Disappearing the Future:
Memory Culture and Dystopia in Elliott Hall's
The Rapture

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Abstract   In the last few years, the fields of utopian studies and memory studies have independently developed an interest in how a concern with the past can inform the imagining of alternative futures. Both fields have interrogated the present possibility of utopian projects that look beyond the confines of the current socioeconomic order, a possibility that has been under pressure since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Elliott Hall's dystopian noir thriller *The Rapture* (2010), which is part of his Strange trilogy, offers an acute diagnosis of the difficulties besetting the mobilization of memory for a utopian future. At the same time, the novel shows that one particular element in the discourse of memory studies, the notion of "trauma," can play a vital role in restoring the conditions under which the utopian imagination can flourish again.

Keywords   cultural memory, dystopian fiction, future, utopia

1. Introduction: The Juncture of Cultural Memory Studies and Utopian Studies

Since the 1980s the study of group memory has figured prominently on academic agendas both in the humanities and in the social sciences.[1] Centering on the notions of "collective memory" (coined by Maurice Halbwachs [1992] in the 1920s) and "cultural memory" (introduced by Jan Assmann [2008]), the field of cultural memory studies has mainly explored the ways

1. For excellent introductions to the field of memory studies, see Erll 2008, 2011.

group memories are formed and transmitted in sociocultural contexts. While the study of memorial practices is often inspired by a concern for justice in the representation and recognition of cultural difference (Rothberg 2009: 19 – 21), scholars of cultural memory have recently begun to worry whether a focus on the past does not disable a commitment to a better future. Already in 1993 the historian Charles S. Maier (1993: 150) remarked that "the surfeit of memory . . . testifies to the loss of a future orientation." In 2003 the cultural and literary critic Andreas Huyssen (2003: 2) opened an authoritative survey of contemporary memory practices by noting in a similar vein that widely shared cultural concerns over group memory (in academic circles but also in the political and cultural arena) conceal "a fundamental crisis in our imag- ining of the future." For Huyssen, "At a time when an avalanche of [both academic and nonacademic] memory discourses seems to have overwhelmed an earlier activist imagination of the future" that still existed in the 1960s and the 1970s, it is important that scholars and political and cultural actors "actu- ally do remember the future and try to envision alternatives to the current status quo" (6).

In 2010 two collections of essays indirectly heeded Huyssen's call. In his introduction to *The Future of Memory* Richard Crownshaw echoes Huyssen's diagnosis when he writes that "the future of memory studies entails remem- bering what a better future might look like" and how it might be "different from the remembered catastrophes of the past and their legacies in the pres- ent," to which cultural memory studies customarily restricts itself (Crown- shaw et al. 2010: 3). The editors of *Memory and the Future*, for their part, register a concern "that memory itself—and the ways in which it is deployed, invoked and utilized—can potentially hinder efforts to move forward" (Gutman et al. 2010: 1). If scholars of cultural memory studies want to arrive at a better understanding of how group memory works and how it can be mobilized for change in the present, they need to understand "the influence of the future— as imagined and desired by individuals and groups—on how the past is remembered, interpreted and dealt with and vice versa" (ibid.). The issue is not a zero-sum game in which we need to return to the future what the past has taken from it; it is rather the task of arriving at an articulation of past and future in which memory and desire interact with (rather than hinder) each other. The problem, as Maier (1993: 150) suggests, is not with memory as such but with the unbalanced way we currently imagine the relation between past and future. In Huyssen's (2003: 6) words, agents of memory concerned with justice "need both past and future to articulate [their] political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world."

These developments in the field of cultural memory studies signal at least two things: the current paucity of successful mobilizations of memory for the

imagining of a better future and the persistent ambition—of the editors of the two collections mentioned, of Huyssen and Maier, and of a significant subset of cultural memory scholars—to achieve such mobilizations. While the continued profession of the desire to remain attached to the past is easy enough to understand in a discipline nominally dedicated to memory, its fairly recent emergence in the field of utopian studies—a development I outline below— suggests that the perceived imbalance between past and future and the desire to redress that imbalance have broader implications for contemporary critical practice. In the study of utopia, it is customary to locate a turn away from the imagining of a better future in the 1980s—not coincidentally also the decade in which the study of memory began to flourish—to a more indirect questioning of the status quo by, for instance, imagining a *worse* future as the dystopian outcome of current conditions (Jameson 2005; Moylan 2000). This so-called dystopian turn is still felt to constrain the power to imagine a better future today (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 2–3).[2] Because of the conservative backlash in British and American politics in the 1980s and the dire effects of economic globalization, it has become increasingly harder for artists, writers, critics, and scholars alike to imagine credible scenarios for actualizing alternatives to the status quo. This does not mean that the desire for such a future alternative has entirely disappeared in these constituencies (dystopias are not always anti-utopian, as they often appeal to the present audience's willingness to change the current state of things) but rather that it increasingly takes the form of dystopian critique rather than utopian imagining. As Tom Moylan (2000: 106) notes, dystopian literature since the 1980s "at its best reached toward Utopia not by delineating fully detailed better places but by dropping in on decidedly worse places and tracking the moves of a dystopian citizen as she or he becomes aware of the social hell." In this way dystopian literature "contends with that diabolic place while moving toward a better alternative," even if this better alternative is not systematically spelled out.

