“Pitch the king”: Ben Fountain’s games

Françoise Palleau-Papin
“Pitch the king”: Ben Fountain’s games

Françoise Palleau-Papin

1 Ben Fountain has a way with games. In his fiction, games of all sorts allow access to a vision of truth that could not be reached through other means. In that sense, his games are serious ones, of epistemological importance. They vary greatly in kind, but converge to expose dissimulations and lies, to shed light on the unsaid processes at work in human transactions, and to reveal what is at stake: a serious matter of solidarity against corruption, of charity against greed.

2 In the collection of stories Brief Encounters With Che Guevara and the novel Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, Ben Fountain’s characters play many games: baseball, football, golf or chess; they play war, they play a part, they act out, or they play the players to subvert the rules of the game, while Ben Fountain’s narrative voices play with one another, trying to find a collective voice, or to emphasize the lack of one. Dissembling allows characters and narrators to look for a position of otherness, to enact a part and magically impersonate another, to look upon the self from a collective vantage point—or to lose themselves. From playing games with the powers that be to being possessed in the Haitian Vodou sense, they set high stakes and risk their lives or sanity. Their games pursue a philosophical goal, served by narrative experimentation with the anonymous voices of a community, alive and dead alike. Ultimately, Fountain’s narrative voices play with the reader, in an invitation to enter their game and to play along. Let us now follow their pitch to understand what it is they are playing for so seriously.

Subverting the rules

3 Games have rules that determine the moves and the relationships between the players. Encounters may follow the rules or not, establishing a pattern of understanding or anarchy between the players. In the novel, the rules of “organized ball” are exposed as dulling the faculties to the point of preventing any critical thinking:

It seemed that football must be made to be productive and useful, a net-plus benefit for all mankind, hence the endless motivational yawping about teamwork, sacrifice,
Ben Fountain’s fiction constantly tests the rules in his encounters, to question the assumptions of the game and the players. For example, in the story “Rêve Haïtien,” Mason, a white American chess player, cheats to lose, because of some sense of racial and cultural guilt he feels confronting his black Haitian opponents,—since any chess game is based on the assumption that the players are trying to win the game in a contest that codifies the ancient arts of war. This perverse form of cheating runs counter to a long history of race relations between blacks and whites in Haiti, but also to a history of diplomatic relations between American occupation forces and later, OAS observers, and a Republic struggling to be independent. A better player, an unnamed Haitian mulatto, is so good at chess that Mason is finally asked to play without cheating. When they play for the third time, the warfare of chess seems to follow the rules, as each player seeks to win, without Mason throwing the game: “In the next game Mason focused all his mental powers, but the mulatto had a way of pinning you down with pawns and bishops, then wheeling his knights through the mush of your defense. This game went to thirteen moves before Mason admitted he was beaten.” (Fountain, 2006, 35-36) Mason loses in only thirteen moves, which signifies how comprehensively he has been outplayed. The Haitian man embodies an ideal, heroic figure of Haitian resistance to corruption. He denounces Mason’s previous cheating as an ultimate form of colonial mockery or pity, offering two interpretations successively: “You are mocking us” and “You feel pity for us” (Fountain, 2006, 36). Once they have competed on an equal basis, the winning Haitian player acknowledges Mason’s selective cheating as a test passed successfully, perversely revealing the observer’s integrity, and he enrolls the American OAS observer in his fight for freedom. Thus a well-codified game like chess, once subverted, opens the way for a new game, whose rules are far from defined, because the encounter is closer to real life, to actual politics, and far more dangerous in a literal sense. The ancient game of war turns into actual warfare in the process of subversion.

In real life, the objectivity of OAS observers has often been questioned in Haiti, when they overstepped their mission of observation and got politically involved, reflecting the opinions of the American government in commenting the election results of May 2000. This, along with the blocking of aid to Haiti, may have led to the coup which overthrew Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s administration in 2004. None of the political and economic history is mentioned in the story, published in 2006, other than making Mason an OAS observer, who is clearly aware of the historical backdrop against which the story unfolds. Whether writing about Haiti or with homegrown exoticism like Hollywood, Ben Fountain’s game metaphors are thus a powerful tool to expose corruption. In the story, the men’s honest chess game opens the way to an understanding, by which the American citizen Mason follows his heart rather than his nation’s politics. This changes the game from a non-cooperative one to a cooperative venture. The two men have acknowledged in each other a kindred spirit, a will to change the course of corruption in Haiti. They begin a collaboration and political resistance, which ultimately fails politically, since the Haitian mulatto is murdered, but which nevertheless bears great symbolic import. The games they play have built an ethos of a new kind, collaborative and closer to real-life actions. From a sequential game of chess, in which each player is aware of the other player’s moves, they have progressed to a simultaneous and cooperative game, when one is not aware of the player’s actions, and relies on trust in the other player and hope for
collective success. As the two men become separated in the course of their resistance, their interaction resembles the prisoner’s dilemma, without any clear interaction with any police interrogator. The game gets far more complex as it becomes cooperative and deals with murderous hidden enemies. This change is critical, both ethically and politically, and criticizes American foreign policies and commerce in a very vivid way, in particular when Mason sells Haitian art to American art dealers in Florida to finance the fight for democracy in Haiti. The art dealers are presented as mobsters in white collars, who do not understand the noble rules Mason plays by or his fidelity to his Haitian friend in the separation of the prisoner’s dilemma. The criticism of the mobsters’ game, in which only money rules, is scathing.

