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Jonathan Lethem's Genre Evolutions

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This article proceeds from the observation that all of Lethem's novels subvert traditional genres in some way, and argues that the way genres mutate or evolve reflects one of his central ethical concerns – evolution itself. Many of the characters in *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) are "evolved animals" that have undergone "evolution therapy" and can now talk, walk upright, and carry weapons. As the narrator Metcalf observes, these animals are characteristically reluctant to acknowledge their animal lineage. Here one sees evolution's contradiction: it purports to be progress, but is also a melancholic forgetting of origins. In a world where a drug called Forgettol abstracts people from their own memories, it is the detective's job, though he is despised for it, to continue asking questions and remind people of shared culpability and connected narratives. Metcalf, this paper suggests, is engaged in a struggle to maintain the novel *as* detective fiction, to resist the encroaching sci-fi elements which symbolize the death of community through increasing dependence on an unethical science of forgetting. *Amnesia Moon* (1995) depicts a postapocalyptic America in which the typical "evolutionary" reaction to the unspecified catastrophe is a retreat into a blinkered regionalism which, like Forgettol or evolution therapy, encourages the individual to forget any sense of wider responsibility. The article concludes with reflections on literary influence and the evolution of Lethem's own work in subsequent novels.

"Of course it's weird," said Don. "That's why we love it, right Paul? It's from another dimension, it's fucking weird, it's science fiction."[1]

What do you get if you cross detection and science fiction? What do you call someone who looks like a baby but behaves like an adult? And what happens when a human being is crossed with a kangaroo? The punchlines are all to be found in Jonathan Lethem's novels, and they are only partially comic. This article proceeds from an initial, broad observation that Jonathan Lethem's novels and short stories subvert established fictional genres in some way, and that the frequent intermingling of genres is reflected in the bizarre characteristics displayed by many of the characters. For example, "Light and the Sufferer" is a gritty urban drama of fraternal bonding, drug addiction and robbery which just happens to feature mysterious aliens following the main

[1] Jonathan Lethem, "Light and the Sufferer," in *idem*, *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye*, 1996 (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 94.

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characters. *The Fortress of Solitude* disrupts a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age narrative by investing some of the neighbourhood Brooklyn kids with superheroic powers. *As She Climbed across the Table* is billed as a "campus comedy," yet allows science fiction to infiltrate its witty satire on academic life. *Girl in Landscape* is a western set in space and introduces traditional frontier loners to alien races.

Even leaving aside Lethem's aversion to "bankrupt categories,"[2] it can of course be argued that any genre is necessarily an unstable or flexible category, a volatile mixture of repeated, conventional elements and the variations that provide an individual text with a sense of identity. Scholars such as Margaret Cohen, in "Traveling Genres," have argued just this: genre, she argues, is not simply an inert literary category, but "enables discussion of the social dimension of poetics." "Genres that travel," she continues, "have flexibility and play, offering a way to negotiate cultural differences" at a national and, as I will suggest, a regional level.[3] Rick Altman, in *Film/Genre*, goes further. While there is a common assumption that genres "have clear, stable identities and borders," Altman argues, such an assumption invariably masks ideological or political views. The maintenance of clearly delineated genres helps shore up critical or disciplinary positions. Thus "genres are never entirely neutral categories. They – and their critics and theorists – always participate and further the work of various institutions."[4] Of particular relevance to my argument is Altman's refutation of the idea that genres are "transhistorical," that they can "be lifted out of time and placed in a timeless holding area as if they were all contemporaries." Once again, such an idea stems from a desire to make a historically defined theoretical or critical perspective appear universal and definitive. Yet "there is no place outside of history from which purely 'theoretical' definitions of genre might be made."[5] Genres evolve and mutate, and their critical reception is historically determined. The reader of Lethem's fiction sees genres interacting and

[2] Elizabeth Gaffney, "Jonathan Lethem: Breaking the Boundaries Between Genres," *Publishers Weekly*, 30 (March 1998), 50–51, 50. Andrew Hoberek, in his recent introduction to the special number of *Twentieth-Century Literature* entitled "After Postmodernism," argues that Lethem does not indulge in postmodern "appropriation of popular genres" by more "literary" forms, but treats genres as serious literature in themselves. Thus he also breaks down the categories of "high" and "low" art. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53, 3 (Fall 2007), 238.

[3] Margaret Cohen, "Traveling Genres," *New Literary History*, 34, 3 (2003), 481–99, 481, 484.

[4] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 16, 12.

[5] Ibid., 19, 9.

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changing over time, in the process of reading, and is forced to consider the historical and political circumstances contributing to these changes.

