



*Abstract:* Don DeLillo reimagines the Kennedy assassination in *Libra*. Nicholas Branch, a retired senior analyst for the CIA, has been hired on contract to write a definitive account of the events at Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. In the process, Branch subsumes the role of museum curator; he meticulously combs through the received records in order to challenge accepted versions of “history.”

As the novel’s character-as-curator, Branch examines, positions, interprets, and displays the artefacts at hand to outline the numerous plots swirling around the assassination. This paper will demonstrate how DeLillo, through Branch, reimagines the space of the novel, transforming it into a museum display that challenges the

# **“I wanna die just like JFK / I wanna die in the USA”<sup>1</sup>:**

## ***Libra* and DeLillo’s Curation of the Kennedy Archive**

Mario A. D’Agostino

Warren Commission’s “Single-Bullet Theory” as well as its “Lone-Gunman Theory,” to instead suggest the possible presence of multiple shooters. As the novel’s character-as-curator, Branch meticulously places the objects on display and leaves it to the reader to decide which view to adopt or accept.



*A character in the novel describes the assassination as “an aberration in the heartland of the real.” We still haven’t reached any consensus on the specifics of the crime: the number of gunmen, the number of shots, the location of the shots, the number of wounds in the president’s body—the list goes on. Beyond this confusion of data, people have developed a sense that history has been secretly manipulated. Documents lost and destroyed. Official records sealed for fifty or seventy-five years. A number of suggestive murders and suicides involving people who were connected to the events of November 22nd. So from the initial impact of the visceral shock, I think we’ve developed a much more deeply unsettled feeling about our grip on*

---

<sup>1</sup> Jesus and Mary Chain, “Reverence”

*reality.*

– Don DeLillo, *Interview with Anthony DeCurtis*

The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas is an early twentieth-century warehouse formerly known as the Texas School Book Depository. The museum features films, photographs, and artefacts to chronicle the assassination of former US President John F. Kennedy. While a number of conspiracy theories have attempted to explain Kennedy’s assassination, The Sixth Floor Museum’s mission is to act as “an impartial, multi-generational destination . . . for exploring the memory and effects of the events surrounding his death” (“About the Museum”). While some fifty years have passed since that fateful day in Dallas in 1963, much has yet to be determined with respect to who definitively played a role in the assassination attempt, as well as who was responsible for orchestrating such an event. The Sixth Floor Museum display makes no attempt to provide definitive answers. Rather, it is a provocative and suggestive space that encourages the audience to participate in the meaning-making process. While this unmediated space is crucial to challenging all-encompassing grand narratives, it is the presence of the museum curator that is vital to the creation of its heterogeneous nature. The museum curator collects, positions, and promotes the artefacts on display to undermine a single authoritative perspective. In doing so, the curator is able to question historical imbalances, leaving it to the viewer to decide which view to adopt or accept. In literature, the ability to provide definitive answers is one challenge that historical fiction faces. Instead of offering definitive truths, texts -

(especially ones detailing the Kennedy assassination) do justice to historical likelihood – that is, they attempt to uncover what actually happened in a certain historical event – by remaining open-ended, also leaving it to the reader to decide what evidence, if any, constitutes the “truth.”

This article will thus focus on Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988), a text that “refuses to see the historical record as a fixed or stable entity but instead as the product of interpretation” (Thomas 107). DeLillo’s novel combines historical fact (the events in Dallas in 1963) with fiction (the details of a plot to scare the president into attacking Cuba) in a threefold narrative structure: (1) a psychological portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald; (2) a plot to make an attempt on the life of President Kennedy by anti-Castro CIA agents T.J. Mackey and Walter “Win” Everett; and (3) the efforts of Nicholas Branch, a retired secret service agent, to write a definitive history of the assassination for the CIA. The novel furthermore features a central character, in the form of Nicholas Branch, who subsumes the role of the museum’s curator. In *Libra*, Branch navigates through the Kennedy archive in order to achieve an alternate history from those that have been accepted empirically. As the novel’s chief character-as-curator, Branch redeploys the past in the present in an effort to unearth silent voices, and, by extension, to foster what Michel Foucault would call “an insurrection of subjugated knowledge” (81). Branch, as character-as-curator, is fundamental to *Libra* as he serves a corrective function: Branch collects, archives, positions, interprets, and promotes the

“objects” on display in order to achieve a more representative history of the Kennedy assassination.

*Libra* is a novel that, at its outset, features three disparate narratives that eventually come together through the presence of Branch as the novel’s curator. Branch is not a historian in the modern sense as he is unable to organize the overwhelming nature of the historical record in any coherent or singular narrative. He tells us that “[e]verything is here” (DeLillo 181), and the historical “facts” offered by the CIA range from baptismal records and report cards to post-operative x-rays and photos of knotted string. Branch feels that all this data belongs; he is careful, meticulous, and studies everything, for “he is in too deep to be selective” (DeLillo 59). His approach, like that of the curator, is marked by inclusion, structure, and display. DeLillo himself proclaimed that “the novel [is] a ‘refuge’ for the facts, a space where they can be collected and displayed but not interpreted” (Herbert 291), and we should not be surprised that a connection exists between *Libra* and curatorial studies. The novel, like the contemporary museum space, is “performative, open-ended . . . [and] politically transformative” (Martinon 3). It is furthermore expository in the sense that it *shows* but does not *explain*. By bridging the temporal gap between past and present, *Libra*, like the curatorial, “puts forward a constellation of meaning” (Martinon 2) that relies on the viewer or audience to make sense of the materials on display. One of the central reasons why no definitive account of the Kennedy assassination can be gleaned from *Libra* (apart from its very obvious nature of being a fiction) is because no “absolute correspondence

[exists] between the structure of events and the organization[al] structure of [Branch’s] account” (Wilcox 344). While it is clear that Branch “wants a thing to be what it is” (DeLillo 379), such convenient resolutions are simply unattainable. Part of this is because the CIA’s treatment of the Kennedy historical record, as Shannon Herbert writes, “produced an archiving imperative that treats the collection of facts as a reflexive response to an event without establishing a proper method for processing the facts” (290).<sup>2</sup> The novel thus exposes the archaeological materials but does not exhibit them; rather, it is “viewer-centered: the [reader] makes it experiential and participatory” (Martinon 2).

