

The Power of 'What Might Have Been': Counterfactual and Alternate Realities in Jeff VanderMeer's "The Goat Variations"

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Abstract

Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework based on Schneider-Mayerson (2009), Alkon (1994), and Gallagher's (2007, 2018) critique of alternative histories, this research paper analyses Jeff VanderMeer's "The Goat Variations" (2015) to illustrate how alternate histories within speculative fiction challenge deterministic and hegemonic narratives of official histories. Through an analysis of VanderMeer's use of counterfactuals, the research probes how these alternative realities provoke a critical libertarian skepticism toward the ideological machinery of powerful states, particularly in their manipulation of historical events to serve imperialistic and nationalist ends. This paper examines the story's political subtext and highlights how the speculative genre can disrupt historical complacency, urging readers to reconsider their passive acceptance of dominant nationalistic ideologies and militaristic historiographies. The research finds that "The Goat Variations" (2015) exemplifies the power of speculative fiction to reimagine historical events and challenge hegemonic narratives. Its Y-type forking narrative structure grants equal ontological significance to actual and speculative histories, urging readers to reconsider the authority of dominant historical accounts. VanderMeer's portrayal of a dystopian America besieged by internal conflict, evangelical terrorism, and catastrophic bombings parallels real-world post-9/11 fears, amplifying the political and cultural anxieties of the time. The story's speculative and counterfactual approach challenges the legitimacy of singular historical narratives, particularly those that reinforce power structures and suppress alternative ideologies. By doing so, VanderMeer subverts hegemonic discourses, offering a libertarian critique highlighting the importance of acknowledging diverse historical perspectives. This critique is bolstered by the symbolic imagery of an ossuary and the bio-mass bomb, which reflect the violence and disintegration in both the fictional and actual worlds. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how speculative alternative history can serve as a powerful tool for social and political critique by offering a profound critique of post-9/11 militarism and nationalism.

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Introduction

Alternate historical fiction seeks to expand the popular historical imagination beyond the deterministic and hegemonic interpretations of history. Alternate Histories or counterfactuals critique the constructed-ness and endorse flexibility and plurality of history. They also serve as a medium to subvert the absolutism and univocalism of the dominant historical discourses by replacing them with several possible scenarios. They seek to dismantle the singular temporal configuration strongly upheld by the official historical narrative. The alternate history genre is deeply embedded within the historical context of contemporary society, and it is far from a politically neutral literary endeavor. Margaret Thatcher, a quintessentially representative voice for the Eurocentric capitalist-imperialist enterprise, had once famously asserted that “there is no alternative” (as cited in Tung, 2019, p. 79). Though she actively campaigned against the oppressiveness of historical forces, Donna Haraway (1990) also voiced her helplessness against singular historical formations in the following assertion: “I have lost the ability to think of what a world beyond capitalism would look like” (as cited in Tung, 2019, p. 79). Allo-histories or counterfactuals seek to expand popular historical fiction beyond the constraints of these hopeless assertions. Counterfactuals operate in these grim scenarios and endeavor to help common imagination transcend “the total domination of capital has made everything fully contemporaneous” (Tung, 2019, p. 79). In a scenario where theorists like Francis Fukuyama predicted the end of history with the “universalization of Western liberal democracy and capitalism” (Tung, 2019, p. 80), counterfactual historians are invested heavily in an enterprise of an alternate culture of counterfactuals. They intend to provide history to individuals deprived of their right to own and shape history for themselves.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2020), counterfactuals can be explained as “[p]ertaining to, or expressing, what has not in fact happened, but might, could, or would, in different conditions” (counterfactual adj.). The term alternate history is categorized as a form of historical fiction that speculates what would have happened had history gone differently. Counterfactual history is

speculative because it uses a tangible and plausible real-world setting with certain actual historical events occurring differently. These speculative historical fictional accounts comprise ‘what-if’ scenarios about some of history’s pivotal and epoch-making events like the American Civil War, WWII, and, most recently, 9/11. The conjectural or speculative nature of counterfactuals has been hailed by many as an attempt to understand the real in a more accurate light. Black and MacRaild’s (2017) definition explicates this *raison d’être* for the alternate histories: “It is, at the very root, the idea of conjecturing on what did not happen, or what might have happened, in order to understand what did happen” (p. 125).

