CONTAGION OF INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS IN POST-9/11 NOVELS

Alberto S. Galindo

I want your ugly.
I want your disease.
I want your everything
As long as it’s free.
— LADY GAGA

Judith Butler’s 2004 essay collection *Precarious Life* opens with a clear and strong condemnation of post-9/11 censorship and anti-intellectualism.¹ In relation to Butler’s suggestive hypotheses, this chapter explores the ways in which two post-9/11 fiction works in prose try to comment on, evade, or outwit governmental and imperial mechanisms of a discourse against an open and intellectual debate in a post-9/11 United States.

The chapter brings together an American writer’s novel, Claire Messud’s *The Emperor Children* (2006), and a novel by a British writer, Zoë Heller’s *The Believers* (2009). Both novels are threaded by the socioeco-
nomie privilege that their respective characters have and the luxury that such freedom affords them when dealing with, coping with, and surviving the events of September 11 and their aftermath. Most of the main characters in these two novels form their narratives from the class position that the character Rosa in *The Believers* calls “bourgeois liberalism.”

It is this bourgeois liberalism that becomes one of the central ideologies in both novels and then spreads metaphorically throughout the texts, similar to the spread of Communism as a metaphor of contagion during the Cold War. Thus, this chapter explores not the literal, bodily notion of contagion but rather the contagion of intellectual ideas, primarily the characters’ constant implicit and explicit acceptance of a bourgeois notion of liberalism in the aftermath of 9/11.

The choice of two women writers and their nationalities is not serendipitous. It is, partly, a response to the observations made by scholars and critics such as Kristiaan Versluys, who writes: “It is also a matter of mere conjecture whether the new 9/11 fiction will remain the preserve of male white writers or whether it will be marked by more gender and ethnic diversity or acquire a more outspoken international dimension.”

Besides the common ground both writers share, the novels are both third-person narratives concerned with the bonds and ties of bourgeois liberal families who are affected by the events of 9/11, and this, in turn, generates a fictional dialogue between the politics of both texts.

Emerging from a character’s notion of bourgeois liberalism, this chapter also invokes the concept of ideology constructed in the novel through a digested version that several characters conceive based on some of Antonio Gramsci’s writings. The ideological apparatus is derived from and referenced by, in the case of *The Believers*, a famous quote attributed to Gramsci that serves as the epigraph to Heller’s novel: “The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.” The scope of a bourgeois liberalism and its hegemonic culture clearly expands through the texts in contrast or response to ideological premises that are feared and criticized by the characters in the present, such as Rosa’s previous interest in communist socialism, but that may have marked their lives in the past, as in the case of the patriarch in *The Believers*, who claims that his epitaph will be by Gramsci as well: “a pessimist because of intelligence and an optimist by will.” The privilege of these characters in *The Believers*, who quote Gramsci at will,
creates an environment that allows for the construction of subtle metaphors of contagion, or social contagion as studied by sociologists. It is the epigraph’s question of modernity and illusions that permeates the characters in *The Believers*, but also in *The Emperor’s Children*, especially if seen through Gramsci’s notion that ideology—the bourgeois liberalism mentioned here as well as the culture indispensable to maintaining such liberalism—does create these characters and provoke them to act. Such political and intellectual action can be read in the novels particularly because both texts push for public intellectuals or figures who try to take charge of ideological practices and their respective intellectual debates.

The characters in *The Emperor’s Children* fear the anti-intellectualism and censorship that Butler studies in *Precarious Life*, and in order to avoid these, they want to spread intellectualism, in its privileged and bourgeois version. The response to their concern with this metaphoric contagion is to generate and speak from another form of contagion, but without perceiving it in such a way. In their attempts to counteract the expansion of one form of contagious, neoliberal cultural stagnation, they participate willingly in another iteration of metaphoric contagion, namely, a liberal cultural revolution in this case. These characters, as well as most in *The Believers*, desire and engage with a contagious bourgeois liberalism that they hope will spread like contagious laughter. This chapter focuses on the pacts these characters have made with their respective ideologies and the ways in which such ideologies become metaphors of wishful contagion that spread throughout these fictions.

If, on the one hand, both novels can be tied to questions of ideology through the use and reading of Gramsci in the text of *The Believers*, then, on the other, the following epigraph in *The Emperor’s Children* suggests issues surrounding the use and construction of narratives: “The General, speaking one felt with authority, always insisted that, if you bring off adequate preservation of your personal myth, nothing much else in life matters. It is not what happens to people that is significant, but what they think happens to them.” The quote, from Anthony Powell’s 1971 novel *Books Do Furnish a Room*, allows Messud to introduce the question of narrative, especially in the form of myth, while simultaneously alluding to Powell’s interest in humor in literature, especially satire. These two epigraphs, from Gramsci and Powell, guide the construction of both novels as well as the reading proposed by this chapter: the turns in the
narrative form in relation to the ideology of a bourgeois liberalism that spreads through the novels in metaphoric ways.

