"In the shadows":
David Foster Wallace and multicultural America

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for Ezra and dad, my fallen men

We need to think about the deposits and the legacies of the things that have shaped us as a set of human beings in the States, and living in America. If we can get along without having to face difficult questions, we tend to do that. But there is a real way in which history works in the present: if you don't answer the difficult questions of the past, then they will come back again and grab you by the throat.
– Anthony Bogues

One might begin to question whether postmodernist fiction—that too-slippery category—has been marked from the outset by its escape from considerations of the social uses and misuses of power with regard to human difference, and its return instead to the universalized cultural problems of contemporary whiteness, maleness, Americanness.
– Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Difference is no lover; it lives and dies dancing on the skins of things.
– David Foster Wallace

Contents

Abstract

This dissertation reads David Foster Wallace's literary output against the complicated history of identity politics and multiculturalism in America. Wallace's career coincides with the institutionalisation of second-wave feminism in the 1980s (including at his own university, Amherst College), the turn towards multicultural education and alternative literary canons in the 1990s, and the rising tide of nationalism and right-wing patriotism after 9/11. I depart from the universalist, ahistorical, post-racial framework of traditional Wallace scholarship to consider the literary and rhetorical strategies that Wallace employs as he tries to make a name for himself and remain relevant in a time of rapid social change, shifting reader demand, and growing hostility towards the elite postmodernist style in which he was trained. I argue that Wallace's fiction is marked not so much by an effort to adapt the writing to be more multicultural, race-conscious, feminist, and so on, but rather by an effort to *signal* that the author is aware of multiculturalism, feminism, and race matters, and that he is on the winning side of the ongoing culture war.

Looking at *The Broom of the System*, I highlight the negotiation that takes place in the book between Wallace's desire to appear as the erudite and masterful postmodernist, versed in the tenets of metafiction and poststructuralism, and his desire to appear as the sensitive white male, attuned to an increasingly politicised female readership. In *Infinite Jest*, I examine Wallace's attempt to almost "out-traumatise" black women's writing of the 1990s by delivering a sprawling anthology of white hardship and anguish (grounded mainly in upper-middle-class experience). In *The Pale King* and Wallace's other post-9/11 writing, I show how the author wraps his unmistakably conservative vision of America and American masculinity in socially liberal, progressive-sounding discourse. The postscript offers a brief reflection on the significance of Wallace's work in the age of a Donald Trump presidency, and suggests that Wallace, had he lived to witness the 2016 election, might not have been as unequivocal in his rejection of Trump as his admirers might assume.

Preface
Communing with the past

In an essay entitled "Communing with the Past", about the process of writing his first book, Raúl Coronado explains his use of the first person:

> I use the blatantly autobiographical "I" because in many ways my former colleague, Eric Slauter, is right in recognizing that "the origins of [my] project are deep and personal." I'd like to make that observation more explicit, not to dwell on the self but to flesh out the unabashedly humanistic aspects of my work that connect the personal to the social, the immanent to the transcendent, to examine those fleeting moments of fullness. After all, as Eric's and my former adviser once noted, "Every dissertation is an autobiography." And so, too, every book.[1]

Following Coronado, I open this dissertation with an account of its "origins", which is an account of my scholastic journey from South Africa to America and back again, and the way this movement shaped my reading of David Foster Wallace, who has followed me from coast to coast. In a dissertation that brings out the political and historical entanglements of Wallace's work, foregrounding the specificity and contingency of my own project seems appropriate. The purpose is not to "dwell on the self", as Coronado mentions, but to "connect the personal to the social", hinting at the broader ripples and aspirations of this "deep and personal" project.

In a letter to me earlier this year, a close friend from the US wrote that she was rereading Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which she first read when we were freshmen together at college. Her comments gave me pause: "Re-reading Kundera, and it's like, at 19, I hardly paid attention to the political dimensions of the book, to place, to the Russian invasion, which is really the whole of the book in many ways. At 19, I was at Harvard and not in the world. The world was a place to study, not live." "The book," she writes, "as it lived in my reading memory, was a love story, set vaguely in Eastern Europe, and the author occasionally spoke directly to the reader, which was a literary device I had never encountered, and which impressed upon me then a sense of disruptive authenticity." Then, responding to something I had said in a previous letter about the political situation in South Africa, she concludes: "I basically understood that you were from a complicated place, but with my general optimism about progress in the world I thought all was fine now. Which is what I thought about America, too." My friend's ten-year transition from self-assured optimism to humble uncertainty, from romantic, universalist reading to embodied, political reading, affirmed the trajectory of my own reading and thinking practices over the same period. Kundera's postmodernist innovations and authorial "authenticity" had overshadowed the political significance of his work in my friend's mind, and Wallace's writing style had affected me in a similar way. As I suggest in this dissertation, it continues to affect the direction of Wallace studies as a whole, which has largely failed to unearth the political layers of the author's work.

[1] Raúl Coronado, "Communing with the Past", *PMLA* 131, no. 3 (2016): 765–766.

When I was 19, I was somewhat less optimistic about the world than my friend, having spent my teenage years buried in newspapers and consumed by an unrelenting, nameless guilt. But, like my friend, I lacked the historical awareness to contextualise what I was seeing in the news and on every street corner in Cape Town, where I lived. I had studied apartheid with great seriousness, but I thought that with Mandela and 1994 and the Rainbow Nation we were past it. I concluded that some countries had poverty, AIDS, famine, war, and tsunamis, and others were free of these things, and that the imbalance between the two groups was simply the result of a great and arbitrary misfortune. I believed, impassionedly, that the "First World" countries should be benevolent enough to share their abundant resources with the broken ones, just as people like me who felt badly about the way things were should "give back" and become humanitarians. I did not think much about how these national resources had been acquired, or about what exactly I would be "giving back", and why, and to whom. I knew, somehow, that capitalism was the villain in this story, but how it had snaked its way across the world was still unknown to me. Although 1652 had been etched in my mind since the early years of primary school, I could not seem to see the stains of the past on the landscape, what with all the trimmings of the modern city. I also remember there being a vaguely celebratory tone surrounding this date at my school. (Of course, as I would later discover, my and my schoolmates' detachment from the ongoing legacies of the past was precisely the basis of our privilege.)

When I entered my twenties, I was several thousand miles away from South Africa at a prestigious university in America—in my worldview of the time, a distinct mark of progress. There, I found permission to assuage my crushing guilt about the world and my unearned privilege in Nietzsche and the other European existentialists, whom I studied obsessively for four years. Suffering, in the existential framework, was the universal human condition: I was part of it, not outside of it. Guilt, the moral imperative, and the humanitarian impulse, meanwhile, were leftovers of religious and metaphysical dogma. I was free to ignore their pull and decide for myself which rules to live by. My college years were primarily about my own suffering. I floated along on a nihilistic cloud for much of the time, far from home, ill at ease within American college culture, empty of the earlier sense of messianic purpose, processing a devastating loss for the first time, and so on. No doubt a necessary phase in my personal development, it nonetheless contained certain ruptures and disjunctures that I had to work hard to elide. There were Nietzsche's bizarre claims about women ("You go to women? Do not forget the whip!"),[2] which I sometimes laughed off as something between poetry and madness, and sometimes internalised as true. There were the dozens of homeless people living and sleeping in Harvard Square, reminders that our bubble of intense introspection and philosophical searching ended at the gates of our hallowed Yard.

It is into this psychic atmosphere (of blind spots, strong convictions, half-truths) that Wallace stepped. I received *Infinite Jest* from another college friend in 2010, as a graduation gift. I read the book over the subsequent months-long vacation, and through the prism of my college gloom. Looking back, I am embarrassed to realise that it is possibly the only contemporary American novel I read as an undergraduate, but this reading history means that Wallace had a monopoly on my understanding of the country and its "postmodern" moment. It was easy for me

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parks (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 58.

to believe that the gravest difficulties facing America were rampant consumerism, addiction to entertainment and forms of escape, the unhealthy pressure on kids to succeed, and the intense loneliness and isolation caused by these forces. After all, in the bubbled version of America I had spent the last four years in, these were the difficulties I had come closest to. To see them described, in Wallace's work, as part of a general postmodern, postindustrial malaise afflicting the nation at large (and everyone in it) made sense to me: why not? It was easy enough, too, to apply this view of America, with its crisis of technology and late capitalism, to the rest of the "developed" world, and to my own Europeanised version of South African reality. It was easy to believe that the millennial malaise the author was describing was universal—in the same way that the existentialists' *ennui* seemed universal to me. Like many other first-time readers, though, I was most excited by Wallace's tentative ethics of empathy and connection, which I systematised into something coherent to live by. I took the novel with me to England and wrote a Master's thesis about it there, receiving no significant challenge to any of these assumptions.

So enamoured was I of Wallace that when I returned to South Africa in 2013 I enrolled at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to do PhD research on his work. My proposed topic was Wallace's relationship with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language: a largely formalist reading, technical and politically neutral. Some months into my first year of research, I received an email announcement from a fellow postgraduate student in the English Department:

> Nick Shepherd, of the Centre for African Studies, has proposed a reading group on Decolonial Theory—the analytic materials of which will be super interesting to anyone thinking through issues like power, coloniality, modernity, Marxism, world-systems theory, Eurocentrism, racism, postcolonialism, Occidentalism, epistemology, etc. etc.[3]

I deleted the email. I was not thinking through any of these issues; I was thinking about Wallace, Wittgenstein, and language. About five minutes later, I went fishing through my Trash folder to find the email, and I signed up for the reading group. The terms I had read in the announcement seemed weighty and urgent to me, although I did not yet fully understand them. Perhaps I was already registering on an unconscious or bodily level the shock of being back in South Africa after seven years away in an Ivy–Oxbridge cocoon. Every piece of interesting public commentary circulating in the country at that moment, like every encounter in a public space (the park, the street, the supermarket), had the effect of politicising my privilege and relativising the existential *ennui* I had clung to and built an intellectual identity around while overseas. Perhaps, too, I was already registering the very particular strangeness of being at the University of Cape Town, about which there was something unmistakably eerie that I could not name.

Reading the work of the Latin American decolonial thinkers over the next year or so (Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Sylvia Wynter, Ramón Grosfoguel) was a turning point—a "moment of realisation", as Anthony Bogues calls such events.[4] It gave me, for the first time, a critical historical framework that connected apartheid racism to colonialism,

[3] Kavish Chetty, group email communication, 1 August 2013.
[4] Anthony Bogues, keynote address, "Towards an Archive of Freedom: Why Now?", symposium hosted by the Centre for Curating the Archive, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, 28–29 October 2015.

colonialism to modernity, capitalism, and Christianity, colonialism in Africa to the conquest of other parts of the world, and, most importantly, highlighted the persistence of "coloniality" or colonial power structures (cultural, sexual, spiritual, economic, epistemic) long after the dismantling of colonial administrations.[5] Immediately, my personal history became implicated in this framework. My Judeo-Spanish ancestors (Sephardim) had been exiled from Spain as part of the "limpieza de sangre" (purity of blood) campaign in 1492, the same year Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic and "discovered" the Americas, under the patronage of the same Catholic Monarchs of Spain who had decreed the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, and who quickly expanded their campaign of racial cleansing to the indigenous populations of "New Spain".[6] After a long period of exile on the Greek island of Rhodes, my great-grandparents sought shelter from economic depression and the growing tide of European anti-Semitism in the DRC (then the Belgian Congo). There, they suddenly found themselves on the opposite side of the colonial divide, with their skin colour and European origins affording them access to cheap labour, domestic servants, and full citizenship rights (despite their cultural alienation from the other white settlers). In 1974, after Mobutu Sese Seko implemented an effective ban on foreign-owned business, as part of his decolonisation ("Zairianisation") campaign,[7] my grandparents and my mother fled to the "safety" of apartheid Cape Town. I was born thirteen years later. The colonial story was my story, then, as it is the story of most human subjects in the modern world. I began to apprehend the ways in which my personal identity intersected with colonialism, as a Sephardi Jew but also as a white South African whose parents and grandparents had benefitted from apartheid. I began to apprehend, too, my family's troubled relationship with racism, and the way centuries of anti-Semitic racism and persecution had gradually given way, through a long period of immersion in colonial Africa, to the anti-black racism that is the norm among white South Africans of a certain generation and culture.[8]

Just as the reading group forced me into an encounter with my personal embeddedness within colonialism, so it forced all of us in the group to come to terms with the coloniality of the institution we were studying at. There was the very fact of its being an institution in the first place, with knowledge rationalised into highly regimented and hermetic "disciplines", skewed towards European culture, and produced in English, in line with Enlightenment conceptions of truth and progress.[9] Then there was the built environment of the place itself: the way colonial symbols

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[5] See Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms", *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (2007): 211–223.

[6] See Jerome Friedman, "Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 1 (1987): 3–30; María Elena Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza De Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479–520.

[7] Michael G Schatzberg, "The State and the Economy: The 'Radicalization of the Revolution' in Mobutu's Zaire", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1980): 240–241.

[8] I think here of Fanon's words about racism as a cultural norm: "The racist in a culture with racism is therefore normal". See Franz Fanon, "Racism and Culture", speech delivered at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, Paris, September 1956, http://tamilnation.co/ideology/racism.htm. For an account of the complex racial position of the South African Jewish population, see Sally Frankental and Milton Shain, "Accommodation, Apathy and Activism: Jewish Political Behaviour in South Africa", *Jewish Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1993): 5–12.

[9] Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 1–23.

(statues, place-names, decorative art) crowded the landscape; the way the campus towered over the rest of Cape Town, inviting students to climb its gruelling steps to Jameson Hall and erudition, then look down at the Cape Flats and enjoy a giddy sense of elevation over the underclass.[10] When the Rhodes Must Fall (#RhodesMustFall) and Fees Must Fall (#FeesMustFall) movements burst onto the scene in 2015, the structural imbalances of the university became much harder for the administration to camouflage as progress.[11] The protesting students framed these imbalances in specifically colonial–decolonial terms, rather than in the more comfortable apartheid–transformation terms that had allowed the university to keep its overall institutional culture intact for the twenty or so years since 1994, with minor nominal adjustments made here and there.[12] While not without its problems,[13] the protest movement had succeeding in "changing the terms of the conversation", to use Walter Mignolo's phrase, and the university had entered a new phase in its history.[14]

Within the English Department where I was based, the situation was tense. For decades, the syllabus for the introductory first-year course had remained essentially unchanged: students began with Shakespeare, Austen, Eliot, and Conrad as their "core" texts, and in the second semester contemporary authors were added. When I first starting teaching in 2013, the second-semester list featured (I believe for the first time) a contemporary South African text and a contemporary Nigerian text. But a few members of the faculty began proposing a much deeper shift in the way English was presented, suggesting that the old "chronology" approach be replaced with a loose selection of texts that foster "critical literacy" and that are, above all, accessible to a diverse student body. The shift would be away from "English" literature and towards world literature and texts in translation (which might include British texts, but not necessarily).[15] The suggestion generated a fair amount of resistance in the department. Today, though, in 2017, English "101" at UCT begins with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, and Makhosazana Xaba's queer retelling of Can Themba's short story "The Suit". Canon reformation, if not "decolonisation", was in motion at UCT.

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[10] I owe these insights to Nick Shepherd, who shared them as part of a group discussion on 15 August 2013 at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

[11] With its poor handling of the "Mamdani affair" (involving Ugandan intellectual Mahmood Mamdani) and the Mafeje controversy (involving exiled South African scholar Archibald Mafeje) in the 1990s, the administration had missed the opportunity to take these imbalances seriously much earlier. See Stacy Hardy, "Love and Learning under the World Bank", *Chimurenga Chronic*, 5 August 2015, http://chimurengachronic.co.za/love-and-learning-under-the-world-bank/.

[12] Daniela Franca Joffe and Moses Marz, "Editorial", *Postamble* 9 no. 1 (2015), http://postamble.org/portfolio/editorial/.

[13] See especially Fezokuhle Mthonti, "A Rapist State's Children: Jacob Zuma and Chumani Maxwele", *The Con*, 8 April 2016, www.theconmag.co.za/2016/04/08/a-rapist-states-children-jacob-zuma-chumani-maxwele/, for a discussion of the patriarchal structures that continue to plague the movement. Debate around the movement's use of violence (burning artwork and property, for instance) is too contentious and loaded to unpack in detail here.

[14] Walter Mignolo, "Global Coloniality and the World Disorder: Decoloniality after Decolonization and Dewesternization after the Cold War", World Public Forum, Rhodes, Greece, 3 June 2015, http://wpfdc.org/images/2016_blog/W.Mignolo_Decoloniality_after_Decolonization_Dewesternization_after_the_Cold_War.pdf/.

[15] Hedley Twidle, English Department, University of Cape Town, group email communication, 29 August 2013.

These on-campus debates around coloniality, knowledge production, and the literary canon complicated the set of beliefs I had gathered in high school in South Africa and at university overseas, and redirected the course of my doctoral research. Connecting the dots, I realised that a similar culture war to the one I was now in the middle of had been raging in America since the 1990s, under the broad banner of "multiculturalism", and that its history was largely coterminous with that of Wallace's literary career. I also realised that as a scholar based in the politically turbulent South African academy—postcolonial, post-apartheid, post-Rainbow Nation—I might be uniquely situated to think through how the political turbulence of Wallace's own social environment might have seeped into his literary work.

Rereading Wallace's texts with this new context in mind, I found traces of the multiculturalism movement scattered everywhere, but I also found traces of the civil rights and feminist movements that preceded it, and of the 9/11 tragedy that in many ways ended it. What I discovered in Wallace's fiction was not so much an effort to adapt the writing to be more multicultural, race-conscious, feminist, and so on, but rather an effort to *signal* that the author was aware of multiculturalism, feminism, and race matters, and that he was on the winning side of the culture war. I began to detect what seemed to me to be the self-consciousness and identity anxiety of a young male writer schooled in the elite postmodernist style, trying to make a literary name for himself in a time of rapid social change, shifting reader demand, and hostility towards all forms of elitism. My observations constellated around three key moments in Wallace's three novels, which guide the structure of this dissertation: the scene of sexual harassment at the start of *The Broom of the System*; the scene of physical abuse, narrated in black dialect, at the start of *Infinite Jest* (the "Wardine scene"); and the substitute teacher's speech about heroism, sacrifice, duty, and honour in *The Pale King*. In these scenes, I saw Wallace's attempting to incorporate fragments of multiculturalist and feminist discourse into his texts, which nonetheless remained "resoundingly and in all ways white", as Wallace once described himself,[16] but also male-dominated and, especially in *The Pale King*, somewhat regressive and conservative in their vision.

When I had visited Wallace's archive at the University of Texas at Austin in 2013 and 2014, I had found in it a kind of paper trail that linked Wallace almost exclusively to Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and other big names in the postmodernist tradition. Wallace's obsession with DeLillo especially was written all over the archive, both in the long letters he wrote to DeLillo over a ten-year period, and in the copies of DeLillo's books that he annotated and underlined heavily, some of which even included detailed plot notes for his own future novels (see Figure 1). Now, though, I began to wonder at the stray copies of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* that I remembered seeing on Wallace's archived bookshelf, among the hundreds of postmodernist "classics", the tomes on tax law, the volumes on art and philosophy. It seemed to me that that there was more to the story of Wallace's literary influences, of the forces that shaped his writing in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Maybe Morrison's African American literature and Faludi's feminist scholarship were less peripheral to Wallace's story than they at first appeared.

[16] David Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage", *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 102.

The history of identity politics and multiculturalism in America through these decades, then, forms a kind of subliminal alternative framework for reading Wallace, operating alongside the frameworks of technology, addiction, loneliness, and postmodernity that Wallace repeatedly foregrounded in his texts and interviews, and that Wallace studies as a whole, following the author's lead, has foregrounded as well. It is this alternative framework that my dissertation pursues—necessarily still full of blind spots and strong convictions, but perhaps a useful addition to the scholarly conversation around Wallace.

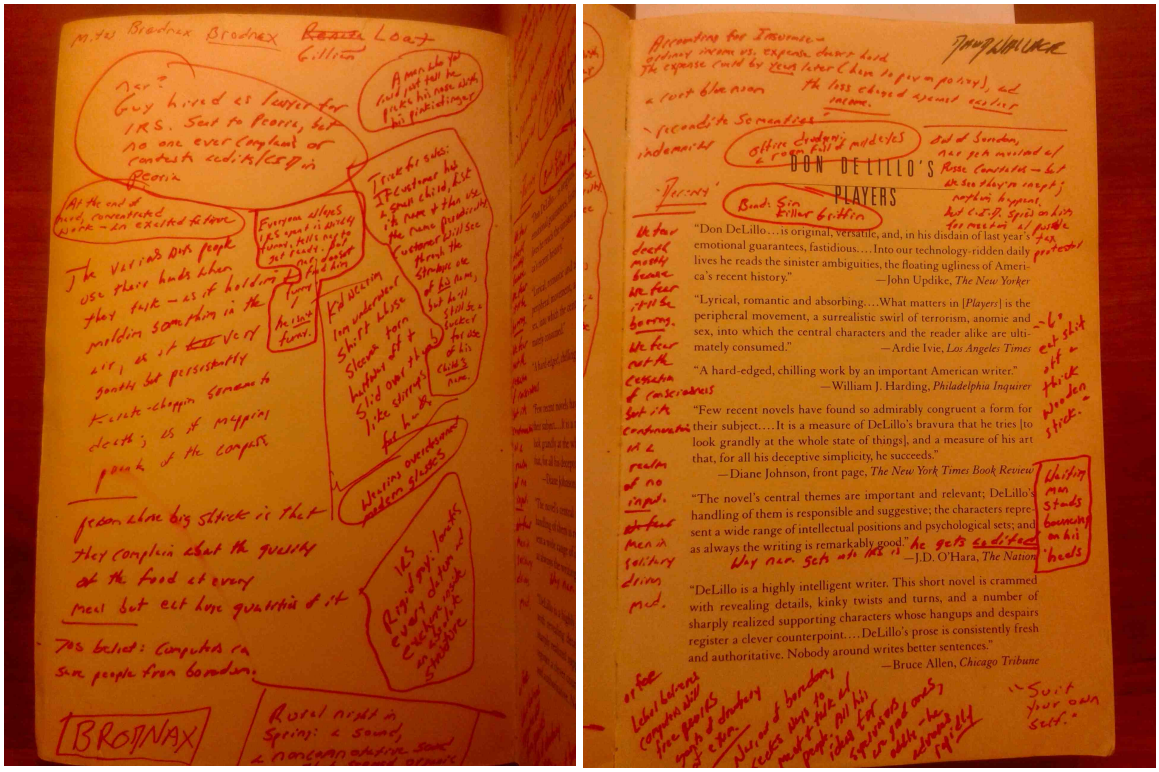

Figure 1. Wallace's annotations in the front matter of his copy of Don DeLillo's novel *Players*. David Foster Wallace Collection (1971–2008), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin. The notes include comments such as "Guy hired as lawyer for IRS. Sent to Peoria", "At the end of hard, concentrated work—exalted", "70s belief: computers can save people from boredom", which suggest that Wallace was drafting his ideas for his final novel, *The Pale King*, about bored IRS workers in Peoria, while he was reading *Players*, which explores the middle-class boredom of a young couple in New York. Like many fragments from the archive, these annotated pages tell an interesting but relatively uncomplicated story about Wallace's literary influences, drawing a straight line from *Players* to *The Pale King*, from DeLillo-style postmodernism to Wallace's brand of post-postmodernism. I want to reroute that line, making stops at the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, multiculturalism, and 9/11.

Introduction

"In the shadows": David Foster Wallace and multicultural America

Canonising Wallace

The process of reading Wallace against the history of multiculturalism, identity politics, and the literary canon has involved a confrontation with Wallace's own canonisation (as "the best mind of his generation", as "the voice of his generation", as "one of the most influential and innovative writers of the last 20 years", and so on),[17] which over the course of my PhD has gained tremendous momentum, and which now seems more or less a done deal. New editions of his books are being released every other year (with exciting new covers), unpublished tracts and speeches are being converted into sellable book form (his undergraduate philosophy thesis, his commencement speech at Kenyon College),[18] published essays and book reviews are being collated into sellable book form,[19] a dedicated annual conference about Wallace is going into its fourth year, a dedicated peer-reviewed journal about Wallace is being launched this year, the number of PhD dissertations focusing on Wallace is on the rise, and *Infinite Jest* seems poised for "classic" status. They even made a movie about Wallace in 2015, starring Jason Segal and Jessie Eisenberg.[20] Wallace is being marketised, but he is also becoming mainstream: a household name, an Internet name, a name you have to know.

But whose households are we talking about, really? And for which generation or sub-sub-generation is Wallace a voice? In my own capacity, I have been complicit in the will to canonise Wallace. It is only once I started thinking about these two questions more deeply that my commitment to the project became shaky. When I arrived back in South Africa to start my PhD, no one had heard of Wallace. UCT had none of his books of its library shelves; no one at the university taught his work. I was confused: Wallace is important! There should be space for him within the South African academy. He had such a rich understanding of human interiority, of the complexity and weirdness of the psyche—surely South African students could benefit from his insights? Inspired, I set up a third-year seminar to teach *Infinite Jest*, and it is true that many of the students were moved by the poetic accounts of Geoffrey Day's billowing depression, Katherine Gompert's institutional alienation, Hal Incandenza's anhedonic loneliness, and Don Gately's

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[17] A O Scott, "The Best Mind of His Generation", *The New York Times*, 20 September 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html; David Ulin, quoted in Claire Noland and Joel Rubin, "Writer David Foster Wallace Found Dead", *Los Angeles Times*, 14 September 2008, http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-wallace14-2008sep14-story.html; Adam Kirsch, "The Importance of Being Earnest", *New Republic*, 28 July 2011, https://newrepublic.com/article/92794/david-lipsky-foster-wallace-pale-king.

[18] David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

[19] Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012); Wallace, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York: Melville House, 2012).

[20] *The End of the Tour*, film, directed by James Ponsoldt (Los Angeles: Anonymous Content, 2015).

recovery journey within the AA. But I struggled to sell them on the rest of the book, which students found obtuse, inaccessible, boring, antagonising, even unreadable at points, full of American pop-culture references from the 1990s that meant nothing to them, and dense jargony language that they found not inventive but taxing and overwrought. Moreover, some of the sections were just plain weird: the Wardine scene at the beginning; the slimy mutant infants that kept popping up.

When I first read the book, I had been taken in by its aura as much as by its content: its notoriety as a "difficult read", which appealed to my longing to be seen as an intellectual; the vast online fan base it had accrued, which made it seem cool and trendy; the glowing peritext[21] of my copy of the book, which proclaimed its greatness and importance before you had even gotten to the story; and the circumstances of Wallace's death, which cast a mysterious shadow over the whole reading experience. I assumed the students in my seminar would be similarly enthralled. But the majority of my students could not afford the R300 ($20) paperback copy I had prescribed and were working with pirated, no-frills PDF versions of the book. And most did not care much for American nerd-niche Internet culture or for the rest of the epitextual[22] hype surrounding the book. (Incidentally, those who did and who were already privy to the hype tended to enjoy the book more.) Their reactions made me see that the book, whose universal, humanistic appeal I had so believed in, in fact had *specificity* (cultural, historical), and that there was more to Wallace than the feel-good, redemptive qualities I had affixed to his work—much more, in fact. Instead of "bringing Wallace to South Africa", as I had naively hoped to do, perhaps the better exercise would be to turn the literary gaze around and bring the fraught South African experience to bear on Wallace's texts and how I read them. What might a South African gaze on Wallace's work reveal?

Intersectional discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and class were everywhere in our universities while I was writing up my PhD, and they seem to have been everywhere in the American academy and imagination during Wallace's joint career as a writer and college teacher. Certainly, I had found echoes of these discourses in almost all of Wallace's texts. It began to bother me that the dozens of scholarly essays I had read about Wallace over the years, comprising the emerging discipline of "Wallace studies", had, save for a handful of exceptions, failed to engage with these discourses of identity, despite their obvious presence in the texts and in Wallace's America. The closest thing we have to an overview of the discipline comes from Adam Kelly, who in 2011 described the three "waves" that Wallace scholarship has followed since the first critical essays emerged in the early 1990s.[23] None of the scholarly "waves" that Kelly identifies is concerned with situating Wallace politically. The first "wave", focused on Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, was mainly interested in the author's connection to the postmodernist literary tradition and to the burgeoning field of information systems.[24] The second "wave", emerging in

[21] The term "peritext" refers to the textual and visual elements surrounding the main body of published text (for example, the preface, the introduction, the author's note, the blurb, the front cover, and so on). See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[22] "Epitext" refers to the discourse and commentary relating to a published work but not "materially appended" to it (for example, interviews, online forums, book reviews, and so on). See Genette, 344.

[23] Adam Maxwell Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline", *Irish Journal of American Studies Online* 2, no. 1 (2010): web, http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/.

[24] See Lance Olsen, "Termite Art, Or Wallace's Wittgenstein", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 199-215.

the early 2000s, paid very close attention to *Infinite Jest* and to the two non-fiction pieces that Wallace published in the 1993 *Review of Contemporary Fiction*: the now-famous "TV essay", in which Wallace critiques the ironic, minimalist style of postmodern fiction, and the equally famous interview with Larry McCaffery, in which Wallace makes a number of similar points about the current state of fiction.[25] "Second-wave" critics, in Kelly's analysis, identified dichotomies in Wallace's theory and fiction—irony versus sincerity, style versus affect, alienation versus empathy—and then showed how the author resolved these dichotomies in unique ways.[26] Kelly calls the third "wave" of scholarship "ethical criticism" because it is interested in "show[ing] as precisely as possible . . . how Wallace's radical method for waking readers up to agency operates in his texts, and how this technique is linked to his highly original style."[27] In other words, this is a highly technical and formalistic approach in which critics unpack Wallace's prose at the sentence level to see how it keeps dichotomies and contradictions intact, forcing the reader to make her own choice about the matter at hand. The movement in this genealogy of the discipline is from Wallace the postmodernist to Wallace the post-postmodernist to Wallace the radical ethicist. How radical or conservative Wallace's various discourses and positions were in *political* terms is a matter not yet considered in mainstream Wallace scholarship, as it is surveyed by Kelly, and as I myself have experienced it.

After I presented a condensed version of the first chapter of this thesis, which analyses Wallace's engagement with second-wave feminism in his debut novel, via Skype video at the Third Annual David Foster Wallace conference last year, I was contacted by another postgraduate student who had attended all three days of the conference and who wanted to form a strategic alliance of emerging Wallace scholars. His impressions of the conference confirmed my own intuitions about the general direction of mainstream criticism about Wallace:

> The conference itself was very interesting because it exhibited a bunch of very smart people, doing good, serious work about David Foster Wallace, but there was also, troublingly, an astonishing lack of diversity in both the conference attendees and the methodological approaches to Wallace's oeuvre. I strongly believe this is a problem for the long-term prospects of Wallace's work within the academy. With absolutely no disrespect intended to the fine research and intellection being done by the passionate, capable scholars at the DFW conference, if Wallace studies ossifies into rooms full of able-bodied, straight, white men only interested in exploring Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, then Wallace will wither on the vine. He will come to be seen as the dead-end of a particular strain of masculine, white, American postmodernism: the last stop on the Gaddis–Pynchon–De Lillo subway . . . I heard only a few voices discussing feminism. I was the only person talking about disability. There was no one with any evident interest in bringing Queer

[25] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 127–50; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 151–194.
[26] See Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Stephen J Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
[27] Kelly.

> Theory to Wallace Studies. I did not hear a single person mention race at any point. Postcolonial theory was seemingly totally absent. If you were to write a prescription for the slow academic death of a hyper-articulate, difficult, white, male author over the next few decades, would it look any different?[28]

This description of the conference raises questions about Wallace's continuing relevance within the academy, and about what mainstream Wallace scholars are doing to connect their ideas about the author with contemporary theories of American identity.

I have used the term "mainstream criticism" because there are, in fact, a small number of voices within the scholarly archive that discuss Wallace's work in relation to more embodied aspects of identity: race, gender, disability, and so on. I think of Mark McGurl's 2011 essay "Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program", Emily Russell's 2010 essay "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*", Olivia Banner's 2009 essay "'They're Literally Shit': Masculinity and the Work of Art in the Age of Waste Recycling", Kathleen Fitzpatrick's chapter "New White Guys" in her 2009 book *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*, Samuel Cohen's 2015 essay "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace", Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson's 2015 essay "'The Rare White at the Window': A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*", and D T Max's 2013 biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*.[29] The work of these scholars has inspired and informed my own. Their voices, read together, can be thought to constitute a marginal but nonetheless active "fourth wave" of scholarship, in which Wallace's whiteness, masculinity, and political conservatism are all interrogated in relation to his literary output. My dissertation makes a humble contribution to this emerging wave (or undercurrent) of scholarship, which is necessarily more dissonant, dissenting, equivocal, and cautious in its appraisal of the author.

McGurl has suggested that Wallace's canonisation over the years has relied precisely on an avoidance of the more difficult aspects of his work, and that this avoidance reflects a broader trend within literary studies towards "reparative" modes of reading.[30] He writes, "Wallace's canonization is occurring in a time of widespread rejection of the negative in literary studies, a general foreclosure on the possibilities of dialectical thinking in favor of cheerleading."[31] In Wallace's case, the

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[28] Rhett Farinholt, University of San Diego, personal communication, August 2016.

[29] Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program", *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27–54; Emily Russell, "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*", *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 66, no. 3 (2010): 147–169; Olivia Banner, "'They're literally shit': Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 11 (2009): 74–91; Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006); Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace", *Postmodern Literature and Race*, eds. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228–243; Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, "'The Rare White at the Window': A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*", *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 77–97; D T Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012).

[30] McGurl, 49. McGurl has in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's model of reparative reading, developed in her essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You", in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–151.

[31] McGurl, 48.

preference for positive or uplifting readings is, according to McGurl, "[m]agnified by the authenticating pathos of his suicide", with his literary canonisation often taking on the aspect of religious canonisation (that is, the process of turning a dead person into a saint).[32] Within this intellectual climate, pointing to "the limits of [Wallace's] seductively fine mind", as McGurl's essay does, and as many of the pieces listed above do, can feel almost like "a violation of hagiographic protocol".[33] But the probing is worthwhile and necessary, if we are to arrive at a more complex understanding of who Wallace was as a writer and what his writing means in the twenty-first century—if we are to rescue him from "slow academic death" in a room full of Hegel, Heidegger, even Wittgenstein.

Importantly, Wallace's close friend and literary peer Jonathan Franzen has made a similar point about the relationship between the writer's suicide and his subsequent "canonisation" (in both senses of the word). In an essay written for *The New Yorker* in 2011, Franzen expressed the anger and the sense of betrayal that have attended his friend's death, as well as his despair at the repackaging of a deeply flawed and tainted individual into a one-dimensional writer-saint. The passage in which he delivers this message is worth quoting in full:

> Betrayed not merely by the failure of our investment of love but by the way in which his suicide took the person away from us and made him into a very public legend. People who had never read his fiction, or had never even heard of him, read his Kenyon College commencement address in the *Wall Street Journal* and mourned the loss of a great and gentle soul. A literary establishment that had never so much as short-listed one of his books for a national prize now united to declare him a lost national treasure. Of course, he was a national treasure, and, being a writer, he didn't "belong" to his readers any less than to me. But if you happened to know that his actual character was more complex and dubious than he was getting credit for, and if you also knew that he was more lovable—funnier, sillier, needier, more poignantly at war with his demons, more lost, more childishly transparent in his lies and inconsistencies—than the benignant and morally clairvoyant artist/saint that had been made of him, it was still hard not to feel wounded by the part of him that had chosen the adulation of strangers over the love of the people closest to him.[34]

Cheerleading, adulation, canonisation: Franzen's broader point, like McGurl's, is that a straightforward celebration of Wallace's work necessarily involves not simply a misreading of his character (in any case, that is a judgement only a loved one can make) but also a misreading of his fiction, which is "populated with dissemblers and manipulators and emotional isolates", with psychopaths and hideous men.[35] Overall, Franzen imagines for his friend "a narrative of ambiguity and ambivalence truer to the spirit of his work".[36]

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[32] Ibid., 33.
[33] Ibid., 48.
[34] Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away: 'Robinson Crusoe,' David Foster Wallace and the island of solitude", *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-jonathan-franzen.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

It seems that this more ambivalent narrative is slowly creeping into mainstream critical discussions. I was impressed to notice the theme for this year's David Foster Wallace Conference: "Legacies of Complexity". The conference will include a number of "special sessions" exploring Wallace's relationship with feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, politics, disability studies, philosophy, and religion (listed in that order on the conference website). Whether these sessions will coalesce into another round of adulation for Wallace's sensitivity and thoughtfulness on matters political, or whether they will instead do the uncomfortable work of digging up the insecurities and anxieties underlying much of his "laborious hyper-considerateness and moral wisdom", to quote Franzen, remains to be seen.[37] It is equally unclear whether an investigation of Wallace's personal politics will invite debate about his canonisation, and about his relevance in an era of Trump, Brexit, and the ascendancy of the far right, or whether the exercise will simply be absorbed into the canonisation process, a fashionable offshoot of the annual conference. My dissertation assumes an ongoing gap between the first and second of these outcomes, as far as Wallace studies is concerned. It takes a step in heeding the call made by McGurl, Franzen, and others, and moving the discipline towards critical engagement with the difficult question of Wallace's politics, and with the way he might have couched his conservative ideas in the seductively humanistic, inclusive-sounding rhetoric that has endeared him to so many readers over the years.

Multicultural America

In a sense, the question of canonisation lies at the heart of the cultural shift that my dissertation reads Wallace's work against. Just as the literary canon at the University of Cape Town became one of the fulcrums on which decolonisation efforts turned in 2015, so the problem of the canon (and of who and what gets taught at educational institutions) became a vital site of debate, contestation, and reform in America in the 1990s, as multiculturalism became steadily institutionalised. In the pages that follow, I briefly map the most important of the debates and reforms emerging out of multiculturalism, so that the reader has a clear sense of the general historical context in which I am wishing to place Wallace's work.

One of the early challenges to the established Western canon came from Jane Tompkins in her 1986 book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, which questioned the "powerful" assumption that so-called "classic" works of literature earn their status because of an "essential greatness" that is removed from any social circumstances or political manoeuvring.[38] Indeed, Tompkins in the book puts forward the very opposite view: "that a literary classic is a product of all those circumstances of which it has traditionally been supposed to be independent".[39] Focusing her discussion on Nathaniel Hawthorne, she argues that the elevation of certain works to "classic" status, and the exclusion of others from this category, is always the result of particular political investments and interests:

[37] Ibid.
[38] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–4.
[39] Ibid., 4.

> The argument [advanced in *Sensational Designs*] is not critical of the way literary reputations come into being, or of Hawthorne's reputation in particular. Its object, rather, is to suggest that a literary reputation could never be anything but a political matter. My assumption is not that "interest and passion" should be eliminated from literary evaluation—this is neither possible nor desirable—but that works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position. Identifying the partisan processes that lead to the establishment of a classic author is not to revoke his or her claim to greatness, but simply to point out that that claim is open to challenge from other quarters, by other groups, representing equally partisan interests. It is to point out that the literary works that now make up the canon do so because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential.[40]

In place of "universal values", Tompkins proposes partisan processes, partisan interests, and cultural influence as the primary determinants of literary stardom, and opens the door for "challenge" to the dominant canon "from other quarters".

Henry Louis Gates Jr dramatises Tompkins' idea about the politics of literary reputation in his hardboiled-fiction parody "Canon Confidential", part of his 1992 collection *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, one of the defining texts of the 1990s. In the story, a detective named Sam Slade gets persuaded by a crime-busting "broad" named Estelle that the literary canon is not what it seems. There is, according to Estelle, a massive undercover operation that decides who makes it onto "the A list of great literature" and who does not. It is "the biggest scam since the 1919 World Series", and Slade must use his academic connections to get to the bottom of it.[41] Slade tracks down everyone he knows in the American literati, from Helen Vendler to Toni Morrison to Cynthia Ozick to Jacques Barzun to Harold Bloom. They all either seem in on it or refuse to talk to him. Eventually, while trailing Susan Sontag, he gets knocked out and taken to the head office of "the organization", where a smug old man confirms that the canon is indeed fixed and that there is nothing Slade can do about it.[42] Looking out the window, Slade sees massive industrial machines crushing to pulp tons of uncanonised books. The old man makes him an offer: in exchange for his silence, the organisation will ensure that Slade's only published poem, an embarrassing piece he wrote in high school, will be reproduced in all the important anthologies and elevated to classic status. Join us, the old man implies, or enter pulverised oblivion. When Slade later tells Estelle that he has sold out, she removes her wig and her prosthetic breasts and reveals who she really is: Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon, it turns out, resents his exalted position within the postmodernist canon and longs for anonymity.

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[40] Ibid., 4–5.
[41] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Canon Confidential: A Sam Slade Caper", *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3–4.
[42] Ibid., 10.