In his seminal work, *What Almost Was: The Politics of the Contemporary Alternate History Novel*, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2009) identifies 1995 as a phenomenal year for the growth and development of alternate history novels. However, he also contends that the counterfactual or what-if narratives have been in vogue since classical times. He refers to Roman historian Livy, who devoted the ninth book of his treatise to speculative history. The most prominent example of Livy’s counterfactuals was based on an alternative scenario of Alexander the Great choosing to launch a military campaign against Italy instead of Persia. Isaac D’Israeli, in the nineteenth century, was the first key proponent of counterfactuals in England. D’Israeli’s (1824) essay “Of a History of Events Which Have Not Happened” built several what-if scenarios. The twentieth century has seen phenomenal growth in the proliferation of these categories because gifted fiction writers and postmodern historians worldwide have made significant gains in building what-if scenarios. For example, Gavriel Rosenfeld (2005) has made an exhaustive study of Nazi-related alternate-history scenarios that emerged after WWII. His work serves as evidence that there was a significant amount of activity within this particular genre during the twentieth century.

E. H. Carr (1960) once derided alternate history as “the parlour game of might-have-beens” (as cited in Gallagher, 2007, p. 56). However, with the advent of statistical and other technologies, validating what was once held as wild imagination has become possible. Economic historian Fogel, in his 1964 book *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History*, speculates, with scientific rigor, on the socio-economic scenarios if the US had not built railways. Geoffrey Hawthorn’s 1991 publication, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences*, and Niall Ferguson’s *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, published in 1997, have been influential

in subverting the deterministic narrative of history through postmodernist frames like contingency, alterity, chance, chaos, and simultaneity.

The literary endeavors in alternate history have been even more productive. Two noteworthy examples are Harry Turtledove's *How Few Remain: A Novel of the Second War Between the States and Confederates* (1998) and Philip K. Dick's "The Man in the High Castle" (2002). Hailed as the master of alternate history, Turtledove writes an epic of the speculative Second Civil War, which takes place in 1881. In his what-if scenario, the Second Civil War strengthens the South. It consolidates their gains in the First Civil War as Confederate General Stonewall Jackson displays his military genius, whereas the Northern states are leaderless. In a similar vein, Dick's "The Man in the High Castle" (2002) is built on the scenario of Nazi triumph in the Second World War. The dismembered USA, as depicted in the novel, consists of the 'Pacific States of America' (PSA), which is ruled by the Japanese Empire. The 'United States' is being ruled by Nazi Germany, and a third, relatively independent part, the 'Rocky Mountain States' (RMS), acts as a buffer zone between the two.

Oppression, totalitarianism, institutionalized discrimination, acts of military betrayals, and the suppression of dissent by the state's physical and ideological apparatuses have generally been accommodated in counterfactual histories as their main preoccupation. Despite these grim portrayals, they retain a utopian optimism for egalitarian and just futures sanctioned by historical variability. Alternate histories in this context operate as cultural formulations. They manifest and validate the power of libertarian politics. They choose a pivotal moment in history as a point of departure and diverge from the actual to build an alternate ontology, a parallel world, a possible world. In the process, they strengthen common belief in the myriad possibilities of historical change.

According to Rosenfeld (2005) and Hellekson (2001), counterfactual narratives tend to weave scenarios by reversing some of history's most crucial and epoch-making historical events. Critical events of the past that have shaped human destinies and left their imprint on the sands of times tend to fuel the imagination of alternate historical fiction writers. 9/11 was such an event that transformed literature and culture most profoundly. Owing to its overwhelming penchant for political and military history, the alternate history genre responded in numerous ways to this cataclysmic event of recent history. The alternate history fiction writers have

ventured into the political, cultural, ethical, discursive, and civilizational dimensions of historiography and its related discourses surrounding 9/11.

