



Alice Balestrino*

ALTERNATE GEOGRAPHIES FOR ALTERNATE HISTORIES. THE DIAGONAL SPACE IN MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION*.

One practice to define, organize, and conceptualize space is by asserting temporal origins that determine geographical boundaries; the creation of nations, it is well known, has largely to do with the invocation of historically constructed identities to legitimate their authority on a topographically delimited region. In *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace*, Jewish-American anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin claims that “statist ideologies involve a particularly potent manipulation of the dimensionalities of space and time. [...] States may be said to map history onto territory” (1994, 16). In other words, events “take place” as spatiotemporal happenings that appropriate space turning it into place or rather, into a place – one definite and particular reality, identifiable in a multitude of other similar but distinct realities. Therefore, the configuration of space seems to be constitutively related to time because, in order to grasp and measure space, human understanding resorts to time, thus engendering a cognitive interplay in which these two dimensions cannot be separated.

This macro practice of conceptualizing space by turning its boundless vastness into bounded places depends on micro cognitive issues; by this I mean that our daily experience of society is itself defined by spatiotemporal coincidences: interactions, meetings, projects, social dynamics – the convergence of space and time is what constitutes our everyday life. Such a reciprocity can be imagined as a grid of intersected lines crisscrossing the reality of a place, as Italo Calvino lyrically depicts it in a passage of *Invisible Cities*, when he envisions the city of Zaira as consisting:

of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession. (1974, 10)

In the scenario evoked by Calvino, space and time are intertwined, being inextricable threads that weave the social and cultural fabric, i.e. the identity of places; but at the same time, they are also the axis of the imaginary grid with which we read reality, on the basis of which we orient ourselves in the world. Space intrinsically temporal, time extrinsically materialized, “Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city however does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows” (1974, 10-11).

Therefore, time seems to be the ordering principle of space as well as history is the ordering principle of geography – by shifting our focus from actual onto fictional universes, one may elaborate a system whereby alternate geographies may correspond to alternate histories and can be read as such. Our aim is to explore this interaction between spatial and temporal discourses in the fictional universe of Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), an alternate history novel which, as it is typical of counterfactual works, does not depict but rather creates a distinct world. With this statement I obviously posit my argument against the background of Brian McHale's speculations on postmodernist fiction as informed by an ontological dominant; indeed, as noted by Lubomír Doležel in *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*, the emergence of

* Alice Balestrino is a PhD candidate in American literature at “Sapienza” University of Rome. She holds a BA and an MA in Modern European and American Literatures from the University of Turin. She is currently writing her dissertation on Holocaust fiction published in the aftermath of 9/11. She has published on Jewish-American Holocaust literature and postmemory: “Living in the Presence of an Absence. The Puzzling Holocaust Legacy of the American Post-Holocaust Generation” in *Ricognizioni. Rivista di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne*; and “‘Radiant Darkness Leaked out Through Her Crack:’ Cracked Families and Leaking Trauma in Michael Chabon's *Moonglow*” in *CoSMo – Comparative Studies in Modernism. Upcoming for RIAS – Review of International American Studies: “Placing Time, Timing Space. Memory as Border and Line of (Hi)Stories in Richard McGuire's *Graphic Narrative Here*” (for which she won the Emory Elliott Award at the 8th IASA International Conference in 2017).*



counterfactuality as a literary genre in the age of postmodernism may be “connected with the general undermining or erasing of established ontological boundaries characteristic of the postmodern imagination” (2010, 105). According to Doležel any counterfactual history is always “constructed as a global world of an alternative order, as a world in which the total conditions of social and individual acting are contrary to what we know about the corresponding actual world” (2010, 105).¹