While obviously tongue-in-cheek, the story, like Tompkins' book, speaks to the careful manufacturing of culture, and highlights the central thesis of the 1990s multiculturalism movement: namely, "that knowledge, value, and culture are political and perspectival and must be treated as such".[43] Elsewhere in his collection, Gates explores how the dominance of formalism in the twentieth century—practised mainly by the Practical Criticism movement at Cambridge and the New Criticism movement at Yale—helped produce the belief in essentially or universally "great" texts.[44] Even though the criteria for greatness was largely predicated on a racial and gendered sameness among its practitioners, "[r]ace, along with all sorts of other unseemly or untoward notions about the composition of a literary work of art, was bracketed or suspected", allowing the fantasy of universality to perpetuate.[45] Crucially, in Gates' analysis, poststructuralism, for all its alleged dismantling of hierarchy and consensus, did not dismantle the hegemony of the literary establishment. "Consider the irony", writes Gates: "precisely when we (and other Third World peoples) obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity in the republic of Western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain't no such thing as a subject, so why should we be bothered with that? In this way, those of us in feminist criticism or African-American criticism who are engaged in canon deformation and reformation confront the scepticism even of those who are allies on other fronts, over this matter of the death of the subject and of our own discursive subjectivity."[46] Poststructuralists began dismantling and evacuating "master narratives" like subjectivity and identity right when marginalised groups began reclaiming and politicising these concepts for the first time.[47]

And what of the postmodernists? When Sam Slade discovers who Estelle really is, he says, "Thomas Pynchon. Now there's someone you never saw on 'Oprah Winfrey.'"[48] While partly a reference to Pynchon's reclusive tendencies and aversion to public appearance, this comment is also perhaps a reference to the implicit division sustained by the postmodernist movement between its own sophisticated, avant-garde modes of cultural production and the forms of media and entertainment consumed by the mass market, with this market typically "feminized" and construed as "mindless".[49] As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, this feminisation of mass culture was the main flaw of the earlier modernist movement, forming the basis of its elitism:

> [T]he nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the "wrong" kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture. Again, the problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high

[43] Jack David Eller, "Anti-Anti-Multiculturalism", *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 249.
[44] Gates, "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes", *Loose Canons*, 47.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Gates, "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes", 36.
[47] Gates, "The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition", *Loose Canons*, 217–218.
[48] Gates, "Canon Confidential", 14. See also Fitzpatrick, 218.
[49] See Fitzpatrick, 7.

art and depraved forms of mass culture and its co-options. The problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is depraved.[50]

While Huyssen argues that the differentiation between high and low forms of art has largely fallen away in the contemporary period, Fitzpatrick makes the important point that the current cultural fluidity only works in one direction. So-called "highbrow" artists are free to play with and borrow from "low" forms of culture, but consumers of mass culture are routinely barred from participating in elite forms of art, as part of an underlying fear of "contamination".[51] Jonathan Franzen's refusal in 2001 to have his novel featured on the Oprah Winfrey Book Club list reflects the ongoing fortification of cultural boundaries, and Fitzpatrick would point out that Oprah's identity as not only a woman but also a woman of colour, and Franzen's as a white male, is not incidental to the drama that unfolded between them.[52] "Canonical postmodernist fiction," she concludes, "through its relentless ironizing, works to distance itself from the contaminating otherness of the masses and to retreat into the purity of universal white masculinity."[53] Postmodernism was not quite able to get past the elitism of the modernism movement, and the "radicalism" of the postmodernists was largely restricted to their technical and metafictional innovations. As Kwame Anthony Appiah observed in 1991, the "post" in postmodernism is not the "post" in postcolonialism.[54]

John Barth's twin essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980) were for many years viewed as a kind of manifesto for "high" literary postmodernism. Together, they form an interesting case study for the shifting perceptions of postmodernism at the end of the twentieth century. In the first essay, Barth argues that all the original stories have already been written, and that the only way to be an artist in these dried-up literary times is to write fiction that calls attention to the impossibility of originality and the deadness of the form: to write metafiction, in short.[55] In the second essay, he urges postmodernist writers to move beyond the hermeticism and inaccessibility of high modernists like Eliot, Pound, Nabokov, and Borges, whose politics he admits were "inclined either to non-existence or to the far right".[56] He also urges writers not to simply "rush back into the arms of nineteenth-century middle-class realism", ignoring the radical advances of the twentieth century: "Freud and Einstein and two world wars . . . nuclear weaponry and television and microchip technology and new feminism and all the rest".[57] Despite these seemingly progressive claims, Barth does not hesitate in this essay to dismiss outright the fiction of "many of our contemporary American women writers", whom he

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[50] Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman", *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44–62.
quoted in Fitzpatrick, 219.
[51] Fitzpatrick, 219.
[52] See Ibid., 8, 1–2.
[53] Ibid., 219–220.
[54] In Appiah's analysis, the postmodernist art movement fetishises Africa and the so-called "Third World" as "other" in much the same way that its modernist predecessor did. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?", *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336–357.
[55] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 73.
[56] Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 202.
[57] Ibid.

characterises as the literary equivalent of gossip columnists, concerned with issuing "secular news reports" to the reading public.[58]

By the 1990s, this undercurrent of elitism (defined against a feminised mass culture) was what mattered most about Barth's essays, more important than any claims he was making about the future of fiction or the death of the novel—a clear sign that the times were changing. Writing about Barth in the 1990 edition of *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, Molly Hite pointed out that the postmodernist novel was increasingly being "perceived—and criticized—as a white male genre".[59] She noted that the list of worthy postmodernist authors that Barth compiled in his essays included twenty-three men and one woman, all white. She noted further that, despite their claims to "subversiveness" and "marginality", postmodernist writers such as DeLillo, Pynchon, and Barthelme were all being published by mainstream publishers, their work "widely available and widely reviewed".[60] Indeed, postmodernism was largely a "mainstream" movement, enjoying a central position with the literary establishment.

Combined with the political upheavals of the early 1990s, academic critiques like Hites' were to permanently destabilise the centrality of postmodernism. Amy Hungerford, in her essay "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary", describes what the arrival of the new decade meant politically: "The fall of the Berlin Wall, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War seemed to tell us that we had arrived at a moment of genuine historical transformation. Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history shortly after, in 1992, and it would seem to follow naturally that the post-45 era was coming to a close."[61] With the twilight of the postwar period came a renewed emphasis on identity-based politics and culture, both stateside and abroad. In America, multiculturalism was changing the face of knowledge production, and the culture wars were "warming up".[62] In Eastern Europe, identity-based clashes turned bloody in the Bosnian War and other regional sectarian conflicts.[63] Hungerford sums up the situation as follows: "On the American literary scene, pluralism defined the moment; in the international scene, sectarianism; in both cases, identities seemed to be at stake. But if, in Bosnia, your identity could get you killed, in America, it seemed, your identity could get you published."[64] In America, the old publishing norms challenged by Tompkins, Gates, Hites, and many others were slowly being recast.

The result, in America, was "a vastly expanded canon", "a wealth of well-crafted novels from relatively unknown writers", and "a few major [new] careers to account for"[65]—with Toni Morrison's the most famous among them. As for Barth, his earlier "stigmatization" of women's writing "had lost its purchase by the turn of the millennium". More importantly, and "[n]ot

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[58] Ibid., 195–196.
[59] Molly Hite, "Postmodern Fiction", *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 698.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary", *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (2008): 410.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid. The same sectarianism was, of course, also brewing in Africa, with the Rwandan genocide only a few years away, and violence between Zulu and Xhosa political parties already sweeping through South African townships.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 411.

incidentally", his own novels "had lost a good deal of their purchase on readers as well".[66] John N Duvall describes the shift in more dramatic terms: "A scholar of contemporary American fiction today reads multiculturally or not at all, and in the world of literature anthologies . . . John Barth must make way for Toni Cade Bambara; Joseph Heller for Amy Tan; Ken Kesey for Sherman Alexie."[67] The boundaries of the canon and the measures of literary "greatness" were interrogated for their political biases, and redefined. The postmodernist work of Barth and his peers was, by all accounts, the casualty of this cultural renegotiation—nothing quite as dramatic as pulverisation by industrial machinery, but nonetheless a body of work now less central and revered within the contemporary canon than it had been before the arrival of multiculturalism.[68]

On one level, the growing appetite at the end of the twentieth century for fiction grounded in racial, cultural, gendered, and sexual experiences of identity—for what McGurl calls "the richly emotionally resonant communities and traditions that guide the work of writers such as Philip Roth or Toni Morrison"[69]—had to do with the increased representation of women and minorities within the publishing industry itself. Toni Morrison herself, for example, worked as a senior editor at Random House in the 1970s and 1980s, and in that capacity began publishing and promoting writing by black women (including Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Angela Davis).[70] Her own books received minimal mainstream acclaim initially, but by the late 1980s/early 1990s Morrison was a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize, a tenured professor at Princeton, and a permanent fixture on high school and college syllabi. The pre-*Beloved* novels that had been dismissed by mainstream cultural institutions like *The New York Times* when they were first released were now praised by those same institutions, and read widely and hungrily by the American public.[71] The author had not changed; the country had.

Indeed, on another level, the growing multicultural appetite that popularised Morrison and depopularised Barth and his cohort was a reflection of vast structural change within the American academy since the 1960s. In the wake of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the black feminist movement, the indigenous movement, the black arts movement, the rise of the New Left, and, further afield, African decolonisation, space was gradually made within universities across America for a range of new disciplines: postcolonial studies, African American studies, Hispanic studies, chicana/chicano studies, Asian American studies, Native American studies, women's studies, and so on.[72] In tandem with these changes at the disciplinary

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[66] Ibid., 412.

[67] John N Duvall, "Introduction", *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

[68] For a useful discussion of the impact of postcolonialism and multiculturalism on the postmodernist canon, and on Pynchon's work especially, see David Witzling, "Introduction", *Everybody's America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–25.

[69] Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program" *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 44.

[70] Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 52.

[71] Nancy Peterson, "Introduction: Canonizing Toni Morrison", *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, nos. 3–4 (1993): 462.

[72] See Henry Louis Gates Jr, "African-American Studies in the 21st Century", *Loose Canons*, 121–127; Ann Ducille, "On Canons: Anxious History and the Rise of Black Feminist Literary Studies", *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29–52; Lillian S Robinson, "Canon Fathers and Myth Universe", *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, eds. Lennard J Davis and M Bella Mirabella (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 25–35; Nellie Y McKay, "Literature and Politics: Black

and faculty level, desegregation, affirmative action, the postwar GI Bill, and the new immigration laws of 1965 permanently altered the student demographics of historically white upper-class universities.[73]

Just as the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements have shaken the foundations of the postcolonial, post-apartheid South African university in recent years, so the restructuring of the American academy from the 1960s onwards slowly forced a confrontation with mainstream educational practices, now considered ethnocentric, phallocentric, and exclusionary by many internal parties.[74] Proponents of multicultural, pluralist pedagogy called for an end to the universal truth-claims of the liberal arts, which, they pointed out, in fact privileged the white male subject who had previously been the sole producer and consumer of Western knowledge, with other subjectivities and forms of knowing systematically invalidated.[75] They urged white Americans to acknowledge their status as a particular racial group, and as just one group among many, rather than as essentially or exceptionally "human".[76] "Society, a state," wrote one commentator, "consists—if it is multicultural—of diverse communities and belongs to none of them."[77] Another commentator wrote, in slightly stronger terms, "If you're still talking about American culture and not talking about ways in which the institution of slavery was constitutive of the empire, then you're writing history the way they wrote it in the 1940s and the 1950s."[78] Various ideological outposts sprung up in relation to the multiculturalism movement, spawning a new critical lexicon and jargon: pluralism, particularism, Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, universalism, essentialism, and so on. The clash between these outposts was, generally speaking, the "culture war" that Hungerford and others have mentioned in relation to the 1990s. As we have seen in our discussion throughout this chapter, the battleground for this clash was very often the canon, and the question of which works get included or excluded during syllabus and curriculum creation.

Resistance to the multicultural model came mostly from conservatives, who continued to advocate strict adherence to the "great texts" tradition and the "melting pot" (assimilationist) theory of culture. They believed in forging a "common American identity", based "less on cultural particulars than on a few universal convictions, such as the dignity of the individual and the freedom of thought and action—that is, classic liberalism".[79] They complained about the

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Feminist Scholars Reshaping Literary Education in the White University, 1970–1986", *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, 84–102; Hector Calderon, "At the Crossroads of History, on the Borders of Change: Chicano Literary Studies, Past, Present, and Future", *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, 211–235.

[73] Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech", *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 386.

[74] Eller, 249, 254.

[75] See Eller; Gregory S Jay, "The End of 'American' Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice", *College English* 53, no. 3 (1991): 264–281; Peter McLaren, "Multiculturalism and the Postmodern Critique: Towards a Pedagogy of Resistance and Transformation", *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (1993): 118–146; Peter McLaren, "Schooling the Postmodern Body: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Enfleshment", *Journal of Education* 170, no. 3 (1988): 53–83.

[76] Eller, 250.

[77] Joseph Raz, "Multiculturalism: A Liberal Perspective", *Dissent* 41, no. 1 (1994): 69. Quoted in Eller.

[78] Cornel West, "Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism", *Modern Philology* 90, no.1 (1993): 147.

[79] Eller, 250. See Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Joshua Parens, "Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism", *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 1 (1994): 169–181. And see Deepak Lal for a discussion of the strange conjunction of classical liberalism and American

"Europhobia", the "particularism", and the "essentialism" of the multiculturalism movement, and they warned against a descent into relativism and nihilism.[80] On campuses around the country, right-wing resistance to multiculturalist policies turned violent among students, with race-based attacks increasing steadily from 1986 onwards.[81]

Resistance to multiculturalism also came from radicals, however, some of whom wanted to replace Eurocentrism not with pluralism but with cultural forms of black nationalism (with "Afrocentricity" chief among them).[82] Others rejected the way multiculturalism was being rationalised, professionalised, and bureaucratised within American universities, a luxury activity reserved for the "professional, managerial" class.[83] "Struggles over turf, slots, curriculum, and debates over multiculturalism", wrote Cornel West in 1993, "have been reduced to the either/or option of the bureaucratic squabble."[84] Others, still, considered multiculturalism and diversity to be poor substitutes for radical "left-wing politics" and the quest for real economic equality. As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, "a diversified elite is not made any the less elite by its diversity and, as a response to the demand for equality, far from being left-wing politics, it is right-wing politics."[85] On the other hand, many critics on the left who were broadly supportive of an expanded canon and curriculum were nonetheless concerned about the essentialist tendencies of race, class, and gender discourse, which had become "the holy trinity of literary criticism" in the 1980s and 1990s.[86] They pressed for "new theories and discourses of identity" rooted in intersectionality: that is, theories and discourses that examine "the multiple intersections of race, class, and gender in feminist, lesbian, and gay studies, the interrelations of postcolonialism, nationalism, and ethnicity in ethnic and area studies, and so on."[87] Finally, Stanley Fish, accepting multiculturalism as an irrefutable "demographic fact" about the nation, questioned its status as a coherent philosophical attitude or pedagogic approach.[88] Multiculturalists, in his analysis, are either "boutique multiculturalists" who respect other cultures but only to a point (usually the point at which the culture in question contradicts their understanding of "human rights" or "human dignity", which reveals their investment in the very universalist principles that multiculturalism is meant to be

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conservativism. Lal, *Reviving the Invisible Hand: The Case for Classical Liberalism in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 51.

[80] Eller, 250–251. See Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures", *The American Scholar* 59, no. 3 (1990): 337–354.

[81] Gates, 18; Noel Jacob Kent, "The New Campus Racism: What's Going On?", *NEA Thought and Action* 12, no. 2 (1996): 45–57; Sylvia Hurtado, "The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict", *Journal of Higher Education* 63, no. 5 (1992): 539–569.

[82] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988); Bayo Oyebade, "African Studies and the Afrocentric Paradigm: A Critique", *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 2 (1990): 233–238; Ama Mazama, "The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions", *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 4 (2001): 387–405.

[83] West, 148.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Walter Benn Michaels, "What Matters", *London Review of Books*, 27 August 2009, https://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n16/walter-benn-michaels/what-matters; Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007).

[86] Kwame Anthony Appiah, Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Editors' Introduction: Multiplying Identities", *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 625.

[87] Ibid, 626.

[88] Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech", *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 385.

challenging), or they are "strong multiculturalists", willing to embrace all cultures, even fundamentalist and exclusivist ones, such that their multiculturalist commitment becomes compromised.[89] There is no multiculturalist position that is not contradictory, Fish concludes, and illusions about the movement being a unified whole, with a set of unified rules and principles, should be abandoned in favour of an approach of "inspired adhoccery" and improvisation, with multiculturalism always adapting itself to the particular "situation-of-crisis" in which it intervenes.[90]

"The deafening silence of irrelevance"

Even Fish, writing in the late 1990s, admits that "multiculturalism and its discontents are all people are talking about these days".[91] If we take seriously, as I do in this dissertation, the pervasiveness and unavoidability of multiculturalism and the politics of identity in the late 1980s, in the 1990s, and in the aftermath of 9/11, then the question of Wallace's relationship to these political circumstances becomes crucial, given the overlap of their timeline with the author's literary career. The chapters that follow do the work of mapping this relationship in detail. They are grouped into three periods (corresponding to the three decades of interest), and centred on the novel that Wallace wrote in each period, with input from Wallace's short stories and non-fiction informing the main reading of the novel.

The first chapter, "'The last word': Second-wave feminism and poststructuralism in *The Broom of the System*", considers Wallace's response to the feminist movement that was sweeping through college campuses (including his own Amherst College) while he was writing his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in the 1980s. It highlights the negotiation that takes place in the book between his desire to appear as the erudite postmodernist writer, versed in the tenets of poststructuralism, and his desire to appear as the sensitive white male, who is attuned to contemporary women readers. The second chapter, "'Eyes blue but darkly so': *Infinite Jest* and the aesthetics of white pain", analyses Wallace's growing awareness of his whiteness against the growing appetite for multicultural fiction. It examines his attempt to almost "outcompete" the trauma narratives coming out of marginalised groups in America by delivering a sprawling anthology of white hardship and anguish in *Infinite Jest* (grounded mainly in the white upper-middle class). Finally, the third chapter, "'We live inside bodies, after all': Whiteness, masculinity, and the Midwest in Wallace's writing after 9/11", contemplates Wallace's response to the 9/11 crisis, which in some ways confirmed his belief in the special vulnerability and victimisation of mainstream America, and shows how Wallace wraps his increasingly conservative and nationalistic discourse about America and American masculinity in socially liberal, progressive-sounding rhetoric. (This last chapter looks closely at *The Pale King*, but given that the novel was published posthumously, with significant editorial input, the chapter pays equal attention to some of Wallace's other literary output from the period.) The postscript offers a brief reflection on the relevance of Wallace's work

[89] Ibid., 378–384.
[90] Ibid., 386.
[91] Ibid., 385.

in the age of a Donald Trump presidency, and suggests that Wallace, had he lived to witness the 2016 election, might not have been as unequivocal in his rejection of Trump as his admirers might assume.

I conclude this introductory chapter by offering a clue into the overarching insight of this study. The clue comes via Franzen, and an essay he wrote in 1996 on the state of literature, entitled "Perchance to Dream". In the essay, Franzen makes the argument that the institution of "serious" literature has been eroded by mass entertainment and by the rise of electronic media (TV, movies, the Internet). In his genealogy, these pressures have caused white male authors to leave the literary establishment and seek their fortunes in better-paying industries in New York and Los Angeles. And in their absence, multiculturalism has flourished:

> The institution of writing and reading serious novels is like a grand-old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways. Ringing the depressed inner city of serious work are prosperous clonal suburbs of mass entertainment: techno and legal thrillers, novels of sex and vampires, of murder and mysticism. The last fifty years have seen a lot of white male flight to the suburbs and to the coastal power centres of television, journalism, and film. What remain, mostly, are ethnic and cultural enclaves. Much of contemporary fiction's vitality now resides in the black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women's communities, which have moved into the structures left behind by the departing straight white male.[92]

Franzen's logic here is almost transparent in its biases: white men and their output constitute the spiritual centre (the "inner city") of the institution of serious literature; the rising media empire has lured many of them away in recent years; and black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay and women writers have "moved in" to occupy the ruins. The implication here is that minority and women's writing is but a shadow of the former literary empire. And the implication is also that white men (such as Franzen) who still want to write are left marginalised and homeless in the new identity-based literary order. That black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women writers have discarded mainstream literary "structures" and invented their own is not considered, and neither is the limited access that denies these groups the same mobility and freedom as the "straight white male" (who can be lured to the entertainment industry, or, like Franzen himself, choose not to be).

Madhu Dubey describes the distortion at work here: "In this mapping of the post-1960s literary field as analogous to an earlier period in US history—the suburbanisation of the post-war decades—Franzen elides and mystifies the processes of urban redevelopment and gentrification that were well underway by the time he published this essay, processes that were remaking urban racial geography in a manner exactly contrary to his account, leading to the massive displacement of racial minority populations from inner cities . . . Franzen shores up his own position as a marginalized white writer by figuratively appropriating the position of racial minority groups

[92] Jonathan Franzen, "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels", *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, 39.

displaced from the city."[93] Franzen's geographic analogy is not only ahistorical and inaccurate, then; he also manipulates it in such a way that white male writers emerge as the most vulnerable group. But that is not all. As Dubey explains, "he then goes onto convert this imagined displacement of white male writers into a source of cultural authenticity by laying claim to the very space from which he feels banished: 'By 1993 I was as depressed as the inner city of fiction.'"[94] Faced with what he characterises as "the deafening silence of irrelevance",[95] Franzen tries to turn the resulting depression he feels into a literary aesthetic: "depressive realism", he calls it. Franzen styles his depressive realism as an authentic counterpoint to the "therapeutic optimism" of the multicultural worldview—but it is also, perhaps, a way for him to manufacture a trauma narrative and compete with the "identity-based fiction" now at the centre of the multicultural literary market.[96] And, just like that, Franzen manages to borrow the emotional richness and subjective experience typically associated with the writing communities he has just denigrated and present it as his own artistic invention. As activist Jane Elliot has commented, "[B]y dint of his mainstream status, Franzen was able to spend a 20-page article reinventing the same wheel tribal writers had been using, all the while arguing that theirs wasn't really a wheel anyway."[97]

Elliott uses the term "tribal writers" somewhat facetiously here, I suspect, following Franzen's awkward usage in the essay. At one point, Franzen makes the argument that "[t]he current flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities may in part represent a movement . . . to anchor fiction in the only ground that doesn't shift every six months: the author's membership in a tribe."[98] But the term "tribal writers" actually comes from the mouth (or the pen) of Wallace himself, and this is where Franzen's essay becomes most relevant to our purposes. Towards the end of the essay, Franzen includes an excerpt from a letter he received from his friend Wallace after the two of them spent an evening discussing the subject of writer marginalisation and electronic culture. In the letter, Wallace complains that "tribal writers" at least get to write about the evils of mainstream culture, with a community of readers to receive their work, while white males "*are* the mainstream culture", and are therefore not able to step outside of it or participate in alternative communities and "subcultures".[99] For this reason, Wallace writes, white men are left "in the shadows" by the forces of history—an image so powerful that I have chosen it as the title for this project.

I unpack Wallace's letter to Franzen in more detail in my chapter on *Infinite Jest*, but it is important to say here that Wallace seems to share Franzen's sense of frustration at the current direction of American literature, with the surface-level frustration involving the erosion of serious literature in the Information Age, and the deeper undercurrent of frustration involving the uncertain position of white male writers in the age of multiculturalism. And just as Franzen is

[93] Madhu Dubey, "Race and the Crisis of the Postmodern Social Novel", *Postmodern Literature and Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 33–34.
[94] Ibid., 34.
[95] Ibid., 40.
[96] Franzen, 44, 48.
[97] Jane Elliott, "O is for the Other Things She Gave me: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and Contemporary Women's Fiction", *Bitch Media*, 15 February 2002, https://bitchmedia.org/article/franzen. Quoted in Fitzpatrick, 217–218.
[98] Franzen, 47.
[99] Ibid., 51.

careful in the essay to distance himself from conservativism—a conservative would never acknowledge, as Franzen does, the view "that a universal 'American' culture was little more than an instrument for the perpetuation of a white, male, heterosexual elite, and that its decline is the just desert of an exhausted tradition", even if he goes on the undermine this argument in subtle ways—so Wallace works hard in his writing to present himself as the compassionate, egalitarian, and progressive writer-citizen, all while reinstating the centrality of white masculinity. The result, as we will see, is a complex rhetorical strategy in which Wallace's often conservative and traditionalist views on political matters are routinely softened and textured by the hyperconsiderate way in which he packages them.

What was at stake, for Wallace, in this rhetorical strategy? McGurl offers a theory of the "nothingness" that Wallace was constantly battling: both the existential and philosophical nihilism at the back of secular American identity, and the deeper, looming threat of literary extinction and cultural irrelevance. The latter anxiety, in McGurl's analysis, was a particular function of Wallace's training in what McGurl calls the "technomodernist" literary style (which I have called high literary postmodernism elsewhere in this chapter), especially in an artistic climate of "high cultural pluralism" where writers like Toni Morrison commanded the stage. As McGurl explains:

> In the high cultural pluralist mode, the debt one owes is to family and ethnic tradition, whose funds of experiential capital are used (not without agony) to generate an epic literature of cultural establishment. In Wallace, by contrast, the debt is to the "system" or institution itself, with its purely formal markers of success. Hence his fear of being nothing—nothing, at any rate, that will be recognizable in positive terms in the literary field.[100]

In other words, Wallace's fear of literary nothingness is what steers his artistic creation. Expanding McGurl's argument, I consider in this dissertation how Wallace enriches his fiction by "ethnicising" and "pluralising" the whiteness and masculinity of his central characters in various ways, without these characters or their concerns ever having to relinquish their centrality or dominance in the text.

And what is at stake in my reading of Wallace's writing and rhetoric in this way, against a backdrop of identity politics and multiculturalism? For one, it presents an alternative methodological approach to Wallace, with his work read for its historical specificity and contingency, rather than for what it has to say about, as he put it, "what it means to be a fucking human being",[101] given how fraught such sweeping universalist terms were at the time when he was using them. Part of this methodology involves an analysis of precisely the way Wallace constructs himself as by turns a humanistic and a pluralistic author, when in fact his work is grounded in a quite narrow set of concerns, related mainly to subjects who look and speak like him. In short, it involves not necessarily being taken in by Wallace's uplifting, therapeutic prose—not taking him "at face value", not reading him "on his terms"—and instead interrogating the

[100] McGurl, 44.
[101] McCaffery, 131.

political positions that lie behind the prose, and the cultural anxieties that drive their particular expression at this particular moment in time. If McGurl warns us of Wallace's "seductively fine mind", I am most interested in his seductively fine rhetoric, which can be so intoxicating and soothing for the reader that before you know it you have fallen in love with cowboys and Ronald Reagan, having signed up to read a story about a child of the 1960s. (I am thinking of the Chris Fogle section of *The Pale King*, of which more in the third chapter.) Perhaps what is really at stake, then, is a confrontation with the dissembling and conservative aspects of Wallace's literary project, and what this confrontation means for Wallace's seemingly inexorable canonisation and for the "fan club" tone of much of Wallace studies.

There are costs involved in such a methodology, though. While I have set myself the task of uncovering the disjunctures between Wallace's progressive discourse and his traditionalist views of America, and injecting some much-needed "ambiguity" into Wallace scholarship, more often than not I go further than that, showing an uncomplicated preference for the progressive end of the political spectrum and an uncomplicated distrust of the traditionalist end. I am similarly prone to elevating race and gender over class, and to a blanket association of straight white masculinity with privilege, whereas in fact things are probably much more complicated than that in 2017. My analysis is also, without doubt, heteronormative. I do not do enough to interrogate heterosexuality in Wallace's work, or, for that matter, to challenge the rigidity of race and gender categories: I simply use these categories ("black", "woman") as though they actually mean something beyond their arbitrary social construction. Of course, they do mean something, as the commentary by Gates and others in this chapter has shown. Despite being ontologically false and meaningless, race and gender categories have been used to divide and subjugate populations for centuries, and therefore carry *historical* meaning. Indeed, my entire argument is founded on the immense historical weight of these identity categories. When I say "black", I mean the population group historically designated and treated as black; the same goes for "white", and for "woman", and for "man". I could render these terms in scare quotes throughout the dissertation, but doing so would, as Paul Warmington observes, negate their ongoing, seemingly unending political "realness", and would place me within the identity-neutralising poststructuralist camp I am trying to critique in this thesis.[102]

A separate, and perhaps more subtle, dissertation could, I suppose, be written on the relative merits of some of Wallace's more traditional views, and on the failings of even the most intersectional and inclusive identity-based thinking. It is possible that my own entanglement with identity politics and multiculturalism in South Africa has pushed me to "choose sides", as it were, instead of maintaining a more balanced position about the author. In this regard, I am encouraged by the narrator of Teju Cole's *Open City*, who, confronting an impassioned Moroccan activist in Brussels, has this to say about the hazards of choosing a side: "A cancerous violence had eaten into

[102] See Paul Warmington, "Taking Race out of Scare Quotes: Race-conscious Social Analysis in an Ostensibly Post-Racial World", *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 3 (2009): 281–296. See especially these comments by Carolyn McKinney: "[W]hile the concept of 'race' might be justifiably rejected on scientific grounds (since it has no biological basis), as a social construct it is real in the lives of many. The point is that it continues to have a significant effect in the understandings that people and groups have of each other and the relationships they construct with one another as a result. It cannot, therefore, simply be disregarded." McKinney, "'If I speak English, does it make me less black anyway?': 'Race' and English in South African Desegregated Schools", *English Academy Review* 24, no. 2 (2007): 7.

every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, all that mattered was the willingness to do something. Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one's case, was to be enraged. It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?"[103]

[103] Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011), 107.

"The last word": Second-wave feminism and poststructuralism in *The Broom of the System*

The Broom of the System was submitted as a creative writing thesis in 1985, while Wallace was a senior at Amherst College, and published a few years later by Viking. As anyone who has read the famous 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery will know, Wallace had this to say about the novel:

> Think of *The Broom of the System* as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin–Wittgenstein–Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct. This WASP's written a lot of straight humor, and loves gags, so he decides to write a coded autobio that's also a funny little post-structural gag: so you get Lenore, a character in a story who's terribly afraid that she's really nothing more than a character in a story. And, sufficiently hidden under the sex-change and the gags and theoretical allusions, I got to write my sensitive little self-obsessed *bildungsroman*.[104]

Here and in another major interview,[105] Wallace foregrounds the "cerebral" and "theoretical" aspects of the novel, framing it as a kind of intellectual autobiography of his time at Amherst. If Wallace is to be believed, the novel's protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, is simply an abstraction of Wallace's own "fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct", a fear derived from his undergraduate encounter with Wittgenstein's early work (specifically, the *Tractatus*, in which Wittgenstein develops his theory that language constrains reality, or that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world").[106] Lenore, then, is a dramatisation of the Wittgensteinian view of language, and also the site where Wallace rehearses its metafictional possibilities. As Wallace explains, Lenore's anxiety about language becomes a private joke (or "gag') between the author and his readers: Lenore fears that she is a linguistic construct, and indeed Wallace, as author, is linguistically constructing her.

Wallace's summary makes it clear that what the book is "about" is language and language theory, Wittgenstein and poststructuralism. Even as he dismisses the book as "self-obsessed", and "way too clever" for its own good,[107] he communicates his intelligence by presenting himself as a nerdy college student consumed by difficult theoretical philosophy. As he told David Lipsky of the novel-writing period, "I had four thousand pages of continental philosophy in my head".[108] In fact,

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[104] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 142–143.
[105] See also David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Conversation with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 35–36.
[106] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C K Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), §5.6, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf.
[107] Lipsky, 35.
[108] Ibid.

it seems that Wallace, with *The Broom of the System*, wanted to create the ultimate poststructuralist text. Jane Caplan has written that "the poststructuralist", by definition, "can never have 'the last word'", and that Derrida, for example, "constantly acknowledges the provisional nature of his readings . . . and subverts his own authority as a reader".[109] Wallace, almost formulaically, has his novel end in mid-sentence, ceremoniously depriving himself of the last word: "You can trust me", says Lenore's boyfriend Rick Vigorous at the end of the book; "I'm a man of my".[110] The circuitry of the book remains open, and the reader writes the ending, creating the *scriptible* ("writerly") text that Roland Barthes envisioned in the 1970s.[111] Certainly many critics have interpreted the novel in this way,[112] in line with the current vogue in Wallace studies (the "third wave", in Adam Kelly's schema) of showing "how Wallace's radical method for waking readers up to agency operates in his texts".[113] The missing word in Rick's sentence is also, of course, "word", and the delicious absent-presence (the Derridean "trace") of *logos* is meant to round off the book's status as "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida", as Wallace described it to David Lipsky.[114]

But if the book is primarily about Wallace's undergraduate engagement with language theory, why undergo a "sex-change", as he calls it, and narrate his *bildungsroman* through a female protagonist? Might there be more to this gender-bending than the simple need to disguise and encode an "autobio" as fiction? Might there have been some political motivation for becoming, in the 1980s literary space, a woman? The particulars of the opening scene of the novel suggest that this might be the case. The opening scene, set in 1981, nine years before the main, language-themed drama, appears so anomalous against strictly theoretical interpretations of the novel that it is often simply ignored altogether. In it, a fifteen-year-old Lenore Beadsman is visiting her older sister Clarice at Mount Holyoke, Amherst's all-female "sister school", when she, her sister, and her sister's roommates get sexually harassed and assaulted in their dorm room. The culprits? Two "WASP" frat boys from none other than Amherst College. Lenore, in her resistance to the intruders, comes to embody empowered womanhood. Before the men have even entered the room, she has distinguished herself from the older, more desensitised group of women through her reaction to the topic of campus rape. When a gossipy conversation around a lesbian resident of the dorm turns to the reason she has started dating women ("Nancy Splittstoesser sort of got assaulted right before Thanksgiving . . . Well, raped, I guess, really"), and when it emerges that Clarice and her roommates in fact know of "about ten women" who have been raped at Mount Holyoke in recent months, Lenore is visibly horrified and outraged (*BS*, 8). The others, meanwhile, brush the subject off, telling Lenore that "[y]ou get used to it", and that the whole drama can be avoided "[i]f you're careful, you know, and stay off the paths at night" (*BS*, 9). When Andrew "Wang

[109] Jane Caplan, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians", *Central European History* 22, nos. 3–4 (1989): 268.
[110] David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (1987) (New York: Penguin, 2016): 467. Subsequent references to *The Broom of the System* are cited parenthetically as *BS*.
[111] See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).
[112] See, for example, Marshall Boswell, "*The Broom of the System*: Wittgenstein and the Rules of the Game", *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 22.
[113] Adam Maxwell Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline", *Irish Journal of American Studies Online* 2, no. 1 (2010): web, http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/.
[114] Lipsky, 35.

Dang" Lang and Biff Diggerence force their way into the room moments later, only Lenore takes a real stand against them, refusing to submit to the men's demand that the women participate in their fraternity initiation ritual and sign their names on the men's derrières. While Clarice argues, Sue cries, Mindy masks her fear with a display of seduction, and all the women eventually acquiesce, Lenore removes a stiletto, throws it at the men's heads, and makes her escape through the door (*BS*, 20–21).

Wallace, then, chooses to privilege the female perspective in his opening scene, and offers, through Lenore, both a critique and a rejection of the forms of masculinity being produced at his own university. Rather than Wittgenstein and Derrida, the immediate frame for the novel includes such charged themes as gender inequality, sexual violence, college rape culture, fraternity culture, political lesbianism, patriarchy, and feminism. Even the lighter with which Mindy lights up her joint in the scene bears the mark of Wallace's acute gender consciousness in this novel, emblazoned as it is with the slogan "When God Made Man She Was Only Joking" (*BS*, 17). Indeed, if we take seriously the novel's engagement with gender politics, Rick's unfinished sentence at the end of the novel becomes as much an attempt to reassert his crumbling masculinity ("I am a man") as a poststructuralist *jeu de mot*. At the very least, the gendered inflections of the novel should not be elided, even if Wallace himself sometimes diminished their importance.

This chapter seeks to map these gendered inflections, and takes a first step in reading *The Broom of the System* against the particular historical circumstances surrounding its production. It argues that Wallace's framing of the novel in terms of empowered femininity and crumbling masculinity reflects not only the rapid institutionalisation of second-wave feminism in the 1980s, both on Wallace's own campus and in America more generally, but also his longing as an aspiring white upper-middle-class male writer to be viewed as progressive and sensitive, especially to an increasingly politicised female audience. In a sense, the opening scene operates like the self-deprecating preface in classical rhetoric, with Wallace humbling himself before the female reader in order to earn her trust.[115] (Wallace's fondness for this device is evident even in the McCaffery interview, where he calls himself a "sensitive young WASP" before he says anything about his first novel.) But the author's need to be seen as progressive clashes, finally, with his need to appear clever, well-read, and well-versed in avant-garde literary praxis, and in the end is overpowered by it, as the novel becomes less about Lenore and her empowerment and more about Rick's stylistic experimentation and Wallace's authorial language games, revealing the limits of Wallace's empathy with the feminist cause. In fact, Wallace's desire to be "master" of the text and, consequently, of Lenore's fate may represent a passive (and no doubt unconscious) form of resistance to the latest wave of social reform, a way of reasserting some of his threatened power as a man, all while rhetorically positioning himself on the side of the feminist movement.

[115] See, for example, Martijn Wackers, Bas Andeweg, Jaap de Jong, "Putting Yourself Down to Build Trust: The Effect of Self-deprecating Humor on Speaker Ethos in Educational Presentations", *Trust and Discourse: Educational Perspectives*, eds. Katja Pelsmaekers, Geert Jacobs, Craig Rollo (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), 135–160.

No man's land

Liberal or "equality" feminism was in many ways the most influential strain of second-wave feminism.[116] By mapping its institutionalisation in the 1980s, and in particular the transformative effect it had on Wallace's own institution, Amherst College, at the very time when he was writing *The Broom of the System*, I hope to link the feminist narrative to the scholarly narrative around Wallace's first novel, and, reading against the grain of Wallace studies, to show how the book functions as much as a response to second-wave feminism as a meditation on poststructuralist theory.

Liberal feminism centred on legal and financial equality for women, or, as scholar Johanna Brenner puts it, on "mak[ing] women fully free sellers of our own labour power, by substantially dismantling the legal and normative edifice which had mandated women's subservience in marriage, denied us rights in our bodies and reproductive capacity, and legitimated our economic marginalization".[117] The victories of liberal feminism are by now well known. Despite the libertarian tide of the Bush–Reagan 1980s, and a rising anti-feminist backlash within government, mass media, even Hollywood,[118] women's calls for the "right to compete and contract free from limitations imposed on account of [their] sex" became "institutionalized and culturally incorporated" at a greater rate than ever before.[119] Resistance to the liberal feminism movement did not only come from the Right, however. Black, lesbian, and radical feminists challenged the movement for its white, heterosexual, middle-class biases, and for its preference for bureaucracy over activism, pointing to the way mainstream feminism itself perpetuated various forms of oppression.[120] As Fred Pfeil notes in his book *White Guys*, the equalising benefits of liberal feminism were "unequally distributed amongst women of different races and classes", and the movement's dependence on *average* wage figures for men and women tended to obscure "the gains middle-class, college-educated white women have been able to make in the professions, both absolutely and in relation to the stagnation and/or outright decline in poor and non-white women's income" (*WG*, 57). For better or worse, liberal feminism had succeeded in becoming mainstream, and America would never be the same again.

Probably the most significant consequence of liberal feminism from the 1960s onwards, apart from the paradoxically unequal division of its spoils, was the "decline of the male breadwinner", as gender sociologist Kathleen Gerson observes in her 1993 book *No Man's Land:*

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[116] Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (New York: Verso, 1995), 37. Subsequent references to *White Guys* are cited parenthetically as *WG*.

[117] Johanna Brenner, "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: US Feminism Today", *New Left Review*, no. 200 (1993): 104. Quoted in Pfeil.

[118] See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) (New York: Broadway Books, 2006). As I mentioned in the preface, Wallace had Faludi's book on his bookshelf when he died. See also Nancy Gibbs, "The War Against Feminism", *Time*, 24 June 2001, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,159157,00.html.

[119] Brenner, 102. Quoted in Pfeil.

[120] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–660; Ann Ducille, "On Canons: Anxious History and the Rise of Black Feminist Literary Studies", *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29–52; Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism", *Social Text*, nos. 9–10 (1984): 91–118.

Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work.[121] According to Gerson, the "expansion of women's legal rights, employment opportunities, sources of economic support, and capacity to live independently"—and the collapse of traditional gender roles that attended these developments—"undermined men's ability to control them, as wives or as workers."[122] Moreover, it "prompted confusion and discomfort because it call[ed] into question many of our most deeply held beliefs about manhood and masculinity." What is a man, Gerson asks, if both his elevated role as economic provider and the "special rights and privileges" affixed to that role are stripped away? What kinds of familial relationships are available to him once his status as patriarch is eroded?[123] Gerson's research reveals that, in the 1980s, domesticity was not yet a real "option" for men—partly because women's increasing flight from child-care had positioned it as a socially "undervalued, isolating, and largely invisible accomplishment".[124] Unable to fully be the breadwinner or the stay-at-home-dad, men in the 1980s found themselves experiencing "ambivalence, regret and, at times, thinly veiled resistance" (*WG*, 58). Masculinity fell into an identity crisis of sorts, as the traditional basis for its various social and economic relationships was chipped away.

The polarising effects of second-wave feminism were perhaps most pronounced in a branch of the movement called "cultural feminism" (mostly by its detractors). Emerging as a diluted offshoot of 1960s and 1970s radical feminism,[125] cultural feminism cited innate differences between men and women and sought to create an alternative culture (or counterculture) rooted in "feminine" values, regarded as gentler, more nurturing, and less violent than the dominant patriarchal culture. An important corollary of cultural feminism was the creation of "safe spaces" for women, including (women-only) shelters, crisis lines, centres, and communities. Despite the obvious value of some of these spaces, cultural feminism drew sharp criticism from feminist activists and thinkers working in the political space, who were disappointed by what they perceived to be its crude essentialism, and its preservation of exactly the kinds of hierarchies and divisions they were trying to dismantle. Brenner, for example, following Alice Echols, offered this comment:

> "Cultural feminism" has replaced radical feminism as the hegemonic worldview in what remains of the autonomous women's community . . . The polarization of "male" to "female" ways of being, knowing, feeling and thinking that is fundamental to cultural feminism encourages a politics of salvation through womanly virtue that leaves little room for the pragmatic, limited, ambivalent, and conflictual political practice of coalition-building among women divided by race, ethnicity, sexual oppression, not to mention with organizations of working-class class and oppressed people which include men.[126]

[121] Kathleen Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work* (New York: Basic Books, 1993. Quoted in Pfeil.
[122] Ibid., 266.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 248.
[125] Willis, 91–92.
[126] Brenner, 153. More than two decades later, these shortcomings of cultural feminism would be brilliantly dramatised in the second season of the Amazon.com TV series *Transparent*, where the protagonist, a seventy-something transgender woman, gets aggressively chased away from a "women-only" festival once he is found to be "biologically" male.

While many women focused their efforts on "political practice" and "coalition-building", many others "[fell] back on cultural feminism's 'empowering' assurances as inner compensation for all the external, enabling power it seem[ed] impossible to win" (*WG*, 60). This insular, women-centred approach gained traction in the 1980s, as neoliberal policies and dominant conservative attitudes created further barriers to political reform. Crucially, the divide between cultural and liberal feminism existed not only "*across* feminist communities" but also "*within* individual feminist women", with the one expression of the movement acting as a "dialectical obverse and complement" to the other (*WG*, 59).[127] Even more crucially, though, the increased popularity of cultural feminism intensified the identity crisis of many "progressive" men, who recognised the failings of patriarchy but who were unwelcome in closed women's circles. Cultural feminism seems in part responsible for the rise of the mythopoetic men's movement, and other expressions of the "men's movement" for that matter, in which men sought refuge from their crisis in comforting mythologies and rituals involving "ancient" expressions of manhood (and, in the process, inadvertently reasserted their dominance in the form of cultural appropriation).[128]

Of all liberal feminism's successes in the 1980s, perhaps the most relevant to campus culture was the changing legislation around sexual harassment and sexual violence. The 1970s had seen the abortion-hostile Hyde Amendment passed, under interim president Gerald Ford (*WG*, 55), but it had also seen feminist lobbyists securing victories in the spheres of rape shield law (that is, laws preventing the use of rape survivors' sexual history as evidence in court) and marital law.[129] In 1979, feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon published her ground-breaking study *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, which introduced the term "sexual harassment" into mainstream discourse for the first time, defining it as a violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act for its interference with one gender's ability to work.[130] In 1980, under the Carter administration, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission incorporated MacKinnon's terminology into its regulations surrounding gender discrimination. This decision paved the way for a landmark

[127] My emphasis.

[128] See Alastair Bonnett, "The New Primitives: Identity, Landscape and Cultural Appropriation in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement", *Antipode* 28, no. 3 (1996): 273–291.

[129] Abortion was legalised in 1973, and the procedure was essentially free for low-income women under the government's Medicaid programme. In 1976, however, the Hyde Amendment banned Medicaid's coverage of abortion, except in "medically necessary" cases or in cases of reported incest or rape. The medical exception was withdrawn in 1979, and the incest and rape exceptions were withdrawn in 1981. It was not until after Clinton's election in the 1990s that these exceptions were re-instated. To date, abortion is the only medical procedure not covered by federal healthcare. See Heather D Boonstra, "The Heart of the Matter: Public Funding of Abortion for Poor Women in the United States", *Guttmacher Policy Review* 10, no. 1 (2007): 12–16. On rape law developments in the 1970s, see "Law Reform Efforts: Rape and Sexual Assault in United States of America", *International Models Project on Human Rights*, last modified 18 October 2013, http://www.impowr.org/content/law-reform-efforts-rape-and-sexual-assault-united-states-america.

[130] "U.S. Legal History of Sexual Harassment: Statutory and Case Law as It Relates to Teens", *The Schuster Institute of Investigative Journalism* (https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/teen-sexual-harassment/timeline.html). See also Catherine MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

Supreme Court victory for Mechelle Vinson against her employer, Sidney Taylor of Meritor Savings Bank, in 1986, as well as legal recognition of sexual harassment as a *civil* violation.[131]

Perhaps against this backdrop of growing legal recognition for sexual violence, the first Take Back the Night marches took place in the 1970s, and in the 1980s they had spread to the streets of Massachusetts (where Wallace was based), drawing crowds of thousands of women. The marches spread to local campuses, too, with hundreds of Harvard and Radcliffe students marching after the rape of a Radcliffe student on campus.[132] The unique vulnerabilities of college women became the focus of intense media and academic attention during this period. In 1982, the feminist *Ms.* magazine published an article entitled "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic?", which was the first major piece of journalism to report on the largely taboo phenomenon of campus date rape. The article drew on Mary Koss's research at Kent State University, which found that one in eight of the women students interviewed had been victims of rape and one in four had been victims of attempted rape, and that "at least ten times more rapes occur among college students than are reflected in official crime statistics".[133] Soon after the *Ms.* article emerged, Billie Wright Dzeich and Linda Weiner published *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual Harassment on Campus*, observing that 20 to 30 percent of the college women interviewed as part of their study had been harassed by their professors, across both private and public institutions.[134] As a new vocabulary and sensibility regarding sexual violence on campus took root, fraternity culture also came under attack. Research into fraternity houses found that they were one of the most prevalent sites of violence against women. One study on campus gang rapes determined that fraternity members committed 55 percent of them, and that a disproportionate number of rapes occurred on fraternity property.[135] Another study suggested that, given the high prevalence of both rapes and rape cover-ups by

[131] Catherine MacKinnon, "The Logic of Experience: Reflections on the Development of Sexual Harassment Law", *Georgetown Law Journal* 90, no. 3 (2002): 824–825.

[132] Kathryn Tolbert and Richard Higgins, "Thousands of Women Take Back the Night", *The Boston Globe*, 30 August 1981; John E Yang, "Three Thousand Women March to Protest Violence", *The Boston Globe*, 10 August 1980.

[133] Following the overwhelming public response to the 1982 *Ms.* article, a three-year study into college rape ensued—conducted by *Ms.* and Koss, and funded by a federal loan from the Reagan Administration, which, unsurprisingly, stipulated it they would not fund the *dissemination* of the study's findings. 6000 women from 32 colleges were interviewed. In addition to consolidating the initial "one in four" figure of rape or attempted rape, the study also found that the majority of respondents whose experiences matched the legal definition of rape did not report the crime, and possibly did not think they had been raped—a finding that caused significant backlash from right-wing commentators, who rubbished the research for ignoring women's own perceptions. That rape had been normalised and silenced was, of course, the whole point of the study. See Ellen Sweet, "Date Rape: Naming, Publicizing, and Fighting a Pandemic", presented at "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s", conference organised by the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, Boston, MA, 27-29 March 2014 (http://www.bu.edu/wgs/files/2013/10/Sweet-Date-Rape-Naming-Publicizing-and-Fighting-a-Pandemic.pdf).

[134] Barbara Townsend, "Review of *The Leacherous Professor*", *Higher Education* 14, no. 1 (1985): 112–114, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1345&dat=19851104&id=KP5LAAAAIBAJ&sjid=tvkDAAAAIBAJ&pg=2508,396618&hl=en; Billie Wright Dziech and Linda Weiner, *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual Harassment on Campus* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

[135] Carol Bohmer and Andrea Parrot, *Sexual Assault on Campus: The Problem and the Solution* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1993). See also Julie K Ehrhart and Bernice R Sandler, *Campus Gang Rape: Party Games?* Project on the Status and Education of Women (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges, 1985); Patricia Yancey Martin and Robert A Hummer, "Fraternities and Rape on Campus", *Gender & Society* 3, no. 4 (1989): 457–473.

fraternity members, sexually abusive men tended to receive support from their peers, and that rape culture was facilitated by the homosocial living arrangements characteristic of college fraternities.[136]

Amherst College was initially slow in implementing structural changes to its traditional all-white, all-male model, but once the wheels of change were in motion they accelerated at a relatively rapid pace. Amherst was home to the oldest college fraternity house in the United States (Alpha Delta House, founded in 1875), and was in many ways the embodiment of elite "WASP" education.[137] The college graduated its first African American student, Edward Jones, in 1826, but it was another 130 or so years before it hired a female professor and set up a black studies department, and another 150 years before it opened its doors to women for the first time.[138] In 1980, Amherst graduated its first group of women students—the same year Wallace enrolled as a freshman.[139] In fact, some of the most drastic and historic structural changes would occur during Wallace's time at the college.

In 1982, after a six-foot phallic ice sculpture was discovered on the lawns of one of Amherst's fraternity houses, the college disbanded the organisation and called for a review of fraternity culture as a whole.[140] By late 1983, women constituted a significant portion of fraternity membership, having been welcomed in after the college became co-educational, but roughly one out of three female fraternity members "eventually quit their clubs because of male sexist behavior".[141] Indeed, as media interest in campus violence and fraternity culture grew, Amherst did not escape scrutiny, and a paper trail of "bad press" can be found in the local and national newspaper archives from the period.[142] On 26 February 1984, after a series of sit-ins and hunger strikes on the part of protesting fraternity members, the college board of trustees voted unanimously to permanently ban all fraternities on campus.[143] It was one of the first colleges in the country to do so, earning itself a much-needed reputation as an inclusive and progressive school (despite the fact that its student body in the 1980s remained overwhelmingly white).[144] Within the

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[136] Walter S DeKeseredy, "Male Peer Support and Woman Abuse: The Current State of Knowledge", *Sociological Focus* 23, no. 2 (1990): 129–139; Martin D Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy, *Sexual Assault on the College Campus: The Role of Male Peer Support* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).

[137] "Amherst's History: An Amherst Timeline", Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/history/timeline).

[138] "Amherst's History: 'Firsts' at Amherst College", Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/history/firsts). "Half a Century of Women Teaching at Amherst College: The Pioneer Women of Amherst College, 1962–83", Amherst College (https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/colloquia/women_teaching/early_bios).

[139] Chris Black, "Amherst Graduates Its First 129 Women", *The Boston Globe*, 26 May 1980.

[140] Associated Press, "Fraternity at Amherst Disbanded by Officials", *The New York Times*, 1 February 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/02/us/around-the-nation-fraternity-at-amherst-disbanded-by-officials.html; Associated Press, "Alumni Vote on the Fate of Amherst Fraternities", *The Boston Globe*, 18 December 1983.

[141] Gary McMillan, "Colby Abolishes Fraternities, and Amherst May Be Next", *The Boston Globe*, 29 January 1984.

[142] See examples in footnotes above. Amherst's neighbour college, UMass Amherst, had been the site of a gang rape in 1981, which presumably did not help the college's public image. See "Six Held in Amherst Rape", *The Boston Globe*, 19 May 1981.

[143] Associated Press, "Amherst Students Hold Sit-In", *The New York Times*, 21 February 1984, http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/21/us/amherst-students-hold-sit-in.html; Associated Press, "Amherst Trustees Vote to Close Fraternities", *The New York Times*, 26 February 1984, http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/26/us/around-the-nation-amherst-trustees-vote-to-close-fraternities.html.

[144] Zach Schonfeld, "Inside the Colleges that Killed Frats for Good", *Newsweek*, 10 March 2014,

space of a few years, then, second-wave feminism had permanently transformed the institution, first by making co-education a reality, and then by converting fraternity culture into an outlawed relic of the past. Wallace, whose Amherst career corresponds exactly with this local transformation, which was also playing out simultaneously at institutions across the country, absorbed the various impulses, energies, anxieties, and tensions that sprung from it into the novel that he wrote in his senior year.

Perhaps the defining image in the novel of the uncertain state of white masculinity in the 1980s comes in the opening dorm room scene, right after Lenore has learnt about the "ten women" who have been raped at Mount Holyoke in recent months. Her gaze immediately wafts to a poster on the wall of "a really muscular guy, without a shirt on . . . his back all shiny and bulging every which way" (*BS*, 8). Lenore's sister Clarice has had this poster since she was a teenager. Crucially, it is "old and ripped at the edges," and the man's face is not visible, since the reflective light from the ceiling "hides it in white" (*BS*, 8). Through this erasure, the blanched, faceless male becomes a stand-in for white heterosexual masculinity in general, as it is traditionally conceived and performed: big, virile, strong. That the picture is fraying and worn-out, however, and that Lenore sees it right after she hears the word "rape", hints at the damaged and untenable state of gender norms in the 1980s, and at the darker side of the ideal or posterised forms of masculinity on display in the dorm room. (Mindy's corner, we are told, boasts posters of James Dean and Richard Gere.) Indeed, the women will, minutes later, experience the darker side of masculinity first hand, as "Wang Dang" Lang barges into the room and has his way with them. And only Lenore, who notices the poster and is alarmed by the mention of rape, will do anything to stop him. Although seemingly a straightforward critique of hegemonic masculinity, the opening scene is complicated in the rest of the novel by Wallace's growing empathy with Lang, by the limits he places on Lenore's power and Lenore's resistance to Lang, and finally by Wallace's own displays of authorial dominance and control over Lenore.

"A penis with a thesaurus"

Despite the gender dynamics of *The Broom of the System* being unavoidably right there, in the opening scene, Clare Hayes-Brady is one of the only scholars who has paid attention to them. In her essay on the novel, she protests that "[w]omen are conspicuous in [Wallace's] writing either by their absence or [by] their lack of development".[145] Investigating this gender imbalance in Wallace's work, Hayes-Brady takes as her starting point the following comment made by Jonathan Franzen in his 2011 *New Yorker* piece about Wallace: "At the level of content, he gave us the worst of himself: he laid out, with an intensity of self-scrutiny worthy of comparison to Kafka and

http://www.newsweek.com/inside-colleges-killed-frats-good-231346. And see Associated Press, "Amherst, as Stipulated, Hires a Black Professor", *The New York Times*, 22 January 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/22/us/around-the-nation-amherst-as-stipulated-hires-a-black-professor.html, for an overview of the college's demographics in the 1980s.

[145] Clare Hayes-Brady, "'. . .': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace", *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds., Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 131.

Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, the extremes of his own narcissism, misogyny, compulsiveness, self-deception, dehumanizing moralism and theologizing, doubt in the possibility of love, and entrapment in footnotes-within-footnotes self-consciousness."[146] Hayes-Brady takes this casual charge of misogyny very seriously. She cites an interview in which Wallace commented that misogynistic attitudes are largely "rooted in fear", a comment she thinks displays "surprising tolerance", even sympathy, towards such attitudes.[147] The larger elephant in the room is, of course, Wallace's 1999 short-story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, which Franzen's passing reference to misogyny seems anchored in. In the collection, anonymous white males recount the details of their often-garish sexual exploits to a nameless, voiceless female interviewer, with the final instalment ("Brief Interview #20") dealing explicitly with the question of rape.[148] In her recent book on Wallace, Hayes-Brady affirms that the volume "has largely been read as a grouping of misogynistic voices talking through their fundamental hostility to women".[149] Another commentator has written that, taken as a whole, the volume "adds nothing interesting to the misogynist landscape that [Wallace] so chillingly explored in #20", which he argues should have remained as a standalone piece in the *Paris Review*, where it first appeared.[150] For many readers, the book has seemed gratuitous and indulgent, at best, and complicit in the characters' misogyny, at worst.

Hayes-Brady's overall objective is to offer a "more nuanced vision of Wallace's (admittedly frustrating) engaging with femininity and femaleness".[151] To this end, she points to Wallace's "almost-pathological consciousness of gender politics", which she finds present in his consistent use of the feminine second-person pronoun whenever he is talking about the reader (whom he refers to as "she" or "her" rather than "he" or "him").[152] She makes the argument that Wallace's literary "distancing" or erasure of women was not the result of "dislike" or even "fear", but a reflection of his "hyperaware[ness] of gender difference", of his keen sense of the "alterity" and "mystery" of femininity.[153] For Hayes-Brady, then, Wallace kept women at a distance in order to honour their difference from him. In this chapter, I am more interested in the moments when Wallace brings women close and embodies them, as he does in the opening scene of *The Broom of the System*, and in what this awkward proximity has to say about Wallace's anxiety regarding his female readership and his status as a male writer in a feminist era. (In other words, I want to reintroduce into the conversation the "fear" that Hayes-Brady stores neatly away.) I argue that Wallace's "hyperawareness", his "almost-pathological consciousness", of gender was not simply a

[146] Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away: 'Robinson Crusoe,' David Foster Wallace and the island of solitude", *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-jonathan-franzen. Quoted in Hayes-Brady, "Language, Gender".
[147] Hayes-Brady, "Language, Gender", 133.
[148] See Rachel Haley Himmelheber, "'I Believed She Could Save Me': Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20'", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no. 5 (2014): 522–535.
[149] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 175.
[150] Bob Wake, "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: Review", *Culture Vulture*, no date, https://culturevulture.net/books-cds/brief-interviews-with-hideous-men/.
[151] Hayes-Brady, "Language, Gender", 133.
[152] Ibid., 132.
[153] Ibid.

point of ontological intrigue, as Hayes-Brady presents it, but also an important political response to the social and literary climate in which he was writing. Put otherwise, I find the debate around whether or not Wallace was a misogynist less interesting than his evident desire not to *appear* as one, and in the strategies he employs to convince his readers accordingly.

Perhaps the best evidence we have that Wallace wanted to distinguish himself from his postmodernist forebears, who in the multicultural environment of the late 1980s and 1990s were being increasingly labelled as misogynistic, elitist, and generally out of touch, comes in a 1998 review he wrote of John Updike's novel *Towards the End of Time*. In the review, Wallace makes his dislike of Updike known, calling the author a "phallocrat" (male supremacist) and, along with Roth and Mailer, one of the "Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar realist fiction" in America.[154] In a footnote to the phrase "Great Male Narcissists", Wallace sarcastically qualifies his harsh appraisal: "Unless, of course, you consider constructing long encomiums to a woman's 'sacred several-lipped gateway' or saying things like 'It is true, the sight of her plump lips obediently distended around my swollen member, her eyelids lowered demurely, afflicts me with a religious peace' to be the same as loving her."[155] Wallace implies that anyone with a modicum of decency would consider such "encomiums" the markers not of love but of sexism and gross disrespect. Wallace's critique is a distancing move, an act of self-definition by an artist writing in the same general tradition as Updike and company: I am not them, he declares.

At one point in the review, Wallace itemises the number of pages devoted to different chauvinist themes in Updike's latest novel. His list reads like a feminist parody, and signals his intolerance of the kinds of attitudes being showcased:

> Total number of pages about Ben Turnbull's penis and his various feelings about it: 7.5;
> Total number of pages about the prostitute's body, with particular attention to sexual loci: 8.75;
> Total number of pages about golf: 15;
> Total number of pages of Ben Turnbull saying things like "I want women to be dirty" and "We are condemned, men and women, to symbiosis" and "She was a choice cut of meat and I hoped she held out for a fair price" and "The sexual parts are fiends, sacrificing everything to that aching point of contact": 36.5.[156]

Wallace also includes three "actual—trust me—quotations" about Updike from women he knows:

> "Just a penis with a thesaurus."
> "Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?"
> "Makes misogyny seem literary the same way [Rush] Limbaugh makes fascism seem funny."[157]

[154] Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One: Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer*, 13 October 1997, http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/observer1.html.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.

By offering himself as a mouthpiece for these female readers and their frustrations about sexism within the postmodernist genre, Wallace sides with them against the mainstream literary establishment—and presents himself as something other than mainstream. Wallace's main complaint, he tells us, is not that Updike's most recent protagonist is "stupid" (after all, "he can quote Kierkegaard and Pascal on angst and allude to the deaths of Schubert and Mozart") but that "he persists in the bizarre adolescent idea that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants is a cure for ontological despair". And when Updike mourns "the narrator's impotence as catastrophic, the ultimate symbol of death itself", it becomes clear that the author shares his hero's sex-obsessed view. Wallace concludes, "I'm not especially offended by this attitude; I mostly just don't get it. Erect or flaccid, Ben Turnbull's unhappiness is obvious right from the book's first page. But it never once occurs to him that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole."[158] Wallace does not "get" it because he, presumably, is not an asshole. And he knows the difference between fiction that is clever (replete with references to Kierkegaard, Pascal, and so on) and fiction that is socially aware. As we will see in *The Broom of the System*, he wants to show his readers that he can do both kinds of fiction.

Elaine Blair has suggested that, for all its feminist name-calling, Wallace's Updike review in fact betrays deep anxiety about his female readership: "No one", after all, "wants to be called a penis with a thesaurus".[159] She notes that, unlike Updike and the other "Great Male Narcissists", Wallace's generation of male postmodernist writers had to contend with a generation of women readers who were "not only children of divorce, but children of a feminist movement that had an especially profound influence on cultural criticism." Women, now, were a cultural and literary force to be reckoned with. Being cut off or "unloved" by this major readership contingent would constitute a "crisis" for the contemporary writer, who now had to write with this contingent in mind, but who did not necessarily want to stop writing about himself and his own demographic.[160] The creative solution to this conundrum is what Blair calls the "loser-figure", a sex-obsessed but perennially defeated character whose "humiliation" and "self-loathing" saturate the novel as much as his perverted thoughts do. The loser-figure is constantly putting himself down, or else the author's "ironizing impulse" is beating him to it.[161] The author does not mourn his hero's impotence as catastrophic but rather makes fun of it, parodying and exaggerating his failures with the opposite sex. And so the loser-figure functions as a kind of embedded apology to the female reader on the part of the male author, who preempts her scrutinising gaze by mocking the perverted hero before she can, and neutralising his sexist attitudes through derision. Blair imagines the writer's strategy here as a kind of "complicated bargain": "Then you and I, female reader, can share a laugh at the characters' expense, and this will bring us closer together and forestall the dreaded

[158] Ibid.
[159] Elaine Blair, "Great American Losers", *New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/03/09/great-american-losers/.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.

possibility of your leaving me."[162] In short, the loser-figure is the fictional version of Wallace's book review, parodying misogyny left, right, and centre in an attempt to win the female reader's favour.

But the trappings of derision mask a deeper affiliation between author and pervert-hero, who in the end still gets to "own" and dominate the text. "Female characters get to remind the hero that he's a navel-gazing jerk," Blair observes, "but most of the good lines, and certainly the brilliant social and psychological observations, still go to the hero". In fact, it is almost as if "the hero is entitled to the spotlight *because* he has been appropriately self-critical—it's his novel, bought and paid for with all those jokes at his own expense".[163] The author's feminist solidarity only go so far, in other words, and the writer's agenda is less progressive than it first appears. As Blair concludes: "The male novelists performing elaborate genuflections toward female readers are perhaps not exactly bargaining so much as trying to draw us into a new contract: I, the author, promise always to acknowledge my characters' narcissism, and you, in return, will continue to take an interest in it."[164] The new generation of writers is smart enough to make a point of attacking androcentrism while still creating an androcentric text. A similar sort of pattern is actually already evident in Wallace's Updike review, where even as he catalogues women's complaints about the author he subtly undermines them, saying that they are partly a result of the "P.C. backlash" and that "they're usually accompanied by the sort of facial expressions where you can tell there's not going to be any profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy or talking about the sheer aesthetic pleasure of Updike's prose".[165] Almost simultaneously, then, Wallace wholeheartedly affirms feminist objections to Updike's literature and roundly dismisses them as irrational and narrow. This simultaneity becomes less confusing if we follow Blair in seeing the doubleness (or doublespeak) of Wallace's generation of white male writers, who needed to appeal to a wider, more politically engaged audience but who still inhabited a very particular set of concerns and perspectives.

In *White Guys*, Pfeil identifies an uncannily similar phenomenon within mainstream films emerging in the early 1990s, and his argument is helpful in confirming Blair's diagnosis of a certain generation of American cultural producers. Pfeil discusses five films released in 1991 (*City Slickers*, *Regarding Henry*, *The Doctor*, *The Fisher King*, and *Hook*), giving them the collective name of "sensitive-guy films" because of the similar way in which they all construct masculinity: attuned to the changing times, but only to a point. The films all portray "the redemption and conversion of their white male protagonists from one or another variant of closed-down, alienated boor to an opened-up, sensitive guy", writes Pfeil (*WG*, 37). The protagonists are uniformly corrupted, arrogant, macho, emotionally distant high-fliers of the professional-managerial class—a yuppie, a lawyer, a surgeon, a radio host, another lawyer—who, through some major "life-changing" event, end up spiritually reformed and renewed: more sensitive, more emotionally connected, more authentic, more "feminine". Despite their spiritual softening, however, these men do not relinquish any of their social privileges. As Pfeil puts it, the films must figure out "how the born-again, sensitized White Guy can keep the wisdom of his new-found or reborn childishness without

[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Wallace, "John Updike".

dropping the reins of his power" (*WG*, 42). This negotiation works itself out mainly in these men's spousal relationships, which remain unchanged in terms of normative gender roles and patriarchal control: the wives remain demure and submissive throughout their husbands' transformation. In the end, these films "enact a critique of the callous selfishness of dominant modes of white straight masculinity, and endorse the traditionally feminine attributes of sensitivity, compassion, nurturance and emotional fluency", yet they ultimately "leave their women characters short of power and their male protagonists reinvigorated in their predominance" (*WG*, 60–61). Nothing has changed, except the way that masculinity *presents* itself. Meanwhile, the same kind of hypocrisy we find in these films was presenting itself on the global stage in the late 1980s and 1990s, as President Bush attempted to "call for a 'kinder, gentler' nation while brandishing his saber in Panama and the Persian Gulf and slashing away at social programs at home" (*WG*, 60).

In the strange and conflicting impulses of the sensitive-guy film, Pfeil sees traces of Antonio Gramsci's dictum that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (*WG*, 55). By the end of the 1980s, traditional and aggressive forms of patriarchy were no longer tolerated by the culture, but gender equality and inclusivity had not yet been achieved. For Pfeil, the 1991 films are simply a reflection of the liminal politics of the period. They mirror the "everyday white, middle-class, proto-*feminist* consciousness" that was being formed at the turn of the decade, which was still a "protean mélange of ideologies"—fluid, flexible, ambivalent—rather than anything unified and coherent (*WG*, 55, 60). In other words, the films only go so far in transforming masculinity because the culture itself had only progressed so far in its thinking about masculinity. He dismisses the other possibility: that masculinity itself plays a part in halting women's progress, by absorbing feminist discourse into itself, and using feminine tropes like sensitivity and care to improve its image and maintain its stronghold. He denies, indeed, that these films represent "the newest ruse of patriarchal power", or "a concerted attempt to simultaneously renovate, modulate, and extend male dominance" (*WG*, 55, 60). After all, he points out, these films were all box-office successes, and the audiences were generally full of more women than men: we cannot assume that these female moviegoers were uniformly duped, or uniformly right-wing (*WG*, 55). Rather, their attraction to the androcentric sensitive-guy film seems to reflect the ambivalent nature of mainstream feminism at the time (*WG*, 55). But what if the truth involves a combination of these two possibilities, in line with Blair's hypothesis? Feminism may still have been defining itself, but some level of unconscious co-optation, negotiation, and resistance was surely also taking place among men, including male artists and creatives. The usefulness of feminism as a softening and sensitising rhetorical device—rather than strictly a tool for social reform—was beginning to creep into mainstream culture. And the abundance of women in the audience speaks as much to the success of this rhetorical strategy as it does to the protean nature of second-wave feminism.

Interestingly, Wallace's own film criticism suggests that he, too, supported feminism but only to a point. In a review article on *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, another 1991 film, Wallace makes a case for why the original *Terminator* movie is superior, citing the second movie's over-reliance on special effects at the expense of plot and character depth. Beneath this claim, though, is a complaint about the main woman character, Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton. Wallace is put off by her butch physique in the second film, and by the fact that she is constantly "snarling and baring her teeth and saying stuff like 'Don't fuck with me!' and 'Men like you know

nothing about really creating something!'"[166] He compares her to the original Sarah Connor, who he considers to be "the first of [director James] Cameron's two great action heroines", with the other being Ellen Ripley of the 1986 film *Aliens*.[167] In a footnote, he explains his admiration for these heroines, betraying his understanding of feminism:

> It is a complete mystery why feminist film scholars haven't paid more attention to Cameron and his early collaborator Gale Anne Hurd [producer of *The Terminator* and *Aliens*]. *The Terminator* and *Aliens* were both violent action films with tough, competent female protagonists (incredibly rare) whose toughness and competence in no way diminished their "femininity" (even more rare, unheard of), a femininity that is rooted (along with both films' thematics) in notions of *maternity* rather than just sexuality. For example, compare Cameron's Ellen Ripley [in the later *Aliens*] with the panty-and-tank-top Ripley of [Ridley Scott's 1979] *Alien.*[168]

Wallace is savvy enough to applaud the "toughness and competence" of these female protagonists, which replaces the typical sexualisation and objectification of women in cinema. He even suggests that he has outdone feminist critics by noticing these characters and their virtues. But Wallace apparently draws the line at versions of femininity that are "unfeminine", or that muddy the boundary between masculinity and femininity in comfortable ways (i.e., Sarah Connor's fierceness and vulgarity in the second film, her more aggressive expression of her "maternity"). In Pfeil's appraisal of the second *Terminator* film, he actually celebrates its "buff warrior-mom Sarah Connor" as an image of "literally empowered womanhood", and a complement to the other big blockbuster of the year, *Thelma and Louise* (*WG*, 53). However, like *Thelma and Louise*, and like the string of sensitive-guy films that emerged the same year, *Terminator 2* "places limits on the effectivity of women's newfound power", rendering the film dissatisfying for Pfeil. Sarah cannot defeat the evil man-machine, the T-1000 Terminator, "without the help of another man-machine"—Schwarzenegger.[169] Wallace, by contrast, seems to have the opposite complaint: the version of womanhood on display is too empowered, too masculine. In Wallace's preference for one *Terminator* over the next, we find a kind of model for Lenore Beadsman, who takes a stand against sexual harassment and aggressive heterosexual masculinity in the opening scene and elsewhere, but who then finds all sorts of limits and constraints placed on her power—mainly by Wallace himself.

[166] Wallace, "The (As It Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*" (1998), *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 187.
[167] Ibid., 180.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.

"Playing pimp"

While Blair does not mention Wallace's fiction in her analysis, and while *The Broom of the System* was written some years before Pfeil's "sensitive-guy" movies came out, the novel is an uncanny illustration of the cultural genuflection to feminism described by these scholars. Of course, the most conspicuous instance of the novel's hyperawareness of the female reader is the opening scene, and Wallace's portrayal there of Lenore as a kind of kick-ass proto-feminist. But Wallace also creates his own "loser-figure" in the form of Rick Vigorous, Lenore's boss-turned-boyfriend of several years, and another alumnus of Amherst College. Rick is the physical embodiment of sham hypermasculinity, and of the general crisis of masculinity being defined in the 1980s, as men's identity as breadwinner, provider, protector, patriarch became increasingly tenuous. Rick is "Vigorous" in name only: by his own admission, he is "vaguely effeminate . . . [l]argely without chin, neither tall nor strong, balding badly" (*BS*, 286). (Another character puts it more strongly, referring to Rick as "the little fruit fly in the beret and double chin" [*BS*, 126].) Most strikingly, though, he is endowed with a "freakishly small penis", which is the cause of endless nightmares, panic attacks, and fits of debilitating envy, and which renders him physically unable to have sex with Lenore (*BS*, 151). To compensate for his effective impotence, his almost inter-sex physiology, Rick gets into the habit of telling Lenore quirky, elaborate stories while they are in bed, paraphrased versions of the short-story submissions he receives at the literary journal that he runs (with Lenore's help). These submissions, he tells Lenore, are almost always "troubled-college-student material", notable for their tendency to be "hideously self-conscious . . . mordantly cynical, then simperingly naïve . . . consistently, off-puttingly pretentious . . . not even potentially literature" (*BS*, 307). This cynical, self-conscious description is an obvious reference to the novel's own status as "troubled-college-student material", creating an associative link between Wallace-as-storyteller and Rick-as-storyteller: in the world of the novel, Wallace-type college writers produce the inadequate material that Rick uses to cover up his inadequacies in the bedroom. Instead of falling into grief about his main character's failed manhood, then, as Updike does in the novel Wallace so scathingly reviewed, Wallace turns it into a source of not only caricature but also self-critique, making himself complicit in Rick's inadequacies, and effectively shielding himself from the very ridicule he would later heap on Updike and his writerly ilk. After all, no one can call you "a penis with a thesaurus" if your fiction is all about foregrounding the shortcomings (as it were) of American men, including their literary output.

But Blair's thesis proves correct in the end. The text really "belongs" to Rick, who takes up much more narrative space than Lenore, the official protagonist, does. The novel is filled with his first-person journals and reveries, the "Fieldbender" stories he tries to write, the stories he tells Lenore at night, and his sex-fuelled dreams, which he describes to the psychologist he shares with Lenore. (She cannot even claim that space for herself.) Indeed, much of the content generated by Rick's persona is sex-fuelled: his dreams involve urinating from an enormous penis in front of Lenore and performing oral sex on the Queen of England, for example, and the Fieldbender collection turns on a perverted man who spies on little boys in the next-door house for his pleasure (*BS*, 325, 44, 336). According to Blair's theory, the female reader tolerates these bizarre perversions because Rick himself is such an impotent and pathetic figure:

> When you see the loser-figure in a novel, what you are seeing is a complicated bargain that goes something like this: yes, it is kind of immature and boorish to be thinking about sex all the time and ogling and objectifying women, but this is what we men sometimes do and we have to write about it. We fervently promise, however, to avoid the mistake of the late Updike novels: we will always, always, call our characters out when they're being self-absorbed jerks and louts. We will make them comically pathetic, and punish them for their infractions a priori by making them undesirable to women, thus anticipating what we imagine will be your judgments, female reader.[170]

As a framework for understanding the function of Rick Vigorous in the novel, I find Blair's characterisation of the loser-figure immensely helpful. It also helps us make sense of the way the "troubled-college-student material" is repeatedly derided for its pretentiousness and naivety, while still taking up dozens of pages at a time—and, extending the logic, of the way Wallace can implicitly deride himself as pretentious and naïve while still writing out this "self-obsessed *bildungsroman*", as he called it. There is a curious way in which Wallace's concessions to feminism allow him to keep white masculinity centre stage.

The real loser in all of this is, of course, Lenore, who is kept at a third-person distance throughout the novel, and who is more often than not the direct object of Rick's fantasies and Wallace's gags (rather than a free-standing subject and protagonist in her own right). When we meet Lenore again in 1990, nine years after the opening ordeal, her circumstances are not especially favourable. Despite being a skilled university graduate, she is working as a switchboard operator at Rick's literary journal, earning "four dollars an hour" (just about minimum wage at the time).[171] And even though she defied her family by not following her sister to Mount Holyoke, choosing the more neutral Oberlin College instead, her experience at Mount Holyoke as a teenager has left its mark on her: she suffers from a "persistent nosebleed problem", which seems to have its origins in that night at Mount Holyoke, when her nose started bleeding as soon as she had escaped from the dorm room; she showers compulsively, "between five and eight showers a day", and feels "*dirty*"; she avoids men her own age and instead pairs up with the much older Rick, who does not pose any kind of sexual threat, but who compensates for his diminished sexuality by being possessive, controlling, and "schizophrenically narcissistic" (*BS*, 67, 405, 58). Towards the end of the novel, Rick goes so far as to lure Lenore into the fictional man-made desert outside their town and actually handcuff her wrist to his own. While perhaps a statement about the economic and social realities facing women in the late 1980s and early 1990s, even after all the institutional advances wrought by second-wave feminism, or about the lingering effects of sexual violence, Wallace's positioning of the older Lenore very quickly descends into the realm of caricature and pubescent humour. For example, Wallace names Rick's partner at the literary journal Monroe Frequent, and the literary journal itself Frequent and Vigorous, which means that Lenore spends all day saying "Frequent and Vigorous" into the phone. She also lives in the fictional city of East

[170] Blair.

[171] US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, "History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938–2009", https://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm.

Corinth, Ohio, which her father owns and her grandfather built, planning it in such a way that the aerial view of the city is an exact replica of 1950s sex symbol Jane Mansfield. The house where Lenore rents a room is located in the "trim lower" suburb of the Mansfield grid: her vagina, in other words. It might be possible, again, to read this description as a feminist comment on Lenore's literal embeddedness within a system of patriarchy and sexual objectification, but it is just as much a silly sex joke at her expense ("paid for", to use Blair's terminology, by all the references to patriarchy in the novel, and by Wallace's portrayal of both Lenore's father and her grandfather as cruel megalomaniacs).

Lenore loses all her power at the end of the novel, when she is paired up with Andrew "Wang Dang" Lang, the grotesquely virile fraternity pledge who forced his way into the women's dorm room in the opening scene, and who makes a comeback in the later part of the novel as a strapping thirty-something womaniser. It emerges that Lang has been married to Clarice's seductive roommate Mindy since the incident at Mount Holyoke—the beneficiary of a clear case of Stockholm syndrome—and that his misogynistic tendencies have only intensified over the years. In the scene in which he leaves his wife, Wallace offers us a full display of Lang's misogyny, which is ratcheted up to the point of parody. Lang tells Mindy that he has "run out of holes" in her body and "things to stick in them" ("My pecker, my finger, my tongue, my toes . . . My hair, my nose. My wallet. My car keys") (*BS*, 176). He tells her he has "blasted over a dozen women" since their wedding and betrayed her "hundreds of times" (*BS*, 177). When Mindy begs him to stay, he calls her a "very very dumb woman", tells her to "fuck off", and assures her that his growing erection during the scene is "purely perverse excitement at seein' [her] upset" (*BS*, 176–178). Later in the novel we see Lang calling patrons of a gay bar "faggots", making lewd comments about a flight attendant ("Lord, though, look at that. That's a first-rate pooper, under that skirt"), and sleeping with Lenore's best friend Candy in an attempt to get closer to Lenore (*BS*, 225, 258). Indeed, through a Dickensian sequence of events, Wallace brings Lang to East Corinth, has him seduce Lenore, and finally has him rescue her from Rick's literal, handcuffed grip and carry her off into the distance. Marshall Boswell, citing the Updike review, has argued that Wallace's portrayal of Lang in the book is an extended parody of Updike's fiction, and especially of his *Rabbit, Run* series, the first novel of which features the protagonist leaving his wife in much the same way that Lang leaves Mindy.[172] He reads *The Broom of the System* as, among other things, a "large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny writ large".[173] But if Lang is a straightforward Updike caricature, why have Lenore end up with him? Why move Lenore from the position of the stiletto-throwing proto-feminist to the same position of Stockholm syndrome originally occupied by the defeated Mindy, especially given the emphasis on how traumatised Lenore was by the Mount Holyoke incident?

