

**The Unlikely Blessings of Living on  
Borrowed Time in a Leased Land  
—Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish  
Policemen’s Union***

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**Abstract**

The culture of violence committed in the name of faith, a malady which plagues our world today, is the subject matter of Michael Chabon’s 2007 speculative fiction, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, which is based on the historical premise that Israel, in losing the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, was destroyed, and millions of Jewish refugees given temporary shelter in Alaska, on a 60-year lease with the United States of America. The novel opens in 2007, when the Reversion is to take effect, and Diasporic Jews once again face homelessness. Against this counterfactual background of collective anxiety, Chabon has his detective-protagonist follow a murder case only to unravel a conspiracy to “basically force [the] Messiah

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to come.” Recognized as one of the most important Jewish American writers of the present time, Chabon posits in his novel a provocative question by placing Jews in the awkward position presently occupied by the Palestinians: having to live on borrowed time, on land not their own, with Diaspora an everyday reality. How are peace and redemption possible under such circumstances, given that contingencies tend to divert history from rationally calculated paths onto unintentional detours? Chabon’s counterfactual fiction proffers a strident critique of religious fundamentalism in all its forms, especially fundamentalisms bound up with nationalism. Neither Diaspora nor Zionism guarantees Jews their long-awaited redemption; however, small-scale redemption is readily available when the redemptive fantasy is placed in suspension, thus opening up space for “the blessings of more life.”

**Key Words:** counterfactual, conspiracy, diaspora, fundamentalism, exceptionalism

These are strange times to be a Jew.  
—*The Yiddish Policemen's Union*  
(Chabon, 2007: 4)<sup>1</sup>

Four years after the 9/11 attacks, Philip Roth published *The Plot Against America* in which he reimagines a counterfactual scenario wherein, as a result of Franklin D. Roosevelt's failure to win the 1940 presidential election, the United States enters the Second World War in 1942 rather than in 1941. Due to this one-year delay anti-Semitism flourishes on American soil, culminating in the government's implementing two neo-Nazi programs that curtail the human rights of American Jews: the Just Folks Initiative, which takes Jewish children away from their families to be reeducated by Christian foster families, and the Homestead '42 Program, which relocates urban Jews to the Midwest. In speculating on the possibility that the US, which prides itself on its exemplary democracy and moral exceptionalism, is quite capable of turning itself into a neo-Nazi state, Roth uses a counterfactual narrative to expose a traumatic core of fear at the center of American democracy. This fear—whites' fear of Jews, or vice versa, among others—disrupts the exceptionalist narrative of the nation-state America has written for itself, displacing the ideology of democracy for all with the ideology of security for the majority, and in so doing undermining its claim to exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> Roth's fiction, with its

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<sup>1</sup> This statement, or its truncated form, "Strange times to be a Jew," appears at least six times in the novel (pages 4, 7, 13, 29, 112, 304), and constitutes a leitmotif of the novel. In her article fittingly entitled, "Strange Times to be a Jew: Alternative History After 9/11," Margaret Scanlan highlights the phrase, "strange times to be a Jew" (2011: 505), which she culls from Chabon's novel, to examine what political and ethical lessons can be derived when Chabon juxtaposes "the shock of 9/11 and moral outrage at the War on Terror" with the legacies of Holocaust (506). While Scanlan's argument is incisive, I agree with Alan Gibbs that Chabon's ambition goes beyond the juxtaposition of events, past and present, Jewish and non-Jewish, "as he uses the counterfactual mode as a means to draw parallels between and demonstrate the evils of all shades of fundamentalism" (2014: 222).

<sup>2</sup> American exceptionalism is a central myth or fantasy governing American's self-

speculative rewriting of the past, can be read not only as a critique of the present but also as a proposal for a turning away from and a suspension of a teleological and preemptive understanding of history. This rigid view of a nation's trajectory can lead to justifying taking drastic means to govern contingency and prevent alternative historical paths from being articulated.

Three years later in 2007, another Jewish American writer, Michael Chabon published *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, in which he imagines an interim Jewish settlement in Alaska rather than a Jewish state in Palestine. It is no coincidence that two of the most prominent Jewish American writers of their time have both taken up the Holocaust as their subject, while cloaking their inquiry into this subject behind the hypothetical question of a "what if" in plotting

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understanding, self-definition, and self-representation. Historically, there have been different claims about what constitutes the exceptionality of America: America is exceptional in the sense that it is exemplary, different, unique, and/or missionary. The idea that America is exceptional is a familiar, and very old theme in American literature. The famous "city on the hill" sermon, delivered by John Winthrop to his puritan followers, registers the early colonists' fervent belief that the new "city on the hill" that they were destined to build in the New World would be an exemplary community for the whole world to behold. At the heart of Winthrop's inspirational rhetoric lies a messianic streak, the belief that the young country could not only set itself up as an exemplary model to be emulated, but it is also its mission to further the moral and political emancipation of the world. In the nineteenth-century, American exceptionalism underwent a decisive shift when the "city on the hill" idiom is fused with the rhetoric that it is the young nation's "manifest destiny" to expand westward. However, the desire to expand did not end with the "closing" of the western frontier; it continues even today. The fusion of these two notions of American exceptionalism—as an example or as its mission—has launched the US into a series of wars, resulting, rather ironically, in its colonization of the native peoples, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War, the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the First Gulf War, and the War on Terror. Wherever there is a national crisis, the language of American exceptionalism is recycled both to assert America's hegemonic position in the global geopolitics and to justify America's domestic and international policies. For a critical survey of the historical development of American exceptionalism, including its cultural and theological meanings and the implications for reshaping the field of American Studies, please refer to Donald Pease's "Exceptionalism" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2007).

their alternate history novels. The “what if” scenario allows both writers to speculate on the difficult questions that the Holocaust has thrust upon human beings; namely, whether it could be possible for the Holocaust to happen elsewhere, perhaps even in the United States, and whether it is possible that humans may have failed to learn the lesson of the Holocaust; that is, history, traumatic as it is, maybe endlessly repeated, in different forms and guises. At the core of these questions lies the desire to search for an alternative to, or an exception from, what is perceived to be the norm of modernity—the pervasiveness of violence, a drive towards paralysis and death, and a homelessness that leads only to dead-ends. In a sense, both Roth and Chabon, in their different ways, believe in the possibility of humankind’s finding a different way of conducting ourselves and interacting with others, one that could lead to our intervening in, and suspending the logic of identity at the heart of, both the modern nation-state and liberal individualism. The concern of both these authors is that fantasies of exceptionalism ultimately encourage and endorse exclusionism and violence, even though they have trodden on divergent pathways and propose different critiques of the fantasies of exceptionalism.

In a way, both Roth’s and Chabon’s alternate-history novels can be regarded as responses to the tyranny of History; that is, its linearity and causality. At the root of what-if thinking, Adam Rovner posits, is a “serious impulse: to reconcile the role of chance with our ‘search for a useful past’” (2011: 131). Catherine Gallagher, in her seminal article, “Telling It Like It Wasn’t,” identifies two kinds of counterfactual narratives, one of which is organized “around those multiple forks or around repetitions with variations” (2010: 22) and the other of which follows easily identifiable “bi-linear structures” (23). It is the latter, with its highlighting the possibilities that unrealized pasts are still alive and even shaping the future (19), that largely accounts for the significant increase, both in number and in popularity, of counterfactual fictions in the past two decades. With its folding of multiple temporalities, counterfactual fiction proffers

a platform on which a form of historical thought attuned both for the contingency of the past and the plasticity of the future is dialectically performed. Given its speculation on “roads not taken”, as well as its increasing concern with possible roads that should be taken in the future, Rovner (2011) points out, counterfactual fiction is structured along two narrative possibilities, the “what could have been” and the “what must have been.”<sup>3</sup> The interfusing of these two narrative movements—a backward-looking movement and a forward-looking one—thus demands the reading of the counterfactual novel contrapuntally, recognizing in its insistence on contingency a desire to free itself from the burden of historical inevitability while simultaneously unearthing, behind its valorization of the exceptional, both a nostalgia for a different now and a yearning for a just future.

