Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* revolves around the figure of the author’s mother, Brave Orchid. Throughout her life, this resourceful woman had to adapt to successive cultural changes. The Chinese society of her youth experienced the fall of the imperial system and the emergence of Sun Yat Sen’s republic. Chinese families had to cope with the emigration of men to the country they called the Gold Mountain—the United States. Once in America, Brave Orchid finds her new surroundings unreal. To Chinese immigrants, the country of white people is “the land of ghosts.” Its culture appears alien and inferior. Brave Orchid finds her bearings in these unstable worlds thanks to her dedication to work. Before her husband can afford to transplant his family to the United States, Brave Orchid, already in her forties, obtains a medical degree. She works as a doctor, a midwife and, as Kingston puts it, a “[s]haman,” battling diseases, spirits and ghosts. In New York and California she assists her husband in back-breaking laundry work. Still, Brave Orchid’s pragmatic temperament has an ambiguous edge. She sometimes devotes her awe-inspiring energy to quixotic pursuits. Also, her obsession with work keeps her from understanding her children’s needs.

Similarly, characters in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* struggle against existential malaise and social injustice by committing them-
selves to improving the conditions of their surroundings. The intertwined narratives of DeLillo’s sprawling novel depict a (post)-Cold-war universe that is spiritually thin and economically iniquitous. After the threat of nuclear annihilation, the U. S. face ecological disaster or AIDS. Yet DeLillo’s world is peopled with such courageous figures as Sister Grace Fahey, Sister Alma Edgar and graffiti writer Ismael Muñoz. Against extraordinary odds of poverty, racism and medical plagues, these characters attempt to maintain a livable space in South Bronx neighborhoods whose very dereliction has become a tourist attraction. Likewise, DeLillo portrays artists—sculptor Klara Sax, comedian Lenny Bruce, painter Acey Greene, graffiteros like Ismael himself—as workers seeking to alleviate trauma and to weave together new communities. While Lenny Bruce gives voice to the angst of the Cuban missile crisis, Klara, thirty years later, refits B-52 bombers into painted sculptures, transmuting fear into art. Acey Greene’s paintings turn Chicago gang members into figures of glamorous menace, reminiscent of Renaissance art. Ismael’s graffiti create a space of aesthetic adventure within the field of urban devastation. However, as in Kingston, DeLillo’s representation of pragmatic commitment is not wholeheartedly optimistic. Sister Edgar, even as she helps Gracie tend to AIDS patients, clings to an orthodox Christianity fueled by loathing of the world. Nick Shay, the novel’s central figure, pursues a pragmatic enterprise of a dubious nature—shipping hazardous waste around the world. Dedication, DeLillo suggests, is defeated by the complex context in which it exerts itself.

In James Ellroy’s My Dark Places (1997) too, pragmatic commitment is the chosen strategy for the healing of trauma. Before publishing this autobiographical memoir, Ellroy had written crime novels centering on violence against women. My Dark Places revisits this issue from a nonfiction perspective: The author reveals that his obsession with violence originates in the unsolved murder of his own mother. The book charts his efforts to reopen the case and his unsuccessful search for the killer. Ellroy’s search for truth and psychological closure is entangled in the discourse of masculinity that informs his previous fiction. In post-existentialist fashion, he seeks to define masculine code heroes. This profile is, in his view, embodied in the conscientious police investigators who investigate the evil wrought by masculine violence. The nobility of their endeavor is based on the understanding that it knows no end.
Realism under postmodernity

By discussing these three texts, the present paper aims to show that pragmatic dedication constitutes one of the core constituents of a contemporary realist outlook. This argument fits in a broader investigation of the modes of existence of realism under postmodernity. Like other contributors to the present volume (Ihab Hassan; Vera Nuennning; Dietmar Boehnke; and Peter Boscor), I believe that referential discourse in literature or other media has managed to perpetuate itself even as postmodernist/poststructuralist theorists radically questioned the validity of its groundings. Realist practices have developed during the last twenty years, feeding both on previous traditions and on the presumably anti-referential aesthetic of postmodern culture itself. The growing awareness of the survival of realism testifies, I think, to a metamorphosis of the postmodern structure of sensibility, if not to an attempt to outgrow it.

José David Saldivar has provided one of the earliest discussions of the paradoxical coexistence of postmodernism and referential discourse. Saldivar all but identifies postmodern realism with magic realism, the form of writing that most famously hybridizes the referential discourse of fiction. For Saldivar, postmodern realism is embodied in the idiom of Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Marquez, Toni Morrison or Maxine Hong Kingston. In his view, novels that, as Angel Flores puts it, transform “the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal” are realistic precisely insofar as they make visible the problems raised by realism under postmodernity. Magic realism challenges the 19th-century belief according to which novels can develop an objective voice of cognitive authority. As such, it performs the othering of the real: it registers the experience of a pluralist culture—an environment in which the ideological world view of Eurocentric modernity may no longer be cloaked as real or cognitively neutral.

Saldivar does, however, not provide a paradigm inclusive enough to accommodate all varieties of postmodern realism. In particular, his model is not meant to cover practices outside of literature. We must indeed acknowledge that literature—especially the academic canon—is not the idiom in which postmodern realism has developed most prominently. Painting has had a pioneering role. Pop Art (Andy Warhol; Roy Lichtenstein) is a postmodern equivalent of previous realist schools, as

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is the subsequent photorealism of Richard Estes and Charles Bell. Today, postmodern realism flourishes in non-literary or mass-culture idioms. It has been a significant component of alternative film-making in the 1980s and 1990s (David Lynch; Lisa Cholodenko; Susan Seidelman; Spike Lee) as well as of cyber-oriented science fiction (William Gibson; Neal Stephenson; Dark Horse Comics such as Frank Miller’s and Dave Gibbons’s Martha Washington series).

