Counterfactual Narratives of the Civil War and Slavery

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This essay examines an overlooked dimension of the American literary preoccupation with slavery since the 1970s – the mass-market genre of alternate histories of the Civil War that began to proliferate after the end of the civil rights movement. Focussing on the genre's unique blend of historical realism and counterfactual speculation, the essay argues that these novels turn to the Civil War in order to reevaluate the trajectory of US racial history and to reckon with the dramatic racial realignments of the post-civil rights period.

The resurgent interest in slavery since the 1970s is now a widely noted fact of American literary and cultural history. The growing scholarship on the topic richly details the various sites at which Americans are revisiting the history of slavery in the post-civil rights decades, including literature, film, television, visual art, commemorative reenactments, and heritage tourism. In the literary sphere, the most widely discussed phenomenon is the turn to speculative genres in African American fiction, with canonical as well as popular novelists – including Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, and Octavia Butler – employing narrative devices such as supernatural possession or time travel to investigate the continuing reverberations of slavery in the present.[1] Extending beyond African American literature, the national preoccupation

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[1] David Lambert points to a strain of "Black-Atlantic counterfactualism" that engages in a kind of historical conjecture distinct from the better-known phenomenon of speculative fictions about slavery, which emphasize the continuing resonance of the past in the present. See David Lambert, "Black-Atlantic Counterfactualism: Speculating about Slavery and Its Aftermath," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 36 (2010), 286–96. Lambert focusses primarily on nonfictional writing about slavery, except for a brief discussion of Steven Barnes's Alternate America novels *Lion's Blood* (2002) and *Zulu Heart* (2003). The genre of alternate history is almost entirely missing from the growing body of speculative historical fiction by African American writers since the 1970s. The few exceptions, such as Steven Barnes's novels and Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008), are imagined histories in which Europeans are enslaved by Africans rather than counterfactual narratives of "what almost was." African American speculative fiction about slavery remains entirely uninterested in the Civil War as a watershed moment of US history; the rare novels that do touch on the Civil War, such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, do so to highlight its failure in bringing about real freedom.

with slavery in the post-civil rights decades also surfaced in the unexpected sphere of mass-market literature, as established writers of speculative fiction began to explore the legacy of slavery through the genre of the alternate history. Also known as uchronia or allohistory, this genre essentially imagines a divergence from accepted historical fact and traces its probable future consequences. In the spate of such narratives published since the 1960s, the most popular counterfactual scenario is a Nazi victory in World War II, followed closely by the Confederate states winning the Civil War. Alternate histories of Nazi ascendancy have begun to receive sustained scholarly analysis, but there is no comparable discussion of those dealing with a victorious Confederacy. Considered together as a phenomenon, these novels constitute a fascinating and thus far unexplored dimension of the rapidly expanding archive of American literary texts preoccupied with slavery.

Entertaining a range of counterfactual scenarios – in which, for example, white supremacists from the present travel to the past in order to defend the institution of slavery, or historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee modify their policies on slavery in view of an anachronistic knowledge of the late twentieth-century future – these narratives reassess the trajectory of US racial history from the Civil War to the post-civil rights period. As Phil Patton points out, exactly what you change in the past shows what you consider most important in history and, we might add, most vexing in the present.[2] Alternate histories of the Civil War began to proliferate in the aftermath of the civil rights and black power movements, with the bulk of them published between 1970 and the early 1990s. The political ferment of the 1960s ignited the literary impulse to revisit a prior period of racial turmoil not only because it forced the problem of continuing racial inequality into national visibility, but also because it destabilized the consensus narrative about the Civil War that had prevailed since the end of the nineteenth century. As historian David Blight has influentially argued, the sectional dissension of the Reconstruction period was glossed over with a "reconciliationist memory" of the Civil War, which affirmed national reunion by denying the causative force of slavery and highlighting the courage and honor displayed by both sides in the war. This depoliticized narrative dominated popular national remembrance up until the Civil War Centennial Commemoration ceremonies, officially launched in 1961, which coincided with the peak years of the civil rights movement. As southern segregationists mobilized memories of Confederate heroism in defense of the Jim Crow system, civil rights leaders seized upon the commemoration as an opportunity to publicize what Blight terms an "emancipationist counter-memory" of the

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[2] Phil Patton, "Alternate History: Lee Defeats Grant" (1999), at www.americanheritage.com.

Civil War, one that emphasized the war's legacy of racial strife and the as yet unfulfilled promise of the Emancipation Proclamation.[3] Although, as Robert Cook extensively documents, American popular culture during the 1960s remained in thrall to the reconciliationist vision, the civil rights and black power movements had a dramatic impact on Civil War historiography, centralizing slavery as the real point of contention.[4] In accord with the newly emergent historical consensus, counterfactual novels about the Civil War squarely pinpoint slavery as the primary cause and identify racial conflict as the crux issue of US history from the Civil War to the civil rights movement.

David Blight observes that "as long as we have race in America, we will have a politics of Civil War memory."[5] The two decades following the political upheavals of the 1960s, when the publication of counterfactual novels about the Civil War achieved critical mass, witnessed fraught public debates about the extent to which race continues to matter in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. Following the attainment of formal citizenship and civil rights, race remained a significant factor in the distribution of inequality, but racial politics confronted new constraints, such as public exhaustion with talk of lingering racism and backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement. The ascendant ideology of color blindness sanctioned the repudiation of race-based public policy, reflecting a broad consensus that the success of the civil rights movement had obviated the need for state intervention to remedy racial discrimination. This consensus posited a redemptive narrative of US racial history wherein the nation's racial problem, rooting back to slavery, had finally been resolved by the civil rights movement.[6] Challenges to this consensus entail a historical counternarrative in which the post-civil rights present remains hostage to the unfinished legacy of slavery. For example, Mark Nesbitt, author of the alternate history *If the South Won Gettysburg* (1980), explains in his preface that his interest in the war was sparked by his belief that the nation "is still dealing with the same problems that caused the

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[3] David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). On the impact of the civil rights movement on the Civil War Centennial commemoration also see Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Jon Wiener, "Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights: The Civil War Centennial in Context," in Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 208–25. [4] Cook, chapter 6. [5] Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 4.
[6] On these realignments in American racial politics from the early 1970s through the early 1990s see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 113–37; Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 97–179.

Civil War and remain unresolved nearly a century and a third later."[7] Although all alternate historians of the Civil War do not necessarily share this conviction, they are centrally preoccupied with the question whether the history of racial injury originating in slavery persists into the post-civil rights present or is safely contained in the past.