What is particularly interesting about Lethem's idiosyncratic treatment of shifting genre, notably in the novels I examine here – *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) and *Amnesia Moon* (1995) – is first its evident self-consciousness. What I mean by this, specifically, is that genre functions both for protagonist and reader as a form of cognitive mapping (to employ an evolutionary term I return to presently). In providing templates or simulation models for human behaviour, genre becomes a means of orienting oneself in geographical, ethical and literary space. Quite simply, one knows roughly how to behave when the generic boundaries, allowing for original elements, are clear. The problem for character and reader is that in Lethem the boundaries are almost never clear.

As a result, hints of self-consciousness about generic conventions (and the disruption of those conventions) can be found throughout Lethem's work.[6] For example, at one point during *Gun, with Occasional Music*, the narrator reflects on "the actuality of the violence" which erupts through the smart-aleck dialogue: "Violence isn't part of the ping-pong game of wisecrack and snappy comeback," he says; "it puts an end to all that and leaves you wishing you'd stayed in or under the bed that morning."[7] The disorientation the reader may feel at Lethem's generic mixing in these novels therefore mirrors the characters' experiences as their personal schemata become obsolete in what one might call "postmodern" environments. (These are environments which are, for the sake of argument, media-saturated, driven by technology and the market, commodifying, heterogeneous and fragmentary.) As Joseph Carroll argues, "The desire to construct reliable cognitive maps assumes unmistakable prominence in a period of serious cultural disorientation."[8] But as I shall argue, Lethem is as

[6] Another example would be the constant references to detective clichés made by Lionel Essrog in *Motherless Brooklyn*. In a 1998 interview with Fiona Kelleghan, Lethem elaborates on this self-consciousness: "I think that I have a propensity or weakness for writing metafictionally about genre. All of my stories tend to be, at one level, interrogations of the genre they inhabit. Since most of my work is fantastic in some sense, I'm usually asking questions at some level, often subconsciously or automatically, about what happens to a given story when a fantastic element intrudes into it, and this becomes a parallel interrogation into the question of what happens to human existence when fantastic elements intrude." "Private Hells and Radical Doubts: An Interview with Jonathan Lethem," *Science Fiction Studies*, 25, 2 (July 1998), available at http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/letheminterview.htm.

[7] Jonathan Lethem, *Gun, with Occasional Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 57. Subsequent references are by page number in the text.

[8] Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 387.

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much afraid of scientific, taxonomic impulses such as those exemplified by the literary critic and rabid anti-post-structuralist Carroll as he is the potential chaos of dismantled categories.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is a close connection between genre stylistics and the narrative preoccupations of Lethem's first two novels. In this essay I argue that the way in which genres intermingle and *evolve* in his work, ultimately achieving a kind of unstable hybridity, is consistent with the author's interest in evolution itself as a scientific, ethical and political standpoint. I focus on three key interlinked themes: evolution, amnesia and regionalism, demonstrating that Lethem tends to approach evolution as an adaptive process ironically, and that evolution is therefore not viewed as progressive, but frequently as a retreat into deliberate amnesia or denial of history, coupled with an increasingly atomized and parochial world view.

In each text, it is the ascendance of science fiction tropes which heralds the radical forgetfulness and narrowing of perspectives suffered by the characters. Therefore science fiction occupies a contradictory position: it is the common endpoint of an evolutionary trajectory of genre that simultaneously reveals its own ethical and literary inadequacies. It should be stressed once again that Lethem's attitude towards genre is in no way rigid or hierarchical: his concern is precisely that when hierarchies do get constructed for political ends, when for example a sci-fi obsession with advanced technologies and scientific development begins to take precedence within society, seemingly old-fashioned concepts like "community" and "freedom" are fatally compromised.

Ostensibly, Lethem might appear to set up a classic (and naive) opposition between the literary – that which is ambiguous, contested, questioning – and the scientific – that which delimits, avoids equivocality, seeks answers. However, even these categories eventually become destabilized, especially in his third novel, *As She Climbed across the Table* (1997). In fact, Lethem is at pains to present the complex relationship between science and literature in a far more nuanced way than a theorist such as Joseph Carroll in his mammoth polemic *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995). Carroll's book belongs to a venerable critical tradition, a pivotal contributor being Ferdinand Brunetière with his *L'Evolution des genres* (1890–94), which draws on Linnaean and Darwinian classificatory models to label and fix the boundaries of genre. As Rick Altman says, such work aims to prove that genres "operate systematically, that their internal functioning can be observed and systematically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory."[9] It also

[9] Altman, 6.

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represents an attempt to make a historically determined scientific viewpoint seem universal and timeless, as I have mentioned. Moreover, such work maintains a naive distinction between the scientific and the literary precisely by its need to circumvent ambiguity and its faith in science's ability to do so.