We first meet Branch on page fourteen: he is sitting in “the book-filled room,” the room of “documents . . . of theories and dreams” (DeLillo 14). In the fifteenth year of his labour, he has been hired on contract to write the secret history of the Kennedy assassination, though the voluminous and expansive nature of the historical record has resulted in many futile attempts. Too many fine-grained details, too many coincidences, the “facts” drip with endless

---

<sup>2</sup> What Herbert refers to here relates to Benjamin’s analysis of Klee’s “Angelus Novus” in “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin describes “the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past . . . one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it front of his feet” (257). Herbert’s point is that no definitive explanation of the assassination has ever been produced. Had Lyndon B. Johnson not declared the case closed in order to pacify the anxieties of the American people, this “archiving imperative” to which Herbert alludes above and, by extension, the contradictory nature of the historical record that resulted from it may not have come into existence. This is not to perpetuate conspiracy theories involving L.B.J. and Oswald as “the fall guy.” However, it is because of this “archiving imperative” that the apparent holes in the *Warren Commission Report* exist. To use Benjamin’s words, there is “pile of debris” (258), and, in the case of *Libra*, it is up to Branch to sort through it.

suggestiveness. Branch has seen “Schlesinger, Colby, Bush, Turner, Casey and Webster” (60) occupy the CIA’s Director’s chair, though it is unclear whether any of these men are aware of his task. Branch is a retired senior analyst for the CIA, and “six point nine seconds of heat and lights” (15) – the novel’s enduring reference to the fatal bullet that took Kennedy’s life – is what presently occupies the majority of his time. In many ways, Branch is trapped in what Pierre Nora calls the acceleration of history; that is, “an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into the historical past that is gone for good” (1). Branch, along with the book-filled room, is “growing old” (DeLillo 59), and he is horrified by the weight of the career of paper that surrounds him. Branch’s present is rapidly moving into a past that is irrecoverable, not unlike the irrecoverable nature of the “truth” regarding Kennedy’s assassination. He has abandoned his retired life to understanding that fateful day in Dallas but has little to nothing substantial written on the matter.

The truth is Branch “hasn’t written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes—notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose, there is precious little” (59). Part of the reason for Branch’s inability to write is because the material he is dealing with is marked by ambiguity, error, and political bias. He has devoted the remainder of his life to understanding that moment in Dallas, “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (181), though he has nothing substantial or definitive to say on the matter. The book-filled room eerily resembles the inner workings of a museum space. There are stacks of folders

that reach halfway up one wall. There are legal pads and cassette tapes that cover the floor and desktop. There are countless books that cover a table and much of the floor. There are also massive filing cabinets stuffed with documents. While no formal system exists to help him track the data, the spontaneous display of the documents and artefacts speak to the endless plots swirling around the assassination. Like the spectator of a museum display, Branch uses “hand and eye, color and shape and memory, the configuration of suggestive things that link an object to its contents” (14-15) to move through the materials located in this room. As the novel moves forward, Branch meticulously details other artefacts that appear in the fireproof room the CIA has built for him. Such documents and artefacts include results of internal investigations; bullet trajectories; street signs; locations; character backgrounds; printouts of names, witnesses, informers, investigators; people linked to Lee Oswald; people linked to Jack Ruby; a roster of the dead; homicide reports; autopsy diagrams; results of spectrographic tests on bullet fragments; maps; FBI papers on the assassination; unpublished state documents; polygraph reports; Dictabelt recordings from the police radio net on 22 November 1963; photo enhancements; floor plans; home movies; biographies; bibliographies; letters; rumors; the *Warren Commission Report*; postcards; divorce petitions; cancelled cheques; daily timesheets; tax returns; property lists; thousands of pages of testimony; dental records; samples of pubic hair; old shoes; pyjama tops; Oswald’s letters from Russia; FBI memos; autopsy photos of Oswald and of JFK; results of ballistics tests; a “modernist

sculpture” in the form of goat’s flesh used to simulate bullet entries; documents on “exit velocities”; trial transcripts; coroners’ reports; the Zapruder film; novels and plays about the assassination; films and documentaries; panel discussions; radio debates; and, of course, guilty verdicts.

The heterogeneous nature of the aforementioned artefacts shows that a relationship exists between Branch (who resembles Walter Benjamin’s “collector”) and the objects he has collected. Andrew Robinson, in his analysis of Benjamin’s “Theses,” notes that the method of collecting is “about liberating objects from their status as commodities,” and Branch spends much of his time attempting to liberate the aforementioned objects from the contradictions and discrepancies of the historical record. We are repeatedly reminded that the historical events of *Libra* are shrouded in uncertainty and suspicion. Branch sits in his glove-leather chair and battles claustrophobia because of “the paper hills around him” (DeLillo 15). While Benjamin notes that the process of collecting can be regenerative for the collector, that “the collector comes to life in the objects” (Robinson), quite the opposite is happening in *Libra*. Branch says “they are mocking him”: the collected objects are saying, “this is your history . . . not your beautiful ambiguities, your lives of the major players, your compassions and sadnessess . . . Your history is simple. See, the man on the slab. The open eye staring” (300). For Benjamin, the preserved manner of the objects is meant to “renew the world,” yet the “endless fact-rubble of the investigations,” the “network of inconsistencies” (300), and the problematic nature of the

archive are preventing Branch from moving forward. It is not Branch’s fault that the archive mocks him. As John Johnston points out, it is the nature of the archive, “a vast untidy assortment, much of it apparently meaningless – collected in the *Warren Commission Report* and then transmitted to the American public in a highly fictionalized form” (“Superlinear” 325), that creates the largest barriers between Branch and the “facts” at hand. Yet, to a certain extent, Branch achieves some semblance of artefactual liberation. The precise manner in which he arranges the artefacts within the book-filled room creates “an exhibition space where the material can be encountered on its own” (Johnston, “Superlinear” 325), separate from the conflicting historical archive.