I believe that tackling this broader corpus requires taking four dimensions of the texts into account: reference, dialogism, contract and pragmatism. By foregrounding reference, I mean to point out that no realist art form, however postmodern, can elude the issue of the relation of discourse to the real. This need not imply a blind belief in what Richard Rorty calls the correspondence between “pieces of thought (and language) and pieces of the world.” Yet it signifies that referentiality should at least be an object of literary scrutiny. Dialogism (or polyphony), as defined by Mikhail Bakthin, designates the condition of texts composed of heterogeneous discourses, each linked to specific world views and social affiliations. In the present volume, Vera Nuenning and Dietmar Böhnke show that the texts contributing to today’s realist revival display such heterogeneity: The new corpus plays off the discourse of classical realism against postmodern devices—metafiction, particularly. Writers who produce dialogized realist texts acknowledge the impossibility of developing a voice of cognitive authority designating the real in monological fashion. One might add that, in the history of literary realism, referential monologism has more often been a norm than an actual practice. Numerous nineteenth-century realist works—naturalist novels, particularly—are remarkably heterogeneous in their use of literary discourse.

Contract is a defining parameter for realism because texts do not acquire a referential status on the basis of intrinsic discursive features alone. The voice claiming to designate the real is empowered by a social pact. The realist reading contract is established through writers’ discussions of their own practice, critical arguments, reviews, readers’ feedback or any statement informing the appraisal of the text’s truth

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value. Instances of realist contracts are Daniel Defoe’s framing remarks on the reliability of Robinson Crusoe’s narrative; the classical realists’ flaunting of their positivistic investigation methods; D-Day survivors’ praises of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*; or, in the present corpus, the implicit “autobiographical pact” that links Kingston and Ellroy to their readers, certifying that the memoirs’ contents match the authors’ life experience.\(^8\)

Pragmatism constitutes the activist, socially committed axis of realist fiction. It informs both Dickens’s attacks on dehumanizing industry and Emile Zola’s desire to turn the novel into a laboratory of social experimentation. Under postmodernity, pragmatism becomes less confidently propagandistic and more closely entangled with existential and referential aporias. It constitutes a fallback solution available to writers who acknowledge the impossibility of an unmediated grasp of the real. Pragmatic commitment—the urge to bring about workable change in the writer’s world—displaces cognitive mapping. This shift in focus is implicit in the everyday meaning of ‘realism’ itself: the phrase ‘be realistic’ connotes the ability to conform to the constraints of a given context. The postmodern pragmatism thus defined ranges from the reluctant reconciliation with a world of inauthentic bargaining to the utopian prospect of an endlessly fashionable reality. As Ihab Hassan indicates in the present volume, such realist pragmatism might form the basis of a postmodern outlook oriented no longer toward skepticism but toward trust.

On the basis of this four-term model, it is possible to specify how the texts analyzed in the present pages—a corpus I henceforth designate as pragmatic realism—position themselves with regard to classical and magic realism. Latin American magic realism is intensely dialogized (its gamut runs from classical realism to the supernatural) yet only moderately involved in reflections on reference. Contract, on the other hand, is essential to this corpus. In their comments on their own practice, Latin American writers challenge received (European) literary wisdom by claiming that “lo real maravilloso” is no romance fantasy but constitutes indeed the reality of the multiethnic “New World landscape.”\(^9\) The pragmatic dimension of magic realist texts—Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1966), for instance—is discernible in these novels’ portrayal of tireless epic characters,

\(^9\) Alejo Carpentier quoted in Saldivar 526.
\(^10\) Saldivar 526.
starkly contrasting with the languid, alienated figures of high modernism.

By comparison, pragmatic realism depicts a significantly less disjointed world—a realm less exposed to magical metamorphoses of the real. Instead of stringing out ceaselessly defamiliarizing catastrophes, pragmatic realism cautiously appraises the extent to which the real can be “othered.” It interrogates the ways in which the unfamiliar is discreetly dialogized with the everyday—how the characters’ round of life resists change or surrenders to it, or, conversely, how their environment may be amended. In the present volume, Klaus Stierstorfer and Peter Mortensen argue that recent postmodern fiction depicts subjects seeking to adapt to—even to make peace with—the instabilities of postmodernity. Similarly, pragmatic realism examines the paradoxical resilience of commonplace everydayness in a context that is otherwise unpredictable. The universe it portrays, though unstable and fragmented, still manifests itself as a seemingly homogeneous plane of perception. The characters’ praxis aims to maintain or enhance this stability—an effort that forms the basis of a pragmatic contract: The text pledges to help its readers alter their world for the better.

Brian McHale’s typology of postmodern fiction may help us circumscribe the pattern of dialogization implied in this vision of a marginally destabilized everydayness. McHale argues that the evolution from modernist to postmodernist fiction corresponds to a shift from an epistemological to an ontological thematics. Modernist novels raise questions about the possibility of knowledge—about the multiple perspectives through which the world is perceived (What is there to know? How can I know it?). Postmodernist works raise doubts about the very nature of the world(s) that can be perceived or evoked in language. Their hallmark queries are postcognitive questions such as “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?”

Postmodern fiction is therefore pluralist by nature, or rather “heterotopian”—a term McHale borrows from Michel Foucault. Its texts—magic realist novels, typically—juxtapose incompatible planes of being. They resemble the “transhistorical party” of Carlos Fuentes’s fiction, where characters of separate historical periods interact.

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12 McHale 18.
13 McHale 17.
In light of McHale’s argument, DeLillo’s, Ellroy’s and even Kingston’s pragmatic realism is poised between the homotopianism of classical realism (there is only one world, albeit accessed through divergent perspectives) and heterotopian postmodernity. Pragmatic realist texts raise the following questions: How can the world be one and simultaneously plural? How can the seemingly homogeneous world that I perceive (the world of my everyday field of interaction) also be composed of ill-fitting fragments? How could life, as Klara Sax puts it in DeLillo’s Underworld, ever take “an unreal turn at some point,” thus creating a world that seems “fictitious?”14 How can DeLillo’s South Bronx be “real” to the social activists who work within it and “surreal” to tourists visiting it in chartered buses?15 Conversely, how can conspicuously heterotopian universes still be perceived by the same subjects, within a pseudo-homogeneous phenomenal continuum?