Consequently, we have an exhaustive corpus of counterfactuals and speculative fiction that engages with the event one way or the other. Schneider-Mayerson (2009) mentions specifically African American author Steven Barnes. His novels *Lion's Blood* (2003) and *Zulu Heart* (2018) depict an alternate America governed by African Muslims from North Africa. In his counterfactual novels, "racial hierarchies are reversed, with Africans and Arabs in positions of power while European slaves are used for manual labor" (Schneider-Mayerson, 2009, p.78). Lavie Tidhar's *Osama* (2012) is another unsettling and mind-bending political fantasy that portrays OBL as a fictive character from pulp fiction, whereas certain other entities perpetrate the act of terrorism.

Jeff VanderMeer is an established name in speculative fiction and the New Weird literary genre. Penned by the author of the critically acclaimed novels, *Annihilation* (2014) and *Borne* (2017), the short story "The Goat Variations" (2015) can be situated within this burgeoning body of speculative fiction aimed at disseminating an alternative version of history and ontology. Drawing upon Schneider-Mayerson (2009), Alkon (1994), and Gallagher's (2007, 2018) scholarship on the counter-discursive and subversive potential of alternate/speculative fiction, this paper seeks to show how VanderMeer's speculative alternate historical short story, "The Goat Variations" (2015), plays this politics of its genre to its perfection employing a brilliant set of counterfactuals on 9/11 attack. The paper analyses how the presence of alternate history in the story fuels a libertarian skepticism of big governments of the world and their imperial ideological arsenal and how it shakes its audience from their complacent, laid-back response to militant nationalisms and militarism's ideological control and manipulation of history. VanderMeer's story is a part of the anthology *In the Shadow of the Towers: Speculative Fiction in a Post-9/11 World* (2015), which has been hailed with critical acclaim and widespread popularity. This anthology of short fiction features counterfactual masterpieces like "Beautiful Stuff" (2015) by Susan Palwickin, in which the US President reanimates the victims of the Twin Tower attack and asks them in a presser to endorse his attacks on the Middle East. The reanimated people refuse his demands. "The Goat Variations" (2015) is another brilliant counterfactual masterpiece that embodies Duncan's (2003) assertions that the "most alternate histories [...] tend to depict dystopias, bad societies that might have been" (p. 212). This brilliant short story is a counterfactual

rendition of the events surrounding 9/11. President Bush, of an alternate reality, presides over an America where its 'heartland' has seceded from the remaining regions of the nation and embarked upon a Christian fundamentalist 'jihad' against the coastal areas like New York. By studying the dynamics of VanderMeer's counterfactualism in his short story, the research hopes to provide a deeper understanding of how alternate histories can displace the singular and deterministic view about global events and offer fresh and de-essentialized world views.

Theoretical Framework

❖ The Politics and Poetics of Alternate Histories

Building upon Alkon's 1994 exploration of alternate histories, this analysis contextualizes "The Goat Variations" (2015) within a libertarian ontology. This perspective liberates historical discourse from predetermined limitations, empowering individuals to envision a spectrum of potential outcomes. Alkon (1994) proposes dual functions for alternate histories: firstly, to deepen comprehension of the past and present, and secondly, to disrupt linear distinctions, thus exposing the fragility of historical accounts. This theoretical framework informs the investigation into how VanderMeer's (2015) work encourages a diverse and ongoing dialogue with history, emphasizing a pluralistic and adaptable approach to understanding the complexities of the past. These theoretical underpinnings play a pivotal role in examining how VanderMeer's (2015) narrative challenges established historical accounts, explores the political criticism inherent in speculative fiction, and underscores the importance of alternative worldviews in reshaping perceptions of societal order.

In addition, this research also draws upon Catherine Gallagher's (2018) theorization on counterfactual Allo-histories. She places the genre within the broader tradition of uchronia. The genre of alternate histories and counterfactuals is called uchronia in most European languages. Therefore, the word uchronia has been used in English. In his dissertation on alternate history, William Joseph Collins (1990) makes "the useful distinction between 'pure uchronia,' an alternate history in the form of a fictional work; 'plural uchronia,' alternate worlds that co-exist in literature" (pp. 85-86). Despite this categorization's flexible nature, essential distinctions must be made. Karen Hellekson (2001) has called the "true alternate history, which is often identified by its opposition to fantasy" (as cited in Myerson, 2009, p. 56). Pure

uchronia, or the true alternate history, aims to create a plausible universe without the intervention of fantasy.