Boswell admits that Lang's transformation into the "good guy" at the end of the novel is "somewhat unconvincing[ ]", but he does not interrogate this failure on Wallace's part.[174] Hayes-Brady, astonishingly, is convinced by Lang's good guy status, arguing that Lenore's "later, better relationship" with Lang is an improvement on her earlier relationship with Rick, because there is greater equality between Lenore and Lang, and therefore greater communication between them,

[172] Boswell, 44.
[173] Ibid., 41.
[174] Ibid., 48.

too.[175] Of course, such a reading neglects the obvious inequality that exists between man and woman in this partnership, beginning with the opening scene of sexual harassment (hardly mentioned in Hayes-Brady's analysis), and continuing right to the end of the novel. Lenore herself emphasises her powerlessness in relation to Lang right before she first sleeps with him, in terms that should make the opening scene impossible to ignore:

> [H]ow come I feel like the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you? . . . When I didn't even ask for it at *all*? . . . When I didn't even *like* you? I didn't *want* you . . . I *hated* you . . . You came in that time, and terrorized us, and were drunk, and that guy's stupid bottom, and Sue Shaw was so scared . . . And I say I don't want you, that I'm mad, and have a right to be, and everybody just winks, and nudges, and gets a tone, and pushes, pushes, pushes . . . I've just felt so *dirty*. So out of control. (*BS*, 405)

Articulating her position in distinctly gendered terms, Lenore declares that she feels prostituted, "dirty", and, most importantly in the context of the novel, "out of control". Is this bold declaration of what Lang did to her back at Mount Holyoke ("terrorized" her), and how she feels about it ("mad", with the "right to be"), simply another expression of the "large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny writ large" that Boswell associates with *The Broom of the System*? Is Wallace here simply calling out the various systems of control that trap and subjugate women against their will? Possibly. In this case, Lenore's final union with Lang would be a statement about the ongoing pervasiveness of patriarchal structures, and about the important work that still needs to be done in dismantling them.

But we should bear in mind Blair's caution about the *uses* of feminist critique for the purposes of remaining relevant to women readers at the end of the twentieth century, and the way this utilitarian mode of feminism often creates the appearance of inclusivity while maintaining the status quo. Following Blair, I would emphasise instead the endless stream of penis jokes that "Wang Dang" Lang allows Wallace to introduce into the narrative, as a counter-point to the impotent loser-figure Rick, and, more seriously, the way Wallace gradually humanises, softens, and sensitises Lang as the narrative wears on. We see Lang move from harassing college women and verbally abusing his wife to displaying genuine tenderness and patience towards Lenore, at one point even recounting stories of his ailing grandmother (*BS*, 416–417). The effect of softening the novel's aggressive alpha male is that he gets to have it both ways: he becomes a more sympathetic character, without relinquishing any of his power over women. After all, Lenore's fundamental resistance to Lang ("I don't want you . . . I'm mad, and have a right to be") is never acknowledged, and once he has "rescued" her from Rick he tells her, "You're mine now"—a phrase that, however cute, does not exactly bode well for her empowerment (*BS*, 442). The feminist critique staged by the novel exhausts itself and becomes something else when the supposed object of its reproach becomes the "good guy", and "gets the girl" against her will.

But Wallace's complicity with the patriarchal systems of control he is meant to be calling out in the novel goes deeper than that. When Lenore claims, "I've just felt so *dirty*. So out of

[175] Hayes-Brady, 144.

control", her statement is meant to have metafictional significance, too. Throughout the novel, Lenore frets over her lack of agency in shaping her reality. The basis for this anxiety is, ostensibly, Wittgenstein's early philosophy of language, fed to her by her great-grandmother and namesake (Lenore Beadsman Senior, or simply, and punningly, "Gramma") who studied under the "mad crackpot genius" at Cambridge in the 1920s (*BS*, 75). Rick sums up Lenore's situation to her like this: "Lenore [Senior] has you believing . . . that you're not really real, or that you're only real insofar as you're told about, so that to the extent that you're real you're controlled, and thus not in control, so that you're more like a sort of character than a person, really—and of course Lenore [Senior] would say the two are the same, now, wouldn't she?" (*BS*, 250). In the context of the novel, this abstract description of Lenore's philosophical conundrum becomes an exact description of her literary status: in books, all "persons" are merely "characters", including Lenore. Herein lies the "gag", as Wallace described it to McCaffery: Lenore is "a character in a story who's terribly afraid that she's really nothing more than a character in a story". The implication of this clever metafictional layering is, of course, that the real puppet master who manipulates and controls Lenore is not another player in the world of the novel—not Wittgenstein, not Gramma, not Rick, not even Lang—but the writer of her story, the creator of her character: Wallace himself. When Lenore asks Lang the question, "[H]ow come I feel like the whole universe is playing pimp for me with you?", the metafictional subtext is that Lenore's "whole universe" is this novel, of which Wallace is master. Wallace, then, is Lenore's effective "pimp". What at first reads like an empathetic feminist critique on Lenore's behalf (in which she speaks up for the first time about her teenage trauma and her sense of powerlessness) just as easily becomes "a funny little post-structural gag" at her expense, designed to display the full breadth of Wallace's wit and literary prowess, as he himself admits in his interviews about the novel. Hayes-Brady writes that "Lenore represents the passivity of the feminine [in Wallace's fiction], which contrasts strong with the active male—the tennis player, the criminal, the maker of objects, and doer of things".[176] I think we need to consider Wallace's own active masculinity in *The Broom of the System*, as it is expressed through his desire for total mastery and control—his desire to have the novel's last word, as it were.

Might Wallace's desire for mastery extend further than his characters, touching even the reader herself? Adam Kelly suggests as much, but he phrases the matter in terms of a simple power dynamic between writer and reader, unmarked by gender concerns. Whereas critics such as Boswell see the novel's incomplete last sentence ("I'm a man of my") as a "blank space", leaving the system "open" to the reader, Kelly argues that, "because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in the sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated".[177] The last word (and so, too, "word" and *logos* itself) belongs to Wallace: even though he leaves the space blank, the reader can only finish it in one way. The ending of the novel is "a *gesture* toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it", writes Kelly, and Wallace ends up imitating "the elaborate authorial mastery he associates with the postmodern metafictionists".[178] Given Wallace's obsessive reference to the reader as "she" in much of his non-fiction, and given Blair's suggestion

[176] Hayes-Brady, 135.
[177] Adam Kelly, "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 273.
[178] Ibid., 273, 282.

that Wallace's generation of writers were indeed hyperaware of their female readers, I would like to push this argument further and consider the gendered significance of Wallace's "desire to control meaning and the reader's agency", as Kelly puts it.[179] Wallace's empowerment of Lang at the expense of Lenore may run parallel to his elevation of his agency as writer over the agency of the reader as woman, and both devices may on some level be a form of subtle pushback against the uncertain state of masculinity in the age of second-wave feminism, an attempt to reassert masculine authority in discreet ways. Meanwhile, Wallace's efforts to nonetheless create an impression of openness and "free play", of the ideal *scriptible* text, may mirror his efforts to present himself as a straightforward feminist sympathiser, well versed in the language of gender equality and gender politics. Kelly proposes that Wallace's grand authorial aspirations in *The Broom of the System* were what "most encouraged Wallace later to dismiss the book as a failure".[180] But perhaps his dismissal of the book also has something to do with its failure to really pursue the gender equality that it pays lip service to (or to properly critique the gender inequality that it talks so much about), both at the level of character development and at the level of the writer–reader relationship. In the end, the novel seems a missed opportunity to join the "political practice of coalition-building" that Brenner mentions and truly embrace an attitude of feminism, defined by Jackie Brookner as "a commitment to the full humanity of all women *and* all men, and a dismantling of the patriarchal values that inhibit this".[181]

Feminism versus poststructuralism

There is a fundamental tension in *The Broom of the System* between the contested, embodied realm of politics, identity politics, and social reform, on the one hand, and the more neutral, "intellectual" realm of language, theory, metafiction, and artistry, on the other. On the whole, the novel's theoretical concerns take precedence, but, as I have been suggesting, such concerns are never purely neutral, and are always still imbued with particular political ideologies, aspirations, anxieties, and agendas. When Wallace creates a female protagonist to dramatise Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and rehearse its metafictional possibilities, her gender interacts with that philosophy and changes the stakes of the metafictional games set up around her character. When Wallace moves his protagonist through different empowering or subjugating relationships with men, these narrative movements are not peripheral ornamentation for the main, theory-driven plot, but rather reflect the cultural energies of the campus on which they were written, and complicate the book's heavy emphasis on theory in important ways.

If the novel's empathy with the feminist cause seems to wane in direct proportion to the author's enchantment with metafiction, language, and his mastery of these things, this overlap may be meaningful. A number of scholars writing about poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s have commented on the fraught relationship that existed between these

[179] Ibid., 273.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Jackie Brookner, "Feminism and Students of the '80s and '90s: The Lady and the Raging Bitch; Or, How Feminism Got a Bad Name", *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (1991): 11–13. My emphasis.

literary movements, on the one hand, and earnest political engagement and the pursuit of structural reform, on the other. Kathleen Fitzpatrick has in fact argued that postmodernism was adopted so enthusiastically as a theoretical paradigm precisely because it sanctioned an "escape" from political responsibility. As she wrote in 2006:

> [P]ostmodernist theory came to prominence in the contemporary academy to some degree as a reaction to the identity-based political and intellectual movements of the 1960s and 1970s, reevaluating concepts of individual sovereignty just as some marginalized groups gained the political sway necessary to assert and give voice to their individuality, declaring the death of the master narrative in the wake of the articulation and critique of the master narratives of patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonial power. In this way, postmodernist theory functioned to return a group of predominantly white male thinkers to the center of intellectual inquiry while masking the social implications of both the theory's evacuation of individual identity and the particular identities of its practitioners. One might likewise begin to question whether postmodernist fiction—that too-slippery category—has been similarly marked from the outset by its escape from considerations of the social uses and misuses of power with regard to human difference, and its return instead to the universalized cultural problems of contemporary whiteness, maleness, Americanness.[182]

Even if one disagrees with Fitzpatrick's exact historiography, the dichotomy she draws up between identity-based politics and activism and the "universal" concerns and political fatigue of postmodernist writing is worth paying attention to, because it constitutes the main strain of criticism levelled against the postmodernism movement over the decades. Certainly, it is possible to characterise the narrative arc of *The Broom of the System* as performing exactly this "escape from considerations of the social uses and misuses of power with regard to human difference", and this retreat "to the universalized cultural problems of contemporary whiteness, maleness, Americanness", as the novel moves from intense immersion in campus gender politics and the perils of rape culture to clever metafictional vignettes involving stories-within-stories, talking cockatiels, characters convinced they are characters, and so on.

Writing a couple of decades before Fitzpatrick, and focusing more on European poststructuralism than on American forms of postmodernism, Terry Eagleton noticed a similar dichotomy between politics and theory in the post-1960s academy, arguing that "[t]here are some forms of post-structuralism which represent a hedonist withdrawal from history".[183] Eagleton's historiography looks slightly different to Fitzpatrick's, however. In *Literary Theory*, Eagleton points to the devastating failures and betrayals of the 1968 student uprising, in which trade-union leaders reneged on the students' and workers' demands and accepted "a generous, capitalist-preserving

[182] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 218. My emphasis.

[183] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1983): 130. For a concise and cogent discussion of the relationship between poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and history/post-history, see Jane Caplan, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians", *Central European History* 22, nos. 3–4 (1989): 260–278.

deal from the government",[184] and the effect that this outcome had on the prevailing academic mood in Europe in the years that followed. As the student movement was "driven underground into discourse", Eagleton writes, poststructuralism was born: "Post-structuralism was a product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least, was likely to beat you over the head for doing so."[185] The poststructuralist suspicion of totalising, extra-discursive meta-narratives, then, is not accidental but instead "born of a specific political defeat and disillusion".[186] In language, text, writing, and reading-as-writing, Eagleton argues, European intellectuals found "the last uncolonized enclave in which [they could] play, savouring the sumptuousness of the signifier in heady disregard of whatever might be going on in the Elysée palace or the Renault factories".[187] So-called "Third World" intellectuals did not have this luxury, of course. For them, a "general grasp of imperialism"—and the use of other political meta-narratives—was essential for the decolonisation campaigns that would secure their independence from European rule. The "erotic frissons of reading" would not be enough to solve their problems.[188]

The version of Derridean construction practised by the Yale critics in the late 1970s represents, for Eagleton, the most dangerous manifestation of the poststructuralist capacity for hedonistic withdrawals from history. These critics' belief in "the impossibility of language's ever doing anything more than talk about its own failure" freed them "from having to assume a position on important issues" (since no stated position could ever be "serious" or "true") and also gave them the ability to neutralise the horrors of history, "viewing famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifle as yet more undecidable 'text'".[189] This is the very same view of language that John Barth put forward in his 1967 treatise "The Literature of Exhaustion", where he insisted that texts in the postmodern tradition should constantly signal their own status as texts, reminding the reader that the "story" she is reading is really just a string of words spun from the author's pen, rather than an actual representation of anything beyond the textual material.[190] Wallace's debut novel, which styles itself as a kind of "pure" postmodernist text, seems to share this exhausted view of literature, with its characters who continually question their own reality, and its self-referential comments about the pretentiousness and naivety of college-level fiction. As we have seen, too, the seriousness of its various scenes of sexual harassment, misogyny, and feminist outrage is gradually eroded and undone by the conversion of the narrative into one big language game, played by a godly Wallace with his impotent characters, as his equally impotent reader looks on. And so these gender-based concerns end up becoming "yet more undecidable 'text'" for the trickster author to render meaningless and self-constructed, as he blurs the boundaries between truth and untruth,

[184] "Egalité! Liberté! Sexualité!: Paris, May 1968", *The Independent*, 23 February 2008, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/egalit-libert-sexualit-paris-may-1968-784703.html.
[185] Eagleton, 123.
[186] Ibid., 124.
[187] Ibid., 122.
[188] Ibid., 124.
[189] Ibid., 126, 125, 127.
[190] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 62–76.

seriousness and jest.

Writing in the late 1980s, feminist scholar Linda Alcoff made the argument that, because poststructuralist modes of thinking tend to declare every problem, question, text, and interpretation "undecidable", they can be of very little use to feminists, who have to make decisions about what constitutes sexism and gender discrimination and then take steps to remedy these injustices. She grounds her argument in Derrida's famous deconstruction of Nietzsche's views on women in his book *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Despite "the seemingly incontrovertible interpretation of Nietzsche's works as misogynist", Alcoff explains, one of the three interpretations that Derrida puts forward about Nietzsche frames his work in relation to "purportedly feminist propositions", rendering the question of Nietzsche's misogyny less decidable that it at first appears.[191] Alcoff is unconvinced: "But how can this be helpful to feminists, who need to have their accusations of misogyny validated rather than rendered 'undecidable'?" Her point is not that we must brand Derrida "antifeminist", or reject the whole of deconstruction as hostile to feminism. Rather, it is that "the thesis of undecidabillity as it is applied in the case of Nietzsche sounds too much like yet another version of the antifeminist argument that our perception of sexism is based on a skewed, limited perspective and that what we take to be misogyny is in reality helpful rather than hurtful to the cause of women."[192] Wallace tows this line directly in *The Broom of the System* when he presents the blatantly misogynistic, womanising Lang as by turns "hurtful" and "helpful" to Lenore, rendering his misogyny less "decidable" than it at first appears (as the scholarly ambivalence surrounding this character confirms).

Alcoff makes this point about Derrida and Nietzsche as part of a larger enquiry into the relationship between poststructuralism and feminism, or "poststructuralist feminism", which she argues is a fundamentally contradictory and conflicted approach. "Applied to the concept of woman," she writes, "the post-structuralist's view results in what I shall call nominalism: the idea that the category 'woman' is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction."[193] The nominalist position is, of course, attractive, since "it seems to hold out the promise of an increased freedom for women, the 'free play' of a plurality of differences unhampered by any predetermined gender identity as formulated by either patriarchy or cultural feminism."[194] Essentialist, binary thinking about identity is substituted, in this model, with the fluid and free play of the non-subject. But the "wholly negative" version of feminism practised by Julia Kristeva, for example, who rejects "everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society", because the category of "woman" is "something which does not even belong in the order of being", is self-defeating, in Alcoff's analysis.[195] For if patriarchy, gender roles, and the right-wing subject who maintains them are culturally constructed, why not also feminism, equality, and the left-wing subject? "Post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity pertain to the

[191] Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", *Signs* 13, no. 3 (1988): 419.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid., 417.
[194] Ibid., 418.
[195] Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial", in *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 166; Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined", *New French Feminisms*, 137. Quoted in Alcoff.

construction of all subjects or they pertain to none", Alcoff concludes. "And here is precisely the dilemma for feminists: How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject? Nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself."[196] Phrased in terms of *The Broom of the System*, how can we ground a feminist politics in a novel that constantly undermines the female protagonist's very reality? Emphasising Lenore's status as a linguistic construct might seem to align Wallace with poststructuralist feminism, where "woman" and "man" are false categories to begin with, but Lang's "Wang Dang" virility does not get the same treatment, remaining more or less unchallenged and triumphant until the end. Wallace risks deconstructing Lenore to the point where she is no longer a political subject whose grievances and struggles even matter or exist at all.

"Word magic"

Wallace's first novel certainly shares affinities with European poststructuralism, including its fraught relationship with feminism, but it also more broadly reflects the troubled relationship between literature and politics in the aftermath of the New Left in America. Michael Szalay and Sean McCann, in their essay "Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left", explore how the perceived failures of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and the horrors of the Vietnam War prompted a search for new avenues of social reform. Frustrated with the Kennedy-style institutionalisation of mainstream liberalism, and the similarly "programmatic, managerial" approach of the Old Left, leftist activists, intellectuals, and artists in the 1960s found refuge in a conceptual paradigm that overdetermined the relationship between language, culture, and self-realisation, on the one hand, and politics, on the other.[197] They believed that writing, performing or culturally embodying alternative political realities was enough to effect them—that writing a novel about the Vietnam War might end it, as Norman Mailer famously stated.[198] Cultural events like the Human Be-In and the Monterey Pop Festival brought together scores of anti-establishment bohemians who did not necessarily share an ideological position, or hold one at all. The focus of these gatherings, as Szalay and McCann see it, was less direct political agitation, which risked falling into the "overly rationalizing, managerial" ways of the establishment, than "a kind of therapeutic rite aimed at the self-realization of its participants".[199] In many ways, the culmination of this radicalised counterculture was the 100,000-strong March on the Pentagon in October 1967, a literally spectacular affair that saw the costumed and technicoloured protesters attempting to levitate and exorcise the Pentagon building.[200] New Left politics called for a renewed

[196] Alcoff, 419.
[197] Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, "Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left", *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2005): 436–437.
[198] Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (New York: Plume, 1994), 9. Quoted in McCann and Szalay.
[199] Ibid., 444.
[200] As Szalay and McCann point out, the March on the Pentagon was a powerful illustration of C Wright Mills' theories of "the cultural apparatus", advanced in the late 1950s. Since intellectuals, in Mills' terms, "professionally create, destroy, elaborate" the "symbols" that shape everyday reality, they also have the power to change that reality into something entirely different by changing the symbolic order. Effectively, this is what the New Left and its allies, with their focus on cultural revolution, were trying to do. See C Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People: The Collected*

appreciation and mobilisation of "the spontaneous, the symbolic, and ultimately, the magical".[201] As Mailer wrote approvingly in 1969, "Politics had again become mysterious."[202] Politics, now, was a thing negotiated in language, performance, street theatre, psychedelia, chanting, and prose.

Szalay and McCann cite Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo as two contemporary writers who, "[d]espite their evident differences", have "turn[ed] the counterculture's suspicion of bureaucratic rationality into something approaching a literary program".[203] In Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1993, she contrasted "dead language" with "word magic". Unlike "arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness", Morrison insisted, the "unmolested language" of "a cry without an alphabet", language that "reach[es] toward the ineffable" and towards a time "when language was magic without meaning", can pave the way towards political liberation and spiritual redemption.[204] DeLillo's novel *The Names* pursues a remarkably similar theory of language. The protagonist becomes obsessed with a murderous language cult that matches the initials of its victims with the place-names of its murder sites—a cult determined "to see words not as representations or abstractions but as objects themselves, replete with virtually sacred significance".[205] In addition, the novel offers different images of "glossolalia" (speaking in tongues) and linguistic experimentation, and ends with the protagonist visiting the Acropolis and hearing a scrambled medley of different dialects, "one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong".[206] For both the authors, Szalay and McCann conclude, "language assumes a magical and anti-authoritarian power only to the degree that it has nothing to say".[207] Indeed, the anti-authoritarian spirit of "word magic" is key for these authors. Just as Morrison's novels are mistrustful of government bureaucracy and the black bourgeoisie that panders to it, so DeLillo is wary of meddling government agencies like the CIA.[208]

The libertarian undertones of these attitudes are not incidental. As Szalay and McCann observe, they speak to a much larger kinship after the 1960s between the countercultural and literary New Left and the emerging New Right, both of which sides of the political spectrum "shared a basic antipathy to big government".[209] Prominent activists within the New Left's Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) such as Tom Hayden actually encouraged their members to forge links with student activists on the Right, whom they commended for stirring students to consciousness and speaking truth to statist power.[210] Moreover, the New Left's overinvestment in

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Essays of C. Wright Mills, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 226. Quoted in McCann and Szalay.

[201] Ibid., 436.

[202] Mailer, 86, Quoted in McCann and Szalay.

[203] McCann and Szalay, 477. While McCann and Szalay offer a fascinating reading of Morrison and DeLillo's fiction, these writers' complicity with New Left politics might be overstated. For a counter-argument, see John A McClure, "Do They Believe in Magic? Politics and Postmodern Literature", *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (2009): 125–143.

[204] Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Lecture, 7 December 1993, http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html; Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 95. Quoted in McCann and Szalay.

[205] McCann and Szalay, 450.

[206] Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 331. Quoted in McCann and Szalay.

[207] McCann and Szalay, 450.

[208] Ibid., 448, 449.

[209] Ibid., 442.

[210] Rebecca E Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of

cultural revolution and the symbolic order amounted in certain cases to "a dismissal of the formal sphere of political action and a consignment of the legitimate powers of government to the ash heap of history",[211] in much the same vein as New Right libertarianism. In de-emphasising traditional forms of governance to the extent that it did, then, the New Left also discarded certain vital forms of political intervention, such as welfare. And in sympathising with the New Right, the New Left failed to take seriously "the rise to political preeminence of an enormously powerful conservative movement" that still dominates American politics today[212]—as evinced, perhaps nowhere more chillingly, by the ascendancy of Donald Trump. As Szalay and McCann understand it, the conservative backlash that began in the 1960s and crescendoed with the Reagan administration promotes "an almost theological deference to the freedom of capital . . . even while a right-wing movement, unremittingly hostile to every form of social welfare, holds the upper hand in the formal political sphere".[213] All of which is to say that the New Left's vision of culturally and symbolically driven transformation has come to naught, in economic terms.

Wallace's place within this literary–political landscape is complex, and worth briefly mapping for what it reveals about the author's strained relationship with politics and the state. Especially in *The Broom of the System*, Wallace seems to share DeLillo's and the New Left's fascination with the reality-altering power of words, and this language obsession ultimately diminishes the political efficacy of the book. Gramma Beadsman keeps telling Lenore that "she is in possession of some words of tremendous power" ("Not things, or concepts. Words"), because when she studied under Wittgenstein at Cambridge he taught her that "everything was words" ("Really. If your car would not start, it was apparently to be understood as a language problem") (*BS*, 73). While this set-up may seem to hold the possibility of feminist empowerment, in fact, as we have seen, the only person really in possession of any word power is Wallace, who uses metafictional devices to showcase the influence of his language on his characters and his readers.

In thinking about language in this way, as something potent and magical, Wallace seems to have been directly inspired by DeLillo and *The Names*, which he read for the first time while at Amherst, and which he counted among his favourite books.[214] The annotations in Wallace's copy of the novel (excerpted here) reveal that he absorbed from it DeLillo's view of language not as a mere system of referents but as a mystic, powerful, physical, even violent force in and of itself:

> Effect of language on psych – BIG
> Language as violence
> (The language does not refer – it is sound, shape)
> Violence + names
> Jostled by languages. Languages as <u>physical</u>
> Magic, the magic spell – say words, reality is altered

California Press, 1999), 213–238. Quoted in McCann and Szalay.
[211] McCann and Szalay, 458.
[212] Ibid., 441.
[213] Ibid.
[214] D T Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012), 47. See also Wallace's letters to DeLillo, stored in the Don DeLillo Collection (1936–), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

> cult's whole power is that nothing it does signifies or means
> It gets symbolic
> Names of countries – Persia, Rhodesia. Changing name = changing country
> Writing carved in. Cf 'character' – a sharp tool. Language as violence
> Alphabet itself. Letters as objects, not signifiers
> Language as secret access
> Word→reality[215]

The principle of "Word→reality" in many way sums up the philosophy of language that Wallace tries to dramatise in *The Broom of the System*, where the power of the author's words in shaping his protagonist's reality is constantly foregrounded, even as Wallace's note about "Language as violence" raises the question of whether this power amounts to a kind of gender violence, given the vulnerable womanhood of Wallace's protagonist. Overall, the book seems more concerned with the author's linguistic power than with the protagonist's political power, which diminishes steadily over time. If DeLillo's novel bears traces of the New Left and its political failures in transforming the status quo, so too does Wallace's, which rehearses 1980s feminist discourse without actually implementing it. Talking about feminism is not the same as doing feminism, just as changing Rhodesia's name to Zimbabwe in 1980 did little to undo the centuries of colonialism, oppression, corruption, and authoritarianism that had blighted the nation.

Wallace's later writing of the 1980s is a lot less interested in language games and a lot more interested in the political reality of its time. In fact, *Girl with Curious Hair*, a short-story collection published in 1989, is one of Wallace's most politically engaged works, offering three-dimensional women, lesbian, gay, and black characters, real critiques of misogyny and racism, and very little in the way of loser-figures or penis jokes. One of the most striking stories from the collection is "Lyndon", which gives an account of the fictional relationship between Lyndon B Johnson and a made-up character named Boyd who serves as the president's closest confidante and right-hand man. Set in the 1960s, the story explores the gay romance between Boyd and a black Haitian man named René Duverger, including the unnamed disease that eventually ravages them both. Through these two characters, who manage to find a legal loophole in the racist, homophobic system and get civilly married, Wallace offers a vision of interracial same-sex marriage decades before this was to become a reality, as well as an oblique portrayal of the HIV/AIDS epidemic sweeping through America at the time when Wallace was writing. But through the fictional character of President Johnson, Wallace also offers a critique of the anti-statist attitudes of the New Left, and an implicit endorsement of the welfare state, all against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The war regularly inserts itself into the narrative, at times metonymically ("Tonkin. Cambodia"), at times bluntly ("How many kids did I kill today, boy?"), at times subtly ("By 1965, the incoming mail was on the whole negative").[216] In a scene set in 1967, the year of the March on the Pentagon, Lyndon looks out the window of the Oval Office at the "protesters' bonfires in the park across the street"

[215] Wallace, unpublished annotations of *The Names*, David Foster Wallace Collection (1971–2008), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
[216] Wallace, "Lyndon", *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: Norton, 1989), 104, 105, 103. Subsequent references to "Lyndon" are cited parenthetically as "L".

and gives Boyd his interpretation of the student movement ("L", 104). Referencing the Great Society programmes that, under Lyndon, saw increased government spending and policy shifts on welfare, education, health insurance, housing, and civil rights, the fictionalised president theorises that the "youths of America" are protesting against the government precisely because they are so well taken care of by it.[217] "They ain't never once had to worry or hurt or suffer in any real way whatsoever", and so they "take some suffering from some oriental youths . . . take those other folks' suffering and take it inside themselves" ("L", 106). Lyndon starts to doubt the welfare state he has created: "I think I'm getting to be a believer in folks' maybe needing to suffer some. You see the implications in that belief? It implies that our whole agenda of domestic programs is maybe possibly bad, boy . . . We're taking away folks' suffering here at home through these careful domestic program, boy . . . without giving them nothing to replace it" ("L", 106). In airing these doubts, Wallace issues a subtle warning to the anti-authoritarian, anti-government New Left that threatens to forsake even welfare in its crusade for liberty. Just as Lyndon fails to see that the protestors' anger might actually be warranted (on this specific narrative day in 1967, the fictional president is responsible for the deaths of "[p]robably between three and four hundreds kids" in Vietnam, by Boyd's calculations), Wallace suggests that the protestors, who are beneficiaries of a stepped-up social-development campaign, might also be too quick to say *"fuck you*" to the government that supports them, throwing the baby out with the bath water, as it were ("L", 105, 106).

Wallace's commentary in "Lyndon" gains special meaning in the 1980s context in which the story was written, for this was a decade in which the Reagan administration "sought to cut taxes, privatize the welfare state, and constrain federal expenditures on domestic programs, all while increasing military spending", and all in the midst of a global recession.[218] During this decade, too, as Mark McGurl has pointed out, Wallace himself became a beneficiary of state-funded welfare, as his battle with depression, alcoholism, and drug use saw him moving between different institutions, treatment centres, and halfway houses. In an anonymous testimonial posted on the website of Granada House, the halfway house in Boston where Wallace spent six months between 1989 and 1990, the author, unmistakeably Wallace, argues for the financial feasibility of the welfare state, using himself as a case study:

> Citizens or government agencies that are considering financial support of Granada House might be interested in the following breakdown. From 1983 to 1989 I paid almost no taxes, cost two different health insurance companies almost $100,000 in treatments, institutionalizations, and psychiatric care, cost myself and my parents another $70,000–$80,000 when insurance ran out, and cost two different states several thousands of dollars

[217] When these programmes were first implemented, unemployment dropped from 5.2% (in 1964) to 3.8% (in 1966). See US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "US Unemployment Rate, 1920–2014", https://www.infoplease.com/business-finance/labor-and-employment/united-states-unemployment-rate.

[218] Jonathan Oberlander and Theodore R Marmor, "Ronald Reagan's Lasting Healthcare Legacy: How '80s Deficit Spending and Conservative Ideologies Reshaped the Healthcare Debate", *Salon*, 27 July 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/07/26/ronald_reagans_lasting_healthcare_legacy_how_80s_deficit_spending_and_conservative_ideologies_reshaped_the_healthcare_debate/. By 1982, national unemployment had climbed to 9.7%, and it only dropped down to 5% at the end of the decade.

> when my own support ran out and I had to declare myself indigent. In 1990 and 1991, I paid no real taxes but also didn't cost anyone anything. From 1992 to present, I have cost family, government, and charitable institutions nothing, have paid well over $325,000 in federal, state, and municipal taxes, and have donated at least another $100,000 to various charities. I don't know what is cost to put me through Granada House for six months (I myself paid $20 a week in rent, though this was sliding-scale because I was broke), but by even the coldest type of cost-accounting, it appears to me that it was worth it for everyone.[219]

Welfare, Wallace wants to impress upon us, is "worth it for everyone". When the state invests in its citizens, its citizens prosper and invest back into the state, as the calculations involved in his case plainly show. It is a win–win transaction. As McGurl summarises the sentiment here, "liberal technocracy gets the last word".[220] In fact, Wallace would have benefitted directly from the Medicare and Medicaid health-insurance programmes that Johnson had set up in the 1960s, which were among the only social programmes that Reagan kept intact (and even expanded) as president.[221] Arguably as a result of this personal entanglement in state policy, Wallace, in the late 1980s, becomes a proponent of welfare statism, and a tacit critic of the libertarianism of both the New Left and the New Right. It was perhaps this same level of entanglement that was missing in *The Broom of the System*, where Wallace's abstract alliance with feminism and gender-based concerns very quickly faded into the background of a more self-empowering fictional project, grounded in the author's enchantment with word magic. As we will see in our discussion of *The Pale King* at the end of this dissertation, however, Wallace's commitment to welfare and civic-mindedness is not, in the final analysis, enough to move him beyond a mode of writing grounded in primarily white, masculine concerns, even though *Girl with Curious Hair* does take a stride in that promising direction.

"One kind of response to Otherness"

Regardless of the personal or political developments that might have occasioned the shift from one book to the next, the opening short story in *Girl with Curious Hair* reads as a kind of feminist revision of *The Broom of the System*. "Little Expressionless Animals" begins in much the same way as the earlier book did: with scenes of childhood trauma that will shape the main female characters when we meet them again as adults. One vignette shows Julie Smith, current star of the

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[219] "An Ex-Resident's Story", Granada House, www.granadahouse.org/people/letters_from_our_alum.html. Quoted in Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program", *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 50. Originally quoted in Maria Bustillos, "Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library", *The Awl*, April 5, 2011, www.theawl.com/2011/04/inside-david-foster-wallaces-private-self-help-library.

[220] McGurl, 50.

[221] Interestingly, Reagan, then still an actor, was one of the most outspoken critics of Medicare when Johnson proposed it in 1964. See Peter Ubel, "The Biggest Government Health Care Spender Since LBJ Was . . . Ronald Reagan?", *Forbes*, 28 February 2014, http://www.forbes.com/sites/peterubel/2014/02/28/the-biggest-government-health-care-spender-since-lbj-was-ronald-reagan/#4ce5b14d4d3f.

fictionalised TV show *Jeopardy!*, at age eight, being abandoned by her mother in front of a field. The second vignette shows Faye Goddard, a researcher on the show, also at age eight, sitting next to her mother in a dark movie theatre while a strange man in the seat behind them fondles her mother's head and hair for the entire length of the film.[222] In 1988, when the main action takes place, Julie and Faye are dating, and the narrative explores at length the effect that these early incidents have had on their lives, as well as what their lesbianism means to them. The exploration of lesbian identity includes a back-and-forth exchange between the women about what might cause a woman to "reel into lesbianism, from the pain": for example, getting engaged to a guy whose father one night "laughingly tell[s] the guy that the penalty for bigamy is two wives. And the guy laughs" ("LEA", 35). These hypothetical scenarios eventually give way to both women confessing that their experiences at age eight are the real reason they prefer women to men: Faye because "a strange man in the dark was touching [her] mother in a sexual way", and the experience has damaged her mother for life; Julie because the "blankness" and impenetrability of men's faces remind her of the expressionless cow she saw in the field the day she was abandoned, and "how can you ever even hope to love what you can't even grab onto" ("LEA", 37–38, 41). In the end, Julie tells Faye, "Say lesbianism is simply one kind of response to Otherness. Say the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask" ("LEA", 32). On a list of "things Julie Smith dislikes most", one of the items is "John Updike", which signals Wallace's ongoing effort to create a distinction between the chauvinism of Updike's literature and the feminist solidarity and empathy of his own literature ("LEA", 12). Whereas this solidarity seemed, in *The Broom of the System*, to be mostly rhetorical, I read the exchange between Julie and Faye in "Little Expressionless Animals" as a more honest attempt at understanding trauma and its effects on sexuality, including the role played by hegemonic masculinity in creating this situation. In his portrayal of the two women, Wallace offers a more nuanced alternative to the game-show host's dismissal of Julie as "one of those political lesbians": "You know the kind? The kind with the anger? She looks at men like they're unsightly stains on the air" ("LEA", 20). At the very least, the short story confirms Wallace's preoccupation with feminism in the 1980s, and should encourage scholars to pay more attention to the gendered cadences of his early work.

In the titular story, "Girl with Curious Hair", Wallace combines a critique of nihilistic "Brat Pack" fiction with a critique of misogyny and racism in the figure of Sick Puppy, the psychopathic narrator. A Yale graduate and Young Republican, Sick Puppy hangs out with punk-rock skinheads and gets pleasure from burning things: Young Democrats, stray puppies, women. His narrative voice is an obvious parody of Patrick Bateman's in *American Psycho*: "I keep my hair perfectly groomed, neat, and short at all times. I have exceptionally attractive ears"; "Gimlet allowed me to burn her slightly and I felt that she was an outstanding person"; and so on.[223] But in addition to Sick Puppy's fetish for burning his girlfriend, Wallace assigns the character a host of racist attitudes that are meant to consolidate his repugnance and link white supremacy to psychopathy, perversion, the Republican Party, and the irresponsible fiction of Bret Easton Ellis

[222] Wallace, "Little Expressionless Animals", *Girl with Curious Hair*, 3–4. Subsequent references to "Little Expressionless Animals" are cited parenthetically as "LEA".
[223] Wallace, "Girl with Curious Hair", *Girl with Curious Hair*, 65, 63. Subsequent references to the "Girl with Curious Hair" are cited parenthetically as "GCH".

and his crew. A corporate-liability lawyer, Sick Puppy spends his time defending companies against, in his words, "racial minorities" with "swarms of children" ("GCH", 65). And when he attends a Keith Jarrett concert with his punk friends, he comments, "I very much enjoy seeing Negros perform in all areas of the performing arts. I feel they are a talented and delightful race of performers, who are often very entertaining. I especially enjoy watching Negroes perform from a distance, for close up they frequently smell unpleasant" ("GCH", 55). Rather than let Sick Puppy's infantilisation of Jarrett stand undisputed, though, Wallace introduces the character Cheese, whose function is to expose the narrator's inhumanity. When Cheese praises Jarrett for his ability to arrange improvisational melodies through his "sub conscious", and Sick Puppy responds that he doubts "that Negros ha[ve] sub consciousnesses", Cheese "frown[s]" and says that his wife is mixed race ("GCH", 66–67, 71). He then steers the conversation back towards the narrator's "white experiences and emotions", presumably to avoid further insults to his wife and Jarrett ("GCH", 71). Cheese is the only punk rocker in the group who is "frightened" by the narrator ("GCH", 70). He is the conscience of the story.

It is worth mentioning here that the conventional reading of the Jarrett scene makes no mention of the musician's race or of Sick Puppy's racism, instead focusing solely on Wallace's efforts in this story to "move fiction forward toward an open reengagement with emotions".[224] But race was evidently on Wallace's mind in the late 1980s. The interaction between Sick Puppy and Cheese in "Girl with Curious Hair", and between Boyd and Duverger in "Lyndon", suggests a growing confrontation on Wallace's part with the problems of race and whiteness in America, as does the "Negro servant" named Wardine in the "Lyndon" story, who appears as a silent, invisible "shadow" in the First Lady's chamber ("L", 116). This Wardine figure will show up again in a controversial scene in *Infinite Jest* (discussed at length in the following chapter), which Wallace seems to have drafted at the same time that he was writing "Lyndon".[225] As America began to enter the multicultural era that would transform its institutions and its literature in much the same way second-wave feminism did in the 1970s and early 1980s, Wallace's fiction becomes more multicultural and more "inclusive", too—at least superficially. He starts introducing more black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, lesbian, and woman characters into his fiction, as well as more poor characters. *The Broom of the System* features one heavily caricatured black character named Walinda, a bar full of distant "faggots", and virtually no discourse about race alongside its elaborate gender discourse; *Girl with Curious Hair* has a much more diverse cast, and seems as self-conscious about whiteness and heterosexuality as it is about masculinity (*BS*, 380, 454).[226] In *Infinite Jest*, as

[224] See Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 81.

[225] The Wardine scene of *Infinite Jest* was most likely written in 1986; the "Lyndon" story was first published in 1987, in the magazine *Arrival*. Stephen J Burn, "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': Closing Time in *The Pale King*", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 386; Mark O'Connell, "My Metonym for Self-Reference Weighs a Ton", *Slate*, 9 April 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2013/08/signifying_rappers_david_foster_wallace_and_mark_costello_s_book_about_rap.html.

[226] Walinda Peahen, Lenore's supervisor at *Frequent and Vigorous*, is portrayed as an angry black woman, prone to "embolisms" and shouting fits, and given a stilted, unrealistic black dialect ("You the chump be makin' that nasty food my child like to choke on one time?"). When she is called "a perfectly charming negress" by Lenore's father in one scene, no one in the room flinches (*BS*, 380, 454).

we will see, this self-consciousness morphs into something different: anxiety, defensiveness, a sustained effort to blur the lines between black and white, male and female, and prove that whiteness and masculinity can be forms of "Otherness", too. White upper-class men, in the later novel, come to claim the vulnerable status reserved for racial and sexual minorities and women in the earlier works, in ways that cannot help but seem regressive.

Though *Girl with Curious Hair* seems to take what Fitzpatrick calls "the social uses and misuses of power with regard to human difference" rather seriously, already there are signs within the collection of Wallace's desire to get past difference and return to the comfort of universals. In the final story, "Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way", the narrator offers his views on the arbitrariness, artificiality, and danger of racial difference:

> [D]ividing this fiction business into realistic and naturalistic and surrealistic and modern and postmodern and new-realistic and meta- is like dividing history into cosmic and tragic and prophetic and apocalyptic; is like dividing human beings into white and black and brown and yellow and orange. It atomizes, does not bind crowds, and, like everything timelessly dumb, leads to blind hatred, blind loyalty, blind supplication. Difference is no lover; it lives and dies dancing on the skins of things.[227]

No one would argue with the claim that categories of difference are divisive, socially constructed, and "timelessly dumb", or that difference lies only "on the skins of things". But the invention of racial difference has had a long and bloody history, and this history has produced vastly different social, cultural, and economic experiences of the world and of being-in-the-world. It has also produced a variety of entrenched political identities, forged as part of the effort to combat the unequal legacies of state-endorsed segregation. Indeed, the hope implicit in this passage that there might be a single "human" literature, or a single "human" history, or even a single "human" race, risks reducing the complexities of history to a feel-good mantra, and risks becoming yet another investment in the "universalized cultural problems of contemporary whiteness, maleness, Americanness" that Fitzpatrick mentions.