For Lethem, science and literature are not mutually exclusive discourses. Evolution is a story unfolding in unpredictable ways; science creates space for literary interpretation or storytelling and is in itself a form of literature. Therefore it cannot pretend to objective "truth."[10] Joseph Carroll, impatient with rhetoricians who "insist that the laws of discourse take precedence over the laws of science," at least recognizes that literature itself constitutes, just as science does, a form of knowledge.[11] However, he fails to acknowledge that the reverse is also true: science deals in narrative speculation as well as knowledge. More damagingly, he chooses to ignore the ideological undercurrents of evolutionary theory and its more nefarious ramifications (notably eugenics[12]), and then proceeds to incorporate all literature into a biological evolutionary paradigm that reduces literary knowledge to a series of taxonomies. For instance:

> Protagonists can be motivated by any combination of the following purposes: the need (1) to define, develop, or integrate the self (psychodrama, *Bildungsroman*); (2) to find or fulfill sexual romance (love stories; quantitatively by far the largest category); (3) to protect or nurture a family or to establish a right relation of family functions (domestic dramas, for which *Oedipus Rex* is a classic prototype); (4) to found or reform a society or to protect or establish the protagonist's position within a given social structure (political drama, novel of society); (5) to define some peculiarly human ideal (heroic quests, cultural romance); (6) to live and thrive, to survive or come to terms with death (naturalist fiction; any work in which the author concentrates on man's animal nature); and (7) to achieve a religious vision or sense of cosmic order (religious and philosophical dramas).[13]

[10] Although the fantastic technological and scientific developments depicted in Lethem's stories tend to have a negative, stultifying effect, it is true that they also create a space for the narrative to emerge. This is especially true of *As She Climbed across the Table*, in which a group of physicists at a California university create a negative space, nicknamed "Lack," through which an alternative universe is created. Various academics, including the quite wonderfully parodic Georges De Tooth, the deconstructionist, compete to forge narratives that capture the true meaning of Lack. The narrator's girlfriend, Alice, ends up falling in love with it. In manufacturing a parallel campus universe (note the microcosmic provinciality of it all) comprised "only of the elements Alice found charming or harmless," Lack becomes merely a vessel for subjective, paranoid impositions of narrative. Jonathan Lethem, *As She Climbed across the Table* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 177. It is clear that this is Lethem's revisiting (or evolution) of *Alice through the Looking Glass*.

[11] Carroll, 31.

[12] See, for example, Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche, eds., *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880–1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complicity* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), 11.

[13] Carroll, 250–51.

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To recap my opening remarks: if Lethem's work illustrates anything, it is that human life is not readily amenable to the imposition of generic boundaries, and that even if genres do indeed offer a form of cognitive mapping, the vicissitudes of experience will eventually, and necessarily, redraft those maps. Although Carroll acknowledges the complex interrelations between the genres listed above, there is surely the risk of placing even more emphasis on forms of discourse than those critics he savages for denying a reality beyond the text. Literature does indeed reflect human experience, but such categorizing risks an inadvertent inversion: human experience can best be described through textual species. Carroll merits close attention, if only for his unblushing adherence to what he calls the "truth" of science;[14] for his bludgeoning collective dismissal of thinkers as diverse as Fredric Jameson, Richard Rorty, Terry Eagleton and Jacques Derrida; and for his remarkable equation of queer theory with a postmodernist conspiracy to rob the world of material reality and replace it with autogenous text.[15] In the words of Philip Engstrand, the narrator of *As She Climbed across the Table*, he truly has "[p]aradigm eyes."[16] The following remarks demonstrate that Lethem's texts at least approach evolution – as a scientific, ethical and literary concept and as a way of reflecting on Lethem's own development as an artist – with somewhat more maturity and inclusiveness than this.

Lethem's debut novel *Gun, with Occasional Music*, if one is to believe the blurb, is a scintillating stylistic marriage of Philip K. Dick's dystopian visions and Raymond Chandler's literary detective fiction. The protagonist, Conrad Metcalf, is unmistakably a gumshoe wisecracker in the Philip Marlowe mould:

> By this time we'd gotten the attention of Mr. Suit. He put down his magazine and stood up, rubbing his jaw with his big beefy hand as if considering the possible juxtaposition of jaw and hand; mine and his, specifically. (*Gun* 14)

Somewhere on the West Coast, Conrad is investigating the death of a former client, a doctor called Maynard Stanhunt, on behalf of the chief suspect Orton Angwine. There is nothing especially unconventional in this. Yet the maelstrom of corruption, violence and sexual intrigue which ensues, involving some deeply unpleasant gangsters as well as the "Inquisitors," a futuristic police force intent on controlling the state, throws up characters one would not normally expect to find in a detective narrative. Chief amongst these are Joey, the talking, gun-wielding kangaroo assassin, and Barry the "babyhead."