Moving forward, this article will demonstrate how Branch, as the novel’s character-as-curator, does justice to historical likelihood. Branch curates all the historical evidence and puts it on display in the book-filled room (i.e., to suggest what *may* have happened). However, he does not make any definitive assertions concerning the death of President Kennedy. Rather, as the novel’s character-as-curator, Branch meticulously places the objects on display in order to mirror a contemporary museum space. In doing so, it is up to the reader or viewer to decide which view to adopt or accept. This is one of the main functions of the character-as-curator. Unlike the historian whose job it is to present conclusive evidence, the character-as-curator leaves the material open-ended so the audience may develop their own conclusions. Moreover, because each piece of evidence carries a story within it, Branch places the objects on display in such a

way that all the evidentiary stories-within-stories are illuminated. By accounting for these stories-within-stories, the character-as-curator brings to light the complexities of history that the historian glosses over. This article will also discuss/engage with subsidiary curators present within *Libra*, appearing in the form of Win Everett and T.J. Mackey. Roving through this fictitious subplot will grant me the ability to take a closer look at DeLillo’s belief that Oswald, as a historical figure, was scripted into his historical role. To ultimately demonstrate DeLillo’s point, I will analyze the figure of Oswald in *Libra*, a figure that assumes the role of pseudo-curator in his desire to script himself into history. Finally, this article will argue that the curatorial and museum aspects of the novel induce the reader into questioning the sociocultural, historical, political, and institutional ideologies (as well as the dominant discourses at play) that create the historically definitive account of Kennedy’s assassination – and we clearly see how this narrative is inherently problematic.

### **Historiographic Metafiction and the “Roster of the Dead”**

*Libra* pushes the multivalent qualities of the novel, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, to its limits. Bakhtin observes a distinctiveness in the genre of the novel that separates it from other generic literary characteristics. The traditional novel is similar to Leo Tolstoy’s writing: it is monological and forwards only one particular viewpoint. When we come to Fyodor Dostoevsky, however, we encounter a dialogical or polyphonic method. Given the number of historical artefacts that appear within *Libra*, it is evident that DeLillo employs a dialogical

approach, in which a variety of viewpoints are forwarded but these are neither mediated nor orchestrated to generate a singular viewpoint. Instead, the artefacts that Branch puts on display leave the reader with a multiplicity of views that are often contradictory and remain unresolved. This lack of resolution leaves it to the reader to decide which view to adopt or accept. Branch is unable to discern an overarching grand narrative from the referential facts at hand. While he desires to achieve some empirical understanding of these facts, Branch does not wish to uncover the social, political, and economic power structures involved in conveying certain versions of the truth as they relate to the Kennedy assassination. He understands the historical record is shrouded in uncertainty and suspicion and, as a result, his empiricism ultimately “falters and folds back on itself, leading to radical skepticism about ordinary claims to knowledge” (Wilcox 344). In “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin notes that “the present, in all its open-endedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man” (924). In *Libra*, the dialogical nature of the narrative lends to the novel’s open-endedness. Branch combs through the historical archive in the present day but is unable to conclusively demonstrate what actually happened to President Kennedy. Because of the dialogical nature of *Libra*, there are no conclusions in the text; there is no conclusive ending to Branch’s story. The story is open-ended because the reader is unable to go back and collect the facts for his or herself. The dialogical information that is available to the

reader, through Branch, is put on display and left to the reader to develop his or her own interpretation of the events.

Leonard Wilcox, writing in “Don DeLillo’s *Libra*: History as Text, History as Trauma,” furthermore notes that “[o]ne of the chief difficulties Branch faces is that his study of the evidence surrounding the assassination fails to converge on some transcendental signified or to provide some stable meaning to historical events” (340). Branch is inundated by the sheer volume of aforementioned artefacts at his disposal. The facts are not just waiting to be collected, reoriented, positioned and conveyed to produce some coherent empirical “truth.” Rather, only parts of the whole lie before him, and Branch is quick to remind us that “the data keeps coming . . . new lives enter the record all the time. The past is changing as he writes” (301). It is clear in the text that there is still much work for him to do. Wilcox states that the “most definitive account of the [Kennedy] assassination is the *Warren Report*” (341), and Branch “finds it difficult to differentiate this report from fiction or poetry” (341). After all, Branch cheekily reminds us that the *Warren Commission Report* is the “megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (DeLillo 181).<sup>3</sup> He must go beyond the Report, “follow[ing] the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the

---

<sup>3</sup> Branch goes on: “Everything belongs, everything adheres, the matter of obscure witnesses, the photos of illegible documents and odd sad personal debris, things gathered up at a dying – old shoes, pajama tops, letters from Russia. It is all one thing, a ruined city of trivia where people feel real pain. This is the Joycean Book of America, remember – the novel in which nothing is left out” (182).

shadows” (15), to uncover the assassination plot fictitiously concocted by disgruntled CIA agents Everett and Mackey.