If Ben Fountain’s readers recognize the rules of a game of chess (even minimally), and the references to the political situation of Haiti, most of which are provided in the text, they have “established a common ground” and they can play the reading game of “calling into question” the conventions of the text as well as of the games the narrator plays with his implied readers; they can enter in an “interaction” with it, in the words of Wolfgang Iser (Iser, 1978, 66) and decode the game in the writing. Irony is one such example of the game of decoding shared by reader and narrator, which Fountain uses extensively, in the first story of the collection for example, “Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera” and in nearly all the others. Such extensive irony (of situation, of characterization, of utterance, of plot reversal…) reaches over the characters’ heads to the implied reader, and creates a complex set of shared values in a parallel, implicit world of shared references within the story and without. In that sense, irony becomes a poetic process of high creative potential, jointly writing itself out between reader and author in the course of reading.

**Games for criticism and satire**

Unlike Oulipo writers such as Harry Mathews, who may include alphabetical or other constraints in their text without providing the key to the constraints, Ben Fountain does not play covert games with his readers. He lets readers catch a glimpse of the shifts in his narration, and of the ways he pulls the carpet from under the characters’ feet, if only belatedly: retrospectively, we understand the trick of the stories, as in “Rêve Haïtien” we are first asked to suspend disbelief and dive into the Vodou possession, until we are turned around to revise our fascination in the light of the trick in the plot. Fascination was both real and orchestrated, and we were given the key to the reading, with a delay granting room for suspense and increased projective empathy.

Likewise, Fountain’s subliminal network of game metaphors can be followed without deciphering intricate linguistic or alphabetical games, which does not mean they are straightforward. When metaphorically, he pitches to the catcher or reader, as in a throw of baseball, his game displays an intricate understanding of the rules of the social network he criticizes, as in the following scathing description of Hollywood, in the words of Albert, a Hollywood insider:

Hollywood’s a sick, twisted place, I will most certainly grant you that. Corrupt, decadent, full of practicing sociopaths, roughly analogous to, say, the court of Louis the Sun King in seventeenth-century France. Don’t laugh, guys, I’m serious, sometimes it helps to visualize these things in concrete terms. Gobs of wealth floating around, obscene wealth, complete over-the-top excess in every way, and every jerk in town’s got their hustle going, trying to break off their little piece of it. But for that you’ve got to get to the king, because everything goes through the king,
right? But that’s a problem. Huge problem. Access is a problem. You can’t just walk in off the street and pitch the king, but at any given moment there’ll be twenty, thirty people hanging around the court who can get to the king. They’ve got access, influence, they’re tapped in—the key is getting one of those guys attached to your deal. (Fountain, 2012, 63)

The word “key” is used to stress the need to crack a code. In the courtly game of getting access to the King through one of his courtiers, strategy is everything, or the “key” to social and professional access to the higher realms. To “pitch the king” in the metaphor of a baseball throw, one needs access to an intermediate, amorphous and anonymous plural, called successively “twenty, thirty people hanging around the court,” or “those guys.” With the expression “pitch the king” the baseball metaphor doubles up on itself, including other sports, possibly a lateral pass in American football, or a card game in which the pitch would be a powerful card—the king. The whole novel revolves around such parallel or multiple games: the official football game televised across the nation on the occasion of the Thanksgiving Day game hides the subversive game played between the sports mogul, satirically named Norm, and the soldiers of the Bravo squad, in the negotiation of movie rights. The mogul does not play fair and, failing to cheat the soldiers out of their share of profit in direct negotiations, tries to get the army to put pressure on them, to no avail. Gradually, the soldiers, as represented in the duo between private Billy and his sergeant Dime, come to grasp the mysterious “keys” of the social game in which they are only pawns at first. Their gradual understanding of the way the nation is ruled by money and privilege, as in the court of Louis the Sun King of France, builds up a powerful satire. As Sergeant Dime comes from “old wealth,” he provides a critical viewpoint to Billy’s introduction to the world of lavish wealth they are steeped in, in which political power and big business are interconnected and use soldiers solely for their own interests.

Throughout the novel, the nation is exposed scathingly: sports are only a matter of money, the footballers are psychopathic hoodlums, and the entertainment industry, which is represented by Beyoncé and her band Destiny’s Child at halftime, is just another name for pornography. The entire nation is involved in a giant hustling game of some kind or other, in which anything goes. One element of criticism is that no one understands what war means even as they claim to support the Gulf War for patriotic reasons.