The "critical dystopias"[3] written in the late twentieth century by writers like Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), Octavia Butler (*Parable of the Sower*), and Ursula Le Guin (*The Telling*) illustrate this increasingly indirect imagining of better futures. Such works emphatically do not reflect an anti-utopian sentiment but rather depict "a negatively deformed future of our

2. The fields of utopian and cultural memory studies have almost never been explicitly linked. Raffaella Baccolini (2007: 167) notes that the link between memory and utopia has been "largely ignored." Baccolini's (2003, 2007) own work on dystopia is an exception, as is Geoghegan 1990.
3. Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) coined the term in 1973. While the term is an important part of the vocabulary of utopian studies, it has attracted repeated attempts at redefinition. See Cavalcanti 2003: 48; Fitting 2003: 156; Moylan 2000: xv. See also Baccollini and Moylan's (2003) definition discussed in this essay.

own world" (Baccolini 2003: 115) to serve as "a prophetic vehicle . . . for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in [the dystopian world]" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 1–2). These novels are therefore, in the words of Moylan (2000: 150), explicitly "concerned with [their] own conditions of production and reception." Dystopian fiction has to convince its audience of the *urgency* of its prophetic warning, which is to say, of the fact that the freedom to critique sociopolitical tendencies is on the brink of being overtaken by these very tendencies. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for example, the depiction of a totalitarian theocratic society alerts contemporary readers to the erosion of civil liberties in the present. Dystopian fiction presupposes that the present in which it intervenes is meaningfully connected to the "iron cages" it projects into the future.

Raffaella Baccolini and Moylan (2003: 7) note that contemporary dystopian fiction provides a space for critical thinking and action "*within* the work" rather than only "maintain[ing] utopian hope *outside* their pages." Many classic twentieth-century dystopias appealed to their readers' reactions to the dystopian spectacle they were offered. For the characters in, for instance, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1950 [1949]) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (2006 [1932]), there is no hope for improvement, as they find themselves crushed by an authoritarian state. More recent dystopian fiction, in contrast, does leave room for a measure of hope for the characters *in* the worlds it depicts. It holds open the possibility of subversive action that, in light of the genre's characteristic self-reflexivity, can be read as an echo of the genre's own critical work. After all, if critique and subversive action are even possible in the totalitarian future that dystopias typically depict, then surely contemporary critique need not be fatally hamstrung by its anxieties about its own critical powers.

Critical dystopia's concerns about its critical powers resonate with the developments in the field of cultural memory studies I discussed above. What makes the connections between the two fields even more striking is the observation that, even as scholars of memory studies worry whether they can contribute to the imagining of a better future, the "more open and critical" future-oriented dimension of late twentieth-century critical dystopias is often paradoxically attempted by recourse to the work of memory (Baccolini 2003: 114; see also Baccolini 2007: 166–67). In Le Guin's *Telling* (2000), for instance, the protagonist travels to a planet dominated by science and consumerism, where the only hope for change is located in the books and historical treasures preserved by a clandestine culture (Baccolini 2003: 122–23). The motif of a subversive attachment to a threatened past is perhaps most familiar from Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451* (2012 [1953]), in

which an exiled group of book lovers has memorized books that are no longer tolerated in the dystopian world. Generalizing from such examples, Baccolini (2003: 130) writes that in contemporary dystopian fiction "a *culture of memory*—one that moves from the individual to the social and collective—is part of a social project of hope." History and memory, she notes, "are subversive elements in that they promote hope and the potential for change" (ibid.: 126).

This emphasis on the retrieval of subversive memories as a critical strategy not only echoes contemporary developments in cultural memory studies but also responds to the recognition that totalitarian power relies on an aggressive homogenization or neutralization of memory. The best-known instance of such homogenization in classic dystopian fiction is probably the party slogan "who controls the past . . . controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1950 [1949]: 35, 248), which informs a resolute strategy of historical revisionism overseen by the Ministry of Truth. The strategy of neutralization is famously emblematized in Huxley's (2006 [1932]: 34) citation of Henry Ford's "history is bunk" in *Brave New World*, which in the novel is a justification for a wholesale reduction of history to the status of nothing more than "a little dust." This pervasive suppression of historical knowledge explains how memory, for the protagonists of critical dystopias, can be a "subversive knowledge [that] can potentially break through the normative and naturalized social construction to which they are being subjected" (Moylan 2000: 14). The recovery of "a suppressed and subterranean memory" can break the grasp of the present and paradoxically be "forwardlooking in its enabling force" (ibid.: 150). The "reconstitution of empowering memory" in the dystopian future, in other words, is a vital strategy for the contemporary utopian imagination in its aim to rebalance the relation between past and future, between memory and desire (149).

The focus on the critical potential of memory is not unique to critical dystopias. As Baccolini (2003: 118) duly notes, it updates a respectable tradition linking "memory and emancipation . . . forgetting and loss" (see also Baccolini 2007: 170–71; Geoghegan 1990). Especially in the Jewish secular messianism (Wolin 1996: 50) of twentieth-century thinkers like Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin, a continued affective investment in remnants of the past is valorized as a way to mobilize energies for a better future.[4] As Adorno and Benjamin have also become key figures in contemporary discourses of memory (especially the memory of atrocities and

4. Richard Wolin (1996: 50) notes that the aim of this secular messianism is not to restore the past to "its pristine, original condition. . . . Instead, the very process of conjuring forth the past in a contemporary historical setting serves to activate and release dormant potentials that lie concealed in the past. The past is not merely recaptured; it is rendered dynamic—in the sense of

suffering), this trope again underlines the affinities between contemporary utopian and cultural memory studies. Yet as memory studies are currently confronting the difficulty of promoting memory work as a catalyst of political change, the tentative linkage of memory and utopia in critical dystopias alerts us to a related concern. After all, if contemporary authors promote remembrance as an adequate critical practice in the dystopian future, we may well ask what keeps them from practicing what they preach and thus directly turning to the past without the detour of the future?