Furthering Branch’s difficulty in making sense of the past is the actual figure of the Curator that looms ominously before his task. The Curator is the gatekeeper to a plethora of secured data housed at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Beyond the walls of the book-filled room are reports, transcripts, and other secured documents. If Branch needs access to any of it, “he simply has to ask. The Curator is quick to respond, firm in his insistence in forwarding precisely the right document” (DeLillo 15). That the figure of the Curator exists in *Libra* is crucial to the novel as Branch tells us that he has not met the Curator face-to-face, though “they talk on the telephone, terse as snowbirds but unfailingly polite, *fellow bookmen after all*” (15; emphasis added). I include this quotation because it demonstrates that Branch, growing increasingly more comfortable with the task at hand, begins to align himself with the actual figure of the Curator. In doing so, Branch achieves a level of self-actualization as the Kennedy archives bookkeeper. The Curator in many ways controls the secured data that Branch must access for his historical account, not unlike the way in which the museum curator is limited by the archive on hand when creating a public display. Like the curator of a museum space, Branch is the novel’s controlling figure, “retrospectively choreographing the development both of Oswald’s convoluted career and of the Everett/Parmenter/Mackey plot to implicate Oswald in the assassination” (Boxall 137).

Like a number of contemporary museum spaces, the book-filled room is interactive and relies on multiple technologies. The Agency has provided Branch with a computer for convenient tracking. He enters the date, 17 April 1963, and the “names appear at once, with backgrounds, connections, [and] locations” (DeLillo 16). This computer contains what Branch crassly refers to as a “roster of the dead”: all the individuals linked to the assassination plot who are “conveniently and suggestively dead” (57). While Branch is quick to point out that the House Select Committee concluded in 1979 that there was nothing abnormal about these deaths – he later accepts this decision as “actuarial fact” – there is still an “endless suggestiveness . . . the language of the manner of death” (57). Branch is no longer maneuvering through an insurmountable field of historical details; he is battling paranoia, superstition, and coincidence, too. He tells us that he does not want to succumb to paranoia as the assassination plot already “reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions” (58). Yet, it is because of the suspicious circumstances surrounding the deaths of these characters (all of whom appear within *Libra*’s narrative) that they continue to resonate within Branch’s historical record.

For example, David William Ferrie, a former American pilot who Branch refers to as a “man . . . strange even to himself,” served in the same Civil Air patrol unit as Lee Harvey Oswald in the 1950s and was alleged to have been involved in a conspiracy to assassinate JFK . On 22 February 1967, one day after Jim Garrison’s investigation – which implicated Ferrie as a key figure in the assassination plot – became

public, Ferrie was found dead in his apartment. The official cause of death was initially ruled as suicide because of the suicide notes found at the scene, but autopsy reports suggest that he died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Garrison, upon learning of the coroner’s findings, was quoted as saying: “I suppose it could just be a weird coincidence that the night Ferrie penned two suicide notes, he dies of natural causes” (Norden). While the circumstances of Ferrie’s death seem odd, Branch’s superstition is exacerbated by the death of Eladio Del Valle, “a friend of David Ferrie and head of the Free Cuba Committee” (DeLillo 58), shot in the heart at point-blank range and his skull split open with an axe. Del Valle was murdered shortly after it was made public that he was wanted for questioning as part of Garrison’s investigation. Furthering the abnormality of his death is that Del Valle died just hours after Ferrie on 22 February 1967. By bringing to light the strange circumstances surrounding these individuals’ deaths, Branch encourages the reader to question the official records of the time. It would be easy for Branch to defer to his superstitious impulses (and perhaps we cannot blame him), since “the assassination sheds a powerful and lasting light” (58).

The existence of these historical figures points to the historiographically metafictional qualities of the novel.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, through

---

<sup>4</sup> Furthering the parallels between Linda Hutcheon’s view of historiographic metafiction and *Libra* is that the plot of DeLillo’s text “revolve[s] around characters openly concerned with making sense of the past” (Butter 626), a characteristic especially evident in Nicholas Branch. Hutcheon also describes the two-fold narrative structure of historiographic metafiction, which Michael Butter synthesizes by explaining that “the texts are almost always characterized by a dual timeframe” (626). On one level, we have Branch set in a fictional present

Branch’s archiving exigency, the novel is “intensely self-reflexive,” but it also fulfills Linda Hutcheon’s secondary characteristic of historiographic metafiction in that it “paradoxically lay[s] claim to historical events and personages” (qtd. in Butter 625). Yet, the novel’s historical reconceptualization does not offer a final resolution or synthesis of events as they relate to the assassination of JFK. The dialogical relationship between the facts Branch collects and his inability to order them in any coherent sense surges forward.

Historiographic metafiction concedes that “we cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*” (Butter 627; emphasis in original). Branch is ultimately failing in his task because “he is unwilling to make the selections necessary to fabricate such a [historical] fiction” (Butter 627). Furthermore, given the number of historical characters present in *Libra*, the text is not unlike the nineteenth-century historical novel in the sense that it contains significant social criticism and pleas for social reform (as they relate to police inconsistencies, conspiracy, and government inefficiency). By utilizing these historical figures as characters, DeLillo’s novel questions the alleged scientific objectivity of historical discourse to provide a definite account of history or “truth.” In *Libra*, DeLillo multifariously uses the character-as-curator to blur the peripheral area between history and fiction, in order to

---

and undertaking an exploration of the historical past where he reflects on “the epistemological problems [he] face[s]” (626). On the other hand, and through the characters of Everett, Mackey, and Oswald, *Libra*’s secondary plot is set “in a fictional past where events took place that [Branch is] interested in” (626).

examine the faultiness of the history surrounding the Kennedy assassination.