Given that counterfactual narratives of the Civil War revisit a past juncture explicitly in order to gauge its consequences for the present, they should be particularly well suited to provoking critical reconsideration of US racial history. The emerging scholarship on the genre suggests that it dismantles familiar historical narratives through its mechanism of "history gone awry," inspiring awareness of historical contingency by disrupting the causal chain linking the present to the past.[8] In the strongest defense of the genre's defamiliarizing potential, Paul Alkon argues that it is designed to reveal the historicity of things as they are: foregrounding questions of "causation and consequences," counterfactual narratives prompt readers to think critically about how their world turned out the way it did.[9] The defining formal feature of the genre – its peculiar blend of realist and counterfactual elements – signals its complex relation to established norms of historical representation. As Brian McHale points out, classic historical novels adhere to strict constraints on the insertion of "realemes" into their fictional worlds. Actual persons, places, events, and objects that appear in realist novels cannot contradict the historical record; any imaginative license taken by the novelist must be limited to the "dark areas of history," or those areas on which the historical record is silent.[10] For the most part, alternate historians closely follow this rule, taking pains to shore up the verisimilitude of their counterfactual scenarios, yet they often employ devices such as time travel and anachronism

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[7] Mark Nesbitt, *If the South Won Gettysburg* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1980), xi. A *New York Times* article about plans to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War in several southern states emphasized "how divisive the war remains, with Americans continuing to debate its causes, its meanings and its legacy." Online responses to the article from more than 400 readers contending over the causative role of slavery attested to the reporter's claim that "any master narrative of the war seems elusive" even in the twenty-first century. "Celebrating Secession without the Slaves," *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 2010, A12. Also see Robert Brinkmeyer Jr., "The Civil War and Contemporary Southern Literature," in Thomas Brown, ed., *Remixing the Civil War: Meditations on the Sesquicentennial* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 92–111, on the extent to which slavery continues to be downplayed as a causative factor in contemporary Civil War fiction by white southern writers.

[8] Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 42.

[9] Paul Alkon, "Alternate History and Postmodern Temporality," in Thomas Cleary, ed., *Time, Literature and the Arts: Essays in Honor of Samuel L. Macey* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1994), 65–85, 68.

[10] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 87.

that blatantly rupture the illusion of realism. The formal impurity of alternate histories raises provocative questions about the nature of the historical sensibility specific to the genre.

The use of speculative elements should not in itself disqualify counterfactual narratives from counting as historical fiction or be seen as a symptom of the "waning of historicity," to quote Fredric Jameson's influential formulation.[11] Jameson's account of the distinctive historicity of science fiction helps clarify the historical disposition of genres such as counterfactual narratives that deviate from the realism typical of classic historical fiction. The historical novel of the nineteenth century corresponded with the emergence of a modern sense of historicity, which Jameson defines as "a perception of the present as history," or, in other words, a distanciated posture toward the present that allows us to view it in historical perspective.[12] Jameson, among others, sees science fiction as a rare contemporary genre that reanimates historical understanding. If the current blockage of historical understanding is manifest in the pervasive sense that "there is only the present and that it is always 'ours,'" science fiction produces historicity through the "trope of the future anterior," estranging our reading present by staging it as the implied history of a particular future society.[13] Jameson's argument is meant to apply only to future-oriented science fiction and would therefore exclude a genre such as the alternate history, which always looks to the past rather than the future. However, as Harry Turtledove, a prolific writer of alternate histories, points out, the genre resembles science fiction in its reliance on the principle of extrapolation, which it reverses to extend to the past rather than the future.[14] In other words, alternate histories can estrange the present by repositioning it as the future consequence of a specific development in the past.

While constructing blatantly fictive worlds and deviating from known fact, alternate histories nonetheless play by the rules of historical realism, carefully establishing the plausibility of their counterfactual scenarios and adhering to a strict logic of causality. It is the form's inbuilt divergence between actual and counterfactual registers that can spark a historical approach to the present.

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[11] In his discussion of "postmodern fantastic historiography," Jameson views narratives that invent unreal histories as indicative of the waning of historicity in the late twentieth century. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 368–69. Similarly, for Brian McHale, who regards realism as a necessary component of any definition of historical fiction, "a fantastic historical fiction is an anomaly." McHale, 88.   [12] Jameson, 284.

[13] Ibid., 286, 285. Also see Robert Canary, "Science Fiction as Fictive History," in Thomas D. Clareson, ed., *Many Futures, Many Worlds: Theme and Form in Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1977), 165–66.

[14] Harry Turtledove, "Introduction," in Turtledove, ed., *The Best Alternate History Stories of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Del Rey Books, 2001), ix.

Readers make sense of alternate histories by shuttling between the unfamiliar fictive world and the real world; this process of reading prompts us to discern the specificities of our own world, which thereby becomes visible as a product of history, but it also disembeds us from the apparent givenness of this history, allowing us to entertain other possible trajectories. Activating this kind of mediation between actual and counterfactual realities, alternate histories should be uniquely predisposed to demystify reigning historical meta-narratives. By imagining that history could have taken a different turn and tracking its unexpected effects into the future, the genre has the potential to "defatalize the past," in Philip Roth's phrase, and to undermine assumptions about historical determinism and necessity.[15]

Counterfactual narratives of the Civil War deflect the chain of causation through their use of time travel and anachronism, in the process exposing the fragility of the historical trajectory spanning the Civil War to the post-civil rights period. But most of these narratives fixate on the abolition of slavery as the turning point that launches a progressive historical trajectory culminating in the civil rights movement. In the mainstream of alternate histories of the Civil War, by writers including Harry Harrison, John Jakes, Robert Stapp, and Harry Turtledove, the genre's propensity to imagine otherwise is ultimately contained by a strong counterimpulse to ratify actually existing reality. By restoring the actual course of history as a corrective to the counterfactual divergence, these narratives validate the racial order of the post-civil rights decades as a product of historical inevitability. Exceptional instances of the genre, exemplified in the fiction of Ward Moore, Terry Bisson, and James Morrow, counter this presentist vision by narrating US racial history as a politically contingent and still unfinished process. As I shall argue, the critical power of these works – their ability to instill a sense of the historicity of the present – depends on sustaining an unresolved tension between the genre's actual and counterfactual dimensions.

NO TAMPERING WITH HISTORY

A range of alternate historians of the Civil War, including Harry Harrison, John Jakes, Ward Moore, James Morrow, and Harry Turtledove, favor time travel as the vehicle for mediation between past and present, actual and counterfactual worlds. Forcing contemporary characters into close encounters with history, time travel conveys the past as a matter of immediate, firsthand experience rather than an object of distanciated knowledge. Historian David

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[15] Philip Roth, "The Story behind *The Plot Against America*," at www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/19ROTHL.html.

