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An Alternate History of the Warring States:
Global War in a State of Exception and Democratic
Short-circuit in Matt Gallagher's *Empire City*

G rard Genette's foyer-like definition of the paratext as a liminal space separating – but also, crucially, connecting – the inside and outside of a text in his seminal book *Seuils* (1987) is a first hint at the French theorist's discussion of the considerable power that the information surrounding a literary work holds over it and its interpretation. Genette calls this space a zone of "transaction," or a "privileged space of pragmatics and strategy" that can (and often does) lead to "a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2), at least according to the author.

There are many ways in which extra-textual information can guide the reader's interpretation as well as draw their attention to a number of different issues, and in the case of Matt Gallagher's novel *Empire City* (2020) the two epigraphs that frame the narrative – together with its title – allude primarily to institutional power, its influence over people and its relationship with its enforcers. The titular Empire City, an alternate version of New York City that has officialized one of its old nicknames, calls attention to the United States' imperialist practices abroad and to its fictional counterparts, while quotations from Thomas Hobbes and Emma Sky respectively address the issue of governmental power and its exertion. Evidently, Gallagher chooses a passage from Hobbes's *Leviathan* in which the English philosopher enumerates various forms of power and references certain qualities of men that make them loved or feared, because "it is a means to have the assistance and service of many" (58). Gallagher couples it with a line by Sky, who praises the US military but not the rest of the country it represents, to make it clear from the very beginning that the reader should focus on issues such as the construction of popular consent

and a hypothetical disconnection that exists in the United States between the military, civilians, and the government.

This article argues that Gallagher's novel moves between alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction to highlight the consequences of an indiscriminate use of executive power in the United States through the imposition of a perpetual *state of exception*, a time in which the law is suspended, and citizens are stripped of their rights in order to preserve the existence of the state. As a consequence of this, a perpetual war in the Mediterranean is fought by the US military without the citizens' approval or interest, resulting in millions of troubled veterans struggling to return to civil society and being shipped to rehabilitation colonies. I argue that his alarming rupture between the government, citizens, and soldiers exposes an authoritarian threat that, unlike in typical alternate histories, is not tied to a foreign menace or ideology. Rather, it originates within the American democratic state, where the alienating absence of truly democratic decisions on military operations results in a sharp divide between civilians and service members, raising questions about the motives of the United States' imperialist practices.

Gallagher's novel is roughly set in the early 2010s in an alternative version of the United States which, finally victorious in Vietnam in 1981, have turned into an authoritarian and bellicose state that at least nominally values military culture and seems to treat veterans with the utmost respect. After Vietnam and the fall of the Soviet Union due to a Russian Revolution, the 1980s are marked by the Palm Sunday attacks on Federal City (possibly a rechristened Washington, DC) orchestrated by terrorist leader Abu Abdallah – the start of the so-called Mediterranean Wars, with widespread military activity from Albania to Iran. The narration opens with a focus on Sebastian Rios, a self-described “PR flack” who works for Homeland Authority after having been a civilian hostage in Tripoli during the Mediterranean Wars, attending his old friend Mia Tucker's engagement party. Subsequently, the second chapter follows Mia – a veteran of the war and one of Sebastian's saviors – finding out about her pregnancy and preparing to go to an event where Jaclyn “Jackie” Collins, her future employer and presidential candidate, is set to give a speech. The third chapter completes the roster of focalizers with the introduction of Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, a

Haitian American member of the armed forces and one of the Volunteers, a group of super-powered soldiers created because of the detonation of a bomb containing cythrax, a mysterious substance said to have come from “rocks found deep in space” (Gallagher 273). The other two members of the Volunteers are Pete Swenson and Grady Flowers, two soldiers who were also involved in the operation in Tripoli, where Sebastian was held hostage. Together with Jean-Jacques, they went on to serve in various battles in the Mediterranean, eventually becoming so well-known that they become the protagonists of comic books and star in Hollywood movies as themselves. They are among the few survivors of the bomb, along with Sebastian and Mia who, however, are also changed by the explosion: the first can turn invisible, while the second gains the ability to fly. Their powers, however, are kept hidden by the government, and the two are assigned handlers to manage any possible problem arising from their situation.