In this essay I argue that the emergent recognition of the tension between past and future in cultural memory studies, on the one hand, and the hesitation to affirm the critical purchase of memory work in critical dystopias, on the other, together point to a blockage that besets the viability of critical remembrance in the present. I argue that these phenomena reveal that it is paradoxically easier to imagine how memory can serve as the foundation of subversive practices in an imagined totalitarian future than in the messiness of the present. The reason, I argue, is that contemporary culture does not suffer from a *lack* of memories but rather from an *uncontainable excess* of promiscuously circulating memories that end up neutralizing one another's efficacy and critical potential. As Huyssen (1995: 7) has shown, the "chaotic, fragmentary, and free-floating" dynamics of contemporary memory are the flip side of a widely perceived "culture of amnesia." They testify to "a mnemonic fever that is caused by the virus of amnesia" (7), an amnesia that is paradoxically intensified by the excessive availability of multiple overlapping and interacting memories. In this cultural condition, the forgetting of the past, in other words, is less of a problem than its indifferent availability. While a forgotten past can in principle still be recovered, the contemporary surfeit of memory simply deactivates the dialectic of loss and recovery and makes it difficult to see a way to mobilize memory for the imagining of a better future.

My argument develops in two steps. In the next section I draw on the work of Huyssen and Alan Liu to briefly situate this disabling condition of losslessness in relation to contemporary developments in media and memory culture. In the rest of the article I read Elliott Hall's dystopian noir thriller *The Rapture* (2010). Hall's novel is highly attuned to the currency of memory in contemporary culture, yet it also registers the difficulty of mobilizing memory as an agent of change today. Indeed, it draws on the noir repertoire to evoke the difficulty of developing cognitive mastery over and critical purchase on society. Instead, it invokes another key term in memory discourses, *trauma.*

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a living tradition—as a result of this fructifying contact with the utopian potentials that are secretly at work in the historical present."

Trauma is not only reflected in Hall's choice of the repertoire of noir; it is also presented as an experience that radically refuses to be enlisted in the present and as such restores the minimal distinction between the present and an unavailable and unavoidable past—the very distinction, I argue, that contemporary memory culture is eroding. Trauma, by refusing to be returned to the present, can paradoxically be mobilized as a marker of the very distinction between past and present on which an imagining of the future depends. In this way the novel points the way to a minimal program to restore the bare conditions in which critical memory work becomes imaginable again. This, the novel suggests, is the necessary prelude to any future utopian project.

2. Contemporary Memory Culture: The Disappearance of Loss and the Promise of Trauma

Huyssen opens his book *Present Pasts* (2003: 1) by noting the reciprocal implication of two ongoing developments: "the crisis of history" and "the hypertrophy of memory." In the two centuries following the eighteenth-century revolutions (ibid.: 2), the discourse of history policed the border between the present and the past—it "was there to guarantee the relative stability of the past in its pastness" (1). Yet today the boundary between past and present has become less stable, a development Huyssen connects to changes in contemporary media culture, as nowadays "untold recent and not so recent pasts impinge upon the present through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the Internet, as well as through the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museal culture" (1). The fact that incoherent remnants of the past persist as indifferent parts of the present results in a widespread sense of derealization. Even if political, cultural, and scholarly memory discourses aim to stabilize this volatile situation by forging tangible links to the past, Huyssen notes that they end up compounding the instability they aim to remedy: "The paradox is that memory discourses themselves partake in the detemporalizing processes that characterize a culture of consumption and obsolescence. Memory as re-presentation, as making present, is always in danger of collapsing the constitutive tension between past and present, especially when the imagined past is sucked into the timeless present of the all-pervasive virtual space of consumer culture" (10). "The stubborn and infinite permanence of information on the internet" (Gutman et al. 2010: 3) and the ever-expanding capacities for retrieval and storage that are on offer in contemporary information technologies contribute to a pervasive sense of derealization. In this situation the dialectic of loss and recovery is disabled, because nothing is ever irrevocably lost.

In a 1996 essay on New Historicism, the cultural critic Liu develops a diagnosis of contemporary culture that complements Huyssen's account. Liu (1996: 558) diagnoses the postmodern age as suffering from "an anxiety that may be called the fear of the loss of loss." Postmodern reality is a "closed, lossless, post-historical" world in which nothing can ever be irrevocably lost and in which things remain forever indifferently available (559). When nothing can be lost and everything can be retrieved, there can be no meaningful distinction between past, present, and future and therefore no sense of history or imagining of an alternative future. The phenomenon of the loss of loss, for Liu, reminds us that a sense of history depends on experiences of loss and that the loss of such experiences signals the absence of historical experience as such. History, for Liu, is "the perpetuation or retention of the process of loss" (559). The task of New Historicism, as Liu sees it, consists in restoring the possibility of loss to make history — and the distinctions between present, past, and future — imaginable again. Projects that aim to restore the past and simply take the distinction between past and present for granted threaten to surrender the lost histories they restore to a present in which they cannot be meaningfully distinguished from other equally available pasts.