Lowenthal points out that the literary fascination with time travel bespeaks a misrecognition of historical knowledge insofar as it underplays the "value of restrospection" to an understanding of the past.[16] By definition, the past is that which can no longer be directly experienced, so when literary time travelers experience the past as present, it inevitably ceases to exist as history. But the use of time travel to foreshorten temporal distance need not in itself preclude a historical understanding of the relation between past and present. African American writers of speculative fiction turn to time travel in order to represent the history of racial injury as an ongoing phenomenon that cannot be consigned to the past. For example, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the protagonist is jolted back to the antebellum era on 4 July 1976, the bicentennial anniversary of American independence, initiating a regressive narrative movement from freedom to slavery that is obviously designed to undermine redemptive narratives of US racial history. In *Captain Blackman*, John Williams uses time travel for much the same purpose. His protagonist's journeys to various key eras demonstrate, by dint of sheer repetition, the stasis of a history in which the drive for black freedom was thwarted over and over again. Time travel in these novels is designed to de-reify the present by situating it within a not-yet-finished trajectory and to show that the legacy of slavery, which lingers into the post-civil rights present, cannot yet be seen as a matter of history.

In sharp contrast, most counterfactual narratives of the Civil War endorse an optimistic view of the civil rights movement as the completion of a progressive historical process launched by the abolition of slavery. Novels by prominent writers of mass-market speculative fiction, notably John Jakes's *Black in Time* (1970), Harry Harrison's *Rebel in Time* (1983), and Harry Turtledove's *Guns of the South* (1992), use the device of time travel to foster unequivocal faith in the actual course of US history. In each of these novels, white supremacist characters from the present travel back to the Civil War past with the goal of defending slavery. We would expect the time travel mechanism, which literally dislodges characters from the here and now, to be uniquely capable of revealing the contingency of the present, but in these novels it ultimately serves the function of fortifying rather than rupturing the fabric of the present. The desire to reverse history via time travel is motivated by dissatisfaction with the existing racial order, but because the agents of change are cast as extremists, readers are squarely positioned as political moderates committed to preserving the integrity of national

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[16] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, MA; Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.

history as it really happened and, by extension, to securing an imperiled present.

In Jakes's novel, the white supremacist character, Roy Whisk, becomes radicalized when he is fired from a factory job and replaced by a black man. Reflecting the backlash against the civil rights movement that framed affirmative-action legislation as reverse discrimination, Whisk's intense resentment about racial quotas fuels his desire to "stop the clock of black radicalism" and "make the world safe for the white majority."[17] What is notable is that Whisk goes about this mission not by trying to undo the civil rights movement but by going back much further in time to preempt the abolition of slavery. Similarly, the villain in Harrison's *Rebel in Time*, Colonel McCulloch, feels he has been overtaken by less qualified black workers due to affirmative-action legislation, so he travels back in time to "perpetuate slavery into the distant future."[18] Playing a variation on this pattern, Turtledove's *Guns of the South* features a white supremacist group that time-travels from postapartheid South Africa to the American Civil War era to prevent the abolition of slavery.

These novels teach the clear-cut lesson that it is "catastrophic" to "tamper with the fabric of history" as it actually occurred – a lesson that is surely surprising in a fictional genre founded on the premise that history could easily have turned out otherwise.[19] The sense of inevitability affirmed in all three novels, as well as their conviction about the felicity of actual US history, is reinforced by the fact that the desire to change history is projected on to racial extremists, whether white or black. In *Black in Time*, the cautionary lesson about altering history is most forcefully dramatized through the story of Jomo, a member of an "ultramilitant" group Brothers United for Revolution Now. Regarding the time machine as "the single greatest hope that black people have ever had," Jomo wants to "fix up a little history" in the interests of "black pride."[20] Although his travels back in time are spurred by impatience with the slow pace of racial progress, the novel characterizes him as a mirror image of the racist Roy Whisk in that his goal is to institute black supremacy. In a sense, it is the black militant rather than the white supremacist who comes across as the more dangerous threat in Jakes's novel, because, unlike the bumbling and ineffectual Whisk, Jomo actually succeeds twice in altering history, in both cases bringing about racial orders that are shown to be far worse than the novel's 1970s present. For example, in one of his counterfactual scenarios, Jomo manages to extend the ancient republic

[17] John Jakes, *Black in Time* (New York: Paperback Library, 1970), 80, 71.
[18] Harry Harrison, *Rebel in Time* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1983), 268.
[19] Jakes, 52–53.   [20] Ibid., 23, 171, 51, 106.

of Songhay into the twenty-first century, a promised land of black power and white enslavement.

Historian Gavriel Rosenfeld contends that dystopian alternate histories – those that depict their counterfactual worlds as nightmarish alternatives to the present – generally nudge readers toward relieved acceptance of the status quo.[21] This is exactly the case in Jakes's novel, which eventually negates Jomo's counterfactual scenarios and reroutes history to its proper track, of gradual change in the racial order of things. The alternate scenarios in the novel are filtered through the perspective of the politically moderate character Harold Quigley. Through his vantage point as the guardian of the present, *Black in Time* critiques the myopia of racial militants who hijack the time machine in order to "wreak … historical havoc."[22] The novel's resolution hinges on Harold's commitment to the racial order of the post-Civil Rights period. Harold responds to the most glaring problem in the present, an impending race war being fomented by Whisk, by using the time machine one last time to abduct and abandon Whisk aboard a nineteenth-century slave ship. Once the threat embodied by Jomo and Whisk is vanquished and the time machine dismantled, the novel reconciles Harold as well as readers to the overall direction of US racial history, informing us that the civil rights movement brought about "pretty decent progress" in race relations: "Nowhere near enough to make up for all the hell that had gone before, of course. But the mood had been – well – *right* for a few years. A lot of blacks had moved up." Although the 1970s present is admittedly "pretty rotten," the novel's time-travel plot has shown that things could be so much worse if militants of either race were allowed to tamper with history.[23]

Several alternate histories of the Civil War share this emphasis on racial moderation, implicitly delegitimizing the black power militancy of the 1960s by casting politically temperate black men as trustworthy caretakers of the national interest. For example, Robert Stapp's *A More Perfect Union*, published the same year as Jakes's novel, is set in a near future in which the CSA exists as an independent nation, a totalitarian state led by dictator Howie Ray Spearman. To counter the imminent danger of a Confederate States of America (CSA) military attack, the US state launches a covert mission to have Spearman assassinated. Representing the CSA as a racist dystopia, the novel aligns its fictive USA with the forces of racial progress, showing that as a consequence of "large-scale racial conflict" during the 1960s, the nation finally "draped its vaunted mantle of freedom and equality over the shoulders

[21] Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If'? Reflections on the Function of Alternate History," *History and Theory*, 41, 3 (2002), 90–103, 93.   [22] Jakes, 107, 61.
[23] Ibid., 18, original emphasis, 170.

of its black citizens."[24] The political incorporation of African Americans into the nation is most clearly apparent in the fact that a black man, Robert Dorsey, is appointed special envoy in charge of coordinating the top-secret assassination plot. Like Harold in Jakes's novel, Dorsey is a reasonable character, free of bitterness, who goes so far as to say that "being black has probably been an advantage to me – in some ways," a statement that seems especially odd in light of his detailed account of his family's encounters with systematic racism in both the CSA and the USA.[25] Characters such as Harold and Dorsey betray the equivocation marking these novels' discourse on race, as they concede only to then neutralize the continuing force of racism in the post-civil rights present.