For Roth, however, the digression into the counterfactual “then”—the possibility that the US could have elected as president the arch-conservative and anti-Semitic Charles Lindberg and begun to persecute Jews during WWII, seems marked by a nostalgia for a factual “now”—world peace is only possible when the US assumes its guardianship—that reinforces the sovereignty of the US in the global power structure. In Roth’s novel, it is Americans’ collective amnesia of the young country’s proclaimed exceptionalism as the “leader the free world” that constitutes its naïve child narrator’s “perpetual fear” of the unforeseen. Chabon’s novel, in contrast, challenges America’s image of itself as an ideal democratic nation, while exposing the ideology of American exceptionalism as its rationale for imposing and defending, through violent means, the American way of life across the globe. Chabon’s rewriting of history,

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<sup>3</sup> While most scholars claim that counterfactual fiction explores the question of “what may have happened” if a foundational event should have gone awry, Adam Rovner argues that a serious impulse actually lies within this seemingly indulgence in the “what if.” He points out that this body of literature “exhume[s] the it-could-have-been-otherwise” that is buried “beneath an it-must-have-been-so” (2011: 149) in order to reconcile “chance” with “determinism” as the determining force in the making of history.

rather than celebrating an exceptional, preordained destiny of an individual or a people, accommodates chance and contingency while embracing life as it is, with its messiness, randomness, and singularity. Contingency spells, in this case, freedom, difficult and unpredictable as it is.

For Chabon, the detour into a counterfactual “then”—Israel’s defeat and the US’s decision to offer a portion of Alaska as an interim haven for Jews—does not end up putting either the US or the Jews back at the center stage of international politics. Rather, Chabon brings to the fore how this collective desire to be exceptional, and the strong will of a people to master its fate, can end in the perpetuation of violence and war, especially the kind of violence and war wielded in the name of justice or in the preemption of injustice. Roth ends *The Plot Against America* with Roosevelt’s being elected as President and the entry of the US into World War II, as if the course of History can be set right again once the US repents its isolationist policy and does the right thing: acting to defend the world against the evil of fascism. However, Chabon’s counterfactual imagination seems uninterested in either celebrating the global sovereignty of the US or defending the Zionist right of Return and the Jewish vision of redemption, whether personal or communal.

Roth, despite his love affair with the “what-if,” and despite his strident critique of the implicit racism of American society, ends up reaffirming a fundamental American fantasy of exceptionalism.<sup>4</sup> Chabon’s use of the “what-if,” however, is not an attempt to reinforce existing values and ideologies of the nation-state. Rather, he opens up the past to challenge two statist fantasies, the Zionist narrative of return, on the one hand, and the fantasy of American exceptionalism on the other. Moreover, in Chabon’s novel, even though everything is bound within the framework of grand

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<sup>4</sup> Paul K. Saint-Amour (2011) criticizes Roth, via citing Judith Butler, of creating in his *The Plot Against America* “a paralegal universe that goes by the name of law,” while privileging the supremacist role of the US in the making and defending of world order.

historical narratives, there is still room for small-scale redemption, as long as the “what if” scenario is activated and the momentum of thinking otherwise is maintained. It is, this paper argues, Chabon’s effort to articulate, within the inevitability of the historical given, the “what if,” that constitutes the main interest of Chabon’s counterfactual fiction.

In other words, Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is different from Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, for the latter channels its energies into imagining the probable persecution of Jewish Americans once the ideologies of American exceptionalism escalate and clash with American Jewish exceptionalism,<sup>5</sup> whereas the former focuses on those Jews who have not acquired American citizenship and, therefore, are “exceptional” simply because they live in a state of exception, being “stateless” individuals unclaimed by any nation-state. As such, Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* poses a question that Roth’s *The Plot Against America* does not raise: Is the nation-state indispensable for securing Jews security, happiness, and freedom? What options are available to a people that finds itself in a state of displacement, exiled both from home and the body politic, as disposable life? Is it possible for a large social group to survive this state of statelessness and then go beyond this status of diasporic aporia, to simply “live on,”<sup>6</sup> without the trappings of

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<sup>5</sup> American exceptionalism, especially its contemporary variant that construes and justifies U.S. imperialism as an indispensable measure to preserve world peace, is not the same thing as Jewish exceptionalism, especially its Zionist version that construes the Jews as the “chosen people” (Alam, 2010: 9) and justifies Palestine as their sole and God-given birthright. Similarly, Jewish exceptionalism also bears scanty resemblance to Jewish American exceptionalism, which simply means, as aptly captured in the title of Seymour Martin Lipset’s classical essay from 1991, “A Unique People in an Exceptional Country”; that is, America’s exceptional hospitality towards Jews provides fertile ground for the exceptional talents and intelligence of Jews to flower and thrive. For many Jewish Americans, so Christopher Buck writes, “American exceptionalism is coefficient with America’s ability to preserve and promote Jewish exceptionalism” (2015: 125).

<sup>6</sup> I’m here referring to Derrida’s notion of “living on,” as neither an issue of an individual’s survival nor as an articulation of an identity, but as an event, both lived



ideology or identification? If so, how?

These are the questions raised by Chabon's novel. Along this line of inquiry, in Section One, I analyze the two options available to Diasporic Jews outlined in Chabon's novel—assimilation and Zionism—so as to bring to the fore Chabon's critique of the Diaspora Jews' turn towards statist form of identification. Given that the Diasporic Jews' embrace of statism finds articulation in a Messianic narrative of redemption, I read this narrative of redemption, in Section Two, as a symptom that demands to be re-read to open alternative possibilities. In the final section, I return to flesh out the correlation between Chabon's embrace of the non-statist form of homecoming with the blessing of more life that Eric Santner has developed in his engaged reading of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Franz Rosenweig's theology.

## I. Death of a Messiah

Fear presides over these memories,  
perpetual fears.

—Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*  
(2004: 4)<sup>7</sup>

With a counterfactual premise as its historical background, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* draws on the conventions of the detective novel and gives readers a world-weary, cynical, tough-guy detective, Meyer Landsman, whose cynicism is reminiscent of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe.<sup>8</sup>

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and embodied, that binds the individual to the other in a relationship that approximates "love." See Derrida (1979).

<sup>7</sup> Henceforth all page references to novels under discussion will be given parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>8</sup> Avid readers of detective novels surely know that Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are two master writers of the genre, and they have populated their detective novels with the presence of their charismatic protagonists, veteran detectives Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe.