Liu's account casts doubt on the possibilities of subversive memory work in the present. Before a better future can be imagined, the sense of history needs to be restored. I argue that Liu's account also points the way to such a restored sense of history. It suggests that one way to achieve this is by affirming the reality of something that radically resists absorption in the present, of an experience that continues to index the past while refusing to join the pervasive half-life of contemporary memory culture. Such an experience restores the distinction between available realities and radically unavailable ones. While the former, for Huyssen and Liu, always risk being absorbed by a present in which they cannot be meaningfully differentiated from other realities, the latter manage to remain withdrawn from such neutralization.

In the field of cultural memory studies, such an unclaimable experience is known as a trauma. In one of the seminal works in the study of trauma in the humanities, Cathy Caruth (1996: 6) defines trauma as an experience that is characterized by its "unassimilated nature," by its categorical resistance to our grasp or understanding. Trauma names an experience that continues to haunt the survivor (ibid.: 4), while it refuses to be fully absorbed in her or his normal functioning. In Michael Roth's (2005: 234) words, trauma is "a past that in a fundamental sense is immune to use since by definition the traumatic defies sense making." Trauma introduces a moment of latency and unavailability in the present. It resists inclusion in the indifferent present and can as such function as a reminder of history and thus as a minimal precondition for critical remembrance and the imagining of an alternative future. Character-

ized by both a "radical intensity" and persistent unavailability, trauma, in the words of Roth (2005: 233) again, "has come to perform some of the same functions that negative utopia or dystopia once did."[5] I now turn to Hall's *Rapture* to show how a contemporary dystopian novel promotes trauma as an indicator of the possibility of future critical remembrance — a form of remembrance it shows to be impossible in a present in which experiences of loss have, as Huyssen and Liu argue, been lost. What makes *The Rapture* such an acute intervention at the juncture of utopia and cultural memory is that the dystopian world it depicts has intensified the condition of the loss of loss that Liu diagnoses. In the novel's dystopian world, the powers that be aim not only to eradicate memory but also — and more radically — to render the experience of loss unavailable, so as to preempt the dialectic of loss and recovery. In this situation, the novel argues, the affirmation of a reality that is irrevocably lost re-creates the possibility conditions for imagining alternative futures.

3. The Private Eye and the Impossibility of Totalization

The Rapture is the second part of Elliott Hall's Strange trilogy, the other parts of which are *The First Stone* and *The Children's Crusade*. Set in a near-future United States (rebaptized "the Holy Republic of the United States of America" [Hall 2011: 89]), the series is named after the novels' protagonist, the private eye Felix Strange. The novels' consistent first-person perspective (interspersed with fictional documentary material) is typical not only of the tradition of noir fiction, a repertoire to which the stories pay ample tribute, but also of the usual setup of dystopian fiction. Fredric Jameson (1994: 55–56) influentially notes that "whereas the Utopian text is mostly nonnarrative and . . . somehow without a subject-position, . . . the dystopia is generally a narrative, which happens to a specific subject or character." Baccolini and Moylan (2003: 5) note that dystopia's subjective outsider perspective not only leads to "textual estrangement" but also enables "a deeper and more total-

5. While Caruth's work on trauma, on which I am drawing here, has been instrumental in institutionalizing trauma studies as a research paradigm in the humanities, it has also been criticized. Leys 2000 is still the most searing critique of Caruth's project. A more constructive engagement with trauma studies is Craps 2013, which takes the field to task for its implicit Eurocentrism. A number of critics have noted that Caruth's emphasis on the sudden, punctual nature of trauma sidelines chronic forms of psychic suffering that are the results of structural violence. See especially Laura Brown's (1995: 107) notion of "insidious trauma," Pheng Cheah's (2008: 196) discussion of "incessant quotidian trauma" in a colonial context, and Seth Moglen (2005). In this essay I am less interested in these discussions than in the way Hall's novel mobilizes the notion of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event and how it participates in what Roger Luckhurst (2008: 87–90) has identified as a consolidated trauma aesthetic in contemporary fiction.

izing agenda . . . insofar as the text is built around the construction of a nar-
rative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance." Dysto-
pian fiction, that is, typically depicts society through "its unfashionable
capacity for totalizing interrogation" (Moylan 2000: xii).

   While Hall's choice of a private eye protagonist may seem to underline the
ambition to provide an encompassing account of the dystopian world,[6] his
choice of the noir repertoire—which has always contributed to a depiction of
the world as murky and morally opaque (Eburne 2008: 195)—testifies to the
difficulty of achieving such an overarching perspective. The novels are set in a
near-future United States controlled by a group of revivalist fanatics (the
"Council of Elders") after a nuclear attack on Houston and a subsequent war
of retaliation against Iran that completely destroyed Tehran and left it irra-
diated. The campaign in Iran has left Strange traumatized and seriously ill
with "a disease that has no name and no cure," which leaves him totally
dependent on vast amounts of illegal drugs and therefore on the private
detective work that pays for these drugs. The novels depict a world ruled
by the fatally combined forces of moralist evangelical zeal and corporate
interests. The dystopian United States runs a program (the "Holy Land
Mission") in which its Jewish citizens are strongly encouraged to migrate to
Israel to aid the construction of a new Temple and speed up the Second
Coming (Hall 2010: 74). While the Council of Elders controls the White
House, it shares its true power with organizations such as the "Free Enter-
prise Foundation" (Hall 2009: 104) and the "Committee for Child Protec-
tion" (also called "the Holy Rollers") (ibid.: 12). The latter has more or less
taken over the policing of the state from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.
One of the most important plotlines in the trilogy focuses on the outsourcing
of intelligence and police work to a firm called Fisher Partners. As all these
elements make clear, Hall's trilogy participates in what Moylan (2003: 137)
has analyzed as a more general recent shift in dystopian fiction: the locus of
dominant power is no longer the state but rather "the extensive and intensive
power of the economic-cultural system."