As this dissertation moves through Wallace's work of the 1990s and 2000s, we will encounter more and more examples of the attempt to dissolve or unsettle hierarchies of difference, and we will wonder with Fitzpatrick whether this apparently humanistic effort in fact serves a conservative agenda, and whether it reflects a kind of irresponsibility towards the devastation of history. A taste of what this complex wrestling with identity, otherness, and difference will look like as a fictional device comes at the end of "My Appearance", another feminist-inclined story in the *Girl with Curious Hair* collection. The protagonist, Edilyn, has just appeared on the Late Show with David Letterman and is being transported back to her hotel in a chauffeur-driven car. Tension is building between Edilyn and her husband, also in the car, who does not seem to believe her when she tells him that she "wasn't acting, with David Letterman"—that her "appearance" on the show was a success because she was simply herself. The husband keeps congratulating her for being a "talented and multifaceted actress", evidently believing that her capacity for pretence is what

[227] Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way", *Girl with Curious Hair*, 346.

allowed her to be so effortlessly wry, witty, and self-contained with the famously sarcastic Letterman, rather than her own inherent richness or depth as a woman.[228] The story opens with the words "I am a woman" and is peppered with similar expressions of identity: "I am a woman who simply cries when she's upset; it doesn't embarrass me"; "I am a woman who lets her feelings show rather than hide them"; "I am a woman who dislikes being confused"; "I am a woman who speaks her mind"; "I am a woman who *acts*" ("MA", 175, 178, 184, 181, 201, 191). But the full range of Edilyn's personhood and womanhood is reduced by her husband to the last statement, which she makes during conversation with Letterman on TV. The husband's inability to grasp Edilyn's equal capacity for sincerity, transparency, and seriousness makes him finally no different to the "misogynist" Letterman, who tells Edilyn that her statement "I am a woman who *acts*" should be "emblazoned on the T-shirts of women everywhere", and who later implies that all women are dissemblers and illusionists ("MA", 191–192, 194). "I felt it was a sorry business indeed", says Edilyn, "when my own spouse couldn't tell I was being serious" ("MA", 199). Then something strange happens in the narrative. The intrusion is brief but, I want to argue, significant. Following their strained conversation, the husband "disengage[s] his hand" from Edilyn's, and Edilyn suddenly notices that the chauffeur, who is "darkly Hispanic", has his head "cocked" behind the "thick glass panel", apparently listening to their conversation ("MA", 179, 199). An implicit alliance is set up between Edilyn and the listening driver, right at the moment when the husband grows distant and she becomes vulnerable in her marriage. And Edilyn notices, simultaneously, that the driver's neck is "without pigment" ("MA", 199). "The lighter area was circular", she notes; "it spiralled into his dark hair and was lost to me" ("MA", 199). Why the inclusion of this bizarre detail? Might it be an expression of Wallace's belief that difference "lives and dies dancing on the skins of things"? For the "darkly Hispanic" driver in the story, it would seem, is also partly white: both darkness and lightness dance on the skin of his neck. Reading deeply, perhaps too deeply, in this way, I cannot help but detect a trace of the will to relativise race and difference. It is almost as though Edilyn's whiteness, her obvious economic privilege at being chauffeured around New York City, and the fact, emphasised throughout the story, that she is "loaded" ("MA", 193, 200) can be cancelled out by her status as a misunderstood spouse, just as the Hispanic driver can, from where Edilyn is sitting, look suddenly "not quite" Hispanic. In the following chapter, I argue that the political inversion glimpsed briefly here becomes the guiding aesthetic of *Infinite Jest*.

[228] Wallace, "My Appearance", *Girl with Curious Hair*, 198. Subsequent references to "My Appearance" are cited parenthetically as "MA".

"Eyes blue but darkly so": *Infinite Jest* and the aesthetics of white pain

Barack Obama's election as the first black president of the United States in many ways birthed the national fantasy of post-racialism. In the months following the 2008 election, post-race discourse flooded mainstream media.[229] This discourse was in fact crucial to Obama's securing of the white-majority vote, with the candidate positioning himself as a "uniter" rather than a "divider" of Americans, as a way to avoid antagonising white voters.[230] In his public addresses on the campaign trail, Obama actively distanced himself from a civil rights agenda and focused instead on "race-neutral", "American" issues like the economic crisis and the Iraq war.[231] In one reviewer's analysis, Obama's campaign "seduce[d] whites with a vision of their racial innocence", while whites for their part found in his election "evidence, certification and recognition" of their own "racial progress".[232] Indeed, as Sumi Cho has argued, post-racialism as an ideology differs from the "colourblindness" doctrine of earlier decades precisely in its assertion of "a symbolic 'big event' of racial transcendence"—an event like the election of a black American president.[233] If colourblind practice adopts "race-neutral universalisms" as a way to evade race-based reform and leave white privilege and normativity intact, then post-racialism achieves the same ends by announcing how much reform has already occurred.[234] Its principal target population is "exhausted whites" who, though not necessarily conservative, long for an end to "race-based grievances" and "the stigma of racism" attached to whiteness.[235] Obama's ascendancy seemed to announce a way out of racial exhaustion.

As an attitude of race-evasion, post-racialism dovetails with the post-9/11 backlash against multiculturalism and diversity, and with the attendant "culturalization of politics", which has allowed the Right to frame its xenophobic positions in terms of a preservation of "culture" and

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[229] See, for example, Stu Bykofsky, "My First Post-Racial Column: America Is on the Ascent", *Philadelphia Daily News*, 8 November 2008; Frank Harris, "Election's a Sign of Progress For . . . Whites", *Hartford Courant*, 14 November 2008; "Editorial: "Obama and Affirmative Action", *Boston Globe*, 15 November 2008; "Editorial: Obama's Historic Victory Reflects Nation's Dynamism", *USA Today*, 4 June 2008; "Editorial: Our Moment of Unity: Let's All Relish This Remarkable Progress Together", *Dallas Morning News*, 6 November 2008; Peter Wallsten and David G Savage, "Obama Win Used Against Rights Laws; Conservatives Say Black Victory Erases Need for Voting Act", *Chicago Tribune*, 15 March 2009; Rachel L Swarns, "Vaulting the Racial Divide: Obama Persuaded Americans to Follow", *The New York Times*, 5 November 2008; Joan Vennochi, "Op-Ed: Closing the Door on Victimhood", *Boston Globe*, 6 November 2008. Referenced in Sumi Cho, "Post-racialism", *Iowa Law Review* 94 (2008): 1591–1649.

[230] Alexander Mooney, "Jesse Jackson: Obama Needs to Bring More Attention to Jena 6", *CNN*, 19 September 2007, http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/09/19/jackson.jena6/index.html. See especially Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech of March 2008, which put forward a vision of "binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family". "Barack Obama's Speech on Race", *The New York Times*, 18 March 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html.

[231] Mooney.

[232] Shelby Steele, "Obama's Post-racial Promise", *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 2008, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05-story.html.

[233] See Cho, 1596.

[234] Ibid., 1621.

[235] Ibid., 1599–1600; Steele.

"values".[236] In the academy, it dovetails with the revived leftist insistence on the "universal dimension" of class over race, gender, and other embodied markers of identity,[237] a position also taken up by some whiteness studies scholars, who are increasingly using the history of working-class and immigrant whites to "de-essentialize[ ] the relationship among white skin, white privilege, and white racism", as one critic puts it.[238] Finally, post-racialism reflects the theoretical move, "from Dubois onward", away from race as biological essentialism and towards race as a social construct—a move that is meant to erode the foundations of racism, but that also risks eroding the important work being done by critical race activists and scholars to counteract the imbalances wrought by centuries of racist policies and practices.[239] "Researchers, teachers and students inhabiting that kind of 'post-racial' position", writes Paul Warmington, "may find themselves simultaneously pointing to and away from race as a critical problem".[240] In the end, post-racialism is too easily co-opted for conservative agendas, offering as it does a way to declare slavery and segregation "finished business", and to disavow the need for affirmative action, welfare, and other vehicles for social reform.

David Foster Wallace committed suicide in September 2008, two months before Obama won the presidential election. Though a mere accident of history, the coincidence of Wallace's death with Obama's victory becomes important when thinking through the curious absence of race in Wallace scholarship. As Adam Kelly has noted, Wallace's death birthed a "discipline", and it seems significant that the discipline of Wallace studies has developed in a political climate of post-racialism.[241] Wallace has almost exclusively been discussed by scholars in race-neutral, universal terms—as a chronicler of, in his own words, "what it is to be a fucking human being", rather than of his particular experience as a white heterosexual upper-middle-class male in America.[242] In a casual survey of the scholarly books written on Wallace to date, I found categories like "addiction", "loneliness", "solipsism", "irony", "sincerity", and "empathy"—the usual suspects in Wallace studies—listed in the index pages, but no mention of race or whiteness or masculinity or gender, or of anything that would point to the political specificity of Wallace's work.[243] Wallace is certainly complicit in the race-neutral discourse that surrounds his work, with so many of his popularised interviews and speeches centring on what is wrong with contemporary "American"

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[236] See Alana Lentin, "Post-race, Post-politics: The Paradoxical Rise of Culture after Multiculturalism", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 8 (2014): 1268–1285.

[237] See Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D Torres, *After Race: Racism after Multiculturalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), and Sumi Cho's discussion of their work in Cho, 1628–1633.

[238] Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity", *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 115–150.

[239] Paul Warmington, "Taking Race out of Scare Quotes: Race-conscious Social Analysis in an Ostensibly Post-racial World", *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 3 (2009): 282.

[240] Ibid., 283.

[241] Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline", *Irish Journal of American Studies Online* 2 (2010): web, http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/.

[242] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 127–150, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/.

[243] See, for example, Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Stephen J Burn, *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest*: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); David Hering, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Hollywood, CA: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010); Marshall Boswell and Stephen J Burn, eds., *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

fiction and contemporary "American" culture, or, as above, with what it means to be "human". The concerns he is most famous for as a writer and cultural critic (consumer capitalism, postmodernity, mass entertainment), as well as the antidotes he tentatively held out to readers (community, connection, affective modes of fiction), are all easily construed as post-race phenomena, or phenomena that affect everyone, indiscriminately.

In an indicative passage from Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, the narrator diagnoses the protagonist's despair by opposing an inauthentic "American" culture of hip cynicism and jaded emptiness with an authentic humanism of sentiment and pathos:

> Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic . . . One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia.[244]

Hal is figured as a kind of Everyman. His contemporary "Americanness" cripples him; he needs to learn how to become "really human". Wallace's fictional project is regularly described in the same terms: his work eschews hip, postmodern cleverness to get at more meaningful and "human" forms of storytelling. But thinking about Wallace and his cast of characters in terms of humanism and America—or even posthumanism and globalisation[245]—means obscuring the startling race-specificity of his work, and of the historical moment in which he was writing. Using *Infinite Jest* as a case study, this chapter takes a first step in reinserting race discourse into the largely post-racial landscape of Wallace scholarship. It is a project of reinsertion rather than insertion because Wallace's texts are in fact already alive with layer upon layer of racial drama, puling and writhing "just under" the mask of universalism that most readings engage.

"Of" but not "in" the mainstream

If post-2008 America can be characterised as post-racial, even if only "under erasure and with full ironic force",[246] the 1990s period in which *Infinite Jest* was written was an unmistakably racial one, marked by a national obsession with identity, culture, and "ethnicity". Multiculturalism became

[244] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 694. Subsequent references to *Infinite Jest* are cited parenthetically as *IJ*.

[245] "Posthumanism" in this context refers to a futuristic, cyborg-type reality in which humanity and technology are more or less fused. See Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace", *Twentieth Century Literature* (2007): 327–344; Conley Wouters, "'What Am I, a Machine?': Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 447–463; Lee Konstantinou, "The World of David Foster Wallace", *boundary 2* 40, no. 3 (2013): 59–86.

[246] See Ramón Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative", *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–18; Colson Whitehead, "Op-Ed: Year of Living Postracially", *The New York Times*, 3 November 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/opinion/04whitehead.html.

more than just a "demographic fact".[247] Identity politics and multiculturalism in the 1990s were affairs of the classroom, the literary establishment, and the street. They were mainstream, and they were everywhere. The Rodney King assault, the Los Angeles riots, the Clarence Thomas affair, and the O J Simpson trial all exposed, in different ways, the urgency of racial politics in America, and "race matters" became increasingly central to academic discourse.[248] In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, and in tandem with affirmative action reforms, minority studies, postcolonial studies, and women's studies programmes were developed, and previously marginalised histories and literatures began being integrated into high school and college curricula. Multicultural education was institutionalised, amid much controversy and debate.[249] In the literary arena, the "great" American canon was disputed, reread, reconfigured, and expanded.[250] Postmodernism was put in conversation with postcolonialism, and the elevated and exalted position of avant-garde literature and poststructuralist "high theory" was challenged.[251] Feminist and critical race scholars called attention to postmodern literature's status a "white male" club,[252] and questioned its rejection of "master narratives" such as identity, self, and subjecthood at the very moment when minority writers were actively mobilising these concepts.[253] Meanwhile, Toni Morrison's black-centred social fiction, dismissed as "provincial" when it first appeared in the 1970s, would earn her the Nobel Prize by 1993, redefining who could write "serious" fiction, and muddying the long-held

[247] Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech" *Critical Inquiry* (1997): 385.

[248] See especially Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

[249] Fish, 378–395; Jack David Eller, "Anti-Anti-Multiculturalism", *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 249–256; Henry Louis Gates Jr and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Editors' Introduction: Multiplying Identities", *Identities* 18, no. 4 (1995): 1–6; Sneja Gunew, "Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 22–39; Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures", *The American Scholar* 59, no. 3 (1990): 337–354; Molefi Kete Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education", *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991): 170–180; Joan W Scott, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity", *October* 61 (1992): 12–19; Cornel West and Bill Brown, "Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism", *Modern Philology* 90 (1993): 142–166; James A Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education", *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 5 (1993): 4–14. See the introductory chapter of this dissertation for a fuller discussion of multiculturalism and its discontents.

[250] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary", *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1–2 (2008): 410–419; Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gregory S Jay, "The End of 'American' Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice", *College English* 53, no. 3 (1991): 264–281.

[251] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336–357; Homi Bhabha, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern", *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 245–282; Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-colonialism and Postmodernism", *Unhomely States* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004), 71–93.

[252] Molly Hite, "Postmodern Fiction", *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 698.

[253] Lillian S Robinson, "Canon Fathers and Myth Universe", *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, eds. Lennard J Davis and M Bella Mirabella (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 25–35; bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness", *Postmodern Culture* 1, no. 1 (1990): web, https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/article/27283; Henry Louis Gates Jr, "The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition", *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34–35; Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 217–218.

mainstream–marginal divide.[254] By the turn of the millennium, scholars were reading "multiculturally or not at all".[255]

Wallace conceived of his fictional project almost entirely in relation to the white postmodernist movement that came under scrutiny in the 1990s. In his interviews and essays, he defined the canon he was influenced by (Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, William Gaddis, Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme), the canon he was contemporaneous with (William T Vollmann, Mark Leyner, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers), and the canon he was trying to create (one marked by a "new sincerity", as Adam Kelly has called it).[256] In the epitext surrounding *Infinite Jest*—and especially in the joint essay–interview that he published in the Summer 1993 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*—Wallace constructed his writerly identity as a complex intertextual exchange with these postmodern influences and peers, on the one hand, and a redemptive interpersonal exchange with his readers, on the other. But thinking about the novel in relation to the turbulent, race-fuelled 1990s suggests that we may need to read between the lines of Wallace's careful self-construction. How was Wallace registering the profound cultural, literary, and political shifts taking place in this decade, and especially the challenges to the mainstream postmodern set he identified with?

Although Wallace rarely mentioned black, Hispanic, Asian American, gay, lesbian, or women writers in his discussions of literature, he was nonetheless highly conscious of them. A letter that he wrote to his close friend Jonathan Franzen shortly before the publication of *Infinite Jest*, which Franzen quotes in his 1996 essay "Perchance to Dream", betrays the anxiety Wallace felt about "tribal" writers, especially in relation to his own position as a "straight white male":

> "A contemporary culture of mass-marketed image and atomized self-interest is going to be one without any real sort of felt community," Wallace wrote to me afterwards. "Just about everybody with any sensitivity feels like there's a party going on that they haven't been invited to—we're *all* alienated. I think the guys who write directly *about* and *at* the present culture tend to be writers who find their artistic invalidation especially painful. I mean it's not just something to bitch about and wine-and-cheese parties: it really *hurts* them. It makes them *angry*. And it's not an accident that so many of the writers 'in the shadows' are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why shouldn't we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture? This is

[254] Nancy J Peterson, "Introduction: Canonizing Toni Morrison", *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3 (1993): 461–479.
[255] John N Duvall, "Introduction", *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.
[256] See Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 127–50; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 151–194; Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, "Looking for a Garde of which to be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace", *Whiskey Island Magazine* (1993): 49–57; Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction", *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Hollywood, CA: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131–146.

> the only way to come up with what we want: what we want is to know what *happened*, why things *are* this way—we want the *story*."[257]

Within the context of Franzen's essay, "artistic invalidation" is a *material* phenomenon, linked to the post-Cold War rise of consumer culture, mass production, and digital media, which threatens to engulf the contemporary fiction-writer in the "deafening silence of irrelevance".[258] But what is striking in Wallace's appraisal of these material conditions is the compounding sense of injury and relative disadvantage it claims for "straight white males", who, more than any other social group, are left "in the shadows". Straight white males are, in Wallace's schema, the group most "alienated" and "hurt" by mainstream culture, because they cannot escape it, while "tribal" writers (African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, and so on) are comparatively *advantaged* by the access they have to minority audiences and communities.

In a sense, Wallace's schema repeats the claims to "white injury" that Robyn Wiegman has identified in white responses to civil rights reform and affirmative action in America over the decades.[259] In Wiegman's analysis, both white supremacists and white liberals attempt, in different ways, to "de-essentialize" the relationship between whiteness and privilege, and confer onto themselves a kind of "discursive blackness". Whites on both end of the political spectrum have asserted a "minoritized" social or economic position for themselves—a position almost "akin to blackness".[260] Franzen's framing essay, discussed in detail in the introductory chapter, performs exactly this minoritising move. Franzen argues that there has been a "white male flight" from the arts to "the coastal powers centres of television, journalism and film" in the postwar era, and that white male artists like Wallace and himself who still write novels are "solitary", marginal figures within the cultural landscape.[261] The remaining white male therefore constitutes a different social category to the "*departing* straight white". He does not enjoy the latter's coastal privileges. In a sense, he is more aligned with the "black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay and women's communities" that now generate "[m]uch of contemporary fiction's vitality".[262] Franzen seems to want to place himself on the side of these "ethnic and cultural enclaves", rather than with the mainstream majority.[263] And Wallace seems to want to do the same, placing sensitive white artists in an even more marginalised category than the "tribal" writers he mentions. Both writers "disaffiliate" themselves from mainstream whiteness, to borrow Wiegman's term.[264] Their attitudes in this essay suggest a confrontation with, and a negotiation of, their privileged status as white American males, coupled with a deep anxiety about remaining relevant within a contemporary literary climate that rejects hegemonic whiteness and seeks to correct it through a culture of pluralism and inclusivity.

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[257] Jonathan Franzen, "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels", *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, 35–54.
[258] Ibid., 40.
[259] Wiegman.
[260] Ibid., 126.
[261] Franzen, 39.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Wiegman, 126, 131, 143.

This complex dynamic of confrontation, negotiation, and anxiety is present in Wallace's early 1990s output as well. His sections in a relatively obscure co-authored essay entitled *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in Urban America*, written in 1990, fret about the author's whiteness, and about the impossibility of his ever penetrating the black culture he is writing about.[265] In fact, Wallace posits that the thrill of rap for "the Great White Male" is precisely the music's status as "closed, prepositionally black, Other", and the "scary possibilities" and "vague threat" it presents for the "rare white at the window".[266] Wallace's healthy self-consciousness here about his position as an outsider, looking in, becomes at times neurotic, as he exaggerates the violence embedded in black music, presents himself as its hypothetical victim, and so "perpetuates the common conservative critique of gangsta rap".[267]

Even Wallace's now-famous 1993 essay about irony, television, and postmodern fiction, "E Unibus Pluram", is a lot more race-conscious than Wallace scholars have let on, with Wallace mentioning at one point that the postmodern literature he is concerned with is "written almost exclusively by young white males".[268] Wallace employs a range of strategies in the essay to reinforce the relevance of these young white male authors. For example, in contrast to the strictly aesthetic and theoretical function typically ascribed to the avant-garde (and increasingly being problematised as elitist), Wallace's essay ascribes a very particular *ethical* function to "the postmodern church fathers" (Pynchon, DeLillo, and company). He asserts that these postmodern fathers sought "to illuminate and explode hypocrisy" in American culture, including the hypocrisy of the "Hugh Beaumontish" hyper-masculinity being touted on television in the 1950s.[269] Though largely a white male pursuit, Wallace seems to suggest, traditional postmodernism was at its core pro-feminist. But Wallace goes further than that, arguing that the original moral value of postmodernist literature has been eroded by an overuse of irony and by a televisual culture that has outsmarted it. A new, post-ironic mode of fiction is now needed, he claims, to restore to the avant-garde its original ethical function. Here, Wallace distances himself rhetorically from postmodernism in its current form, effectively mirroring modern feminist and critical race critiques of the tradition, and carving out for himself a fictional territory that overlaps conveniently with women's and minority literature.[270] Read in conjunction with the letter to Franzen, then, Wallace's TV essay works to disaffiliate the white male literary tradition in America from the charges of elitism, conservativism, and misogyny being levelled at it in the 1990s.

In his attack on postmodern irony in the 1993 "essay–interview",[271] Wallace repeatedly invokes the image of the white hipster: the problem with today's culture, he says, is "hip irony", "hip expression", "hip metatelevision", "pop-hip characters" with "hip identitylessness", "hip cynicism", "hip sophistication and literary savvy", and so on.[272] Although Wallace does not

[265] Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in Urban America* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2013). See Morrissey and Thompson for the only published analysis of this strange text.
[266] Costello and Wallace, 24, 31–32.
[267] Morrissey and Thompson, 18.
[268] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram", 182.
[269] Ibid., 182–183.
[270] Fitzpatrick, at least, has suggested as much. See Fitzpatrick, 217.
[271] Kelly, "Birth of a Discipline".
[272] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram"; McCaffery, "Interview".

historicise his use of the term "hip", white hipness and hipsterism have a complicated genealogy—one that is inextricably bound to black culture. As Michael Szalay's work on the Democratic Party has shown, the twentieth-century white hipster, and especially the literary hipster, borrowed his "cool" from black jazz and swing musicians, a borrowing enacted most famously (and most unashamedly) by Norman Mailer in his 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections of the Hipster".[273] Literary hip, writes Szalay, is a "complex variant" of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, involving a similar "fetish" for the black male body. This fetish allows postwar liberal elites to temporarily imagine themselves "possessed of both black and white skin", which obscures their privileged and often exploitative economic position within the "professional–managerial class".[274] For Robin James, too, white hipness involves a delicate manipulation of corporeality, space, and identity.[275] Crucially, the hipster's "performance of stereotypical black male embodiment" through literature, lifestyle, or art is his attempt, "necessarily unsuccessful", "to situate himself as 'of' but not 'in' mainstream white culture".[276] These efforts by the white hipster rest on "the surplus symbolic value of blacks": that is, their tendency to mean "something besides themselves" within the white imaginary.[277] David Savran takes this argument further, suggesting that the "genealogy of the fantasy of the white male as victim" begins with the white hipster movement and with the 1950s male Beats, who framed themselves as uniquely persecuted by a harsh mainstream system.[278] The self-positioning and self-stylisation of white hipsters, white Beats, and "white beboppers" in the twentieth century often obscured the fact that their estrangement from society was "a matter of choice" rather an actual political affliction. As Amiri Baraka observed in the 1960s, "the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice".[279]

When Wallace writes to Franzen that "white males *are* the mainstream culture" but that they are also "in the shadows", spatially closer to "tribal writers", he performs the classic white hipster move (outlined by James) of declaring himself "of" but not "in" the mainstream. He frames his "alienation" as a genuine affliction, when in fact it more of a choice: even if he turns it down for a life of art, the option to become a "*departing* white male" and move to a money-making industry on the coast is always still available to him, whereas "tribal writers" do not necessarily have the same level of access. And yet the whole thrust of Wallace's argument in the TV essay is an attack on literary and cultural "hipness", because of its links to irony and cynicism. Moreover, in

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[273] See Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). See also Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 396–422.
[274] Szalay, 4.
[275] Robin James, "In but not of, of but not in: On Taste, Hipness, and White Embodiment", *Contemporary Aesthetics*, no. 2 (2009): web, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ca/7523862.spec.209?view=text;rgn=main.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 14. Quoted in Szalay.
[278] David Savran, *Taking It like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 5. Quoted in Olivia Banner, "'They're Literally Shit': Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/11 (2009): 74–91.
[279] Amiri Baraka, "The Modern Scene", *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 188.

the interview that accompanied the TV essay in 1993, Wallace makes a point of attacking contemporary rap music, reversing his position of muted awe in the earlier *Signifying Rappers* essay, and inverting the typical white hipster obsession with black masculine embodiments of "cool". He claims that rap has become as "poisonous" as the "postmodern irony" practised by white hip figures like "David Letterman and Gary Shandling", because it has become so mainstream that its critiques of the mainstream are absurd.[280] But he goes further than that: "Today you've got black rappers who make their reputation rapping about Kill the White Corporate Tools, and are then promptly signed by white-owned record corporations . . . You've got music here that both hates the white GOP values of the Reaganoid eighties and extols a gold-and-BMW materialism that makes Reagan look like a fucking Puritan. Violently racist and anti-Semitic black artists being co-opted by white-owned, often Jewish-owned record labels, and celebrating that fact in their art."[281] In other words, black male musicians are now not only as hypocritical as white hipsters but also more racist, more capitalist, and more conservative than white conservatives themselves. In making this claim, Wallace disaffiliates whiteness from racism, such that black hipsters can be as racist as white hipsters, just as he disaffiliates whiteness from social advantage, such that writers like him and Franzen can be as "alienated" as "tribal writers".

In his non-fiction output of the 1990s, then, Wallace seems to want to lump together mainstream whiteness, white hipster rebellion, *and* black rap rebellion, and to distance himself and his fiction from the conservativism, hypocrisy, and oppression he assigns to each of these cultural forms. I argue that the aesthetic of *Infinite Jest* follows the same logic of Wallace's earlier cultural criticism, and perpetuates a similar distortion of the powers and privileges attendant to whiteness in America. For if black rappers can be more oppressive than Reagan, and white male artists can be more alienated than minority writers in America, then whiteness in general can become the benchmark for pain and suffering in a depoliticised America, as it does in *Infinite Jest*. In a sense, Wallace's proclaimed literary position begins to resemble a curiously white male version of black feminism, borrowing from black feminists the tropes of victimhood and vulnerability, but also their investment in affect and community.[282] Indeed, in the multicultural literary climate of the 1990s, these tropes and investments would have carried far more cultural capital for a mainstream artist trying to remain relevant than any performance of black "cool" or white "hip".

"Pale Negro"

Though written in 1996, *Infinite Jest* is set several decades in the future, and in a geographically reconstituted North America, in which the most urgent politics are not domestic but transnational, between America and its Canadian and Mexican neighbour-states. The precise narrative date is never revealed, for time, by this point, has been entirely subsidised and commodified by corporations ("Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar", "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment", and so on). This indeterminate futuristic setting readily accommodates more universalist and post-

[280] McCaffery, 146.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Fitzpatrick, 217.

racial readings of the novel, since what is at stake here is "America", and its fate, as a whole. Indeed, questions of race are easier to pass over in a novel that is overwhelmingly white (see Figure 2). The central characters are never explicitly raced; their whiteness is distinguishable precisely on account of its "invisibility", to use Richard Dyer's term.[283] (Or as Toni Morrison says of a central character in Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, "Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so.")[284] Without any kind of racial inscription, the white characters are free to become what "human" and "American" mean in the novel—and the discourse surrounding them, on addiction, depression, and recovery, is free to become universal, rather than particular to whiteness itself. But the novel very quickly conforms to Morrison's thesis that, in a "wholly racialized society" such as America, questions of race are unavoidable.[285] In *Infinite Jest*, they are in fact highly visible, once you make the decision to look for them.

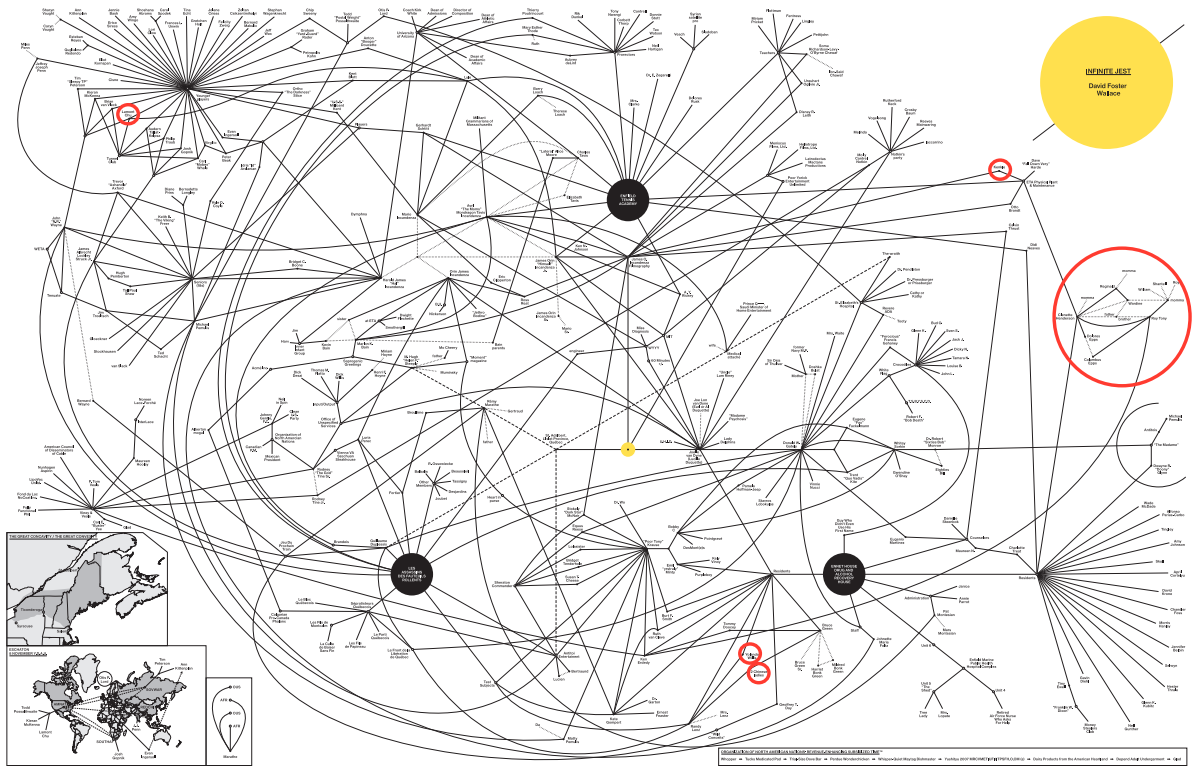

Figure 2. Character mapping of the vast fictional universe of *Infinite Jest*. I have circled in red the handful of characters who are not white: LaMont Chu, the black ETA janitor "Kenkle", "2 Chinese ladies", Ennett House resident Yolanda Willis, and, in the larger circle, Clenette Henderson, Roy Tony, and Wardine. (The other "characters" in the larger circle are not so much characters as simply names mentioned in Clenette's story.) Sam Potts, "A Diagram of Nearly All the Characters in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest,* with Connections and Relations Shown Thereamong", *Sam Potts Inc.*, 6 October 2015, http://sampottsinc.com/ij/.

[283] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.
[284] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 72.
[285] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 4.

Despite being set in the future, the novel regularly "presents" its multicultural 1990s "past". At one point, the novel's undercover government agent Hugh Steeply says to his interlocutor, "I went through school when multiculturalism was inescapable. We read about the Japanese and Indonesians, for example, having a mythic figure. I forget its name. Oriental myth" (*IJ*, 528). Hugh, or "Helen", Steeply is in fact a symbol for identity politics in the novel, since his job requires him to cross-dress and play dress-up as part of his undercover, terrorism-busting duties. The United States Office of Unspecified (USOUS) Services where he works is famous for

> casting men as women, women as longshoremen or Orthodox rabbinicals, heterosexual men as homosexual men, Caucasians as Negroes or caricaturesque Haitians and Dominicans, healthy males as degenerative-nerve-disease-sufferers, healthy women operatives as hydro-cephalic boys or epileptic public-relations executives, nondeformed U.S.O.U.S. personnel made not only to pretend but sometimes to actually suffer actual deformity, all for the realism of their field-personae. (*IJ*, 419)

While this description of the USOUS's casting practices at first seems like an embodiment of the liberatory poststructuralist "free play" with identity discussed in the previous chapter, in which men can perform femininity, women perform masculinity, straight men can perform homosexuality, and so on, the latter half of the passage suggests that free play very easily slips into racial mimicry and "caricature". Steeply himself wore actual blackface in his previous assignment, where he went undercover as a "pale Negro" Haitian for "almost one year" (*IJ*, 420). In other words, what passes for identity-flipping is in fact a team of straight able-bodied whites using racial and sexual "others" as fancy dress, in much the same way that Steeply's "multicultural" education is really just a collapsing of Japanese and Indonesian identity into one "Oriental myth", rather than an actual model of inclusivity and reform.

Steeply's interlocutor for much of the novel, Rémy Marathe, wonders privately about the "psychomechanics" of the undercover process for Steeply. He theorises that Steeply in fact *needs* the "humiliation" and "mortification" of his various caricatures as "fuel for the assignments' performance" (*IJ*, 420). In other words, cross-dressing and wearing blackface are useful to Steeply, even necessary: more effective, somehow, than simply carrying out the assignments as a white heterosexual male agent. I want to suggest that the novel as a whole follows a similar performative pattern. While by no means practising blackface, or fetishing blackness in the tradition of Norman Mailer and the white beboppers, the novel does borrow tropes from black, Hispanic, and other minority experience in order to the tell its homogenously white story—without, however, making that story any less homogenous. In particular, the way the novel sets up its protagonist Hal Incandenza in the first forty pages speaks to a deep dependence on marginalised brownness and traumatised blackness for the purposes of constructing whiteness.

The novel opens with eighteen-year-old Hal in the middle of a college interview at the University of Arizona, unable to communicate with the various directors and deans sitting across from him. He is immediately coded as "damaged" and in need of "*care*", as his attempts at speaking produce only "*sub*animalistic noises and sounds" and he is "pinioned" to the ground and dragged off in an ambulance (*IJ*, 14, 13). Blame for Hal's condition is deflected onto his uncle, Charles

Tavis, who is the director of the prestigious Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA) that Hal attends: "Instead of caring for the boy", says one of the deans, incriminatingly, "you send him here to *enroll*, *compete*?" (*IJ*, 14). But the chain of parental culpability is quickly extended, via a series of jump-cut scenes, to Hal's mother, Avril ("the Moms"), who runs ETA with her brother Charles. We see a scene of Hal at age five accidentally eating a patch of mould and his mother reacting with total "hysteria", running around the yard screaming while the child trips over himself "crying, trying to follow" (*IJ*, 11). The scene, which Hal cannot remember and his brother Orin can only remember with "anxiety", is signalled as clearly traumatic for the children, on account of Avril's inability to provide the appropriate "care" for her son (*IJ*, 11). Avril's culpability is immediately confirmed by another flashback scene in which Hal's father, James, tells the young boy (now aged ten) that his mother has secretly been adding steroids to his breakfast cereal and manipulating his tennis racquets to enhance his performance on the court. Wallace seems to want to prime the reader for a story about an abusive mother, and an abused, damaged boy.

Although the Incandenzas own and run a prestigious tennis academy in a hilly suburb of Boston, Wallace uses an "extras" cast of black and Hispanic characters to create a discursive link between Hal and minority experience, with his "damaged" status effectively cancelling out his mainstream access and disburdening him of his whiteness. As Hal has his breakdown in the college interview room, that most institutional of cultural spaces, a "young Hispanic woman" is placed "at the door", "looking" in, her gaze falling on the flailing Hal (*IJ*, 13). Though Hal is inside the room with the deans, all male and white (and one actually called "Coach White"), he is implicitly likened to the Hispanic woman who stands, symbolically, at the periphery of the space through his inability to cope in the institutional environment in which he has been thrust by his uncle and mother. Later, when Hal thinks about what his time at the hospital will be like, he imagines remaining "*unresponsive*" as conventional "white coat" doctors poke and prod him (*IJ*, 17). In his mind, only someone on the fringes of society, someone resembling the Hispanic woman at the door, will be able to reach him, presumably because Hal, too, is a fringe figure: "It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, invariably—a nurse's aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban orderly who addresses me as *jou*—who will, looking down in the middle of some kind of bustled task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask So yo then man what's *your* story?" (*IJ*, 17).[286] The Cuban orderly's ethnicised address of "*jou*", his looking into Hal's eyes, and his request for Hal's "story" are coded as authentic. They are contrasted with the "gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis" of the hypothetical doctor, and with the impersonal address of the college dean, who, Hal tells us, "delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me" (*IJ*, 16, 3). Hal sees himself being truly heard only once he is outside of mainstream discourse and practice—once the terms of engagement move from "you" to "*jou*". The implication here is that Hal, despite his whiteness, is equally outside the mainstream (he is "of" but not "in"), and that a social kinship exists between him and these unnamed others, whose "looking" can be read as an act of recognition.

The interview scene and childhood flashbacks at the start of the novel function as a framing device for the narrative that follows. Occurring in "Year of Glad", the last year in the novel's

[286] Emphasis in the original.

subsidised calendar, they constitute the chronological end of the story, yet they are placed, structurally, at its beginning. This is the first *and* the last time we see Hal, in other words. Reaching the end of the novel brings us back to these opening scenes, in an "infinite" loop that performs the various looping, recursive structures that the novel is concerned with, as several commentators have observed.[287] I would instead emphasise the opening scenes' staging of a particular kind of white masculinity—vulnerable, traumatised, silenced—that encloses and anticipates the thousand-page drama that follows. In introducing commiserating Hispanic characters, token figures within the larger narrative, the novel also attempts to "minoritize" the white masculinity on display,[288] creating superficial alliances across colour lines as a way to communicate the story's authenticity (but without ever shifting Hal or the other white characters from the centre of the stage). If, as Mark McGurl has argued, the novel is unshakable in its loyalty to various kinds of institutions,[289] the anti-institutional mood that Wallace injects into Hal's character is probably best understood as a rhetorical strategy aimed at ethnicising him and legitimising his tale of suffering and "abuse". Importantly, the opening scenes end with the Cuban orderly's question ("So yo then man what's *your* story?"), which effectively launches the novel proper. Hal's "story", the story of what happened to leave him damaged and mute, is the one we are about to read: *Infinite Jest*. By extension, it seems that Wallace himself, as master storyteller, relies on the presence and gaze of the ethnic other to imagine the story of whiteness that he wants to tell in this novel. The Cuban orderly prompts the story because the story depends on racialised or minority experience to make sense of itself. In Morrison's analysis, white literature in America always does. Focusing on racialised blackness in particular (or "American Africanism", as she calls it), she writes, "What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence."[290]

"An incongruous central blackness"

If Hal is implicitly ethnicised as something other-than-white through his symbolic association with the Cuban orderly and the Hispanic onlooker, later in the novel he is ethnicised more explicitly. When Wallace describes Hal's appearance and ancestry, he "darkens" the character in a number of striking ways. Hal's ethnic-sounding family name, "Incandenza", turns out to belong to an Italian ("Umbrian") ancestor, but the line has been diluted over generations by "N.E. Yankee", "Canadian cross-breeding", and, astonishingly, "a great-grandmother with Pima-tribe Indian S.W. blood" (*IJ*,

[287] See Mary K Holland, "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2006): 218–242; N Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*", *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 675–697; Iannis Goerlandt, "'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2006): 309–328.
[288] Wiegman, 117.
[289] Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program", *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27–54.
[290] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 16.