These metaphors arise from two different post-9/11 moments, 2006 and 2009, in order to remind us that “our understanding of September 11 is incremental and can never hope to be intact and entire,” as Martin Amis claims in his introductory note to his collection of stories and essays *The Second Plane*. These post-9/11 moments are present both in fiction and in some literary criticism of post-9/11 novels that has been instrumental in questioning the narrative and thematic questions raised in these texts as well as in generating its own critical discourse for the analysis of this literature. Richard Gray creates a brief yet substantial genealogy in his essay “American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,” in which he explores some well-known post-9/11 novels. Gray makes three crucial points. First, he clearly states that the novels he is analyzing are marked by the narration and theoretical framework of trauma theory and even claims such narratives fail at exploring any post-9/11 complexities because they are indeed focused on the trauma of a post-9/11 United States. His second significant point is centered on the narrative form itself as he claims that these novels rely on a form that may not allow for any kind of insightful narration. Gray’s final observation turns into a prescription for post-9/11 novelists, almost requiring that this literature should become deterritorialized—borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari—while focusing on immigrant narratives. For Gray, in other words, the questions that post-9/11 fiction must ask should arise from dislocating commonplace post-9/11 narrative voices (meaning mostly those of white, privileged characters) from their national territory (meaning mostly a white, privileged United States). The shortfall of his recommendation is clearly explored in Michael Rothberg’s response to Gray in the same issue of *American Literary History*. Rothberg states that the politics of a deterritorialized, immigrant literature can indeed constitute a sharp point of entry into 9/11 in the United States, but he also prescribes that post-9/11 fiction not only be about the United States; this fiction, according to Rothberg, should also be about the effects of the United States on other countries. If both prescriptions are joined together, it seems that Gray and Rothberg are asking for an American Franz Kafka, a writer who could produce texts of what Deleuze and Guattari term “minor literature”: a political literature of collective value written in the language of
the majority but from a marginal or marginalized position. This kind of writer would exemplify the kind of narrative decentralization that Butler calls for in *Precarious Life*. It should be noted, however, that Rothberg’s response uses an example of literature that is not American; he goes to *Netherland* (2008) by Joseph O’Neill, an Irishman raised in Holland, in order to establish a contrast with the American novels that Gray studies, including those by canonical writers such as Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, and John Updike.

This chapter also seeks to dialogue with Gray’s and Rothberg’s recommendations for post-9/11 novels, not in order to explore the points that some of this literature fails to accomplish or address, but rather to address the issues that this literature seems to be putting forward.

**The Emperor’s Children and the Question of Timing**

Claire Messud’s novel *The Emperor’s Children* spends most of its pages, its first forty-six short chapters, in a pre-9/11 world, slowly presenting its characters in March, May, and July of 2001 until their lives are marked by September 11 in chapter fifty-eight. The chapter “The Morning After” presents Murray Thwaite, a public intellectual and journalist, stuck in a Lower Manhattan apartment with his mistress, Danielle, while his wife thinks he is in Chicago. On this morning of crisis, he decides to walk uptown to his wife and apartment while leaving his mistress behind. Danielle experiences the chaos of the day only in a personal way, from the perspective of the jilted lover. Her concerns center on her own situation; it is not about collective injury or collective trauma but rather the surprise, the shock of a relationship that has ended because of 9/11. This day does change everything for Danielle, for she understands that Murray will be shaken and will reconcile with his wife. Danielle is the first character in Messud’s novel to experience the morning of September 11. She is aware that perhaps she should step away from the private sphere and enter the realm of the public “because in the light of these things she did not matter,” but for her, 9/11 is the end of her future with Murray. And 9/11 will continue to represent that end for her throughout the rest of the novel.

The next chapter presents the opposite of Danielle’s notion of 9/11 as a situation in the private sphere by focusing on the reaction of her lov-
er’s daughter, Marina Thwaite, and Marina’s husband, Ludovic. Ludovic suggests that he and Marina should immediately leave the offices of the magazine they are about to launch, and Marina responds by asking if they should walk on the streets because they have a responsibility as journalists. He replies that they should be outside because history is unfolding and they cannot pretend otherwise. Outside the office, criticism of the immediate response to 9/11 comes via Ludovic, the foreigner who came to the United States to found and edit *The Monitor*, a political magazine. They walk around Union Square for a while, and he reacts to posters of people who are missing after the Twin Towers’ collapse by hyperbolically calling such posters “necrophiliac pornography.” Ludovic is the one character afforded the opportunity to express a critical perspective on 9/11 solidarity, concern, or grief, mostly because he will never risk being called un-American or unpatriotic because he is foreign. The anti-intellectualism Marina and Ludovic fear, that is, the background premise for *The Monitor*’s launch, instantly gains even more force on September 11. Hoping to offset the metaphoric contagion of pre- and post-9/11 anti-intellectualism, they want to disseminate a contagious, leftist, bourgeois liberalism through the costly publication of a political magazine.

The question of being American or un-American is phrased more directly after the members of the Thwaite family find themselves in an uncertain situation when they discover that Frederick “Bootie” Tubb, Murray’s nephew and Judy Thwaite’s son, has gone missing. Marina and her friend, Julius, go to Fort Greene, Brooklyn, to search for Bootie at his place since his mother lives upstate. Once they arrive, Julius focuses on the value of real estate in the area: “If I had a million, I’d buy this dump and do it up. Sooner or later, it’s going to be worth a lot.” Marina not only agrees with this observation but also confesses to having noticed the same in the block they have just passed. Marina had reacted negatively to Ludovic’s description of post-9/11 New York as “necrophiliac pornography” but finds herself in a position to comment on real estate potential just a couple of days after the events, again reenacting their world of socioeconomic privilege or “First World complacency,” to borrow again from Butler’s text. They may not have the actual money to “buy this dump and do it up,” but they clearly speak from that position, which brings to mind the speech President George W. Bush made on September 20, 2001: “I ask your continued participation and confidence
in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity; they did not touch its source.” Marina and Julius, in this minor exchange, clearly exemplify the acts that the president would soon advocate. *The Emperor’s Children* then uses Bootie’s disappearance as a mechanism for reflecting on American prosperity, as suggested by the fictional characters as well as the historical president.

