

Introduction

The New Normal: Polycrisis in America

Is America in the early twenty-first century an America in a state of crisis? While the nation has experienced numerous periods of instability since its founding, there is no denying that the first decade of the new millennium has been a time of extraordinary upheaval for the country as a whole. Indeed, the United States has in recent years faced a series of major crises—political, economic, social, environmental and ideological—that have left the nation in a state of prolonged shock. The burst of the ‘dot-com bubble’ in 2000 marked a first, significant blow to the financial sector, hinting at an underlying weakness and volatility of a financial system increasingly built on risk. The following year, America would be tested in ways no one could have foreseen; the events taking place on September 11 caused unprecedented trauma for the nation, scarring not only the skyline of New York City but America’s sense of safety and its narrative of exceptionalism. As Ulrich Beck explains, the attacks “gave rise to a universal awareness of the vulnerability of the West, notwithstanding its economic and military superiority” (14). The years following 9/11 were marked by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conflicts which have raised profound questions concerning America’s core values and ideology as well as its place in the world. In 2008, the collapse of Wall Street investment bank Lehman Brothers, a giant deemed to be TBTF (“too big to fail”), triggered a financial crisis and recession of a magnitude unseen since the Great Depression. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment fell for an astounding twenty-five consecutive months starting in January 2008; the total job losses amounted to almost 8.8 million (Blinder 11). Millions of homeowners, many of whom fell victim to the subprime mortgage scheme, faced foreclosure and

eviction.¹ The first decade of the new millennium has also seen a growing sense of alarm concerning the calamitous impact of climate change and an increased awareness of the fragility of our planet. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf coast from central Florida to Texas, causing over 1300 casualties, making it “one of the deadliest natural disasters in the history of the United States” (FEMA). Besides the terrifying destruction on American soil, the storm also shattered the illusion that the United States would be able to deal with the consequences of a disaster of this scale in an efficient and dignified manner.

The second decade of the twenty-first century was equally turbulent. A series of terrorist attacks shell-shocked the Western world, which was additionally struggling to deal with a global refugee crisis. These past years have also seen a deeply troubling surge in racial tension in the United States, with a number of disturbing instances of police brutality against African Americans succeeded by waves of major protests and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (protests which reached a peak in 2020, following the brutal killing of George Floyd). This tense and volatile climate was only amplified by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, whose presidency has given rise to unprecedented conflict and disapproval on a national and international level. In fact, it is difficult to recall a period in which the so-called “United” States have appeared more politically, ideologically and socio-economically divided than they do today. Finally, the recent coronavirus pandemic has triggered widespread and unhinged panic, highlighting the risks of a hypermobile world population as well as the human propensity towards irrational and xenophobic responses when faced with existential anxiety.

1 A dangerous proportion of the securities traded in the years before the crash were based on the now infamous subprime mortgages, high-interest rated loans that were given to people who clearly did not have the financial means to pay off their debt. The financial instruments that had emerged in the banking sector in the new millennium, derivatives such as credit default swaps (CDS) and collateral debt obligations (CDO), essentially enabled the banks that offered these ludicrous mortgages to spread and thereby—theoretically—reduce their risks. Consequently, the damage, when the value of these subprime mortgages eventually collapsed in 2008, was enormous and had an impact of previously unseen proportions.

The onset of the twenty-first century has thus been marked by a ubiquitous sense of calamity within America (and beyond). Former president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, uses the term “polycrisis” to refer to this current phenomenon of there being several interconnected crises of a widespread impact within a brief time span. These are crises that “have not only arrived at the same time”, but “[t]hey also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people” (Juncker). In his book *Criticism, Crisis and Contemporary Narrative* (2011), Paul Crosthwaite makes a similar observation when he writes that “it often seems that the horizons of everyday life are defined, today, by an overlapping series of crises” (3). Likewise, in 2005, James Howard Kunstler predicted that America will be struggling to deal with the “converging catastrophes of the twenty-first century”—“world-altering forces, events, and changes will interact synergistically, mutually amplifying each other to accelerate and exacerbate the emergence of meta-problems” (2).