As is evident from this brief description of the world in which the story takes place, Gallagher’s novel constitutes a departure from the use of realism that has characterized much of the fiction that has been published during and about the War on Terror, especially when taking into consideration the literary output of veteran writers who, like Gallagher, have served in Iraq or Afghanistan.¹ It is therefore worth noting that *Empire City* is not, strictly speaking, concerned with the Iraq War, like the author’s previous book-length works of fiction, his memoir *Kaboom* (2008) and his first novel *Youngblood* (2016), but instead presents an analogous conflict set in lands that sometimes overlap with those that have been touched by actual wars in the twenty-first century. The unrealistic elements of the story exist on a spectrum that goes from possible to fantastic and includes alternative outcomes to past historical events and superpowers granted by space rocks.

Speculative Fiction: Past Possibilities and the Authoritarian Threat

In 2004, Margaret Atwood famously introduced a distinction between what she called “science fiction” and “speculative fiction.” Atwood envisioned science fiction as those “books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we

can't go," while speculative fiction was to be intended as a genre "which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (513). In other words, Atwood differentiated between stories that foreground fantastical elements and those that, though fictional, explore plausible alternate realities. With time, speculative fiction has established itself as a broader category made up of "works presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences' understanding of ordinary reality" (Gill 73), thereby including both the kinds of fiction that Atwood indicated in 2004, as well as any other story that presents events and processes that deviate from commonly accepted versions of history and physics. Given its characteristics, *Empire City* could certainly be considered part of this wider catalogue, but its peculiarity lies in its multifaceted genealogy and in its sweeping use of many of the speculative fiction tropes that typify the various genres contained in this broad categorization. Indeed, *Empire City* mainly features elements from three genres: alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction.

Gallagher's novel is, first and foremost, an example of allohistorical writing, or a text that "depend[s] on a 'what if' proposition" and in which a "key moment or conjunction of events is assumed to turn out differently from the documented record" (Malcolm 171). In her extensive theorization of the alternate history genre, Kathleen Singles has used the term "point of divergence" to identify this particular moment in fiction that depicts a (more or less) substantial departure from a commonly accepted narrative of past events, and, indeed, sees it as the defining feature of alternate history as a genre, calling it the "common denominator and the trait that distinguishes alternate histories from other related genres" (7). Singles uses this as a distinguishing feature of alternate history to differentiate it from other, closely related genres like historical fiction and science fiction. In *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity* (2013), she enumerates most of the terms that have been used to define this kind of fictional narratives: "allohistory, alternative history, politique fiction, uchronia, Gegengeschichte, parallel time novel, 'what-if' story, quasi-historical novel, political fantasy, historical might-have-been, 'as if' narrative and counterfeit world, parahistory" (16). For the purpose of this article, I will borrow Singles's approach, who acknowledges the slight

differences in meaning that come with the use of one denomination as opposed to another, but ultimately deems them too weak to warrant the use of distinctive terminology.

The exact point where events in *Empire City* diverge from the “normalized narrative of the past” (Singles 70) is not made explicit in great detail. Readers are made aware that the United States have claimed victory in Vietnam, but no concrete explanation is given to clarify the reason behind this alternative outcome of the war in Indochina, an event that in turn sparks the divergent path that Gallagher explores in his novel. There are hints here and there, like the mentioning of a “former president Rockefeller” (Gallagher 30) that might have succeeded Gerald Ford, or Sebastian sharing his opinions on the “peacemongers” that contributed to the end of the draft: “Made the all-volunteer force possible. Which is how you all won Vietnam” (Gallagher 5). Here Gallagher operates a curious reversal of the usual point of divergence: in most alternate histories the diverging event is understood as a consequence of biographical differences in famous historical figures – what Matthew Schneider-Mayerson sees as an implicit endorsement of the Carlylean idea of history as the biography of great men – or as caused by an alteration of military history (Schneider-Mayerson 73), but most of the time a dystopian outcome in Anglo-American alternate histories is caused by an American defeat, such as a Confederate triumph in the Civil War or a Nazi victory in WW2. By far the most common, the Nazi victory (or the “Nazification” of the United States due to historical figures endorsing Hitler’s message) is featured in some of the most prominent alternate histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004). Whereas in Lewis and Roth’s cases the cause of the authoritarian turn is the rise to power of, respectively, Buzz Windrip and Charles Lindbergh, and in Dick’s novel it is the assassination of president Roosevelt in 1933 that ultimately condemns the US to foreign rule, in Gallagher’s novel it is the American victory in Vietnam that seems to exacerbate some of the most problematic traits of the United States, gradually transforming the “land of the free” into a blatantly imperialist, militaristic, and authoritarian nation.