101). Of all the "extant" Incandenzas, only Hal bears the vague ethnic mark of this "Pima-tribe" ancestral anomaly, and Wallace emphasises both Hal's physical difference and his relative "darkness":

> Hal is the only extant Incandenza who looks in any way ethnic. His late father had been as a young man darkly tall, high flat Pima-tribe cheekbones and very black hair Brylcreemed back so tight there'd been a kind of enforced widow's peak. Himself had looked ethnic, but he isn't extant. Hal is sleek, sort of radiantly dark, almost otterish, only slightly tall, eyes blue but darkly so, and unburnable even w/o sunscreen, his untanned feet the color of weak tea, his nose ever unpeeling but slightly shiny. (*IJ*, 101)

Hal's brother Orin, by contrast, "had got the Moms's Anglo-Nordo-Canadian phenotype, the deep-socketed and lighter-blue eyes" (*IJ*, 101). Blue eyes as a trope were famously and irrevocably bound to whiteness in Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, which Wallace had on his bookshelf when he died.[291] It seems symptomatic of the ethnicising strategy surrounding Hal that his eyes are described as "blue but darkly so". Hal, Wallace wants to persuade us, is white, but "darkly so". It seems somewhat uncanny that his best friend at ETA, and the only person he feels "at complete ease with", is Ortho Stice, whom everyone calls "The Darkness" because of the black clothes and black tennis gear he wears at all times (*IJ*, 521).

In Hal's case, what Wiegman calls "discursive blackness" might better be called "discursive darkness", since Wallace confers not only African American but also Hispanic and Native American forms of ethnicity onto his white lead character.[292] Hal's discursive darkness is set up by his ethnicised name and appearance, his engagement with a Hispanic presence in the opening scenes, and his association with The Darkness at ETA. But Wallace's darkening of Hal becomes a much deeper project than the use of these surface markers of otherness. An explicit discourse of abuse is inserted into the narrative early on via the tragic figure of Wardine, a young black female character who appears on page 37 and then never again. Wardine, who is less than sixteen years old,[293] is beaten by her jealous mother after she is molested by the mother's boyfriend. Through the developing image of Avril as the maternal villain of the novel, this discourse of abuse is transferred onto Hal-as-victim, along with the associated discourses of trauma, victimhood, blackness, and femininity. Hal is coded as "radiantly dark", but he also "worries secretly that he looks half-feminine" (*IJ*, 101). Indeed, in his "story" of parental neglect, he almost becomes the symbolic black female, the white male analogue of Wardine in the novel. Hal's experience of emotional pain and "abuse" in an affluent institutional space is subtly equated, via metaphor, with Wardine's physical and sexual abuse in the impoverished inner-city "Brighton Projects". I read this equation as a distinctly literary move, with Wallace "adapting" his mainstream narrative to the multicultural times, and lending it relevance through an association with black trauma.

[291] David Foster Wallace Collection (1971–2008), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
[292] Wiegman, 123.
[293] Her mother threatens to "beat Wardine to death" if she "let a man lie down before she sixteen" (*IJ*, 38).

The Wardine scene is one of only two instances in the entire novel where Wallace departs from his third-person narration to take on a character's specific dialect.[294] It is also the very first section of the novel that Wallace wrote—he might have written it as early as 1986, as part of his MFA programme.[295] Most importantly, the Wardine scene appears in the opening sequence of the novel, right after our introduction to Hal and his mother. The scene's uniqueness within the novel, as well as its prime placement and early origins, suggests something irresistible about the black female body for Wallace as a symbol for the kind of white injury his novel wants to communicate. Wardine's story is narrated by her "half Sister" Clenette, who shares the graphic details of Wardine's abuse: "Wardine back all beat up and cut up. Big stripes of cut all up and down Wardine back, pink stripes and around the stripes the skin like the skin on folks lips be like . . . Say her momma beat Wardine with a hanger" (*IJ*, 37). Wardine has lost feeling in her "cut up" back: "Wardine say she do not feel nothing in her back ever since spring. She lie stomach on [her boyfriend] Reginald floor and say she aint got no feeling in her skin of her back" (*IJ*, 38). The word "say" repeats over thirty times in the short scene, highlighting the fact that this is a rare act of speech for Wardine, who has kept her abuse hidden for months, and that abuse is usually shrouded in silence: "Wardine look like crazy she so scared. She say she kill herself if me or Reginald tell our mommas" (*IJ*, 38). The image of the sexually abused and silenced black girl immediately calls up black feminist texts of the 1970s and 1980s, most notably Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, whose young heroines are both violated by parental figures. The detailed descriptions of Wardine's numb and wounded back, meanwhile, are impossible to separate from the slavery genre, and particularly from Morrison's *Beloved*, where the keloid "tree" on Sethe's back, the skin of which "had been dead for years", is one of the novel's most powerful images—a literary version of the famous nineteenth-century photograph of "The Scourged Back" (see Figure 3).[296] Appearing as it does in *Infinite Jest*, is this oblique gesture to *Beloved* a borrowing of slave narratives, and of black female trauma, for the purposes of telling a more compelling story about the tennis-playing Hal Incandenza? After all, it is not slave owners who "beat up and cut up" Wardine's back but her own mother, who is motivated by jealousy rather than by the political-historical circumstances of her life, which go unmentioned by the author. In Wallace's novel, abuse is not a political drama but a family drama, which levels the playing fields between Wardine and Hal. Poor black girls get abused by their mothers with hangers, and rich white boys get abused by their mothers with words. Wardine and Hal are perhaps not so different, the logic goes.

[294] See Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace", in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, eds. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 236–237. The other instance of dialectal ventriloquism is a dense seven-page episode narrated by "white trash" drug addict "yrstruly", in his poorly spelt and punctuated street argot. Wallace does narrate some of Hal's scenes in the first person, but his usage around Hal is never dialectal.

[295] Stephen J Burn, "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': Closing Time in the Pale King", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 386; Mark O'Connell, "My Metonym for Self-Reference Weighs a Ton", *Slate*, 9 April 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2013/08/signifying_rappers_david_foster_wallace_and_mark_costello_s_book_about_rap.html.

[296] Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) (New York: Random House, 2004), 21.

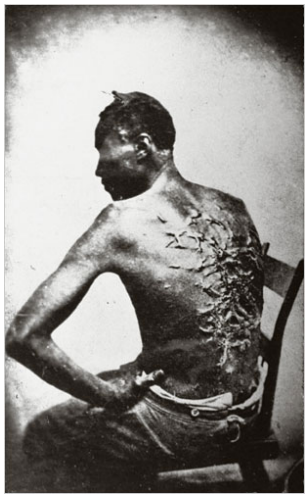

Figure 3. "The Scourged Back", Baton Rouge, 1863, War Department, National Archives, Time and Life Pictures, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/books/review/Letters-t-ASLAVENAMEDG_LETTERS.html.

The analogy between Hal and Wardine is confirmed about halfway through the novel, in a scene that is meant to show the reader what Hal's emotional abuse at the hands of his mother looks like. Hal and "the Moms" are in Charles Tavis's office at ETA. Hal admits that he is a little hungry, and his mother manipulates him into taking her apple, even though he knows it is the only thing she has brought to eat for the day. Her excessive solicitousness towards him "drives [him] bats" (*IJ*, 523). Apparently, this is an old pattern—something Hal's brother calls "Politeness Roulette" (*IJ*, 523). Avril works hard to appear as a caring, selfless mother, but the effect is that her children feel guilty about the sacrifices she makes for them. She acts out her version of idealised motherhood at the expense of her children's self-loathing. As Hal explains, she "makes you hate yourself for telling her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequences will be for her" (*IJ*, 523). In Orin's view, Avril's actions are deliberate, and they amount to a kind of emotional terrorism practised on her children: "He said she went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Clock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot" (*IJ*, 523). Incredibly, Wallace places Clenette, the narrator of the Wardine segment, in the corner of the room, as a silent witness to Hal's "abuse" in this apple scene. (By this stage in the novel, she is working as a cleaner at ETA.) Hal suddenly notices her presence: "And it also seems somehow sinister that she's apparently been in here all this time, this Clenette person, one of the nine-month temps from down the hill, pretty-eyed and so black she's got a bluish cast" (*IJ*, 527). Hal's mentions both Clenette's name and her blackness here because they are vitally important: they recall the Wardine scene, and confirm Hal's discursive blackness as abuse victim. Her presence as a witness in this scene is meant to equate Hal's suffering with Wardine's, which Clenette bore witness to at the beginning of the book, and blur the colour divisions between the characters. Just as Clenette's blackness appears "bluish" to Hal, so Hal's whiteness is meant to appear "blackish" to the reader. Hal's ethnicisation is cemented by an exchange of mutual looking between him and Clenette: "The way she stares at a point just to the side of Hal's own stare as she and her cart wait at C.T.'s inner door for Hal and the others to be ushered sideways through by Lateral Alice Moore" (*IJ*, 523). I would point out that Clenette does

not actually meet Hal's gaze and instead looks to the side of him—an unwitting reminder of the lack of real correspondence between Hal and Wardine, and of the problems inherent in a "white pain" aesthetic.

Towards the end of the book, in a seven-page endnote, Wallace finally departs from metaphor and analogy and explicitly uses the word "abuse" to describe Hal's family situation. Through the character of Marlon Bain, Orin's childhood friend, he tells the story of Avril's beloved dog S Johnson, whom Orin accidentally killed in a drunk-driving accident when he was a teenager. Avril responded not only by accepting Orin's obvious lie about what happened but also by being "overly solicitous and polite" towards him for weeks afterwards, to ensure he did not feel that she "blamed him or loved him less in any way because of the whole incident" (*IJ*, 1051). Bain posits that Avril's performance of "almost pathological generosity" was not "for Orin's sake" but in service of "her own vision of herself" as a "stellar" mother—a mother whom Orin could not possibly feel that he deserved, after what he had done (*IJ*, 1051). And then Bain delivers his damning assessment: "Is it a sign of abuse if a mother produces a child who believes not that he is innately beautiful and lovable and deserving of magnificent maternal treatment but somehow that he is a hideous unlovable child who has somehow lucked into having a really magnificent mother?" He states plainly that he has in mind "Mrs. Avril M.-T. Incandenza", whose behaviour as a mother, though seemingly "indictment-proof", is somehow "*creepy*" and "not *right*" (*IJ*, 1051). He argues that the most psychologically damaged children in America seem to be produced by parents who, like Avril, are "usually upscale and educated and talented and functional *and white*, patient and loving and supportive and concerned and involved in their children's lives, profligate with compliments and diplomatic with constructive criticism, loquacious in their pronouncements of unconditional love for and approval of their children, conforming to every last jot/tittle in any conceivable definition of a good parent" (*IJ*, 1050).[297] Beneath this mask of perfect parenting lies a complex web of emotional manipulation, as we were meant to have glimpsed in the apple scene in Tavis's office.

According to Bain, victims of "clear cases of different kinds of abuse"—"beatings, diddlings, rapes, deprivations, domineerment, humiliation, captivity, torture, excessive criticism or even just utter disinterest"—"at least" have the benefit of "confidently call[ing] it 'abuse'", and receiving support from various social organisations. In "more ambiguous cases"—which is to say, "white", "upscale" cases—he says that "the ambiguity of the abuse becomes part of the abuse" (*IJ*, 1050). This is a striking claim: instead of the ambiguity of these situations calling their very "abuse" status into question, as one might expect, Bain turns it into a point of intensification. He gives the example of a handyman who fails to impart his DIY skills onto his son, leaving his son feeling "inadequate" as a man. "Would you cry 'Abuse!' if you were the unhandy son, looking back", asks Bain. "Worse, *could* you call it abuse without feeling that you were a pathetic self-indulgent piss-puddle, what with all the genuine cases of hair-raising physical and emotional abuse diligently reported and analyzed daily by conscientious journalists?" (*IJ*, 1050). The "unhandy son" is made to feel as though his pain is insignificant and "pathetic" in comparison to overtly abusive scenarios, which apparently intensifies his pain. The rhetoric here is yet another iteration of Wallace's

[297] My emphasis.

complaint in his letter to Franzen: "tribal writers" can "at least" call themselves marginalised, while suffering whites do not have the solace of that option. Within the context of the novel, I read Bain's endnote as part of a sustained effort on Wallace's part to ramp up empathy for Hal by making his "abuse" commensurable with the overt abuse case we saw in the Wardine scene (involving "beatings, diddlings"). As readers, we seem encouraged to endorse the commensurability, and give Hal (and the other white characters) our full empathetic concern. We seem encouraged to emulate the AA model of true listening laid out in the book, with its injunction to "Identify instead of Compare": in the AA, all differences between individuals must be erased, because their stories "are basically alike, and like your own" (*IJ*, 345). But how, in fact, is a father failing to teach his son handyman skills the same as a mother beating her daughter with a hanger? And how is Hal's life at ETA the same as Wardine's life in Brighton Projects? They might both be having a very bad time indeed, but equating their suffering erases the socio-economic and historical conditions that place certain families in slums and other families in tennis estates in the first place. As Clenette's averted stare in the apple scene suggests, the two scenarios do not easily converge, and arguments like Bain's risk substituting wholesale empathy for historical accuracy.

Summarising the central symbolic role of the Wardine scene in *Infinite Jest*, as I have been arguing for it, a seemingly absurdist fragment of conversation wafts into the text some two hundred pages in:

> "And then but now here's this entirely incongruous *middle-aged black woman* playing Jan!"
> "*De gustibus non est disputandum* [In matters of taste there can be no dispute]."
> "Balls."
> "An incongruous central blackness could have served to accentuate the terrible whiteness that had been in ineluct—" (*IJ*, 232)[298]

This fragment is drawn from the unattributed, intersecting conversations overheard by character Joelle van Dyne at a party of pretentious film students. The first speaker describes a film project she was recently involved in, where a (presumably) white male character "Jan" was played by an "incongruous" black woman. After some textual noise, the second speaker offers an analysis that is meant to be ridiculous in its high-flown, jargony affectation, but that ends up being highly meaningful for our reading of the novel. The "incongruous central blackness" of the black actor's presence in the film, like Wardine's in the opening sequence of *Infinite Jest*, serves a vital rhetorical function. It illuminates, in the opinion of the second speaker, the "terrible whiteness" of the scene it interrupts. Blackness "accentuates" whiteness, brings out its terribleness; whiteness, in turn, relies on the racial other as a signifier of wretchedness, and codes itself as wretched via blackness.

[298] Emphasis in the original.

"The personal is the political is the psychopathological"

In her illuminating reading of *Forrest Gump*, Wiegman looks at how the film de-essentialises the colour line in order to position its white hero as a marginalised figure—despite his origins in the slave-owning Deep South, and despite his sharing of a name with his ancestor Nathan Bedford Forrest, the founder of the Ku Klux Klan.[299] The film undoes the link between whiteness and privilege by converting the family's old plantation home in Alabama into a boarding house that Forrest's mother relies on for her income: "a narrative convenience", writes Wiegman, "that renders the family's historical connection to the economics of slavery if not deficient at least not materially advantageous".[300] Moreover, the film presents Forrest's childhood as one marked by physical immobility (leg braces), disability, and discrimination, and has his "social exclusion" at school and later in the army take place on a bus, where he is refused a seat by his peers.[301] Later, he tells the story of his life to a black woman at a bus stop who complains that her "feet hurt", which consolidates the "analogy between segregationist racialization and Forrest's restricted mobility, ostracism, and physical 'difference'".[302] Wiegman understands the film's bus scenes as performing "two functions":

> They rewrite segregation as a discourse of injury no longer specific to black bodies, which installs whiteness as injury; and they define that injury as private, motivated not by a social system but by the prejudices and moral lacks of individuals who seem simply not to know better.[303]

The site of injury moves from the public, social, political, and historical realms to the private, personal, domestic, and familial realms—and, as a result, from blackness to whiteness.

The film also dissociates whiteness from racism by placing Forrest in various televised historic scenes, including the famous scene of desegregation at the University of Alabama, where George Wallace tried to block black students from entering the campus in 1963. Forrest unknowingly but "symbolically" joins the side of the black students when he picks up one of their books. Through this act, Forrest is "strategically disaffiliated from the racist whiteness that [George] Wallace so viciously stands for". But the "violence and anger of that historical moment" are neutralised and anaesthetised in the scene by Gump's innocence, his ignorance of the history he is participating in.[304] As Wiegman concludes,

> The film's commitment to a protagonist unable to read the historical archive he is moving through demonstrates the prevailing assumption of the Reagan years, during which, as

[299] Wiegman, 128. For an excellent discussion of how a similar distortion plays out in the film *American Beauty*, but along gender rather than racial lines, see Erica Arthur, "Where Lester Burnham Falls Down: Exposing the Facade of Victimhood in *American Beauty*", *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 4 (2004): 127–143.
[300] Wiegman, 130.
[301] Ibid., 127.
[302] Ibid., 126
[303] Ibid., 127.
[304] Ibid., 126.

> [Lauren] Berlant puts it, "[the normal American] sees her/his identity as something sustained in private, personal, intimate relations; in contrast, only the abjected, degraded lower citizens of the United States will see themselves as sustained by public, coalitional, non-kin affiliations."[305]

By this Reagan-era logic, the "harm" wrought by slavery and its aftermath is "finished", and any persistent emphasis on political identity is deviant, or unpatriotic, or both.[306] Forrest must, then, be assessed on the basis of his "private, personal, intimate relations" rather than on his actual historical allegiances—which is what makes it possible for the filmmakers to casually place him on the right side of history in the University of Alabama scene.

Though *Infinite Jest* is by no means a conservative mouthpiece, there are still parallels to be drawn with *Forrest Gump* (as it is read by Wiegman). It is not simply that the opening scene of Hal's social exclusion and exile takes place in a Southern university, so that, like Forrest on the Southern buses, he becomes associated with "segregationist racialization", or that, like Forrest at the bus stop, he tells his "story" to a sympathetic racial other. More generally, the novel encourages its readers to view Hal and the other main characters in universalist terms, disaffiliating their whiteness from racism and history, and allowing whiteness to become associated with victimhood. For example, the Wardine scene in *Infinite Jest* is followed immediately by an introduction to "white trash" couple Bruce Green and Mildred Bonk, who drop out of high school to live "just off the Allston Spur in a shiny housetrailer", and who end up with a serious drug problem (*IJ*, 39). Brighton, where Wardine and Clenette live, and Allston, where Green and Bonk live, are geographically adjacent "twin" suburbs in Boston (often written as "Allston–Brighton"). By placing these two scenes side by side, the novel almost seems to want to instate a *social* adjacency or equivalence between its white trash and poor black communities, where class supplants race as the primary marker of group identity. This move parallels key texts in the field of whiteness studies, including Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray's 1997 *White Trash*, which is interested in "how differences within whiteness—differences marked out by categories like white trash—may serve to undo whiteness as racial supremacy, helping to produce multiple, indeterminate, and anti-racist forms of white identity".[307] But any attempt to position the book's white trash characters as "anti-racist" and create an equivalence between them and their black neighbours is undone in the later scenes of the novel: when Bruce Green ends up in the same halfway house as Clenette, he casually refers to her and her friends as "nigger girls" (*IJ*, 827).

In fact, the novel is constantly trying, and failing, to delink whiteness from racism, and reverse the historical positions of victim and perpetrator. Describing the social dynamics of the halfway house where many of the characters are based, the narrator claims "[t]hat black and Hispanic people can be as big or bigger racists than white people" (*IJ*, 200). But this claim goes

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[305] Ibid., 128.
[306] Ibid., 130. See also comedian Louis C K's comments on the relationship between whiteness and slavery. Louis C K, "Slavery", *The Jay Leno Show*, NBC, 12 March 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD6Rjyo77NY.
[307] Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4. Quoted in Wiegman.

unsupported. As we move through scenes of the halfway house and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, white racism keeps puncturing the narrative surface, and it is the only kind of racism we ever see. There are the biker-type veterans in the AA who sport tattoos of "little khaki figures in G.I. helmets plunging bayonets into the stomachs of hideous urine-yellow bucktoothed Oriental caricatures" (*IJ*, 209). And there is Emil Minty from the halfway house who sports a tattoo of "a palsied and amateur swastika with the caption FUCK NIGERS on a left biceps he is heartily encouraged to keep covered, as a resident" (*IJ*, 207). That the swastika is "amateur", and the slur misspelt, seems to be Wallace's attempt to neutralise the racism on his display here and decouple it from whiteness, attributing it instead to the character's idiosyncratic stupidity.

When Minty, "as a resident", is "encouraged" to keep the tattoo covered, he is being encouraged to turn his overt racism into covert racism. This detail provides a hint about the way racism functions within modern-day multicultural institutions like the novel's halfway house: it simply goes underground. But instead of critiquing the contradiction inherent in this institutional paradigm, Wallace seems to endorse it, making it the foundation of his own model for liberal multiculturalism in the book: the AA programme, where transcendent, post-racial connection and fellowship are the order of the day. As the AA vision gets built, scene by scene, the excessive racism of star AA characters such as Don Gately and Joelle van Dyne is neatly apologised or explained away. In one AA meeting, for example, Joelle listens to a male speaker whom she calls "colored". Though she finds his speech "full of colored idioms and those annoying little colored hand-motions and gestures", she soon becomes absorbed: "She can Identify. The truth has a kind of irresistible unconscious attraction at meetings, no matter what the color or fellowship" (*IJ*, 707–708). Joelle's old-school racism here does not go away; it is simply replaced by colourblind notions of "truth" and "identification" that do not address the character's obvious sense of superiority over the speaker. The black particularities of the speaker's story, meanwhile, are replaced with a universalism that Joelle can access. Moreover, Wallace, in an endnote, apologises for his character: "Joelle van Dyne, by the way, was aculturated in a part of the U.S.A. where verbal attitudes toward black people are dated and unconsciously derisive, and is doing pretty much the best she can—colored and so on—and anyway is a paragon of racial sensitivity compared to the sort of culture Don Gately was conditioned in" (*IJ*, 1054). In another endnote, we are told of Gately: "[H]is private term for blacks is *niggers*, which is unfortunately still all he knows" (*IJ*, 1026). Some of the other "private terms" that fill Gately's sections of the book are ""Nuck", "Oriental", "chink", and "fag" (*IJ*, 610, 828, 977, 274). That Joelle and Gately keep their racism "private" differentiates them from the crass stupidity of Minty. By framing these characters as "victims" of their upbringings, rather than perpetrators of hate speech, Wallace frees them from reproach and allows them to become the darlings of the book's AA programme, with Joelle virtually praised for her more "sensitive" racial slur, and Gately quickly becoming the moral centre of the novel. These paratextual asides seem to me a way of avoiding, via two quick sentences, a deeper confrontation with white racism, including how it might hinder the model of "community" being developed through the novel's AA.

By disaffiliating whiteness from racism, *Infinite Jest* depoliticises its white characters. Joelle and Gately's racism is not political but cultural, which means that it can be transcended via the cross-cultural promise held out by the AA, where members "Identify" and "empathize" with one

another, "no matter what the color or fellowship" (*IJ*, 345). The same logic is applied to Hal, who is depoliticised to the point where he is just another helpless child, like Wardine, whose "discursive blackness" he can easily borrow. Like *Forrest Gump*, the novel is free to move "injury" out of the political and into the personal realm, "motivated not by a social system but by the prejudices and moral lacks of individuals who seem simply not to know better".[308] An exam question for a course run at ETA does a particularly good job of illustrating how the novel's depoliticisation strategy works:

> The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds
> Midterm Examination
> Ms. THODE
> November 7, Yr. of D.A.U.
> KEEP YOUR ANSWERS *BRIEF* AND *GENDER NEUTRAL* (*IJ*, 307)[309]

At first glance, this course about the "Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds" seems to be politically orientated, especially with its specific request for "GENDER NEUTRAL" responses. Indeed, the instructor, Mary Esther Thode, is described as "rabidly political", a "radical post-feminist" who was "blacklisted" by the pro tennis circuit for trying to create "pro tournaments organized, subsidized, refereed, overseen, and even attended and cartridge-distributed exclusively to not only women or homosexual women, but only by, for, and to registered members of the infamously unpopular early-interdependence-era Female Objectification Prevention and Protest Phalanx" (*IJ*, 307). Thode is so radical that she is "post-feminist", a "politically repressed" figure within ETA (*IJ*, 307). But Thode's radicalism turns out to be a disguise for a conservative view of identity politics and injury that the book communicates through her course. The liberatory second-wave feminist slogan "The personal is political", which politicised the domestic sphere as a site for urgent social reform in the 1960s and 1970s, is expanded in the course title to "The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological", which has a rather different meaning. The meaning here is no longer that the personal is political, but that "either" the personal "or" the political can be pathological. As the exam question explains: "Whether your problem is true personal psychopathology, or merely marginalization by a political definition of 'psychopathology,' nevertheless, it is a Double-Bind" (*IJ*, 308). In other words, either you have "merely" been marginalised for political reasons (race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on) or yours is a "true personal" marginalisation—apolitical, familial, psychological, transcendent. It does not matter to Wallace: you can be the victim of a "Double-Bind" either way. Psychopathological double binds can be intensely political, like Wardine's, where she will be beaten if she speaks out about her abuse and beaten if she does not, and where she is in this position because she is a poor black girl. But the novel seems more interested in internal, personal, and so-called "true" double binds, like the example given in the exam of an agoraphobic kleptomaniac, who cannot leave the house but who

[308] Wiegman, 127.
[309] Emphasis in the original.

is compelled to "steal, steal, steal" (*IJ*, 307). Or, of course, like the example of Hal, who feels guilty when he refuses his mother's apple and guilty when he accepts it. Once inside ETA and Wallace's pages, then, Thode's radical feminist pedagogy must bend to accommodate the depoliticised logic of liberal whiteness, in which the personal takes precedence over the political, rather than the other way around (as the original slogan intended), and in which family pathology is a purely domestic affair.

The original theory of the "double bind", developed by Gregory Bateson in the 1950s, was equally invested in a depoliticised understanding of the family dynamic. The theory is a near-perfect account of Hal's relationship with his mother, betraying the fact that Wallace had indeed studied the theory in some detail. (Wallace heavily annotated and underlined a chapter called "Art of the Double Bind" in Tom LeClair's 1987 book *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, part of his archived book collection. LeClair's chapter uses Bateson's theories to analyse the mother–son dynamic in DeLillo's novel *Americana*.)[310] Bateson used the concept of the double bind to describe schizophrenia, which he saw as an outcome of family behaviour—specifically, pathological communication on the part of the mother. In Bateson's double-bind scenario, the mother feels intense hostility and resentment towards her child but cannot accept this image of herself as a mother, and so acts overly loving and compassion to compensate for her natural response. The result is a contradictory set of messages that damages the child's symbolic order and the child's own ability to communicate.[311] Though Bateson's theory has been widely applied since its inception, including in multicultural, feminist, and postcolonial frameworks,[312] it is essentially a theory that pathologises white upper-middle-class suburbia and allows this demographic to see itself as uniquely wounded, despite its significant material advantages.[313] This is the theoretical application that Wallace takes up in *Infinite Jest*, where Avril Incandenza is constructed as a Batesonian mother figure, like Mrs Bell of *Americana* before her. Avril's doubleness and duplicity are already suggested by the plural form of her family nickname, "the Moms", and the examples of her pathological communication in the novel are too abundant to enumerate (although the apple scene between her and Hal is fairly representative). Orin calls his mother "a kind of contortionist with other people's bodies", a description that "Hal's never been able to forget (*IJ*, 285). She is constantly taking "pains to let all three of her children know that her nonjudgmental love and pride depend[ ] in no way on achievement or performance or potential talent", yet Hal feels intense pressure to maintain his status as both "a lexical prodigy" and "a really good tennis

[310] Wallace, unpublished annotations of *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, David Foster Wallace Collection (1971–2008), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
[311] Gregory Bateson, Don D Jackson, Jay Haley, and John Weakland, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia", *Behavioral Science* 1, no. 4 (1956): 251–264.
[312] See Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels", *Social Text* 1 (1979): 149–156; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Double Bind Starts to Kick In", *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 97–118; Gabriel Huddleston, "An Awkward Stance: On Gayatri Spivak and Double Binds", *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 9, no. 1 (2015): 17–28; John Nagle, "Multiculturalism's Double Bind: Creating Inclusivity, Difference and Cross-community Alliances with the London-Irish", *Ethnicities* 8, no. 2 (2008): 177–198; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[313] See Deborah Weinstein, *The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Michael E Staub, *Madness is Civilization: When the Diagnosis Was Social, 1948–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

player" (*IJ*, 155). Her complex effect on Hal's psyche comes across most powerfully in a "recurring nightly" dream that he has, in which his mother stands in the bleachers as he plays an impossible match in a "huge" and indecipherable tennis court, her "delicate fist upraised and tight in total unconditional support" (*IJ*, 67). The disjuncture between the mother's stance of total support and the boy's growing dread, anxiety, and loneliness ("Even the 'we' [of the match] is theory"), so intense that they wake him up "*in medias res*" every night, creates the creepy impression that Avril is not what she seems (*IJ*, 67).

Hal mentions twice that his performance in the dream is "public" (*IJ*, 67), which suggests that the novel, like *Forrest Gump* and other post-Reagan narratives, places family drama at the centre of social discourse. Rather than the traditionally political public sphere, post-Reagan narratives prefer an "intimate public sphere", as Lauren Berlant calls it, where "the modernist promise of the culturally vital, multiethnic city" is replaced with a depoliticised obsession with family and suburbs.[314] "That the family is imagined and indeed popularly imaged as white", Wiegman says of this aesthetic trend, "underscores the conservative racial agenda of this new public intimacy."[315] The so-called "publicness" of Hal's dream obscures the fact that the drama playing out within it, like the theory of double binds supporting it, is really a private domestic drama, located in white upper-middle-class suburbia.

Importantly, this dream is the reason Hal starts experimenting with drugs in the first place: he is invited by a fellow student to sample "a couple of late-night bongs", to help him finally sleep "all the way through" the night after "weeks" of the disruptive mom-dream (*IJ*, 67). The chain of maternal culpability hinted at in the opening sequence is here confirmed, as the narrative creates a causal link that connects Avril's pathological communication to Hal's recurring nightmare, to his sampling of the "high-resin Bob Hope" bongs, and finally to his sampling of "the incredibly potent DMZ", the drug that, by all accounts, causes the "catatonic" state in which we find him in the opening/closing interview scene (*IJ*, 51, 170, 15). Incidentally, this is the classic Batesonian outcome for the victim of a double-bind relationship, whose symbolic order eventually caves in on itself: "[I]f an individual doesn't know what sort of message a message is, he may defend himself in ways which have been described as paranoid, hebephrenic [schizophrenic], or catatonic."[316] Hal's father, interestingly, becomes convinced throughout Hal's childhood that his son is slowly going mute, and starts working on a film called *Infinite Jest*, in the hope of drawing his son out of his silence. However, the film, when it is eventually leaked after the *auteur*'s death, proves to be so fatally entertaining that it leaves its viewers permanently catatonic. Why is the film so fatally entertaining? Because it features an angelic-looking maternal figure who tells the viewer, "I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am", over and over again (*IJ*, 939). In other words, even attempts at providing healing and care for the upper-middle-class youth of the novel cause further damage. All roads lead to catatonia. From this we are meant to infer the total, recursive despair and hopelessness of family life in suburban America, with fathers

[314] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 5. Quoted in Wiegman.
[315] Wiegman, 128.
[316] Bateson et al.

only compounding the "abuse" that mothers create. The book's depoliticisation project is complete.

"The subject of the dream is the dreamer"

Infinite Jest depends on the blackness and brownness of racial others to circumscribe its traumatised white characters, to locate its white narrative "of" but not "in" the mainstream, and to make its utopic spaces inclusive despite their overwhelming whiteness. The book blurs colour lines and attempts to redraw them along personal lines, where domestic pathologies supplant racial and gender politics, and the rich white boy can be as traumatised and victimised as the black girl from the projects. This blurring act is disrupted, inevitably, by the incongruence of conflating the diametrically opposed realities of an elite tennis academy and a Boston slum. But, as we saw in our discussion of the AA, it is also disrupted by instances of overt racism in the novel, which reinstate racial hierarchies, and put strain on Wallace's project of transcendent community. The multicultural climate of the book's 1990s production makes itself felt in various ways, but mostly in the attempt to put white suffering in conversation with minority experience (through Wardine, Clenette, and the Hispanic "extras" in the opening scene), and to delink whiteness from racism, politics, even history. Multiculturalism generates anxiety, as Wallace's letter to Franzen showed. In its institutional form, its effects may sometimes be superficial (covering a racist tattoo to keep the peace, for example), but in the literary space it has meant new reading practices, new writing practices, new understandings of "high" and "low", a new marketplace, a new canon. I have tried to suggest that when we see Wardine, or Clenette, or the Hispanic "extras" in the novel, we are seeing a projection, a negotiation, an embodiment of a host of anxieties around race, gender, positionality, and privilege that surround Wallace the writer and Wallace the citizen in the multicultural, identity-fuelled 1990s.

In thinking about the various racialised presences of the novel in this way, I am guided by Morrison's thesis in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* about the reflexivity of blackness in much white literature. Rather than being merely mimetic or "decorative", a "display[ ] of the agile writer's technical expertise", the "Africanist presence" always serves a complex emotional function, revealing the innermost insecurities and aspirations of the writer.[317] As she puts it:

> I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist presence is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this.[318]

[317] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 16.
[318] Ibid., 17.

The subject of the Wardine scene is Wallace himself, and his longing both to narrate black female experience and to equate that experience with white experience through the "abused" character of Hal Incandenza. The scene is not about racial mimicry, or not *only* about racial mimicry: its awkward black dialect and its graphic descriptions of child abuse say much more about Wallace's complex aspirations as a white writer in the age of Toni Morrison and black feminism than they do about any racist attitudes he may have.

The final section of the novel involves an extended, hallucinatory dream sequence, with Don Gately as "the dreamer". Gately is shot in a territorial snafu outside the halfway house and lands up in hospital, where he refuses the opioids offered to him for pain relief because of their similarity to the substances (Demerol, Dilaudid) he was addicted to before he got sober about a year before. Overwhelmed by pain, he drifts in and out of consciousness, arriving finally at the scene that ends the novel: a detailed flashback of the grisly ordeal that pushed him to his "Bottom"—in AA lingo, "the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around"—and led him to give up drugs and enter the recovery process (*IJ*, 347). Strikingly, this final revelation is preceded by a series of dreams, visions, and flashbacks involving what Gately calls "Oriental" figures. These detailed dreams, and Gately's orientalist obsession, have not been picked up by scholars, no doubt because they appear as merely "decorative" to the main event of Gately's reaching "Bottom". But what if we take Morrison's metaphor about "the dreamer" literally, and recognise Gately as the subject of his "Oriental" dreams? In other words, what if these orientalist projections tell us as much about Gately as the story of his final opioid overdose does?

In one dream, Gately tries to "blindfold" "an Oriental" man who has "no nose or mouth", but the man is still able to "see around the twine" and looks "steadily at Gately", "blinking inscrutably" (*IJ*, 809). In another, Gately lies prostrate as "a tiny acne-scarred Oriental woman", "one of those tiny little anonymous Oriental women you see all over metro Boston", stands over him, "looking wordlessly down at him" (*IJ*, 828, 830). Gately cannot look at these Asian personas with them staring back. His gaze, and our gaze as reader, is deflected back onto him. The scars on the dream-woman's face, whose "elusive pattern . . . seems like it wants to mean something", are, perhaps, Gately's own scars (*IJ*, 828). Importantly, we learn that the dream about the acne-scarred woman is a "recurring bad dream", and that it started right after Gately "gave up and Came In and got straight" (*IJ*, 828). Somehow, the "Oriental" woman is a representation of whatever painful truths Gately discovered when he hit "Bottom".

As it turns out, she is almost exactly that. For, in the scene of Gately's "Bottom", the "last rotating sight" that comes into Gately's field of vision before he passes out from an overdose and never touches substances again—and the last rotating sight we get before the novel itself ends—is of a pair of "chinks" holding up a mirror to Gately's face (*IJ*, 981). Gately and his crime and junkie partner Gene Facklemann are in the middle of a Dilaudid binge in a drug lord's Boston apartment when an "entourage-type group" of misfits barge in to exact revenge on Facklemann for a scam pulled off at the drug lord's expense (*IJ*, 975). In the group are two "Oriental punks" who are "small" and who keep "looking down" at a slumped, drugged-up Gately. Crucially, the narrator mentions that "neither had bad skin", a loaded comment that confirms the link between this "Oriental" encounter and the acne-scarred woman in the nightmare that has haunted Gately since (*IJ*, 975–977). As Facklemann's eyelids are sewn open and acid is dropped into his eyes

(punishment for his transgressions), Gately is told to "Hold onto [his] heart" as he is injected with "pharm-grade Sunshine", the most potent opioid analgesic on the market, designed to knock him unconscious (*IJ*, 979–980). Before the Sunshine kicks in and his eyes close on the scene, Gately is forced to see *himself*, and it is the "Oriental" who holds up the mirror:

> The last rotating sight was the chinks coming back through the door, holding big shiny squares of the room. As the floor wafted up and C's grip finally gave, the last thing Gately saw was an Oriental bearing down with the held square and he looked into the square and saw clearly a reflection of his own big square pale head with its eyes closing as the floor finally pounced. And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out. (*IJ*, 981)

In these, the very last lines of the novel, Gately undergoes the painful self-seeing that precedes his arrival on the cold and bleak beachscape—symbol of his total desolation, his "Bottom". When Gately tries to look at the "chinks" in this scene, he gaze is literally deflected and mirrored back onto himself. He sees not their orientalism but his own "paleness". The subject of the dream is the dreamer. I think we can find in this extraordinary final image a model for how to read the racial mechanics of the novel as a whole, with Wallace's insecure whiteness the true subject of the novel's often uncomfortable racial gaze.

That the advent of multiculturalism, as both "demographic fact" and institutional program, is the occasion for the self-reflexive racial encounters we find in *Infinite Jest* is communicated via a strange image that materialises in Gately's mind while he is having a hallucinatory encounter with the ghost of James Incandenza in the hospital. The ghost (or "wraith") suddenly produces an orientalised Coca Cola can, instilling mild panic in Gately:

> [T]he wraith disappears and instantly reappears holding a can of Coke, with good old Coke's distinctive interwoven red and white French curls on it but alien unfamiliar Oriental-type writing on it instead of the good old words *Coca-Cola* and *Coke*. The unfamiliar script on the Coke can is maybe the whole dream's worst moment. (*IJ*, 832)

In the dream's "worst moment", the "good old" Coke can—that most familiar symbol of Western-capitalist culture—is overrun by Eastern inscription, becoming "alien" and "unfamiliar" to the bewildered Gately. The can becomes a multicultural version of itself, a hybrid of East and West, but also of white America and the rest of America, whose relationship was being heavily renegotiated in the 1990s: rather than the "melting pot" model, which forced assimilation to "universal" (white) norms and values, activists, artists, and eventually institutions were pushing for "other, 'chunkier' images in which differences are less digested, where the product (American culture) is less homogenized".[319] The now heterogeneous American "product" destabilises Gately: he cannot read the script. The orientalist presences that crop up in Gately's dreams carry this additional cultural baggage, as do the black and Hispanic presences in Hal's narrative. When

[319] Jack David Eller, "Anti-Anti-Multiculturalism", *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 253.

Gately sees his "paleness" reflected in the racial other, he sees something culturally unstable, decentred, no longer hegemonic. After all, there are "tiny little anonymous Oriental women . . . all over metro Boston" precisely because multiculturalism is already a demographic fact, and the fantasy of a homogenised white culture is already over.

The instability and precariousness of contemporary whiteness start to creep beyond the Coca Cola can, beyond the orientalised dreams, and into Gately's descriptions of the people he thinks of while in hospital. Remembering Whitey Sorkin, for instance, the drug lord in whose apartment Gately's final showdown took place, Gately wonders about the accuracy of the signifier "Whitey", which seems to him now vacuous and slippery:

> It was never clear to Gately why Whitey Sorkin was called Whitey, because he spent a huge amount of time under ultraviolet lamps as part of an esoteric cluster-headache-treatment regimen and so was the constant shiny color of a sort of like dark soap, with almost the same color and coin-of-the-realm classic profile as the cheery young Pakistani M.D. who'd told Gately at Our Lady of Solace Hospital in Beverly how Teddibly Soddy he was that Mrs. G.'s cirrhosis and cirrhotic stroke had left her at roughly the neurologic level of a Brussels sprout. (*IJ*, 912)

The nominal embodiment of whiteness, "Whitey", in fact has the complexion of a Pakistani, and the Pakistani immigrant doctor who delivers the devastating news about Gately's mother's stroke wields the power, authority, and invincibility typically enjoyed by the white male in American culture—he even possesses the stately grandeur of a "coin-of-the-realm classic profile". In a dream a few pages earlier, Gately visualises an "Indian or Pakistani" doctor at his own hospital bed, who is "glossily dark but with a weirdly classical white-type face you could easily imagine profiling on a coin", and who Gately instantly "hates" (*IJ*, 885). This dream is an obvious projection of Gately's anxieties about the darkness of "Whitey", and about the power of the "Pakistani M.D.". One wonders: does Gately "hate" this hypothetical doctor because he is "glossily dark", or because he has a "white-type face" with coin-profile features? Whitey looks Pakistani, the dream-Pakistani looks white, and their confluence muddies what "classical white" even means any more. As with the Coke can, it is the hybridity that seems to scare Gately, the encroachment of "alien unfamiliar Oriental-type" features onto a formerly homogenous and clearly demarcated cultural landscape.