It is crucial to stress just how profound the impact of this prolonged period of upheaval has been on the American psyche. Referring to the tragic events of that September morning in 2001, Wendell Berry remarks on “the unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended that day” (qtd. in Gray 26). And indeed, I would argue that the trauma of this attack has prompted a more general decline of optimism and of a trust in progress—those quintessential qualities in which Americans have long prided themselves. The contemporary period has been marked by what Pico Iyer calls an “undercurrent of anxiety” (*Global Soul* 15), a nervousness that permeates American life and that keeps the nation on its toes. As much as we may have praised the processes of globalization that have so profoundly altered the way we live and interact with one another, there is also the awareness that “a small world is a precarious one; and in our closely linked planet, a fire in one place soon became a blaze in another” (Iyer, *Global Soul* 14). Ulrich Beck contends that the “risk society” that he famously identified and defined in 1986 has now evolved to a “world risk society” (9). “Each nation has become the next-door neighbor of every other”, Beck writes, “and shocks in one part of the planet are transmitted with extraordinary speed to the whole population of the earth” (12). What is unique about

this historical moment, according to Beck, is that “[o]n the one hand, (unintentional) large-scale risks (climate change) are gaining prominence; on the other hand, the anticipation of the new kind of threats emanating from (deliberate) terrorist attacks represents a persistent public concern” (15). It is precisely this notion that catastrophe, in one form or another, can strike at any moment which causes us to feel an ongoing and at times paralyzing sense of fear. Furthermore, there is no denying that we are essentially defenseless to many of the threats that we are facing today. The constant and unpredictable terrorist threat, in particular, has led to an “endemic uncertainty” (4), as Zygmunt Bauman’s terms it in *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007). As a result of this sustained feeling of precarity in our society, there is now “a population horrified by its own undefendability and obsessed with the tightness of its frontiers and the security of the individuals living inside them” (*Liquid Times* 7), Bauman notes. In this period of instability and disquietude, the longing for security has indeed manifested itself with renewed urgency—and at times in concerning forms, as the global resurgence of conservative and right-wing ideology suggests. Ulrich Beck even argues that “[s]ecurity is displacing freedom and equality from the highest position on the scale of values” (9).

That writers feel compelled to respond to this acute atmosphere of crisis should hardly come as a surprise. In fact, as Christopher J. Walsh succinctly puts it, “American writers have historically been charged with picking up the check when the nation finds itself in a crisis, and in these situations, succeeding generations of novelists attempt to get to the very root of the malaise affecting the national consciousness” (254). Of the multitude of crises the United States has faced since 2000, there are two particular crises that appear to have had the deepest impact on cultural production—the first one being 9/11.

Post-9/11 Crisis Narratives

In the months and years after the traumatic events of that September morning, a remarkable corpus of fiction and non-fiction narratives indeed developed, filled with stories that all try to come to terms with the trauma inflicted on America. In *After the Fall* (2011), Richard Gray

explains that the cataclysmic events of that day “are as much part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” (24). The psychological impact of September 11 reverberated far beyond the borders of Manhattan and Arlington; America, as an entire nation, felt violated and hit at the heart of its identity. Don DeLillo, one of many writers who centered a plot around 9/11 (his 2007 novel *Falling Man*), memorably claimed in an essay that “for many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment” (“In the Ruins of the Future”). In works of fiction such as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Good Life* (2006) by Jay McInerney, *The Zero* (2006) by Jess Walter and *Terrorist* (2006) by John Updike, the terrorist attacks of 2001 form a core element of the plot. The commercial success of these and other 9/11 novels clearly revealed that the nation was craving stories that addressed the traumatic events as well as the aftermath, and that could, perhaps, help make sense of senseless. Yet critics have highlighted the inherent difficulty of translating the horror of the attacks and the psychological repercussions into narrative form. *The Economist’s* R.B. distills three reasons why novels directly responding to the events of 9/11 are prone to disappoint or even fail.

The first is that the attack on the World Trade Centre was such a huge and overpowering event that it often overshadows and dominates the fictional elements of a novel: literary novelists normally shy away from choosing such a big and unbelievable event as the backdrop to a story. ... The second is that all fiction of every genre hinges around some kind of crisis, internal or external, that a book has to see its way through. This can take many forms. But 9/11 is in a sense a bigger crisis than many novels can contain or capture: it’s a situation where truth is both bigger and stranger than fiction. ... The third thing that makes it hard to write a successful novel about 9/11 is simply that it’s too soon. ... It is hard to relay an event that many people still remember so clearly—even if, by contrast, those vivid impressions are one reason why 9/11 books have such an audience.