As is often the case in alternate histories (Duncan 212), the consequences of the diverging event in *Empire City* have strong dystopian tones, even though, of course, as Gregory Claeys explains in “The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley, Orwell,” “whether a given text can be described as a dystopia or utopia will depend on one’s perspective of the narrative outcome” (108). I would argue that it is nevertheless safe to assume that a considerable portion of readers would recognize the world of the book as dystopian, as it is shown to be in a state of constant global war, with the United States as the sole global superpower, military operations happening across the Balkans and the Middle East, and nuclear bombs being dropped in the Mediterranean, with “Greek militants still angry about Crete accidentally getting nuked” (Gallagher 146). Like other dystopias, *Empire City* portrays a far-reaching authoritarian state that controls most citizens (Claeys 109), but its organization does not seem to be explicitly tyrannical or even socialist, as is the case in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*. On the contrary, the electoral process closely resembles its real-world counterpart (General Collins’s presidential campaign is the backbone of the story) and political life is still dominated by Wall Street fundraising (Gallagher 294).

The third genre whose elements are featured in *Empire City* is, as already mentioned, superhero fiction. Gallagher’s decision to include a supernatural element, that is, superpowered individuals, is not only unusual for a veteran writer or for the alternate history genre – it is also uncommon for the medium as a whole and runs the risk of diminishing the novel’s literary significance in the eyes of many. As Hatfield et al. argue in *The Superhero Reader* (2013), superhero stories have only recently started to be the subject of academic studies, even though the medium which is almost synonymous with the genre, the comic book (and, crucially, the graphic novel), has already reached a broader public while claiming its place as a serious genre and a fertile space of scholarly inquiry earlier in the last century. Indeed, Hatfield et al. claim that through the years “some of the critics of the superhero genre [were] precisely those who have most enthusiastically embraced the literary graphic novel” (xiv). The decade that separates *The Superhero Reader* and this article has, however, seen an even greater exponential growth of superhero fiction as a popular genre, and

costumed vigilantes are currently ubiquitous in cinemas and on streaming platforms. Consequently, more and more scholars have decided to dedicate book-length studies to the topic, like Chris Gavaler and Nathaniel Goldberg's *Superhero Thought Experiments* (2019), Daniel Stein's *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (2021), and the collection of essays *The Superhero Symbol* (2019), edited by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndaliansis. In the introduction to their book, Gavaler and Goldberg suggest that, in fact, superhero fiction and philosophical thought experiments have a lot in common, and that superhero narratives can serve as a site of philosophical inquiry: "writers and artists of Marvel and DC can be read as philosophers and their works as comic book philosophy" (2).

Just like alternate history and dystopia – and to a certain extent, all fictional writing – superhero fiction rests on a "what if" proposition and typically creates a connection with the real world that takes the shape of a thought experiment. This means that *all three* of the genres that inform *Empire City* function as devices to engage with philosophical issues in imaginative ways. In the "Utopias and anti-utopias" chapter of the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), Edward James claims that "the unasked but essential question in most utopian novels – 'what is the meaning of life?' or 'what is the destiny of man?' – is a question raised by almost no one these days apart from theologians and SF writers" (228), pointing out the sometimes-neglected significance of such narratives. Of course, this is not only the case with science fiction – the same could be said of speculative fiction in general, and of alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction in particular.

What the three genres seem to have in common – and this is especially relevant for *Empire City* – is that they inevitably foreground the representation of the use and abuse of power, be it political, physical, or both. In the case of dystopia, *Brave New World* and *1984* can very easily be read as cautionary tales that argue against the mindless adoption of socialist ideals and that give readers a glimpse of a not-so-distant future in which totalitarian regimes have inevitably taken over. Narratives belonging to this genre usually portray failed or deeply flawed societies that are in some way the result of either the absence or the overzealous use of power. As far as alternate history is concerned, while some narratives

can uncharacteristically pick points of divergence that are not based on the different outcome of great power struggles, most of them typically present a version of the world in which power has drastically shifted hands, like in *The Man in the High Castle*.