As I have proposed in this chapter, Wallace replaces the fantasy of homogenous whiteness with the new, twin fantasies of colourblind abuse and suffering, and post-racial recovery and community. But before closing the discussion of Gately's hospital dreamscape, I want to turn to the way the fantasy of a restored, redeemed, reconstituted whiteness is given one last swan song, through the mythical film ("*Infinite Jest*") that is whispered about and hinted at throughout the book. The film, as we have seen, fails to liberate the viewer from his psychic pain—and indeed all the viewers of the film, to my knowledge, are men—because the healing experience it offers is so appealing that the viewer cannot stop watching it: he neglects all body functions and simply stares at the screen, in catatonic bliss. Even if the film must fail in the end, in order to create a maximally tragic effect for the book's white characters, I am nonetheless interested in how it constructs its fantasy of white redemption and white healing.

After his hallucinatory encounter with the wraith of James Incandenza, the creator of the infamous film, while in hospital, Gately has another dream in which he is effectively granted access to the doomed viewer's experience of the film, allowing the reader a glimpse of it too. In the dream, he is visited by Joelle van Dyne, his fellow resident at the halfway house, and the star of the film that Incandenza made. Joelle, who arrives at the halfway house wearing a veil, is in the dream "without her veil" and "without any clothes" (*IJ*, 850). But Joelle appears to Gately as something beyond sexuality, something celestial, otherworldly, religious: "a total female angel, not sexy so much as angelic, like all the world's light had gotten together and arranged itself into the shape of a face" (*IJ*, 850). At the centre of the film, then, is an idealised, almost Christian vision of white femininity. Indeed, when Joelle explains her role to Hugh Steeply elsewhere in the book, she says that she "wore an incredible white floor-length gown of some sort of flowing material"—the archetypal virgin bride (*IJ*, 939). Joelle's rare, "transhuman beauty" is emphasised throughout the novel, where she is called, at various points, "almost grotesquely lovely", "hideously attractive", "fatally pulchritudinous", "too lethally beautiful for people to stand", and, finally, "Prettiest Girl Of All Time", or "P.G.O.A.T.", a chimeric epithet that captures the "repellent" effect of her potent beauty (*IJ*, 190, 239, 289–290, 298, 940). In one of the only descriptions of her appearance we get, we are told that her "big hair was red-gold and the skin peachy-tinged pale and arms freckled and zygomatics [cheek bones] indescribable and her eyes an extra-natural HD green" (*IJ*, 290). The implication is that Joelle's sublime beauty, specifically marked here as "pale", is part of what contributes to the film's "lethal" appeal.

In constructing the feminine in his mythical film, Wallace draws on all the cinematic tropes discussed by Richard Dyer in his 1997 book *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. In his chapter "The Light of the World", Dyer explores how the "technology of lighting" behind mainstream cinema and photography was designed with white people in mind, and "has a tendency to assume, privilege and construct" idealised forms of whiteness.[320] Discussing the "glow of white women" in particular, Dyer explains how light technology is used to enhance and romanticise white femininity: "Idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on them from above. In short, they glow."[321] White women's "effulgent dazzle" is accentuated, says Dyer, by golden hair and white clothing such as "bridal wear"—"the wedding dress" and "especially the veil".[322] While dark-skinned women "contrast with their bridal wear", white women "can seem like the apotheosis of the clothing's whiteness and glow".[323] Joelle's appearance in the film, in the dream, and in real life corresponds overwhelmingly to this apotheosised female image: her red–gold hair, her flowing white gown, her shimmering veil, her light-drenched face, her angelic radiance. As the "angelic" and "glowing" white woman, Joelle falls into a long line of painterly and literary references that originate in the Renaissance, when the biblical angel figure—traditionally genderless—began acquiring a feminine form. "Verbal and visual imagery of the angelic beg[an] to be applied to idealised, or just simply adored, women", Dyer writes, citing examples from

[320] Ibid., 84.
[321] Ibid., 122.
[322] Ibid., 124.
[323] Ibid., 124–125.

Spenser, Ruskin, and other Victorian and more modern male writers.[324] Significantly, in Dyer's analysis, the Christian trope of "the white woman as angel" has historically emerged during times of "heightened perceived threat to the hegemony of whiteness" within the British and American colonies: the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the Jamaica Revolt of 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Great Migration, and so on. The glowing woman becomes in the colonial imagination "the symbol of white virtuousness", an important part of the supremacist belief that "what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities."[325] If Gately's Coca Cola dream is a sign of white panic (or even, on a more subtle level, Wallace's letter to Franzen about "tribal writers"), we might add multiculturalism to this list of perceived threats. Certainly, the idealised white femininity in the film *Infinite Jest*, and in the novel *Infinite Jest*, can be read as a cultural fantasy that heals the insecurities of whiteness in the multicultural age.

Wallace adapts the fantasy somewhat to his postmodern moment. Dyer writes that Hollywood tends to idealise the white heterosexual couple as the "bearers of the race", its reproductive engine. Wallace upsets the strict heteronormativity of the tradition by placing an "epicene" character in the film *Infinite Jest*, just as he does in the novel *Infinite Jest*: "Hermaphroditic. Androgynous. It wasn't obvious that the character was supposed to be a male character. I assume you can Identify", Joelle, describing the film, says to Hugh/Helen, who is meant to be the gender-fluid presence of the novel. However, Steeply and the male actor in Incandenza's film are only pretending to be gender-non-conforming: more specifically, they are being paid to perform their role. Their gender ambiguity is not authentic. Wallace also adds a postmodern twist to the traditional Christian/Renaissance trope of the glowing white woman by casting her in the film as the guilty mother, whose script involves "twenty minutes of permutations of 'I'm sorry'", repeated over and over again to the male viewer, who is placed in the position of the innocent infant-child (*IJ*, 939). During filming, we are told, the lens was fitted to a "crib", with an "auto-wobble" built into it, producing a "crib's eye view" (*IJ*, 939). As Joelle explains, "I don't think there's much doubt the lens was supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field" (*IJ*, 940).[326] In the cosmology developed in Gately's dream, mothers are inherently guilty towards their babies because they "knowingly or involuntarily" killed them in a previous life (*IJ*, 850). In the context in which the film was conceived and produced, as a cure for Hal's muteness, "Moms" such as Avril are guilty because they emotionally manipulate and "abuse" their children. In other words, in Wallace's postmodern staging of an age-old fantasy of white redemption, the transhuman beauty of the white woman is smudged by her maternal guilt, and innocence is reserved for the white male alone: it is the Avril–Hal relationship played out on a mythic scale. If Joelle's "lethal beauty" is indeed part of what damages viewers of the film, then the mythology of white male innocence (and white female culpability) is complete.

Wallace's commitment to this mythology in the 1990s comes across strongly in a short story from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a collection he published at the end of the decade.

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[324] Ibid., 126.

[325] Ibid., 127.

[326] In his dream of the film, Gately's vision gets increasingly "unfocused and wobbly", "until near the end it's as if he's seeing [Joelle] through a kind of cloud of light, a milky filter that's the same as the wobbly blur through which a baby sees a parental face bending over its crib" (*IJ*, 850–851).

"Suicide as a Sort of Present" is an abridged and intensified sequel to Avril and Hal's relationship, capturing in four pages the entire double-bind drama theorised by Bateson and performed in *Infinite Jest*. The short story extends the novel's thesis about "ambiguous abuse" when it describes the story's "mother-to-be" and her childhood: "From an objective perspective, it would not be inaccurate to say that this mother-to-be had had some very heavy psychic shit laid on her as a little girl, and that some of this shit qualified as parental abuse. [Her parents, by the way, did not beat her or ever even really discipline her, nor did they pressure her.]"[327] The child becomes an obsessive perfectionist, with cripplingly low self-esteem. As with Bain's endnote in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wants to persuade us that the parents' behaviour, though not "abusive" in the conventional sense, still counts as abuse. When the mother-to-be becomes a mother, her "damage" is transferred onto her son. She has "impossibly high" expectations of the child, and resents him whenever he makes a mistake (as children are wont to do). But, like Avril, she is determined to appear as the perfect mother, and "[n]o good mother can loathe her child or judge it or abuse it or wish it harm in any way."[328] And so, like Hal, the child receives mixed signals from his mother, and grows to loath himself as undeserving of the mother's "perfect" love. Instead of communicating clearly with the child, the mother tries to "absolve[ ] him, redeem[ ] and renew[ ] him" by absorbing his imperfections into herself. Because the mother cannot express herself honestly, the son's final response is to "express[ ] it all for her". He kills himself, "desperate, as are all children, to repay the perfect love we may expect only of mothers".[329] The boy silences himself permanently, as Hal does at the beginning/end of *Infinite Jest*. Rather than redemption, we get stasis, stuckness, irreparable pathos. It is the tragic mother–son cosmology all over again.

Remembering the figurants

It seems to be Wallace's hope in *Infinite Jest* that a common, depoliticised vulnerability can unite Americans across colour, class, and gender lines, which would grant even a white writer like himself access to authentic, minoritised experience, and to the literary market that placed value on such experience in the 1990s. Why else do we find in the novel an almost obsessive detailing of the pain of white Americans? There is the central Hal–Avril drama, and there are the back stories of the other central characters, almost all of which involve a repressed childhood trauma: Don Gately, who watched his alcoholic mother getting beaten by her "MP" boyfriend; Joelle van Dyne, whose father molested her in movie theatres; Randy Lenz, whose stepfather beat him; Bruce Green, whose natural parents died gruesome, consecutive deaths. The novel even suggests at various points that Avril is guilty of molesting younger boys, including her son Orin (*IJ*, 552–552, 791). It is as though Wallace is trying to create a continuum of whiteness, from "upscale" to "white trash", with each tier performing its own complex but routinely damaged version of white America, and the tiers collectively "out-traumatising" black America, which sits in caricatured obscurity on the other side

[327] Wallace, "Suicide as a Sort of Present", *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 283.
[328] Ibid., 285.
[329] Ibid., 286.

of the novel in the form of Wardine. Abuse becomes something that can have either a "true personal" (familial, domestic) or a "merely political" (historical, socioeconomic) origin—that is, something that can affect anyone indiscriminately, white or black or brown or "Oriental". Abuse, in *Infinite Jest*, becomes "colourblind", the better to erase the imbalances of American racial history.

There are of course real instances of white people in America suffering the kinds of abuse that Wallace details, but I am interested in why Wallace feels compelled, in the 1990s, to imagine and gather all these instances together into a single narrative, with one lone black female experience inserted at the beginning as a reference point. The resulting picture is undoubtedly a distortion of contemporary racial reality, where political, historical, and socioeconomic disparities mean that child abuse rates are much higher in minority versus white American families, with minorities also less likely to access support services.[330] Poverty rates among black and Hispanic Americans, meanwhile, are more than double those of white Americans.[331] But the deeper problem with the novel's picture of American suffering is that it converts child abuse from a political problem into a personal problem, which means that, like substance abuse, it can be absorbed into the messianic and private AA paradigm of the novel. Rather than representing abuse as a problem that requires urgent public, state-level address, it retreats into the "intimate public sphere" of suburban drama. State politics in the novel revolve around the environmental and ecological prospects of America—its toxicity, its radioactivity, its unsustainability. "Personal" crises like abuse are removed from the novel's political agenda and must be worked out in the "church basements and hospital auditoria" of AA meetings, between speaker and audience (*IJ*, 209). There, the casual racism that fuels ongoing structural inequality in America is no barrier to belonging in the group, since every story is "basically alike, and like your own", and even racist white characters like Joelle and Gately can find themselves in each story, "no matter what the color or fellowship". It seems significant that the man who molests Wardine at the beginning of the book, Roy Tony, lands up in the AA, too, and that his sole function in the scene in which he appears is to force a reticent white guy called Ken Erdedy who refuses to participate in the AA tradition of hugging to "risk vulnerability and discomfort and hug [his] ass" (*IJ*, 506). The image of a burly black man from the projects pulling a scrawny white man from suburban Boston into the AA circle consolidates Wallace's fantasy of a post-racial culture, founded on shared vulnerability and "truth". If redemption via white hegemony and glowing white women is closed off to the male subject at the centre of *Infinite Jest*, at least he might be redeemed through a borrowed otherness, joining the multicultural community of

[330] See, for example, the results of a recent study: "In bivariate analyses, African American (25%), Asian/Pacific Islander (21%), and multiracial children (21%) have a higher prevalence of substantiated physical abuse than whites (20%). Native Americans (0.21%), African Americans (0.15%), Asians/Pacific Islanders (0.12%), and Latinos (0.11%) are more likely to die from physical abuse than whites (0.09%). African Americans have higher odds than whites of reported . . . and substantiated . . . physical abuse. Latinos have higher odds of reported physical abuse . . . and lower odds of substantiated physical abuse . . . Native Americans have lower odds . . . and Asian/Pacific Islanders higher odds . . . of reported physical abuse vs whites. Latinos have significantly lower odds than whites of receiving support services." Suzanne R Dakil, Matthew Cox, Hua Lin, Glenn Flores, "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Physical Abuse Reporting and Child Protective Services Interventions in the United States", *Journal of the National Medical Association* 103, nos. 9–10 (2011): 926–931. (I have removed the odds ratios and confidence intervals from the results for ease of reading.)

[331] US Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015", September 2016, http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.pdf.

sufferers.

As I have tried to suggest throughout this chapter, Wallace's positioning of whiteness as excessively embattled may have been a specific response to the increasingly multicultural literary scene of the 1990s, where rock-star minority and feminist writers such as Toni Morrison were encroaching on the white male mainstream centre. At best, the picture of whiteness presented in the book simply reflects his anxieties about his mainstream status in a decidedly race- and gender-conscious moment. At worst, it represents his attempt to "out-traumatise" the black female narratives of his contemporaries. Whiteness is never redeemed in *Infinite Jest*: the film proves fatal, Hal remains catatonic, and Gately's orientalising gaze keeps reflecting back at him. But the tragic whiteness of *Infinite Jest* may nonetheless have been redeeming, or at least useful, for the writer himself—a way to join the "party" he felt excluded from, as he put it in his letter to Franzen. "So why shouldn't we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture?" he had asked in that letter. "This is the only way to come up with what we want: what we want is to know what *happened*, why things *are* this way—we want the *story*." Wallace's novel tells a particular kind of story about "what *happened*", one that reverses in subtle ways the racial politics of its day, and even the "real" story of white and black history in the United States.

Indeed, in thinking through the way that whiteness others itself in Wallace's work of the 1990s, the massaging of history becomes important. Don DeLillo, arguably Wallace's biggest literary inspiration, has this to say about the postmodern writer's relationship with language and history:

> Ultimately the writer will reconfigure things the way his own history demands. He has his themes and biases and limitations. He has the small crushed pearl of his anger. He has his teaching job, his middling reputation and the one radical idea he has been waiting for all his life. The other thing he has is a flat surface that he will decorate with words.
>
> Language can be a form of counterhistory. The writer wants to construct a language that will be the book's life-giving force. He wants to submit to it. Let language shape the world. Let it break the faith of conventional re-creation.
>
> Language lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.[332]

If we foreground DeLillo's white masculinity, his longing to be "delivered" from history and acquire "redemption" through "otherness" becomes loaded with political meaning. It starts to resemble a kind of race evasion, another iteration of the post-race conceit surveyed at the start of this chapter. Certainly, feminist critic Kathleen Fitzpatrick construes DeLillo's argument in this light, pointing to its desire "to 'redeem' the white male from his historical role as the dominant and to enable his search for 'an unconstraining otherness,' a more comfortable sense of himself as

[332] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History", *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 September 1997, 63, http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html. Quoted in Fitzpatrick.

the marginalized".[333] In the postmodern project, the fantasy of redemption has racial implications, privileging language over history, the personal over the political, and the private over the public. DeLillo's "one radical idea" is perhaps much more conservative than he lets on.

Given Fitzpatrick's suggestion about the manipulation of history, we should perhaps think again about the temporal setting of *Infinite Jest*. Does placing his narrative several decades beyond the tempestuous 1990s help Wallace imagine a version of America and of history in which white pain takes centre stage, with black pain reduced to a set of referents and marginalia? Is the novel's leap forward in time also an attempt to leap into post-racialism, where white and black pain are indistinguishable and analogous because both "human" pain? Wiegman's reading of *Forrest Gump* reminds us that what is at stake in these questions of history and time are also questions of memory and forgetting. Contemplating the film's insertion of its Southern white male protagonist into historical scenes he played no actual part in, Wiegman suggests that,

> [w]hile the film's overall trajectory is of the most reactionary political kind, it fulfills the cultural desire to forget what we don't know how to remember by remembering in haphazard and incoherent ways the images of racial trauma and social dissent that we can't yet forget.[334]

Forrest Gump facilitates a kind of forgetting that is necessarily unsuccessful, since the painful object of its amnesia is not so easily erased. *Infinite Jest* does something quite similar: it wants to tell a story about how contemporary whiteness is damaged, but it keeps orbiting around the very racial other it is trying to forget or go beyond—much like Gately does in his orientalist dreams.

During Gately's discourse with the wraith, the dead filmmaker talks about background actors, or "extras", the forgotten people of the movie world: "*[F]igurants* the wraith says they're called, these surreally mute background presences whose presence really revealed that the camera, like any eye, has a perceptual corner, a triage of who's important enough to be seen and heard v. just seen" (*IJ*, 835). Reminded of their presence, Gately suddenly thinks of the figurants milling in the "corner" of every drama:

> And Gately remembers them, the extras in all public scenes, especially like bar and restaurant scenes, or rather remembers how he doesn't quite remember them, how it never struck his addled mind as in fact surreal that their mouths moved but nothing emerged, and what a miserable fucking bottom-rung job that must be for an actor, to be sort of human furniture. (*IJ*, 835)

Given the forgotten but vital importance of the various racial "extras" in *Infinite Jest*—the Asian dreamers, the Hispanic onlooker, the Cuban orderly, the Pakistani doctors, Clenette, Roy Tony, and, most of all, Wardine—and their role in framing the novel's whiteness, we would do well to

[333] Fitzpatrick, 233.
[334] Wiegman, 124.

remember them. We would do well to look past Gately himself, past Hal and Avril and the other white characters, and listen out for what the silent human furniture might have to say.

"We live inside bodies, after all": Whiteness, masculinity, and the Midwest in Wallace's writing after 9/11

In the days following 9/11,[335] David Foster Wallace penned a brief reflective piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine, describing his experience of the attacks. The piece, entitled "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", appeared in the October 25 edition of the magazine, with the following subtitle:

> LOCATION: Bloomington, IL
> DATES: 11–13 Sept. 2001
> SUBJECT: Obvious
> CAVEAT: Written very fast and in what probably qualifies as shock[336]

Wallace's original title for the piece was "The View from the Interior", a play on words that highlights both the personal nature of the piece and the author's location in the Midwest at the time of the attacks.[337] In August 2011, to mark the ten-year anniversary of the attacks, *Rolling Stone* reprinted the piece under the new title "The View from the Midwest", which foregrounds again its geographic specificity.[338] As these various subtitles and working titles suggest, Wallace's unique "view" from "Bloomington, IL", "the Interior", "the Midwest" onto New York's unfolding "Horror", as he was to call 9/11, is part of what lent the piece its special aura. Wallace was in the American heartland, and the heartland trope was to feature heavily as a source of comfort and nostalgia in the processes of nation-building that emerged after the attacks.

As history has demonstrated, however, nation-building very quickly turned nationalistic, with aggression and paranoia meted out in equal measure through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and through the domestic obsession with "homeland security". The heartland imagery that suffuses "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", and that featured in many mainstream responses to the attacks, was to become commensurate with white, heterosexual, xenophobic, and generally conservative social attitudes. Indeed, I am interested in the way this short, unassuming essay by Wallace is in fact steeped in many of the conservative discourses and positions that would rise to prominence in post-9/11 America: for example, assertions of American innocence and goodness, an appetite for traditional gender roles, and a nostalgia for the pastoral landscape that

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[335] I use this term for the events that took place on September 11, 2001, fully conscious of its function as a potent signifier and as so much more than a simple date abbreviation. Here Ruth Frankenberg's summation is helpful: "When 'September 11' is referred to with no year attached to it, that which one might call 'instant ahistoricism' is generated. It is as though from now on there will be only one 'September 11'. As with July Fourth and Thanksgiving, the original moment has already become less relevant than the name, the date less important than the origin story attached to it." See Frankenberg, "Cracks in the Façade: Whiteness and the Construction of 9/11", *Social Identities* 11, no. 6 (2005): 555.

[336] David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 128.

[337] See D T Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 263.

[338] Wallace, "9/11: The View from the Midwest", *Rolling Stone*, 19 August 2011, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/9-11-the-view-from-the-midwest-20110819. Subsequent references to "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" are cited parenthetically as "VMT".

whitewashes its bloody colonial history. In Wallace's later work of the 2000s, particularly his novella "The Suffering Channel" and his uncompleted last novel *The Pale King*, the author's investment in heartland imagery finds sustained expression. With this investment comes a host of conservative attitudes about the special woundedness of the white Midwestern male and the threat that women pose to his remasculinisation. Perhaps what I am most interested in, though, is how Wallace makes such outmoded positions palatable to the liberal *Rolling Stone* reader, and to his own savvy urban readership more generally. And not only palatable—invisible, too, for the conservative undercurrents of his post-9/11 work have gone almost entirely unnoticed among scholars and reviewers, who continue to applaud Wallace for his progressive politics. What are the rhetorical strategies that Wallace employs to repackage his mostly white, masculinist narratives as inclusive and progressive? And if we agree that these strategies amount to a distortion, what does this mean for how we read and make sense of Wallace as a writer? These questions steer the work of this chapter.

In "View from Mrs. Thompson's", I examine how Wallace moderates his open nostalgia for old-fashioned notions of femininity and masculinity through a strategy of self-deprecation, in which he emerges as the misfit cynic who could not belong in the conservative world of small-town Midwest even if he wanted to. In describing his unbelonging, Wallace ends up framing himself as a persecuted figure, putting himself in the same position as the brown-skinned immigrant in the tense aftermath of 9/11, and thus erasing the whiteness that in fact grants him easy, unqualified access to the local community. In two stories from Wallace's 2004 collection *Oblivion*, "Incarnations of Burned Children" and "The Suffering Channel", Wallace develops a picture of white Midwestern fathers and sons as the most vulnerable political group of all, with mothers and women in general portrayed as aggressors and antagonists. Wallace achieves this stunning historical and political reversal of the gender order by systematically feminising his male protagonists, such that "patriarchy" becomes an empty phrase, and domestic and workplace injustice become phenomena suffered primarily by men. The 9/11 context of "The Suffering Channel" elevates the alleged vulnerability of Midwestern men to the level of a national crisis, with these men becoming the face of the tragedy in Wallace's fictional universe. Finally, in *The Pale King*, Wallace develops a mythology of redemption for the downtrodden, nerdy Midwestern white male, one that borrows heavily from the conservative post-9/11 discourses of heroism, sacrifice, civic duty, and institutional loyalty—and one that is explicitly marked as off-limits to women and minorities. And yet Wallace all the while draws on the language of second-wave feminism and critical race theory to lend his vision of redemption a progressive "look and feel". In all these texts, I trace the multiple, intersecting discourses and suggest what their combined rhetorical function might be, especially under the protracted shadow of 9/11. In doing so, I gesture to an alternative mode of reading Wallace's work of the 2000s.

Incidentally, in one of his essays from this period, Wallace spells out a very similar argument to the one I am making in this chapter about his use of discourse. "Authority and American Usage", published a few months before 9/11, contains a lengthy dissection of the politics of language-use in contemporary America. The most relevant section of the essay for our purposes is the "spiel" that Wallace says he routinely gives his black students who are not proficient in formal, academic English (i.e., Standard Written English). The overall gist of Wallace's spiel is that

Standard Written English is just one of a range of valid English dialects used in America, but it is the *only* dialect considered valid within institutions such as universities, and so the student in question should learn how to use it if she wishes to attend and pass through university successfully. While this appeal may seem like a simple statement of fact, or even a helpful suggestion, Wallace phrases it in unmistakeably conservative terms:

> In class—in my English class—you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call "Standard White English" because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people . . . This is just How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself . . . And [STUDENT'S NAME], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I'm going to make you.[339]

Wallace complains that some of his colleagues found the spiel "racially insensitive", and that a few students were "offended", but racial insensitivity is not the only problem with Wallace's rant.[340] It also betrays a deep loyalty to institutions, even when they are "racist and unfair", and a deep resignation to "How It is", rather than a commitment to transforming institutions to be more inclusive and just. In Wallace's view, any challenge to the institution must occur on its terms, and in its language—which means no challenge at all, since its terms and language remain intact.[341] Moreover, Wallace's image of "our nation" talking to itself in Standard Written/White English is a troubling one. Who, one wonders, is included in this definition of the nation? What about the other forms of discourse, commentary, and critique (in Spanish, black English, immigrant languages, indigenous languages, and so on) circulating within the "nation"? If all this were not enough, the student is not given a choice in the matter: she will use Standard White English because Wallace is going "make" her. Wallace becomes inseparable from the institution, coercing dissenters into submission.

What is striking is that Wallace quickly realises his error, admitting that his speech "appeared not candid/hortatory/authoritative/true but elitist/high-handed/authoritarian/racist".[342] Yet he categorises his error as nothing more than a "rhetorical boner", attributable to his "gross rhetorical naïveté".[343] His problem, as he understands it, is not that he was racist or elitist, but that he was racist- and elitist-*sounding*. "Rhetoric-wise," he explains, "what happened was that I allowed the substance and style of my Logical Appeal ['an argument's plausibility or soundness, from *logos*']

[339] Wallace, "Authority and American Usage", *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 108–109.
[340] Ibid., 109.
[341] See Walter Mignolo's concept of "changing the terms and not only the content of the conversation". "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 4.
[342] Wallace, "Authority and American Usage", 117.
[343] Ibid., 117, 116.

to completely torpedo my Ethical Appeal: what the student heard was just another PWM [Privileged White Male] rationalizing why his Group and his English were top dog and ought 'logically' to stay that way".[344] In Wallace's mind, racism and elitism are primarily problems of rhetoric that can easily be ironed out by a more fine-tuned presentation. They are not problems inherent in the "Logic" of the argument itself, which Wallace continues to maintain is "true",[345] impervious to the obvious institutional loyalties and cultural biases governing it.

The particulars of this example are less important than what it reveals about Wallace's ongoing anxiety about his "Privileged White Male" position, and about his special concern with rhetoric and self-presentation in the 2000s. I have been arguing throughout this dissertation that questions of self-presentation—as an artist, as an intellectual, as a white person, as a man—were hugely important to Wallace, from the beginning of his writing career and right through the 1990s. The politics of the college English classroom seem to confirm, for Wallace, the importance of rhetorical layering in getting his point across. As he explains:

> These are tense linguistic times. Blame it on Heisenbergian uncertainty or postmodern relativism or Image Over Substance or the ubiquity of advertising and PR or the rise of Identity Politics or whatever you will—we live in an era of terrible preoccupation with presentation and interpretation, one in which the relations between who someone is and what he believes in and how he "expresses himself" have been thrown into big-time flux. In rhetorical terms . . . the different sorts of Appeals [Logical, Ethical, Pathetic] now affect and are affected by one another in ways that make it nearly impossible to advance an argument on "reason" alone.[346]

In other words, a certain kind of rhetorical savviness is now needed to make one's message palatable to a diverse, politicised audience. This dissertation as a whole is most concerned with the last item on Wallace's blame list—"the rise of Identity Politics"—and the important challenge it has brought to Enlightenment notions of a pure or objective "reason". Viewed through the prism of identity politics, "reason" is always embodied, and Wallace's reasoning/logic arises from his particular embodiment as a white American male, educated and cultured in a certain way. It is the contention of this chapter that Wallace's logic, as it is expressed on the page, becomes increasingly skewed towards conservativism and institutionalism in the years following 9/11, but that Wallace also becomes increasingly sophisticated in meeting the rhetorical challenge outlined above.

Into the heartland

In November and December 2001, *The New York Times* published a series of modified Norman Rockwell paintings, as part of a combined memorialisation and advertising campaign in the

[344] Ibid., 117.
[345] Ibid., 116.
[346] Ibid.

aftermath of the attacks.[347] Justine Toh explains that Rockwell's "depictions of the lives of 'everyday' Americans are deeply nostalgic, featuring happy (white) families, apple-cheeked, cherub-like children, the local milk bar, small town existence".[348] The *New York Times* preserved this aesthetic in its print campaign, depicting only white Americans in traditionally gendered roles. The iconic Budweiser commercial that was broadcast at the first Super Bowl after the attacks presented a similar picture of the nation. The commercial featured a group of Clydesdale horses pulling an old wagon through the snowy American countryside, making its way towards Lower Manhattan. "In its depiction of a barn, frolicking horses in a pastoral landscape, Main Street of small town America, a barber wearing an old-fashioned smock gazing out at the passing Clydesdales," writes Toh, "the advertisement presented images of rural and small town America that harked back to an earlier time in the nation's history."[349] The trauma of the events of 9/11 seemed to beget a nostalgic gaze backwards, towards "old times", "tradition", "the way things were". The heartland as a trope became the repository for this gaze, the backdrop against which American could view itself as essentially innocent and good. For the heartland, of course, is not only a physical designation for "the territorial Midwest", "the geographic middle of America" that stretches from Ohio to Missouri to the Dakotas.[350] It is also the symbol of "the most American part of America", "the emotional and spiritual core of American identity".[351] The values commonly associated with the heartland in the American psyche are "humility, tradition, ordinariness, decency, innocence and simplicity".[352] Invoking the heartland after 9/11, as became common practice in mainstream memorialisation efforts, was about returning to the "real" America: "the 'real' America that was attacked on 9/11, and the 'real' America that would provide solace in the attacks' traumatic aftermath".[353]

In Toh's analysis, idealised images of the Midwestern landscape "implicitly shore up white, heterosexual, anti-urban, politically conservative values" that in fact lie at the heart of the nation's very origins.[354] The Puritan colonists believed that "the pastoral condition provided the route to paradise", while Thomas Jefferson was convinced that "agricultural toil would produce good, moral, citizens [who] would form the basis of the new American republic".[355] In a 1780s text, Jefferson wrote, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue".[356] Implicit in these formulations is the belief that the chosen people of God would be not

[347] See Francis Frascina, "The New York Times, Norman Rockwell and the New Patriotism", *Journal of Visual Culture April* 3, no. 2 (2003): 99–130.
[348] Justine Toh, "The White Fireman and the American Heartland in the Memory of 9/11", *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014): 4.
[349] Toh, 3.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Toh, 3; James R Shortridge, "The Emergence of 'Middle West' as an American Regional Label", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984): 213–214. Quoted in Toh.
[352] Toh, 4.
[353] Ibid., 3.
[354] Ibid., 4.
[355] Ibid., 5.
[356] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia" (1781–1785), *The Complete Jefferson: Containing his Major Writings, Published and Unpublished, Except his Letters*, ed. Saul Padover (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearch, 1943), 678. Quoted in Toh.

only agrarian but also white. Indeed, Thomas Ross has argued that ideas of nation and ideas of race were intimately linked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that "the United States [was] a nation that defined itself as White": "The terrible constitutional endorsement of slavery made clear that the Declaration's 'God given' rights had a racial exclusion. As an early order of business, the new Congress enacted a federal statute limiting naturalized citizenship to 'Whites.'"[357] Historically, then, pastoralism has been linked to a legacy of "racial exclusion", and the homey heartland images that became popular after 9/11 conceal the "suppressed histories of violence" that crowd the landscape.[358] The heartland has a dark side, as Toh explains:

> Recognition of the treatment of Native Americans, as well as the practice of African slavery, is often completely elided in the nostalgic signifier—and must be if the heartland is to signify moral purity. Effectively, the use of the heartland in the memory of 9/11 scrubs the past violence of these spaces, and in place of these ghosts of history substitutes a victimised (white) American identity, under assault from new "savages" in the form of Al Qaeda operatives at the behest of Osama bin Laden.[359]

In other words, in erasing the transgressions of the white settlers, colonisers, and slave-owners from the pastoral landscape, 9/11 memorials that used heartland imagery were able to project an image of white America as once again innocent in the face of attack.

With the fantasy of American innocence, of course, came the parallel fantasy of Arab evil. The attacks were almost instantly transformed from a complex "military, political and economic event" into a primarily moral event: an "assault upon American identity", and a "desecration of American wholesomeness and innocence", with the heartland representing the wholesome core under attack.[360] This account of the events of 9/11 was also the "official reading" provided by the Bush administration, as Ruth Frankenberg explains, in which "'bad guys', 'evil men', or 'rogues' (from 'rogue states') attacked 'innocent, good people' for 'no reason' other than 'hatred' for 'our American values' and the 'successes' that have followed therefrom".[361] In this account, a group of terrorists affiliated with Al Qaeda and led by Osama bin Laden hold complete and sole responsibility for the attacks—and the US, accordingly, holds none.[362] The distribution of innocence and guilt is straightforward, and categorical. For Elisabeth Anker, the logic here conforms to the "melodramatic mode" of narration that emerged after 9/11. The melodramatic mode creates an "unambiguous" moral landscape of good versus evil, heroes versus villains, that helps justify a retributive military campaign against the Middle East.[363] But it also "does away with the need to interrogate possible reasons why the 9/11 attacks occurred".[364] Preferring melodrama

[357] Thomas Ross, "Whiteness after 9/11", *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy* 18 (2005): 227.
[358] Toh, 9.
[359] Ibid.
[360] Ibid., 4.
[361] Ibid., 559.
[362] Ibid., 560.
[363] Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11", *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (2005): 24–25. Quoted in Toh.
[364] Toh, 15.

over introspection, this official, state-endorsed reading of the attacks coincides with what Judith Butler identifies as "the rise of censorship and anti-intellectualism that took hold in the fall of 2001".[365] Questioning America's innocence became almost tantamount to treason.

Wallace's essay about 9/11, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", moves between a confrontation with "the Horror" of the attacks and a nostalgia for the pastoral Midwest, in much the same way as the memorialisation examples cited by Toh. The opening section of the essay, "SYNECDOCHE", reads as a kind of Midwestern set piece aimed at the urban coastal reader, from the perspective of the local insider. "In true Midwest fashion," writes Wallace, sharing his cultural know-how, "people in Bloomington aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved" ("VMT", 128). He describes a conversation "overheard" at the local convenience store between "a lady in an Osco cashier's smock and a man in a dungaree jacket cut off at the shoulders to make a sort of homemade vest" ("VMT", 128). With these cultural insights and even costuming details, we are placed right in the heart of the heartland, which Wallace deliberately signals as the "lens" of his 9/11 piece. Later, in a lengthy descriptive section about the town of Bloomington, he will insert all the usual Midwestern tropes: flatness, endless corn, earthy fertility, "armpit"-like humidity, perfectly "manicured" suburban greenery ("VMT", 132, 133, 134). The decidedly pastoral effect here is enhanced by the Benadryl that everyone in Bloomington is "stoned on" in highly pollenated early September, which "tends to give the early morning a kind of dreamy, underwater quality", as Wallace explains it.[366] In addition to this visual dreaminess, Wallace works an association between heartland values and moral innocence into his story. The Osco cashier, for example, explains how her "boys" initially thought that what they were seeing on TV on the morning of 9/11 was a movie, "like that *Independence Day*" ("VMT", 128–129). Wallace adds parenthetically that the age of the "boys" is not mentioned, a comment meant to remind us, very early in the essay, that in the Midwest a kind of innocence and uncorruptedness holds sway: men are still "boys", whatever their age; bad things only happen in movies; people are simple and decent.

Importantly, Wallace later tells us that whenever one of his neighbours finds out that he does not own a TV the reaction is always, "Well shoot boy, get over here" ("VMT", 134). By all accounts, he is a Bloomington boy, too, fully immersed in the wholesome heartland he is describing. Indeed, the main strains of "community" activity in Bloomington, IL, are church-going and TV-watching, and Wallace portrays himself as being actively involved in both ("VMT", 134). Wallace's lack of a TV and his neighbour's "instinctive" kindness means that he is "a kind of constant and Kramer-like presence" in his neighbours' houses, popping in and out to watch TV with them ("VMT", 134). And Wallace repeatedly emphasises the fact that he belongs to a church, that quintessential feature of the Midwestern town.[367] "Most of the people I know well enough to ask if I can come over and watch their TV", he says, "are members of my church" ("VMT", 135). Mrs Thompson herself, at whose house Wallace lands up watching the news on September 11, is

[365] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), xiii.
[366] Zuzanna Ladyga, "The Televisual Poetics of David Foster Wallace", *Projecting Words, Writing Images: Intersections of the Textual and the Visual in American Cultural Practices*, eds. John R. Leo, Marek Paryz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011): 242.
[367] Wallace explains that Bloomington, "[l]ike most Midwest towns . . . is crammed with churches: four full pages in the phonebook" ("VMT", 133, 125).

described as "a long-time member and a leader in the congregation", as well as the mother of Wallace's close friend "F——" ("VMT", 135). Wallace's biographer D T Max has pointed out that "F——" was really Francis P, Wallace's close friend from the AA, and that Wallace in this essay "disguised his recovery group circle as friends from church".[368] In exaggerating his church-going habits, Wallace seems to want to create an image of himself as authentically Midwestern, and lend his essay that special "heartland" quality that the nation longed for in the weeks following the attacks.[369] To be sure, Wallace takes pains to mention that his church is not the kind that "throw[s] Jesus' name around a lot or talk[s] about the End Times", and he keeps describing the "folks" of Bloomington with a distancing "They" ("They basically all play softball or golf and grill out . . . they watch massive, staggering amounts of TV") ("VMT", 133). But he involves himself in Midwestern life even as he caricatures it, adding a healthy dose of cynicism to his account of his dreamy, homey neighbourhood. He seems to want to position himself as the savvy, slightly superior younger guy, with East Coast experience and a college education, who nonetheless partakes in local customs with ease. He is inside and outside at the same time.

The small-town impressions, conversations, and images at the beginning of Wallace's story set the stage for a more sustained claim about the "innocence" of his Bloomington community. This claim centres on the "other ladies from church" who are gathered with Wallace at Mrs Thompson's on the morning of the 11th, watching the footage on CBS ("VMT", 136). Wallace is careful to mention, at various points, the working-class status of his neighbours. Many congregants "are veterans and/or have kids in the military" or in the "Reserves", "because", he tells us, "for many of these families that's simply what you do to pay for college" ("VMT", 135). Mrs Thompson's living room, moreover, is "prototypical working-class Bloomington, too", with its framed family photographs, magazine racks, and thick carpeting ("VMT", 137). These are good, simple people who have served their country and who are doing their best to get by, Wallace wants us to know, carefully erasing any privileged attached to their whiteness. When a particularly horrifying clip comes on the screen, the women in the room realise that the "dots detaching from the building and moving through smoke down the screen" are "actual people", and "look[ ] at one another with expressions that seemed somehow both childlike and terribly old" ("VMT", 136). This last image of a community's innocence being irreparably shattered (rendering them "both childlike and terribly old") is a powerful one, and one that was being rehearsed in different forms across America in the days after 9/11. Later, it becomes clear to Wallace that none of the women in the Mrs Thompson's has "even the vaguest notion of New York's layout", having come to know the city almost entirely through TV ("VMT", 139). They are innocent the way the Osco cashier's "boys" are innocent, with little direct knowledge of the big bad world beyond TV. Wallace concludes as much: "What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There

[368] Max, 263. See also Frank Bruni, "The Grunge American Novel", *The New York Times*, 24 March 1996, http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/reviews/wallace-v-profile.html, where Wallace presents his AA friend Doug Poag as someone he met "at a Mennonite house of worship".

[369] *Slate* writer Forrest Wickham calls this habitual Christian posturing on Wallace's part the writer's "favorite lie", and argues that Wallace disguised his AA friends as church friends out of obeisance to AA protocol: he was protecting their identities. See Wickham, "David Foster Wallace's Favorite Lie", *Slate*, 31 July 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/07/the_end_of_the_tour_david_foster_wallace_and_church_how_dfw_tricked_david.html.

is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room" ("VMT", 140). Here the association between the heartland and moral innocence finally becomes explicit.