In contrast, plural uchronia provides space for fantasy to be integrated. Gallagher (2018) has provided more valuable and comprehensive categorizations in the recent scholarship. She divides the counterfactual histories and their fictional counterparts into three main categories. According to her categorization, 'counterfactual histories'... include counterfactual speculations with an analytical focus; "alternate history" ... describe a singular continuous divergence from actual world history while all along drawing on actual historical figures and events; and "alternate-history novels" ... include texts that combine the fictional with the counterfactual. (p. 3)

She postulates that the last two categories construct a cohesive narrative by departing from the established historical sequence of events and creating an alternate fictional world. However, these narratives constantly employ accurate historical figures as characters. The third category, referred to as "the alternate-history novel, constructs not only alternative historical trajectories but also introduces fictional characters" along with the actual historical figures. Thus, they construct a comprehensive alternative reality by meticulously depicting "the social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the alterations" (Gallagher, 2018, p. 3).

Gallagher (2007), in her essay *War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels* explains the nature and scope of counterfactual and alternate histories at a great length:

Alternate-history novels attempt to create a complete alternative reality, presenting in detail the social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the alteration, which is why they are often called 'alternate world novels'. The historical alteration in the novels permeates to the level of commonplace individual lives, where habits of thought, modes of speech, and routines of daily life are registered. (p. 59)

Gallagher (2007) goes on to theorize a Y-type pattern to describe the narrative structure of the alternate histories. She contends that their temporal/narrative configuration is shaped like a 'Y'. The singular base or the 'trunk' bifurcates into two at the point of divergence. She labels this juncture as the point of rupture in the

temporal scheme of alternate historical fiction. This point of rupture serves as the moment of departure from a critical juncture that has already transpired in the historical record. She writes that academic alternate historians and alternate history novelists employ the same structure with varying degrees of effectiveness and plausibility. Most noticeably, the counterfactual writers assign equal ontological weight to the diverging branches of the fork in their novels and short stories. They imbue both the prongs of the fork with equal plausibility and truthfulness within the diegesis. The point of divergence serves as the primary distinguishing feature that sets counterfactual historical fiction apart from other genres.

The oft-quoted specimen of this type of narrative is Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of the Forking Paths* (1941), in which "each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one" (as cited in Gallagher, 2007, p. 63) from the forking paths. In addition to this, these novelists also benefit from the whole reservoir of literary devices at their disposal. "Their narrators have full access to other consciousnesses; they frequently manipulate point of view and focus; they use free indirect style, along with its peculiar tenses, etcetera" (Gallagher, 2007, p. 63). Thus, they can create a similitude rooted in historical plausibility and variability. Therefore, the "crosscut parallel plotlines and side-by-side timelines" (Tung, 2019, p. 81) of these narratives displace the robustness of the singular time. Moreover, the dialogic and supplementary relationship between the two prongs of the temporal puts them in a situation where they jostle with each other for discursive/ontological supremacy.

Schneider-Mayerson (2009), in *The Politics of the Contemporary Alternate History Novel*, deliberates on the ideological position and political interest of this genre in engaging with the powerful nation's militaristic enterprise and their official historical discourses, which are entwined with their wars. He postulates that the prime preoccupation of these works is the alternativity and non-synchronous histories. These features have been induced by postmodernism's distrust of grand narratives and its penchant for alternative narratives. The postmodernist view of history and historiography is pivoted on incredulity toward traditional/grand historical narratives. Therefore, the alternate histories are inevitably focused on military enterprise as the most significant catalyst in the annals of history. However, at the same time, they have taken it upon themselves to dismantle and tear down the rigid heterogeneity and oppressive singularity of these political and militaristic junctures of history. Schneider-Mayerson (2009) writes:

They are turning points, moments of bifurcation, whose consequences fundamentally determine the character of the world for decades, centuries, or even millennia. ... Most contemporary alternate histories portray worlds that are dominated by the preparation for, waging of, and consequences of war - the two most popular themes in the genre are a Nazi victory in World War II and a Confederate victory in the American Civil War. (p. 73)

By creating a bifurcation, a split in historical trajectories, alternative histories hint at the randomness and contingency of historical events and allow the authors to play the subversive politics of the genre.