   What distinguishes Hall's novels from more typical dystopian fictions is
that this "economic-cultural" system is not presented as comprehensible—as
a totality that the novel can represent. In this respect the trilogy is closer to

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6. In his classic account of detective fiction, Franco Moretti underlines the crucial importance
of the fact that Sherlock Holmes "is not a policeman but a private detective." For Holmes, the
purposes of the law are less important than the "*purely cultural* aim" to fully reconstruct the world
of the crime. "Holmes' culture . . . knows, orders, and defines all the significant data of individ-
ual existence as part of social existence. Every story reiterates Bentham's Panopticon ideal: the
model prison that signals the metamorphosis of liberalism into total scrutability" (Moretti 2005:
143). Hard-boiled fiction in general and Hall's trilogy in particular adopt the detective form to
mark their difference from this cultural program.

other examples of noir science fiction (or "tech-noir"), such as Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and more recently, China Miéville's *The City and the City*. Hall's protagonist only acquires piecemeal information about the powers that be, and the mutual imbrication of the different institutions of capital and evangelism is never fully understood, as his moments of insight never add up to a picture of the whole. Indeed, Hall's choice of an "obsessed, alienated, vulnerable, pursued" narrator—which is typical of noir fiction—underlines the insufficiency of the merely ratiocinative and analytic approach that was customary in traditional detective fiction (Horsley 2001: 11). Instead of offering a classic Holmesian detective who can "restore order and set all to rights" (20) noir fiction, in Lee Horsley's words, "foregrounds the difficulties of interpreting a mendacious society" (9). Hall's protagonist fails to extricate himself from the world he confronts, a world he indirectly helped bring about when he served in the campaign in Iran, and he does not achieve a critical distance that would allow him to acquire a comprehensive view of the powers that structure the novels' dystopian world.

Hall's adoption of noir elements can be read as a way to recognize that the sociopolitical tendencies that organize the world today do not allow for rational analysis and cannot be comprehensively mapped. These tendencies are animated by the forces that control the dystopian world in which the novels are situated, the twin powers of unbridled capitalism and evangelical zeal, and the multifarious ways these powers interact. The political philosopher William Connolly (2005) has helpfully referred to this complex as "the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine." He uses the image of a resonance machine to capture the mutually reinforcing powers of capital and evangelical religion and to underline that their reciprocal imbrication is immune to traditional causal analyses. In the "theo-econopolitical machine" of evangelical capitalism, normal causality is no longer operative (878), Connolly writes, as it "morphs into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other*, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation" (870). The blend of religion and capital that Connolly observes in the contemporary United States and of which Hall's novels present an intensified near-future form cannot be understood by classic ratiocination. Hall's trilogy drives home the insufficiency of causal explanations by way of its ruthless focalization through the character of Strange, a strategy that allows readers to experience the protagonist's frustrated attempts to come to an adequate understanding of the dystopian world he inhabits.

Connolly's image of a resonance machine also recalls Liu's analysis of the disappearance of loss. The resonance machine relentlessly blends and echoes

different elements until they are all absorbed by the pervasive noise of media culture. Memories are neither verifiably absent nor tangibly present. The effect is, again, that the critical dialectic of loss and recovery is rendered inoperative. In the world of the Strange trilogy, a recovery of memory is not a viable critical strategy. Unsurprisingly, one of the strategies used to disable resistance in the novel is the careful removal of experiences of loss.[7] *The Rapture* centers on a plot in which the authorities are disappearing what Strange gradually discovers to be vast groups of citizens. At the beginning of the novel, he learns that Isaac Taylor, one of his fellow veterans, has gone missing. He soon discovers that not only has Taylor physically disappeared but all traces of him have been erased from the records (Hall 2010: 16). The upshot is that Taylor has literally *not been lost*, as there is no trace of his former presence left against which his current absence can be verified.

The meticulous removal of all traces of a former existence and the careful cultivation of uncertainty about the fate of the disappeared disable a dialectic of loss and recovery and normal processes of mourning (Reineman 2011; Robben 2000). The logic of forced disappearance has been most extensively studied in the case of Argentina's so-called Dirty War and other Latin American dictatorships. In these campaigns of forced disappearance, parents and friends were deliberately left in the dark about the fates of the disappeared "and were thus denied the right to properly bury and mourn their dead" (Robben 2000: 71). As any public acknowledgment of loss was preempted, family members were condemned to the "madness of believing that their children had never existed" (Edkins 2011: 159). Whereas in normal processes of mourning, reality testing confirms the loss of the loved one and allows the survivors to work through that loss and to begin a process of mourning, in the case of forced disappearances, reality provides no such verification. Here reality testing only confirms the survivors' uncertainty, as "a search of police-stations, military bases, hospitals, and morgues does not provide any conclusive indication of death" (Robben 2000: 87). In *The Rapture*, as in the Latin American contexts on which it is modeled, campaigns of forced disappearance are an effective strategy to disable potentially subversive remembrance.