True to the formula of the hard-boiled detective novel, Landsman enters the novel thoroughly burnt out: a 44-year-old workaholic and alcoholic, depressed by his guilt-ridden memory of his father's suicide, his sister's sudden and enigmatic death, his wife's painful abortion and a divorce. All of these experiences have made him a cynic in a world of desperate believers: "To Landsman, heaven is kitsch, God a word, and the soul, at most, the charge on your battery" (130). The novel is set a year before the sixty-year lease between Jewish settlers in Alaska and the US government is to expire, with Landsman finding himself unsure if he will be able to keep his job, or, more correctly, if he will be able to stay in Alaska, as all Jewish settlers either have to leave or stay as illegal immigrants. Worse still, he finds himself already homeless years before Alaska reverts to the American government when he and his wife, Bina, divorce after losing their unborn baby. Since his divorce, Landsman has lived in a worn-out hotel, dulling his pain with alcohol. It is not difficult for the reader to see that Landsman has been reduced by forces beyond his control, living now as a creature deprived and dispossessed. His world, in other words, is a prison, in which he lives on, devoid of any hope for redemption, awaiting the end. By taking up alcohol, Landsman is simply hastening the arrival of his day of reckoning.

As Landsman's personal life is collapsing and the collective fate of Alaskan Jews hangs in the air, he becomes obsessed with a murder that occurs in his hotel. In a sense, the murder saves him from his own suffocating ennui. Landsman finds the murder victim, who calls himself Emmanuel Lasker but is actually Mendle Shpilman, is the son of the most influential Rabbi of an ultra-orthodox Jewish sect called the Verbovers. Mendle was believed by many to be the messiah, allegedly born to Jews in every generation, even though he had run away from an arranged marriage and a plotted life and become a drug addict. Why should a young man run away from his influential family and a promising future? How could this dramatic reversal of fate be explained? "What did he do?" and "Exactly why was he dead to [his family] already?" (143). These questions rankle

Landsman, shocked by the indifference—the “ten thousand miles of frozen sea” (142)—he sees in the eyes of Mendel’s father, Rabbi Shpilman, when he informs the Rabbi of his son’s death.

As Landsman plods on, the murder case leads to the discovery of an anti-Arab conspiracy engineered by Zionist Jews and aided by the American government, with the dual aims of precipitating World War III and returning the Jews to their promised land in Palestine. Before Landsman acts on this knowledge, the Zionists-Evangelists launch an attack at the Dome of the Rock—a sacred site for both Jews, Muslims, and Christians—which is reduced to a “magnificent plume of black smoke” (358), a scenario that resonates with the twin towers destruction on 9/11.<sup>9</sup> The novel ends with Landsman debating whether to go public with his theories, as he doubts the information will make a difference. In other words, however hard he tries to name the murderer, unveil the truth, and uncover the conspiracy, Landsman is convinced he can neither change his personal destiny nor save the world from an imminent warfare, as the Dome has already been destroyed and a global killing spree already started, with Jews, Muslims, and Christians pointing fingers at one another for maliciously destroying their sacred religious shrine. So, why and what does it matter whether or not the truth of who killed Mendel is unveiled, or the conspiracy uncovered? Why should one act, think, or feel otherwise; that is, what is the justification for counterfactual thinking? What possibilities would it open up?

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<sup>9</sup> I’m here echoing the argument made by Margaret Scanlan that by centering his novel on an inverse 9/11, Chabon explores an issue that touches the heart of his contemporary American readers; that is, “the relationship of American Zionists, both Christian and Jewish, to their militant counterparts in Israel, as well as the implications of that relationship for the War on Terror and for the American Jewish community” (2011: 506).

## II. Assimilation or Zionism: Nationalism as Miracle or Curse

Landsman tries to weigh the fates of Berko, of his uncle Hertz, of Bina, of the Jews, of the Arabs, of the whole unblessed and homeless planet, against the promise he made to Mrs. Shpilman, and to himself, even though he had lost his belief in fate and promises.

—Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*  
(2007: 410)

Unlike Roth's counterfactual novel, which has, as its focalizer, a child too young to comprehend or explain away the many traumatic events that befall various members of his extended family, Chabon's counterfactual novel has a mature but fatigued detective as its narrator. As the young and naïve narrator in Roth's novel struggles to comprehend the effects of American history, though a counterfactual one, on families and individuals, he exposes his fear of antisemitism only to eventually restore his confidence in the uniqueness of the Jews and the exceptional greatness of America. The adult narrator of Chabon's novel, in contrast, is anything but naïve. Focusing his novel on a hard-boiled detective, Chabon imbues his novel with an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspense, while rendering insecurity, futility, and disappointment norms, rather than exceptions, in the counterfactual world of his novel. As the novel opens, Landsman has just received an eviction notice from his hotel. Landsman's wretched condition, both homeless and stateless, resonates with the tenuous condition of Jews in Sitka in Chabon's counterfactual novel. It can also be taken as an oblique reference to the wretched condition of the homeless and stateless Palestinian refugees forced into living on borrowed time and leased land as a result of the 1948 war which led to the founding of Israel.

In the counterfactual world of the novel, the Yiddish-speaking

Jews in Alaska had, by 2007, already lived on borrowed time and leased land for over fifty-nine years. Disappointment has become the keynote of their lives as they suffered one setback after another; Landsman is no exception. He is a Jew about to be expelled from his homeland to seek his luck on foreign soil. His cynicism and pessimism bear only superficial resemblances to Hammett and Chandler's tough-guy detectives, for, unlike them, his losses are more substantial and cannot be willed away. He knows, as everybody else in the novel knows, that he needs to take action to find himself a "place" to live. With time running out, only a few options are still available. He needs to assimilate or emigrate, both of which involve meeting various conditions, or he could join the struggle to found a Zionist state in Israel.

Landsman is too busy abandoning himself to alcohol to consider any of these options. While he drinks to numb himself, others come to their own solutions. A careful scrutiny of the three options outlined above suggest that the Jews seem to believe that the Jewish problem can only be resolved by either founding a new state or assimilating into an existing one, perhaps the US. That is to say, the Jewish problem has become a political problem, in its narrowest sense. It is this reduction of the problematic of "Jewishness" to an identitarian issue with a nationalist and redemptive strain that Chabon is calling into question. Without denying the importance of the nation-state, Chabon draws the reader's attention to the high price individual Jews may have to pay if they choose to give their own life narrative a historical causality and a singular teleology, oriented towards the nation-building project, so that they disavow the possibility of thinking outside of the framework of the "political," especially the framework of the statist form of identification. Chabon goes further than simply calling into question the Zionists' embrace of nationalism; he has Landsman eventually recognize other options for the future of his people, options that seem resonant with the theological strains within the Jewish tradition. However, Landsman only learns to take a different perspective in

approaching the bareness of his existence by the end of the novel. Before he achieves such “traumatic awakenings,”<sup>10</sup> he still has to work through the fatal seduction of the redemptive promises which are part and parcel of the discourses of both Jewish exceptionalism and American exceptionalism.

The problem with these two discourses of exceptionalism is that they subscribe to, and then put into practice, an exclusionary logic that merges the old traditions of land entitlement with the age-old idea of a chosen people, whether Jewish, of the Church, or American, into a hybridized discourse that justifies the means—the use of law or violence to exclude those deemed to endanger the integrity of the national body and its identity project—with the ends—the establishment and sustaining security of the state. The discourse of Jewish exceptionalism, as analyzed by Shaid Alam, “has taken three principal forms” (2010: 6): Jewish doctrine of chosenness, the spectacular achievements of Jews for human civilization, and, finally, the long history of Jewish suffering. All three forms of Jewish exceptionalism, even though they are indispensable for Zionists in their efforts to forge a sense of nationalism, need to be supplemented by, and supported with, biblical prophecy: that of the arrival of a Messiah to return the Jews to their Promised Land. It is this prophecy about the Messiah’s ushering in a Zionist state that becomes the burden of the Jewish exceptionalism Mendel has to bear, thereby rendering his creaturely life and death a testimony to the biopolitical imperatives informing the Zionist exceptionalists’ power to let live and let die.