With 9/11 comes the end of *The Monitor*. The head financier behind *The Monitor* explains that “nobody wanted such a thing in this new world, a frivolous, satirical thing.” These characters in New York, in the immediacy of 9/11, are aware of the heavy seriousness of these events and the reduced role, if any, of any sort of humor in commenting instantly on 9/11. The novel seems to enter into dialogue with the unhesitant declaration of the end of irony made immediately after 9/11 by many public figures such as Graydon Carter of *Vanity Fair* and Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* magazine.20 The description of *The Monitor* as a work of satire seems crucial here, especially in the context of post-9/11 debates on the uses and abuses of humor. Parts of this debate have been summed up by Amis, for example, as follows: “Islam, as I said, is a total system, and like such systems it is eerily amenable to satire. But with Islamism, with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies”21

Within the novel, there are two crucial moments of irony that perhaps allow for some intellectual distance from 9/11. The turn of the screw in *The Emperor’s Children* is the way in which Bootie uses the day advantageously. Every member of the Thwaite family, including his mother, uncle, and cousin, have been looking incessantly for news about him, but, as it turns out, he has taken a bus down to Florida.22 Bootie consciously does the almost unspeakable: he wants to disappear by allowing everyone else to think he has died; he desires to join the throngs of the missing. It is Bootie who does what no one even dares to conceive, namely, to embrace the resulting deaths of 9/11 not for any notion of grief or mourning but for personal gain: “He had been given—his fate—the precious opportunity to be again, not to be as he had been. Because as far as anyone knew, he wasn’t.”23 Bootie changes his name to Ulrich New while his family holds a burial ceremony for him in Water-town, New York. The irony behind the live dead Bootie decentralizes, or *deterritorializes*, part of the grief discourse performed by the Thwaite
clan in *The Emperor’s Children*. By using 9/11 to create a new persona, it is almost as if Bootie can eschew the trauma narrative of his family and generate a different political territory for himself while everyone else keeps to their bourgeois liberalism.

Bootie’s situation recalls Amis’s statement about terrorists, “for whom death is not death—and for whom life is not life, either.”\(^{24}\) This is not to say that Bootie is a terrorist or even behaves like one, but rather that his actions shift the definition of death. The irony of the situation also plays a joke on the reader, who has been grieving Bootie’s disappearance with the family throughout chapters 60 and 61 before he reappears in chapter 62.

The other ironic situation in the novel is also directly related to Bootie’s disappearance, which the family deems a certain death. Murray is addressed frequently as a public intellectual and is asked about his feelings regarding his nephew. He states, “It’s an indescribable loss. And ours is just one of thousands.” As the public intellectual, Murray seems almost to address the reader as well; his voice in the novel tries to organize 9/11 for the curious reader who is also trying to make sense of it or at least understand its ramifications. The narrator elaborates on Murray’s previous statement, commenting “and Murray couldn’t help but be aware of the irony that Bootie’s death had granted him greater nobility, and importance—he knew it to be false—as a man of justice, unswayed by the arrows of misfortune.”\(^{25}\) The irony here lies in the ways in which this death in the family authorizes Murray to oscillate between the private and public spheres. He can perform his speech acts with intellectual authority and as a New Yorker because he has been intimately affected by 9/11. Death becomes a privilege for him because he is grieving and negotiating post-9/11 trauma.

The final twist takes place in South Beach, Florida, instead of New York City, generating a geographic distance from the epicenter of the events. Danielle, after a failed suicide attempt, takes a trip with her mother, and they discuss Danielle’s possible return to New York—“She had a film about liposuction to make. It seemed, in some lights, trivial, but it wasn’t really. By the time it was finished, people would be tired of greater tragedies, and would be ready to watch it again.” The humor here is for the reader: after 9/11, the liposuction must go on. Again, *The Emperor’s Children* finds a way to make Danielle’s life in New York
more about the private sphere than about anything related to the public sphere or the collective history unfolding in the city. “People would be tired of greater tragedies,” predicts Danielle in November 2001, in a novel published in 2006. In a way, this metafictional moment questions the novel’s own place in a post-9/11 literary world, asking whether the “greater tragedy” of 9/11 has given way to other interests, or whether those interests—whatever they may be, but presented here as metaphorical contagion of ideological apparatuses—had been in place before 9/11 and afterward. That question of timing—of whether it is too soon to be inane rather than serious, personal instead of collective, or comedic, ironic, or satirical instead of tragic—marks the very last pages of the novel. Danielle runs into Bootie/Ulrich at the hotel where she is staying and where he now works. He explains to her the reason behind taking advantage of the disastrous events of 9/11: “I needed to go. I would be dead, otherwise. I needed—I haven’t done anything wrong. If I would’ve killed myself otherwise, then I’d be dead, really dead. Maybe that would be better. Then would you be satisfied?”

The question of timing and the circumstances presented in the previous passage underline the final irony behind Bootie’s disappearance. Bootie is still performing his first-person narrative in this dialogue, but he does so from a decentralized political position; he questions which deaths are worth more, which lives are grievable and ungrievable, to echo Butler’s questions and categories.

Even though a metaphoric contagion of ideologies pervades the text, as expressed mostly through the bourgeois liberalism of the Thwaite family, the one character who refuses to make a pact with such contagion, Bootie, ends up becoming one of the missing in order to avoid the aforementioned ideological apparatus. That is, Bootie’s decision to become part of the disappeared and carry the weight of the narrative’s irony with him allows him to avoid the bourgeois entrapments of the emperor and his children.

The end of the novel puts the reader in a different kind of precarious position. The questions put to the characters, the systems of belief that are somewhat scrutinized by the children of the emperor, are also generated by and for the post-9/11 reader. The uses of irony within the context of the bourgeois liberalism of the text become a vital mechanism for creating a point of entry into post-9/11 politics and culture.
The Believers and the Question of Social Justice

Zoë Heller’s 2009 novel *The Believers* also exhibits a very similar contagion of bourgeois, left-wing politics; all the main characters are actively engaged with the benefits and perils of being socially liberal and economically privileged. This section explores the socioeconomic complexities of class in *The Believers* but also pays close attention to the use of irony as a narrative mechanism for perhaps questioning the intricacies of the metaphoric contagion of ideas and ideals.