Harry Harrison's *Rebel in Time* even more clearly illustrates the mechanisms by which alternate histories of the Civil War end up reinstating the racial order of the present. In this novel, the threat to the present is embodied by the white supremacist Colonel McCulloch, who has disappeared into the Civil War South to ensure the perpetuation of slavery. Once the FBI discovers McCulloch's scheme, they depute a black ex-military man, Sergeant Troy Harmon, to follow him into the past to make sure that US racial history turns out the way it actually did. The crucial move here, as in Stapp's novel, is to identify a black man with the interests of the US state, so much so that he becomes the primary agent for securing the future of the nation. Harmon is told that the nation's security must be protected in the past as well as in the present and future, and time travel becomes the mechanism for redoubling Harmon's commitment to the actual course of US racial history. Although Harmon holds a BA in history, it is time travel that makes the past feel real to him, arousing an emotional hatred of slavery along with an urgent awareness that the Civil War represents *the* critical juncture in the history of the nation. Harmon's task, of thwarting McCulloch's effort to win the war for slavery, is presented as a mission to safeguard the very "existence of this nation," which, as Harmon now realizes, hinges on the issue of slavery.[26]

In *Rebel in Time*, time travel operates in a manner exactly contrary to its use by Octavia Butler or John Williams, to clarify the disjunction between slavery and the post-civil rights present. Harrison painstakingly renders the shock of dislocation experienced by a late twentieth-century character thrust into the world of chattel slavery. Harmon's anachronistic presence in this world makes him keenly aware of the otherness of this past, in which he must pose as a white man's slave and speak in thick plantation dialect just to

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[24] Robert Stapp, *A More Perfect Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 29, 197.
[25] Ibid., 206.   [26] Harrison, 168.

survive. Harmon's alienation from the past clinches his loyalty to the US nation of the future:

> He was behind enemy lines … In his own country – but still not his country. Not yet. History, as he knew it, had just come alive for him in a way he had never understood from books. For the first time he could understand at least one of the reasons why the Civil War had been fought – and just what the victory was that had been so painfully won.

It is only by experiencing firsthand the debasement of life as a slave in the Civil War South that Harmon comes around to appreciating his racial status in the post-civil rights era. Convinced that his future world might never exist unless he intervenes to save it, Harmon gets involved in the raid on Harper's Ferry. Although hindsight tells him that the raid will fail, Harmon joins John Brown and his crew because they "wanted to bring about the America that he knew. It wasn't perfect, he knew that," but "it was infinitely better than this slave state."[27]

Harmon's logic traces the circuitous route by which so many alternate histories eventually validate the present. By revisiting the past, Harmon realizes that his present hinges on a specific historical outcome – the North winning the Civil War and putting an end to slavery. The speculative dimension of the alternate history (it could have happened otherwise) is narrated in dystopian terms and thereby easily overridden by the return to actual history (what a relief it happened the way it did). The counterfactual possibility of the South winning the Civil War thus serves as a detour necessary to heighten commitment to an endangered present. The real achievement of these novels is that they manage to ratify a present reality that is merely "not … bad" or even "pretty rotten," and they do so by underscoring its vulnerability.[28] The very fact that the plots of these novels move toward rectifying the historical divergence and restoring the reader's present indicates that the present is perceived to be at risk. The sense of threat must be very carefully calibrated: it must be potent enough to require urgent intervention, yet it must not call into question the essential rightness of the present. Accordingly, the racist villains in these novels are hyperbolically characterized as part of a lunatic fringe rather than reflective of mainstream US society: Whisk's mind is "completely unhinged" by the "fires of jihad" and McCulloch is described through a pile-up of adjectives as a "homicidal, violently racist nut case," "a sick, mad, contemptible racist."[29] In Turtledove's *Guns of the South*, the members of America Will Break are similarly marginalized as "a tiny group of radicals" who believe that "God has established that white men are to rule over

[27] Ibid., 190, 268.   [28] Ibid., 290; Jakes, 170.   [29] Jakes, 157; Harrison, 152, 285.

blacks."[30] Turtledove mitigates the menace of this kind of old-school racism by detaching it both spatially and temporally from late twentieth-century America: the AWB men are from South Africa and white supremacy is so unacceptable in the present world of the novel that it can be pursued only by way of temporal regression to the Civil War period.

Darko Suvin has observed that the counterfactual dimension of alternate histories "is used to articulate possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world."[31] The alternate histories of Jakes, Harrison, and Turtledove identify persisting racial conflict as the problem that triggers counterfactual speculation, but in fixating on the end of slavery as the crux moment of US racial history, they end up displacing the problem that demands resolution. This work of displacement follows a convoluted logic. First, the racism that persists in the post-civil rights decades is restricted to militant white supremacy, which in turn is characterized as an aberrant residue from the past. In a telling twist, white supremacy is initially presented as a backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement, but then plays out as resistance to the end of slavery. Because present-day racism is depicted as a mission to restore slavery, it is easily dispelled as a regressive impulse to derail the nation from the progress it has already achieved. When the problem is posed in this way and narrative energy is directed to battling a reversion to chattel slavery, the present cannot but triumph because, of course, slavery has already been abolished in reality. Following a contradictory logic, slavery stands in for racism in these narratives even as it is shown to be utterly anachronistic in the post-civil rights period.