The Yiddish Policemen’s Union skews orthodox history and performs a transformative shift from factual to counterfactual past by speculating on what could have happened if a 1940 proposal to open up the Alaskan territory to European Jews marked for extermination had passed (the “Alaskan Resettlement Act” was actually killed in Congress). Chabon changes only this historical detail, and then lets the magic happen – from this, a chain reaction of consequences subverts the history and the geography of the world as we know it. The author-demiurge creates a turn in the temporal continuum, “a road not taken” by the course of events, and from this act a whole universe is generated: the city of Sitka (a real city in Alaska) becomes a fictional Jewish homeland, a haven for European Jews who fled the Holocaust. In line with the features that Doležel identifies as key to the construction of counterfactual fictional worlds, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* “deviates from the historical world because at some point [...] an event contrary to well-attested historical facts occurred;” more to the point of my argument, the novel depicts a world “characterized by a social and political order that is substantially different from the order of the corresponding historical world” (2010, 109). In other words, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* represents a storyworld in which the alternate history generated by the skewing event implies the definition of an alternate geography; in Chabon’s novel, when the Alaskan representative who, in the actual world, opposed the “Alaskan Resettlement Act” is killed in a car accident before being able to reject the proposal, not only the history but also the geography of the fictional world become alternate to the actual historical world.

The historical and geographical counterfactual premise of the novel is that a large portion of the Jewish population was relocated from Europe to Alaska in the 1940s. However, the U.S. government allowed Jews to remain in that territory only for the following sixty years. Despite the temporary nature of their Alaskan safe haven, Jews of Sitka are “[p]roud, grateful, and longing to be American, [and] have created their own little world in the Alaskan panhandle, a vibrant, gritty, soulful, and complex frontier city that moves to the music of Yiddish.”² The narrative is set in 2007, when the granted period has almost expired, the Americans are about to regain control over the district of Sitka, and diaspora is once again a looming threat for the Jews. In this context, the protagonist of the story, detective Meyer Landsman, investigates the homicide of a former chess prodigy turned drug-addict, who goes under the pseudonym of Emanuel Lasker, a famous chess master of the early 20th century – an investigation which will lead Landsman to disclose international, high-profile terrorist plots, and to unearth the truth about other killings.

The Yiddish Policemen’s Union contains the cosmogony of a space-time that is the result of imagined conditions and yet is fully real; it is not actual and yet it exists.³ The term space-time is explicit in the novel, as Chabon himself suggests: “Sitka space-time is a curved phenomenon” (2008, 359); these words resonate with Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, complicating the Modern Era model of a universe where space and time were distinct units. According to Einstein, in fact, there exists only one monad, the “space-time” composed of what used to be perceived and got to be categorized as two discrete functions: spatiality and temporality.⁴

¹ For an extensive survey of the theory of possible worlds in narratology, see also Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*.

² Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, front cover flap.

³ For an analysis of the difference between “real” and “actual” worlds in terms of ontological status, confront the works of two theorists of possible worlds: David Lewis’s *On the Plurality of Worlds* (in which he systematizes the indexical actualism) and Nicholas Rescher’s “How Many Possible Worlds Are There?” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (where he discusses his cognitive approach).

⁴ The physicist Brian Greene proposed the image of the “spacetime loaf of bread” in order to convey the understanding of the universe as a continuum whose length is time, while height and width are space. Greene’s analogy goes on to identify the slices cut out of this loaf as moments: time ceases to be represented as an arrow laid out on a Cartesian plane and it is instead conceived as a series of blocks intrinsically spatial, subjected to the physical law of the time-reversal symmetry that considers time as moving both forward and backward. Therefore, by stressing Greene’s metaphor one may argue that the



Sitka is a space-time on its own terms, a dimension that I define as ‘diagonal space.’ A storyworld is ‘diagonal’ when it represents the ontological intersection between straight facts and outright fiction; when it occupies the interstice that lies between factuality and what in the theory of possible worlds is labelled “total counter-factuality:”⁵ universes based on ontological premises that are completely different from those of the world we inhabit; narratives where the distance between the historical and the counterfactual is so radical that their relation can no longer be identified. In this respect, my definition of diagonal space applies to counterfactual fictional universes, in which the boundaries between the actual world and the alternate one are constantly violated. This negotiation, or diagonality, between actual and fictional is highlighted in the counterfactual plots, for instance, by “the coexistence and interaction of fictional and fictionalized characters” (Doležel 2010, 109). Beyond the dichotomy between history and fiction, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* occupies a diagonal space-time which reconceives fiction from hermeneutic approach on reality to generative process of a reality that relates a *what-if* past in the light of an *as-though* present. Considering that the novel does not directly deal with the relocation of persecuted Jews from Europe to Alaska (which constitutes the premise to the narration) and that it is set instead in 2007, the diagonal past results in being hinted at, implicitly asserted, but always looming in the background. This chronological choice allows the reader to retrace retrospectively the sixty years separating the events narrated from the counterfactual past on which they are based; it is a span of alternate historical occurrences which have determined geographical alternatives to the actual world: Sitka becomes a Jewish territory, while Israel is destructed in 1948 and in 2007 Jews are once again faced by historical uncertainty and geographical relocation.