*The Believers* takes place in an almost entirely post-9/11 world but opens by introducing the main character, Joel Litvinoff, meeting his future wife, Audrey, at a 1962 party while on his first trip to London. Joel goes on to describe his job to Audrey and explains that he works with disenfranchised people in the American South. He later elaborates: “Negroes are the most disenfranchised people in America,’ he said, ‘and they’re up against the most powerful people in America: the white establishment.” The novel’s opening pages then trace Joel back to 1962 in order to provide some background to his job forty years later. In 2002, Joel is working as a defense lawyer for Mohammed Hassani, described in the novel as a member of an Arab American group who visited an Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan back in 1998. Joel’s opens his remarks for the case of *United States of America v. Mohammed Hassani* with the following statement about terrorism and fear: “Sometimes, in our earnest desire to protect this great country of ours, we can and do make errors. Errors that threaten to undermine the very liberties we are trying to protect. I am here to tell you that the presence of Mohammed Hassani in this courtroom today is one such error.” These lines highlight the metaphor of a family, a community, and a nation that have come under attack and must be protected from terrorists. Heller’s text voices the post-9/11 notion of a Christian United States fighting against an extremist notion of Islam, but Joel uses such discourse to explain that Hassani has not engaged in terrorism. By resorting to the binary that joins Islam with extremism, Joel accepts the metaphor of feared contagion instead of rejecting it. Such a binary is put in place in the novel to organize a post-9/11 United States, as Butler notes at the beginning of *Precarious Life*. Joel embraces ideas of terrorism in order to speak from within them and defend Hassani. The novel pushes this pact with terrorism
forward through Audrey, Joel’s wife, who insists that her husband should defend Hassani “on grounds of legitimate Arab rage.” Audrey utters Butler’s observation about the instant gratification that arises from such moralistic accusation while attacking other political viewpoints.32

Immediately after establishing Joel as Hassani’s lawyer, the novel introduces his socioeconomic position by anchoring it to his family home on Perry Street, next to houses that were renovated as the result of a certain “yuppie extravagance” on this “eighteenth-century street.” The house on Perry Street is described not in architectural terms but rather in terms of a family history that is also imbued with privilege, as in the following description of the family tree and the family’s adopted son, Lenny: “Joel had been very high on the idea of subverting traditional models of family life. Adopting seven-year-old Lenny was no mere act of bourgeois philanthropy, he had maintained, but a subversive gesture. . . .”33

The novel parallels Joel’s class with his notion of political subversion, and this is clearly picked up by the New York media.34 Joel’s character is introduced as a radical who has chosen to adopt un-American and terrorist ideas while living in the United States. In this first chapter, defending a terrorist means becoming one. Joel convinced Hassani not to make a deal with the prosecutor, in contrast with the other five men who were accused of terrorism and agreed to plea bargains. Hassani is the last man standing, trying, with Joel’s defense, to prove that he is not a supporter of Al Qaeda, but Joel has to dive into the metaphoric uses of terrorism in order to defend his client.

At the end of the first chapter, Joel suffers a stroke as he is about to continue Hassani’s defense. This moment halts not only his defense of Hassani but also his defense of terrorism. After Joel’s stroke, Audrey is even more supportive of Hassani’s defense and becomes another voice backing this seemingly willing contagion with terrorist ideas. Audrey talks to her friend Jean Himmelfarb about the ways in which Joel, almost as a terrorism-infected entity, has been “marginalized” and partly made the victim of “a bloody witch hunt going on in this country at the moment.”35 Both marginalization and witch hunts are used as mechanisms with which to present Joel in the novel and, more important, serve as a means of initially making him indistinguishable from Hassani.

This indistinctness between Joel and Hassani allows irony to play a crucial role in the lawyer-client relationship because both characters
have to enter the realm of terrorism in order to explain that Hassani is not a terrorist. That is, Joel’s initial portrait of Hassani as an “American citizen with three American children” is insufficient to defend him in a court of law in the United States. Instead, Joel has to explain the difference between terrorism and criticism of U.S. foreign policy in order to portray Hassani as an observer of the latter rather than the former. Irony becomes central to the novel, especially in relation to Hassani, because both terrorism and left-wing liberalism are presented as strict dogmas, as in Audrey’s case: “For decades now, she had been dragging about the same unwieldy burden of a priori convictions, believing herself honor-bound to protect them against destruction at all costs. No new intelligence, no rational argument, could cause her to falter in her mission. Not even the cataclysmic events of the previous September had put her off stride for more than a couple of hours.”36 The more Audrey wants or claims to defend Hassani against the charges of terrorism, the more extremist her argument seems to be, as Jean notes. The novel, up to this point, weighs ideologies against each other, trying to find some common ground between the two. The end result is that it continues to highlight the ways in which both ideologies operate under very strict, almost unchangeable paradigms.

The novel proceeds with a flashback in order to delve further into a brief historiography of political movements, including the subject of terrorism. This comes forward in Karla’s memory of something that happened when she was younger and living at home. The three Litvinoff children are sitting at the table with their father, discussing violent and nonviolent approaches to political mobilization, and Joel concludes, “If you look at history, you see that people who fight for their rights are often called terrorists, guerrillas, or whatever. But if they succeed—if they win their fight against oppression—they become national heroes. They become the new government.”37 The novel needs to go back in history, back in time, to a pre-9/11 world, in order to show that Joel had some kind of intellectual reflection on the subject before September 11, 2001.