The satire gets ferocious when the main focal character, private Billy Lynn, realizes that his hard-earned critical view is not shared by his fellow Americans, because like children, they cannot grow up if pampered at home:

No matter their age or station in life, Billy can’t help but regard his fellow Americans as children. They are bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem, and no amount of lecturing will enlighten them as to the state of pure sin toward which war inclines. He pities them, scorns them, loves them, hates them, these children. These boys and girls. These toddlers, these infants. Americans are children who must go somewhere else to grow up, and sometimes die. (Fountain, 2012, 46-47)

The external narrator uses balanced sentences, with many binary structures and echoing rhythms (with four verbs in quick succession: “He pities them, scorns them, loves them, hates them”), to convey the soldier’s resigned tone, in his weariness. He is marching along in words and thoughts, resigned to the predictability of the military marching rhythm of “These boys and girls. These toddlers, these infants.” Billy, who is still in shock
after having seen his friend and mentor die in battle, has matured far beyond his nineteen years of age. Yet he is not embittered, and can still feel a sense of admiration and wonder when real children play. Aged children who refuse to grow up are seen as a national hindrance to wisdom, while small children who learn about the world through their games are a subject of wonder and delight to the young man, when for example, he watches his nephew during a brief visit to his family:

Based on his highly limited experience with small children, Billy had always regarded the pre-K set as creatures on the level of not-very-interesting pets, thus he was unprepared for the phenomenal variety of his little nephew’s play. Whatever came to hand, the kid devised some form of interaction with it. Flowers, pet and sniff. Dirt, dig. Cyclone fence, rattle and climb, grit links between teeth. Squirrels, harass with feebly launched sticks. “Why?” he kept asking in his sweetly belling voice, its tone as pure as marbles swirled around a crystal pail. Why him wun up the twee? Why him nest up theah? Why him gadder nuts? Why? Why? Why? Why? And Billy answering every question to the best of his ability, as if anything less would disrespect the deep and maybe even divine force that drove his little nephew toward universal knowledge. (Fountain, 2012, 82)

The child’s mimetic pronunciation asserts the voice as authentic. The falsely naïve series of actions with “whatever came to hand” recapitulate the evolution of man through the ages in a short paragraph, while the falsely naïve series of questions “why” lays the ground bare of past mistakes and biases. If one asks the questions from the start, without taking any habit for granted or accepting any gesture as a given, one may begin the world anew, without the weight of history. This new beginning is not presented as the American Destiny but as the birth of a philosophical approach to life devoid of prejudice and preconceptions, through a child’s eyes. There is a whiff of Rousseau’s philosophy here, as it was later developed across the Atlantic in its Transcendentalist form, in particular by Emerson who proposes to rid the eye of preconceptions and biases, like a “transparent eyeball” opening onto the world anew. Like the child in his innocence, asking the right questions and playing with life is the simple game the leading characters play to get a grasp of the world without the lies they have been fed. Ultimately, the purpose of the novel’s satire is education. Billy refuses to let his fellow Americans play the game of war from afar, and wishes they could grow up and learn.

The first step of this education through satire is to learn a new language, because the old buzzwords of propaganda are a set of dangerous lies. Buzzwords are the kind of words that pay lip-service to certain ready-made thoughts that are taken for granted and supposed to establish the basis of the nation. They repeat myths without questioning their distortion of the common mythology in a new context, and they use them for unacknowledged motives. Thus, words do not stand for themselves but for the hidden agendas of the powers that be. In context, during the Gulf War, such words were often heard, and the novel puts them in situation to criticize the ideological short-cuts they imply while seeming to be absolute and unquestionable, such as the word “democracy.” They come to embody ideology because they shunt the long philosophical and historical debates the word “democracy” stems from (for example, is it demagogical, therefore negative, and how does it compare to aristocracy or to monarchy?), precisely because they are set as absolute tenets, supposedly beyond criticism. To counteract them in the novel, the words are exposed as a game of chance, a lotto draw, or the tumble of a washer or dryer, from the very first page: “and the man embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain” (Fountain, 2012, 1). Buzzwords are then set on the page in a way that modifies linear
reading as it imitates the tumbling around in the character’s brain (Fountain, 2012, 2). There are several instances of such words running amok in the novel, as on page 38, which is reproduced here as faithfully as possible from the printed page:

```
terrRr
Eye-rack,
Eaaaar-rock,
Sod’m
freedoms
nina leven,
nina leven,
nina leven
hero
sacrifice,
sook-preewene sacrifice
Bash

values
dih-mock-crub-see
```

Such display changes the way we read the page from a linear, consecutive order which is made almost abstract in its minimalization of the two dimensions of the printed page to a spatial field emphasizing the bi-dimensional extension of the page, much like visual poetry (as in E. E. Cummings’s works) and comics. Spatial figuration and phonic transcriptions draw the attention to the signifier, minimizing the signified, thus changing the concepts attached to signs by usage to something like pre-linguistic sounds, on the verge of mere blabber or mindless echoes. Words are here deprived of their discursive capacity to reason, as sentences disappear and words spin visually when they are scattered against the typographic blanks on the page. They become separate entities, prone to mutations and phonic distortions, as in comic strips. The word “terror” resonates its rumbling Rs without vocalization when it becomes “terrRr”—the better to emphasize the brainwashing from the powers that be that lead a nation to war when enemy attack is not immediate and effective enough to supply sufficient fear. The various pronunciations of the enemy country echo the voices of the President (“Eye-rack”) and of other commentators (“Eaaaar-rock”) in succession. The key buzzword to trigger the fear factor is the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, known through its date of “Nine Eleven” which here becomes “nina leven” in an absurd mockery that makes it sound like a feminine name. The final word exposes the mockery of democracy of it all in cutting up the word into “dih-mock-crub-see.” Buzzwords are cut up to reveal their innate absurdity, their self-cancellation, and they are displayed as buzzwords on a page without the organizing principles of syntax and discursive thinking, because the context in which such words were used precluded critical analysis. The words become magical, and Billy Lynn analyzes how they operate on the speakers who repeat them in a mantra to hypnotize themselves: “in the act of speaking they experience the mighty words”
He understands that the civilians he meets lose themselves in the exhilaration of the vicarious experience:

[...] they lose it when they enter his personal space. They tremble. They breathe in fitful, stinky huffs. Their eyes skitz and quiver with the force of the moment, because here, finally, up close and personal, is the war made flesh, an actual point of contact after all the months and years of reading about the war, watching the war on TV, hearing the war flogged and flacked on talk radio. (Fountain, 2012, 39)

The words of lies and distortions have enacted their magic spell, they have possessed their speakers and listeners. The purveyors of propaganda may well know that their words are lies, but once the lies are set loose, they take on a life of their own, and carry their consequences into the world. The game of propaganda is a dangerous one when it no longer relies on pretense or make-believe, when one is no longer trying things out like a child at play or an actor at work, when words declare war against critical reasoning. The main threat of acting and pretending is that one ends up being the part one was playing; one ends up living the lie.

**Acting, or being acted through: singular or plural roles?**

Private Billy Lynn has learned that to be a master of his demeanor is a form of role-play that empowers him when it answers his audience’s expectations:

He came to the style more or less by instinct, this tense, stoic vein of male Americanism defined by multiple generations of movie and TV actors, which conveniently furnishes him a way of being without having to think about it too much. (Fountain, 2012, 37)

He is conscious of his effect upon others: “people totally eat it up, in fact they go a little out of their heads.” (Fountain, 2012, 37) Freud’s analysis of the army would apply here, as the crowds invest the token soldiers with more than what they are, and project their egos onto the soldiers as in a superego, but the analysis is bypassed, possibly because it is too well-known (Freud, 1959). Freud’s analysis is mainly changed in terms of numbers. The crowd’s fascination no longer transfers the numerous egos into one leader chosen as superego, but disseminates them in a collective trance, by which the collective egos are redistributed equally in the crowd. The surrender of willpower goes from each individual to the many. From an addition of singular egos, the crowd reaches a sense of plural wholeness, but without any dominating figure in its lead. Rather than explain the phenomenon, Fountain chooses to show it, by switching to another form of ecstasy, that of religious possession. In the novel, the expression “mystical transference” (Fountain, 2012, 39) is used to describe a hysterical loss of self very much like the one that occurs in the stories of possession such as “Rêve Haïtien,” “The Good Ones Are Already Taken,” “Bouki and the Cocaine,” or even “Fantasy for Eleven Fingers” (not set in Haiti but in pre-war Vienna).

In “Bouki and the Cocaine,” the main character named Syto is a master at repressing his desires. Unlike him, Syto’s brother Lulu lives very close to his unconscious. When he paints, for example, his inspiration comes from his dreams: “and now he spent most of his days painting the dreams he had at night, making dark, blobby pictures that seemed to rise out of an underwater realm in his head.” (Fountain, 2006, 126) When he feels under pressure, he feels possessed by a god, as if his unconscious bursting forth was the...
mouthpiece of the saint: “He was trying to fight the god coming into his head, but Lulu succumbed so easily to possession—a little drumming could do it, a little dancing and rum, or at times the mere sight of someone else who was possessed.” (Fountain, 2006, 140)

When Syto thus hears his brother Lulu under such a spell, he too feels the effect of magic: “Syto felt the skin along his spine prickle, a hundred tiny needles jabbing to the bone.” (Fountain, 2006, 140) What differs from the classic tales of transference from a crowd to a leader or hero, is that such contagious spells of possession are not vertical, from a crowd to a superego, but horizontal, binding the possessed characters together without any relinquishing of the self to a higher authority but rather, to a collective spirit. This is a change from the binding that comes of a crowd’s hero worship. The men become possessed by the figure of Gédé, a Vodou saint, which means that each man becomes a Gédé figure in the process that binds the people against the authorities. Such collective possession is the highest manifestation of solidarity to fight the powers that be. Even though the origin of the god is a singular spirit, as “Papa Gédé was one of the lwa who’d come with the ancestors from Africa and had sustained them through the bitter times of slavery and beyond” (Fountain, 2006, 131), the Vodou saint enacts a multiplication of Gédé figures acting as so many lords of misrule through the persons of the villagers on a bus. When the corrupt police stop their bus to terrorize them, the villagers turn into more Gédés than the ones who initiate the misrule:

The Gédés danced into the road singing and clacking their teeth, gleefully farting as they went for the officers. Many of Syto’s fellow passengers were possessed at once, lurching about until they were caught by their neighbors, then coming to with saucered eyes and sucking cheeks to exchange ritual greetings with their fellow Gédés, vigorously shaking both hands and twirling around, blowing mists of pepper-rum in one another’s face. Soon the road was filled with leering, chanting Gédés, most of them strutting about in fashions from the nineteenth century. (Fountain, 2006, 143)