If, as Edgar McKnight argues, the narrative drive of most alternate histories is to correct their own fictional divergence from recorded history,[32] in counterfactual narratives of the Civil War this corrective drive positions the post-civil rights era as the end point of American racial history. The rare alternate histories that provoke a critical view of this presumed teleology, such as Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1955), do so by narrating the restoration of actual history in ambivalent rather than straightforwardly corrective terms. The counterfactual reality of Moore's novel is premised on a Confederate victory in the Civil War, resulting in the establishment of the CSA as a separate nation. The novel's protagonist, Hodge Backmaker, is a professional historian who lives in a fictive USA brought to financial ruin by its

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[30] Harry Turtledove, *The Guns of the South* (New York: Del Rey Books, 1992), 160.
[31] Darko Suvin, "Victorian Science Fiction, 1871–85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-genre," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 10, 2 (1983), 148–69, 149.
[32] Edgar McKnight, "Alternative History: The Development of a Literary Genre," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1994, 60.

defeat in the war. Hodge seizes on time travel as a mechanism for perfecting his knowledge of the Civil War, disregarding his wife's caution that there are "no shortcuts in writing history."[33] In the novel's rather complicated plot, Hodge's anachronistic appearance in the past alters it beyond recognition. Confused by his odd presence on the scene, Confederate advance troops lose the critical Battle of Gettysburg, inaugurating the actual history familiar to Moore's readers, in which the Union won the Civil War and the US remained an undivided nation. Hodge specifically pinpoints race as the most important aspect of the history that displaces his own, highlighting the improved political status of black people in the world brought about by northern victory in the Civil War.

We would expect Hodge's elimination of his own historical timeline to offer some relief to Moore's readers, considering that it is a society characterized by popular acceptance of scientific racism and mass lynching that is eclipsed by the end of the novel. Readers of *Bring the Jubilee* should feel a gratifying sense of closure when the novel ultimately reinstates US history as we know it to have happened. The last chapter of the novel encourages the impression that history has been righted as even Hodge, who has just lost his whole world, admits that the world he has inadvertently brought into existence "is a better place than the one into which I was born."[34] However, as McKnight points out, there is no denying the keen sense of loss that permeates the end of Moore's novel, for the rehabilitation of the reader's actual history occurs at great personal cost to Hodge, who ends up stranded in an unfamiliar past.[35] Moore further discourages a celebratory stance toward actual US history by showing that it came about through the sheer accident of Hodge's inopportune presence at Gettysburg. Describing the Confederate defeat in the Civil War as "an error with momentous consequences," the novel emphasizes the role of chance and thereby denies readers the assurance that their world is a product of historical necessity.[36]

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[33] Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 1955), 179.

[34] Ibid., 219.   [35] McKnight, 61.

[36] Moore, 222. This sense of historical contingency also marks another alternate history published while the civil rights movement was still under way, MacKinlay Kantor's *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1960). Here, the South wins the Civil War and, in the absence of coercive pressure from the North, readily emancipates the slaves. Kantor envisions the actual history of the Civil War as a horrific counterfactual possibility: if the South had been defeated in the war, the "inevitable result" would have been "a period of enforced amalgamation" leading to "common hatred directed at the Negro" (93). As in *Bring the Jubilee*, the course of history is shown to hang on the thinnest thread of chance: in the alternate history in which the South wins the Civil War and goes on to abolish slavery, it is Union general Grant's accidental death, caused by his horse's reaction to a cat–dog chase, that brings about "monumental effects" for future US history (12).

Moore's halfhearted endorsement of the "better" course of actual US history can be partly attributed to the fact that *Bring the Jubilee* was written during the early years of the civil rights movement. In 1955, when the novel was published, the future course of the movement was necessarily uncertain, with the major acts of civil rights legislation still to come in the future. The open-endedness of this transitional juncture is registered in the novel's emphasis on the tenuous nature of historical causality and its lack of conviction about the teleology of US racial history. Most importantly, in Moore's novel the abolition of slavery does not necessarily augur future racial equality. In common with Jakes, Harrison, and Turtledove, Moore raises the problem of white supremacy but pointedly detaches it from the racial ideology of slavery. In the novel's counterfactual history, after the CSA wins the Civil War, slavery is abolished under pressure from President Robert E. Lee, but "Negro emancipation … soon revealed itself as a device for obtaining the benefits of slavery without its obligations."[37] *Bring the Jubilee* attenuates the customary emphasis on slavery as the nexus issue, showing that white supremacy remains the cornerstone of CSA policy long after abolition. Institutionalized racism runs rampant for decades after the end of the Civil War, as freed black people in northern and southern states alike are stripped of franchise and civil rights. Moore's disenchanted view of the present hinges on his refusal to equate abolition of slavery with freedom.

THE ANACHRONISM OF SLAVERY

Exactly contrary to Moore's novel, Turtledove's *Guns of the South* unambiguously affirms the racial order of the present by causally linking the demise of white supremacy to the abolition of slavery. In one of the novel's most bizarre plot twists, white supremacists end up as the sore losers not only of actual history, but also of the counterfactual history in which the South wins the Civil War. The AWB men travel back in time equipped with AK-47s, hoping that military advantage will ensure a Confederate victory and therefore consolidate white racial privilege. In Turtledove's counterfactual world, the Confederates do win the war with the help of twentieth-century weaponry, and the rest of the novel is consumed by the conflict between the AWB men and General Robert E. Lee over the future racial order of the South. By the end of the novel, the progressive vision of Lee triumphs as he abolishes slavery and commits the newly established CSA nation to a course of gradual racial progress. Sidelined by Lee, the racism of the AWB men is shown to be as incongruous in the postbellum South as it is in the

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[37] Moore, 62.

twenty-first-century future. This progressive turn of events hinges on the trick of historical anachronism. Agonizing over the controversial matter of slavery, Lee comes across an object from his future – Bruce Catton's *American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War*, an actual book published in 1960, which in Turtledove's fictive world is transported to the 1860s by the AWB men. Turtledove's choice of anachronistic future text perfectly serves the novel's complacent view of US racial history. David Blight dubs Bruce Catton "the national literary reconciler-in-chief" for his crucial part in popularizing the consensus narrative of the Civil War, which Blight describes as "a pleasing tale" about the "righteous progress of a problem-solving, redemptive people."[38] In Turtledove's novel, Catton's book reveals to Lee that history will move in the direction of increasing racial equality, firming his resolve to battle the conservative forces of his time.[39]

Anachronism is among the most contentious features of post-1960s novels about history – not surprising, given its flamboyant violation of the rules of historical representation. As Brian McHale points out, the realist "constraint on anachronism" extends to the material culture of a period (including technological artifacts such as books or weapons), as well as its worldview and ideology. The sense of "historicity collapses," McHale remarks, when contemporary novelists transgress boundaries between time periods,[40] such as, for instance, when Ishmael Reed refers to Abraham Lincoln's assassination being televised or to antebellum fugitive slaves traveling on jumbo jets in his novel *Flight to Canada*. With specific reference to the alternate-history genre, Catherine Gallagher reiterates the importance of the constraint on anachronism, asserting that the "allohistorian must avoid all anachronism in extending the counterfactual premise further up the timeline," in order to sustain historical realism.[41] Anachronism poses a problem even for scholars who do not hold a brief for realism as the preferred vehicle of literary-historical representation. Fredric Jameson, for example, singles out anachronism as a marked symptom of the contemporary crisis of historicity, insofar as a spatialized juxtaposition of disparate periods inhibits any attempt at synthesis.[42] As I shall show, however, anachronism can be – and has been – used by alternate historians such as James Morrow to defamiliarize given understandings of historical

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[38] Blight, *American Oracle*, 113, 27.

