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Qualified Hope

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TIME, POSTMODERN DIFFERENCE, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICS

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise . . . is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*

“The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise” must be produced as experience if the otherwise is to proceed.

—Peter Osborne, “The Politics of Time”

What is the political value of time? Is the future, as Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist work suggests, a source of hope and change—the only possible time for radically new ideas and events to emerge onto the scene? Or is the future just an ideological pipe dream that infinitely defers political change and reinforces the conservative status quo, as Lee Edelman argues in his polemical *No Future*? Is the future an empty canvas onto which we can project our utopian dreams and desires, or does the very act of such projection make us complacent to the more pressing concerns of our time? And what about our responsibility to the past, which might not be the site of politics, but which nevertheless informs our understanding of exactly what kind of political work needs to be done? Is history a source of inspiration and guidance, or does its intimate connection to the present threaten our ability to move beyond it? *Qualified Hope* not only makes the overarching claim that politics can only succeed when treated as a function of time, but it also contends that no single panel of time—future, present, or past—sufficiently grounds politics.

For example, when Homi Bhabha asserts that the political question “What do I belong to in this present?” best captures the problem of

modernity, he also notes that an “ambivalent temporality,” caused by an irreducible tension between the smooth time of forward progress and the contingently fractured time of any given present moment, makes answering this question virtually impossible (204). If we experience time exclusively as a forward flow into the future, then we can unproblematically locate political change and action in the future; and if we experience time exclusively as an isolated present moment, then we can most assuredly strategize a course of political action without worrying about the demands of the past or the contingencies of the future. But if we experience time as both motion and fracture, then the temporal ground of politics, and of subjectivity itself, becomes both contradictory and compromised.¹ Bhabha’s notion of “temporal ambivalence” thus points us toward an epistemological problem that has substantial implications for both individual and collective action, a problem that I will refer to throughout this book as the time-knowledge paradox. A quip from Van Veen, the narrator and protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada*, nicely articulates this paradox: “[N]o wonder I fail to grasp Time, since knowledge-gaining itself ‘takes time’” (538). Reducing time to the present makes “grasping time” easy, but it compromises time’s constant flow; and as Van notes here, allowing for the flow, for the fact that things “take time,” compromises knowledge. Moreover, this paradox applies not just to knowing time, but to any attempt to know, interact with, and relate to the content of our world. Things are easy to know when removed from time, but removing them from time ignores a crucial component of their existence and thus circumscribes our knowledge.²

Taken separately, Grosz’s and Edelman’s ideas about the proper relationship between politics and the future represent an inability to account for the time-knowledge paradox that produces Bhabha’s “ambivalent temporality.” Taken together, they embody this paradox, as Grosz’s work sacrifices political content for the sake of time’s flow while Edelman rejects temporal form for the sake of politics in the present. Basing her conception of time on an evolutionary model in which new species are created not gradually but all at once, Grosz argues that time’s movement into the future can completely break from that which came before. This in turn allows her to posit a future so new and surprising that we cannot even conceive or predict it in the present—a “future yet unthought” that is politically empowering precisely because of its radical emptiness. But such an immanent vision of feminist politics requires us to ask, “[H]ow does one maintain an openness to alterity or novelty without sacrificing the intelligibility that comes with boundaries, context, discipline, familiarity, and a shared language?” (Pagano).³

Edelman would say, “One doesn’t.” A committed Lacanian, he sees

time's move into the future as an always-already futile attempt to reconcile the Symbolic and the Real, a reconciliation made impossible by the Other's irreducible and inescapable externality. Edelman contends that because Lacan's foundational lack can never be filled, any hope that the future will be better than the present—a hope that he identifies with the figure of the child in contemporary culture—is just a lie that we tell ourselves to feel better about our failings in the present. If the widespread equation of children and futurity only perpetuates a suffocating heteronormativity, then the political work of queerness belongs to the present, where its radical negativity names “the resistance of the social to itself, a resistance that the discourse of futurism, linked as it is both to reason and law, must appropriate either as liberal reform or consign to the space of the monstrous, the unthinkable, the perverse” (“Post-Partum” 182). Seeing deferral and inefficacy where Grosz sees the radically new, Edelman thus rejects time's form—its continual passage—in favor of the content-based changes that he insists on in the present (e.g., resisting antigay zoning laws and expanding the fight against AIDS).

In short, Grosz gives us time without knowledge, Edelman gives us knowledge without time, and both limit the temporality of politics to a single panel of time, effectively sidestepping the challenges posed by Bhabha's “ambivalent temporality” and the paradox it bespeaks. Neither is ignorant of the paradox, but they both make the compromise that their respective politics require. Rather than choosing between time and knowledge, *Qualified Hope* argues that modernity's “ambivalent temporality” need not entail such irresolvable contradiction if approached through a temporalized process of qualification. Although qualification produces a more convoluted conception of time's political value than either Grosz or Edelman offers, we should embrace such complication for its willingness to account for the ambivalent nature of temporal experience. In short, *Qualified Hope* will ultimately demonstrate that “qualified” can simultaneously resonate negatively (hope as provisional and tentative) and positively (hope as capable and well-equipped).

Identifying a political treatment of time that transcends the compromised positions of Grosz and Edelman requires two things: new temporal experiences that explode the dichotomy between flow and fracture, duration and instant; and new modes of knowing grounded in the forms of those new temporal experiences. To find both of these things, *Qualified Hope* turns to literature. In doing so, I am, like Grosz and Edelman, treating temporal experience as a form of knowledge. However, whereas they limit their understanding of temporal experience to time's linear chronology, I focus on the temporal experience of reading. Since reading is an experi-

ence determined by literary form, its temporality is necessarily qualified, no longer confined to the linear temporality of real-world experience.⁴ In making this literary turn, *Qualified Hope* draws on Paul Ricoeur's crucial observation about the difficulties that any theoretical discourse faces when thinking about time: "The striking fact about the theory of time [is] that any progress obtained by the phenomenology of temporality has to pay for its advance in each instance by the ever higher price of an even greater aporicity" (Vol. 3, 11).⁵ Convinced that "speculation is powerless to contribute to the aporias of time," Ricoeur argues that only fiction and *poesis* can engage the time-knowledge paradox without reiterating its self-contradicting structure (Vol. 2, 4).⁶ This is because literary form need not adhere to the linear forms of temporal experience that make time and knowledge so antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Instead, because it has recourse to imaginative forms which ensure that its production of knowledge is rarely transparent or aleatory, literature's innovative forms are free to shape knowledge in ways that purely theoretical discourse cannot. In the productive activity of reading, one is neither entirely outside nor entirely inside a work of literature. Rather, one is always in both places at once because literature demands that we simultaneously engage it epistemologically, ontologically, and phenomenologically. Implicitly arguing that form precedes and directly shapes content and thus knowledge, I contend that literary form is political not, as the Russian Formalists would have it, because it is able to alienate and defamiliarize, but because, as a governing influence on *how* we know, it also determines *what* we know. Confining the possible forms of temporal experience to either flow or fracture limits time's political value to either the future or the present. But expanding the form of temporal experience by, for example, embedding durations in instants as Thomas Pynchon achieves in *Mason & Dixon*, populating and temporalizing the present with the past as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* manages, or insisting on the simultaneity of past, present, and future as Leslie Scalapino's experimental poetry does, in turn expands our ability to conceive the political value of time. Pynchon's unique temporal forms reconcile the competing temporalities of globalization, Spiegelman's challenge the detemporalizing effect of post-9/11 preemption, and Scalapino's imagine a feminist politics separate from the logic of "choice."