The game of misrule they play has serious consequences, as it deflects police violence and establishes the rule of the common people, if only momentarily. The nineteenth-century garb of their costumes taps into the roots of Haitian history, going back to Haitian independence from colonialism early in that century. After the possession has run its full course, we discover that the villagers disguised as Gédés had cocaine sewn in invisible pouches in their garments by the village wives. The smugglers were dressed as Gédés, while the rest of the bus passengers entered the fray of possession and added to the diversion. The whole village has thus managed to smuggle away the Colombian drugs Lulu and Syto had found by chance in a cove while they were fishing, and which the police wanted only to enrich themselves: “Every man had smuggled eight to ten kilos in his clothes: Gédé’s extravagant costume had carried the weight, and while possession had not been part of the plan, the men were elated to learn that the god had been in their heads.” (Fountain, 2006, 145) This reverses hierarchy and drug trafficking between states, as the profits now go to poor villagers who are non-entities for the drug lords of Columbia, Haiti and the U.S.A. The Gédé is multiplied in as many anonymous villagers, and fights the tyrants in the person of the chief of police and his men. Acting out a mad Gédé spirit pageant with full costume has turned into a collective experience of solidarity and possession which has united the people not so much with a god as with themselves.

Ben Fountain thus manages to address Vodou practices and beliefs as narrative functions. Gédé possession “on All Hallows’ Eve” (Fountain, 2006, 140) turns into a gigantic expression of the first person plural, all being possessed in a joint plural, emphasizing
selflessness and the power of union amongst the anonymous people. This is akin to
the Jamaican expression of "i-an-i," from a neighboring Caribbean island, even though Ben
Fountain’s story is set in Haiti. Adrian Anthony McFarlane has analyzed the function of
the first-person plural locution “i-an-i” in Jamaican English as interrelated with the
pronoun I which governs the imperative:

The power of the I lies in its ability to command the self; its reflexiveness is its
strength, and its purpose is to create a new identity and meaning for the speaker.
Rastas take instructions from no one outside of themselves—a profile that often
causes confrontation with law-enforcement officials. All commands come from
within [...]. So even though it sounds odd to have the imperative in the first person,
it makes “Rasta sense” to be directed by the I, buttressed by i-an-i.” (McFarlane,
1998, 108)

22 The I is “buttressed by I-an-I” to avoid solipsism and tyranny, and to strengthen the first
person singular with group-backing, as in the story “Bouki and the Cocaine.” Lulu is in
touch with his dreams, which bring him closer to the dead and to Vodou saints, a
collective spiritual energy from which he taps his strength after a brutal beating from the
police; Syto turns to the community of villagers during the Gédé misrule on All Hallows’
Eve because he is being harassed by the authorities to the point of risking his sanity:
“they’re trying to get inside your head. They’re trying to drive you nuts.” (Fountain, 2006,
138) In return, the profits of the drug smuggling outside of the country is equally shared
by the villagers: “Everyone in Trois Pins has a new house now, concrete-block structures
with running water and stout zinc roofs that purr in the rain.” (Fountain, 2006, 145) The
“purring” of the “stout zinc roof” may be heard as an animal sound of collective
satisfaction in the village of poor fishermen fishing in overfished waters. The voices of
the lwa or saints have spoken through Lulu and Syto, and through the mouths of the
entire village as they acted out their frenzied possession. The Vodou saints rest once
justice has been done by the people, echoing Toussaint Louverture’s revolution, and they
may express their presence through the “purring” of the roofs. Thus in this story, the
collective first person is a numerous plural indeed, encompassing the living and the dead,
and a sense of history speaking through time to the present.

23 Even when collective voices come from antagonists, they still manage to invade a
character’s unconscious, and he then feels the prey of evil eyes. When Syto becomes the
object of a file in the C.I.A. archives, the popular belief that he suffers from “eyes” is
turned into a narrative issue of ventriloquy: “And while he has no knowledge of the
classified files in Langley, Virginia, concerning the drug-running franchise of one “Cito
Charle” (the incorrect, homophonic spelling of Syto’s name by the Agency), “Syto
nevertheless suffers sometimes from “eyes,” the general fretfulness and anxious feelings
you get when too many people are talking about you.” (Fountain, 2006, 146) To be spoken
about is to be spoken through, and the wrong spelling of a name does not diminish the
magic, because the oral spell does not follow any written script. The voices of antagonists
materialize in the consciousness of the character as eye pain; they speak through his
body. Possession and the spells of sorcerers are not far from ventriloquy, but use the
entire body to convey their message, not just the voice, much as actors give life to their
lines through their physical presence. This humorous remark about the C.I.A., implicitly
portrayed as a bunch of evil sorcerers casting Vodou spells on a benevolent Haitian
fisherman, serves as a reminder that Vodou possession is a risky business which may
easily be reversed, although in this instance the villagers have played a prank on the
authorities and for once won the game.
Playing the player

24 The story “The Lion’s Mouth” provides an example of a double play, taking the possession game one step further. When the focal character, a young woman named Jill, who works for an NGO, decides to smuggle some illegal diamonds (or “blood diamonds” from mobsters) to finance her charity, she plays the player and gets caught in her double game. At first, she decides to play the bad girl or trafficker on the way to a noble end, but in the course of the adventure, decides to revert to being a good girl in a fit of morality that sounds very much like a fit of madness, and befuddles all rules. She encounters Dutch nuns who are to be evacuated because the rebels have conquered their village. This would leave the insane patients, who were cared for by the nuns, in the hands of ruthless torturers. Jill decides to pay the rebels with the blood diamonds she smuggled under the cover of her NGO protection, and in so doing, not only loses the profit for her association, but also her lover’s financial support, since he is the main diamond trafficker. She also ends up burdened with more people than she can support. So she is back to the beginning, when she was desperate to fund her cooperative venture for handicapped women, only more desperate than before, burdened with the prospect of destitute handicapped women and helpless lunatics without any asylum to put them in, in an inextricable mess of guilt and insanity, having lost perspective of what goal she claimed for her own in the process.