[14] Ibid., 5. [15] Ibid., 166. [16] Lethem, *As She Climbed*, 80.

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How these two outlandish individuals have come to be, and how they might disrupt the trajectory of the detective narrative, are central to understanding the text's ethical orientation. With another nod to generic self-consciousness, Conrad reveals Barry and Joey's provenance:

> The streets were a bit too quiet for my taste; I would have liked it better to see kids playing in front, running, shouting, even asking each other innocent questions and giving innocent answers back. That's the way it was before the babyheads, before the scientists decided it took too long to grow a kid and started working on ways to speed up the process. Dr. Twostrand's evolution therapy was the solution they hit on; the same process they'd used to make all the animals stand upright and talk. They turned it on the kids, and the babyheads were the happy result. Another triumph for modern science, and nice quiet streets in the bargain. (*Gun* 18)

One consequence of the mysterious Dr. Twostrand's therapy is that, for the detective, the streets no longer seem mean enough; they have, in fact, ceased to feel alive at all. His natural environment has been stripped of the idle talk that so often provides the detective with answers.

If any one character has stayed mean, it is Joey the kangaroo. It is illuminating to treat Conrad and Joey's relationship as the central agon of the text. Not only does the kangaroo's participation in several murderous episodes drive the narrative forward, leading to the eventual showdown between detective and marsupial baddie, but it is also made clear that these antagonists embody two contrasting epistemological standpoints that are crucial to Lethem's ethical concerns. (In fact, the opposition is much starker in *Gun, with Occasional Music* than in subsequent novels.) The following exchange, taken from the first meeting between Conrad and Joey, is illustrative of the key differences:

> "Don't play human with me, Joey. I've got the same privilege with you as anybody has with a kangaroo. Who sent you?"
>
> In case I forgot about the gun he stuck it in my gut. Like so many of the evolved, he didn't like being reminded of his lineage. (*Gun* 56)

Initially, it should be noted that Joey's attempts to "play human" reveal a fundamental misconception about evolution itself. As Chris Colby contends, "One common mistake is believing that species can be arranged on an evolutionary ladder from bacteria through 'lower' animals, to 'higher' animals and, finally, up to man."[17] In fact, there are significant passages in *On the Origin of Species*, notably one in which he alludes to "our ignorance of the precise cause of the slight analogous difference between species," where

[17] Chris Colby, "Introduction to Evolutionary Biology," *Talk Origins*, 16 Sept. 2006, available at http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/faq-intro-to-biology.html.

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Darwin is happy to compare "differences between the races of man" with, for example, the propensity of cattle of a certain colour to be pestered by flies.[18] In *The Descent of Man* he is famously more explicit: "there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties."[19] Apart from factitiously privileging man in essence, rather than simply as an organism adept at adapting to and imposing upon its environment, the belief in the "evolutionary ladder" is implicated in the melancholic tendencies Joey exemplifies. Attendant upon his aspiration to be human is the desire, which Conrad recognizes, to deny lineage, to erase history.

Evolution here is a form of willed forgetting, combined with a desire to bring the future forward more quickly,and it is epitomized by the sci-fi ingredients of the story. It betrays a melancholic fixation on the futuristic present, despite the ghostly physical evidence of the "past" animal body. Another example would be the babyheads Conrad encounters in the bar later in the novel, drinking themselves to death "to counteract the unpleasant side effects of the evolution therapy" (*Gun* 145), trying to forget themselves even as they are dressed absurdly in toddlers' clothes and smoking cigarettes. Most importantly, this forgetting stands in direct contrast to the avowed aim of the detective. Throughout the narrative, Conrad is referred to, seldom admiringly, as a "question asker" (*Gun* 147). Questions have, of course, always been the primary weapon in the detective's armoury, but in this increasingly sci-fi-inflected environment, conducive to individual and collective forgetting, the need to uncover past connections, to re-establish a sense of community in the face of increasing isolationism, becomes essential.

In a neat inversion of Joey's anthropomorphism, Conrad's honest appraisal of himself as "the creature who asked questions, the lowest creature of them all" (*Gun* 130), reveals the dread and antipathy the population has developed towards the detective function. The detective, as someone who carries "the weight of the past like ballast, something only I was stupid enough to keep carrying" (*Gun* 234), strives for a sense of connection, ethical responsibility and collective narrative in the face of atomization. Appalled by the "disconnected creatures pass[ing] through the blackness, towards solitary destinations," Conrad is "stupid enough to think there was something wrong with the silence that had fallen like a gloved hand onto the bare throat of the city" (*Gun* 130).

[18] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. Joseph Carroll (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003), 219.