[39] The future that Lee sees in Catton's book is inspired by "a continuing search for justice and equality between the races, one incomplete even in that distant day, but nonetheless of vital import to both North and South. This seems to [Lee] to be in accord with a continuation of the trends that have grown here in [the nineteenth] century." Turtledove, *Guns of the South*, 435.   [40] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 88, 89.

[41] Catherine Gallagher, "When Did the Confederate States Free the Slaves?", *Representations*, 98, 1 (Spring 2007), 53–61, 59.   [42] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 370–75.

periodization and teleology. The problem lies not with anachronism as such but with presentist uses of the device; in other words, anachronism undercuts historicity when used to configure the present as a product of historical necessity.

The intrusion of Bruce Catton's twentieth-century book into the Civil War context of Turtledove's *Guns of the South* presents a perfect instance of this kind of presentist use of anachronism. Breaching the distance between past and present, anachronism here ensures that postbellum US history develops in accord with the political priorities of the novel's present. Many alternate histories employ the trope of the book within a book, encapsulating actual history as a fictive text that appears within the counterfactual world. We would expect this trope to estrange the reader's present by rendering it an "internal fiction,"[43] but the history book in Turtledove's novel exhibits the opposite logic. As Lee reads the book, "all at once the world he knew turned sideways," but here the estrangement function is directed at the counterfactual past rather than the actual present.[44] Instead of prompting readers to look askance at the history that produced their current world, the scene of Lee reading Catton's book makes the past look outdated from the vantage point of the present. Paradoxically, the actual trajectory of US racial history is the only acceptable outcome in many alternate histories of the Civil War, even when they seriously entertain counterfactual possibilities. In Turtledove's novel, the alternative scenario wins out over the actual one, yet this changes nothing: the South wins the Civil War, but nonetheless goes on to abolish slavery. Turtledove tries to lend credibility to this outcome in the "Historical Notes" appended to the novel, pointing readers to documents that corroborate his portrait of an abolitionist Lee, but this does not mitigate the fact that the fictional Lee's opposition to slavery is guided by the impossible intervention of a text from the future rather than emerging from the interplay of contemporaneous political forces. The divergent strand of the novel (it could have happened otherwise, the South could have won the Civil War) begins to converge with history as it actually happened, as Lee abolishes slavery in light of the teleological view of history affirmed in Catton's book: the "trend in history seems to be ever towards more liberty."[45] Readers are apt to feel cheated by this resolution because the novel pointedly identifies slavery as the crux of the Civil War, but the war, as narrated in the novel, carries no real consequences; either outcome (whether the South wins or loses) will lead to the end of slavery.

Turtledove is by no means unique in affirming that history, whether actual or counterfactual, moves ineluctably in the direction of greater freedom and

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[43] McKnight, 211. [44] Turtledove, *Guns of the South*, 431. [45] Ibid., 351.

equality. The proposition that slavery would have been abolished regardless of whether the Confederacy won or lost is a staple element of alternate histories of the Civil War. This proposition is founded on the belief that the inherently progressive logic of American history would have dictated the end of slavery. Kantor's *If the South Had Won the Civil War* most clearly voices this logic, presenting the victorious CSA's abolition of slavery as an outcome necessitated by the historical "trend" toward "Progressive enlightenment."[46] Likewise, Mark Nesbitt, in *If the South Won Gettysburg*, conjectures that slavery would have been phased out in time because the Confederacy would have recognized that it was incompatible with the forces of moral and economic progress. Nesbitt spells out a detailed plan of tax incentives and penalties that would have ensured a smooth transition to emancipation. But as if to allay a nagging doubt that abolition might not have come about so easily, Nesbitt imagines that the South's attachment to slavery might have lingered, albeit as a minor current of an otherwise forward-looking history. Those few southerners who "couldn't bear to let loose of the past" abandon the CSA for South America, where they create a replica of antebellum life complete with Georgian mansions, horse carriages, plantations, and, of course, slaves.[47] The end of Nesbitt's text is narrated from the point of view of a newspaper reporter investigating this settlement. On entering the enclave of slavery, the reporter feels "as if he had stepped into a time machine," "as if the clock had been turned back to 1850, and time had stood still, forever."[48] Like the white supremacists in Turtledove's novel, the defenders of slavery in Nesbitt's text are both spatially and temporally dissociated from the nation. The reporter's reference to time travel accentuates the anachronistic relation of slavery to the progressive history narrated in the rest of the text.

Faith in the inevitability of emancipation has become one of the "deep Truths" of alternate histories of the Civil War, as Catherine Gallagher contends in her essay "When Did the Confederate States Free the Slaves?". Here, Gallagher tries to explain her dissatisfaction with Kevin Willmott's mockumentary film *CSA: The Confederate States of America* (2004), which imagines a victorious South extending slavery well into the twenty-first century. Gallagher insists that her incredulous response to the film – "This isn't what happens when the South wins the Civil War" – was guided not by belief in the progressive bent of US history but by her appreciation of the truth claims specific to alternate histories.[49] Even as they alter particular historical details, allohistories must rely on the same standards of credibility that obtain in realist fiction. Both genres sustain an aura of "seeming

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[46] Kantor, *If the South Had Won the Civil War*, 91.
[47] Nesbitt, *If the South Won Gettysburg*, 95.   [48] Ibid., 95, 96.   [49] Gallagher, 54.

factuality" by indicating "the long-term trajectories of historic forces" and "implying that certain trends were inevitable."[50] The "deep Truth of slave emancipation" posited in alternate histories of the Civil War can then be defended on the grounds that it adheres to a realist logic of plausibility. Gallagher faults *CSA* for its incredible proposition that chattel slavery could have survived as a legal component of an advanced industrial society in the twenty-first century. Although most alternate histories do strive for plausibility as they trace the consequences of their departures from well-known fact, an exclusive focus on realism cannot fully illuminate a genre that so heavily relies on fantastic devices such as time travel, and seems particularly misplaced in relation to a mockumentary that deliberately mocks audience desires for "seeming factuality."[51]