25 The game was shown as reversible from the start, when she fell in love with the blood diamond trafficker Starkey. In a drunken moment, she decides to use her NGO as a cover to smuggle blood diamonds and save her cooperative from financial disaster; then when the unexpected occurs, she plays the player and gives away the blood diamonds to save lunatics from torture. Her motivation is that she imagines what would happen if she did not save the mad, as a vision of hell, of the kind one sees in Brueghel’s paintings: “Here it would be a pure Brueghel vision of hell, cretins and lunatics left in the care of compulsive torturers.” (Fountain, 2006, 176) Yet in saving the lunatics, on the spur of the moment, what she achieves is another Brueghel vision of hell amplified by the rebels. In an ironic turn: “The rebels bought into the spirit of the thing, buzzing up and down the line in their junkheap technicals and yowling like angels of the apocalypse, singing songs, urging the walkers on, doing note-perfect imitations of the lunatics.” (Fountain, 2006, 180) She could only lose once she forfeited the rules, and she chose to double the ante and made her loss all the greater. This tends to show that ethics and accounting do not work hand in hand. The moral decision Jill makes, to save the lunatics from torture and death with blood diamonds, does not cancel the taint of the diamonds. The story does not moralize about the diamonds as if they were cursed. However, if we follow the logic that one right action cannot right a wrong, this describes the main character as a masochistic woman with little sense of self-preservation. She cannot look after herself, feels conflicted and disaffected in her love life and in her mission, and finds the burden of caring for others overwhelming. When she decides to save the cooperative at all costs, the gamble fails when she doubles the stakes. The description of the rebels mimicking the lunatics portrays the upheaval of a world without rules other than mimicry and the madness of reflexivity. The rebels who are the main danger, and threaten to kill the lunatics, are actually urging the walkers on; however, their aping and their “doing note-perfect imitations” does not rely on sympathy but on a dangerous experience of fascination: it is
an urge to dive into madness, to let go of all control, of all ethics. The madness of reflexivity exposes the motivations of pity and compassion by taking the process of seeing the self as another to the extreme. This echoes the novel *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, when the main character understands the danger of adapting to the war as a form of reflexivity, which he compares to playing a CD on “skip-repeat”:

> He gets so tired of living with the daily beat-down of it, not just the normal animal fear of pain and death but the uniquely human fear of fear itself like a CD stuck on skip-repeat, an ever-narrowing self-referential loop that may well be a form of madness. (Fountain, 2012, 115)

In the loop of reflexivity, the character loses perspective and experiences things without ethical judgment, just as the narrative registers a switch from the third to the first person: “And so you start to sense the humanity even in feelings of hate.” (Fountain, 2012, 115) The distance of the third person has been bridged into an anonymous, collective second person that includes the reader in the experience of the soldier. This intricate metaphor around the loop figure gets developed in Billy’s inner thoughts “while he makes small talk about the war” (Fountain, 2012, 115). He then feels vampirized by the inane repetitions of buzz words devoid of meaning and deformed to absurdity by emphasis and popular pronunciation, yet again: “Ire Christian values. Billy can feel his head emptying out.” (Fountain, 2012, 116, emphasis his) The madness is complete when a local pundit wishes for a victory at the Thanksgiving Day game in honor of the soldiers, as if he owned the game: “We’ll try to give you a win today.” (Fountain, 2012, 117) The novel’s plot proves him wrong, as the Dallas Cowboys lose the game by a wide margin. As already stated, in the novel the actual players are not the ones on the football field but the moneymakers off the field. Eventually, the soldiers thus manage to play such players when they refuse to cooperate, and they emerge as the true winners. Their game is a vital one, as they try to escape the “emptying out” that big business operates on their brains and on their lives, and to reach some sense of selfhood outside the loop of self-reflexive war madness and meaningless patriotism.

**Games as epistemological tools**

In the stories and in the novel, games paradoxically allow access to a sense of truth that had escaped the characters at first. Once they learn to crack the rules of games they did not grasp, they understand their world and their place in it without the blinds they had once put over their eyes. In the story “Asian Tiger,” the professional American golfer Sonny is used as a ploy in Myanmar (Burma) to facilitate illicit transactions between corrupt generals and mobsters. When he understands the extent of the corruption, and the brutality of the scam he took part in and which he refused to contemplate, he is finally unnerved. This is expressed in golf terms, as a desultory gesture his friend makes at the end of the story: “Sonny walked into the pro shop with the dazed air of a man trying to remember where he’d left his pants. Tommy Ng was spinning a ball on the face of a sand wedge, a zen thing he could do for hours.” (Fountain, 2006, 116) The ball goes nowhere, spinning on its own meaningfulness, and the mention of zen serenity is only ironic. Likewise, in spite of his excelling at golf, Sonny’s trajectory is going in circles, because he cannot escape the game in which the mobsters have entrapped him. Like the dead in the circles of Dante’s hell, he lost all hope when he entered: “Like he wasn’t allowed to hope.” (Fountain, 2006, 117) Corruption goes on forever, as the image of the generals suggests: “Outside it had started raining again. Back in the locker room the
generals were playing cards.” (Fountain, 2006, 117) This recurrent image of the rain, and the generals playing placidly, conveys the pathos of Sonny’s despair without any expression of grief. It functions as a signal of evil. The game of golf, at which he excels, has not taught Sonny to escape the lure of corruption; however, the mobsters’ game into which he was conned has taught him to see the truth, in spite of his feeble denial: “Sonny stared at the rain and decided he would never understand anything.” (Fountain, 2006, 117) This sentence is the conclusion and summarizes his bitter enlightenment, no matter how negatively. The player has finally understood what game he was playing, and the truth hurts.