[19] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 1, 35.

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Obviously, it is not at all unusual for science fiction to offer dystopian visions. What is interesting here is that the detective tries to maintain classic, romantic hard-boiled genre values in the face of the sci-fi elements – artificially evolved animals, anti-gravity pens, the state-sanctioned accounting and docking of citizens' "karma" (*Gun* 33) – which repudiate his efforts. Ultimately, the unravelling of the case hinges on another such element – the drug called (making the point explicitly) Forgettol. The novel's "twist" hinges on the discovery that the victim, Maynard Stanhunt, actually orders his own hit. His excessive consumption of Forgettol has caused a radical bifurcation of his personality, such that his professional self cannot even remember that his private self is enjoying an elicit affair in a motel with a woman named Celeste. Tragically, the professional self takes out a successful contract on the private self, with Joey the kangaroo as hitman.

Not only does this scenario represent a narcotically enhanced rehearsal of the Calvinist split self, it also points to an underlying paradox operative both narratively and metanarratively, namely that despite the detective's old-fashioned craving for the facts and thus for communal culpability for past events, it is the radical act of forgetting which creates the very narrative in which Conrad Metcalf is involved. Indeed, Forgettol, if the chemist's analysis is to be believed, can potentially be used as a narrative drug:

> "Anytime you try to regulate Forgettol, it's a delicate balancing act. Someday they'll work it out, but they haven't yet." He smiled a funny smile. "If he's doing it right, he can eradicate whole portions of his experience with the make, then sew up the gap for a sense of continuity." (*Gun* 106)

As he says, "a sense of continuity" can be achieved if the correct balance between amnesia and memory is found. Discomfiting elements can be strategically rejected in favour of the comforts of concatenation. It appears, then, that narrative is a combination of remembering and forgetting, and that the assumed purity of the detective's drive for recollection is in fact no more palatable than the denial practised by the artificially evolved.

Yet the real problem is, as the chemist recognizes, that forgetting cannot and should not be controlled in this way. Moreover, Lethem has created a fictional world where it is the state that increasingly attempts to control it through manipulation of technology, in order effectively to relax society's critical faculties and disable resistance or freethinking. Evolution therapy is one aspect of this. Mass produced Forgettol is another: later in the novel, after Conrad has spent six years in suspended animation ("the freeze") for reaching zero karma points (*Gun* 211), the drug "makery" has become completely mechanized (*Gun* 239) and the time-release version of the drug, which completely obliterates memory, is now the most commonly used

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(*Gun* 216). Indeed, the detective leaves the freeze after six years to find a world more recognizably imbued with the qualities of science fiction than ever before. Most telling of all are the little boxes everyone seems to own which have supplanted recollection. Conrad attempts to interview again several of the people involved in the case, only to find them stripped of integral memory, obliged instead to consult the electronic box for their "memories." Memory itself has become abstracted, "externalized, and rigorously edited" (*Gun* 224). Thus the population is condemned to the numbing drudgery of an eternal present, free to listen to the muzak "which was sure to be coming out of the nearest water fountain or cigarette machine" (*Gun* 224) and divested of the potentially unsettling cognitive maps memory might supply in order to inspire resistance. The ending of the novel is resigned and pessimistic: once the case has been "cracked," Conrad too looks forward to the anaesthetic pleasures of time-release Forgettol.

Gun, with Occasional Music begins as a noir detective novel with elements of science fiction, and evolves into a dystopian sci-fi text, which has rendered the ethical and literary aspirations of the detective obsolete. Consequently, the narrative trajectory describes a retreat into atemporality and solipsism. Evolution is depicted not as a process whereby living organisms adapt their physical and cognitive faculties to suit their environments, but as one of many techniques, along with the administration of drugs and the seductions of consumerism, for detaching the individual completely from his or her environment and a sense of collective responsibility. Similarly, imaginative use is made of scientific knowledge in order to demonstrate that if one is not careful, all narrative runs the risk of becoming science fiction in the end. Science fiction in this novel is what results when an ideologically charged sense of individual sovereignty overwhelms individual rights. An overly enthusiastic acceptance of Darwin's optimistic evolutionary prediction, that "all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection,"[20] results in its antithesis – social breakdown and withdrawal into a numb individualism. In Lethem's terms, the individual's drive to perfectibility, based largely on "technological opportunities," suggests "a search for zipless transcendence which [is] usually a mistake."[21]

As its title would suggest, *Amnesia Moon* is also a novel about the dangers of mass forgetting. And again, it offers an amalgam of generic forms, this time fusing the road narrative with science fiction dystopia. It takes place in a postapocalyptic America but denies both protagonist and reader any knowledge of the exact nature of the cataclysmic event. Various theories are

[20] Darwin, *Origin*, 397.