The hidden plurality of social experience is central to DeLillo’s Underworld. The novel makes visible a seemingly homogeneous environment—a country concerned with the practicalities of postmodern capitalism. Yet this human constellation is haunted by underworlds of fear, violence or utopian hope. Nick Shay is obsessed with “Dietrologia”–the “science of dark forces”16–and with mystical treatises such as “The Cloud of Unknowing,”17 which represent God as a receding presence. Conversely, Kingston’s Woman Warrior foregrounds the paradoxical oneness of heterotopias. As a child, Kingston communicated through the front-door mailbox slot with a creature she had been taught to view as a “The Garbage Ghost”–in fact a white American dustman.18 Yet unlike ghosts, the latter displayed such reassuring features as the ability to “cop[y] human language”–that is, to mimic the children’s Chinese.19 The enigmatic pseudo-unity of dislocated worlds is also central to cyberpunk science fiction. Characters in these texts access distinct planes of reality (phenomenal space, virtual consciousness, holographic projection ...). Yet they retain a minimal sense of a homogeneous subjectivity, however metamorphosed through transits from layer to layer of virtuality.

15 DeLillo 247.
16 DeLillo 280.
17 DeLillo 295.
18 Kingston 115.
19 Kingston 115.
Epiphanies of the real: Pragmatic realism and poststructuralist theories of reference

In their approach to reference, one might expect contemporary realist writers to break with the anti-mimetic tenor of post-structuralism/modernism and thus to seal a new allegiance with classical realism. Joseph Dewey, in a study of American fiction in the 1980s, makes the rejection of postmodernist anti-mimesis a key element of the late-20th-century realist revival. Under the label “spectacle realism,” he describes a corpus (Joyce Carol Oates; Anne Tyler; T. Coraghessan Boyle; Richard Powers) in which realism acts as an antidote to the infosociety’s semiotics of consumption, which Dewey identifies with postmodernism at large.

However, Dewey’s argument dichotomizes realism and postmodernism in a way that does not fit the present corpus. In DeLillo, Kingston and Ellroy, reality is not something that can be retrieved by a transparent realist aesthetic. It is no background one can confidently point at by means of what John Searle calls “ostensive or indexical” speech acts. We have seen above that pragmatic realism differs from postmodernist textuality and Latin American fiction’s polyphony only by what one may metaphorically call a change of lighting: It acknowledges the difficulties in assessing the contours of the real, yet performs the epistemological equivalent of a salvage operation: It explores how far referentiality stretches in a field of discourse that otherwise does not lend itself to totalizing documentary representation.

Above all, sharply demarcating a pragmatic realist from a postmodernist view of referentiality implies an overly rigid reading of poststructuralism/modernism itself. Poststructuralism is often invoked (sometimes by its own proponents) to support the claim that reference is a mere impossibility, unworthy of any investigation. This counterintuitive argument implies that the extralinguistic real is never perceived as an unmediated presence. Non-semiotic stimuli acquire meaning only through language—a medium that deprives them of presence, stability or authenticity. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe summarize this

view as follows: “[P]hysical objects do exist, but they ... only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse.”

However, Laclau and Mouffe’s blatantly paradoxical statement shows that reference is bound to remain an open-ended, anxiety-ridden question. Poststructuralists do not deny the existence of an extra-linguistic field of reference. Yet, to borrow Derrida’s words, they ascribe to it a “spectral” status (Derrida, 22, 28). In their view, the extra-linguistic is a haunting presence, never quite grasped yet never entirely forgotten. When it has to be characterized at all, it is portrayed through two metaphorical representations. On the one hand (in Lacan, Derrida, Jameson, Baudrillard), it is a lost, abyssal background. It is the emptiness that replaces the ground to which, in realist epistemologies, language used to be anchored. On the other hand (in Deleuze; Lyotard; Kristeva), the extra-linguistic is viewed as a force. It is the energy beyond or within language that keeps the chain of discourse going.

Understandably, a spectral referent inspires in its observers a response different from the matter-of-fact objectivity of classical realism. The discourse of reference in poststructuralist theory and postmodernist fiction fosters indeed a quasi-mystical structure of feeling, harking back to literary modernism’s obsession with epiphanic moments. This transpositivistic stance is illustrated in the postmodern variety of the sublime and in discourses focusing on what we might call the epiphany of the real. Lyotard acknowledges the possibility of sublime epiphanies when he mentions the rare appearance of what he calls "the occurrence, the event, the marvel [l’occurrence, l’événement, la merveille]." In this formula, the ‘event’ is an unexpected emergence issuing from the unrepresentable field beyond or in between semiotic processes. Such an “event” momentarily shatters the linguistic grid. In Lacanian terms, it is a liberating intrusion of the real into the symbolic. Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic and the symbolic describes referential epiphanies in similar terms: The semiotic—i. e. the pre-oedipal, semi-

26 Lyotard, Différend 255.
articulated idiom of unconscious drives—is a disruptive force that occasionally breaks through the symbolic network of articulated language. In both authors, any contact with the extra-linguistic (or with the mode of discourse closest to it) is a quasi-religious intuition: it is impressive yet fleeting, no sooner expressed than betrayed.

Admittedly, it is odd to suggest that realistically-oriented postmodernist art shares with contemporary theory the belief that world and text interface through mystical revelations. Still, this non-positivistic approach marks the specificity of pragmatic realism with regard to earlier referential texts. Realism in the present corpus does not merely scan appearances. It describes how perceptions and meaning are constructed (and deconstructed) in a social environment that does not lend itself to totalizing mappings. In this context, elements connoting the spectrality of the real (magic; the gothic), though alien to classical realism, act as guarantors of referentiality. They signal the limits of documentary perception. Secondly, highlighting these texts’ epiphanic moments leads us to nuance the authors’ presumed dedication to praxis. We will indeed see below that pragmatism in the present case does not boil down to a calculus of efficient gestures. It remains troubled by questions about totalizing meanings and goals—issues that are the objects of the mysterious revelations.