Such an embedding of games is a pattern in Ben Fountain’s plots. A game hides another game, and the covert one has rules that are more difficult to master because the parameters are not revealed, leaving more room for uncertainty. Once discovered, the covert game provides epistemological access to a higher form of knowledge or self-knowledge. What seems farther from the truth than a game, with its codified set of rules and conventions? Yet in Fountain’s fiction, games help disclose something of the intricacies of life, in a series of paradoxical reversals such as the ones between the “real” war and the “fake” news footage in the novel:

Nothing looks so real as a fake, apparently, though ever since seeing the footage for himself Billy has puzzled over the fact that it doesn’t look like any battle he was ever in. Therefore you have the real that looks fake twice over, the real that looks so real it looks fake and the real that looks nothing like the real and thus fake, so maybe you do need all of Hollywood’s craft and guile to bring it back to the real. (Fountain, 2012, 289)

With such a programmatic series of reversals, it comes as no surprise that the novel sets out to turn a dead language into motion, tumbling the patriotic buzzwords of the Gulf War into a distorted display to have them fall upon themselves and express other ideas than the hackneyed ones too often rehashed on news footages. The novel also reactivates dead phrases as in the expression: “Bravo is roasted, toasted, and ready to pop, or maybe already popping in the case of Sykes, who sits himself down on the bottom step and weeps sparklers of racy little hopeless tears.” (Fountain, 2012, 241) The language of the novel works on sexual stereotypes to reveal social clichés, such as the one that turns a group of soldiers into passive tools for show-business, to denounce the intermingling of politics and big business that they do not control. From the beginning, a neologism stigmatizes their plight as a demeaning betrayal, a form of prostitution to the gods of television and Fox News with the expression “the pussification of Bravo” (Fountain, 2012, 22) Another word-forging concatenation expresses a similar idea when they are submitted to the choreography of Destiny’s Child as passive audience, “standing at attention” while feeling they are being “pole-danced” to: “The entire stage has become a blowup of foreplay aerobics, rocket thrusting, shadow humping, knurling hips and ass, here on the second tier the dancers are twurking Bravo and not a damn thing you can do except stand at attention and get pole-danced in front of forty million people.” (Fountain, 2012, 239) The word “knurl” is ancient, while “twurk” is such recent slang that it is not referenced in slang dictionaries on paper, but in the online, collaborative Urban Dictionary as meaning to rub or to grind in dance-like motions in an erotically charged manner (also spelled twirk or twerk). This gives an example of how Fountain plays with language, using its onomatopoeic quality, its flexibility, juxtaposing old usage to newly coined words.
The most striking expression of Fountain’s dismantling of old habits in language and thought is the way he playfully renders the Star-Spangled Banner at the beginning of the Thanksgiving Day game, as a “ritual torturing of a difficult song.” (Fountain, 2012, 203). Words spread out on the page, to be read from top left to bottom right, or from lower left to upper right, disrupting the conventions of reading. Vowels expand as if mimicking the actual singing, in which private Billy Lynn hears a love song celebrating his own newly found love for the cheerleader he’s just met. Finally, after women converge to speak to him and touch him in a moment of collective hysteria, Billy Lynn wonders: “Are we talking the same language here?” (Fountain, 2012, 207) The playful use of language points to the serious misunderstandings between people who do not live in the same world, as when Billy says “I feel full” (Fountain, 2012, 207), which may be understood as the pun “fool”, just as another soldier is said to be “actin’ a fool?” on the following page (Fountain, 2012, 208). Distorting the national anthem and language is a serious game, from which one does not escape unscathed. The characters may not be ready for the linguistic jumbling of the narrative voice, whose game gets played for the implied reader, in a parallel to the Thanksgiving Day game. Ben Fountain offers an echoing chamber of critical counter-game to the actual sports event, whose dithyrambic description can be read metafictionally: “Football’s strategic, it’s got tactics, it’s a thinking man’s game in addition to being goddamn poetry in motion. But you’re obviously too much of a dumbfuck to appreciate that.” (Fountain, 2012, 210) Sergeant Dime sounds epic (and insulting) when he explains his view of football to a Mexican-American soldier who prefers soccer. The over-the-top praise echoes the plot, as the strategy of the game is eclipsed by the strategy of the stadium owner to swindle the soldiers out of their share of movie rights, just as the narrative voice has another strategy in exposing the intermingling of sports, business, war and media coverage by the likes of Fox News. In so doing, Fountain has tied up the game he wants to play with his reader, one of deciphering meaning, joining up against mass manipulation, and playing the metafictional game.