In *The Rapture* the police cannot search for "someone who according to their records didn't exist" (Hall 2010: 57). In the novel's United States "the

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7. Connolly's analysis makes clear that both capitalism and evangelical religion thrive on a denial of mortality and finitude. He writes that while capitalism "discounts the future of the earth to extend its economic entitlements now," evangelical religion discounts it "to prepare for the day of judgment against nonbelievers" (Connolly 2005: 876). Following Connolly's analysis, which seems particularly congenial to Hall's work even if it does not invoke it, the obliteration of loss that Hall's novel constitutes as a vital aspect of its world can be said to grow "out of a will to revenge against mortality, time, and the world" (877).

fingerprints and DNA of every American" are on file (58), so when someone's records cannot be found in the files, this means nonexistence rather than loss. The authorities' surveillance of the lives of its citizens goes hand in hand with the operations of an alternative bureaucracy that carefully and selectively erases the detailed records that the more conventional institutions painstakingly compose. In the novel this alternative bureaucracy has not even left "a paper trail of purchases, salaries and expenses" (126). The upshot is a total elision of the moment of loss. The life of the citizen is either totally accounted for or totally erased, and the transition between the two states is rendered invisible—which is to say, unavailable for uptake in a critical recovery project.

This double bureaucratic apparatus is further complemented by a careful public policing of the past, a theme that is reminiscent of classic dystopias like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*.[8] Following moralist campaigns against artistic nudes and official attempts to censor evidence of evolution in natural history museums, museums no longer serve as repositories of the past (Hall 2009: 82). Public memory is monopolized by the compulsive rehearsal of the memory of the destruction of Houston, especially during a yearly memorial, while the realities of the "Great Patriotic Crusade against Iran" (7) that followed the assault on Houston and that equally resulted in massive suffering and destruction are carefully removed from the public domain. We only learn about it through Strange's traumatic flashbacks interspersed in the story of *The Rapture*.[9] The novel remarks that "both cities had been destroyed, but only one had been erased" (Hall 2010: 188). Judith Butler (2004: xiv) has studied the process in which some injuries are compulsively rehearsed to constitute a community of grief while other lives are rendered "unthinkable and ungrievable." In the world of the novel, this means that Iranian lives cannot be grieved or mourned, and the option of establishing (potentially subversive) connections between Iranian suffering and the violence committed by the authorities against their own citizens is precluded. Recognizing that a neocolonial campaign in Iran is a testing

8. In the case of Latin America also, the neutralization of subversive memory work through enforced disappearances was part of a more encompassing memory politics. This explains why cultural memory became a privileged site of contestation in, for instance, Argentina and Chile. For the case of Chile, Steve J. Stern's (2006: xxiii) monumental three-volume *The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile* offers an extensive account of the prolonged "struggles over collective memory" in the last four decades. Stern (2004: 104 – 33) develops his key methodological notions of "emblematic memory" and "memory knots," which are coined to complement and correct the implicitly Eurocentric notions with which memory studies have traditionally worked.
9. The novels' protagonist recognizes that the glorification of the victory in Iran is a strategy of public forgetting that obliterates the horrors that actually took place: "Everyone called us heroes, but the title was bestowed as a way of forgetting" (Hall 2011: 72).

ground for state violence at home is impossible.[10] The novel complements Liu's diagnosis of the loss of loss with the insight that a triumphalist and homogenizing public memory culture contributes to the elision of experiences of loss.

The novel underlines that such a total elision of experiences of loss does *not* obey the traditional logic of state terror, in which the state periodically reminds its citizens of its monopoly of violence and of its willingness to exercise it (Schwarzmantel 2011). In the world of *The Rapture* citizens are only intermittently granted such reminders: there is a strict distinction between "public liquidation," in which case the authorities want the death to be known, and "full erasure," which means that "they're going to wipe out any trace of your existence, reverse your birth" (Hall 2010: 268, 310).[11] The disappearing of citizens leaves no mark except a blank, thus preempting Felix Strange's detective work: "It's difficult to prove a negative" or to "investigate an absence" (218). The gaps in the record are "like black holes: impossible to see until you're past the event horizon" (335). This state of affairs does not allow for a perspective that can comprehend both the current absence of something and its past presence; there is no position, that is, from which loss can be experienced. The dystopian world has carefully rendered normal detective work and the critical work of remembrance that it stands for ineffective.

4. Trauma and the Disappeared Past

As already noted, the novel counterpoints this carefully manufactured elision of loss with an insistent past reality that cannot be disappeared. The linear narrative of the novel is interspersed with a number of prolonged flashbacks in which Felix Strange relives his campaign in Iran and in which we learn that he was co-opted by an elite killing squad.[12] Intent on finding traces of weap-

10. The idea that colonialism is a testing ground for totalitarian violence by Western powers against their own citizens has been widely studied, especially in the field of comparative genocide studies (see Rothberg 2009: 33–65). In Hall's novels the protagonist explicitly connects colonial to violence on American soil (see Hall 2011: 60, 69–70).
11. Lawrence Weschler notes that in the Argentine Dirty War, in which approximately thirty thousand people were disappeared, "there were no soldiers on the street, nor were there any public spectacles" (quoted in Edkins 2011: 155). Indeed, the campaign of forced disappearances attempted a full-scale evacuation of the public realm. The disappearances were "not public but intensely private and personal" (Robben 2000: 70), as the regime's refusal to recognize the disappearances also led the survivors away from public action "to ever more desperate and futile and isolating efforts at search and rescue" (Weschler, quoted in Edkins 2011: 155).
12. The third book in the series more directly juxtaposes the dystopian American reality with memories of Iran and also of the period that Strange spends in prison, being tortured and interrogated, between the narrative present of the second book and that of the third. Typically,

ons of mass destruction and hardly having the linguistic know-how to inter-rogate the citizens of Iran, the squad continuously crosses the thin line between interrogation and (often lethal) torture.[13] The activities of this squad prefigure the violence the authorities will later use against their own population. Unsurprisingly, these are precisely the kinds of memories the authorities try to erase at all cost. What renders such programmatic forget-ting impossible is that Strange's memories are not substantiated in a form that allows such erasure. Instead, they persist in the latent state we have come to associate with trauma, available neither for erasure nor for active recall. The description of the fight in which Strange is hit, which leads to his removal from the theater of war, already foregrounds the essential latency that marks traumatic experience:

> I was on the ground. There was a singing in my ears, a tone so loud it made everything else sound like it was underwater. I could feel hands on my arms, but the sensation was distant, as if it were happening to another set of limbs I'd left at home. . . . I blinked, and finally realized I was wounded. My hands examined my body, especially the crotch. . . . The pain didn't come home until I saw the ranger medic inspecting the exposed anklebone. (330)

The past intermittently surfaces in the violent fits that punctuate Felix Strange's existence. The source of these fits is unclear, but the novels strongly suggest that they have to do with Strange's—and other veterans'—exposure to radioactivity during the war in Iran.

Coping with these fits requires vast quantities of illegal drugs, which means that Strange must continue to bring in more money than his veteran's pen-sion earns him. In a sense, then, the traumatic persistence of the past necessi-tates his detective work and thus informs the novel's tentative exploration of the possibilities of subversive action. I have so far read the novels' adoption of noir elements as a strategy for designating the limits of a merely ratiocinative approach. At the same time, the scarred, haunted, and alienated protagonist the novels adopt from this tradition corresponds to the figure of the trauma survivor as codified in contemporary culture. The rise of trauma as a popular

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an event in the novel's narrative present (say, baptism) triggers a sudden memory of Strange's traumatic past (say, water boarding).

13. Memory in *The Rapture* is decidedly that of a bleak rather than a glorious past. In traditional dystopias the remembered past is often an idealized past. Baccolini (2007: 176) has argued that such a regressive nostalgia has been replaced in critical dystopias by a more progressive kind of nostalgia which is accompanied by the awareness that a return to the past is not a viable solution and which instead recovers nostalgia "as the desire for what could have been." See Baccolini 2007: 172–86 for a critique of nostalgia and for analyses that point to the potential for a "critical nostalgia."

cultural notion since the 1980s has been decisively shaped by the medical codification of posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of political campaigns mounted by Vietnam veterans (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 77–97; Luckhurst 2008: 59–76). Hall's protagonist reveals the significant overlap between the symptomatology of posttraumatic stress disorder and the figure of the private eye in the noir tradition. By combining trauma suffering with detective work, the novel shows the crucial importance of acknowledging a past reality that is, due to its traumatic nature, radically unavailable for either erasure or recuperation. Strange's seizures typically lead to a loss of consciousness, which means they appear as elisions in the novel's first-person narration and readers only learn about them at the moment when Strange recovers from them and readjusts to the narrative present from which the seizures have temporarily removed him. This narrative strategy thus signals the minimal potential of trauma to escape from the compulsive grasp of the present.

The novel's plot underlines the power of trauma by having it play a crucial role in solving the case of the disappeared veteran. Felix Strange is led in the right direction by Isaac Taylor's diary, which Taylor started keeping during his time in Iran. The diary managed to go undetected only because it looks like a pocket Bible (Hall 2010: 63), the only form in which books survive in the novel's world. The obliteration of the past is not just a matter of media; it is also a matter of scale. The decisive clue comes in the form of a microdot, a text shrunk to a tiny size using camera tricks, which manages to pass below the radar only because it is so old-fashioned, "a primitive technique in the era of digital encryption," and therefore invisible to enemies "looking for hidden files on a computer, a thumb drive or an optical disk" (166). Like trauma, the microdot manages to escape erasure or recuperation only by operating on a plane on which normal memory and detection work cannot operate.

The final step in Strange's retrieval of the few traces left by the massive campaign of erasure comes in the form of a letter from Iris, the trilogy's femme fatale. The revelation that Iris has gone missing—for which the letter offers proof—again registers as a traumatic event too intense to assimilate, overtly resonating with Strange's memories of war (a narrative device which is only fully explored in the trilogy's final part): "I couldn't process what I'd read. I was caught in the moment after a flashbang detonates: the overloaded retina transmitting that single, frozen image of the world just before the explosion" (ibid.: 298). The letter points him to a warehouse, where he finally encounters material evidence for the meticulous disappearing operation taking place. He encounters "seven rows of naked box-spring beds, twelve beds to a row, each one perfectly spaced from its neighbors. . . . It looked like the remains of a shelter set up in the aftermath of a disaster" (301). It looks, in

other words, like the aftermath of an aftermath, yet this bare remainder is enough to spur Strange's detective work that, even if it does not recover a determinate past or the identities of the people who have been disappeared in the warehouse, bears witness to an experience of loss. While the room seems to be expertly emptied of human traces, Strange finds a few spots of dried blood and even two initials scratched into the gray paint of one of the beds. This minimal remainder is a reminder of loss: "Two letters were all that was left of a human being, and that was more than would remain of the others who had passed through here" (302).[14]