In his discussion of postmodernism Fredric Jameson shows how documentary discourse and residues of mysticism may indeed paradoxically coexist within contemporary referential art. He argues that photorealist paintings—art works obsessively concerned with reproducing the phenomenal world—are imbued with a contemplative atmosphere which he calls the postmodern sublime. As fragmentary snapshots of (post)industrialism, these paintings manifest their inability to make present what Jameson, in a Marxist perspective, regards as the underlying referential ground of their world—the “impossible totality” of its social relations. This fascinating entity is only glimpsed spectrally: it shines through the cracks of the dysfunctional cityscape.

Jameson regards photorealism’s epiphanies as manifestations of a romantic structure of feelings: In photorealist works, the postindustrial city supersedes romantic nature as the object of sublime fascination. Yet if we focus on fiction, epiphanies pointing to an underlying real

suggest instead a modernist filiation. Proust, Joyce or Woolf’s characters await revelations that might redeem the dreariness of the everyday. Pragmatic realism appropriates this modernist topos, yet re-enacts it at a different level on a scale of transcendence and immanence. Ihab Hassan has made transcendence and immanence defining features respectively of modernism and early postmodernism. His argument can, I think, be extended to include contemporary referential fiction. In Hassan’s logic, modernist epiphanies aim for objects beyond the world.29 Proustian involuntary memory, as Samuel Beckett describes it, offers glimpses of “an extratemporal essence,”30 allowing its recipient to become an “extratemporal being.”31 Likewise, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus imagines a telephone network putting him through to God himself—to “Edenville. Aleph alpha: nought nought, one.”32 On the contrary, high postmodernism—John Cage’s musical happenings, for instance—abolishes the modernist romancing of a Platonic afterworld. Its ethos is what Hassan calls “indeterminance”—the playful enjoyment of immanent, indeterminate experience.33

Pragmatic realism, on the other hand, pursues neither transcendent absolutes nor the ecstasy of indeterminance. Its object is the ghostly presence of an immanent totality—the spectral presence of the extra-linguistic real. Its full revelation is not to be hoped for, particularly in a culture that, as Jameson points out, makes the deliquescence of meaning an aesthetic thrill.34 Yet characters in pragmatic realism feel vindicated at least to raise questions about the survival of immanent values. Their concern with meaning manifests itself in a thematic of temporary revelations and nostalgia. Revelation and the receding therefrom is the keynote of DeLillo’s narrative of the 1951 play-off game in which the Giants defeated the Dodgers. This historical match culminated with a miraculous referential event: the Thomson-Branca home-run—a gesture that federated the whole country. The positive import of the event is anticipated early on in the depiction of young Cotter Martin’s gate-crashing run toward the Polo Grounds’ bleachers. The young man’s

31 Beckett 75.
33 Hassan 92.
34 Jameson 10.
flight is a perfectly meaningful event in itself: it “reveals some clue to being”35 and allows the young runner “to open to the world.”36 The remainder of the novel shows characters attempting to recapture this privileged moment, for instance by appropriating the baseball that scored the home-run and was presumed lost. Nick Shay, who has bought what he thinks is the prized item, clutches it in his fist during sleepless nights. This materially embodied nostalgia is typical of pragmatic realism: aspirations focus not on transcendent values but on items or persons that symbolize the reconstitution of the immanent totality. Characters attempt to retrieve people or things forgotten or lost. In The Woman Warrior, Kingston collects memories of her aunt, who became pregnant out of wedlock and was driven to suicide by patriarchal Chinese village society. Ellroy seeks the figure of his dead mother. The desire for a reconstituted life world is the more moving as it is inevitably frustrated. The promise of immanent closure recedes into ghostliness and loss.

The dialogization of reference
The previous discussion has highlighted the non-positivistic, even magic-realist dimension of reference in pragmatic realism. However, we must bear in mind that the texts discussed in the present pages resort for the most part to discourses—documentary description, local-color realism, social history—that perpetuate the referential ambitions of classical realism. In most cases, they endorse the realist reading contract of these constituent idioms. Thus, they differ less than might be expected from the kind of minimally dialogized postmodern realist writing embodied in Raymond Carver’s stories, for instance (see Peter Boscor’s discussion in the present volume). Even Kingston’s text, in spite of its magic-realist affiliation, is for the most part a documentary memoir.

On the other hand, the very concept of spectral reference implies that the texts cannot limit themselves to homogeneous realism. The ambition to grasp the real as an immanent totality compels them to swerve from realist verisimilitude. The objects the writers attempt to represent “out-imagin[e] the mind,” as Klara Sax puts it in Underworld, referring to mass nuclear destruction.37 They exceed the horizon of perception and language and thus force the texts to switch toward

35 DeLillo 13.
36 DeLillo 13.
37 DeLillo 76.
discourses (the gothic, the sublime) that aim beyond the imitation of the phenomenal world.

In DeLillo, the dialectic opposing realist everydayness to unrepresentable underworlds shapes the lives of the novel’s referential questers—Nick Shay, Klara Sax, Lenny Bruce. Nick likes to introduce himself by means of a formula of carefully measured ambiguity: He lives “a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix,” like “someone in the Witness Protection Program.”³⁸ To most observers, his goal is to “liv[e] responsibly in the real.”³⁹ Yet the second half of his introductory formula hints at the disquieting memories of his past murder conviction. As a teenager, he served a prison sentence for helping a heroin addict kill himself. His brother Andy compares Nick’s mind to a “black box,” a “flight recorder” that “metaphysicians of the future” will only be able to interpret after his death.⁴⁰ To his wife Marian, he is a “demon husband”–a gothic figure.⁴¹