[21] Kelleghan, "Private Hells."

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propounded – alien attack and nuclear accident, to mention but two – but the true significance lies not in what happened but in the consequences of, and reactions to, the unnamed event. Indeed, what links the multifarious idiosyncratic individuals in *Amnesia Moon* is the fact that in lieu of any hard facts about the event, they have all "made a tradeoff. They've exchanged freedom and awareness for some kind of organizing principle or explanation."[22] It is a novel in part about the political capital which can be made from fear and ignorance, and again genre evolutions (or mutations) prove to be integral.

To offer a brief synopsis: our hero is a man named Chaos (Lethem is seldom shy about using heavily allegorical names) who, when the novel begins, is living in a disused multiplex cinema in Wyoming. After an altercation with the local self-appointed tribal leader, Kellogg, who appears to be able to control Chaos's dreams, Chaos hits the road in a stolen car and heads out west to California with a young girl named Melinda, in a bid to discover his pre-apocalyptic identity.

Melinda may or may not be Chaos's daughter. It is worth remarking that his possible paternity is marginally less interesting than the fact Melinda is covered in smooth, shiny "brown fur" and resembles a seal.[23] Her bodily modification is aesthetically rather pleasing, which is more than can be said for some of the other mutants in Hatfork, Wyoming. Neatly invalidating a weak evolutionary concept of man as the pinnacle of biological adaptation, Lethem depicts a world in which, as Chaos observes, "The animal kingdom is dead" (*Moon* 5), so that the almost logical outcome is the diversification of human physical forms (and genres) into different subspecies. In this, Lethem's early work displays distinct similarities with the novels of the British science fiction writer and social satirist Jeff Noon, especially his *Vurt* trilogy.[24]

The second thing to note is the archetypically American character of the journey through the wilderness, the "journey west" (*Moon* 149). Not only does it echo the move from East to West Lethem himself made aged eighteen (of which more in due course), but it forces us within the textual arena of mutation and accelerated evolution to reflect that the westward expansion so integral to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis has itself a

[22] Ibid.

[23] Jonathan Lethem, *Amnesia Moon* (Orlando: Harvest, 1995), 30. Subsequent references are by page number in the text.

[24] The hero of *Pollen* (1995), for example, is a black cab driver called Coyote – half man, half Dalmatian, but all cool. Jeff Noon, *Pollen* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995); *idem*, *Vurt* (Manchester: Ringpull Press, 1993).

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form of evolutionary thrust. The creation of a kind of national species, characterized by "dominant individualism, working for good and for evil," is its most devout wish.[25] If it is a thesis ably challenged by the new western historians such as Brian W. Dippie and Patricia Limerick, who propose a US constituted by regions of distinct personality, Lethem takes this idea yet again to its almost logical conclusion. For in *Amnesia Moon*'s landscape of fear and confusion, regionalism becomes a parochialism so narrow in its perspective that the citizens of California are barely even aware of the existence of Wyoming, or "Little America," let alone these other regions' distinct reactions to the apocalyptic event. For example, in Vacaville, California, Chaos notices that in the magazines the "cover stories were all about the television and the government, even when they were versions of magazines like *Time* and *Rolling Stone* and *Playboy*, which Chaos knew from before. Nothing referred to anything outside Vacaville" (*Moon* 98). Another character remarks to Chaos, "I'm sure you've noticed how local things can get nowadays" (*Moon* 139). Indeed, the primary result of the cataclysmic event is this parochialism, especially in California, and it is a narrowing of perspectives the state government officials (who double as the television and film stars in heroic action films and romances) actively encourage. This is not a classic American regionalism balancing, as Tom Lutz expresses it, "local and larger perspectives," it is a deliberate form of atomization and hence control.[26]

Memory – of a past when one's identity comprised not only pride in local colour but also a wider civic responsibility – is the victim once again. To exacerbate this loss, the California state government forces people to take different jobs every day and to move twice a week. Quite simply, there is not enough time to accumulate meaningful memories. Like the sci-fi environment of *Gun, with Occasional Music*, this California relies on the melancholy of the banal, eternal present. Even Chaos acknowledges that his apparent ability to hold on to some of his memories might be a trick of locality:

> Here in Vacaville he had managed to hold onto his previous identity, his memories of Hatfork and his trip west. He felt a certain pride in that. He wanted to believe he was getting stronger, building up an immunity to local effects, and Vacaville obviously had its share of changes. Chaos didn't remember much, but he knew people shouldn't have to move twice a week and work a different job every day. Or have their luck tested.

[25] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 40.

[26] Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 192.