In its particular focus on postmodern American literature, *Qualified Hope* makes two distinct yet related historical arguments.⁷ One addresses the periodization of twentieth-century literature; the other concerns the emergence, in the United States and after World War II, of two difference-based conceptions of "the political," each of which has specific effects on the literature of the period. First, by identifying postmodern American

literature's persistent commitment to the political value of time as a mode of experience, I stand on its head our conventional understanding of modernism as the time of time and postmodernism as the time of space. Descriptions of modern and postmodern literature typically associate modernist innovations such as stream-of-consciousness, perspectivalism, and free indirect discourse with attempts to represent time-consciousness or temporal experience, while postmodernist innovations such as pastiche, fragmentation, and metafiction are read as rejections of time as a mode of organizing experience. One thinks here of canonical modernist authors such as Proust, Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, and Faulkner—variously influenced by Henri Bergson's comprehensive philosophy of time and Sigmund Freud's expansion of human consciousness—who experimented with literary form to get closer to the truth of memory, time itself, or the mental and physical experience of living in time. Conversely, a mistrust of teleological progress narratives is frequently (and accurately) cited as a dominant characteristic of postmodernism.⁸ Manifesting this suspicion, postmodern literature fragments time, flattens history, and shifts its attention to space, making recourse to parataxis, juxtaposition, and collage.⁹ Further reflecting this shift from time to space as the dominant mode of experience and knowledge, a proliferation of critical works during the late twentieth century announced themselves as “geographies,” “maps,” or “cartographies” of their object of study.¹⁰ Relatedly, more politicized scholarship also began organizing itself around border/boundary metaphors, producing the field of border studies and other period-defining metaphors such as liminality, border crossing, and “third space.”¹¹

Fredric Jameson captures this spatializing tendency in the definition of postmodernism that opens his first tome on the subject: “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (*Postmodernism* ix). Jameson here contends that postmodernism wants to think about history, but it does so only in ways that sap history of the very temporality that makes it historical. Thus, as Linda Hutcheon and many others have pointed out, postmodernism is deeply interested in questions of time, particularly in the form of history, but this interest always manifests itself spatially. Postmodernism is so deeply suspicious of time and the idea of experience altogether, or so the argument goes, that it approaches time or history only after first breaking it apart, reducing it, and flattening it into easily manipulable parts. Consequently, postmodernism's sense of time lacks temporality, and its understanding of history ignores historicity. Contrary to these evaluations that focus on what postmodernism has “forgotten,” *Qualified Hope* instead highlights its “attempt

to think the present historically,” taking seriously this literature’s very real desire for timely knowledge and arguing that its formal innovations represent the need to rethink, but not reject, the political value of time. Just because postmodern literature fragments time and flattens history does not mean that it lacks a specific temporality or that it has rejected time as a viable mode of experience. To suggest as much is to throw the baby of temporal experience out with the bathwater of teleological thought.

In fact, an array of socio-political developments, centralized in the United States after World War II, so challenged and perverted the nature of temporal experience that postmodern authors had good cause “to think the present historically” and develop a politics of time. These events include the deployment of nuclear weapons and the ensuing paranoia and fear that pervaded the Cold War; the globalization of capital facilitated by monumental advances in computer technology; the 9/11 attacks and the preemptive U.S. war on terror; and the decades-long civil rights struggle that spawned other social justice movements such as the women’s movement, the Chicano movement (*El Movimiento*), and the gay-rights movement.

Just as many have said of 9/11, after the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan in 1945, everything changed. Entirely new and utterly unfathomable, the bomb radically altered our understanding of violence and destruction. While the immediate horrors of the bomb negated time and anything else within its radioactive reach, the specific fear produced in its aftermath, along with the Cold War politics that both managed and perpetuated that fear, had clearly temporal contours. First, the threat of nuclear annihilation suffusing the Cold War truncated one’s sense of time and the future. Concurrently, however, this apocalyptic temporality distended the future, instituting a temporality of waiting that constantly supplanted the moment of annihilation with a moment of life. The result was a temporal experience in which the present was perpetually overdetermined by a simultaneously foreshortened and deferred future, a truly “ambivalent temporality” that challenged an entire nation’s ability to relate to and interact with other nations around the globe.

While the threat of nuclear war clearly problematizes the political value of a future that might never even arrive, the technology-driven globalization of capital and commerce erases both the past and the future, collapsing them into the present to accelerate the instantaneous exchange of “information.” Because transnational corporations and global markets cannot function on the same time, technology intervenes to make the temporal discrepancies as slight as possible. The constant acceleration of daily life aims to decrease the amount of time required to do any given task, and as that time moves

closer to zero, increased instantaneity permits global simultaneity, a radically new experience of time in the present. Instantaneity, once conceived as the absence of time, has become a temporal experience all its own, as any given moment is taken up with the simultaneous performance of multiple tasks. At the same time, however, technology's acceleration of the present creates new windows of dead time never before experienced: waiting two minutes for Adobe Reader to open and download that online *American Literature* article I've been dying to read, or the first minutes of a plane flight when *all* portable electronic devices must be off. In such moments when our temporal experience is not one of pure instantaneity, duration returns to remind us that the future need not always be now.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the future was now, but for a different reason: the doctrine of preemptive war required that the United States respond to the future before it even had a chance to occur. If for Grosz the radically new and unknown proves liberating, for the United States and its global war on terror, the future's unpredictability continues to be its primary enemy. Conversely, the overdetermined future that Edelman finds so smothering would, from the Bush Administration's perspective, look like a clear sign of victory and success. Despite reversing the political value of time in these ways, the "War on Terror" still leaves the United States with a stark, all-or-nothing choice: it can subscribe to a real-time model of temporal experience, a wait-and-see approach that might get everyone killed; or it can preempt time, acting in the present to make sure that the future plays out according to its plans and desires. Further problematizing post-9/11 temporal experience, the time of trauma, marked by the continued presence of the past, only heightens the temporal ambivalence of the present for anyone living in the wake of the attacks. When the horrors of the past abut a future that is either frighteningly unknown or dismayingly preempted, temporal experience once again offers little stable ground from which to mount a politics despite the deeply political implications of time itself.

A similar difficulty plagues the temporal politics of any social justice movement trying to parlay past oppressions into present and future political gains. In such cases, the past is full of the violence, oppression, loss, and trauma that the movement wants to overcome yet honor through remembering. Meanwhile, the future presents itself as a wide-open space of infinite possibility, the location of hope for a tomorrow better than today. This double motion, back to the past and forward into the future, presents unique complications to one's sense of time in the present. Sometimes history overdetermines the present, yielding a politics that merely reiterates the structure of past oppression. In response to such historical

overdetermination, the future looks quite tempting, but a too-quick rejection of the past in favor of the future makes Bhabha's question "What do I belong to in this present?" equally unanswerable. Pulled in two directions, the present runs the risk of being evacuated, leaving an individual with no stable footing from which to launch political struggle in the first place.