This research article draws upon this combination of Schneider-Mayerson (2009), Alkon (1994), and Gallagher's (2007, 2018) ideas to create an integrated and comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing VanderMeer's "The Goat Variations" (2015). These theories offer a critical lens to probe the short story for its contrafactual potential, its historiographic and political ramifications, its subversion of hegemonic historical narratives, and its dismantling power of counterfactuals. These notions combined allow for a nuanced and profound interpretation of the text in light of recent scholarship on counterfactuals and Allo-histories.

Textual Analysis

Tung (2019) maintains that "true alternate history emerges at that moment out of a militaristic, anti-welfare-state" (p. 102). The militaristic power and its aggressive imperial designs produce a 'nexus moment' that forms the core of a speculative/counterfactual plot. "The Goat Variations" (2015) follows this pattern and posits the 9/11 attacks as the moment which triggers a sequence of events in an alternate reality. What unfolds is uncannily similar. The temporality and setting flow directly from the actual history. The interlocutors involved in the event and the sequence of events experience exciting twists. Thus, the alternate scenario builds an alternate present imbued with an ontological veracity of equal importance. "The Goat Variation" (2015) relies on well-worn science fiction tropes, such as psychic adepts, time machines, and alternate realities. Despite these familiar devices, VanderMeer's strength lies in his ability to present these elements in innovative ways. The counterfactual scenario centered on an alternate version of 9/11 presents a gripping and thought-provoking reflection on history and politics. This what-if

approach invites readers to engage with the original event critically, blending speculative fiction with historical inquiry.

❖ **The Libertarian Ontology of "The Goat Variations"**

At the heart of "The Goat Variations" (2015) lies the logic and practice of counterfactuals—hypothetical alterations of historical events—and their broader political and historiographic implications. VanderMeer's story suggests that history, far from being fixed or deterministic, is fluid and subject to manipulation by power structures. This reimagined present, where Christian fundamentalist radicals terrorize the United States, draws parallels to the actual events of 9/11 while also challenging readers to reflect on the power of hegemonic historical narratives. This what-if scenario expands the historical consciousness of its audience and builds their capacity to speculate different versions of the political realities. It also exposes their lopsided assumptions about official histories and problematizes their support for jingoistic nationalism and its narrative about the historical necessities of militaristic enterprise.

The structure of "The Goat Variations" (2015), built around half-scenes and flashbacks, echoes Gallagher's (2007) theory of Y-type forking narratives. VanderMeer's counterfactual reality embodies this forking structure by questioning the legitimacy of singular historical narratives and offering an equally plausible alternate history. By attributing equal ontological weight to both the actual and speculative versions of events, he encourages a libertarian critique of hegemonic power structures, challenging the dehumanization and marginalization of alternative ideologies and experiences. As President Bush of his story grapples with an alternate reality, he reflects: "Sometimes he feels like he is presiding over a pile of skulls." (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 57). This haunting imagery underscores the president's feelings of helplessness as he navigates a fractured nation besieged by evangelical radicals and internal warfare. By intertwining counterfactual possibilities with historical realism, VanderMeer's narrative aligns with Alkon's (1994) assertion that speculative fiction can reveal the inherent contingency of historical developments. The narrative punctures the rigidity of historical determinism, offering a libertarian ontology that equates the speculative with the real. VanderMeer's counterfactual narrative encourages readers to imagine alternate historical possibilities, providing a space for questioning and reimagining the world order. By liberating the historical consciousness from hegemonic narratives, "The Goat Variations" (2015) opens the door to a more pluralistic and just future.