Landsman, despite his cynicism, still invests his confidence in the US; after all, the US has offered Jews assistance twice. Why can’t he, or other Jews, expect the US to perform a miracle and naturalize all of them? In the novel, Americans have indeed come up with

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<sup>10</sup> I am here making reference to Cathy Caruth’s notion that the awakening to a traumatic experience is itself traumatic, but such an awakening, traumatic as it is, involves the ethics of witnessing that which is otherwise unclaimed and unremembered. See Caruth (1996).

proposals, not once but twice, to tackle with the so-called “Jewish problem,” but the solutions they propose are political ones, rather than psychotheological ones. The first of these proposed solutions, to save the European Jews from political persecution, was made by Harold Ickes in 1938, offering Alaska as a “haven for Jewish refugees from Germany and other areas in Europe where the Jews are subjected to oppressive restrictions.”<sup>11</sup> In reality, the US Department of the Interior did draft a report, commonly called the Slattery Report, but the main focus of this report was to solve the “Alaskan” problem. As a solution to the backwardness of Alaska’s economic development, Ickes proposed importing European Jews to Alaska—not yet an American state at that time. The reasoning was that Jews, given their educational and cultural capital, could help boost Alaska’s social and economic development. In other words, the plight faced by the European Jews only won Ickes’ attention because the importation of Jewish refugees could have solved an internal US problem. It was out of self-interest that Ickes found the Jewish problem of interest to him. In actuality, Ickes’ proposal did not even reach the floor of the Senate, and European Jews before the Second World War were thus left to fend for their own lives, six million of which were subsequently lost.

Chabon took up Ickes’ proposal and gave this historical event a fatal twist by making Anthony Dimond, Alaska’s Delegate to the House of Representatives, a victim of a car accident, and as a consequence of his demise, the Alaskan Settlement Act was introduced, passed, and put into practice in 1940 in Chabon’s counterfactual novel. The first wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived, with great expectations, in 1940. Their hope was met with a chilly reality, as life was hard and jobs nowhere to be found. Eight years later, “In August the defense of Jerusalem collapsed and the outnumbered Jews of the three-month-old

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<sup>11</sup> For an interesting account of Ickes’ “plan to save Europe’s Jews” from the points of view of Jewish Americans, please see the opinion piece written by Raphael Medoff (2007).

republic of Israel were routed, massacred, and driven into the sea” (29). Dismayed by the “grim revelations of the slaughter of two million Jews in Europe, by the barbarity of the rout of Zionism, by the plight of the refugees of Palestine and Europe” (29), the US Congress passed the Sitka Settlement Act in 1948 and “granted the Sitka Settlement ‘interim status’ as a federal district,” adding an additional clause that said “In sixty years that status would revert, and the Sitka Jews would be left once again to shift for themselves” (29). The Sitka Settlement Act is the second action taken by the US to solve the so-called Jewish problem. Neither the Alaskan Settlement Act nor the Sitka Settlement Act comes without conditions. Neither, moreover, can fill the void felt by Alaskan Jews concerning their perpetual homelessness and statelessness.

For some years, the economy in Alaska, with the arrival of the first wave of Jews after the implementation of the Alaskan Settlement Act, was “booming,” and the Alaskan Jews made efforts to settle and make themselves feel at home in Alaska. Circumstances changed drastically afterwards. When the first wave of immigrants arrived, they were hopeful of their eventual return to their “home,” even though it is not Israel to which they want to return. The first wave of Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe, and it is their homes in Eastern Europe for which they pine. The arrival of the second wave of immigrants from the newly eradicated Israel in 1948 did not renew the hope of the first wave of Jewish immigrants for a homecoming, but shattered their dream of an eventual Return. Their temporary stay drags on, a prolonged sixty-year “waiting for Godot.” Throughout all these years, Jews suppress their knowledge of the eventual end of their tenure in Alaska, with occasional efforts made by different individuals either toying with the Jewish belief in the redemption offered by the coming of the Messiah, or fighting with Russian gangsters in ethnic ghettos, or scheming to establish a Zionist state, not in Palestine, but in Alaska, for Diasporic Jews.

The second wave of Jewish immigrants comes to Alaska after their territorial-bound dream for founding a Zionist state in



Palestine is brutally shattered by the military might of Arabic troops, while their romance with Zionism, and the ideology of Jewish exceptionalism it endorses, is ruthlessly disrupted. As they fail to actualize their Jewish exceptionalism by attaching it to a divinely ordained land, they can only sustain their romance with Jewish exceptionalism by suturing their loss with other ideologies that can better articulate their long-held notion of Jewish exceptionalism. It is in this void, caught in between a broken romance, a deferred dream, and an alternative dream or romance that is yet to be invented, that the Alaskan Jews—both the first-wave and the second-wave immigrants—find themselves trapped between two losses: the loss of a grand dream that makes them exceptional, and the failure to imagine an alternative dream to supplant the broken one.

This strenuous work at articulating an ideology of Jewish exceptionalism to suture the contradictions and ambivalence of the Jewish experience of being always already excepted, first by the Nazi Germany that has excepted them, then by the Arabs who have destroyed their newly established nation, and finally by the U.S. that has exiled them, throws them into a chronic state of melancholia. Different groups react differently to their losses. The majority of Jews simply resign themselves to their fate, trying to take for granted the statelessness that is considered by some to be their diasporic destiny, as they busy themselves either applying for permanent residence in the States or seeking to move to another land. Landsman's Uncle Hertz chooses to go native, *a la mode* of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and works single-handedly to obtain Permanent Status for Alaskan Settlement. In other words, other than those who resign to a fate as wandering Jews, many Alaskan Jews choose to attach themselves to the fantasy of the nation-state, believing that their problems would be solved either through assimilation into the US or by the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine.

Exceptionalism and faith in Jewish redemption become strange

bed fellows for Assimilationists and Zionists because for both of these groups redemption is bound to a land that is believed to have been given to them directly by God. The fantasy of exceptionalism, the other side of Jewish Messianism, becomes the force that prompts Diasporic Jews to write a teleological narrative that privileges the ends over the means while suppressing superfluous details so as to underscore the future-changing role of the alleged Messiah. This direction is taken to such a degree that they are willing to kill off the alleged villains to round off a closure that validates the ideology of exceptionalism.

The fantasy of exceptionalism assumes many different guises. In writing *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Chabon singles out two different discourses of exceptionalism, while staging a "dialogue" between these two so as to bring to the fore the underside of both ideologies: Jewish exceptionalism on the one hand and American exceptionalism on the other. In other words, Zionist nationalism and assimilation into the US. These two discourses of exceptionalism team up at the end to force upon their joint narrative of redemption a closure that meets the mutual expectations of their believers. For Zionists as well as for Assimilationists, it is imperative to construct a narrative in which Alaskan Jews play the central role. They must find a home for themselves and refashion the order of the world, a narrative that, because it is repeatedly told, everybody ends up believing.

Moreover, in order to defend the coherence and creditability of such a narrative of redemption, "tactics of sacrifice" (318), as Landsman describes Uncle Hertz's repeated use of blackmail and violence, have been used so often that the sacrifice of others has become an "addiction" not only for Uncle Hertz but also for the Jews in general. A narrative of redemption, especially one oriented towards a nation-building project, demands and then justifies the deployment and employment of the "tactics of sacrifice."