I highlight this array of postmodern temporal experiences, all of which manifest a "temporal ambivalence" that makes answering Bhabha's question of modernity maddeningly difficult, to suggest not only that time remains a primary concern in the second half of the twentieth century, but also that it takes on heightened political stakes. It is precisely because of time's political implications that a significant cross section of postmodern American authors rejects the era's spatializing logic, searching instead for new ways to think about and experience time. Certainly, these historical events complicate temporal experience, but that is no reason to conclude that temporal experience should not remain a crucial variable in any attempt to know each other and our world. Consequently, the authors of the texts addressed in *Qualified Hope* respond directly to at least one of the temporal challenges described above, looking for specifically temporal solutions to what are clearly temporal problems. And in so doing, they develop innovative literary forms that deliver new experiences of time—all of them qualified in some way—that in turn produce new ideas about and approaches to the political themes highlighted above. Rather than insisting on the primacy of a single panel of time and thus compromising thought accordingly, they show us that "ambivalent temporalities" are perfectly qualified to ground a political vision. Although some literary forms outmaneuver the time-knowledge paradox more successfully than others, taken together, this collection of authors—Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Art Spiegelman, Nathaniel Mackey, Leslie Scalapino, and Dagoberto Gilb—represents a group of postmodern American writers who insist on the abiding political relevance of temporal experience.

Different Politics of Difference

In the socio-political events described above and among the authors whose work *Qualified Hope* reads, we find two different understandings of "the political." The first notion of politics—engaged here by DeLillo's treatment of the Cold War, Pynchon's interest in globalization, and Foer's and Spiegelman's respective portrayals of life after 9/11—emphasizes epistemological concerns: How is reality ideologically and technologically mediated?

To what extent can we understand the meaning of an event? What criteria allow us to establish a claim's truth-value? The second approach—with which Mackey's commitment to African-American civil rights, Scalapino's feminist politics, and Gilb's depiction of Chicano border consciousness are all in conversation—focuses on ontological issues: What does it mean to be black, female, or Chicano? What criteria should be used in constituting a given identity? What is the nature of the difference between one identity and another, between self and other?¹² Another way to think about the difference between these two political modes is to note that each group asks Bhabha's question "What do I belong to in this present?" in a different way. When those concerned with the politics of the Cold War, globalization, or 9/11 ask the question, they are wondering whether or not the inevitable mediation of experience and knowledge leaves them irreparably alienated from the political sphere in general. When those concerned with the politics of social justice movements ask the question, they are trying to determine the relationship between individual and group identity, as well as the relationship between one group's identity and that of other groups.

At first, the differences between these two political modes appear stark. Seeing as how the four authors in the first group are all white men and the three authors in the second group are people of color or female, I seem to have described a naive divide between poststructuralism and multiculturalism, theory and identity. But, of course, thinking of the difference in these terms never works; multiculturalism certainly has no shortage of theories, and poststructuralism has plenty to say about identity. Similarly, DeLillo, Pynchon, Foer, and Spiegelman are intimately concerned with race and gender issues, while the works of Mackey, Scalapino, and Gilb constantly highlight the artifice of linguistic mediation. An underlying premise of *Qualified Hope*, therefore, is that these two groups wrestle with the exact same problem but simply approach it in different ways, one epistemologically and the other ontologically.¹³

That core problem is the problem of difference. For the first group, difference is a necessary fact of language, or any other form of mediating representation. Consequently, when they think about politics, they are preoccupied with all the ways in which forces such as the government, corporations, or technology mediate and thus manipulate their experience of the world. This is why difference for them is an epistemological issue: an irreducible gap between truth and the world compromises their knowledge and alienates them from the political sphere. For the second group, difference is a necessary fact of being. Consequently, when they think about politics, they are invested in either overcoming or respecting difference in

the name of equality. Difference for them is ontological in a way it is not for the first group—in a way that it could perhaps never be for white men in the United States. After all, if, as a minority, you are the majority’s “other,” its embodiment of difference, then your politics of difference is always-already a function of your being and identity. Conversely, it is easier to focus on the differential effects of language and other forms of mediation if you are not marked as different yourself. Ultimately, however, the same problem—the relationship between difference and identity—plagues both groups; they just attach “difference” and “identity” to different concepts. For the epistemologically inclined, representational mediation is their “difference,” and true or stable knowledge functions as their “identity” principle. For the ontologically inclined, people and their bodies are the primary sites of “difference,” and “identity” designates a stable and coherent subjectivity.

Qualified Hope does not privilege one politics of difference over the other. Instead, the book is divided into two parts: Part I, “The Culture of Politics,” which addresses works by DeLillo, Pynchon, Foer, and Spiegelman, engages an epistemological politics of difference. Part II, “The Politics of Culture,” which includes chapters on Mackey, Scalapino, and Gilb, examines an ontological politics of difference. I keep the two groups separate to acknowledge that the differences between them are meaningful, even if they are both struggling with the same problem in different forms. Finally, I have been careful thus far to assert that my collection of temporally inclined authors “engage” or “are in conversation with” these epistemological and ontological approaches to politics without wholly placing them in these camps. This is because their common investment in a politics of temporal experience places them in a different camp altogether—a camp that locates difference neither in language nor in being, but in time.¹⁴ In other words, some of these authors thematize politics as an epistemological problem of representation while others thematize it as an ontological problem of identity, but they all insist that these problems will never be solved unless the phenomenological form of temporal experience becomes the new ground of politics.

The basic “problem of difference,” regardless of its epistemological or ontological form, is its iteratively circular relationship with identity. In *The Seeds of Time*, Fredric Jameson names this problem “the antinomy of identity and difference,” describing it as “a static reversal and repetition in which identity turns into difference, and difference back into identity in an unproductive way” (68). On the epistemological side of things, this occurs whenever knowledge becomes its own object: when the difference between the real and what we know about the real becomes the thing that we know

(i.e., we know that we do not fully know the real). Whenever this happens, difference becomes an identity that in turn requires another level of difference to be known, an iteratively circular process that can be repeated infinitely. On the ontological side of things, difference de-essentializes identity but then quickly establishes itself as a difference-based identity that once again requires difference's de-essentializing power if it hopes to avoid being hypostatized as the essence of antiessentialism. For example, to say that the truth of African-American identity is its differential construction quickly becomes as essentializing as a belief in a true black identity.¹⁵ According to Jameson, such tedious vacillations between identity and difference, whether epistemological or ontological, point to "the paralysis of postmodern thinking" and force us to ask, how can we "coordinate our very limited positions, as individuals or indeed as historical subjects and classes, within a History whose dynamics representationally escape us?" (69). Suggesting that postmodernism only thinks of time as an "eternal present," Jameson argues that identity and difference spin their wheels precisely because they fail to account for the temporal form of experience and knowledge (70).

In *The Armies of the Night*, a historical novel about the anti-Vietnam War demonstration at the Pentagon in 1967, Norman Mailer struggles to describe an event whose "dynamics representationally escape" him because of their inherently temporal nature, thus creating a novel that perfectly exemplifies the epistemological challenges that the time-knowledge paradox poses for both politics and literature. As an experiment in New Journalism, Mailer's novel sets up a homology between the political logic of the protest and his own artistic production. Both are trying to create something new—the protestors want a change in the course of the Vietnam War as well as a new conception of Leftist politics, and Mailer searches for a new aesthetic, some amalgam of history and the novel that best captures the truth of the event being represented. To create these new things, however, both must confront the temporal dynamics of their respective actions. For instance, Mailer describes the march as a test of the New Left's ability to articulate a meaningful argument against the war despite the disparate political contingents that compose (and thus compromise) it: hippies, pacifists, anarchists, old Communists, and black nationalists. While the Old Left, a unified coalition of Communists of various stripes, could rely on Marx's "unassailable logic of the next step" (86), the New Left, believing that "authority could not comprehend nor contain nor finally manage to control any political action whose end was unknown," refuses to say what the future should look like (88). Pursuing a "revolution which preceded ideology" and rejecting "the sanctity of the original idea" (88),

the only truth that guides this politics is “the intimate truth of the way [the revolution] presented itself to your experience” (87). Consequently, the success or failure of the march will be “the result of episodes one had never anticipated, and the results might lead you in directions altogether unforeseen” (86). This very Groszian approach to politics adheres to a temporal logic grounded in the formal experience of the revolutionary process, and Mailer views his own aesthetic project in exactly the same terms: “Just as the truth of his material was revealed to a good writer by the cutting edge of his style . . . so a revolutionary began to uncover the nature of his true situation by trying to ride the beast of his revolution” (87–88). Such an aesthetic thus depends less on “the substance of one’s ideas” and more on “the style of one’s attack” in and over time (25).