❖ **The Pet Goat: Echoes of Historical Reality**

The pivotal scene in the story, where President Bush visits an elementary school, draws direct parallels to the real-world event on September 11, 2001, when Bush was informed of the 9/11 attacks. VanderMeer carefully mirrors these historical moments, using Bush's reading of "The Pet Goat" as a springboard for a more dystopian alternate history. By reflecting on a dismembered U.S. and the looming threat of evangelical terrorists, VanderMeer's narrative complicates the original event, revealing the latent power dynamics and ideological struggles that shape historical memory. In the story, the president receives shocking news from his aide: "There are no people left in New York ... the rebels have detonated a bio-mass bomb in New York City, ... a broth of fungus and mutation: the nearly instantaneous transformation of an entire metropolis into something living but alien..." (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 65). This scenario not only mirrors the historical attack on New York but amplifies its catastrophic impact, painting a more terrifying alternate history. Gallagher's theory of Y-narratives plays a significant role here, as VanderMeer's story diverges from historical reality into a speculative and catastrophic alternative, disrupting linear assumptions about historical development (Gallagher, 2018). This forking narrative highlights Schneider-Mayerson's (2015) assertion that such counterfactuals can challenge the power structures embedded in historical events, urging readers to question how political narratives are constructed and maintained.

❖ **The Alternative America and The Power of 'What-If**

Alkon (1994) emphasizes that speculative fiction, by disrupting conventional temporal frameworks, enables stories like "The Goat Variations" (2015) to critique dominant historical ideologies and narratives. For instance, a recurring motif in the story is Bush's obsession with the word ossuary, which he associates with the pile of skulls representing the casualties caused by the United States' dismemberment in the story. VanderMeer's portrayal of a war-torn America, plagued by guerilla warfare and internal conflict, reflects a broader critique of American militarism and nationalistic ideologies in the post-9/11 world. The dilapidated school setting symbolizes the decay of America's sociopolitical and ideological edifice, with Bush presiding over a crumbling empire. Moreover, the war-torn scenario he copes with is filled with religious zealotry, ideological weaponry, and dehumanization. Thus, the story transforms the American president from an overseer of a dominant, stable country, steering the world into a clueless observer of his country's dismemberment.

The latest satellite photos from the battlefield states of Kansas, Nebraska, and Idaho make him think of the word. The evangelicals have been eschewing god-missiles for more personal methods of vengeance, even as they tie down federal armies in an endless guerilla war. Sometimes, he feels like he's presiding over a pile of skulls. (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 57)

By exploring such alternative realities where VanderMeer substitutes American presidential power with that of a Banana Republic leader who is morally fatigued with the dread of a grim future, the text prompts readers to reconsider the solidity and stability of historical events and the narratives that shape our understanding of them.

The alternate reality in "The Goat Variations" (2015) takes a dark turn when the president learns that a bio-mass bomb has obliterated New York City. This dystopian scenario, far more catastrophic than the actual 9/11 attack, intensifies the sense of political and cultural disintegration. VanderMeer's correspondence between historical and speculative events underscores the potential fragility of historical timelines, as the speculative prong of the Y-shaped fork opens up new possibilities for interpreting the past. In this catastrophic version of events, the president's aide tells him: "Over sixty thousand people have died in battle in Atlanta, and the air space back to the capital is no longer safe. He also warns about the imminent fall of the capital" (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 65). Schneider-Mayerson (2015) suggests that speculative re-imaginings like the bio-mass bomb scenario in this story challenge nationalistic narratives and critique state power, particularly in moments of crisis. The obliteration of New York City in VanderMeer's alternate reality highlights the catastrophic potential of unchecked militarism and authoritarian governance. This extreme outcome exposes the fragility of state power and the dangers of unchallenged militaristic forces, ultimately prompting readers to critically reflect on the dominant historical narratives that shape their understanding of power and governance.

❖ The Subversive Power of Counterfactuals

Through flashbacks and whispered reports from his aides, Bush is reminded of an alternate geopolitical reality where the U.S. has never fully seceded from Britain, and he presides over North America and Britain. This counterfactual political landscape, rife with violent struggles between secularists and evangelical terrorists, further destabilizes the hegemonic historical narrative. VanderMeer (2015) presents

a hotbed of religious and political extremism, reflecting on the consequences of unchecked militarism and ideological warfare. “After the attack on 9/11, the president is faced with the hard choice of making peace with the Ecstasics and their god-missiles” (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 66). By situating Bush in this tumultuous alternate landscape, VanderMeer critiques historical narratives and underscores the precarious nature of political power amidst the chaos of ideological extremism. Gallagher’s theory (2007) of forking narratives illustrates how these alternate histories challenge deterministic perspectives of the past, exposing the complexities and ambiguities that characterize historical events.