Importantly, it is not the meaning of the initials that is crucial—Strange remarks that he would "never know what these initials stood for. The person who had scratched them into the iron could be a man or a woman, young or old, everyone and no one" (ibid.). Instead, it is the bare fact of their inscription that qualifies the initials as testimony to human life and as the "scrap of hope" that, according to Moylan (2000: xiii), saves "militant dystopias" from cynicism and quietism, even in the absence of a determinate, realistic "utopian horizon." Such traumatic remainders do not inform the counternarrative of resistance that, according to Baccolini and Moylan (2003: 5), counterpoints the narrative of the dominant order in more typical critical dystopias. Instead of opening a usable past ready for retrieval, they do the preparatory work of marking an experience of loss, which is a precondition of future memory work. The novel's ending explicitly points to the possibility of a modest project of remembrance: a wall of the missing in a New York subway station featuring short profiles and pictures of those who have been disappeared and who are now, because of this minimal memorial gesture, properly lost.[15] The novel's use of noir elements acknowledges the unavailability of most of the analytic and memorial strategies that many contemporary dystopian fictions take for granted. At the same time, it points to the power of a radically

14. In the third part of the trilogy, Strange has himself been disappeared. Here also it is a remainder of the traumatic past—the pistol that had seen his grandfather and uncle through two wars and Strange himself through the campaign in Iran—that is the only remaining evidence of his existence: "Fisher Partners had erased the records of my birth, where I went to school, my time in the army. They'd taken my name off the lease to my office in New York, removed any records that I'd ever been there. . . . In a way, this gun was the only physical record left of my existence" (Hall 2011: 260).

15. *The Children's Crusade*, the sequel to *The Rapture*, offers no guarantees that this act of remembrance has beneficial effects even if it clearly triggers historical and critical action. In the case of Strange himself, it seems to inspire the campaign of revenge in which he engages in the first part of the third novel: "I tried to think of the exact moment I'd decided to kill the men who had taken Iris. Maybe it had been the wall of faces at Grand Central, the names upon names of the missing, or that warehouse, with its room of bare iron beds waiting for more detainees" (Hall 2011: 244).

unusable traumatic past to restore the distinction between past and present and to make the dialectic between loss and recovery imaginable again.

5. Conclusion: Literature, Loss, and the Possibility of Critique

As in many critical dystopias, *The Rapture*'s exploration of critical practices can be read as a thinly veiled meditation on the genre's own critical potential in the present. *The Rapture* does not offer its readers a recovered history. Just as it shows the experience of loss to be threatened in the dystopian future it depicts, it also hints at the unavailability of loss in the present. The novel's critical operation can best be appreciated as an attempt to recall its readers to the continuing occurrence of loss in the contemporary world. The novel carefully maximizes the overlap between the near-future United States it depicts and the present its readers inhabit to invite readers to contemplate the dystopian world as the (only slightly) "negatively deformed future of our own world" (Baccolini 2003: 115). By foregrounding the assault on personal safety, social security, and privacy that marks the novel's world, it invites its audience to become conscious of these latent diminishments and to begin considering these deprivations as determinate losses, as elements that can no longer be taken for granted in the present. *The Rapture* presents these elements, which have arguably been quietly disappeared from contemporary life, *as lost*, which means that it makes them desirable again. *The Rapture* is not, to appropriate Miguel Abensour's famous definition of utopia, an "education of desire" but rather a more modest education *to* desire (quoted in Thompson 2011: 791). Only when we learn loss can we learn to desire, and only then can a better world become imaginable at all.

   In *The Seeds of Time* Jameson (1994: 90) notes that "we might think of the new onset of the Utopian process as a kind of desiring to desire, a learning to desire." This argument resonates with Jameson's (2005: 288) argument elsewhere that science fiction allows us to apprehend "the present *as* history"—as, that is, different from yet significantly related to the past and the future. The problem is that "the present . . . is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect," and this calls for "strategies of indirection" (ibid.: 287). Hall's use of the overlapping registers of noir (part of a more general tendency toward "genre blurring" in contemporary dystopias [Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 7]) and trauma transforms the present from a numbing domain of habituation into a terrain where things can be lost and therefore also mourned and desired. Near the end of the novel, Cassandra, a member of an (ultimately unsuccessful) underground resistance movement, confronts Strange with this logic: "Sometimes it is necessary for the dead to be dug up and shot again. It's best if you see it. . . . You won't believe me otherwise"

(Hall 2010: 346–47). Bringing loss to consciousness, *The Rapture* suggests, is one way of preparing for a different future.

The sobering message of Hall's trilogy echoes the one we encountered at the juncture of utopian and cultural memory studies. In the absence of full-fledged scenarios that confidently move toward a better future, scholars, critics, and writers are left with the more modest task of restoring the possibility of imagining such scenarios. Near the end of *Ill Fares the Land*, his assessment of the present conjuncture written shortly before his untimely death, the historian Tony Judt (2010: 223) recalls that even if "Left" in the political imaginary often denotes "radical, destructive and innovatory, . . . there is also a close relationship between progressive institutions and a spirit of *prudence*." Judt notes that "it is doctrinaire market liberals who for the past two centuries have embraced the relentlessly optimistic view that all economic change is for the better," while "the democratic Left has often been motivated by a sense of loss" (223). While for Judt this cultivation of loss translates into an imperative to preserve "the institutions, legislation, services and rights" associated with the welfare state (222), developments in the fields of utopian and cultural memory studies in the last three decades have made it clear that there is also a need to address the memory of the suffering the welfare state has failed to prevent. By restoring the experience of loss, *The Rapture* formulates at least a double imperative: the imperative to again learn to desire achievements that we have come to take for granted and the imperative to mourn the suffering and the waste that these achievements have as yet failed to address.

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