balancing act has, through the conspiracy of various coincidences, led him to a window at the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. There, “allow[ing] himself to be swept along,” he once again “find[s] himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction,” aiming a mail-ordered rifle at the president and pulls the trigger (DeLillo 101).

Conclusion: The Real Question

This paper discussed how Don DeLillo's *Libra* uses narrative structure and symbolic excess, as well as its non-fiction account of Lee Harvey Oswald's biography to uncover the dynamics of coincidence and randomness at the hidden intersection between the official, factual narrative of the Kennedy assassination and the vast dimension of fictional conspiracy theories. Thusly narratively destabilized, the novel exemplifies how historical facts and literary fiction fuse together in DeLillo's postmodern literary smelter to create a singular alloy of subjectivity, chance, and conspiracism. Consequently, as Norman Mailer articulated most lucidly, if it should be true that the “nonentity” Oswald “destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd”(Millard 198). Building its narrative on the shaky epistemic underpinnings of such an absurd universe, *Libra* shows that the fact/fiction binary has indeed become a strange proposition in answering the whodunit of the Kennedicide. Instead, it only

leads to the non-choice of believing either in the magic bullet of one or the faceless conspiracy of many.

John F. Kennedy's violent death marked a watershed moment for the postmodern destabilization of a commonly shared historical reality and the ways in which social knowledge is created and questioned. Almost sixty years after the events in Dallas, empirical observations of the world and scientific methods have increasingly lost ground to more disjointed and subjective worldviews that confirm themselves in sociocultural bubbles and the echo chambers of the internet. From human evolution, the moon landing, climate change, 9/11, flat earthers, manipulated elections, to COVID-19 as the great reset: Broad social consensus about what is true continues to wane before the rise of alternative narratives. In the light of these developments, renewed engagement with the cultural work of non-fiction texts like Don DeLillo's *Libra* seems critical. Not only because it thematizes and dramatizes the escalating tension between facts and fictions but also through its experimentation with narrative form and the dramaturgical devices of non-fiction literature, which together shine a spotlight on the gray areas between epistemic categories. Ultimately, the real question is not so much who killed the president but which cultural vocabulary we use to answer the question.

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