In their execution, however, neither the protest nor Mailer’s novel achieves the ideals of this fully temporalized aesthetic, since to be meaningful and intelligible the unknown must become known and style must accede to content. For example, the protest’s organizers predetermine the meaning of their event when they decide that the Pentagon represents the best “symbol” of the march’s politics. This attempt to make the march symbolically meaningful entails a shift from locating difference temporally to locating it representationally. Once this shift occurs and meaning rather than form becomes primary, the iterative cycle of identity and difference begins. As Mailer explains, the Left claims that the protest means one thing (e.g., the vast number of protestors represents a sharp rebuke to U.S. action in Vietnam while the violence perpetrated against them suggests an increasing totalitarianism within the government), and the government claims that it means something different (e.g., such acts of free speech are precisely what the U.S. action in Vietnam is defending) (240). As soon as politics has to *mean* something, the different identity positions in question—in this case, the Left and the government—can appropriate the differential gap at the heart of any act of representation to make the event mean whatever they choose. Even when the organizers arrange for a period of unorganized and unscripted civil disobedience in which “individuals will act on their consciences and in their own personal styles,” they do so as a way to tell the radical fringes of the New Left that they are not being ignored; the meaning undermines the very spirit of the action (234).

Like the aesthetics of the protest, Mailer’s own literary aesthetics also shift from locating difference temporally to locating it representationally. The text oscillates between historical and novelistic accounts, frequently blurring the lines between the two, to ensure that the “style [is] in each case the most appropriate tool for the material of the experience” (88). Believing that the “novelistic” first section, “History as a Novel,” has cut

through a media-created “forest of inaccuracy” that would otherwise “blind the efforts of the historian,” Mailer begins the second section, “The Novel as History,” by officially “passing the reins” to the historian. And halfway through the “history” of the second section, Mailer remains attuned to the experiential truth of his material and switches back to novelizing: “the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry” (255). But the moment he makes this metanarrative turn and begins representing his formal techniques, telling us what they mean and are intended to accomplish, he reduces them to thematic content in the same way that the unknown elements of the protest are reduced to merely symbolic meaning. And once the generic experimentation becomes a representational or thematic element of the text, difference and identity can do little more than spin out of control: the event can never be fully known; Mailer’s metanarrative knows that it can never fully know the event and makes that its primary theme; and we can imagine a meta-metanarrative that knows that it does not know that it knows that it does not know, and so on. In the same way that time falls out of the equation once politics focuses on meaning rather than form, whenever a metanarrative thematizes the process of making meaning, it must stand outside itself, something that is possible only when time, itself a constitutive element of meaning, is ignored.

Ultimately, although Mailer clearly understands the importance of temporal form to both political and aesthetic production, *The Armies of the Night* reveals just how difficult it is to locate difference in time and still yield an effective politics or an intelligible novel. Also, it more broadly demonstrates the problems with any meta-epistemological approach that takes the limits of knowledge as its primary focus, which is precisely what a vast body of postmodern literature and theory, preoccupied with meaning’s inherent instability, does.¹⁶ Although the structural and poststructural linguistics that ground postmodernism’s interest in the instability of meaning have much to say about time (I am thinking here of Saussure on “auditory” signifiers, Jakobson and his syntagmatic axis, Lévi-Strauss’s insistence on diachronic analysis, and the deferral half of Derridean *différance*), most articulations of such instability detemporalize the meaning-making process, reducing linguistic indeterminacy to spatial terms. The result is the meta-epistemological claim: even if knowledge remains uncertain, we at least have certain knowledge of knowledge’s uncertainty. But, of course, the initial observation regarding knowledge’s uncertainty also applies to and thus undermines the secondary metaknowledge of that uncertainty,

and so on. Once we slip into meta-epistemology, the object we want to know becomes inaccessible and only our knowledge of that inaccessibility remains, something that occurs only because knowledge jettisons time to better know itself. Meta-epistemology's iterative structure requires that the object of knowledge remain static and removed from both its own temporality and the temporality of our encounter with it, thereby ensuring postmodernism's inability to account for temporal experience, ambivalent or not.

As Mailer's novel exemplifies and as Linda Hutcheon has explained, these problems appear in postmodern literature as a persistent concern about the relationship between literary form and historical content. Given its hyperawareness about the artifice of language and the social construction of reality, can postmodern literature engage meaningfully with the world, or is it just so much narcissistic belly-button gazing? Hutcheon argues that postmodern writers, unable to resolve this tension, achieve political engagement through self-reflexive formal innovations which, in accounting for the artificiality of their discourse, render that engagement always-already provisional. In this account, meta-epistemological awareness requires that all political engagement contain an element of complicity. Believing that complicity need not preclude political relevance, however, Hutcheon contends that irony allows postmodern authors to negotiate this paradox fruitfully: "It is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit . . . critical distance and then undo it. It is also this doubleness that prevents any possible critical urge to ignore or trivialize historical-political questions" (*Politics* 15).¹⁷ Irony helps postmodernism remember that its own discourse about the artificiality of discourse is itself artificial while at the same time allowing it to remain straight-faced about its political aims and commitments. Citing Stanley Fish's famously ironic warning, "Ye shall know that truth is not what it seems and *that* truth shall set you free," Hutcheon acknowledges that postmodern self-consciousness can easily institute itself as a new master narrative—that is, as a new identity (quoted in Hutcheon, *Poetics* 13). Nevertheless, she maintains that as long as no single discourse claims mastery and authority over any other, making claims about the artifice of discourse achieves a productive politics of provisional complicity rather than a self-defeating politics of contradiction and hypocrisy. I would argue, however, that we only have to accept Hutcheon's political vision of provisional complicity—a vision that has become a touchstone for any work on postmodernism and politics—if we also accept postmodern literature's general failure to account for time. But as the authors gathered together in *Qualified Hope* suggest, not everyone has abandoned the possibility of a meaningful difference located in time.

Provisional complicity represents an admirable last-ditch effort to salvage something meaningful from the circular dead ends into which epistemologically oriented postmodernism has theorized itself. But as the ultimate reabsorption of difference into identity, knowing the artifice of knowing leaves us nowhere to go but in self-reflexive circles, and time has more to offer.

Tellingly, things do not look much better for the strain of postmodern thought concerned with ontological difference and the politics it entails. Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* makes exactly this diagnosis of ontological difference, but it also counters the ontologically rigid positions taken up by the text's cast of characters by insisting on the political relevance of temporal form. Describing a millennia-old struggle between oppressive and liberating energies, *Mumbo Jumbo* depicts a moment in the United States in the 1920s when the battle has become racially divided. Fighting for creative expression, alternative religious beliefs, and a generally anti-Western, anti-Enlightenment approach to knowledge, Papa LaBas and Black Herman, two voodoo ministers, join forces in support of Jes Grew, an indeterminate and uncontrollable "psychic epidemic" that most commonly manifests itself through dancing. Arrayed against these black characters, Hierophant 1, the leader of the Wallflower Order, and Hinckle Von Vampton, the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, are commonly committed to suppressing Jes Grew and the pleasures it entails. A third party to this conflict, a black Muslim preacher named Abdul, also fights against Jes Grew but does not align himself with its white enemies.