The detailed description of Sitka’s Jewish society with its spatiotemporal coordinates – the lines crisscrossing its inner structure as recounted by Calvino – shapes the diagonal space into a diagonal place; its alternate history reciprocates its alternate geography and vice-versa; like a parallel and a meridian, fact and fiction meet at one specific point, grounding and characterizing a specific place. One is reminded of Jorge Luis Borges who narrates this transition from topographical epistemology to geographical ontology in his famous short story “On Exactitude in Science” (1946), in which he asserts: “The Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. [...] In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars” (1998, 325). With his tones of fabulation, Borges reflects on the role of narratives, suggesting that in describing the world, they may end up coinciding with it or even become a reality in themselves, with inhabitants, a peculiar history, and a geographical localization; “the Animals and Beggars,” indeed, inhabit the maps themselves – a diagonal space-time between the differing levels of narrative ontology. Similarly, Chabon conceives of a geographical, alternate ontology in defining Sitka as an autonomous, self-referential universe.

Chabon produces a similar reflection on the origin and the autonomy of fictional spaces by introducing a peculiar figure of Sitka’s diagonal society, the “boundary maven.”⁶ This “expert” of boundaries not only maps the territory, but also creates, with the help of lines of any sort, imaginary places called “eruv” where Jews can sidestep the Sabbath rules:

[Eruv] has something to do with pretending that telephone poles are doorposts and that the wires are lintels. You can tie off an area using poles and strings and call it an eruv, then pretend on the Sabbath that this eruv you’ve drawn – in the case of [the boundary maven] and his crew, it’s pretty much the whole [Sitka] District – is your house. That way you can get around the Sabbath ban on carrying in a public place, and walk to shul with a couple of Alka-Seltzers in your pocket, and it isn’t a sin. Given enough string and enough poles, and with a little creative use of existing walls, fences, cliffs, and rivers, you could tie a circle around pretty much any place and call it an eruv. But somebody has to lay down those lines, survey the territory,

space-time created by Chabon is a peculiar, counterfactual loaf of bread of which the novel narrates some moments-slices; Sitka itself is a slice, a cross section of this broader universe.

⁵ Doležel arranges counterfactuals on a scale assessing the varying degree of probability in the actual world: from “fully plausible,” to “plausible,” “implausible,” and “totally implausible” (2010, 101-102).

⁶ At the end of the novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* includes a section labelled “Glossary” where the translation of “maven” is provided: “**maven** expert, guru” (2008, 414).



maintain the strings and the poles, and guard the integrity of the make-believe walls and doors against weather, vandalism, bears, and the telephone company. That's where the boundary maven comes in. (2008, 110)

The imaginative power of the above-mentioned short stories by Calvino and Borges seems to echo throughout this passage. Sitka's reality is intersected by lines, strings, horizontal and vertical connections as that of Calvino's *Zaira*, while the topographical act of generating worlds which then grow auto-referential, with a distinct ontology of their own (or free from conventional rules), is crucial both for the enterprise of Borges' cartographers, and for the boundary maven's activity. The latter, like the author himself, performs his agency in creating alternate space-times; the boundary maven has the authority and the power to decide over the ontology of his productions: "When a question arises as to whether or not some particular stretch of sidewalk or lakefront or open field is contained within an eruv, Zimbalist, though not a rabbi, is the one to whom all the rabbis defer. [...] By some accounts, he's the most powerful yid in town" (2008, 111). The boundary maven's strings outline places which are themselves diagonal in relation to the (itself diagonal) space-time of Sitka; the counterfactual universe of Sitka represents a diagonal negotiation between history and fiction, while the eruvs delimited by the strings intersecting and crisscrossing Sitka are interstices not completely in and not completely out of Sitka: while the eruvs are physically part of the society, social and religious norms are disputed. In other words, the eruvs may be considered as diagonal places because they are negotiations between Sitka's society and its complete subversion.