Superhero fiction itself is no stranger to “what if” stories that depict alternate realities *within* a comic book or cinematic multiverse. Famous examples include Marvel’s 1977 comic book anthology series *What If* (and the homonymous 2021 animated series), DC’s 1985 miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (which also received a TV adaptation, in 2019), not to mention the introduction of parallel worlds in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2021. While these stories *can* address political fantasies – like Mark Millar’s *Superman: Red Son*, in which Superman is raised in the Soviet Union instead of the United States – they predominantly address the question of power – and sovereignty – in a different way, namely by highlighting the conflict between vigilante justice administered by superpowered individuals outside of the law and state-sanctioned forms of law enforcement. In other words, superheroes are both an aid and a challenge to state sovereignty – they break the law to ensure that other laws are followed.

Real and Dystopian Forever Wars: An Altogether American State of Exception

In any case, the three genres represent situations in which the legal rights of certain individuals are suspended in an effort to uphold the rule of law. In *State of Exception* (2005), Giorgio Agamben notes that nations (especially totalitarian states) preserve the integrity of their political system through the creation of a state of emergency, which “allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (2). The totalitarian regimes depicted in alternate histories and dystopias – like their real-life counterparts – employ these methods regularly by suspending the rule of law whenever the state is threatened, effectively creating an *Ausnahmezustand*, or state of exception. In *Leviathan*, Thomas

Hobbes famously envisioned an absolute sovereign as the solution for the *bellum omnium contra omnes* that would ensue if humanity were to be left in a state of nature. The monarch imagined by Hobbes is the guarantor of civil safety; his office “consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of the safety of the people, to which he is obliged by the law of nature” (222). And yet, in order to guarantee the safety of the subjects, the monarch needs to maintain power, as Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* (1976): “if someone dared to rise up against him and transgress his laws, then he could exercise a direct power over the offender’s life: as punishment, the latter would be put to death” (135). The powers of the sovereign, however, do not seem to end where the function of the law is exhausted – in case the order is threatened, a state of emergency ensues, and the rule of law can be *lawfully* suspended. In *Die Diktatur* (1921), jurist Carl Schmitt stated that whoever “rules over the state of exception therefore rules over the state, because he decides when this state should emerge and what means are necessary” (14), while characterizing the state of exception as *plenitudo potestatis*, or the “legally unlimited exercise of power” (13) on the part of the sovereign.

Agamben points out the inherent contradiction that the state of exception creates when it is included in the constitution of modern democracies, as it is intended as a legal instrument aimed at the imposition of extra-legal (or illegal) norms. Although it is closely associated with authoritarian states – and with periods of political uncertainty that lead to authoritarian states – Agamben explains how “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones” (*State of Exception* 2). Rather than an explicitly sanctioned state of exception – which nonetheless was the principal instrument used by governments around the world to fight the COVID-19 pandemic – Agamben argues that “in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government” (14).

Agamben’s argument is at least partially informed by the events that followed the September 11 attacks in New York. Accordingly, he uses the

Bush administration's reaction as an example of how western democracies govern through the imposition of a constant state of exception justified by a state of emergency: "Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible" (22). Here Agamben shows how the formally undeclared wars in Afghanistan, and later in Iraq, are mirrored in the United States by the adoption of invasive surveillance measures, a widespread phenomenon that finds its justification in the safeguard of the citizens and of democracy itself: "in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" (14).

The problem, of course, is that democracy itself, together with the rights of individuals, can become the victim of the state of exception. The prisoners of Guantánamo serve as a somber example of this risk, as they are reduced to a status of "bare life": "President Bush's order [...] radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being," and the Taliban POWs exist completely outside the law (both national and international): "not only do the Taliban captured in Afghanistan not enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention, they do not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws" (3). Thus, Agamben is able to draw a parallel between the seemingly democratic government of the United States and the totalitarian state par excellence, the German Nazi regime: the Taliban prisoners – the unwanted that are perceived as threats to the survival of the state – are enclosed in camps just like Jews and other "undesirables" during WW2. Achille Mbembe, on the other hand, has noted that "dominant states" have frequently adopted both a rhetoric of terror – the American wars in the Middle East have usually been referred to by both the administration and the media as a "war on terror" – and the creation of enclosed spaces to separate society from a perceived threat, or a way of "spatializing and discharging that terror by confining its most extreme manifestations to some racially stigmatized third place – the plantation under slavery, the colony, the camp, the compound under

apartheid, the ghetto or, as in the present-day United States, the prison” (34).