Willmott's film revels in anachronism precisely in order to challenge emancipatory narratives of US racial history since the Civil War. Presented as a television documentary, *CSA* consists of narrative segments relating the counterfactual history of the CSA from the Civil War to the twenty-first century, interspersed with parodies of classic American films and commercials for products such as multimedia devices for slave-training. The unsettling humor of the film, apparent in ads for the "Slave Shopping Network," derives from the outrageousness of its juxtapositions, its purposefully uneven grafting of slavery on to late capitalist commodity culture. That Willmott is invested in making certain kinds of truth claims becomes clear at the end of the film, which identifies overlaps between mock CSA history and the actual history of the USA. Pointing to the factuality of some elements of his counterfactual world, such as Dr. Samuel Cartwright's term 'drapetomania' (naming a supposed disease that caused slaves to run away) or uses of minstrel imagery to promote everyday household objects all the way up to the 1980s, Willmott is obviously aspiring for truth effects different from those of realist historical fiction. Instead of trying to demonstrate that the institution of chattel slavery could plausibly exist in the twenty-first century, the film pushes audiences to recognize those lingering traces of the antebellum past that still haunt American popular culture.[52]

James Morrow's short story "Abe Lincoln in McDonald's" exploits anachronism in remarkably similar ways, in order to question the "deep Truth of slave emancipation" presupposed in most alternate histories of the Civil War. Morrow employs time travel as the vehicle of anachronism, but

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[50] Ibid., 57, 61.
[51] Gallagher substantiates her argument solely with reference to counterfactual narratives of the Civil War written by historians rather than novelists.
[52] Kevin Willmott, dir., *CSA: The Confederate States of America* (IFC Films, 2004).

whereas the time travelers in all other alternate histories of the Civil War journey from the present to the past, "Abe Lincoln" reverses the trope, featuring a character who travels from the Civil War era into the future. In 1863, President Lincoln is debating whether to sign a treaty that would accommodate slavery in order to bring the Confederate states back into the nation. After a consultation with his Chief Soothsayer and Time-Travel Advisor, Lincoln visits the future (the year 2009, to be exact) to see how the nation would turn out if he signed the treaty. As he walks around Boston and Washington, DC, Lincoln notices that slavery coexists with twenty-first-century life. As in Willmott's film, the story's disquieting power derives from the casualness with which Morrow inserts slavery into the familiar scenes and activities of everyday life in a highly advanced society. For example, Morrow's narrator blandly refers to Sonny's Super Slaver emporium, where "whelps" are kept in cages and litter-trained before being sold. The story ends as Lincoln, having just witnessed a mercy killing of a slave, decides to eliminate the "particular tomorrow fated by the … Treaty."

We have already encountered the scene of a historic figure from the past altering history in light of his knowledge of the future, but anachronism in Morrow's story works very differently than it does in Turtledove's novel, which looks askance at the past of slavery from the secure vantage point of an unquestionably enlightened present. Abe Lincoln wanders around in a future that will be reassuringly familiar to Morrow's readers at some moments (such as when Lincoln thoroughly enjoys a meal at McDonald's) but disturbingly unfamiliar at others (for example, when an enslaved woman is described as a "wonderful yard-sale item").[53] The story denies readers a firm foothold in either the actual present or the counterfactual future. Whereas in Turtledove's novel the divergent history seamlessly converges with actual history as Lee shapes the past in accord with future priorities, Morrow's story situates the past and present in disjunctive proximity, as Lincoln is flummoxed by much of what he encounters and in turn the twenty-first century characters see him as an oddball in an Abe Lincoln costume.

Morrow's use of anachronism is better appreciated in light of Amy Elias's account of the workings of parataxis in post-1960s fiction about history. A mode for juxtaposing disparate elements without any connective logic, parataxis supports a spatialized conception of history in which multiple layers of time exist on the same plane. Decontextualizing historical elements by

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[53] James Morrow, "Abe Lincoln in McDonald's," in Gregory Benford and Martin Greenberg, eds., *What Might Have Been*, Volume II, *Alternate Histories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 146–59, 151, 149, 153.

removing them from their own time and recombining them with incongruous elements from other times, anachronistic tropes can convey the friction between contradictory historical forces at any one time. This stratified and discontinuous history fractures not only the linear temporality of realist historical fiction but also commonplace assumptions about coherent historical periods and chains of causality.[54] Morrow's use of parataxis is designed to dispute the assumption, prevalent in alternate histories of the Civil War, that whichever way the war turned out, slavery was destined to die out thanks to the inexorable logic of progressive modernity. In twenty-first-century Boston, Lincoln is surprised to see the practice of slavery flourishing in a world of skyscrapers and computers. In 1863, Lincoln had hesitated to sign the treaty out of concern that perpetuating the plantation system would necessarily curb progress, but he now finds that "slavery wasn't dragging the Republic into the past, wasn't retarding its bid for modernity."[55]

Far from painting a realist portrait of twenty-first-century slavery, Morrow's aim is to show that the history of slavery is not safely contained in the past. Yoking together two terms that are generally taken to be incongruent (slavery and modernity), "Abe Lincoln" offers a counterpoint to alternate histories such as Nesbitt's *If the South Won Gettysburg*, in which slavery is so surely relegated to the remote past that you have to time travel to find it. Notwithstanding its light and playful touch, Morrow's story poses troubling questions for alternate histories of the Civil War which overwhelmingly assume that the end of slavery was destined by the irresistible force of progress. Slavery comes to an end in the story only because Lincoln chooses to rip up the treaty, rejecting the possibility of armistice with the South and reigniting the Civil War. Through this turn of events, Morrow shows that, far from withering away on its own, slavery had to be fought over and actively destroyed, thereby highlighting the political stakes of the Civil War, which become obscured when alternate historians assert the inevitability of emancipation.[56]

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[54] Amy Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 110–12, 123–24.   [55] Morrow, 152.

[56] Robert Charles Wilson's story "This Peaceable Land," in David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, eds., *The Year's Best SF* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 36–64, similarly suggests that a violent and costly war was necessary to end slavery. In Wilson's counterfactual reality, the Civil War is averted by political compromise and chattel slavery dies out as industrialization of southern agriculture makes it increasingly unprofitable. But ex-slaves who remain in the South are herded into institutions (called Liberty Lodges) that proscribe "reckless reproduction" and allow them to "live out their lives with their basic needs attended to for an annual fee" (48). This dystopian scenario implicitly validates the course of actual history, which the story represents as an alternate reality imagined by Harriet Beecher Stowe: "a part of me wishes that that war had indeed been fought if only because it might have ended slavery. Ended it cleanly, I mean, with a sane and straightforward liberation, or even a liberation partial and incomplete – a declaration, at least, of the

Forcing slavery and the late twentieth-century present into a relation of jarring simultaneity, Morrow uses anachronism to militate against a depoliticized view of historical necessity.