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> On the other hand, the effect was milder here. The Vacaville equivalents to Kellogg and Elaine – the government stars – lived in the media instead of invading dreams. And you could always turn the television off. So maybe his ability to hold onto his old self was just a part of local conditions. (*Moon* 99–100)

And he can never be sure whether these memories are real at all, or simply oneiric illusions. What is clear is that even regional identity is merely a media effect.

This might all simply be a familiar satire on the widely perceived provincialism of much of Middle America, as well as the vacuity of media-saturated politics. It can even be interpreted as highlighting the inherent absurdity in mythical American notions of newness, the forgetting of the Old World as one moves out west to forge a new identity. Most of all, however, it is important to emphasize the broader political and ethical connotations. These are most lucidly, if ironically, revealed through the paranoid fantasies of one of the incidental characters, a soldier called Vance. He has a particularly outlandish theory about the cataclysmic event: "Vance waved his hand impatiently. 'Listen: why do you think the world got broken up? *Because the aliens landed*. It was a defensive response, an evolutionary step. Reality shattered to isolate the hives'" (*Moon* 181, original emphasis). Even if the alien theory is false, the defensive reaction it postulates is significant and strangely prescient, when one considers some of the consequences of 9/11. Evolution is, as in *Gun, with Occasional Music*, a form of retreat into blinkered perspectives even as the idea of progress it promulgates represents a return to grand narratives. It is certainly evidence of adaptive facility in the face of fear, confusion and a destabilized cultural, political (and generic) environment, but its outcomes are isolation, and thus division and rule. Lethem is not, I think, extolling the virtues of a nationalist perspective instead, so much as he is warning against a regionalism which remains unaware of the exquisite tension between differing regional and cultural identities necessary to sustain a sense of identity in the first place. The urban regionalism of *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Fortress of Solitude*, to which I refer later, comes much closer to such a sophisticated outlook.

I would like now to open out some of the evolutionary ideas discussed in relation to *Gun, with Occasional Music* and *Amnesia Moon* and speculate, as it were, on the evolution of Lethem's later work. Lethem has not yet attracted a great deal of critical attention,[27] and my intention here is to provide some

[27] Much of the work has been on *Motherless Brooklyn*. See, for example, Bennett Kravitz, "The Culture of Disease or the Dis-ease of Culture in *Motherless Brooklyn* and *Eve's Apple*," *Journal of American Culture*, 26, 2 (June 2003), 171–79. *Science Fiction Studies* has published a number of interviews and articles, which is ironic given Lethem's feelings about genre

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perspectives from which future scholarship, including my own, can proceed. First, it is curious that the kind of narcotic science fiction which characterizes these two novels and the one which followed – *As She Climbed across the Table* – was Lethem's chosen genre while living in California. After this he produced *Girl in Landscape* (1998), a science fiction coming-of-age narrative taking place mostly on a distant planet, but beginning in the near future with a family fleeing a Brooklyn blasted by the catastrophic effects of global warming. Lethem has admitted in interview that in these opening chapters "you're seeing me daring myself to open that box and really let it come"; that is, daring to reconnect with and portray elements of his Brooklyn past, including the death of his mother when he was fourteen. "For years," he admits, "I was overwhelmed by Brooklyn … The richness of my own upbringing was too much for me to contend with, either in my life or my writing, and so I was in a kind of flirtation."[28] Despite its interplanetary perspectives, *Girl in Landscape* reads much more like a regionalist text than the introspective parochialism of *Amnesia Moon*, though admittedly it is still an unconventional example. But its key themes are familiar from classic regionalist texts such as Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943): the encounter with and embracing of otherness (here in the form of extra-terrestrials called the Archbuilders), the establishment and maintenance in adversity of community values, and the rejection of repressive paternal authority.

When he eventually returned to Brooklyn, Lethem produced the more or less conventional detective novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (notwithstanding the narrator's Tourette's syndrome), followed by *The Fortress of Solitude*. Both were, as he has acknowledged, much more personal, candid pieces of work, couched in the geographical and cultural specificities of his birthplace. It appears that there is some inherent characteristic of Brooklyn which facilitates a regionalism based in genres more amenable to representing community – detection and coming-of-age, that is – and that the ironic distancing of the author's science fiction is a result of his earlier state of exile. It is, in essence, the initial step in the process of "[d]reaming my way back to

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pigeonholing. See, for example, Carl Abbott's "Homesteading on the Extraterrestrial Frontier," *Science Fiction Studies*, 32, 3 (July 2005), 240–64, which looks at *Girl in Landscape*. For links between Philip K. Dick and Lethem see Umberto Rossi, "From Dick to Lethem: The Dickian Legacy, Postmodernism, and Avant-Pop in Jonathan Lethem's *Amnesia Moon*," *Science Fiction Studies*, 29, 1 (March 2002), 15–33.