Likewise, DeLillo presents Klara Sax and Lenny Bruce within a finely textured realist background. Klara’s development is charted through historically specific scenes spanning four decades. Lenny appears in chapters offering a scrupulous reconstruction of the early 1960s. Yet both of them are obsessed with the sublimity of nuclear annihilation, which risks wiping out everydayness forever. In his stage act, Lenny constantly repeats the phrase “[w]e are all gonna die!”—giving voice to a boundless terror, both devastating and fascinating.⁴² Klara’s art displays a more serene form of the sublime. By painting over the bodies of hundreds of decommissioned B-52 bombers, she creates a spectacle in which both grandeur and everyday details have their place. On the one hand, she showcases the killing machines in an aesthetically sublimated landscape. On the other, the labor invested into this work of art revives the “element of felt life”—the small narratives—behind the weapons systems.⁴³ This healing gesture matches the sculptor’s romanticized view of the Cold War. To Klara, the airplanes evoke a time of paradoxical security, when stratospheric custodians roamed the skies, exerting a “meaningful power.”⁴⁴

³⁸ DeLillo 66.
³⁹ DeLillo 82.
⁴⁰ DeLillo 447.
⁴¹ DeLillo 261.
⁴² DeLillo 506-07; emphasis in original.
⁴³ DeLillo 77.
⁴⁴ DeLillo 77.
DeLillo’s characterization strategy embodies dialogism at the psychological level: It presupposes that there will always be a plurality of subject positions toward the horizon of the real—fear and morbid prurience in Lenny’s case, romance in Klara’s, wide-eyed false consciousness in Nick’s. Thus, as Bakhtin would put it, the universe of Underworld cannot be phrased “monologically,” through one single character’s voice and world view. Each of the world’s fragments is dialogically related to a remainder of the real that has to be uttered in other idioms, in an unresolved dialogue. One might on first inspection believe that Underworld crudely contrasts the voices of authentic referential questers—Klara, Lenny, Nick, Acey Greene, Ismael, Sister Grace—with the lies and paranoia of Cold-War strategists such as J. Edgar Hoover. Yet dialogization requires that even Hoover’s world view carry its modicum of wisdom. The FBI chief’s doom-laden musings—his fascination for paintings such as Pieter Bruegel’s The Triumph of Death—make visible an otherness without which the novel would recede into the triviality of the everyday. Hoover’s obsessions are noxious not in themselves but in so far as the FBI chief fashions them into a body of monological knowledge. Dialogical otherness—the Bakhtinian equivalent of Derrida’s spectrality—is the root of the atmosphere of incompleteness and mystery that suffuses realist descriptions in DeLillo, Kingston and Ellroy.

On first inspection, this polyphony differs little from modernist multifocalization or postmodernist heterotopia. In Bakhtinian terms, one might argue that texts straying from monovocalism may not legitimately be called realistic. I believe on the contrary that the present corpus illustrates the workings of a genuinely realist polyphony. One dialogic pattern it resorts to might be called interstitial referentiality. Unlike in classical documentary films or naturalist fiction, referential data is not forced on the reader by an authoritative narrator. It appears in the margins of a main narrative that may not itself lay claim to realist verisimilitude. Kingston’s Chinese fables, though steeped in the supernatural, reveal the inequalities of traditional Chinese society. Ellroy’s narrative abides by the genre clichés of the police procedural. Yet it also casually documents the social discontents of 1940s and 50s L. A.,

45 Mikhaïl Baktine, La poétique de Dostoïevski, transl. Isabelle Kolitcheff, preface by Julia Kristeva.
46 See Bakhtin, Dialogic, 411; Poétique 35-36, 51.
47 DeLillo 50.
48 See Bakhtine, Poétique 47.
thus painting for its readers the real-life backdrop of noir narratives. DeLillo’s novel achieves a similar effect by its very bulk. On the one hand, its Dos-Passos-style interweaving of multiple narratives constitutes a deliberately artificial, defamiliarizing device. On the other, its mapping of postmodern everydayness is carried out on such a scale that numerous flickers of referential disclosure appear in between the meshes of the textual skeleton.

Overall, the dialogization of reference in pragmatic realism obeys what we may call a centripetal logic, distinct from the centrifugal movement of magic realism. Bakhtin uses these two terms in order to describe competing dynamics within texts. Unifying norms—the “centripetal forces of language”⁴⁹—vie against the “centrifugal” action of dialogism, polyphony or heteroglossia.⁵⁰ Though the Russian critic favors polyphony, he depicts centripetal forces as useful regulatory mechanisms.⁵¹ In this light, pragmatic realist texts, instead of embracing open-ended polyphony, display voices that circle around an elusive point of reference. On the one hand, the texts’ voice of authority is internally dialogized. Its components, to use Lyotard’s terminology, are involved in a “différend”—a conflict of jurisdiction within discourse preventing them from fully making present their object of enquiry.⁵² On the other, the texts’ splintered voices are expected to converge toward the horizon of the real—toward the same receding object (the unity of American experience in DeLillo; the empowerment of Chinese-American women in Kingston; the murdered mother in Ellroy).

The centripetal dialogization of reference is the more noticeable in Ellroy’s My Dark Places and in Kingston’s Woman Warrior as these nonfiction texts rely on discourses endowed with strongly referential reading contracts—police reports in Ellroy, social history in Kingston, autobiography in both authors. In Ellroy, neither factually based police investigations nor the author’s recollections bring back the figure of Jean Ellroy. The police language screens out the author’s affects toward his mother. The autobiographical account is steeped in the author’s ambivalent feelings towards her, and inflected by the lies spread by his father. In Kingston, patriarchy impedes the reconstruction of Chinese women’s history. The narrator realizes that the witnesses of her aunt’s suicide—both men and women—have interiorized patriarchal prohibi-

⁴⁹ Bakhtin, Dialogic 270.
⁵⁰ Bakhtin, Dialogic 272.
⁵¹ Bakhtin, Dialogic 270.
⁵² Lyotard, Différend 9.
tions so thoroughly that they censor their own memories. The victim remains the “No-Name Woman”–the voiceless subject whose fate had long been a family secret, and whose life can only be reconstructed through hypotheses or fantasies.\textsuperscript{53} Conversely, as an autobiographical narrator, Kingston achieves considerable insight into Chinese-American family life. Yet her perspective is restricted by the fact that the young Kingston lived in a sheltered environment and that she was made to perceive the exterior world as ghostly and alien.