The use and abuse of power are central themes in *Empire City*. While the inclusion of a quote from *Leviathan* as one of the epigraphs anticipates this focus, the political environment described in the book is rife with examples of states of exception and challenges to sovereign power. The Palm Sunday terrorist attacks are both the cause and justification of the state of emergency – and are an obvious reference to the September 11 attacks in New York – that enables the imposition of a perpetual state of exception in the United States. Details about the events are scattered throughout the book, and most of the information about them is contained in a sixth-grade history exam that, like other fictional historical documents, serves as a break between chapters (Gallagher 165). The attacks on Federal City are regarded as a political turning point in history: asking where one was during the attacks has become commonplace (as happened with the fall of the Berlin wall or 9/11) and are thought to be the reason for the collapse of the two-party system in the United States (Gallagher 56). The biopolitical power of the government over the life and death of its citizens is made apparent as Sebastian slowly comes to realize that the explosion of the cythrax bomb – the origin of the Volunteers’ superpowers – was a government experiment conducted without regard for the life of those involved in it. Of course, the majority of the experiment’s subjects were Rangers, a special operations regiment, and the crown jewel of the American armed forces: not only are civilian lives shown to be exp(a)endable for the government – soldiers are even less valuable and are treated as though they were inanimate assets. This tendency to treat soldiers as weapons that can be discarded once they have served their purpose reaches gargantuan proportions in the book: in the first speech that General Collins gives at a Wall Street veteran meeting, she complains that “only three percent of Americans serve in the military” (30) – figures in the real world are closer to 0.5 percent (“US Armed Forces”) – while twelve million veterans have served in the Mediterranean Wars alone (Gallagher 148).

The opening reference to Genette’s definition of the paratext allows me to highlight the fact that successful readings of alternate histories, by their nature, are dependent on extra-textual information. Singles explains

how “alternate histories create a ‘dialogic’ relation between history and its alternative version, superimpose them, rather than merging them or canceling each other out” (72), and this happens at various points throughout *Empire City*. However, while many of the events of the book have more or less clearcut counterparts in the real world, they almost always portray what I would call an “intensified” version of them. Rather than creating a universe in which things are radically different, it seems as if the American victory in Vietnam has resulted in an altered but parallel succession of events that read as an intensified version of recent historical events, particularly those connected to the War on Terror – the ongoing Mediterranean Wars, for example, have been fought for thirty years and show no sign of de-escalation.

In *The World Hitler Never Made* (2005), Gavriel Rosenfeld notes that there might be political tendencies associated with certain types of alternate histories: what he calls “fantasies” “tend to be liberal, for by imagining a better alternate past, they see the present as wanting and thus implicitly support changing it”; nightmares, instead, “tend to be conservative, for by portraying the alternate past in negative terms, they ratify the present as the best of all possible worlds and thereby discourage the need for change” (Rosenfeld 11). While *Empire City* does portray a sort of nightmare scenario, it also seems to (heavily) imply that the real world really does need some improvement, and thus the book walks a fine line between representing a dystopian alternate present and a political allegory that highlights actual, urgent issues in the United States. Schneider-Mayerson has argued that the “abuse of power and mobilization of the industrial state for nefarious purposes is the most glaring and perhaps universal feature of the contemporary alternate history novel” (73), and while this is true in the novel, it seems that dystopias or nightmare scenarios in American alternate histories are usually the product of ideologies that are perceived as external or even opposite to an ideal American spirit. The militaristic and invasive regime of *Empire City*, however, is not caused by fascism or communism. Rather it is the product of an intensification of American militarism after the victory in Vietnam and – in a turn of events that reads as scarily similar to the real world – the government’s reaction to terrorist attacks that turns into an endless, global, war. The threat of terrorism and

war become the excuse for the imposition of security measures that make governing easier at the expense of democracy itself – in other words, in the book it is the American democratic process itself that slowly plunges citizens in an authoritarian state.