[28] Steven Zeitchik, "A Brooklyn of the Soul," interview with Jonathan Lethem, *Publishers Weekly*, 15 Sept. 2003, 37–38, 37.

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Brooklyn."[29] Lethem's work, somewhat ironically, reveals a more inclusive and humanistic outlook the closer it gets to a romanticized conception of "home": what might be regarded as atavism or nostalgic retreat is, in ethical terms, a form of evolution. Conversely, California simply appears too weird, too saturated with postmodern pastiche and alienation to write about without ironic distance.[30]

Second, one cannot study Jonathan Lethem without taking into account the question of literary influence. This, as Lisa Hopkins has observed, is an "example of evolutionary change" in itself.[31] Lethem is typically very explicit about his own influences:

> I sometimes use the word "exoskeleton" of plot or concept. With the first couple books, there was always an exoskeleton of concept, which I then filled with all sorts of ephemera, emotions, autobiographical feeling, jokes, and so forth. But there was always that exoskeleton of plot or concept: *Let's put Philip K. Dick and Raymond Chandler together*, or *Let's put Don DeLillo and Italo Calvino together* … I've always been very open about influence – not just in confessing it to others, but between me and myself.[32]

If one accepts that genre functions as a kind of shared cognitive map for protagonist and reader, one might also ask to what extent recapitulated literary ideas constitute cognitive maps, and how far they can be applied and adapted to new historical and cultural circumstances. Might Lethem's deliberate recognition of the enduring influence of certain literary tropes and stylistic devices in some way represent "the survival of the fittest" in terms of canon formation? In which case, intellectual heredity affirms the primacy of

[29] Robert Birnbaum, "Birnbaum v. Jonathan Lethem," *Morning News*, 7 Jan. 2004, available at http://www.themorningnews.com/archives/personalities/birnbaum_v_jonathan_lethem.php.

[30] Lethem's 2007 novel *You Don't Love Me Yet* bears out this assessment. It returns to California to satirize, among other areas of cultural endeavour, the indie music scene and conceptual art happenings. Its narrative, centring on a band which enjoys momentary success and then splits up due to internal relationship issues, is less about the importance of community than its inevitable breakdown in a society based on shallow, cannibalized, disposable culture. In a wry intertextual reference to Lethem's first California novel, there is a subplot involving a kangaroo suffering from ennui, which is rescued from the zoo by the band's lead singer and kept in his bath for several weeks.

[31] Lisa Hopkins, *Giants of the Past: Popular Fictions and the Idea of Evolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 35.

[32] "Jonathan Lethem Takes the Long Way Home," interview with Jonathan Lethem, *Powells*, 23 Sept. 2003, avcailable at http://www.powells.com/authors/lethem.html. Lethem's openness is taken to extremes in his article "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," *Harpers Magazine*, 314, 1881 (1 Feb. 2007), 59–71, in which he extols the virtues of creative stealing from other artists. Almost the entire article, it transpires, is itself constructed from a series of cleverly assembled plagriarisms.

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authorship as conceptual touchstone. Lethem thereby runs the risk of subscribing to paradigms of dominance in evolutionary theory, against which the novels themselves, as I have shown, appear to militate.[33]

Finally, one has to acknowledge, for all his literary allusiveness and reflexiveness, that mixing genres constitutes for Lethem not merely metafictional game-playing or an arch demonstration of cleverness. Rather, it addresses a fundamentally human question about how the individual behaves when confronted with alterity, with what is perceived as exotic or out of recognizable context. A story such as "Light and the Sufferer," for example, quite self-consciously introduces sci-fi elements to a realist urban tale. The "Sufferers," aliens who suddenly materialize as dogged yet silent companions at the side of humans in trouble, force the individuals concerned to question their own behaviour, as well as their attitudes to otherness and the possibility of external forces participating in their lives. As the author expresses it, "It's a story about interventions."[34] Lethem's treatment of genre takes the form of a series of interventions, designed to destabilize the cosy categories with which we orient ourselves, and the equally comfortable categories employed by scholars for their literary interventions.

[33] This adumbrates a certain conservatism which occasionally surfaces elsewhere in Lethem's novels: in *The Fortress of Solitude*, for example, the pivotal friendship between the dual-heritage Mingus Rude and the white Dylan Ebdus culminates in troubling divisions enacted at the formal level. Without wishing to provide too many spoilers, it is crucial to note that Dylan ends up as a successful music journalist and occasional first-person narrator of the novel itself, whereas Mingus ends up in prison, referred to only in the third person and by his graffiti tag, "DOSE." Thus the two forms of "writing" – journalism/the novel and graffiti – only serve to exacerbate the racial delineations in operation.

[34] Kelleghan, "Private Hells."

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