According to William Gass, metafiction means producing fiction that may in turn produce further fictions. Ultimately, the game Fountain pitches to his “king” of a reader is the capacity to generate one’s own fictions, following the decoding game displayed in the novel and in the stories. The game of fiction goes on, because the deciphering of narrative games such as irony, ventriloquy and metaphors of play has involved the reader’s active participation, without which the writing would not be complete. Furthermore, Fountain’s narratives invite the reader to further the fiction, since many of his stories end on an invitation to a dream on new premises. At the end of “Rêve Haïtien,” Mason plays the drum in which he has hidden the money he obtained to support the fight for freedom in Haiti: “The money was there, all that latent power stuffed inside the shaft—something waiting to be born, something sleeping. He cradled the unformed dream in his hands and wondered who to give it to.” (Fountain, 2006, 51) The metaphor of pregnancy adds potential to the fiction to be continued. At the end of “The Good Ones are Already Taken,” the Caucasian American character Melissa opens up a wealth of speculations about the Vodou magic of her husband and of any love relationship when she is waiting for sleep: “Melissa kissed her husband’s shoulder, closed her eyes, and waited for sleep.” (Fountain, 2006, 84) This sentence is not conclusive, after the epistemological quest that her reflections have opened, as she pondered: “Voodoo, desire, oversexed spirits, drams channeling information like a video stream—if these were real, then the business of who we were transpired mostly in the air around us.”
(Fountain, 2006, 84) At the end of “Bouki and the Cocaine,” Syto imagines meeting his dead daughter and another fiction begins, that of a life she would have lived with her family, had she not died because of the political corruption and the embargo on drugs imposed on Haiti: “The last time Marie-Lucie appeared in his dreams, she was fourteen or fifteen, a trim, pretty girl wearing loafers and the plaid uniform of the École Supérieure. She had books and a looseleaf binder in her arms, and she smiled at Syto as she entered the yard.” (Fountain, 2006, 146) The dialogue that takes place is cut short, to be continued by other voices.

The stories do not end on a single voice, but on a call for cooperation to further the quest for justice, commitment, or truth that the narrations have initiated. They end on the suggestion of a further development, even when they suggest an ironic dead end, as in “The Lion’s Mouth.” In the last sentence of the story, a character addresses Jill, who has no plan to look after the insane people she has rescued: “We need to know what to do with these people now.” (Fountain, 2006, 182)

In the novel, what the sergeant does not emphasize is the degree of cooperation in the game his squad plays against the sports and business pundits off field. His soldiers play cooperatively and win the game against the highest bidders in the covert competition for power that covers a broader range of the nation’s politics than football only. If the sergeant does not develop this cooperation, the whole orchestration of the novel does, ironically turning the soldiers’ rough-and-tumble games with one another into a one-minded group action powerfully set against the corrupt game managers they fight. Likewise, the narrator’s invitation to the reader to play along with him makes for a rewarding game for the reader, as we recognize the ironical twists and turns in the plot.

Finally, the main narrative game in the stories and in the novel consists in trying to find a collective voice for a reliable ethical stance. In spite of the conventional, artificial rules of games, and in spite of the way some games are rigged, in Ben Fountain’s fiction they provide an incentive to set out on a quest for the truth, under the control of a genuine collective voice, not one manipulated by coercion or self-blinding, by the media or the lies of any propaganda.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The spelling corresponds to the October 2012 subject heading modification by the Library of Congress, which changed from the previous “voodooism” to “Vodou” in response to a petition by scholars in connection with KOSANBA, a scholarly association for the study of Haitian Vodou based at University of California Santa Barbara; source: http://www.research.ucsb.edu/cbs/projects/haiti/kosanba/ (page consulted Feb. 5, 2013)

2. The Organization of American States.


4. For the prisoner’s dilemma, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York, Basic Books, 1984, revised edition 2006. It is the most studied model in game theory, and its solution the simplest. Two prisoners are separated and offered a deal if they tell on the other and incriminate the other further to reduce their own jail time. Should they take the deal? What are the risks, without knowing what the other will decide?


8. “There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don’t mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the work of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions” (Gass, 1971, 24-25).

9. Ben Fountain’s stories were published long before the spelling of the subject heading was changed by the Library of Congress.
ABSTRACTS

In his stories and his novel, Ben Fountain uses games as an epistemological tool. Games allow him to subvert the cultural codes, his satire becoming a political critique of the nation and of US foreign policy, and to operate a fusion of the characters’ voices, as he looks for a collective or transpersonal expression. He ultimately plays with his readers, inviting them to be active recipients and discoverers.

Dans ses nouvelles et son roman, Ben Fountain utilise le jeu comme un outil épistémologique. Le jeu permet la subversion des codes, la satire allant jusqu’à la critique de la nation et de la politique étrangère américaine, et il opère la fusion des voix des personnages, à la recherche d’une expression collective ou transpersonnelle. Il met en place un jeu avec les lecteurs, une invitation à une réception active et à une découverte.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Ben Fountain, théorie du jeu, narratologie, satire, vaudou, politique étrangère, personnage transpersonnel, théorie de la réception.
Keywords: game theory, narratology, Vodou, foreign policy, transpersonal characterization, reader response.

AUTHOR

FRANÇOISE PALLEAU-PAPIN

Université Paris 13-Sorbonne Paris Cité