A PRESENT AS CONJECTURAL AS THE PAST

As scholars such as Gavriel Rosenfeld and Edgar McKnight have observed, alternate histories generally narrate their counterfactual scenarios in dystopian terms and then expend considerable narrative energy in reinstating actually existing reality. Conversely, alternate historians who resist this corrective impulse or who present the correction in equivocal terms are less committed to conserving the sociopolitical order of the present. The more provocative instances of the genre exploit the tension between the speculative and factual registers instead of succumbing to the inertial pull of history as it really happened. Morrow and Willmott, for example, upset the balance that generally obtains between actual and counterfactual dimensions in order to contest the "deep Truth" of teleological narratives of US history. Lending greater weight to their counterfactual scenarios of slavery persisting into the late twentieth century, these texts seek to challenge historical consensus narratives as well as commonsensical understandings of the present. While Morrow and Willmott still hew to genre expectations in projecting dystopian counterfactual scenarios, Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988) presents a unique instance of an alternate history of the Civil War that represents actual rather than counterfactual history in dystopian terms. By obviating the need for the correction back to reality, this reverse strategy effectively defamiliarizes both the present and the course of actual US history.

What sharpens the novel's critical view of US racial history is that we see it askew, from the vantage point of characters living in a counterfactual utopian society. In this fictive world, slaves are liberated by a violent revolt coordinated by John Brown in concert with Harriet Tubman. The struggle against slavery in the South succeeds thanks to international intervention and, with time, abolitionism takes on a revolutionary (rather than liberal) cast, eventually resulting in the transformation of the southern states into the socialist nation of Nova Africa. Bisson's idealized portrayal of Nova Africa is unconvincing, but the novel's power inheres in its critical estrangement of US history rather than its depiction of a utopian alternative. As in other alternate histories, this estrangement occurs by way of the trope of the book within the book. In the novel's present time setting of 1959, a group of Nova African characters

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immorality and unacceptability of human bondage – anything but this sickening decline by extinction" (58).

come across a book titled *John Brown's Body*, a "what-if" story that recounts the failure of Brown's raid and the subsequent Union victory in the Civil War. Incorporated into the world of the novel as a fictive text, the book, of course, narrates the real events of the Civil War and beyond. Elaborating why his characters view this history as a "nightmare" and the postbellum US nation as a racist "mis-topia," Bisson challenges several widely accepted assumptions about the stakes and consequences of the Civil War.[57] First is the deeply engrained belief that abolition of slavery ensured a historical trajectory of ever-increasing equality. From the incredulous perspective of the Nova African characters reading *John Brown's Body*, the Union catchphrase "One nation indivisible" sounds like a rallying cry for "white nationalism," for they understand that the Civil War was "fought to keep the old U.S. together rather than to free Nova Africa."[58] Like Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, Bisson's novel reveals the "fine distinction between slave and free [being] seared away" after the end of the Civil War. The US in the postbellum period is described as "a sort of white supremacist utopia" where "white right prevails" despite the demise of chattel slavery, as African Americans are consigned to peonage in the rural South and servile industrial labor in northern cities.[59] Delinking abolition from freedom, a Nova African historian speculates that if events had followed the course laid out in *John Brown's Body*, the end of the Civil War would have led to the consolidation of capitalism and the spread of American empire throughout the world.

Bisson subverts the facticity of actual history as well as its putative teleology, as he shows his Nova African characters marveling at the implausibility of the narrative presented in *John Brown's Body*. According to the book (and the prologue to the novel summarizing the facts of John Brown's raid), Brown's plan failed because of a causal chain set off by the event of Harriet Tubman falling ill. With its plot turning on the trick of coincidence, *John Brown's Body* does not even live up to minimal standards of historical realism. The book reads as a "somewhat overdone" work of historical "fantasy" to the novel's characters because it makes history hang on one stray strand of chance but nonetheless construes it as if it were fated to happen that way.[60] Bisson's treatment of the trope of the book-within-the-book reverses the process of mediation between realist and speculative narrative levels that obtains in alternate histories, where the credibility of the counterfactual divergence is measured against the norm of actual history. When one of the Nova African characters dismisses *John Brown's Body* with the comment, "That's why I don't like science fiction. It's always junk like that. I'll take the real world, thanks," the history familiar

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[57] Terry Bisson, *Fire on the Mountain* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 1988), 76.
[58] Ibid., 66, 75.   [59] Ibid., 115, 75, 76.   [60] Ibid., 113.

to the novel's readers is derealized and stripped of its aura of inevitability.[61] Consequently, the present is also revealed to be a provisional outcome rather than the only possible culmination of a progressive historical trajectory: as encapsulated in the novel's epigraph from Black Panther leader George Jackson, "The present, due to its staggering complexities, is almost as conjectural as the past."

The alternate history should be uniquely predisposed to reveal the conjectural nature of the present, thanks to the genre's basic premise of dislocating historical certainties by way of counterfactual speculation. Alternate histories of the Civil War seek to reckon with a present conjuncture that scholars have characterized as a period of dramatic racial realignment, in which assertions about the declining import of racism were mobilized to delegitimize race-based public policies. Even the more politically quietist Civil War alternate historians counter the overtly reactionary currents of the time by highlighting the persistence of racism in the post-civil rights decades, in fact centralizing it as the source of counterfactual divergence. The novels of Harrison, Jakes, and Turtledove distance themselves from the backlash against the civil rights movement by identifying it with white supremacists who espouse militant racism. However, when the racial backlash of the post-civil rights period is framed in this way, as a matter of individual bigotry restricted to an extremist fringe, what gets obscured is the extent to which right-wing ideology infiltrated the mainstream of political discourse during this period of "liberal retreat" from racial justice and equality.[62] In this climate of political retrenchment, slavery emerged as an intense object of investment for the American literary-historical imagination. Rendered either as ancient history or as "an injury that has yet to cease happening,"[63] slavery was marshaled in support of contending claims about the continuing significance of race. As I have argued here, most alternate histories of the Civil War construe slavery as a decisively closed chapter of US history, thereby delivering a reassuring view of the racial order of the post-civil rights present as the completion of a redemptive trajectory launched by the Emancipation Proclamation. The counterexamples of Ward Moore, Terry Bisson, and James Morrow maximize the dissonance between the genre's actual and counterfactual dimensions, forcing the history of slavery into anachronistic simultaneity with the present even as

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[61] Ibid., 144.

[62] I am echoing the titles of two important books about the racial realignment of American liberalism in this period: Stephen Steinberg's *Turning Back*; and Adolph Reed Jr., ed., *Without Justice for All: The New Liberalism and Our Retreat from Racial Equality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

[63] Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101, 4 (2002), 757–77, 772.

they refuse to equate the racial inequality of the post-civil rights period with slavery. As these texts demonstrate, alternate histories of the Civil War fulfill their critical promise when they contest the deep Truth of slave emancipation that shores up presentist consensus narratives about the inherently progressive arc of US racial history.

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