### **Conspiracy, Curation, and Multiple-Viewpoint Narratives**

*Libra* is a novel of multiple levels of curation. Beyond Nicholas Branch, who I have referred to as the novel’s chief character-as-curator, there are other subsidiary curators present as well. Win Everett and T.J. Mackey, both disgruntled CIA operatives, devise an assassination attempt on the president’s life to be perpetrated by a Castro sympathizer and designed to be a “spectacular miss” (DeLillo 51). The CIA had unceremoniously dismissed Win Everett, the mastermind of this plot, for his connection with the Bay of Pigs invasion. Three levels of CIA specialists termed his dismissal “motivational exhaustion” and decided it would be best for Everett to semi-retire to a teaching post at Texas Woman’s University; his job at present is to recruit “likely students as junior officer trainees” (DeLillo 18). It is because Everett has been “deprived of real duties, of contact with the men and events that informed his zeal” (18), that the ultimate goal of his plot is to now kill Fidel Castro after the failure of the Bay of Pigs attack. On another level, however, is Everett’s desire to show the backroom workings of the CIA. He reminds us that the “major subtext and moral lesson” of his plan is to reveal to the general public the “successive

layers” (21) of both his and the CIA’s schemes to assassinate Castro.<sup>5</sup> After all, as we are reminded, “knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset” (21). The CIA had built a hierarchical platform where the next-level person was unaware of the secret operations being carried out below him on the ground level. It was better for the CIA if the Director of Central Intelligence did not know about secure matters, as “the less he knew, the more decisively he could function” (21). Moreover, the “Joint Chiefs were not to know . . . The Secretaries were to be insulated from knowing . . . The Deputy Secretaries . . . expected to be misled . . . [and] the Attorney General wasn’t to know the queasy details” (21). Part of Everett’s anger with his demotion is because he was one of these ground-level employees that ascribed to the CIA’s notion that “details were a form of contamination” (21), and it is partially for this reason that he wishes to expose the inner workings of the CIA, to reveal “the secrets that quivered like reptile eggs” (21).

While Everett and Mackey’s chief function in *Libra* is to fulfill the role of conspirator, both men can also be considered a *kind* of curator. The narrator tells us that these men were “at work devising a general shape, a life” (DeLillo 50). They would script a gunman “out of ordinary dog-eared paper . . . a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world” (50). In order to achieve a fake attempt at the President’s life, both Everett and

---

<sup>5</sup> We are told elsewhere in *Libra* that a number of plans to assassinate Castro were currently in the works, ranging from poisoning his cigars, designing cigars with micro-explosives, poison pens, conspiring with other organized crime figures, snipers, and saboteurs.

Mackey need a patsy, a slightly clearer image of an individual at the centre of the assassination attempt. This individual will “be trailed, found, possibly killed by the Secret Service, FBI or local police” (50). They will forge document blanks, photographs, fingerprints, handwriting samples. All these doctored artefacts will be carefully placed so that this “near anonymous” marksman, “with little known history” (50) will surface and disappear throughout the investigation until he is finally charged for shooting at JFK. While I acknowledge that the traditional curator does not forge documents or purposefully mislead the audience, I think it is crucial to point out the type of role that Everett and Mackey play within *Libra*. Johnston notes in “Superlinear Fiction” that Everett and Mackey do not simply set up a fall guy; they carefully *put together* an individual, “someone with a fabricated trail leading back to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate” (326). Ultimately, Everett wants to “plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event” (DeLillo 27). Leaving a paper trail is central to the operation. These men want to use “[m]ail-order forms, change-of-address cards . . . photographs” (28) to script a person that will arouse the suspicion of the authorities. Ironically, the placement of fake documents and artefacts so closely resembles the function of the curator that another member of the plot, Laurence Parmenter, likens the scheme to a portrait curated in an art museum. He states, “if a monumental canvas existed of the . . . conspirators, a painting that showed them with knit brows and twisted torsos, darkly scheming men . . . it might be titled ‘Light Entering the Cave of the Ungodly’” (24). Further framing this “spectacular miss” with a Cuban

sympathizer is Everett’s insistence that Miami be “the clear choice” to stage the assassination attempt. His reasoning for this location is that “hundreds of exile factions lived there, conspired and squabbled, waited for another chance – *movimientos, juntas, unions*” (51; emphasis in original). There is a sense of decorum in choosing Miami as a central location since “it was a city of open wounds, of explosive politics and feelings” (51).

It is at this point in the narrative that Everett no longer mulls over whether or not the operation needs a patsy: he has made up his mind. He would find “a man with believable quirks,” a man that could be the central character of his plot (78). Enter Lee Harvey Oswald, who Frank Lentricchia describes as “an undecidable intention waiting to be decided” (201). Oswald conforms to Everett’s plan because of his dizzying history: he is a communist sympathizer, Cuban supporter, lone shooter, social outcast. Lee Oswald “fits so aptly into the role Win Everett evolves in his basement” because “everything is ‘linked in a vast rhythmic coincidence’” (Radford 238). Coincidence or not, Oswald is determined to be worthy of Everett’s plan since he is most recently questioned by the authorities for taking a shot at the right-wing general Edwin Walker. While Everett begins building “a skein of persuasion” through false “address books . . . photographs expertly altered (or crudely altered) . . . [l]etters, travel documents, [and] counterfeit signatures,” his “massive decipherment” is already in the process of constructing itself (DeLillo 78). Andrew Radford is correct in noting that throughout the novel, Oswald constructs “social masks for himself” (234): he aims to “script himself an active role in

history as a defiant communist sympathizer” (227) and, in doing so, assumes a level of curation in the tailoring of his own social nuances. We are reminded that “Oswald wanted his path to be tracked and his name to be known” (DeLillo 303). As such, Oswald leaves traces of himself to be found through his transparent alter-identity, Hidell. There are “the homemade documents, the socialist literature, the weapons and false names” (303). Oswald curates himself into this history. After deciding that both he and the fictional Bobby Dupard (Oswald’s former cellmate) would attempt to assassinate General Walker, Oswald had his wife, Marina, snap a series of photographs of him clutching the rifle he would eventually use to perpetrate the assassination attempt. He is purposefully leading the authorities to the centre of his own plot. As such, I argue that Oswald, like the curator, generates and intentionally places artefacts in such a way to create a certain history. The subject of this history is himself. Radford, furthering this line of thinking, writes that Oswald should be viewed as a “ritual to be performed using carefully rehearsed artifice, adopting and then discarding a variety of social postures” (234).