All of these characters conceive politics as a function of an individual's ontological identity, regardless of whether that identity is essential or constructed. In an argument that Papa LaBas and Black Herman have with Abdul, for example, they support Jes Grew because of its connection to "something so deep in the race soul." While acknowledging that their voodoo work connects them to something "basic," something that black people have "submerged in their talk and in their music," Abdul counters their essentialist argument with a vision of his own antiessentialist self-construction: "I had no systematic way of learning but proceeded like a quilt maker. . . . I would hungrily devour the intellectual scraps and leftovers of the learned" (37–38). Complicating things, however, the essentialist position comes from the polytheistic voodoo ministers while the monotheist Muslim preacher advocates antiessentialist perspectivalism. Accordingly, black essence is defined by a religious tradition that "bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can hold," while one of the constructed elements of Abdul's antiessentialist position involves the belief that whoever "worships other gods besides Allah shall

be forbidden to Paradise and shall be cast into the fires of Hell” (35). The white religious traditions in the text, represented by the Wallflower Order and the Knights Templar, suffer a similarly paradoxical divide. Both are Atonists, believing in one true God and, by extension, one right way for the world to be. A millennia-old schism exists between the two groups, however, because Hinckle Von Vampton’s Order deviated from the one true path and began “acquiring African powers as a result of [its] contact with the Arabs” (68). Like Abdul’s constructed approach to religious belief, they borrowed from various traditions to constitute their own belief, but their antiessential essentialism (a constructed approach to believing in one true God) conflicted with the Wallflower Order’s essential essentialism, causing an abiding rift.

This is what Jameson’s “antinomy of identity and difference” looks like when applied ontologically. Differentially constructed identities are nevertheless essentialized (LaBas’s and Herman’s essential polytheism), and essential identities are nevertheless constructed (Abdul’s and Hinckle’s polymorphous monotheism). When these characters calculate their response to the social, cultural, and political phenomenon that is Jes Grew, they base their decisions on identity—on their essential or antiessential approach to being. But as this loopy relationship between identity and difference demonstrates, each theory of being embeds its own contradiction, effectively undermining the original grounding of any decision to either support or suppress Jes Grew. Because identity and difference constantly turn into each other, the characters are never sure about the dominant feature of their identity. Are they antiessential or essential, permissive or oppressive? In addition to diagnosing the failure of a politics of ontological difference, Reed also suggests that improvisation might be one way to embrace a temporal form of difference that overcomes the antinomy, a point Black Herman makes to LaBas after LaBas fails to exorcise a Voodoo loa from a woman named Earline (130). Although improvisation certainly sounds a lot like the constructed approach to identity that Abdul and Hinckle advocate, improvisation never makes ontological claims in the same way that their antiessentialism does. Instead, the dominant feature of improvisation is its temporal form; it describes the *way* something is, not *what* something is, over a period of time. Similarly, Jes Grew never becomes a thing that can be touched or seen; its presence is always a trace of its being, manifest in a host of formal symptoms that remain untreatable. For instance, we learn early in the novel that “Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text”—specifically a text known as *The Book of Thoth* that comprises Jes Grew’s “liturgy.” But Jes Grew never finds its text; it never coincides with its ontological object and instead remains a mode of being in the world.

Of course, this emphasis on textuality requires us to ask similar questions about the ontology of the novel itself: is it a thing or is it a mode of being in the world? Whereas Mailer's metanarrative turns the form of *The Armies of the Night* into its content, effectively ontologizing the creative process and excising it from time, Reed resists that metafictional impulse, never permitting his text to be the text that the novel is about. Since *Mumbo Jumbo* is a novel that not only represents Jes Grew but also manifests its improvisational aesthetic sensibilities, we might be tempted to read it as Jes Grew's liturgy, as *The Book of Thoth*. However, *Mumbo Jumbo's* plot describes Abdul's destruction of *The Book of Thoth*, and *Mumbo Jumbo's* own construction—an amalgam of newspaper headlines, handwritten letters, historical images, gnomic diagrams, academic citations, and unattributed sketches—prevents the text from ever establishing its own ontological identity. Although Reed's intent clearly lies behind each and every textual artifact, the generally paratactic relationship among those artifacts makes the reading experience one in which readers improvise rather than interpret textual meaning. While Henry Gates finds political liberation in the radical indeterminacy of such a reading experience (312), Theodore Mason has argued that these improvisational techniques cannot be considered political because they work only while the novel is being read (103). Implicitly noting the circular relationship between difference and identity, Mason correctly contends that Gates's exuberance for indeterminacy runs the risk of becoming determinate and hegemonic itself (106). In countering Gates's epistemological approach, however, Mason's ontological vision requires that politics be a thing and fails to imagine it as a way of being, which is precisely Reed's point in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Just because the novel does not tell us what that looks like does not mean that it cannot show us what it feels like.

Critically, this need to see what politics looks like manifests itself as an insistence on the value of recognizing otherness as such, whether that otherness appears representationally, embodied by characters and their experiences, or formally, as a text's material resistance to its readers. Such arguments, which locate difference ontologically and in turn ignore the political value of temporal experience, have most recently found a home in the ethics-based criticism that has proliferated in literary studies since the early 1990s. (According to the MLA index, the number of publications containing the search term "ethic*" increased 800 percent between 1970 and 2000.)¹⁸ Whether difference is located within a text or defines the text itself, both scenarios create detemporalized encounters in which the imperative to recognize difference effectively preempts time since the thing being recognized must preexist the ethical encounter. For example,

in Satya Mohanty's influential reading of *Beloved*, the possibility of ethics hinges entirely on Paul D's ability to "recognize" a certain set of truths about Sethe's situation: in particular, the truth "that both motherhood and the gendered division of labor on which slavery was built are objective historical and social facts that shape what he knows and what he does not, that—consequently—influence the moral judgment he makes" ("Epistemic Status" 42).¹⁹ This notion that ethics somehow involves learning something already known echoes Mohanty's disturbing justification for his politicized mode of textual analysis: "I am interested in progressive politics and would like to believe that my values and commitments are not rigidly determined by my social background or my narrow personal interests" ("Values" 803).²⁰ Is it any surprise, then, when Mohanty's readings find precisely the ethical politics that they set out to discover?²¹ Something remarkably similar occurs when a text's irreducible materiality becomes the source of ethics, when the thing being recognized is a textual otherness manifest as the impossibility of total recognition or understanding. In such accounts, recognizing textual otherness supposedly initiates a Levinasian ethical encounter between the self and the other's (i.e., the text's) opaque irreducibility.²² As Simon Critchley explains of such textual encounters, "[A]lthough you cannot know the other, you can know that you do not know the other, and . . . this produces a disorienting, enriching fall into ethics" (13). However, whether we are recognizing the irreducible otherness of people or of texts, such moments of recognition fail to move politics beyond the antinomy of identity and difference because the temporality of the ethical encounter remains preempted.