VanderMeer’s masterful use of counterfactuals not only subverts the dominant historical narrative but also offers a critique of militarism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. By placing the readers in an alternate historical space, “The Goat Variations” (2015) disrupts their passive acceptance of the historical record and challenges them to consider the broader implications of historical variability. The story’s deconstructive power lies in its ability to generate skepticism about dominant ideological discourses and invite reflection on the fragility of the global political order. As the president reflects on the chaos around him, the future torques into secret trials, torture, rape, and hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, or displaced, a country bankrupted and defenseless, ruled ultimately by martial law and generals. Cities burn, the screams of the living are as loud as the screams of the dying. (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 66)

This powerful imagery aligns with Gallagher’s (2018) assertion that alternate histories allow for a re-examination of established narratives, prompting readers to confront the uncertainties and complexities of the past. VanderMeer critiques socio-political conditions through these references while highlighting speculative fiction’s power to challenge historical and ideological narratives.

Furthermore, the speculative core of “The Goat Variations” (2015) allows Jeff VanderMeer to challenge historical judgments by revealing the fluidity and products of past events. Through this, he offers an alternative to rigid narratives that enrich our understanding of history, showing that different outcomes are always possible. This perspective liberates the reader from a deadened view of the past. It encourages them to question how history is created and remembered, making readers more aware of the forces that shape historical events. VanderMeer takes this idea even further, as seen in his flashbacks to George Bush and the description of the iconic

"bone graveyard" he controls, further blurring the line between reality and fiction. Imagine New York City boiling with "the water of disease and change" (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 65), which is not only a reimagining of the 9/11 attacks but also a reflection of the historical blindness of the event. In America's Civil War, VanderMeer offers a perspective on what questions matter in historical debate. His story shows that the current world order is not as fixed as it seems and that small changes in history can lead to different outcomes. It also reinforces that history is not an immutable fact but a competitive process defined by power and ideology. As the president contemplates his inadequacy, his helplessness and resignation become a metaphor for the fragility of historical narratives: "At times, it felt like he was checking his skull" (VanderMeer, 2015, p. 57). By destroying "all evidence of solid history" (Raghunath, 2020, p. 85), the story invites readers to question their understanding of history and consider how other histories can help create a more just and equitable future. Through the interplay of fiction and historical research, "The Goat Variations" (2015) exemplifies how factual fiction can provide essential insights into understanding history and the nature of reality.

Conclusion

"The Goat Variations" (2015) exemplifies the power of speculative fiction to reimagine historical events and challenge hegemonic narratives. Using well-established science fiction tropes such as alternate realities, psychic abilities, and time machines, VanderMeer creates a counterfactual exploration of the events surrounding 9/11. The story's alternate version of history disrupts the fixed narratives of historical determinism, revealing the fragility of the global political order and the dangers of unchecked nationalism, militarism, and religious extremism. Through its Y-type forking narrative structure, "The Goat Variations" (2015) grants equal ontological significance to actual and speculative histories, urging readers to reconsider the authority of dominant historical accounts. VanderMeer's portrayal of a dystopian America besieged by internal conflict, evangelical terrorism, and catastrophic bombings parallels real-world post-9/11 fears, amplifying the political and cultural anxieties of the time. The story's deconstructive approach challenges the legitimacy of singular historical narratives, particularly those that reinforce power structures and suppress alternative ideologies. By doing so, VanderMeer subverts hegemonic discourses, offering a libertarian critique highlighting the importance of acknowledging diverse historical perspectives. This critique is bolstered by the symbolic imagery of an ossuary and the bio-mass bomb, which

reflect the violence and disintegration of both the fictional and actual worlds. Thus, “The Goat Variations” (2015) is not merely a work of speculative fiction but a profound commentary on historical consciousness. It invites readers to question the political and ideological forces that shape historical memory and challenges the deterministic view of history. By presenting an alternative history of 9/11, VanderMeer fosters a critical reflection on the contingency of history, urging readers to imagine a world where alternative possibilities might have unfolded. Through its counterfactual narrative, the story demonstrates how speculative fiction can serve as a tool for deconstructing hegemonic power structures and expanding our understanding of history and politics.

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