### III. “Tell [Them] a Story”: Productive Misreading

Huh-uh. The story, Detective Landsman, is telling us. Just like it has done from the beginning. We’re part of the story. You. Me.

—Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*  
(2007: 365)

A story, in other words, has to be told to invest the “tactics of sacrifice” with ideological significance that fits the psychological needs of a people. To conservative Americans such as Cashdollar, the Federal Representative sent by the US government to “sort things out,” their job is to “tell a story”—“fulfilling what was already written,” for stories are what people want in order to make sense of the barrenness of their existence. To ensure that the manifest destiny of the US be fulfilled and “the divinely inspired mission of the president of America” (339) be achieved, American officials like Cashdollar find it imperative that the US should exercise her sovereignty by “Holding the strings. Setting the agenda” (375), including collaborating with radical fundamentalist groups such as the Verbovers and launching a terrorist attack against their joint enemy. So, to ensure the US can continue to set the agenda of world politics, Cashdollar must feed the Zionist fundamentalists and the rest of the world certain stories. The stories Zionists want to read, and the stories they end up telling themselves, are those that help them act out their fear and shame while en route to homecoming and redemption. To understand this, we need to turn to Jacqueline Rose (2007), who in *The Question of Zion* offers a perceptive diagnosis of Zionism as a collective defense mechanism that eventually turns aggressive, as Zionists resort to preemptive measures of aggression and violence to screen out their collective shame and fear.

This is precisely the mechanism, with tactics of defense translated into tactics of offense or “sacrifice,” that the Jewish

fundamentalists, the Verbovers, adopt in Chabon's novel. Once the Verbovers are mobilized and their Zionist vision militarized, violence becomes, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, "a form of creativity, a form of 'constructive aggression'" (2007: 141). Zionism was originally invented and then reanimated in Israel, Rose writes, as a response—first to anti-Semitism in Europe and then to the Holocaust. It is a response to a long history of pain, suffering and loss, as suffering congeals into an assemblage of shared affects such as fear and shame: fear of annihilation and shame for the Holocaust. Rose argues that Israel "comes into being on the back of a guilty, repudiated, unconscious identification with its own dead" (141). It is fear—the fear that they may perish of shame—that prompts the fundamentalists such as the Zionist Verbovers to sweep shame under their carpet. The Verbovers, moreover, also give the logic of Zionist thought a deadly twist as secular and political Zionism succeeds in sacralizing itself and is translated and re-told as a messianic narrative.

What is the messianic narrative that Zionists activate to lend legitimacy to themselves? Jacqueline Rose and Judith Butler have both offered diagnoses of this Zionist symptom.<sup>12</sup> For Rose, it is both a narrative of redemption and of catastrophe; or, to be more precise, it writes a narrative of apocalyptic redemption, with evil being forcefully defeated and the divine retribution of justice re-instituted. First, the conservative fundamentalists are terrified that a history of pain and shame will be repeated. This proactive, though pessimistic, view of the future motivates them to take preemptive actions to prevent what they fear the most from being actualized. However, in order to mobilize people otherwise indifferent to, if not unsympathetic, to their causes, they turn to hatch and organize a conspiracy to bring about a small-scale catastrophe, with the sole

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<sup>12</sup> Other than Jacqueline Rose whose *The Question of Zion* I engage with here, Judith Butler has also attempted to articulate, by drawing upon Jewish sources, a diasporic and non-nationalist-oriented ethics that allows Jews to live and be together with non-Jews. See Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and Critique of Zionism*.

aim of using the small-scale catastrophe to prevent a global-scale catastrophe from occurring.<sup>13</sup> The only problem here is, to save themselves from a life of homelessness and to attain redemption, lives—not theirs but others’—have to be lost, violence unleashed, war launched, and apocalypse engineered. Their redemption, in other words, becomes the doom of their neighbors.

In this narrative of redemption written collectively by the fundamentalist group, Mendel is initially seen as the very embodiment of the prophetic project they have anticipated. When Mendel turns his back on his destiny and betrays the great expectations of his people, he is disowned and disavowed. Yet, once the Verbovers team up with the US government, their prophetic vision and theological passion become fused with the ideology of American exceptionalism, which is also a nationalism with a messianic strain.<sup>14</sup> It is this messianic strain that allows their narrative of Jewish exceptionalism to acquire an additional layer as it now requires that Mendel be killed off, his exceptionality denied and forgotten.

Mendel, a messiah-to-be, finds himself used as a pawn whose presence is needed to legitimize the Zionist narrative. He is the receptacle of divine messages waiting to be decoded. His untimely

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<sup>13</sup> Such a mechanism, I’d like to point out, fits very well the immunization procedures that Roberto Esposito (2008) so eloquently elaborates and develops in his *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, except his overall endeavors move toward the articulation of an immunization paradigm that protects life from death and unwittingly induces self-destruction. Annie J. McClanahan, also discusses in her dissertation *Salto Mortale: Narrative, Speculation, and the Chance of the Future* the tendency of contemporary American fiction to expose and critique the emerging discourses of “investing in the future” (2010: 12), especially the logic of preemption that supports such discourses. In Chapter two of her dissertation, she analyzes both Roth’s *The Plot Against America* and Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* to argue that both novels use the speculative genre to “register neoliberalism’s violent negation of liberal democracy” (2010: 1).

<sup>14</sup> In *American Exceptionalism and Human rights*, Michael Ignatieff defines American exceptionalism as a “messianic American moral project,” and, in carrying out this project, America believes it is its divine mission to “teaches [sic] the meaning of liberty to the world; it does not learn from others” (2005: 14).

death leaves a mystery to be unraveled by Landsman, the detective, whose job it is to read in Mendel's dead body any clue that may lead to a singular answer—the identification of Mendel's killer, the disclosure of the murderer's motive for killing the deceased, and the completion of Mendel's story of a life of failure. As Landsman himself puts it, weary as he is, he has not lost his "appetite for people's stories," his appetite for "puzzling back through [people's stories] from the final burst of violence to the first mistake" (168). However, as Landsman goes on with his investigation, it is as if Landsman, rather than being guided by his detective instinct, has been singled out and called out by Mendel so that he has no other option but to respond to this call and read on. Landsman continues to investigate Mendel's murder case, unmotivated by self-interest or calculation. In other words, it can be said that it is Mendel who, in his untimely death, brings out in Landsman what has lain dormant "as a potential waiting to be addressed" (Santner, 2001: 132), that which exceeds Landsman's knowledge and understanding.

Mendel is the text that Landsman cannot resist reading, but before Landsman can properly read Mendel's stories he must begin by piecing together the puzzles randomly scattered about the crime scene. The detective's reliance on random details is well attuned to the emphasis of contemporary counterfactual narrative on contingency and arbitrariness. Adam Rovner, in noting the prevalence of detective form in contemporary counterfactual fiction, argues that the marriage of the detective form and the counterfactual thinking functions to excavate, through the remnants of an unsolved mystery, counter-memories that are also alternative histories. So doing, the counterfactual novel that makes use of the detective form helps to "dispel the illusion of determinism that the historical perspective creates: this liberation enhances the freedom for thought, for reform, for change" (149). Indeed, the coupling of the detective form and the counterfactual thinking can be taken as a response to, or a critique of, "the historiography's displacement of the contingent" (149). However, the detective reader, in successfully solving the

crime, has also come face to face with his own blindness; that is, his inability to see the real murderer from the beginning. As Theodore Martin puts it, the “detective novel is haunted by disappointment” (2012: 168) as the detective reader discovers by the end of the novel that the “mysteries are not solved by logic and deduction but by some capricious, unforeseeable interpretative leap” (167). In the counterfactual scenario, the detective reader is haunted by surprises and disappointments, the surprises that the final revelation exceeds the reader’s expectation and the disappointments that, even though the murder case is solved, the real culprit responsible for the murder is still at large, and ready to wreak further havoc. As Martin aptly puts it, “by preventing apocalypse, [Landsman the detective] transforms the end of his narrative into a nonevent, the perfect absence of any climax” (169).