The Phenomenology of Production

Indeed, if time were permitted into the equation, we could do much better than the logic of provisional complicity that comes from making politics a function of knowledge and the presumptuously preemptive logic of recognition that comes from making politics a function of being. The most obvious way to retemporalize politics would involve adopting a real-time approach to gaining knowledge and producing meaning. This is a turn that Louis Althusser, constantly criticized for the spatializing structuralism of his thought, made late in life when he began theorizing what he called "aleatory materialism." In an interview with Fernanda Navarro, he used the metaphor of train travel to distinguish between idealist and aleatory philosophy. An idealist philosopher boards a train only after determining where he has come from, where he is, precisely where he is going, and at what time

he will arrive. The philosopher of aleatory materialism, however, boards the train and rides without consulting signs or timetables and without considering where the train has been or where it is going. This model clearly resolves the antinomy of identity and difference; knowledge could never become meta-epistemological or paradoxical if it were, so to speak, always just riding the train. And yet producing knowledge immanently in the pure flow of time simply reverses the extremity of someone such as Edward Soja who insists on the primacy of space. As the train metaphor suggests, the aleatory's radically open temporality demands a complete nonknowledge of the past and future, effectively reducing time's horizon to the present instant and negating epistemology altogether. Any such turn to real time undoes time's spatialization, but it does so at the expense of knowledge, trapping us once again in the time-knowledge paradox: being in time compromises knowledge, while stabilizing knowledge compromises temporal experience. In the first case, politics loses its ability both to ground itself in the past and to imagine a better future; in the second case, a meaningful and effective politics falls victim to iterative loops of identity and difference.

When Elizabeth Grosz unites immanence and difference, making difference "internal to the function" of time's immanence, she is trying to solve this paradox by transforming its "either-or" logic into "both-and" logic. As I have been suggesting, however, as long as this transformation maintains the original paradox's treatment of difference as either epistemological or ontological, and as long as time's immanence only flows forward into the future, the paradox will remain unresolved.²³ This is why, rather than locating difference epistemologically, ontologically, or simply within aleatory time itself, *Qualified Hope* locates difference in the form of phenomenological experience, particularly in the formal experience of reading. Linked to experience, this difference is temporalized, but its temporality does not come from time's immanent self-differing—that is, from its linear march into the unknown future. If it did, then we would be left with the naively transparent relation between experience and knowledge that prompted postmodernism's rejection of phenomenology in favor of epistemology and ontology in the first place. Instead, *Qualified Hope's* return to phenomenology carries with it the lessons that postmodernism has taught about the indeterminacy of meaning and the constructedness of reality. Consequently, it asks, "How do we know?" without finding an answer transparently tied to real-time experience. Instead, "experience" in *Qualified Hope* refers to the temporal forms of an action or event—specifically reading—with the full understanding that these forms are always ambivalent and convoluted, never linear or purely immanent because of the unique literary forms that produce them. In locating difference in the

form of the phenomenological experience of reading, I am examining how the unique temporalities of innovative literary forms shape a reader's experience of the text, particularly the experience of producing an understanding of the text. In turn, whenever the temporal form of a text teaches us new ways of producing knowledge, something deeply political is going on.

It is precisely this attention to the temporal form of knowledge production that Peter Osborne emphasizes when he notes that the aporia "between cosmological time [i.e., difference] and existential time [i.e., immanence] will always be socially mediated" (*Politics* 66). Rather than linking political possibility to utopic projection or aleatory openness, Osborne emphasizes the *production* of possibility rather than its location, arguing that any act of production is determined by its "temporal structures." Osborne explains: "[T]he fundamental categories of historical experience . . . are not the products of different totalisations of historical material across a common temporal frame. . . . They are alternative temporal structures, alternative *temporalisations of 'history,'* which structure experience temporally . . . in what are, politically, significantly different ways" ("Politics" 45). Here Osborne describes a difference located in the phenomenological form of experience—in this case, the meaningful difference between the subject and her historical conjuncture, a conjuncture necessarily constituted by a temporality unique to its particular modes of production.²⁴ Such phenomenological difference is embedded in the *form* of any given production of meaning and becomes timely through the unique temporalities of that specific experience. Without reverting to Deleuzian immanence or relying on a detached and detemporalized moment of recognition, Osborne here offers a temporally constituted version of political value in which the form of temporal experience precedes and produces historical content.²⁵

But how exactly might these ideas translate to literature? Linda Alcoff helps us take that step when she theorizes representation and reference as "specific constellations of human practice." Foregrounding the production of representational meaning, she writes:

Representation is not an association between a linguistic term and a bit of the world, but a kind of momentary constellation in which active human practice is involved though not unilaterally determinant over the outcome. . . . The terms *representation* and *reference*, used in this context, do not convey an appropriation of being; they convey a *productive*, always partial and temporally indexed, description of a virtual reality, that is, a composite of temporary constellations. (72)

This description, which applies equally well to writing and reading, treats the stakes of one's interaction with language phenomenologically; it suggests that the determination of truth is less important than "the dimensions of the multiple forms of knowing and practices by which truths are ascertained" (75). In other words, she is asking "how," not "what" or "whether," we know; and the moment "how" becomes the issue, knowledge no longer falls prey to postmodern subjectivization and time becomes foundational rather than relativizing. Taking Alcoff's conception of representation as a linguistic version of Osborne's temporally determined politics, *Qualified Hope* treats reading as one such phenomenological conjuncture for the production of meaning, knowledge, and, by extension, politics. As literature is at liberty to produce particularly imaginative "temporal structures," each "constellation" of reading has the potential to produce temporal experiences that can enhance our ability to think about an array of political challenges.

Reading, Literary Form, and the Political

Such a scenario clearly requires a theory of reading in which the unique and temporally defined interaction between reader and text produces a work's meaning and the reader's understanding of it. Throughout *Qualified Hope*, I draw on the recent work of Derek Attridge who, in thinking about the ethical potential of reading, describes reading as an "act/event." In doing so, he usefully balances the increased agency someone such as Roland Barthes gives to the reader with the magical powers that someone such as Gary Saul Morson gives to the text.²⁶ For Attridge, a text's meaning is produced whenever the knowledge a reader actively brings to a text works in tandem with the unknown otherness to which a text subjects its readers. Reading thus becomes a site of production that includes both what a reader does to a text (the act) and what a text does to its reader (the event).

Attridge names the feature of a literary work that elicits and demands the "act/event" of reading "textuality," but this difference, this otherness that defines the relationship between reader and text, is phenomenological, not epistemological or ontological. That is, the difference of "textuality" is not "just a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding and could not have been predicted by means of them; its singularity, even if it is produced by nothing more than a slight recasting of the familiar and thus

of the general, is absolute” (“Innovation” 22). Attridge here articulates an existential, experiential, and fully temporalized difference grounded in the phenomenological conjuncture of reading, not in a text’s epistemological reflexivity or ontological opacity and not in time’s immanent self-differing. Although this difference is indeed temporalized by time’s self-differing—hence Attridge says that it “could not have been predicted”—it does not depend on that unpredictability, on the inherent unknowability of the next moment. If it did, then reading would be an event and not an “act/event,” merely a surprising thing that happens to us because we do not know what will happen next in the plot. Even more disturbing, there would be no reason to reread since we would come to the text heavily laden with foreknowledge that would preclude our eventful surprise.

But as anyone who has ever reread a book knows, a text not only means more when read a second time; it might even mean differently. This is because meaning is not a function of a purely temporal difference, of not knowing what will happen next; instead, there is just as much “act” to reading as there is “event.” Consequently, Attridge locates the expansive possibility of textual meaning not in literature’s content—in the array of different paths along which a text might unfold—but in a reader’s differential interaction with literary form, an interaction that necessarily changes with each instance of reading: “the cultural context in which and by means of which the reading takes place, constantly change” while “the knowledge of what is to come in a text one has read before and the memory of the experience of earlier readings are both aspects of the singular event of rereading” (“Singular” 61). Despite being a singular event, the reading experience need not be a single event since the “act/event” of reading produces understanding from the temporalized form of the reading experience. Rather than paralleling the linear unfolding of textual content over time, however, this temporalized form emerges from the productive interaction between the text’s temporal form and the reader, whom Attridge describes as an amalgam of “cultural context,” prior knowledge, and “the memory of the experience of earlier readings” (*Singularity* 88).