And yet, despite these undeniable difficulties of narrativizing a culturally momentous event such as 9/11, many writers felt compelled to try.² As Kristiaan Versluys notes in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), “[i]n their ongoing missions to interpret the culture and to provide points of view from which to approach it, [novelists] have no choice but also to confront the signal event that reorients the culture and marks it in its deepest substratum” (12). It appears that those works of fiction that critics deemed to be most successful in representing the unspeakable trauma of that Tuesday morning were those that approached the events most cautiously and obliquely. As Versluys puts it,

... the best 9/11 novels are diffident linguistically. On the whole, the narratives shy away from the brute facts, the stark “donnée” of thousands of lives lost. As an event, 9/11 is limned as a silhouette, expressible only through allegory and indirection. (14)

The memory of witnessing the event, of actually *seeing* the tragedy unfold—even if for most people this happened (luckily) only via their screens—meant that there was not only less need for storytelling relying on direct and explicit imagery of the event, but perhaps even a downright refusal to endure it, again. This may also explain why Oliver Stone’s blockbuster movie *World Trade Center*, released less than five years after the cataclysmic events, had a hard time winning over both critics and the public. Not only did it force viewers to live through the attacks in painstaking detail through the perspective of first responders, but the storyline, oozing with patriotism and dramatic performances (first and foremost by leading actor Nicolas Cage), represented a Hollywood spin of an event that was still much too raw and vivid in people’s minds. Compared with filmmaking, then, fiction writing had the advantage of allowing the “primal terror” (DeLillo, “Ruins”) of that day to occupy a more liminal, nuanced space, that the public may be more receptive towards.

2 To gain more insights into post-9/11 fiction and other cultural productions, refer to Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), Kristiaan Versluys’s *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) as well as *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television* (2015), edited by Paul Petrovic.

Crunch Lit

Besides 9/11, the other national crises in the new millennium that prompted American writers to pen and paper to such a degree was the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. Of all the crises that America has faced since the year 2000, the economic downturn that started in 2008 was one of those that had the most direct and tangible consequences for a vast number of American citizens.³ And yet, despite this very palpable experience of the crisis in their everyday lives, most Americans felt utterly puzzled as to how a disaster of this scale could have developed. This inability to fully comprehend the catastrophic events that unfolded in 2008 and 2009 was due, on the one hand, to the complexity of the actual financial mechanisms at play, and on the other to a lack of transparency by the people in charge on Wall Street as much as on Capitol Hill. This explains why a new appetite for literature, both fiction and non-fiction, that elucidated the complex workings of the financial sector and that offered more relatable narratives of the credit crunch, emerged in the recession years. As Katy Shaw points out, one manifestation of this literary interest in finance was the popularity of financial confession narratives that provided an insider glimpse into the financial institutions where the crisis unfolded. These semi-autobiographical texts, such as Tetsuya Ishikawa's *How I Caused the Credit Crunch: An Insider's Story of the Financial Meltdown* (2009), were "concerned with explaining behaviour, justifying actions and repositioning prominent individuals as moral agents in the wake of the crisis" (Shaw 7). Documentaries like *Inside Job* (2010) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) also grappled with the details of the crash, offering a critical reflection of the events and called out the culprits of the disaster. It did also not take long for fiction writers, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, to respond to the economic turmoil as well. The drama unfolding on Wall Street and quickly spreading to financial sectors abroad indeed offered fertile ground for fiction writers and cinematographers alike. In her study of the so-called

3 The other one being the coronavirus pandemic that hit in early 2020, the literary response to which will be interesting to observe in the coming years.

‘Crunch Lit’ genre, Katy Shaw argues that by “[s]tretching the crisis away from facts and figures onto a broader pictorial canvas that illustrates individual impacts, experiences and consequences, these new writings speak to a public desire for new narratives about this period” (13). Novels such as John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012), Sebastian Faulks’s *A Week In December* (2009), Adam Haslett’s *Union Atlantic* (2010) and Alex Preston’s *The Bleeding City* (2010) personalized the credit crunch by telling the fictional stories of, on the one hand, individuals inside the financial institutions, who are often presented as either modern-day villains or ignorant bystanders, as well as of those tragically affected by the socio-economic aftermath of the meltdown. Filmmakers similarly recognized the dramatic potential of the housing bubble and the financial crisis, with films like *99 Homes* (2014) and *The Big Short* (2015) painting a perceptive and chilling picture of the subprime debacle and its consequences.