### **The Character-as-Curator and Museum Sensibility**

Stephen Bernstein writes that the parallels between Everett’s, Mackey’s, and Oswald’s plottings are actually due to a plot’s general impulse to take a life of its own, “to spin out of control” (20). In *Libra*, the Everett/Mackey/Oswald plots come together independently without needing to be curated. Everett reminds us that “plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death

. . . [and] he believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot” (DeLillo 221). While it is clear that Everett wants the shooter “to hit a Secret Service man, wound him superficially,” Everett is also aware that something more “insidious” is happening, for he “had a foreboding that the plot would move to a limit, *develop a logical end*” (221; emphasis added). Another historical character in the novel, David Ferrie, alludes to some kind of terrestrial force that is pulling the strings of Everett, Mackey, and Oswald’s design. The assassination site conveniently moves from Miami to Dallas as a result of the change in location of the President’s motorcade route. In that time, Oswald, who is unable to find steady work, lands a job at the Texas School Book Depository through a close friend of the family. Witnessing these two independent plots converge into one, Ferrie tells Oswald, “Truth isn’t what we know or feel”; “We didn’t arrange your job in that building or set up the motorcade route. We don’t have that kind of reach or power. There’s something else that’s generating this event” (DeLillo 333, 384). Branch, who is at present working through the historical ambiguities left over by the *Warren Commission*, supports Ferrie’s point and comes to view Oswald as a technical diagram, an “exercise in the secret manipulation of history” (377). The reason I draw attention to the converging of these two independent plots is because DeLillo himself believed that Oswald’s character was fabricated from a historical sense. He touched on the idea of Oswald’s historical composition in an essay he wrote for *Rolling Stone*, titled “American Blood”:

Oswald often seems a secret design worked out by men who will never surface – a procedural diagram, a course in fabricated biography. Who put him together? He is not an actor so much as he is a character, a fictional character who first emerges as such in the year 1957 . . . [He] seemed scripted out of doctored photos, tourist cards, change-of-address cards, mailorder forms, visa applications, altered signatures, pseudonyms. (qtd. in Johnston, *Information* 198)

Oswald presents a significant problem for DeLillo the writer. As such, we notice that, through the novel’s two independent subplots, DeLillo goes to great lengths to show the problems of Oswald’s historical composition.

The mysteriousness of Oswald’s character and history poses one of the largest obstacles for Branch. While Branch’s initial hope is to uncover “an empirical bedrock of historical fact” (Wilcox 341), his motive is challenged by Oswald, a figure “‘dripping in language’ already written in a chain of prior representations” (341). DeLillo further states that “someone who knew Oswald referred to him as an actor in real life, and . . . there is a sense in which he was watching himself perform” (qtd. in DeCurtis 60). As Branch sifts through the historical materials of the book-filled room, he asks himself time and again who Lee Harvey Oswald is. And what were his motivations for killing Kennedy? Branch wants absolute correspondence between the structure of events and the organizational design of his historical account. The problem is that Oswald’s character is written not only in part by his conspirators but also by himself, too. As Peter Boxall

eloquently states, “at the heart of this huge historical machine is Oswald, blinking in the headlights . . . absolutely unaware that his dabbling in Marx, his stumbling passion for Castro, is not taking him beyond the borders of the nation state, but rather delivering him, as a patsy, to its very heart” (142). Branch hopes that the “documents [will] point unproblematically to their source . . . yet each document contains ‘endless suggestiveness’” (Wilcox 344).

From Branch’s book-filled room, to Everett and Mackey’s conspiracy, to Oswald’s desire to achieve a “clear sense of role” in history (DeLillo qtd. in Lentricchia 201), it is obvious that *Libra* is a novel that features various levels of curation. In the novel, Branch proves to be the text’s controlling curator. Beneath him are men who subsume a *kind* of curation that muddles the history he is trying to write. Branch’s inability to achieve a conclusive history of the Kennedy assassination shows how the novel is perfect for analyzing the function of the character-as-curator. Because there is no definite conclusion, the reader is granted the opportunity to explore multiple narratives featuring various levels of curation. Herbert reminds us that “DeLillo’s novel does not seek the truth about who killed Kennedy or why, but rather performs the forensic evidence” (291). The novel is a “performative space” that respects “the innocence of facts and attempt[s] to make them meaningful” (291). Herbert’s point makes sense because the historical material with which DeLillo engages is open-ended and the case remains unresolved; therefore, the novel must employ an open-ended form that mirrors a museum space. In this sense, all the historical materials may be collected, displayed,

turned over, and examined. DeLillo, himself, comments on the kind of open structure his novels employ, stating that “my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one at all, is outside the book. My books are open-ended” (qtd. in DeCurtis 63). Meaning in *Libra*, like the contemporary museum space, is generated by the reader or viewer. That DeLillo states the answer is located outside of the text makes obvious that the answer resides within the reader. The great thing about the museum is that there is choice: one may follow the curated path or one may skip parts and follow his or her own path willy-nilly. By giving the reader/viewer access to multiple narratives without providing a definitive conclusion, *Libra* achieves an end similar to that of the contemporary museum space.

Moreover, the function of *Libra* is not to discover a version of the “truth” concerning the death of President Kennedy because the assassination is a moment in American history that “resists the cohesive power of narrative” (Boxall 133). DeLillo, eschewing this fact, reminds us in his author’s note to *Libra* that “any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record” and that this can only be achieved by “alter[ing] and embellish[ing] reality, extend[ing] real people into imagined space and time, invent[ing] incidents, dialogues and characters” (458). Indeed, the Mackey and Everett subplot is the artistic liberty DeLillo has taken in order to create his text. This subplot, while a fiction, grants DeLillo the ability to contemplate the assassination “without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years”

(458). It is artistic liberty that ensures DeLillo’s text will not devolve into crackpot conspiracy theories. Rather, the biographical portrait of Oswald, along with the Mackey and Everett subplot, are the plausible “altered and embellished” realities DeLillo utilizes to investigate all the documents and artefacts as they relate to the assassination of JFK.