Treating literary form as a productive source of meaning is absolutely crucial if we want to account for time without linking our knowledge of a text exclusively to time’s immanent self-differentiation. Once Morson makes such a link, he is forced to conclude that rereading, with its diminished sense of suspense and its departure from the irreversible presentness of real life, represents “an occupational hazard of literary critics” (“Narrativeness” 69). In effect, Morson’s theory accommodates only those transparent literary forms that are most isomorphic to real experience, effectively jettisoning the relevance of form in the text’s production of meaning

and relying exclusively on content. But grounding readerly understanding in textual content isolates knowledge in the present moment of that content's appearance on the page, providing for only the most narrow of temporal experiences.²⁷ Instead, because even the most realist of literary forms are rarely linear and transparent, I contend that reading almost always requires a more complicated conception of time. Although this is generally true of all literature, *Qualified Hope* focuses on a set of authors writing after World War II who deploy particularly complex forms in direct response to the vexing temporal experiences emerging from key socio-political events of the era. Finally, treating reading as an act of production dependent on the singularly dynamic interaction between readers and literary form resists criticism's all-too-frequent reduction of form to theme, which occurs whenever fractured narrative form is treated simply as a critique of the phenomenological knowledge gained through temporal experience. By paying attention to the temporal form of the reading experience and not to the real-time temporal unfolding of textual content, *Qualified Hope* forges a different path, viewing even the most ostensibly spatialized forms as sources of phenomenological knowledge produced out of the temporalized interface between form and the activity of reading.

To offer an example of just what this approach to reading looks like, I turn now to Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*, a text that manipulates the temporality of its form so that readers produce meaning temporally without reducing time to the presentness of linearly unfolding content, as Morson does, or to the presentness of an isomorphic performativity between text and reader, as Barthes does. Nabokov's novel suggests that temporality, as shaped and produced by the text's narrative innovations, stands as the only viable catalyst for achieving a meaningful, nonparadoxical relation between history and language. Despite knowledge's obvious limits, Nabokov contends that knowledge can nevertheless speak of more than its own paralysis and contingency if it approaches the problem phenomenologically. Consequently, the text admits this negative or meta-epistemological knowledge but does not resign itself solely to its domain. Because meta-epistemology's iterative vacillations occur whenever the object of thought is also the form of thought, and vice versa (as when Van Veen cannot know "Time" because knowing "takes time"), Nabokov mediates thought about time through a medium other than time's own linear form (301). In *Ada* that other medium is the novel and the expansive sense of form it allows. However, in the *Texture of Time* (the name Van gives to his nonfictional treatise on time, the draft of which appears as Part Four of *Ada*) that medium proves to be space, much to Van's chagrin. The novel thus presents two versions of temporal knowledge: a failed nonfictional

version embedded in a successful fictional one. Crucially, the reader's resulting knowledge manages to be more than negatively meta-epistemological.

Part Four rides on the tension between thinking about time as the form and object of thought, and this tension plays itself out in Van's struggle to give his consideration of time a positive, determinate form uninfluenced by the spatial metaphors that would otherwise ossify that form. Van wants to know Time, but his struggle to have anything other than meta-epistemological thoughts about it constitutes the section's main content. He believes firmly in the project to determine what time is, but he knows only what it is not (space, metaphor, motion, measurement, or the future). Because Part Four fails to resolve these problems, I suggest that Nabokov offers it as an instructive failure. Van refuses to resign himself to the limits of his knowledge and instead just lets the tension simmer. Although the section concludes with Van telling Ada that he has conceived his treatise, *The Texture of Time*, to be a text "with illustrative metaphors, gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction," Ada responds skeptically, reinforcing the unhappy lesson of Part Four: knowledge of time must be mediated, and mediation usually takes the form of spatialization via metaphor. Ada concludes, "We can know time, we can know a time. We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like—" (563).

It is like what? Perhaps it is like, or even simply is, the novel that we are reading. Alfred Appel convincingly argues that "the similes and metaphors she is about to grope for comprise the novel's first 532 pages, a considerably extended metaphor," and the book's final pages, a parody of the marketing blurb that might appear on the back of the novel, clearly fulfill Van's hope that his treatise will dissolve into "bland abstraction" (165). Considering that Nabokov wrote Part Four first, that this section provided the novel its originally intended title, and that Van's description of his treatise aptly applies to *Ada* itself, Ada's words seem to be an invitation to read the novel, metaphors and all, as an alternative medium through which to know time. Although creating timely knowledge through reading will not yield the precise knowledge Van so desires, it will elicit a knowledge grounded in temporal experience that avoids both paradox and pure presentness. The specific formal element Nabokov uses to produce such understanding in the reader involves the novel's manipulation of genre, which occurs as part of its extended parody of the history of the novel. Just as the fictional novel *Ada*

embeds the working notes to an ostensibly nonfictional treatise on time, the novel's postmodern wordplay, artifice, and metafiction intersect with the verisimilitude of a nineteenth-century realist novel. The work's subtitle, *A Family Chronicle*, suggests biographical properties, and once we discover that Van is writing and narrating the chronicle with supplemental commentary from Ada when both are nonagenarians, the "chronicle" begins to feel even more like memoir or autobiography. Further amplifying the illusion of realism, a family tree appears at the beginning of the novel, and rather than offering the customary disclaimer about the purely fictional nature of the book's characters, an editorial note preceding the narrative straightforwardly claims that with the exception of a few characters, "all the persons mentioned by name in this book are dead." This simple editorial comment transforms the novel's narrator, editor, and characters into "real" people, and it becomes the central clue in any attempt to figure out precisely when and where the text we read is being written in relation to the events that unfold within it. The editor's ability to add this note implies that he exists outside the novel, but he actually shows up inside the text not too soon after the novel begins. In short, even though Van, as the text's "author" and narrator, cannot write his own death, the editorial note leaves readers with the uncanny effect of being spoken to from beyond the grave.

Of course, including details of the novel's composition within the novel itself highlights its artificiality as much as it does its "reality." The first sentence of the novel, "'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,' says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel," not only alludes to and inverts the first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, but it also refers to itself and the "famous novel" we hold in our hands written by Nabokov, that "great Russian writer" (3). This history-of-the-novel theme continues throughout *Ada* as a way to make allusive sense of the characters' behavior while also insisting that we recognize the artifice of what we are reading. For instance, to narrate a brief encounter between Van and Ada in the hallway of Ardis Manor, Nabokov writes, "Then Van and Ada met in the passage, and would have kissed at some earlier stage of the Novel's Evolution in the History of Literature" (96).