As a detective, Landsman is also a reader competent in puzzling together random clues, but in becoming obsessed with the case he is investigating, he performs “a ‘strong misreading’ we might say—performed by one who feels singled out, addressed by it” (Santer, 2001: 132-133). In a similar vein, in investigating Mendel’s death, Landsman comes face to face with that which has agitated within every wandering Jew—their exclusive entitlement to the land of Palestine as justified by God’s promise—and that which has agitated within every Jewish American—Jewish immigrants’ claim to American citizenship. It is this dream to which they have long been passionately attached, and the insubstantiality of it which has kept them biopolitically entrapped and psychically agitated. Mendel’s death makes it impossible for Landsman to run from his own psychic agitation and his investigation activates in him a “miraculous” disidentification with both the ideologies of Jewish and American exceptionalism, so that he begins to see in his otherwise banal and meaningless life multiple meanings. It is fair, thus, for us to say that it is due to Landsman’s strong misreading of Mendel’s death that Mendel is retroactively made into a Messiah, if not of his generation, then at least for Landsman. Misreading, in other words, is implicitly

ethical, for only through a “strong and creative” misreading of the narrative of Jewish exceptionalism and the redemption that it promises can Diasporic Jews open up other narrative possibilities that a Zionist reading has precluded.

Mendel, the murder victim, is declared by his father, even before his death at the age of thirty-six, as having been dead for more than twenty years. Landsman, the detective who voluntarily takes on the job investigating Mendel’s murder against the advice of his boss, is not recognized by the government he works for as a citizen entitled to the constitutional rights that come with citizenship. Both the victim and his investigator have been disowned and excepted, and neither fits in with his community. Landsman, we may say, sees in Mendel another man unmade by the system, disowned by his community, leading a parenthetical life. The death of Mendel haunts him as a remnant, a fierce reminder of the invisibility and nakedness of his own existence, so much so that it demands from him a response, as a way to exorcise his own trauma as well as a way to dissolve his attachment to an ingrained structure of disavowal.

Landsman becomes keenly aware that he has been “dispossessed.” However, as Judith Butler cautions the reader in her analysis of the state of dispossession, “We can only be dispossessed because we are already dispossessed. Our interdependency establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2014: 5). As social beings, we do not claim ownership of our “selfhood,” even though the myth of possessive individualism leads us to believe otherwise. So, in the face of one’s being dispossessed of one’s civil rights and home, should one embrace the ideology of possessive individualism or retreat into an alienating individualism? The question, for Butler, is wrongly posed, for the real question to ask is “how [such an ideology] works, and in the service of what sorts of political aims” (2014: 9). Dispossession, Butler argues, has to be thought not only as a condition of deprivation but also as an exposure to the other’s vulnerability. Butler’s goal is, by inviting a reconceptualization of dispossession



outside the logic of possession, both to undermine the fantasy of the autonomy of the human subject and to highlight the constitutive displacement of the self. In *Parting Ways*, Butler further draws on Edward Said's reflection on the diasporic character of both Jewish and Palestinian history, "a condition of having been scattered, having lived among those to whom one does not clearly belong" (Butler, 2012: 214) to call for an ethic of "cohabitation" that simultaneously transcends exclusive Jewish claims to citizenship and territory and embraces the heterogeneity of what is now Palestine/Israel. If Jews use a Zionist perspective to define themselves in terms of land possession, Butler argues, they then lose sight of an age-old "Jewish perspective, that is non-Zionist, even anti-Zionist" which defines Jewishness not in terms of either land entitlement or dispersal but in terms of relationality to alterity, then dispersal or dispossession can be thought of as "a condition of possibility for thinking justice," as well as "an ethical modality . . . that must be 'brought home' to Israel/Palestine in order to ground a polity where . . . sovereignty itself will be dispersed" (6).

Chabon obviously agrees with Butler that it is time for Jews to reject the Jewish claim to exceptionalism, when he entitles an op-ed he wrote for the *New York Times* "Chosen, but Not Special" (2010). Whereas in his op-ed, Chabon is blunt but earnest in his call for Jews to shed the myth of Jewish exceptionalism, in his counterfactual novel, he offers both an oblique, though no less forceful, critique of the fantasy of Jewish exceptionalism, and a rethinking of the dispossession as an ethical condition. In the case of Landsman, we can say that Landsman has been "dispossessed" in both senses of the word as it is defined by Butler—deprived of land and livelihood and dispossessed of his agency. Meanwhile, he also confronts the "aporia" of dispossession: the private form of dispossession is supplementary, rather than corrective, to the collective form of dispossession. In other words, for a stateless man already dispossessed by those powers that both define and deprive him, the very retreat into the margin of society is neither a solution to, nor an escape from, the

double “dispossession” in which he is trapped. As Butler goes on to analyze such an experience of “aporetic dispossession” undergone by many contemporaries, she proceeds to call for “a conception of reflexivity in which the self acts upon the terms of its formation precisely in order to open in some way to a sociality that exceeds (and possibly precedes) social regulation. . . . So this form of reflexivity seeks to resist the return to self in favor of a relocation of the self as a relational term” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2014: 69-70). The alternative kind of dispossession that Butler discusses—in which one is dispossessed of himself or herself by virtue of being moved or disconcerted by the encounter with the other—is a prelude to one’s arriving at and opening up some “new modes of sociality and freedom” that will once again bring one back into “being-together” or “being-with” the other.

In a way, both Landsman and Mendel are exiles in their home communities, and both have to apologize constantly for their pitiful lives. Whereas Landsman is defined and then excluded by a statist form of biopolitics, Mendel is delineated and exiled by a biopolitics informed by religious fervor. Landsman, as a residential immigrant, finds himself excepted by the US, whose American exceptionalism collides with Jewish/Zionist exceptionalism. Mendel, on the other hand, embodies the ultimate paradox inherent in any discourse of exceptionalism. As a Messiah-to-be, one who is chosen by God to speak for and inspire Diasporic Jews, Mendel has, and needs to retain and maintain, his exceptional status, as he is divinely favored, uniquely talented, and indescribably charismatic, to serve the needs of Zionists in their efforts not only to forge a nationalism, but also to actualize this nationalist aspiration by establishing a Jewish state on earth. In other words, Mendel has been dispossessed and rendered unintelligible by the discourse of Jewish exceptionalism. The discourse itself is promoted by Zionist ideologues as it is infused with nationalistic fervor. To those who promote exceptionalism, Mendel is either a Messiah or a “husk” (140), a living corpse. There simply isn’t any other option available for him. As a figure that

embodies Jewish exceptionalism, their chosen-ness, he lives a life devoid of personal choice or value. Once he takes exception to the exceptionalism he embodies, he becomes literally a wandering Jew, homeless and bereft of hope.