It should be noted that this new literary genre that developed post-2008, aiming to represent the financial crisis and the subsequent recession head-on, has in recent years received increased critical attention, with Katy Shaw’s book *Crunch Lit*, published in 2015, being the most comprehensive study of the genre to date.⁴ Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski’s book *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television* (2013) widened the focus by examining the representation of the financial crisis in the arts in general. David Mattingly’s contribution in this collection, “Crash Fiction: American Literary Novels of the Global Financial Crisis”, presents an important overview of the emerging fiction of finance.

Engaging with the National “structure of feeling”⁵

When critics discuss the literary response to the crises and periods of upheaval that America has experienced in the twenty-first century, they

4 Other pertinent studies include Hamilton Carroll and Annie McClanahan’s “Fictions of Speculation: Introduction” (2015) and Laura Finch’s “The Un-real Deal: Financial Fiction, Fictional Finance, and the Financial Crisis” (2015).

5 Gray, *After the Fall* (24).

primarily turn their attention to exactly these two distinct categories that I have sketched out on the previous pages: on the one hand, the post-9/11 novels that gave voice to a nation derailed by the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and on the other, the "Crunch Lit" books that captured the gradual moral decline of the financial sector and the havoc of the market meltdown. Yet, in my opinion, what has been widely overlooked is the fact that many other novels written in recent years have engaged with the ongoing climate of crisis in a more nuanced and subtle manner. The novels discussed in this book engage with the atmosphere of uncertainty and the anxiety resulting from the multiple and often overlapping crises of the new millennium. What these novelists are focusing in on is less the cataclysmic event itself, than the lingering sense of malaise and disquietude left in its wake. These narratives offer a portrait of a fragmented and unsettled nation; they register and urge us to confront the cracks in our society's foundation. Christopher J. Walsh is right when he claims that "one of the highest accolades we could bestow upon a writer is that they produce something that makes us see the world differently, that makes us reconsider our relationship to our culture and our environment" (271). Never is there more of a need, and more potential, for writers to produce stories that cut to the very core of uncomfortable truths than in times of national upheaval. Naomi Klein argues that, following a crisis, a state of shock sets in and "we lose our narrative, we lose our story, we become disorientated" (qtd. in Shaw 14). Such a moment of rupture can become a catalyst for human beings to question perceived certainties, to interrogate and reappraise the value and belief systems which always appeared reliable and stable but which suddenly come undone—and fiction offers an ideal space for precisely such probing and questioning to occur. The question that imposes itself, however, is *how* novelists can convey the prolonged sense of insecurity and underlying feeling of disorientation that has marked the collective experience in millennial America.

The Ubiquity of the Home and Mobility Binary

This book takes as its central argument that contemporary novelists have managed to express the malaise and sense of contingency felt in the crisis-ridden historical present by exploring two distinct tropes in their storytelling: home and mobility. I contend that the image of home—and related concepts such as domesticity, belonging and stability—as well as the notion of mobility—connected to the ideas of progress, the journey and dislocation—have been utilized by novelists to address and accentuate the anxious and uncertain post-9/11 esprit. It is crucial to point out that these two opposing and yet also interrelated concepts occupy a central position in the American mindset and the nation's cultural history more broadly. Indeed, it could be argued that “the painful dilemma occasioned by these twin desires” (23), as Terri Witek puts it, can be traced throughout American history like a red thread, weaving its way all the way back to the country's colonial beginnings. Richard Ford, one of the authors whose fiction is examined in this book, has repeatedly pondered these contradictory impulses lying at the heart of the nation's mindset: “America is a country of more rationalized cognitive dissonance than almost any I know” (67), he writes in his essay “An Urge for Going”. Ford also contends that this “dissonance” springs out of the nation's unique founding story: in my interview with the author, he referred to a “schismatic torque between a European past in which we stay in our village, and the way in which we look westward across this great continent. And the pull of those two things is where literature comes from” (Personal Interview). Ford here suggests that fiction writing is not only influenced by, but emerges out of, the friction of these ambiguous forces so deeply ingrained in American thinking. Through storytelling, writers can indeed explore and probe the tension between our innate longing for home and the need to remain on the move and progress. These antipodal tendencies, so intrinsic in the American spirit, are a favored subject in literature, as a glimpse at the American literary canon will easily reveal: from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), home and mobility permeate the stories that have shaped the