Centripetal polyphony is a fitting dialogic pattern for works that waver between heterotopian and homotopian ontologies–between the view of the world as multi-layered or unified. It need, however, not be construed as an epistemological deadlock. Pragmatic realist texts are based on an optimistic betting on time. Their narratives unfold according to an open cycle of approach and retreat. Characters yearn for an epiphany of the real that might be communicated with the immediacy of Searle’s “ostensive” demonstration.\textsuperscript{54} Yet they resign themselves at least provisionally to seeing referential strategies reabsorbed into the realm of the everyday. In My Dark Places, Ellroy, instead of reclaiming his mother’s presence, ends up writing a paean to the police investigators whose lives he can actually document. Similarly, Kingston starts writing about her aunt–a ghostly figure–but ends up depicting icons of feminine empowerment within her reach–her mother Brave Orchid, and, at the fantasy level, Mulan, the amazon warrior of Chinese folk tales or the warrior poetess Ts’ai Yen.

DeLillo’s Underworld mobilizes this dialectic of (non)-revelation in less optimistic terms. The gestures of renunciation that follow the impetus toward disclosure are tainted with existential inauthenticity. Klara wishes to keep the memories of the Cold War alive, yet her art is a commodified aestheticization of war. Lenny struggles against political doublespeak yet surrenders to self-indulgent despair. Nick explores psychological evil yet treasures the comforts of his upper-middle-class round of life. The ending of the novel indicates, however, that referential epiphanies that have outspent themselves may still be rekindled. The last chapter describes a would-be miracle: the ghost of Esmeralda, a young vagrant raped and murdered in the South Bronx tenements, flashes on a neighborhood billboard as subway trains go by. The miracle is most likely a fabrication–a game of smoke and mirrors engineered by Ismael Muñoz’s distraught graffiteros. In this guise, the

\textsuperscript{53} Kingston 1.  
\textsuperscript{54} Searle 80.
pseudo-epiphany offers a sentimental compensation to a disenfran-
chised crowd. Yet the skeptical Sister Edgar endorses the miracle. Its
ontological status is left in doubt, and the hope for immanent revelation
is not extinguished.

**Trauma, loss and authenticity**

What is at stake in the thwarted momentum of centripetal dialogi-
zation—in the approach to and recoil from referential epiphanies—is the
existential authenticity of pragmatic commitment. Ellroy’s and King-
ston’s works suggest that pragmatic texts bestow legitimacy on an act
of renunciation—the gesture by which characters settle down to values
that fall short of the promise implied in the short-lived epiphanies. This
narrative dynamic fits what Georg Lukács calls the novel of educa-
tion.\(^55\) For Lukács, novels display protagonists committed to a search
for authenticity within a degraded life world. Their quest is “demonic:”
It is unfulfilled and brings about the protagonists’ alienation.\(^56\) Char-
ters in *Bildungromane* eventually give up their quest and resign them-
selves to living according to the code of their environment. They
thereby achieve a paradoxical form a maturity—both a token of wisdom
and an acknowledgment of failure.\(^57\)

Lukács implies that protagonists may too easily forfeit their
“problematic” status—their existential dissatisfaction with the world.\(^58\)
They easily surrender to inauthenticity\(^59\)—to what Jean Paul Sartre
would call “bad faith.”\(^60\) In this light, the compromise with the world
staged in *Bildungsromane* can be premature and unearned. Pragmatic
realist texts fend off such a lapse into inauthenticity by their obsessive
emphasis on loss and trauma—respectively the acknowledgment of a
vanished plenitude and the memory of actual suffering. Kingston’s
characters struggle both with the loss of their homeland and with
patriarchal repression. Ellroy’s autobiographical persona, as he revisits
the L. A. settings of his childhood, remembers not only the death of his
mother but also a life of alienation under the aegis of a manipulative
father. DeLillo’s Nick Shay is haunted by the unexplained disappear-
ance of his own father—an event he interprets as a mob killing. Nick’s

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\(^{55}\) Georg Lukács, *La théorie du roman*, transl. Jean Clairevoye, with an introduction by Lucien

\(^{56}\) Lukács 98.

\(^{57}\) Lukács 131-33.

\(^{58}\) Lukács 73.

\(^{59}\) Lukács 143.

mother lives as an exile in her son’s and her daughter-in-law’s Phoenix house, uprooted from a Bronx neighborhood now devastated by poverty. Ismael Muñoz struggles against this devastation on a daily basis as he sells scrap metal or paints graffiti angels on tenement walls as mementos for dead neighborhood children.

Loss and trauma are, again, elements that pragmatic realism borrows from modernism. Managing historical trauma—the shock of the First World War, for instance—was a key concern for Anglo-American writers of the 1920s. Likewise, mid-twentieth-century writers and philosophers lamented the disappearance of a presumably organic past and its supersession by the very industrial society that precipitated world conflicts. Pragmatic realism differs from these earlier sources by representing trauma and loss through a logic of spectrality and, to borrow a fashionable term from chaos theory, fractality. By spectrality, I mean that anxiety in pragmatic realism issues as much from loss and trauma themselves as from the prospect of seeing these elements fade into a ghostly background. Hemingway’s Nick Adams, a modernist protagonist, has to struggle to “choke” his own mind in order to silence the memories of WWI battlefields. DeLillo’s characters, on the contrary, struggle to retrieve, not forget, increasingly elusive objects and experiences. Marvin Lundy, a baseball fanatic, has traced the Thomson/Branca baseball by means of film footage that he “rephotographed ... enlarged, repositioned, analyzed ... step-framed.” Yet he could only locate the approximate area in the bleachers where the ball vanished from view. Ironically, the person to whom he reports his efforts—Brian Glassic, Nick Shay’s friend—is concerned neither with baseball nor with the pathos of recollection. Similarly, Kingston’s The Woman Warrior raises the question whether the tragedies of the past—the death of the author’s aunt—are bound to re-emerge as comedy in the contemporary U.S. Whereas the text opened with the death of “No-Name Woman,” it closes with the bittersweet story of Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid’s sister, who tries to recover the husband of her youth, a man much younger than herself who has become an Americanized doctor. To the younger generation Moon Orchid’s request—and Brave Orchid’s relentless pursuit of the case—are pointless and embarrassing.