The death of Mendel leaves a mystery for Landsman to solve. As a detective, his job is to piece together the clues left behind along with Mendel's dead body. As a Jew living in a leased land with time running out, he nonetheless chooses to "waste" his time solving the mystery of Mendel's murder, seeing in Mendel's dead body a "shared vulnerability" that belongs to people who are homeless, dispossessed, and stateless. In investigating Mendel's murder, Landsman confronts that which defines Mendel as a Messiah who has failed to materialize his prophesy; that is, a Messiah who keeps his believers waiting so that, in compelling them to linger on in the present, he compels them to keep on living, but differently.

#### IV. It Is Time for Homecoming

My homeland is in my hat. It's in my  
ex-wife's tote bag.

—Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*  
(2007: 368)

Landsman does not have faith in a Messiah, but he believes in the power of his detective work to disclose the truth of Mendel's death and put his murderer behind bars. In investigating Mendel's murder, however, he finds that even though he is able to name the murderer and uncover a multi-national terrorist conspiracy, it is already too late for the disclosure of this knowledge to make a difference: the bombing the Dome has already taken place, and, in the aftermath, "people are rioting on television in Syria, Baghdad, Egypt? In London? Burning cars. Setting fire to embassies . . . That's the kind of shit we have to look forward to now. Burning cars and homicidal dancing" (406). If Chabon's detective novel ends

suggesting, as Martin posits, “it is not the absence of an answer that is disappointing but the answer’s anticlimactic presence, which is never exactly what we expect it to be and thus *leaves us perpetually waiting for something else*” (2012: 173; italics added), what then is that “something else” that Landsman is groping for, and what is it that he has learned from his investigation into Mendel’s murder?

First of all, Landsman finds in Mendel a character who, despite his alleged potential to be his generation’s Messiah, cracks under the pressures of too great expectations. The story of Mendel is one that spills out of its generic boundary as he is expected to fit his role and satisfy his manifest destiny. In Mendel, Landsman witnesses both the ambivalence and the paradox of the state of exception. He is called upon to respond to, in an act of reading or misreading, the state of exception that Mendel embodies, to determine whether the “state of exception” signifies one’s subordination to the forces of sovereignty or one’s exemption from the sovereign power and its laws.

For Giorgio Agamben, as pointed out by Agata Beilik-Robson, the “state of exception” carries an assemblage of ideas, some of which are mutually exclusive, if not mutually cancelling. It may signify “the redemptive possibility of liberation from sovereign power,” and it may also signify “a moment of extreme intensification of power from which there is no escape” (2010: 105).<sup>15</sup> If so, if the state of exception carries both possibilities, one positive and liberating, the other negative and oppressive, under what circumstances can the “oppressive state of exception” be turned into a positive state of exception? How can, that is, the oppressive state of exception be “converted into a positive, Benjamin ‘real state of emergency,’ where the human being will finally lead a ‘happy life’ beyond any imposed project, work, or

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<sup>15</sup> Beilik-Robson actually identifies eight different definitions that Agamben has used in his discussion of the state of exception in his various writings: “whatever,” “limbo,” “the righteous with animal heads,” the tragic hero, “*homo sacer*,” “the remnant,” “the man without content,” and “*der Muselmann*” (2010: 104).

vocation—*beyond any law*” (Bielik-Robson, 2010: 106)?

Even though Chabon is not a theorist, in writing *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, he posits and attempts to answer these Agambanian questions by giving us the inquisitive Landsman, who in piecing together the story of a drug addict who is also a Messiah, achieves his own small-scale redemption by letting go of his attachment to the contrapuntal discourses of both American exceptionalism and Jewish exceptionalism. Instead of seeking assimilation into the US, thus ascribing to the supremacy rhetoric of American exceptionalism or indulging in the redemptive narrative concocted by Zionist nationalists, Landsman distances himself from both grand ideologies and treats them as errors and mistakes. To Landsman, the enigma of life cannot be translated into the language of nationalism, nor can it be equated with the idiom of either possessive or alienating individualism. It is not assimilation, nor the founding of a Zionist state, that will procure for him the happiness that he had in his own marriage and witnessed in the marriage of his partner and half-cousin, Berko Shemets, who, as a mixed-blood Jew, is, rather paradoxically, more Jewish than the “pure-blooded” Landsman. Berko is seen by both Jews and Tlingit Indians with suspicion, as “a Minotaur,” with “the world of Jews [being] his labyrinth” (41). Precisely because he has to work hard to disentangle and comprehend the Other’s claim on him, Berko makes conscious efforts in living as a Jew who is nevertheless observant of Judaism “in his own way for his own reasons” (41). By so doing, Berko proves himself more a Jew than his father, given that he actualizes the Jewish legacy by engaging in everyday life and valorizing the “slow paces of daily tasks” (75), to borrow a phrase from Jacqueline Rose. This legacy to obey the divine commandments by investing everyday life with divine significance is what the Zionists have forgotten in their haste to embrace and militarize Zionism, and it is this legacy to which Chabon is trying to give voice.

For Landsman, it takes the investigation of the death of a Messiah to realize finally that the blessings of life do not reside in

the nation-building project, nor can they be found in the claiming of a homeland. Rather, he realizes “[His] homeland is in [his] hat. It’s in [his] ex-wife’s tote bag” (368); that is, his homeland is not ordained by God in accordance with the covenant of Jewish election. His homeland is the result of his marriage with a woman whom he sometimes thinks he can fully understand and whom he sometimes considers to be a total stranger. There are too many disruptive contingencies which make it impossible for him to manage his marriage with Bina; nor are there clear guidelines to assist him in shaping their impossible life together. Their life together as a married couple is similar to the covenantal relationship between the Jews and God, as “Every couple’s life is structured around a set of shared and often nonsensical rules and patterns that they would never admit to an outsider” (Santner, 2001: 120). Landsman can only find his way home when he is willing to engage with everyday life, to tackle those contingent, random, unruly, aspects of his relations and interact with his intimate but also strange others.

It is this willingness to accept mastery as delusional and contingency as the “norm” of life that allows Landsman, at the end of the novel, to embrace the marriage plot, obeying an inner voice that tells him to demand and even enact a new kind of justice, one that affirms not the supremacy of either Jewish exceptionalism or American exceptionalism, but the exceptionality of the singular and the contingent. In re-bonding with his estranged wife, Landsman exits the statist form of the creaturely condition. What Landsman realizes is that, once he learns to suspend the law, once he breaks the structure of identification—nationalist, religious, or ethnic, he encounters the “something within himself”—or the miraculous potentialities—that frees him from the crippling entanglements of guilt, of having fallen short of expectations.