In his collection of essays *Maps and Legends, Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (published one year after *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*), Chabon dwells extensively on the fiction by those authors whom he labels "great writers" (2009, 13) and among them he counts Borges and Calvino, "who wrote at the critical point of language, where vapor turns to starry plasma, and yet who worked, at least sometimes, in the terms and tropes of genre fiction" (2009, 136). At the critical point of language indeed, Sitka, *Zaira* and the cartographers' Map of the Empire are all – though belonging to different narrative mechanisms – diagonal spaces; interstices between parallel universes.⁷

In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the diagonal space is exemplarily depicted by the image of the game of chess, recurring over and over in the novel, and provides what I believe to be a very suitable metaphor for reading Sitka's space-time. The person killed in the crime which Detective Landsman is investigating was a former chess-prodigy who died with a chessboard on his bedside, several other characters are portrayed while (or as fond of) playing chess, and Landsman himself belongs to a family of talented chess players. "Chess," the narrator points out, "is permitted to the pious Jew, even – alone among games – on the Sabbath" (2008, 88). Sitka's space-time itself seems to unravel and function as a game of chess; indeed, chess games, like Sitka, are constructed through moves and counter-moves, actions and speculations, horizontal moves and vertical moves but are also made, and more significantly so, out of diagonal shifts – a third alternative. Through another allusion to the space-time, by naming its theoretician, Chabon imagines his protagonist as moving on a chessboard: "Landsman pursues Albert Einstein across the milk-white, chalk-white ice, hopping from square to shadowed square across relativistic chessboards of culpability and atonement, across the imaginary land of penguins and Eskimos that the Jews never quite managed to inherit" (2008, 372).

Eventually, Landsman solves the puzzle regarding the chessboard found next to Lasker's corpse, which was set in a very peculiar layout; the detective realizes that Lasker had presented a chess problem before dying:

"They call that *Zugzwang*," Landsman says. "Forced to move." It means Black would be better off if it could just pass." "But you aren't allowed to pass, are you? You have to do something, don't you?" "Yes, you do," Landsman says. "Even when you know it's only going to lead to you

⁷ Diagonal spaces as the ones abovementioned are often self-aware (meta)narratives. There are more meta-literary passages in the novel, in which Chabon debates the broader issue of the generative potential of story-telling itself: "This is not about getting the story right. Because you and I, we know, gentlemen, that the story is whatever we decide it is, and however nice and neat we make it, in the end a story is never going to make a damn bit of difference to the dead" (2008, 288). And a hundred pages later: "But we aren't telling a story" "No?" "Huh-uh. The story, Detective Landsman, is telling us. Just like it has done from the beginning. We're part of the story. You. Me" (2008, 365).



getting checkmated.” Landsman can see it starting to mean something to her, not as evidence or proof or a chess problem, but as part of the story of a crime. A crime committed against a man who found himself left with no good moves at all. (2008, 400-401)

The impossibility to move without being checkmated, the inexorability of a tragic end, the constraints of a condition beyond one’s control point to the fact that the chess problem lying at the core of the crime’s solution shares several traits with the socio-political as well as the historical condition of Sitka’s Jews, doomed to relocate once again. Indeed, Sitka’s space-time functions as a chessboard and its diagonal, narrative mechanisms – as diagonal moves – seem insufficient to counter a future that may be deterministically ordained. The paratexts of the book strengthen the metaphor of the game of chess; in the inside front cover for example, there is a comic panel in which the silhouette of a detective is drawn on a chess layout, next to (and hence compared to) chess pieces. This furthers the understanding of Sitka’s space-time as grounded into the structure of chess. In fact, its inhabitants are moving on the same plane as chess pawns, responding to the same rules, and the construction of its society is moving according to the same dynamics of horizontality, verticality and diagonality.

Diagonality manifests as a juncture between two dimensions, negotiation and consequent hybridization of two realities; the last part of this paper will be devoted to the discussion of two other vectors of diagonality in the novel (besides the construction of eruv), language and history – both being alternatives to the actual world.⁸ Once again, the paratexts of the book are a key to a broader reading of the narrative: one of the last sections of the book is a “Glossary,” an editorial choice quite telling of the vocabulary of the story. The reason which makes a glossary necessary is that there are about eighty terms, between Yiddish words and neologisms, that the average, English-speaking reader may not know. The anecdote that backs this linguistic peculiarity also roots the entire conception of the novel, as reported by Patricia Cohen in her piece entitled “The Frozen Chosen,” an interview to Chabon which first appeared in *The New York Times* in 2007 and was then included itself as a paratext in the first Harper Perennial Edition of the novel (2008).