In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis entitled “An Outsider in This Society,” quoted in my epigraph, DeLillo expands on what an open-ended form can lend to novels dealing with history and fiction:

Branch feels overwhelmed by the massive data he has to deal with. He feels the past is changing as he writes. He despairs of being able to complete a coherent account of this extraordinarily complex event. I think the fiction writer tries to redeem this despair. Stories can be a consolation – at least in theory. The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, *and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there’s a kind of redemptive truth waiting on the other side*, a sense that we’ve arrived at a resolution. I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere. (64; emphasis added)

In *Libra*, the differing interpretations of fact that arise from the *Warren Commission Report* strengthen the absence of any one kind of authoritative experience, thus demonstrating the provisionality of historical “truth.” In order to “rescue history from its confusions,” DeLillo employs a character-as-curator, in the form of Nick Branch, who works retrospectively to piece together the infinitesimal traces of the JFK assassination. The marginal facts Branch relies on will not lead him to a permanent history; rather, it will offer a different way of thinking about the assassination that is free from political bias or ambiguity. By utilizing a polyphonic, multiple-viewpoint narrative structure that relies exclusively on archival source material, DeLillo attempts to achieve an alternate version of the “truth” that has been historically misrepresented or simply undiscovered. The key to his desire to restore coherent cause and effect are the artefacts on display in the book-filled room.

Branch employs a “framing” mechanism that is not unlike the kind of display technique derived from the field of museology. As Janet Marstine explains, “[f]raming is a metaphorical process that creates a vision of the past and future based on *contemporary needs*” (4; emphasis added). And this concept, echoing Bakhtin’s sentiments regarding the redemptive power of art set in the present tense, provides “an ideologically based narrative context that colors our understanding of what’s included, rather than isolating a work from the wider world” (4). The book-filled room is known as “the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams” (DeLillo 14), and the “epistemological problem posed by [its] unfiltered data is solved

artificially – through storage and display rather than interpretation” (Herbert 302). It is the architecture of this room that frames the historical materials encased within it. Branch spends his afternoons slumped in a chair, trying to make sense of the past for the CIA’s present contemporary needs. As the novel’s character-as-curator, Branch frames the archaeological materials to better understand that fateful day in Dallas, “separating the elements of each crowded second” (DeLillo 15). While Branch never completes his history of the Kennedy assassination, he does achieve something more meaningful: “he assembles the evidence into a collection, a contemporary cabinet of curiosities” (Herbert 292). It is for this reason that the architectural design of the book-filled room is so important. It is a space where the evidence can be collected and displayed. Michaela Giebelhausen argues that the architectural design of a museum space “is the museum: it is precisely the architectural configuration that gives the museum meaning” (42; emphasis in original). On one level, the spatial qualities of DeLillo’s text determine the configuration of meaning-making within *Libra*. On a secondary level, however, the space and configurations of the book-filled room determine “the viewing conditions both conceptually and physically” (Giebelhausen 42). The book-filled room not only frames the archeological materials but also shapes our reading experience, much in the way that a museum display frames a visitor’s viewing experience.

A major difference should be noted, however, between the structural qualities of Branch’s room and a typical museum space, in that “the architecture of a museum . . . unfold[s] along a processional

route . . . [and] provide[s] symbolic architectural decoration which help[s] to frame the elaborate classification of the collections” (Giebelhausen 51). When one proceeds through a museum display, there are barriers and walkways, different forms of visual cues, that weathervane the viewer down the path they must follow (and, furthermore, down the path laid out by the museum’s curator). In *Libra*, no such signage exists; the book-filled room is built as an extension to Branch’s already existing living space. It is not meant for processional use; it is a space in which the objects may be collected and analyzed but not displayed to the general public. After all, Branch tells us that the CIA “will not reveal what they’ve learned to other agencies, much less the public” (DeLillo 442). It is for this reason that “the history [Branch] has been contracted to write is a secret one, meant for the CIA’s own closed collection” (442).

In this sense, and because the book-filled room is a private space, the reader enacts the role of viewer/visitor in *Libra*. Just as no two individuals go through an exhibition in exactly the same way, *Libra* envisions a typical and/or ideal “viewer” to whom the book-filled room is tailored. Such an ideal “visitor” to DeLillo’s text “is one who would be ideologically and culturally at home” with the artefacts on display, “politically comfortable with the information that is presented” (Lindauer 204). In this sense, the book-filled room comes to represent what Pierre Nora refers to as a *lieu de mémoire* (or site of memory), “any significant entity . . . [which] has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (17). The book-filled room can be considered a *lieu de mémoire* because it

is artificial and deliberately fabricated. It “exist[s] to help us recall the past – which is . . . necessary in order to make living in the modern world meaningful” (Nora 17). By curating the objects on display in the book-filled room, Branch uncovers strands of meaning within “the whole of the sprawling mess that surrounds the events in Dallas” (Green 100). Or, as Herbert opines in “Playing the Historical Record,” *Libra* “produce[s] [an] extrajudicial space where evidence can be performed for the purposes of public display” (305). Ultimately, the book-filled room “becomes a collection of relics . . . [and] produces no truth greater than the fact of Kennedy’s death itself” (303). As the character-as-curator, Branch does justice to historical likelihood: he displays the artefacts in such a way that he reveals the assassination to be the work of anti-Castro operatives. Branch makes no definitive assertions about the assassination: “it raises as many questions as it answers: Oswald may be a patsy . . . but he also has his own curious and complicated motivations” (Herbert 287). The genius of Branch’s curatorial plotting is that it not only prevents “novelistic invention” from becoming “the heart of the book” (as well as succumbing to hare-brained conspiracy theories), but it also provides DeLillo with “a clear historical center on which I could work my fictional variations” (qtd. in DeCurtis 58). DeLillo thus reiterates to DeCurtis the artistic liberties he has taken, in the form of the Mackey/Everett/Oswald subplot, to shape his narrative.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by DeLillo’s fascination with the JFK shooting. Consider that his inaugural novel, *Americana* (1971), concludes with its central character journeying through the