The family’s almost fanatic behavior, as seen in the words and actions of Audrey and Joel, is also narrated through Rosa, the Litvinoffs’ younger daughter, who decides to study Orthodox Judaism after 9/11. Rosa, like her mother, engages with certain intellectual dogmas and demonstrates awareness of her intellectual trajectory: “For most of her life, she had
been immunized against self-reproach by the certitudes of her socialist faith.”38 The past participle “immunized” allows the narrator to organize intellectual traditions through metaphors of contagion. Rosa had been immunized against guilt through socialism in her past, but “after a long and valiant battle against doubt, she had finally surrendered her political faith, and with it the densely woven screen of doctrinal abstraction through which she was accustomed to viewing the world.” Rosa had clearly been working against what she considered “bourgeois liberalism,” yet she realizes the irony behind her struggle: she wants to circumvent her socioeconomic privilege, but it is her bourgeois guilt as well as her privilege, to be without debt and with a college education, that allows her to work in an after-school program for a small salary. “She had become just another do-gooder, hoping to make a difference by taking underprivileged girls on museum trips.”39 Rosa proceeds in her intellectual struggle and one day is inexplicably moved while visiting a synagogue on Amsterdam Avenue.40

Her mother resorts to sarcasm to describe Rosa—“still dancing off the hora”—as well as ridicule: “Rosa’s not depressed. She only went to Cuba to show everyone how special and interesting she was.”41 There are two crucial issues at stake here: first, Rosa’s changing focus, from Cuban socialism to Orthodox Judaism; second, Audrey’s perception of Rosa’s performance of such interests, from “playing peasant” to “becoming Queen of the Matzoh.” Besides deriding her daughter’s religious interests, furthermore, Audrey then scoffs at the concept of religion, “it’s all about repressing your sexual drives,” a criticism then amplified through Hannah, Joel’s mother, who also participates in the disapproval of Judaism.42 The Believers places Judaism under more direct scrutiny than Islam, mostly because it comes from characters with family ties to the former and its traditions: “[Hannah’s mother] took off her head-scarf and threw it in the water! . . . And why did she do this? So that her children and her children’s children would not have to grow up under the tyranny of religion as she did. What do you think she would say today, if she could see her great-granddaughter futzing around with all the hocus-pocus and pie-in-the-sky that she rejected a century ago?”43 Rosa finds herself at the crux of several critical remarks, including additional scrutiny from the Orthodox Jews themselves, who criticize her work instead of the religion. This takes place when she attends a Shabbaton, an extended Sabbath, in
upstate New York and meets Rabbi Reinman’s father-in-law, Mr. Riskin. The man admonishes her, saying that she should be working with her “own community” rather than providing after-school activities for African American girls in Harlem as she currently does. She responds that “these girls are my community” and adds that “they’re New Yorkers just like I am.” Rosa’s constant search for a community, for a center or a territory, be it in socialism or Judaism, underlines her partly decentralized or deterritorialized position, but as the novel progresses and she aligns herself more and more with Judaist principles, she ends up, quite ironically, in an ideological paradigm similar to the bourgeois liberalism she condemns.

In the novel, another means of immunization is being part of the bourgeoisie, as if its members are somehow protected from contagion from other socioeconomic groups. Audrey, for example, accomplishes this through her marriage to Joel, but after discovering that Joel had a three-year affair that resulted in a four-year-old child (“The great man of the Left having a secret bastard son,” as she describes the situation), she immediately proceeds to try breaking her implicit agreement with her status as a left-wing bourgeois woman. She starts by throwing some glasses to the floor in the kitchen and then goes on to break champagne glasses stolen from the Plaza Hotel as well as a Murano goblet. The destruction of the glasses in the kitchen cabinets ends the second part of the novel and completes the somewhat metaphoric destruction of the Litvinoff family.

This metaphoric rupture with notions of class also comes by means of Rosa, who remains unsure about converting to Judaism after six months of study. She witnesses a mother hitting one of the girls from the afterschool program and concludes, “We’re just one little program. Maybe we keep them off drugs for a while, and maybe we defer pregnancy for a few years, but they still have shitty parents and they still go to shitty schools and they’re still going to end up with shitty jobs, or no jobs. Their’—she made an expansive gesture with her arms—‘their class destiny is still going to be the same.” “Bourgeois liberalism,” as Rosa described it earlier, offers her students in the GirlPower program the socioeconomic resources they may not be able to access on their own. While Audrey tries to break her daughter’s bourgeois, liberal bubble, Rosa becomes more aware of her place in it and the exclusion of others from it.

Capitalism does not emerge exempt from criticism, even from its able
participants. A dinner party at the Litvinoff household while Joel is still in a coma becomes a heated family discussion, which is almost expected of all its participants. Tanya, Lenny’s girlfriend, tries to defuse the tension by describing a launching party for a new Doritos chip, which suddenly becomes a concert by Enrique Iglesias, the pop music star. Mike, Karla’s husband, interrupts Tanya’s inane description of chips and ice sculptures by interjecting, “that’s capitalism for you. Worshipping graven images of potato chips, while Kandahar burns.”47 In *The Believers*, especially as shown by this congregation of the family, except for Joel, no one is content with the ideological, political, or religious pacts the others have made. Capitalism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Judaism, Socialism, and Leftism are among the ideologies embraced by different members of the Litvinoff clan. And the stronger the self-deprecating humor in Heller’s text, the more the text is able to get away with, in terms of those ideas from which it is distancing itself and, most important, those intellectual traditions with which the family members almost seem to be infected. The novel suggests that they do not see clearly, that all the *believers* in the novel want to believe in their respective ideologies.48 In this case, to believe in capitalism is to want to be part of it, to be afflicted with all its symptoms.49 The fascinating aspect of the novel is that it generates such belief in these ideas through the commitment of the believer and the derision of the nonbelievers. *The Believers* can be read as a novel of metaphoric contagion. The characters believe in intellectual traditions—of a political, cultural, and religious nature—and they want to be part of the traditions’ contagion. Such infection is not to be feared, at least not for them.

The novel presents another example of metaphoric contagion through Karla, who is married but ends up flirting and eventually having sex with Khaled, an Egyptian man who owns the newspaper stand outside Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where she works. They meet during a violent encounter, when one of the patients in Karla’s ward attacks her and Khaled, who is in the hospital making a delivery, comes to her aid. Almost as expected, Khaled is initially introduced through Orientalist eyes, by a colleague of Karla’s who cannot resist: “‘Arab,’ she mouthed silently.”50 *The Believers*, like *The Emperor’s Children*, can muster criticism of Arabic or Islamic traditions, practices, or even terrorism only through these very minor characters.
The liberal Litvinoffs have another encounter with an ethnic/racial other, which in this case also works as a clear symbol of the family’s socioeconomic status: a housekeeper who utters phrases such as “the visitors you was expecting.” This use of the verb “to be” is tied to Mrs. Gates, the mother who slaps her own daughter at Rosa’s after-school program with the accusation “You was smoking,” as well as the girls in the program—“We wasn’t slutty.” These minor moments in *The Believers* underline the education and socioeconomic class of the novel’s marginal and marginalized characters, who in turn generate a contrast with the Litvinoff women.