Admittedly, the thought of a nation founded upon the ideas of democracy and freedom being consumed internally by homegrown authoritarianism seems hard to believe at first. In *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009) Donald E. Pease provides a nifty solution to the apparent contradiction by individuating the relationship between the state fantasy of American Exceptionalism and the legitimation of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence (2). Borrowing from Jacqueline Rose, Pease defines a state fantasy as “the dominant structure of desire out of which US citizens imagined their national identity” (1) and argues that in the absence of any logical explanation for its dominance on the individual, the American state necessarily exploits the semantically undetermined idea of “American Exceptionalism” to govern. Pease refers to the “semantic indeterminacy” (9) of the concept to highlight its multiple and often contradictory meanings as well as its malleability. The Cold War here serves as an exemplary period: as the American nation presented itself as the opposite of the Soviet Empire, “American Exceptionalism produced the desire within US citizens to construe US imperialism as a nation-preserving measure” (Pease 20). In this way, Americans lived through an era of repression and the persecution of supposed “communists” while condemning similar practices in the Soviet Union, at the same time failing to recognize the contradictions between American ideals and the occupation of South Korea and West Berlin, instead deriving “enjoyment from these *exceptions* as necessary means to achieve the state's destruction of imperialism as a Russian way of life” (Pease 21; emphasis mine). In other words, the indeterminacy of America's exceptions allows for the Orwellian coexistence of opposing truths – since the invincibility (and exceptionality) of the United States has never been challenged by the Vietnam debacle in works such as *Empire City* and *Watchmen*, the inhabitants of those fictional worlds live in exponentially more authoritarian versions of the US while believing in the same ideals of democracy and individual liberty that have characterized them since the earliest days of the American nation.

Whose Sovereignty? On the Accountability of Soldiers and Superheroes

Soldiers are pictured as both instruments and victims of this sovereign power, and Gallagher, himself a veteran, creates a fictional equivalent of the military-civilian divide that many in the armed forces feel in today's US: there are so many troubled veterans from the Mediterranean Wars that they are sent off to rehabilitation colonies located on islands around the world, which essentially turn into the government's preferred space wherein to deal with the "undesirable" vets, as well as testing labs for both the Department of Defense and the big corporations. Any veteran in these colonies is reduced to a bare existence; they represent, in Agamben's words, *homo sacer*, the condition of bare life whose introduction to the political realm, according to the Italian philosopher, "constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power" (*Homo Sacer* 6), and connects authoritarian and democratic states. As a consequence of this division between the government, soldiers, and the rest of the citizens, veterans have become a considerable portion of the population and have created organizations that challenge the sovereignty of the state.

In the course of the novel the reader meets the Mayday Front, a militia founded by veteran Jonah Gray that wants to re-introduce troubled veterans to society (Gallagher 136), and the Sheepdogs, another militia, founded after the Palm Sunday attacks and made up of "former military and retired police officers, firefighters, and first responders" (Gallagher 215), that is supposedly loyal to the state and later functions as the security service for Jackie Collins's presidential campaign. The general's run for president can then be read as a way to gain back a power – to wage war – that has been in the hands of a political elite for too long – as Liam Noonan says to Mia, at one of the campaign events: "we both shed blood for the homeland. Warfighter to warfighter, Mia: all this? It's a military oligarchy trying to get one of its own elected commander in chief" (248). By showing these divisions the book implicitly criticizes the authoritarian decisions (like the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force) that have brought American "boots on the ground" in the Middle East without the need for congressional approval, bypassing the democratic process. This severed link between the nation's military operations and the will of the

population is shown to be at the root of the deteriorating relationship between civilians and veterans who return home from wars that seemingly nobody approved. In *Empire City*, empty remarks like “thank you for your service” are replaced by more boisterous, and yet even emptier, “America honors the warfighter” and “praise to the victors”; the Mayday Front serves as a possible disruptive force in this situation, as its members are acutely aware of the way they have been used by the government. As one of the members, “Veteran Zero,” says during a terrorist attack aimed at the “Empire City elite”: “We’re not unreasonable. We fought for this country. We love this country. But you forgot about us. Can’t do that. Not in the Home of the Brave” (191).