Fractality designates the process by which the texts refract and disseminate loss and trauma and by which these elements reappear

62 DeLillo 177.
seemingly at random like the motif of a Mandelbrot set. In Underworld, each allusion to loss, however discreet, evokes other types of loss, making up long chains of half-remembered suffering. For Nick Shay, the desire to own the Thomson/ Branca baseball connects to the loss of his father, to the decline of the Bronx’s white ethnic community, to the traumas of today’s South Bronx (“TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, abandonment at birth”)

and, ironically, to his present job as a waste manager, engineering the stashing away of obsolete commodities. Similarly, in Ellroy, the string of scattered clues, false leads and local-color details creates a structure in which the mother’s murder, committed by a nameless killer, resonates with other types of loss—the receding L. A. past and the writer’s sense of having been cheated of proper paternal mentoring.

The pragmatic turn
Maturity is achieved in pragmatic realism when the confrontation with trauma and loss empowers characters or narrators to make peace with or to reform their environment. At that point, Kingston’s, Ellroy’s and DeLillo’s protagonists reverse Lukács’s Bildungsroman pattern: Compromise is not an end point but the beginning of a course of action. The pragmatic commitment issuing therefrom unfolds along three axes: social (acting upon one’s environment); biographical (working to reform one’s life) and writerly (handling discourse as a pragmatic tool). Social activism in Underworld is embodied in the community work of South Bronx residents. In Kingston, the social activist is the writer’s mother—the middle-aged medical graduate who earns the respect of a patriarchal community. Biographical activism informs Ellroy’s and Kingston’s handling of their family legacy: their exploration of past traumas is an act of psychological exorcism meant to bring about changes in their own personalities.

Writerly pragmatism is the strategy that allows authors to pursue their activist agenda through several literary discourses, obeying seemingly incompatible generic conventions. Ellroy, Kingston and DeLillo’s works foster what Kenneth Burke calls “symbolic action”—the use of discourse as gesture or act. Such symbolic acts can be performed in idioms beyond realist representation. Ellroy’s writings, for instance, re-enact one resonant symbolic gesture through discourses endorsing

63 DeLillo 239.
64 Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (1941; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 8.
dissimilar reading contracts. When the autobiographical *My Dark Places* was published in 1997, it revealed that Geneva Hilliker Ellroy’s death had long been a recurrent concern in Ellroy’s previous fictions. Ellroy’s novels represent gender-based violence through a mixture of hard-boiled realism and baroque tableaux. These traumatic scenes are linked from novel to novel by thematic echoes, as if the writer were circling around a personal obsession. In light of *My Dark Places* readers realize that the murder narrated in the earlier novel *Clandestine* is an autobiographical projection of Ellroy’s childhood. Characters in *Clandestine* match Ellroy’s family configuration. In an Oedipal gesture, the author makes the father the central suspect—an element that speaks volumes about the writer’s imaginary but that the autobiography must invalidate. Thus, an autobiographical trauma is explored in turn through fiction and nonfiction.

DeLillo and Kingston make pragmatic empowerment through art a topic of metafictional reflection. *Underworld* describes art—Ismael’s graffiti, Klara’s sculptures, Lenny’s monologues, Acey Greene’s paintings—as political praxis. There is only a slight shift in emphasis between Ismael’s adventurous years as a graffitero in the New York subway and his present efforts as a social activist. Graffiti writing is carefully planned, illegal and glamorous. It allows urban dwellers to reshape the city in their own image. Ismael’s later commitments prolong this effort, albeit with a clearer awareness of the community’s needs. As the Esmeralda miracle reveals, this activism still includes graffiti among its tactics.

In *The Woman Warrior*, writerly empowerment is dealt with in passages depicting the shaping of the writer’s voice. In childhood recollections, Kingston explains that her mother cut the frenum of her daughter’s tongue, hoping that the latter might not be “tongue-tied.” 65 Ironically, in kindergarten, the young Kingston retreated into silence for several years. Later, she could only express herself in the voice of “a crippled animal running on broken legs.” 66 Psychologically, the discordant voice expresses the young woman’s difficulties in finding room for self-expression in a household dominated by her mother’s more resonant accents. Politically, the thwarted voice embodies the medium of a writer working at the crossroads of several traditions. Kingston makes this clear in the metafictional allegory that closes the novel—the story of poetess Ts’ai Yen, the author of “Eighteen Stanzas

65 Kingston 190.
66 Kingston 196.
for a Barbarian Reed Pipe. At twenty, Ts’ai Yen is captured by a Barbarian chieftain. She becomes pregnant by him, bears him two children and fights with the Barbarian army. Among the tribe, ambiguity reigns about what may pass as self-expression. Ts’ai Yen’s children use their mother’s Chinese only as “senseless sing-song words.” Ts’ai Yen herself initially believes that the Barbarian’s only music is the whistling of reed arrows. After she discovers the tribe’s actual flute melodies—beautiful, though still retaining the sharp reed accents—she fashions for herself a hybrid singing voice that merges the Chinese language and the Barbarian flutes. The anecdote reflects on the polyphony of Kingston’s text—it’s use of legends, biography, autobiography—yet it does so in a pragmatic framework. We understand that the memoir’s components are a set of heterogeneous gestures, each endowed with specific efficiency. The very publication of Kingston memoir testifies to the success of the emancipation strategy the text enacts.