Issues related to the Litvinoffs’ bourgeois liberalism and its relation to race as well as ethnicity continue to be explored in *The Believers* when Karla goes to Ground Zero for a sexual encounter with Khaled in Battery Park City. Karla had never been to Ground Zero before and was surprised by the fact that her hotel room faced that area. More importantly, she notices the cleaning up of the area. “The terrible piles of twisted metal that she had seen in newspaper photographs had been cleared away now,” and “in their place lay an enormous, antiseptic gray scar.” The metaphoric scar refers generally to the metaphoric wound inflicted on September 11, but, more precisely, Karla’s observation is about the reminder of the wound that had to be removed from the area. This point about Ground Zero goes hand in hand with the other ideas the characters commit to within the novel. For Karla, having sex with an Egyptian, presumably Muslim, according to the text, is her way of questioning her liberal and bourgeois upbringing. Rosa tries her version of socialism in Cuba and Judaism in New York, while Karla doubts marriage and her Republican husband by pursuing one of the objectionable others in her husband’s binary, namely, a brown, Egyptian man.

The last chapters of *The Believers* intercalate several political events with discussions between members of the Litvinoff family. In its fourth and final part, the novel continues on to September 2, 2002, a moment in the text marked by Joel’s ongoing coma, Audrey’s reluctance to take him off the breathing machine (“Here it comes—the ‘Let’s Kill Joel’ speech”), and, most relevant, Karla’s ending of her six-week affair with Khaled while President Bush addresses a crowd at the Carpenters Joint Apprenticeship Center in Pittsburgh. The ending of Karla’s and Khaled’s affair is interwoven with some lines from Bush’s speech on Labor Day:

Alberto S. Galindo
“I’m sure your kids, they’re wondering, why would you hate America. We didn’t do anything to anybody. Well, they hate America because we love freedom. We cherish our freedoms. We value our freedoms.” The private sphere of Karla’s life unfolds simultaneously with the rest of the United States’ collective.

This same blurriness between the personal and collective aspects of the Litvinoff family also comes about in the antepenultimate chapter of the novel. From the Bush pro-war speech in September, the novel proceeds to the other end of the spectrum with actress Susan Sarandon addressing antiwar protesters in Central Park in October. Jean and Audrey attend the rally along with twenty thousand other protesters, and the occasion is marked by their brief discussion of their picnic of seafood salad, a baguette, and pâté—that is, the novel makes a political turn by presenting President Bush and his critics but does so by pairing the pro-war and antiwar speeches with a discussion of what is presented as a bourgeois outing. The political side of the moment is shadowed by the banality of the picnic. Furthermore, the text’s narration of war politics is mixed with a minor discussion on race as Jean steps away from Audrey and runs into Rosa, who is chaperoning a group of girls from the after-school program. “Jean smiled with the special goodwill that middle-aged white liberals reserve for young people of color.” The novel then brings another of its ideological questions to the forefront by having Audrey and Rosa discuss the latter’s interest in going to a yeshiva in Jerusalem. Audrey asks, “Why Judaism? That’s what I want to know. Why did you have to choose the most reactionary religion?” It is Audrey who turns shaming and extreme mockery—criticized by Butler, for example, as conservative and right-wing mechanisms—into tactics to be used against her daughter. The bourgeois liberals in the novel are unwilling to accept a discourse that is not theirs. The irony in Audrey is that she embodies the intolerance that she readily criticizes. The more she indulges in sarcasm, the more ironic her situation becomes. Unaware of her own bourgeois extremism, Audrey is not the end of irony but a manifestation of the irony that marked some post-9/11 criticism.

Furthermore, Joel’s passing in the novel initially seems to represent the end of an era, but Audrey immediately creates out of his death the Litvinoff Foundation, which “will build on Joel’s legacy by giving grants to progressive political and community initiatives that further the cause
of social justice.” The memorial concludes with Audrey leading the attendees in a rendition of “The Internationale,” bringing together her bourgeois liberal foundation and the anthem for international socialism. The metaphoric contagion of Audrey’s ideology takes over the final moments of the novel; everyone happily agrees with her decision to put her position among the liberal bourgeoisie at the very center.

But this metaphoric contagion does not find a definite, final boundary in the novel’s last pages. As The Believers further pushes the dichotomies influenced by the contagion of bourgeois liberalism, its final straw comes via Audrey’s encounter with and acceptance of Joel’s mistress, Berenice, and Berenice’s son. In an almost predictable fashion, since the novel introduces Joel’s interest in the American “disenfranchised” in its first pages, Berenice is a photographer who is also African American. At the memorial, Audrey not only announces the foundation but also welcomes Berenice into the Litvinoff family. Her clearly insincere kindness is the final sphere that the metaphoric contagion takes over. Audrey, as the new matriarch of the Litvinoff family, carries forward the family’s bourgeois liberalism and will continue to “further the cause of social justice.”