At the end of the novel, Landsman is finally free from the burden of nationalism, even though the terrorist conspiracy still looms ahead and he is still stateless. Nevertheless he gains a “home” bounded by his renewed faith in love and language. Even though

contingencies abound in one's personal life—as one accidental incident may have the grave consequence of taking the course of history to a drastically different direction—and even though the past is flawed and the future is unpredictable, yet one has no other option than to live in the “imperfect now.” Rather than resorting to and embracing the discourse of exceptionalism in attempting to write a narrative of the self in which one emerges as the sovereign of one's life and the master of one's fate, Landsman learns to “shift the order of possibilities” in his life so that he learns to see the index of one's success—being accepted and recognized as a success—is no longer taken to be important. This shifting of the order of possibilities is termed by Eric Santner as an “inner conversion,” which he describes as the “uncoupling” of “the drive from its destiny” (2001: 124). And if I understand Santner correctly, the “uncoupling” that he tries to elaborate upon is nothing more than the “disruption” and “interruption” of the notion of destiny or teleology that is valorized in the writing of the story of an individual or people towards self-fulfillment or self-completion. In other words, Santner exposes and questions the ethical consequences of structuring one's life along a teleological trajectory which, in a way, governs chance events and possibilities by first anticipating them and then by taking preemptive actions to exclude them, or to exclude them by including them. This rationalist attempt to “discipline” and “author” one's life via the “governance of contingency,” to borrow a phrase from Michael Dillon (2007), however, does not mean that contingencies are eliminated and domesticated; rather, as we can see from the growing popularity of counterfactual fiction, one tiny change can lead to a convoluted web of greater changes. Anything can and does happen. What truly matters is not that History—the past, the present, and the future—cannot be disciplined by the mere force of the human will; what matters is that which activates the “uncoupling” of the drive from its destiny so that one can shift the order of possibilities in one's world and learn to live with the contingencies of History.

In Santner's attempt to flesh out a legacy from the Jewish

tradition, he returns to the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig to arrive at the hypothesis that this event of “inner conversion” occurs “under the impact of divine love” (2001: 124). He then goes on to draw upon Sigmund Freud’s exploration of the “superego” as well as Badiou and Agamben’s discussions of Pauline love to make the claim that “divine love,” which is distinct from the command of the sovereign, is that which cuts into, “enters into and transforms the closed particularities of cultural, ethnic, social, and sexual identity” (2001: 128). What Santner means here is that the divine love is that which “divides both sides of the identitarian division such that neither side can any longer enjoy stable self-coincidence” (2001: 129); something else that emerges out of this “cut” or division is what matters here. It is due to this understanding of the “neither identical to . . . nor different from” logic “of the noncoincidence of every identity with itself” that, Santner claims, may eventually help the self escape the fantasy of exception. With this “not-all logic,” one then does not see oneself as a “part” to a “whole,” an “exception” to the “norm.” Given that the fantasy of exceptionalism finds its expression in and is sustained by seemingly transgressive acts; the “divine love” is that which interrupts and suspends this fantasy of exception which valorizes violence and transgression. To translate this into psychoanalytic terms, to cut into the fantasy of exception is to stop fantasizing that one “can except myself from the midst of life” (Santner, 2005: 130) and, instead, accept an ethics of exposure, whereby one is “exposed to the proximity of the neighbor” (Santner, 2005: 131).

This shift of perspectives is what Chabon is also trying to articulate through the figure of Landsman, who is prompted by Mendel’s murder to read differently and think about an impossible future which can disrupt the traumatic repetition of the past, disguised as a future possibility. Rather, Landsman learns through his encounter with, and reading of, Mendel’s death to see his statelessness as both a blessing and a curse. In between both possibilities—a blessing and a curse, something “more” emanates



and remains. It is this “something more” that allows him to free himself from the narrative of Jewish exceptionalism and opens him up to different narrative possibilities—difficult and impossible—that exceed any claim of communitarian politics and transcend any identity politics that is driven by the acting out of trauma. Rather, in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Chabon forces the reader to ask the difficult and impossible question about how to live with the trauma of the present—a present marked by diaspora, dispossession, and statelessness—and reflect on what psycho-ethical conditions would be necessary to work through a traumatic past so as to open up the “more” of the present.

## V. Conclusion

But there is no doubt that what broke the marriage was Landsman’s lack of faith. A faith not in God, nor in Bina and her character, but in the fundamental precept that everything befalling them from the moment they met, good and bad, was meant to be. The foolish coyote faith that could keep you flying as long as you kept kidding yourself that you could fly.

—Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*  
(2007: 393)

Roth’s *The Plot Against America* opens with a thought-provoking counterfactual scenario—fascism can take roots in America—but by framing it as a *bildungsroman* novel and by returning, by the end of the novel, the counterfactual time line of a “what could have happened” to the factual time line of “what actually happened,” it concludes with an easy Hollywood ending to disavow an aggressive interrogation of and confrontation with the specter of racism out of whose exclusion the myth of American

exceptionalism is organized. By filtering his counterfactual novel through the innocent eyes of a child narrator, Roth's novel invites its readers to think differently about what has actually happened, and what might have happened, in the past. Roth's child narrator does not have the intellectual acuity and self-reflexivity of Landsman, a professional detective, to see the solution to Lindbergh's "plot against America"—his mysterious disappearance—as a letdown. By concluding his novel with such a forced *deus ex machine*, Roth translates his counterfactual novel into a cautionary tale that warns Americans about the perpetual presence of domestic terrorism.

In contrast to the easy optimism that makes Roth conclude his novel with the hint of Jews' "perpetual fear" of the unforeseen, Chabon's counterfactual novel takes up and actualizes Roth's hint by having Christian fundamentalists team up with Zionist fundamentalists to bomb up the Dome of the Rock. Focusing on this apocalyptic scenario through a weary but inquisitive police detective, Chabon is able to register Landsman's shock at the conspiracies that he unwittingly uncovers, while translating Landsman's shock into a condition for ethical reflection. In the diasporic scenario in which Landsman finds himself, he is drawn to investigate a murder case but, in the process, experiences a revelation, or a moment of redemption, that allows him to experience a shift in his perspective on his stateless and dispossessed life. Rather than detaching himself from the political events of his time and refusing to walk into a risky, uncertain, but potentially wounding future, Landsman learns to see his being caught in between the tension of the many discourses of exceptionalism as a potentially dialogical event that may lead to his bonding with others, less on the basis of identity, ethnic, national, or religious, than on the ground of the self's non-identification with itself, or the "excess" that is immanent in the very constitution of his subjectivity. Rather than mustering all his energies to defend against the risk and contingency that accompany one's encounter with the other, Landsman learns at the end that the efforts he makes to secure a seemingly eventless life—such as aborting his unborn son,

distancing himself from his family, divorcing his wife, and trying to drink himself to death—only end up reducing his life to the barest essentials.

Instead, in responding to and investigating Mendel's mysterious death, he loosens his defense against those screens and filters through which he fends off the contingencies of life and discovers in the conspiracy jointly plotted by Zionists and Evangelists the underside of identification politics and the preemptive logic it promotes and endorses. At the end of the novel, Landsman is still stateless, but he is no longer dispossessed, given that, while citizenship is a legal issue determined by the law of the state, he nevertheless can regain possession of his own spirit, which is recovered and reactivated as the real "exception" that can alleviate the biopolitical force of the law and activating the "more" of life—that which is blind to those enthralled with the discourses of exceptionalism.

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離散借貸的生命出口：  
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摘 要

謝朋於 2007 年出版的虛構歷史小說《猶太警察工會》提出一個假設的歷史命題：以色列於 1948 年以阿戰爭中慘敗滅國，上百萬之猶大難民暫居於阿拉斯加特區。60 年後，美國即將收回特區，猶太人又該何去何從：再次離散，還是不計代價而獨立建國。小說主人翁為特區猶太刑警，在調查一宗謀殺案件時，意外發現一樁政治陰謀：美國政府擬藉猶太復國主義者之手，毀滅阿拉伯世界，而焦躁的猶太人亦藉此重建故國。謝朋的小說由猶太人千年流亡主題切入猶太救贖議題，提出與其借道國族主義，來終結由猶太離散，不如回歸日常生活，藉由觀點的流動而落實猶太神學虛實相應的恩典。

**關鍵詞：**架空歷史、陰謀論、離散、基本教義主義、例外主義