The three writers’ discursive pragmatism resonates with the Anglo-Saxon theoretical writings that have developed after poststructuralism. In the late 1970s, Cornel West predicted a revival of pragmatist philosophy in Anglo-American thought. Fulfilling West’s diagnosis, theoreticians in Britain and the United States—neo-Marxists, feminists and theoreticians of ethnicity—have used French poststructuralist theories as tools enabling them to describe power relations. Some of the philosophical concerns of the French corpus—the Lacanian obsession with lack, the phenomenological reflections on being and language—have thereby been de-emphasized. The author most Anglo-Saxon theorists enthusiastically emulated was Michel Foucault, who developed a pragmatist paradigm of the workings of discourse in social formations. Discourse for Foucault is a socially situated set of practices. Its meaning resides not in propositional content or in the adequation to truth but in power effects and tactics. The theoreticians loosely labeled as New Historicists relied on Foucault’s model in order to elaborate a vision of society that might be called the pragmatic appa-

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67 Kingston 243.
68 Kingston 242.
ratus: The social world is a lattice of speech acts, generating power relations whenever such practices are mobilized.\textsuperscript{72}

It seems, however, awkward to describe Kingston, Ellroy and DeLillo both as literary offshoots of the neo-pragmatist revival and as realist writers. For philosophers, pragmatism’s speech-acts-based paradigm of language entails the rejection of the realist belief that discourse reflects an extralinguistic ground.\textsuperscript{73} I have suggested above that this dichotomy may be negotiated by arguing that the texts described here shift from a realism of truthful cognition to one of pragmatic expectation. The pursuit of the spectral real gives way to the evaluation of a workable course of action. Ironically, the neo-historicist view of social processes fulfills this pragmatic definition of realism. If a society’s culture consists in the enactment of power negotiations, efficiency becomes a criterion of realness. The pragmatic apparatus regulates itself by a calculus of realpolitik and a politics of what William James called “assertibility.”\textsuperscript{74}

I use the derogatory term realpolitik on purpose in order to point out that, for DeLillo, Kingston and Ellroy, the realism of pragmatic expectations is no full-fledged utopia. Pragmatism is existentially limiting in that it can only evaluate the power effects of social interactions. It can not validate the legitimacy of what passes for “expedient” or felicitous.\textsuperscript{75} Only a totalizing discourse has this prerogative. The texts analysed here acknowledge these limitations in that they present commitment as a policy by default. An aura of dissatisfaction or nostalgia clings to the depiction of praxis. In Kingston, Brave Orchid’s achievements as a doctor occur only during a transitory period of emancipation. The job is meant to provide for Brave Orchid’s income as she waits to join her husband in the United States. There, she devotes herself to patriarchally sanctioned laundry work. Brave Orchid’s empowerment, which seemed symbolically to counterbalance the death of Kingston’s aunt, is therefore relegated to a nostalgic past. Her daughter catches glimpses of her mother’s moment of autonomy only when Brave Orchid, “[o]nce in a long while” takes out her medical diploma from its protective casing.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in Rorty 126.
\textsuperscript{75} Rorty 127.
\textsuperscript{76} Kingston 67.
Similarly, in *Underworld*, pragmatic work occurs in an atmosphere of urban doom or, conversely, inchoate utopianism. On first inspection, De Lillo’s South Bronx activists embody the ideals of Foucault’s pragmatist micropolitics. They are engaged in self-organised community efforts—raising funds by recycling waste and keeping track of the neighborhood’s derelict. Yet there is powerlessness behind the good will. This imbalance manifests itself at the pragmatic level by the magnitude of the task at hand and at the existential level by the fact that the nuns who contribute to the charity work have a problematic relation to faith. Grace Fahey is all dedication yet her generosity lacks spiritual insight. Sister Edgar, on the contrary has a vivid metaphysical conscience yet her meditations focus on evil itself. Pragmatic commitment, for her, stems from the fascination of exploring a world she views as an emanation of Satan.

While DeLillo’s, Kingston’s and Ellroy’s texts cannot overcome the limitations of pragmatic commitment, they do deploy strategies that smooth over the absence of utopian fulfillment. This work of containment is effected by the pattern of dialogization most central to these works—that which opposes the realism of pragmatic expectations to the phenomenological contemplation of the spectral real. By this, I mean that praxis and the contemplation of referential epiphanies function as dialogized voices, each compensating for the other’s lack of closure. In this way, the texts avoid drifting either into a Jeremiad of the lost totality or into an ethos of blind expediency that fails to do justice to what Richard Rorty dismissively calls the “sense of strangeness of the world”\(^77\)—the spectrality of the real.

The three texts’ open endings illustrate this interplay of utopianism and praxis. They are phrased in the optative mode, holding in precarious balance the call to action and the awareness of unrealized hope. The last pages of Kingston’s memoir are, among the three, the most serene. Ts’ai Yen, the poetess, has heard the Barbarian flutes “yearning for a high note, which they found at last and held.”\(^78\) This epiphanic moment empowers Ts’ai Yen’s own poetic gift. In turn, the narrative of the genesis of the “Barbarian” songs serves as a practical model for further artistic vocations (the reader’s, possibly). However, no poetic epiphany seems able singlehandedly to ground a final course of praxis: the flutes’ high note, though inspiring, is “an icicle in the

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77 Rorty 129.
78 Kingston 243.
desert”–distanced into a chilling sublimity.\textsuperscript{79} It offers no objectifiable fulfilment. Likewise, Ellroy’s autobiography states the necessity to pursue the pragmatic quest. At the end of a failed investigation, and still struggling with an incomplete process of self-examination, the writer states: “I will not let this end.”\textsuperscript{80} The epilogue of \textit{Underworld} spectacularly voices this yearning for significant closure, along with the awareness of its impossibility. Sister Edgar visits a web site that displays footage of nuclear explosions. The serial images of mass death slowly gives way to the word “Peace.”\textsuperscript{81} The passage fulfills a wish expressed earlier in the novel: seeing the complex human world subsumed under “a single word.”\textsuperscript{82} The epilogue surprises its readers, however, by settling for peace–as opposed to death–for its final pronouncement. Yet ‘peace’ is evidently not a statement of fact: it is a motto for action. Thus, the last sentence obeys the logic of pragmatic commitment, which requires making a wager on time: it voices the hope that a chain of felicitous gestures may one day bring about a state of the world endowed with immanent meaning.

\textsuperscript{79} Kingston 243.
\textsuperscript{81} De Lillo 827.
\textsuperscript{82} DeLillo 295.