Grieving and Irony

Resolution in The Emperor’s Children and The Believers depends on these two grievable deaths—those of Bootie and Joel—the opposite of Butler’s “ungrievable deaths.” These two deaths are partly necessary to the continuation of the novels’ nation-building processes, or the imagined national community proposed by Benedict Anderson. The United States, or the bourgeois liberal United States that counters Bush’s post-9/11 United States, stands stronger at the end of both novels because the characters have endured death and its subsequent grief. It is also important to notice that these grievable deaths are marked with racial or ethnic privilege. The Emperor’s Children clearly overlooks the racial or even ethnic dimension of its characters, and it could be argued that the story takes place in a post-racial New York, where the Thwaite family could be black or mixed race, but their ideological problems, at least the ones discussed here, clearly are marked by their privilege of being white. The Litvinoffs are non-practicing Jews, which becomes a family issue when a rabbi visits
Joel in his deathbed, and the novel makes it evident that they also live under what seems like white privilege—that is, there is a clear privilege that allows for the Thwaite and Litvinoff families to finally accomplish some kind of closure after enduring a grievable death. But each family’s grief is somehow subverted by additional, unexpected circumstances.

These circumstances, tied to the aftermath of 9/11, are central parts of both novels, but the causes or historical background of September 11, 2001, are not narrated or referenced in either one. In *The Emperor’s Children*, the main concern is the effects of the events in the lives of the white, bourgeois characters. The text narrates pain, but no blame, no condemnation. Even Murray Thwaite, the public intellectual, takes the silent road. *The Believers* adopts a similar narrative standpoint: 9/11 is used as a superficial entry into social justice but ends up being a setup for the Litvinoff Foundation, after the liberal lawyer and patriarch dies. In both novels, the characters, in their complicit silence, are critical only of the government’s post-9/11 violent excesses. These characters fear being infected with a Bush-era, right-wing, conservative ideology and therefore run toward the other metaphoric infection, namely, the “bourgeois liberalism” described by Rosa.

This narration of the effects of 9/11 is also tied to the fact that both *The Emperor’s Children* and *The Believers* follow chronological time lines and, hence, sequential narratives. The two novels almost depend on chronology and structured order for generating their respective pacts with 9/11 as a series of narrative events that alter the plots and dramas of their characters’ lives. September 11 works as a point in the plot—more than halfway through in *The Emperor’s Children* and as a turning point in the recent past of the characters in *The Believers*. The way in which these characters work toward their notion of social justice based on an apparent loss of First Worldism after 9/11, in both their public and private realms, allows them to reinforce and underline their positions within an ideological apparatus while trying to insert themselves as active agents for change in debates about post-9/11 politics.

Of the two novels examined in this chapter, only *The Emperor’s Children* narrates the events of 9/11 and their aftermath in present time, yet the text seems unable to speak about the collective national discourse that immediately followed. *The Emperor’s Children* does not delve into the “hegemonic grammar,”58 to borrow Butler’s phrase, generated in
the United States after 9/11. The text carefully avoids key binarisms that were reactivated on 9/11 and resists uttering the word “terrorism” and its related discourse. The same could almost be said for *The Believers* since the issue of terrorism deflates as quickly, when Joel suffers his stroke early in the novel. Once his brain is no longer working, any questions about terrorism are suddenly out of the scope of the novel because he is no longer defending Hassani.

If 9/11 brings forward questions about the precariousness of life, the Thwaite family believes that Bootie is the only one who has suffered from this state because of his disappearance; he is alive, however, and the novel almost laughs at the family’s grief. Bootie in *The Emperor’s Children* is perhaps the only character who is close to a partial decentralization of the first-person narrative that is never present in *The Believers*, or many other 9/11 novels for that matter. The novel achieves this decentralized or *deterritorialized* character in part because Bootie lacks a notion of home, unlike every other character studied here, but the process is never fully accomplished within the chronological form of Messud’s novel.

These novels seek to explore the mechanisms—literary, historical, political—by which their characters try to avoid ideological traps that they deem unfair and unjust even as these characters refuse to take a critical approach to their almost default ideologies. The metaphorical and ideological contagion in *The Emperor’s Children* and *The Believers* could also be related to the novels’ setting in New York City; they are centralized narratives at the epicenter of the 9/11 events. It is almost as if the characters cannot see their ideological blind spots, or are unwilling to see them, because of their location; they cannot read and perceive the issues that are right under their noses.

Finally, this metaphoric contagion creates a certain resistance to the didactic and prescriptive tone in Butler’s argument as well as in Gray’s and Rothberg’s criticism of post-9/11 literature. Bootie in *The Emperor’s Children* and Audrey in *The Believers* may not be the exemplary characters that would perhaps fulfill the need for deterritorialized narratives, but both surely introduce a point of resistance and contradictions that may not necessarily work against the seriousness of post-9/11 aesthetics and politics. These two characters—one who uses his disappearance as a way out of the epitome of a bourgeois liberal family and the other who embodies a certain bourgeois liberal hypocrisy—resist the heavy
solemnity that characterized a post-9/11 world, defying as well the way in which other characters perceive them. Bootie and Audrey are not read by other characters as people who would resolve their respective plots as they do. This is the final irony ciphered in these novels. The other characters, those who read the lives of Bootie and Audrey, fall victim to the metaphoric contagion of bourgeois liberalism but are not necessarily infected or affected by irony. This irony, or ironic way of reading against the gravity of 9/11, is available only to Danielle in *The Emperor’s Children* and simply is alluded to in Audrey’s self-perception in *The Believers*. Perhaps the ultimate challenge rises from the pages of these novels to their readers, who may end up prey to irony’s metaphoric contagion.

NOTES

5. The connection between the style of *The Emperor’s Children* and *The Believers* has been noted before, as in the case of Jill Abramson’s review of the latter: “There are familiar overtones in *The Believers.* Its depiction of a family galaxy that spins around an accomplished, famous and amorous father is reminiscent of Claire Messud’s satirical novel *The Emperor’s Children*” (Jill Abramson, “The Tribe of Joel,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2009). Fatema Ahmed makes a similar comparison in her review of *The Believers* for *New Statesman* (September 25, 2008) as does Joanna Briscoe in her review of the same novel for the *Guardian* (September 20, 2008).
6. Heller, *The Believers*, 26. Gramsci’s quote is an indirect reference to Romain Rolland. Translations of Gramsci’s text from his letter of December 19, 1929, vary; consider the following variation on the subjects of the sentences in contrast with the quote from Heller’s text: “My own state of mind synthesizes these two feelings and transcends them: my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic” (Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, trans. Lynne Lawner [New York: Harper Colophon, 1975], 159). Gramsci quotes Rolland directly in an unsigned piece from 1920 for the weekly...
L’Ordine Nuovo: “The socialist conception of the revolutionary process is characterized by two fundamental features that Romain Rolland has summed up in his watchword: ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.’” Antonio Gramsci, Selections from Political Writings, 1910–1920, trans. John Matthews (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 188.