When the verisimilitude of the memoir style meets the artificiality of *Ada's* metafiction, however, the experience is one of temporal whiplash. In this early passage, for instance, the two children are naked while rummaging about in the attic of Ardis Hall where they discover an old scrapbook with flowers collected by Ada's mother, Marina. Ada explains to Van:

“. . . the paper flower so cavalierly dismissed is a perfectly recognizable reproduction of an early-spring sanicle that I saw in profusion on hills in coastal California last February. Dr. Krolik, our local naturalist, to whom you, Van, have referred, as Jane Austen might have phrased it, for the sake of rapid narrative information (you recall Brown, don't you Smith?), has determined the example I brought back from Sacramento to Ardis, as the Bear-Foot, B,E,A,R, my love, not my foot or yours, or the Stabian flower girl's—an allusion, which your father, who, according to Blanche, is also mine, would understand like this” (American finger-snap). (8)

With some blessed help from Brian Boyd's annotations, we can parse the above as follows: Ada is speaking, and despite the complexity, it seems that we are supposed to believe that she says all of these words, as a child, at the moment of their discovery in the attic. (Lest we be overly skeptical, we are told later of the aphrodisiacal effect that Ada's “spectacular handling of subordinate clauses, her parenthetical asides, her sensual stressing of adjacent monosyllables” has on Van [61].) This is the first mention of Dr. Krolik, a scientist in the region who shares Ada's flora and fauna passions. Thus the reference to the information-laden narration in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* calls attention to the introduction of a new character in the midst of narrative action. As if the apposite Austen allusion did not adequately make Ada's point, the parenthetical performance of Austen's technique—“(you recall Brown, don't you Smith?)”—possibly alludes to Graham Greene's 1966 novel *The Comedians*, as Boyd notes (44). Having allusively clarified the allusion that comments on her own linguistic stylistics, Ada goes on to note that the flower specimen is called “Bear-foot,” not “Bare-foot,” a distinction she must make both because the words are “really” being spoken and because she and Van happen to be naked up in the attic—thus the possible misunderstanding that Ada is referring to their own bare feet (“not my foot or yours”). Precocious youngster that she is, Ada apparently feels that she must further defend against the possibility that Van will think she is referring to the bare feet of the “Stabian flower girl” who appears in a mural painting, “Primavera,” displayed in the National Museum of Naples and painted by Stabiae, an artist who died in the Vesuvius eruption. In guarding against this possible confusion, Ada seems to realize that her reference is entirely esoteric, although she notes that Van's father, Demon (who, Ada has learned from one of the servants, Blanche, is also her own father), would catch the reference in as much time as it takes to snap one's fingers (American style).

I belabor this passage as an example of how the tension between the novel's illusion of verisimilitude and its extraliterary excesses operates

temporally. The quotation marks are, of course, the first indicator that the words we read are the “real” words that were spoken—that the event is being reproduced seamlessly as if it had been tape-recorded. Spelling out “bear” to avoid the confusion of the passage’s pure auralty, the additional detailed reference to the children’s bare feet, and using the first and second person, which follows logically from the quotation, all place the scene firmly in the moment of its occurrence: specifically, twelve years and eight months after December 16, 1871, or, sometime in August, 1884, which would make Van fourteen and Ada twelve. At the same time, however, evidence of the passage’s metafictional artifice is unavoidable. The references to Austen (nonanachronistically) and Greene (anachronistically) demonstrate Ada’s awareness of the artificiality of her speech, as does identifying her own speech as “narrative.” And if we have been seduced by the quaint need to spell out “bear” because the entire passage is really only being spoken, then we are forced back into textuality by the complete failure to convey the auralty of the “American finger-snap” onomatopoeically. Of crucial relevance to my argument, however, is the fact that this contradiction between speech and writing is temporally indexed. The verisimilitude stays in the past present, in 1884, while the textuality seeps out of the ostensibly present present of the text’s composition (1957–63). That is, Ada’s quoted speech seems fake and contrived despite the verisimilitudinous cues, specifically the auralty. What makes it seem artificial, however, is imported from the present moment of the passage’s composition, a specific temporality that asserts itself when we ask where and when “(American finger-snap)” comes from, or when we read at the conclusion of the scene and this chapter: “Awkward. Reword! (marginal note in Ada Veen’s late hand)” (9). Of course, many texts use direct discourse to create the effect of reality and have narrators who intrude in a way that calls our attention to the artifice of what we read. And in many novels, the temporal location of the narrator differs from that of the characters and the narrated content. In *Ada*, however, realist illusions and metafictional artifice function differently than they do in other texts because of the crucial and complicated role that temporality plays in producing them.

In effect, Nabokov is rubbing the novel’s form and content together to produce the conditions for temporally knowing. This process can be schematized in this way: late in life, Van and Ada are together in a present moment of the novel’s formal composition, and from this present present they move the formal, compositional qualities of the novel backward and then forward again over the remembered past present of their personal history which, as the content of the novel’s form, moves temporally forward in fits and starts. This process allows the novel’s form and content

to be mutually constitutive but never entirely conflated, and it resists the epistemological problem of knowing time in favor of the phenomenological experience of temporally knowing. To understand what happens in *Ada*, readers must incorporate the temporal form of the reading experience into their production of textual knowledge, and the text's innovative formal techniques permit them to do so without entirely submerging themselves in the gradual unfolding of narrative content. This suggests that we can get something out of reading besides either detemporalized pieces of content or the pleasure of just flowing along with the plot. Instead, the unique temporal forms embedded in experimental postmodern literature such as *Ada* can teach us different ways of producing knowledge of our world.

Or as Peter Osborne reasons, "Possibility is produced by and as the temporal structure of particular types of action, it is sustained by others, and eroded and undermined by others still. And it is produced in a variety of temporal forms" ("Politics" 46). Implicit in this claim is a description of how literature might claim for itself not just a politics, but also an ethics. That is, when possibility is produced "by" the form of temporal experience, it becomes political, and when it is produced "as" the form of temporal experience, it exemplifies an ethics. As I have already explained, the politics of temporal form has nothing to do with recognition, nor do different temporal forms correlate to a specific set of political values: there is nothing inherently Marxist about opaque signifiers or inherently conservative about verisimilitude. Consequently, I cannot here ascribe political content or value to forms of temporal experience in general. Instead, each of *Qualified Hope's* six chapters analyzes the specific political implications that emerge from a given author's formal intervention in a particular socio-political conjuncture: Cold War paranoia, globalization, 9/11, racial inequality, gender difference, and life on the United States–Mexico border. Within the specific context of these particular issues, we will see how innovative literary forms produce unique experiences of time that are political precisely because of the new modes of thought they make possible. Saving those particulars for the chapters themselves, I would here simply suggest that in this way, form actually proves *more* political than literary content, a point Ellen Rooney also makes when she contends that thematic readings provide only "what theory or ideology critique has always already anticipated." Instead, Rooney's focus on form highlights the temporal production of politics that occurs whenever form functions as "theory's/ideology's/history's shadow and the force that permits the text to emerge as ideology's or theory's interlocutor, rather than as its example" (34).²⁸ As "example," literary content merely reiterates politics as they already exist,

but as “interlocutor,” literary form allows politics to emerge from a reader’s temporalized production of knowledge.

Finally, considered more broadly, this emphasis on the temporalized process of production also implies an ethics of reading, specifically an ethics like that described by Alain Badiou, who argues, “There is no ethics in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation” (16). Accordingly, if ethics is only ever a process, then being ethical requires maintaining a “fidelity” to that process. The same fidelity is required of any reading experience that produces meaning through a formal encounter with the text rather than finding meaning in textual content. After all, books, their characters, their authors, their plots, and their themes are neither ethical nor political in and of themselves. But if every opening of a book—whether it be for the first or fifth time—balances both act and event, and if every “act/event” of reading or rereading entails the fidelity of a subject to the temporalized form of the experience, then I think we have not only a strong and practicable notion of literary ethics, but also a mode by which literary form participates in the production of new political thought. This book identifies such modes in a vital cross section of postmodern American literature and examines how they produce a politics of time best characterized by its qualified hope in the political value of time itself.