Another possibly disruptive force that can pose a threat to state sovereignty are the Volunteers themselves who, although they are formally part of the armed forces, can and in fact do take matters into their own hands because of their special abilities. As Mervi Miettinen argues in “Representing the State of Exception: Power, Utopia, Visuality and Narrative in Superhero Comics,” “with this superpower, the superhero creates a state of exception and takes on the executive power of the law without the legislative power; in other words, he has no legitimacy of authority behind his actions” (271). Like sovereigns who suspend the rule of law in order for the law to be preserved, the superhero is someone “who aims to support the institutions of democratic power while at the same time undermining their legitimacy with his actions” (Miettinen 271) – while working with his cousin in Mayday, Jean-Jacques finds Gray’s message alluring, and contemplates the idea of actually joining the rebel organization precisely because it purports to be loyal to the original ideas of American freedom and democracy. As Gray preaches during a sermon: “What is crazy about wanting our homeland to fight fascist encroach, to stay true to the ideals it was founded upon?” (Gallagher 266).

According to Neal Curtis, superhero fiction as a genre underwent considerable changes in the 1980s, especially with the publication of Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen* in 1986. After years of being portrayed as mere extensions of American state-approved values, writers started addressing “the implications of the seeming absolute power possessed by some of the

most enhanced heroes or bore witness to the collateral damage ordinarily overlooked, but nevertheless directly caused by our heroes' intervention" (Curtis 210). While superheroes are portrayed as both an instrument of and a challenge to state power in these graphic novels, they also mimic it: like the American government, superheroes usually wield a disproportionate amount of power against those they deem a threat to national or global security. And like the state, they mostly play within the rules of national and international law, but do not shy away from using methods outside of them if required. By foregrounding the undemocratic nature of the government's decisions on military operations, *Empire City* implicitly questions the motives and the righteousness of the War on Terror and exposes the disenfranchisement of its veterans.

In a 2016 essay titled "Citizen Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military," later included in *Uncertain Ground* (2022), Phil Klay deals with the complicated history of the professional army in the United States, from Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and George Washington's distrust of a permanent standing army (70) to the all-volunteer force at the end of the Vietnam War. In the essay Klay addresses the issue of veteran accountability, stating that it is impossible for former soldiers who have chosen to enlist to play innocent, no matter how many representations of American soldiers as pure and just exist in both fiction and nonfiction: none of these representations "can move us past the simple reality that Iraq is destroyed, there is untold suffering overseas, and we as a country have even abandoned most of the translators who risked their lives for us" (84). Civilians, on the other hand, are shielded from responsibility by their lack of involvement in the decision-making process; since operations are authorized with or without the approval of Congress: "even if they voted for the president ordering these strikes, there's seemingly little reason for citizens to feel personally culpable when they go wrong" (Klay 87). The problem, of course, is that soldiers are implicitly serving their country, and, therefore, their citizens, but the citizens have little to do with their actions (heroic or nefarious). This democratic short-circuit is *the* central theme of *Empire City*, and while the novel works to expose the problem, it does not offer easy solutions.

One potential option that seems to emerge from the text is the possibility of giving the military full decisional power over combat operations – a move

that would probably turn the United States into a military dictatorship in which citizens would turn into victims, more than accomplices, of the armed forces. The obvious but complicated answer would be to reinstate – if there ever was one – a truly democratic process in American (foreign) politics, but *Empire City* seems to characterize the endless American war in the Mediterranean as the Derridean understanding of Plato’s *pharmakon*, which, according to Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics* (2018), is both the remedy and poison to the problems of our time. (Perpetual) war is thus not the old Clausewitzian continuation of politics through violence, but the instrument through which the state can maintain “antiterrorist mobilization,” which ensures that “the suspension of rights and lifting of the guarantees that protect individuals are presented as the condition of survival of these same rights” (Mbembe 33), and turns into “a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention” (38). In *Empire City*, war has turned into an end in itself, as well as an economic machine that creates its own markets and replicates itself all over the world, while terror serves as the regulatory mechanism of society. Unfortunately, these remarks apply both to Gallagher’s version of the United States and to its real counterpart, and although many of the reviews featured in the opening pages praise it as a radically different but perhaps prophetic novel, *Empire City* provides a heavily fictionalized – but very deliberate – commentary on present-day America’s forever wars.

Notes

¹ As far as non-veteran literature is concerned, some exceptions to this phenomenon can be found in superhero comics (see Frank Miller’s *Holy Terror* and the 2002 Captain America story arc *Enemy*), a genre that has certainly influenced Gallagher – he mentions Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* in *Empire City*’s Acknowledgments section, while his earlier books (*Kaboom* and *Youngblood*) are titled like superhero comic book series.

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