president’s motorcade in 1963 and ending at the hospital where Kennedy was eventually pronounced dead.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the Kennedy assassination is a topic that has permeated much of DeLillo’s writing career. Boxall has noted that as DeLillo’s work progressed from *Americana*, an “homage to Kennedy [is] made again and again, in variously covert or cryptic ways” (132): in *Players* (1977), “Lyle Wynant finds himself mixed up with a potential terrorist who claims to have known Oswald” (Green 95); in *Running Dog* (1978), “a senator’s wife . . . is reading her way through the twenty-six volumes of testimony that accompanied the *Warren Commission Report*” (Green 95); and, in *Underworld* (1997), “Klara Sax attends a party where the [Zapruder] film is playing in a continuous loop on a wall of television screens set up as both art installation and entertainment” (Herbert 305).<sup>7</sup> While a number of the academics and theorists consulted have raised the following point, I believe it is necessary and crucial to touch on it once again. In DeCurtis’s landmark interview with DeLillo, the interviewer asked whether or not the author could invent a novel such

---

<sup>6</sup> “In the morning I headed west along Main Street, turned left onto Elm and pressed my hand against the horn. I kept it there as I drove past the School Book Depository, through Dealey Plaza and beneath the triple underpass. I kept blowing the horn all along Stemmons Freeway and out past Parkland Hospital. At Love Field I turned in the car” (DeLillo, *Americana* 377).

<sup>7</sup> “It ran continuously, a man in his forties in a suit and tie, and all the sets were showing slow motion now, riding in a car with his confident wife, and the footage took on a sense of elegy, running ever slower, running down, a sense of greatness really, the car’s regal gleam and the murder of some figure out of dimmest lore – a greatness, a kingliness, the terrible mist of tissue and skull, so massively slow, on Elm Street, and they for something to eat and went to the loft, where they played cards for a couple of hours and did not talk about Zapruder” (DeLillo, *Underworld* 496).

as *Libra* without the Kennedy assassination happening. DeLillo responded:

Maybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer; I had only published some short stories in small quarterlies. As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination. (56)

If the Kennedy assassination invented DeLillo as a writer, it also played a central role in the creation of another key design: because of DeLillo's invention, *Libra* brings to life the character-as-curator, a figure that is central to texts that weave history and fiction with curatorial technique and museum design. My hope is that this article highlighted the ways in which the character-as-curator offers the reader a followable model for thinking about the alternate versions of history, of “truth,” offered by these texts. ☉

### **Works Cited**

“About the Museum.” *JFK.org*. The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, 2014. Web. 5 March 2015.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel.” *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Boston: Thompson Wadsworth, 2005. 912-25. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

*Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 253-64. Print.

Bernstein, Stephen. "Libra and the Historical Sublime." *Postmodern Culture* 4.2 (1994): 20. Web. 12 June 2016.

Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Butter, Michael. "Historiographic Metafiction." *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Ed. Brian W. Shaffer. Malden: Blackwell, 2010. Print.

DeCurtis, Anthony. "'An Outsider in this Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. 52-74. Print.

Don DeLillo. *Americana*. New York: Penguin, 1971. Print.

---. *Libra*. New York: Viking, 1988. Print.

---. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 1997. Print.

Giebelhausen, Michaela. "The Architecture *Is* the Museum." *Marstine* 41-69.

Green, Jeremy. "Libra." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Ed. John N. Duvall. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. 94-107. Print.

Herbert, Shannon. "Playing the Historical Record: DeLillo's *Libra* and the Kennedy Archive." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56.3 (2010): 287-317. Print.

The Jesus and Mary Chain. "Reverence." *Honey's Dead*. Def American Recordings, 1992. CD.

- Johnston, John. *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998. Print.
- . "Superlinear Fiction or Historical Diagram? Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 40.2 (1994): 319-342. Print.
- Lentricchia, Frank. "Libra as Postmodern Critique." *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. 193-215. Print.
- Lindauer, Margaret. "The Critical Museum Visitor." *Marstine* 203-225.
- Martinon, Jean-Paul. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*. London: A & C Black, 2013. Print.
- Marstine, Janet. "Introduction." *Marstine* 1-36.
- Marstine, Janet, ed. *New Museum Theory and Practice*. Malden: Blackwell, 2006. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. Print.
- Norden, Eric. "Jim Garrison Interview." Oct. 1967. *Playboy*. Playboy, n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2015.
- Radford, Andrew. "Confronting the Chaos Theory of History in DeLillo's *Libra*." *Midwest Quarterly* 47.3 (2006): 224-243. Print.
- Robinson, Andrew. "Walter Benjamin: Messianism and Revolution." *CeaseFire*. CeaseFire Magazine, 15 Nov. 2013. Web. 14 June 2016.
- Thomas, Glen. "History, Biography, and Narrative in Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 43.1 (1997): 107-124. Print.
- Wilcox, Leonard. "Don DeLillo's *Libra*: History as Text, History as Trauma." *Rethinking History* 9.2/3 (2005): 337-353. Print.

**Mario D'Agostino** holds a B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of Windsor and is a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Program in English at York University. His dissertation, "History, Rhetoric, Proof: The Contemporary Novel as Archaeological Source," explores the use of historical documents in the contemporary Canadian and American novel.

[Return to contents \(LINK\)](#)