Chabon got the inspiration for *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* from a phrase book for travelers called *Say It in Yiddish!* (1058), edited by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich; a mesmerizing discovery which made the author wonder: “Where would be the most fabulous kingdom you could have taken this phrase book, if the Holocaust hadn’t happened?”. Chabon imaginatively answers this question by creating a fictional “Yiddishland” in Alaska,⁹ “a place where you might need to say ‘Help, I need a tourniquet’ (which the phrase book thoughtfully provides)” (Cohen 2008, 7). In Chabon’s Yiddishland a diagonal language (mainly English but with many Yiddish contaminations) is spoken; an idiom for which he had to fill the gaps regarding recent objects – things that did not exist in actual Yiddish societies and therefore had not a real Yiddish name. The glossary lists words such as: “**latke** (*Sitka slang; lit., ‘pancake’*) uninformed patrolman, beat cop; in joking reference to the patrolman’s flat crowned hat” “**noz** (*Sitka slang; lit., ‘nose’*) cop” “**sholem** (*Sitka slang; lit., ‘peace’*) gun; ironic bilingual pun on American slang ‘piece’” “**Untershot** (*Sitkaism, lit. ‘downtown’*) the oldest, central neighborhood of Jewish Sitka” (2008, 414-416).

Another diagonality regards instead the divergence in the historical past – and therefore the alternate historical situation – of Sitka; an aspect which I have presented at the beginning of the present essay. The crucial relocation of European Jews in the 1940s serves as the spark for a series of alternative historical, geographical, social and political details; some are almost deterministically comprehensible in Sitka’s space-time, others seem to bear no direct connection to the triggering event but resolutely define and typify this alternate cosmos as an auto-referential place. From the Jewish colonization of Alaska:

When the Alaskan Development Corporation dispensed tractors and seed and sacks of fertilizer to the fugitive boatloads, [...] two million Jews got off the boats and found no rolling prairies

⁸ Ryan identifies the trans-universe relations linking the actual world to the fictional universe (or, in her terminology, the textual actual world) as relations of “accessibility.” According to this principle, the alternative language and history narrated in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* makes the novel diverge from the actual world in terms of “chronological compatibility” and “linguistic compatibility.” (Ryan 1991, 32-33)

⁹ In the interview, Chabon states: “I got into this early on, that you could imagine a place and it would come into being.” (2008, 9)



dotted with buffalo. [...] Nowhere to spread out, to grow, to do anything more than crowd together in the teeming style of Vilna and Lodz. (2008, 291)

Several other circumstances of diagonality, in the sense of a blended world, take place: “[Germany] survived the dropping of the atomic bomb on Berlin in 1946” (2008, 136); the “American first lady [is] Marilyn Monroe Kennedy in her pink pillbox hat” (2008, 201); in 2007 a Jewish-Alaskan terrorist organization blows up the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem – a territory from which Israel was swept away in 1948 (2008, 315).

All these points, joined one after the other as dots, depict the diagonal shape of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*; its diagonality refers to spatio-temporal conditions that are always “almost but not quite” facts and “almost but not quite” fiction. Indeed, the Atomic bomb is not dropped on England, or on Mars, or during the Napoleonic wars, the American first lady is not Queen Elizabeth III or Lady Gaga – in Sitka’s universe there is always enough factuality to keep the narrative close to (and in deep conversation with) history, and there is always enough counter-factuality to make it diverge from counter history. Pushed and pulled by these “bifurcating forces,” alternative space-times like Chabon’s Sitka manage to point and develop into their own contrasting, diagonal direction.

Works cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis. “On Exactitude in Science.” *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. London: Penguin Books, 1998. 325.
- Boyarin, Jonathan. *Remapping Memory, The Politics of TimeSpace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974.
- Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- . *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.
- Cohen, Patricia. “The Frozen Chosen.” *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* by Michael Chabon. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. 6-17.
- Doležel, Lubomír. *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1987.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. “The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes.” *Poetics Today* 6.4 (1985): 717-755.
- . *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.