7 Wald traces the genealogy of the concept of social contagion back to Robert Ezra Park while relating it to Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim as well: “the term contagion suggested a connective and transformative force and was commonly used to describe how an individual got caught up in the spirit and actions of a group, surrendering personal agency and even rational thought to the collective will.” Furthermore, she discusses social contagion and the ways in which “ideas and attitudes spread like germs because of individual proximity and interdependence.” Wald, Contagious, 131, 137.

8 Chantal Mouffe explores Gramsci’s concept of ideology and its relation to intellectuals: “They [the intellectuals] are the ones in charge of elaborating and spreading organic ideologies, and they are the ones who will have to realize moral and intellectual reform” (Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in Gramsci and Marxist Theory [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979], 187).


10 Trauma theory has been invoked as starting point in various articles and books. Versluys traces many of the uses of trauma in the introduction, “9/11: The Discursive Responses,” to his Out of the Blue.


13 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

14 For Danielle, the events on that day seemed “all too big and too much to take in and she wanted, now, to turn it off, just to turn it all off—and then she kicked off her shoes and with her skirt rucked up, climbed back into her beautiful bed and pulled the duvet—such soft cotton, so very fine, Murray’s special sheets, and they smelled of him—over her head, as she used to do as a child, and she thought that she should cry, she thought
that perhaps later she might cry” (Claire Messud, *The Emperor’s Children* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006], 373).

Ibid., 373.

Ibid., 375. 376. The exaggeration of Ludovic’s statement reads as follows: “This is necrophiliac pornography. . . . But what good does it do to pretend they’ll all come home, that they’re just wandering around Manhattan in a post-traumatic daze?” Ibid., 376.

Ibid., 383.


“He’d chosen Miami because when the station opened at five, it was the farthest and earliest one could go.” Messud, *The Emperor’s Children*, 395. Bootie’s destination brings to mind President Bush’s remarks to the nation from Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport: “Get on board; do your business around the country; fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots; get down to Disney World in Florida.” George W. Bush, “Remarks to Airline Employees in Chicago, Illinois,” September 27, 2001, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65084.

Messud, *The Emperor’s Children*, 393.


Ibid., 425, 429.


Joel elaborates furthermore, “You have been told that Mohammed Hassani is a supporter of terrorism. You have been told that he hates America and wants to aid and abet those who would destroy it.” Ibid., 22.

Butler draws the beginnings of these post-9/11 binarisms from Bush’s “Either you’re with us or you’re with the terrorists.” She mentions other long-standing political and cultural binaries, such as the East-West divide and civilization versus barbarism (Butler, *Precarious Life*, 2).

Joel continues, “Does he possess strong religious beliefs? Yes. But remember, ladies and gentlemen, whatever the prosecution tries to

CONTAGION OF INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS IN POST-9/11 NOVELS
suggest, it is not Islam that is on trial in this courtroom.” Heller, *The Believers*, 22.

32 Ibid., 23, 16.

33 Ibid., 26. Joel’s notion of political and economic subversion even affects his perception of Lenny: “had Lenny ever put his rebellious impulses to some principled use: run away to join the Sandinistas, say, or vandalized U.S. Army recruiting offices” (ibid).

34 Consider, for example, the way in which Joel’s defense of Hassani draws the attention of the press, including the *New York Post*, which describes him as a “rent-a-radical with a long history of un-Americanism” (ibid., 28).

35 Ibid., 35.

36 Ibid., 22, 37.

37 Ibid., 80.

38 Ibid., 58.

39 Ibid., 59.

40 Rosa was “filled with a mysterious, euphoric sense of belonging” (ibid., 61).

41 Ibid., 37, 38.

42 Ibid., 38.

43 Ibid., 93–94.

44 Ibid., 116.


46 Ibid., 160.

47 Ibid., 216.

48 Amis discusses the frequent use of the verb “to believe” as part of the “re-emergence of sentiment as the prince of the critical utensils” (Amis, *The Second Plane*, 18).

49 This paradigm of belief can be contrasted with Amis’s fictional description of Muhammad Atta, one of hijackers on the first plane to hit the World Trade Center: “You needed the belief system, the ideology, the ardor. You had to have it. The core reason was good enough for the mind. But it couldn’t carry the body” (Heller, *The Believers*, 116).

50 Ibid., 132. Consider a similar example from *The Emperor’s Children*, in which Judy’s hairdresser, who styles her hair the afternoon of September 11, describes the whole set of events as “‘awful. It’s those Arabs,’ she said, pronouncing it *Ay-rabs*” (Messud, *The Emperor’s Children*, 379).


52 Joel’s sister-in-law, Julie, is the first to mention Ground Zero in *The Believers* when she visits Joel and Audrey in New York. As she is about to leave to visit Ground Zero with her husband, Colin, she asks Joel for a place “anywhere down there that you’d recommend for lunch,” but Joel decides not to answer her question. As a tourist from England, Julie clearly speaks
from her standpoint of privilege. Her question emphasizes Ground Zero as a tourist destination (ibid., 24).

53 Ibid., 253.
54 Ibid., 283, 288.
55 Ibid., 311, 313.
56 Ibid., 330.
57 Wald analyzes the ways in which Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* presents a useful concept for relating a strong sense of national belonging to reaction to the fear of an outbreak. Wald, *Contagious*, 51–53.