In response to what they see on the TV, the ladies "all sit together and feel really bad, and pray", in true Midwestern style ("VMT", 140). Wallace joins in, praying "silently and fervently" as he watches President Bush address the nation, but he clarifies that he and the "church ladies" are praying for different things. He, the self-fashioned cynic, the insider–outsider, is praying that Bush is "not just some soulless golem or nexus of corporate interests dressed up in a suit but a statesman of courage and probity" ("VMT", 140). He is praying that the creepy resemblance of Bush's address to the "right-wing wacko" one made by Bruce Willis in *The Siege* is not the whole story ("VMT", 140). In challenging the melodramatic mode presented by Bush and the mainstream media on TV that day, Wallace becomes gripped by "a feeling of alienation from the[ ] good people" sitting in the room with him, who are not suspicious of news agencies or political leaders, and who remain focused on the sheer tragedy of the events ("VMT", 139). "Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around", he observes. They force the uncomfortable realisation that "whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, and F——'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies" ("VMT", 140). With these comments about his versus the old ladies' America, Wallace begins to actively remove himself from the heartland idyll. For all his church-going and TV-watching, and despite his whiteness and his Midwestern upbringing, Wallace suggests that he does not really "belong" in the Midwest, that he is excluded from the "ordinariness, decency, innocence"[370] that define this world.

But in separating himself and the other man in Mrs Thompson's living room that morning ("poor old loathsome Duane") from the "ladies", Wallace sets up a troublingly gendered picture of innocence. His portrayal of the innocence and simplicity of Mrs Thompson and her friends, in contrast to his own complex cynicism, smacks of a paternalism that cannot help but bring to mind the obvious cultural reference for Wallace's use of the term "the Horror": Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's novel is filled with Victorian conceits about the purity of women and the need to protect them from "the horror" of the world. When it comes time for Marlow to meet Kurtz's "Intended" (his fiancée) back in England at the end of the book, he decides not to repeat Kurtz's last words to her ("The horror! the horror!"), which would threaten her hallowed innocence. Instead, he tells her that the dying Kurtz uttered her own name.[371] "I couldn't. I couldn't tell her", Marlow says of his decision. "It would have been too dark—too dark altogether".[372] The American point of reference for Conrad's story is, of course, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which transposes Conrad's narrative onto the Vietnam War, and Wallace's references to the Vietnam War in his 9/11 essay enact the same conservative view of gender as Conrad's novel and Coppola's film. He describes his friend F—— as a Vietnam vet who "carries some serious shit in his head" following his years in the war, and who "goes off quietly to camp by himself over Memorial Day weekend" ("VMT", 135). His mother, Mrs Thompson, meanwhile, is painted as the long-suffering woman left behind during the war, who went "weeks at time" without knowing

[370] Toh, 4.
[371] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1990), 68, 71.
[372] Ibid., 72.

whether her son was "even alive".[373] Susan Faludi has written about the "appetite for conservative gender roles" that seemed to grip America after 9/11, with a renewed emphasis on "neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness,' redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood".[374] This new emphasis involved a subtle return to nineteenth- and twentieth-century "gendered discourses of protection where men are protectors and women are the protected", where women are "comforters and keepers of the hearth".[375] Although Wallace presents himself and Duane as counter-points to both the stoic masculinity of F—— and the wholesome innocence of the church ladies, admitting that he and Duane would "never dream of actually enlisting" in the army ("VMT", 138), his evident nostalgia for these traditional expressions of gender, embedded within a heartland pastoral, ends up aligning the essay with some of the conservative discourses around race and gender that were revived after 9/11.

The white foreigner

Echoing Toh, Anker, and Ross, Steven George Salaita defines the racial dimensions of post-9/11 "us–them" rhetoric, which was largely "without nuance or modification".[376] He writes:

> [C]onservatives, particularly neoconservatives, invoked 9/11 as evidence of Arab perfidy and later as evidence of the need to retain George W. Bush to protect "us" from "them"—given the context, "them" is a chilling pronoun spoken inevitably without nuance or modification, acting as the epistemic Other employed to define the White, Christian "us."[377]

The demonisation of foreign "others" after the attacks seemed to bring into sharp relief the whiteness at the heart of American national identity. Inderpal Grewal takes this idea further, looking at how the polarising discourses that arose after 9/11 interacted with the multicultural project that had been born a decade or so earlier. For Grewal, multiculturalism works by racialising and gendering minorities as other and inferior, and then offering them the chance to "improve" themselves through participation in American "consumer citizenship".[378] Before 9/11, however, multiculturalism allowed space for minorities to use their "hyphenated" identities to belong to the nation while also challenging its "normative white, male, heterosexual Anglo-American citizen"—to be subversive consumer citizens, in short.[379] The terrorist figure, on the hand, has always represented the limit of the multicultural improvement project: "such a figure", writes Grewal, "is

[373] Ibid., 138.
[374] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 3–4. Quoted in Toh.
[375] Toh, 8, 14.
[376] Steven George Salaita, "Beyond Orientalism and Islamophobia: 9/11, Anti-Arab Racism, and the Mythos of National Pride", *The Centennial Review* 6, no. 2 (2006): 251.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Inderpal Grewal, "Transnational America: Race, Gender and Citizenship after 9/11", *Social Identities* 9, no. 3 (2003): 536.
[379] Ibid., 538.

beyond redemption and thus is of such high risk to the nation and the state as to be incarcerated immediately or to be destroyed."[380] After 9/11, the terrorist figure became synonymous with the Middle Eastern male, who was singled out for exclusion from multiculturalism and classified as the embodiment of danger. Looking "Muslim" or Middle Eastern was no longer "a sign of cosmopolitanism", as it was in the 1990s multicultural imagination. It now made you the racial other to America's revived "nationalism".[381] Of course, this typecasting was nothing new. It reinvigorated and reconfigured the "old category of the Oriental", which "has been an aspect of Euro-American culture for over two hundred years", with the East and Southeast Asian "Oriental" of the Cold War era now replaced with a newly constituted "Islamic Other".[382] This updated, highly visual form of orientalism is "based on facial characteristics of beards, dark eyes, and turbans", and is almost always gendered as male. [383] Salaita prefers the term "anti-Arab racism" over "Orientalism" or "Islamophobia" when describing the strain of racism directed against Arab Americans in particular, both long before 9/11 and in a much more mainstream and normalised fashion afterwards (by conservatives and liberals alike).[384] Regardless of the terminology employed, America was a scary place for Arab Americans after 9/11, and for people who "looked" Arab, including Sikhs, Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis.[385] The murder of a Sikh man in Arizona shortly after the attacks was widely thought to be a revenge killing, for Sikh men, "with turbans and beards, bore a special burden of 'looking Muslim'", and of looking like Osama bin Laden.[386]

Here the politics of the flag become important. Grewal writes that one "way to protect oneself against racism was to display the sign of allegiance to the American nation, that is, to display the US flag". The same "logic of visibility" that singled brown-skinned Asian bodies out as dangerous and "unAmerican" could be used to signal allegiance to America. And so the flag became a kind of second skin, a "protective device" that desperately concealed racial difference as much as it revealed "loyalty and national allegiance".[387] For Grewal, it is the threat of militant racism, rather than any sense of patriotic pride, that underpins the sudden explosion of flags in "mosques, temples, taxis, dwellings, restaurants and some ethnic grocery stores" after 9/11. The brown people donning them had no choice. She concludes: "America had claimed, finally, even the multicultural spaces that many believed would be able to resist nationalist belonging to the US."[388] Hyphenated identity was forced to become singular, and multiculturalism was mobilised for nationalist ends. The popular feel-good message of "We are all Americans" left no room for debate about those excluded and marginalised by this new brand of patriotism.[389]

Perhaps the most interesting rhetorical move that Wallace performs in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" is the same one we have seen in much of his writing from the 1980s onwards:

[380] Ibid., 539.
[381] Ibid., 546.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid., 547.
[384] Salaita, 251, 260.
[385] Grewal, 546–547.
[386] Ibid., 547.
[387] Ibid., 548.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Ibid.

despite his easy belonging among the white Midwestern community, he positions himself as a marginal, marginalised figure. If the Bloomington community is the embodiment of innocent America, he, the misfit, the cynic, is a foreigner within it—a metaphor he develops throughout the essay. Wallace's self-marginalisation is most present in the "feeling of alienation" that suddenly overcomes him in Mrs Thompson's living room on the day of 9/11. This psychological alienation obscures the fact of Wallace's natural social acceptance into the homes and worlds of these "good people", which occurs automatically on account of his whiteness, his Christian posturing, and his Midwestern origins. (Wallace grew up in Champaign, Illinois, just a few miles east of Bloomington.) The neighbourly "Well shoot boy, get over here" adds the requisite Midwestern warmth and colour to his nostalgic 9/11 story, but it also signals an invitation to be part of a community. Wallace wants us to believe that the invitation is in fact conditional, and that he is at risk of banishment.

This message is communicated at the beginning of the essay, during Wallace's own discussion of flags. "Everyone has flags out," he starts his section called WEDNESDAY. "Homes, businesses. It's odd: you never see anybody putting out a flag, but by Wednesday morning there they all are" ("VMT", 129). After describing the proliferation of flags across Bloomington on September 12, Wallace zooms in on his flag-toting, lawn-mowing neighbour Mr N——, the embodiment of conservative Middle American values. Mr N—— is a "USAF vet" whom Wallace only knows because, as he claims, their churches "are in the same softball league" ("VMT", 130). He subversively asks Mr N—— what he would say if "somebody like a foreign person" were to ask him why he and all the other residents are putting up flags after the attacks ("VMT", 130). The answer Wallace reports is this: "'Why' (after a little moment of him giving me the same sort of look he usually gives my lawn), 'to show our support towards what's going on, as Americans'" ("VMT", 130). By asking this very question, Wallace becomes "like a foreign person", even receiving the contemptuous othering gaze of the patriotic ideal citizen. His question, and Mr N——'s contempt, makes it unclear whom the "our" and the "Americans" in Mr N——'s response refer to: is Wallace himself included in the group?

Wallace almost encourages this ambiguity, eager to play the part of the insider–outsider, the white foreigner. It is Wednesday, remember—the day after his experience at Mrs Thompson's and his "alienation" from small-town innocence. He goes on to list, in a footnote, some of the other responses to his flag question that he gathers over the course of the day:

> "To show we're American and we're not going to bow down to nobody";
> "It's a classic pseudo-archetype, a reflexive semion designed to preempt and negate the critical function" (grad student);
> "For pride";
> "What they do is symbolize unity and they we're all together behind the victims in this war and they've fucked with the wrong people this time, amigo." ("VMT", 130)

The first and last statements are full of jingoistic us–them language: *we're* America; *they've* fucked with the wrong people. The "amigo" at the end also makes the brown-skinned nature of "them" chillingly clear. Wallace cleverly distances himself from this xenophobic rhetoric by inserting the

(no doubt made-up) judgement of a "grad student", who points out that the flag helps people avoid thinking critically. While the convoluted delivery offers some comic relief, it also signals Wallace's own cynical intelligence, which sets him apart from his grammatically and politically incorrect neighbours.

Despite his subversive questioning, Wallace starts to feel "a weird accretive pressure to have a flag out" himself, and has a kind of panic attack when his frantic search through all the town's stores turns up no flags ("VMT", 130). Through this drama of the flag-hunt, Wallace officially becomes one of "them", excluded from the patriotic "unity" of the "Americans" he talks to throughout the day. At the height of his panic attack he finds himself "standing in a fluorescent-lit KWIZ-N-EZ afraid to go home", somehow now the victim of the incipient jingoistic violence he has been recording until this point ("VMT", 131). He effectively browns himself, becoming the at-risk cultural misfit in a conservative white space. This browning reaches an astonishing climax when Wallace creates a literary double for himself in the form of the brown-skinned KWIZ-N-EZ shop-owner:

> [I]n one of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance, it's the KWIZ-N-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani, by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder and *a strange kind of unspoken understanding*, and who lets me go back and sit in the stockroom amid every conceivable petty vice and indulgence America has to offer and compose myself, and who only slightly later, over styrofoam cups of a strange kind of perfumey tea with a great deal of milk in it, suggests construction paper and "Magical Markers," which explains my now-beloved and proudly-displayed homemade flag. ("VMT", 131–132)[390]

This loaded passage sees Wallace being comforted by a "fellow" outsider, whose brown skin and "strange" tea signal his foreignness, which in turn facilitates his instant and "unspoken understanding" of Wallace's plight of exclusion. The shop-owner would have understood the urgency of procuring a flag because displaying one was a matter of life and death for many Arab-looking immigrants after 9/11, as Grewal has shown, but the very different stakes involved for shop-owner and patron are disregarded in favour of a depoliticised equivalence between brown and white.

But this unnamed Pakistani man is more than just a commiserator in Wallace's tale. He is also the old and wise teacher who can reintegrate Wallace into American society. The scene, after all, takes place in the store's "stockroom", which is stacked with "every conceivable petty vice and indulgence America has to offer" ("VMT", 131). The Pakistani owns and has access to these markers of consumer culture; he has the proverbial ticket. And it is the Pakistani who suggests that Wallace use "construction paper and 'Magical Markers'" to make his own flag. With this sound advice, Wallace is able to step out of his association with "them" and rejoin the party of "us", "proudly display[ing]" his "homemade" version of patriotism outside his house ("VMT", 132). It is that easy for him—a mere matter of stationery. The shop-owner, of course, does not have the option of stepping in and out of the mainstream. He remains foreign and "strange"—his skin

[390] My emphasis.

marks him as such—and he must perform mainstreamness as a means of survival. He remains always a step behind (saying "Magical Markers" instead of Magic Markers, for example). This sentimentalised multicultural anecdote enacts a disturbing political inversion, with the immigrant Pakistani presented as more Americanised and thus more culturally advantaged than the white Midwestern Wallace himself. By framing himself as persecuted by his Midwestern community, on account of his failure to find a flag, Wallace actually appropriates a fear that coursed in a very real way through immigrant communities after 9/11, who were at serious risk of revenge killings, and subject to racial profiling and criminalisation after the attacks. And by framing the Pakistani shop-owner as an ally and confidant, Wallace obscures the fact that this man's participation in consumer culture, via his shop and his flag-making skills, forms the basis of his citizenship, via the multicultural "consumer citizenship" model that Grewal describes. Unlike Wallace, who risks mild embarrassment in front of his neighbours, the man's very citizenship is at stake. In short, Wallace erases the racial differences, hierarchies, and exclusions that are inscribed in the multicultural model, especially after 9/11. Despite his whiteness, his Christian background, and his Midwestern know-how, Wallace is able to emerge as the vulnerable foreigner, desperate to find the flag that will grant him access to the citizenship community (the "us") he already belongs to.

Butler argues in her book *Precarious Life* that the injury suffered by America on 9/11 led to a state of "heightened vulnerability" that could have allowed the nation to finally understand and access the daily vulnerability experienced by politically marginalised groups around the world and within its own borders.[391] She writes:

> To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways . . . [T]he dislocation of First World privilege, however temporary, offers a chance to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community.[392]

Rather, the United States perceived its injury and its vulnerability as exceptional, and took to eradicating both at all costs. It "miss[ed] an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community", instead defining and strengthening itself apart from it.[393] While Wallace is certainly not the United States, he uses vulnerability in a similar way, in *Infinite Jest* and his other work of the 1990s, but especially after 9/11. As we will see in the sections that follow, vulnerability is not used as a levelling force that grants the white male writer access to the interior worlds of systemically oppressed groups. Instead, it is an elevating force that lends his own interior world greater solemnity and weight, and keeps the narrative forever circling within its parameters. Certainly, Wallace's experience at the "KWIZ-N-EZ" seems a missed opportunity for exploring the meaning of 9/11 for immigrants and "hyphenated" Americans like the shop-owner, rather than casting the man as an extra in the scene of his own imagined persecution.

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[391] Butler, xi.
[392] Ibid., xii–xiii.
[393] Ibid., xi.

"Wounded inside"

Oblivion (2004) was the first short-story collection that Wallace published after 9/11, and the last piece of fiction he published before his death. In one of the stories, "Incarnations of Burned Children", we find another iteration of the theme, present throughout Wallace's work, of the tragic white family, with the guilty mother, the impotent father, and the wounded white son. The wounding in this particular story, however, is a literal wounding that leads to a literal castration. When "the Mommy" accidentally spills boiling water on her infant son, "the Daddy" swoops in to swaddle the child and save the day, but he forgets to remove the child's nappy.[394] When the horrified father removes the steaming nappy and sees "the state of what was there" (that is, the boy's maimed manhood), he throws a punch "at the air of the kitchen" —a punch that moves and changes nothing, symbol of his own impotence as a father.[395] If, as Rebecca Adelman has argued, "the 9/11 attacks were experienced as a national wounding and castration", white men in Wallace's work are already castrated and wounded, here quite plainly so.[396]

But Wallace's exploration of the relationship between masculinity, the Midwest, and 9/11 finds its most direct expression in "The Suffering Channel", the novella that appears at the end of *Oblivion*. The story is set in early July, 2001, and follows Skip Atwater, a reporter for *Style* magazine, as he investigates a story for the 10 September 2001 edition. *Style*, we learn, is located "on the sixteenth floor of 1 World Trade Center in New York".[397] The looming spectre of 9/11, communicated implicitly through these temporal and spatial references, is made explicit at several points in the text. We are told, for example, which characters will survive "the tragedy by which *Style* would enter history two months hence", and which ill-fated characters have but "ten weeks to live" ("SC", 245, 326). In other words, we are dealing in this story with future 9/11 victims and survivors (even if the characters themselves do not know it yet). We have moved out of Mrs Thompson's Midwestern living room to the very epicentre of the tragedy. But in fact we have not really moved at all: the focus of the story is still the Midwest, and still Midwestern men, who, like Wallace in the "KWIK-N-EZ", are presented as the most persecuted group in the cultural landscape. Wallace uses 9/11 as an opportunity to rehash the masculine themes and dramas he has already rehearsed in his earlier accounts of the Midwest, only now with the official banner of tragedy looming over them.

The novella's central character, Skip, works at *Style* in Manhattan but is actually a Midwestern country boy at heart. Right at the start of the story we are told that his totally "monotone wardrobe" (navy blazer and slacks) is "the number one thing that betrayed his Midwest origins to those interns who knew anything about cultural geography" ("SC", 239). Skip grew up in Anderson, Indiana, and studied journalism in Muncie, Indiana, where he worked in restaurant kitchens to support himself through college ("SC", 250, 240). The story he is investigating for the

[394] Wallace, "Incarnations of Burned Children", *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 114–115.
[395] Ibid., 116.
[396] Rebecca Adelman, "Sold(i)ering Masculinity: Photographing the Coalition's Male Soldiers", *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 1 (2009): 263. Quoted in Toh.
[397] Wallace, "The Suffering Channel", *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 241. Subsequent references to "The Suffering Channel" are cited parenthetically as "SC".

ill-fated September edition requires him spending all his time in Mount Carmel, Indiana, which means that the entire portion of Skip's narrative takes place not in Manhattan but in the Midwest. In Mount Carmel lies the "extraordinary but also undeniably controversial and perhaps even repulsive" story of Brint Moltke, a deeply repressed ex-Army plumber with an overbearing (and morbidly overweight) wife. Brint's outlandish "talent" is that, whenever he uses the toilet, his shit comes out in the form of an intricately detailed sculpture. Skip spends most of his time in the story in the Moltkes' living room, which, like Mrs Thompson's, has all the markers of Midwestern suburbia: "thickly carpeted" floors, magazine racks, an American flag outside ("SC", 247). We are firmly in heartland territory here, with heartland men taking centre stage.

The careful, somewhat heavy-handed construction of both Skip and Brint as Midwestern men who are oppressed, traumatised, and endangered by women, and maternal figures in particular, is almost astonishing—especially when the text is read as a tailpiece to "Incarnations of Burned Children" and "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", as we are reading it now. Skip's mother is framed as a tyrant, in language uncomfortably reminiscent of a plantation slave narrative: "When as a child he misbehaved or sassed her Mrs. Atwater had made little Virgil [Skip's 'true given name'] go and cut from the fields' edge's copse the very switch with which she'd whip him" ("SC", 250). In line with the "splinter denomination" of Christianity she belonged to, Skip's mother "did spareth not the rod" ("SC", 250). His father was entirely absent, emotionally and eventually physically too. The "lone time" Skip saw his father smiling, the smile "turned out to have been a grimace"—the result of a heart attack that killed him ("SC", 251). Seeing their father die, Skip and his brother were paralysed by an "inability to move or cry out feeling . . . much like the paralysis of bad dreams ("SC", 251). This picture of a dying patriarchy and a traumatised boyhood conveys a sense of Midwestern masculinity as deeply imperilled. Today, Skip moves through the world as a "plump diminutive boy faced man" ("SC", 252). He sweats a lot, has a history of humiliating relationships, and is prone to "twinge[s] of abandonment" ("SC", 296). He is not quite a "man", in other words, and his failings go back to his childhood.

Brint's own Midwestern parents, meanwhile, "beat him witless all through growing up . . . whipped on him with electric cords and burnt on him with cigarettes", as Brint's wife Amber tells Skip one day in confidence ("SC", 268). "His daddy was all right . . . didn't outright abuse him," she says. "[I]t was more his mother" ("SC", 268). The father was a deacon, and the mother was "[o]ne of this churchy kind that's so upright and proper in church but at home she's crazy evil" ("SC", 269). The parallels with Skip's story are difficult to ignore (abused son, crazy Christian mother, impotent father). At any rate, these parallels become cemented through Skip's intermittent memory associations. The "Old Spice scent" that Skip smells on Brint reminds him of his dead father's scent ("and, reportedly, his father's father's before him"), while the empty smile permanently plastered on Brint's face reminds Skip of the smile he once saw on a classmate after the boy's father committed suicide ("SC", 248, 254). As Olivia Banner has pointed out, these memory associations "suggest[ ] an unchanging nature to Midwestern masculinity", which is

marked in all instances by dead fathers and traumatised sons.[398] As in "Incarnations of Burned Children", fathers and sons in Wallace's Midwest are locked into cycles and patrimonies of pain.

Amber goes on to tell Skip that Brint is "wounded inside", and that his aberrant toilet habits are a result of the "abuses he'd suffered as a tiny child" ("SC", 270, 269). Wallace, then, has Amber, a woman, introduce the typically female discourses of wounding and abuse into the text and assign them to the men in the story. Continuing this inversion of gender discourse, Wallace frames Amber herself as an abusive Midwestern woman, who joins the ranks of crazies alongside Skip's and Brint's mothers. At one point during their interview with Skip, Amber whacks her husband hard in the chest to get him to talk ("SC", 253). And when Skip raises concerns that Brint's "shyness and woundedness" might get in the way of *Style* running an article on him, Amber responds, "He'll do it . . . He will because he'll do it for me", after which it becomes clear to Skip "whose show this was" ("SC", 278–279). These seem to be Wallace's hints to the reader that Brint's abuse is ongoing, having been transferred from his maternal relationship to his marital relationship. Inasmuch as Midwestern men routinely feature as wounded and embattled, women feature as the antagonists and power-bearers.

In a stunning plot twist, Skip himself becomes the victim of the particular mode of feminine wounding wrought by Amber. Alone with her in her parked car, absorbing "some of the local flavor" (fields, factories, a raging storm), Skip becomes affected by "the immense sexual force field" surrounding Amber, "the sexiest morbidly obese woman" he has ever seen ("SC", 250). Some sort of sexual encounter ensues, and the narrator constructs it in deliberately ambiguous terms. We are told that "a very muffled set of what could either be screams or cries of excitement" radiate from the vehicle, an ambiguity that allows Skip to be framed as a helpless sexual victim whose attempts to say "no" are ignored: "The fluttering motions of his hands as they beat ineffectually at her left shoulder were no doubt misperceived as passion" ("SC", 288). This image of ineffectual male beating is a powerful one: it inverts the usual parameters of domestic violence. That night, "safely" back in his hotel, Skip has a dream "of being somehow immersed in another human being, of having that person surround him like water or air", images of suffocation that gesture to the sheer enormity of Amber's body, and to his relative physical disadvantage in the situation ("SC", 311). Regarding his bruised and inflamed knee the following morning, Skip realises that this is the first time he has "received any kind of sexual injury" ("SC", 312). He feels "injured" and "sore" ("SC", 313). He wonders whether he "*engaged in*" sex the night before, or whether he was in fact "*subject to*" it ("SC", 287). He wonders, in short, whether he is a victim of sexual assault. Given the barrage of images of male injury, the implication is that he is precisely that. Almost predictably, the narration of the car scene is intercut with intrusive references to Atwater's mother ("SC", 312). In fact, the border between Amber and Mrs Atwater becomes increasingly blurred as the story unfolds: Skip looks at Amber and sees his mother. This narrative pattern is meant to identify Amber, Skip's mother, and Brint's mother as so many manifestations of the same "overwhelming feminine force", as Banner has characterised it.[399]

[398] Olivia Banner, "'They're literally shit': Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/11 (2009): 78.
[399] Banner, 77.

This gender drama spills over into the politics of Skip's workplace, where a similar dynamic of oppressive femininity and oppressed masculinity is played out. We glimpse the situation at *Style* mainly through Skip's cross-country phone calls to his intern, Laurel Manderley. *Style* is run by the formidable Mrs Anger (a sort of literary analogue of *Vogue*'s Anna Wintour), and decisions are made by a potent network of "interns"—all women. Unlike humble Indianan Skip, the *Style* interns have all attended elite East Coast institutions like "Rye Country Day School", "Miss Porter's School", "Choate", "Vassar", "Wellesley", and the other "Seven Sisters colleges" ("SC", 240, 244, 261). And in contrast to Skip's bland pants-and-blazer combo, the interns are always dressed in designer-label items that the narrator meticulously describes. Banner, whose essay on "The Suffering Channel" is the only piece of scholarship on the story that points to its conspicuous gender themes, argues that the combined presence of Mrs Anger and the sophisticated women interns at *Style* points to the "feminization of the televisual" in contemporary America. "[T]he East Coast women", she writes, "are producers of a cultural form that Midwestern women then consume"—Midwestern women like Amber, who reads fashion magazines, follows celebrity culture, and hopes her husband's poo sculptures will make her famous.[400] Women have taken over the mass-media circuit, Banner claims, pushing men out to the margins of production and control. I would emphasise instead that none of the female interns are actually paid, and that the paid staff at *Style* are repeatedly referred to as "salarymen" ("SC", 243, 298). The company is economically stratified in exactly the opposite way that Banner suggests. Even the top-ranking Mrs Anger is referred to as the magazine's "point *man*" in all dealings with the parent company ("SC", 244).[401] This is very much a man's world. The "feminization" that Banner refers to is in fact the *threat* of feminisation—a projection of male anxiety in a feminist-era work environment, rather than something actually true about the company. Skip is certainly anxious about his future at the magazine: "What he did feel, suddenly and emphatically in the midst of [one of his phone calls with Laurel], was that he might well be working for Laurel Manderley someday, that it would be she to whom he pitched pieces and pleaded for additional column inches" ("SC", 311). Skip's deep-seated anxiety about being replaced by salary*women* lends meaning to the narrator's passing comment that there are "maternal elements in Laurel's regard for" her boss ("SC", 243). Laurel, too, is a kind of threatening maternal figure next to the ever-vulnerable Midwestern male (who is in fact still getting paid each month while his intern receives nothing).

The novella ends with the magazine's decision to feature Brint on a "Reality/Gaper" cable TV channel called The Suffering Channel. The Suffering Channel features a "loop" of photographs and video clips of the "most intense available moments of human anguish" ("SC", 289, 291). The loop runs through the night, showing its viewers what real, raw suffering looks like. The images used include:

> Handheld video, electroshock interrogation of adolescent male subject, *Chambre d'Interrogation*, Cloutier Prison, Cameroon (subtitles)
>
> . . .

[400] Ibid., 82, 79.
[401] My emphasis.

> Unused BBC2 shoulder mount video clop of *Necklace Party*, Transvaal Civil Province C7, Pretoria, South Afr (audio excellent)
> . . .
> Handheld video, middle aged Rwandan (?) couple murdered by group w/ agric. implements (no audio, facial closeups digitally enhanced)
> . . .
> Low light security video, parents identify remains of 13 year old raped/dec. child, Emerson County Coroner's Office, Brentley, Tx
> . . .
> Webcam digital video, gang rape in dormitory room of 22 year old female designing real time *My Life* Web Site for college course, Lambuth University, Jackson, Tenn. ("SC", 292)

In the final scene of the novella, Brint is positioned atop a toilet rigged with cameras in The Suffering Channel's production studio. The idea is that Brint's defecation will be filmed and the footage will be played back to him on a monitor in real time. He will think that the same footage is being broadcast on television, whereas in fact what the TV audience will see is an image of Brint's mortified face as he watches himself "in the act" ("SC", 328–329). The footage of his face will be added to the loop, alongside the kinds of examples listed above.

If the reader wonders how a Midwestern man's shame about his toilet habits measures up against the "human anguish" of heavily oppressed political subjects (in authoritarian Cameroon, in genocidal Rwanda, in apartheid South Africa) and rape victims, Wallace has the *Style* interns raise the same question: "But is there actual suffering involved?" one of them asks ("SC", 325). The interns agree that Amber's manipulation of her husband, combined with Brint's extreme shyness, means the story can be "represented" as an instance of "bona fide suffering" ("SC", 325). Just as it was Amber who labelled Brint's childhood treatment "abuse", here it is the female interns who decide that the adult Brint is indeed "suffering". I see a complex rhetorical strategy at work here, with the equivalence between the private pain of Midwestern men like Brint and the more overt, political pain of black subjects and rape victims made and validated by women themselves. Wallace's implicit message that Brint's psychic ordeal is as "intense" in its "human anguish" as genocide, apartheid, gang rape, and so on is hardly palatable, but it is easier for readers to swallow when the comparison is thoroughly debated among savvy, critical-thinking women and then declared fair game by them (rather than by Brint or Skip or Wallace himself).

If his appearance on The Suffering Channel affirms Brint's status as a "bona fide" victim, then 9/11 affirms Skip's status as a victim, too. In the novella's unwritten future, Skip will literally become the victim of the attacks on the twin towers. This *telos* is absolutely crucial, for it represents the first time that one of Wallace's wounded white male characters becomes an actual victim of political violence, as far as I can tell. In a sense, Wallace converts the prevailing sentiment that the heartland was the "real" America that was attacked on September 11 into a fictional aesthetic. He turns a story about 9/11 into a story about the Midwest, travelling back and forth between "the cultural heart of the nation" (as Skip calls New York) and its spiritual heartland ("SC", 276). The result is a plot grounded in one Midwestern man's troubled obsession with another Midwestern man's troubled art: two troubled heartland men looking at each other, and seeing themselves. The

subtext is that these wretched men are the "real" faces of the 9/11 tragedy. The deeper subtext, of course, is that Wallace, the Midwestern artist writing the very story we are reading, is looking at himself, too. When he imagines the victims of 9/11, he imagines his own demographic before he imagines any other. This is the "missed opportunity" that Butler speaks of.

As Banner has pointed out, Wallace's story does not initiate a process of "remasculinization" for his castrated male subjects, as usually happens in mainstream American art: "In these situations, the masochistic tendencies of the male protagonist, as well as the victimization he has undergone, first feminize him; in response to such feminization, he then must remasculinize himself, often through violence or a sadistic response to a feminized other".[402] Instead, Wallace keeps his "feminized" characters in a state of pathos and injury. The imminent arrival of 9/11 automatically forecloses the possibility of redemption (or remasculisation) for our Midwestern males, who will be obliterated in one way or another. Brint's hopes for recognition as an artist will come crashing down with the *Style* office on September 11. Skip will be at work that day with everyone else, and he will feel the impact of the planes directly, but whether or not he will survive the ordeal is never stated. Laurel's fate, on the other hand, is made clear very early on: she is "destined to survive", we are told ("SC", 245). Laurel's guaranteed survival almost validates Skip's conservative paranoia about her future success as a female journalist. And the fact that Skip's fate hangs in the balance keeps him in the role of victim until the very last page.

The white face of heroism

When the staff at *Style* are debating among themselves what type of sculpture Brint should be asked to produce during his appearance on The Suffering Channel, one of the contenders on the shortlist is "the well known tableau of several US Marines planting the flag on an Iwo Jiman atoll" ("SC", 316). This casual cultural reference, inserted among half a dozen others, is in fact highly relevant to the novella's 9/11 context. Interest in Joe Rosenthal's famous photograph, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, was revived in the weeks following 9/11, particularly in relation to Thomas E Franklin's photograph of three New York City firemen hoisting the American flag amid the ruins of the World Trade Centre (see Figures 4 and 5). Franklin's photograph, entitled *Raising the Flag at Ground Zero*, was held up as a kind of twenty-first-century double of Rosenthal's earlier one. The *Style* team's reference to the Iwo Jima "tableau" in Wallace's story, then, gestures to the Franklin photograph that would soon occupy a similarly hallowed position within the national consciousness. Knowingly or not, it also gestures to the thematic concerns binding both tableaus: masculinity, whiteness, patriotism, sacrifice, heroism, and duty.

[402] Banner, 76.

Figure 4. Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, 23 February 1945, General Photographic File of the Department of Navy, 1943–1958, Department of Defense, Naval Photographic Centre, Washington, DC, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/520748.
Figure 5. Thomas E Franklin, *Raising the Flag at Ground Zero*, 11 September 2001, hosted by The Record, Bergen County, New Jersey, http://www.groundzerospirit.org/.

In a sense, the Iwo Jima photograph and its spectral 9/11 double move us out of the realm of crisis, wounding, and pain, and into the realm of redemption. For the patriotism, sacrifice, heroism, and civic duty on display in these images offer a solution to the crisis in white Midwestern male identity that we have been tracing in Wallace's writing since the early 2000s, and in white masculinity more generally since the 1980s. They offer a path towards remasculinisation, and, like the nostalgic retreat to the heartland, promise a newly constituted, newly homogenised whiteness. If "The Suffering Channel" foreclosed redemption, Wallace's final magnum opus, *The Pale King*, published posthumously in 2012, is very much committed to it. The novel, set in the Midwest, constructs a mythology of heartland-style masculine honour that is subtle enough to suit the nerdy, cynical strain of Midwestern masculinity that Wallace is invested in. But, as Banner observed, remasculinisation projects often come at a cost, playing themselves out "through violence or a sadistic response to a feminized other".[403] I argue that there are parallels to be drawn between Wallace's commitment to remasculinisation in his final work and the aggressive foreign-policy initiatives put in place by the Bush administration in the 2000s, which aimed to reinvigorate and remilitarise the nation following the humiliation of the attacks. After 9/11, any discourse of remasculinisation carries echoes of Iraq and Afghanistan, of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, and, as we will see, of Hurricane Katrina.

[403] Banner, 76.

Banner's discussion of "The Suffering Channel" brought to my attention Sally Robinson's work on white masculinity—particularly, her 2000 book *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, which builds on earlier work on white masculinity by scholars such as Fred Pfeil and David Savran. Banner's provides a useful summary of Robinson's central thesis:

> [Robinson] sees representations of the emotional and physical wounding of white men as the response to a perceived historical crisis; in her analysis it is the minority social movements of the 1970s—those of African Americans and women, in particular—that prompt this crisis, which is as much fantasized as real; what is important is that the perceived crisis demands that masculinity respond to allay the crisis. White men welcome the violence that ensues and that may damage their bodies. In fact, they may even masochistically desire it, because it instantiates their desire to claim the same sort of particularized identities claimed by ethnic/racial minorities and women.[404]

This notion of white masculinity (and white male authorship) seeing itself as threatened and marginalised by an empowered minority and female consciousness is one we have seen before. It underpinned our reading of *Infinite Jest* as a response to 1990s identity politics and the ascendancy of Toni Morrison and so-called "ethnic" fiction, as well as our reading of *The Broom of the System*, with its anxiety about institutionalised feminism and the masculine literary voice. But with 9/11, the "perceived historical crisis" facing white men became a lot easier to point to. America itself had been attacked, and white American men could more easily conceive of themselves as victims, as the portrayal of Skip and Brint in "The Suffering Channel" suggests. In Robinson's analysis, "literary representations of emotional and physical wounds often serve as symbols of masochistic positioning, of the male body as victimized at the larger collective level of the group".[405] Men write about their bodies as wounded because they long for them to be so. They crave recognition as a vulnerable group. To an extent, then, 9/11 represents a kind of subliminal answer to the unconscious, "masochistic" white male longing for pain, filling the void left by the end of the Cold War (and of the Vietnam War before it), which temporarily foreclosed the possibility of men understanding themselves in terms of violence and war.[406]

Robinson's work emphasises the weird value that "crisis" holds for the fractured male psyche. In times of crisis, men are summoned to "respond to allay the crisis", and to take up again their traditional role as fighters and protectors.[407] Honour and virility come back into reach. The real historical crisis brought on by 9/11 saw a nation-wide apotheosis of the "first responders" at the scene: policemen, medics, rescue workers, and, of course, firemen. For Michan Andrew

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[404] See Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Paraphrased by Banner, 76.
[405] Ibid.
[406] See Joanne Sharp, "Reel Geographies of the New World Order: Patriotism, Masculinity, and Geopolitics in Post-Cold War American Films", *Rethinking Geopolitics*, eds., Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998), 152–169; Kimberly Hutchings, "Making Sense of Masculinity and War", *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 4 (2008): 389–404; Daniel Grausam, "'It is only a statement of the power of what comes after': Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism", *American Literary History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 308–336.
[407] Banner, 76.

Connor, "[o]ne of the most significant popular cultural outcomes of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was the elevation of a set of national heroes".[408] Mainstream media and the Internet exploded with praise for FDNY firefighters; Fisher-Price reported record sales of its "rescue workers" toys; the Thomas E Franklin photograph became famous globally. The image of the heroic fireman was "racialized as inherently white" because of the dominance of white working-class men in the FDNY (to say nothing of its gendering as inherently male: I use the term "fireman" deliberately).[409] Conservative commentators conveniently glossed over the historical and ongoing discrimination within the Department's hiring and promotion practices, which was behind this unbalanced demographic. Instead, they attributed the presence of "less than three and four percent, respectively", of black and Hispanic firefighters in the force to "individual preference and aptitude", and essentialised the heroism displayed by the firemen as a function of their whiteness.[410] For example, one commentator claimed that the relief effort at Ground Zero "was *essentially* a display of heroism by multiculturalism's villain class—white males. An estimated 319 of 343 firefighters who gave their lives at the World Trade Center on September 11 were non-Hispanic whites."[411] 9/11 seemed to offer a chance for the "decentred" white male to reoccupy centre stage. The production (mostly by conservatives, but also by liberals) of this new class of national heroes served, according to Connor, both the "imperial projects of war" and "the ongoing domestic right-wing cultural agenda of defending the privileged cultural, political, and economic standing of white men".[412] In other words, the cultural remasculinisation on display in the televised scenes of rescue and recovery was also playing itself out politically, as the government attempted to strengthen its ostensibly "weak" position. Overall, the attacks "radically destabilized the US sense of self", writes Meghana Nayak, "and thus necessitated a particular reassertion of state identity that pivots violently on gender and race".[413]

The "inability to conceive of heroism without a white face", as Connor describes the valorisation of white firemen after 9/11, dates back to the nation's very founding, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, where citizenship and virtue were defined, legislatively, as white.[414] Indeed, this valorisation had the effect of promoting "particular forms of cultural virtue and construct[ing] categories of ideal citizenship". In the months following 9/11, it went hand in hand with a growing backlash against "'big government,' affirmative action, and the supposed feminization of American culture".[415] The view of America as overly "feminised" and in need of toughening up was in fact already entrenched in American foreign policy. Both the 1992

[408] Michan Andrew Connor, "Real American Heroes: Attacking Multiculturalism through the Discourse of Heroic Sacrifice", *American Multiculturalism after 9/11*, eds. Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009), 98.
[409] Connor, 93–94. See also Susan Faludi's discussion of the downplaying of female first responders' contribution to 9/11 relief efforts. Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 79–88. Referenced in Toh.
[410] Connor, 94.
[411] My emphasis. John Leo, "Color Me Confounded", *US News and World Report*, 28 January 2002, 31. Quoted in Connor.
[412] Connor, 93.
[413] Meghana Nayak, "Orientalism and 'Saving' US State Identity after 9/11", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 42.
[414] Ibid., 95. See also Ross.
[415] Connor, 94.

Wolfowitz memo and President Bush's 2000 campaign speeches framed then-President Bill Clinton's diplomatic attitude as "soft", and vowed to correct it with a more aggressive approach. This sentiment intensified after 9/11, when a sense of the nation as having been "violated" by foreign powers began to set in.[416] As Stacy Takacs explains, "[i]mages of men, even soldiers at the Pentagon, screaming, running, and crying were particularly evocative of this sense of violation, for they also violated cultural perceptions of stoic masculinity." Twenty-four hours a day, the media spread images of vulnerability and chaos, promulgating the notion that the country was indeed "far more pervasively feminine than was previously understood".[417] In so doing, it lent credence to Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld's statements after the attacks that America had been weakened by Democrat rule, and that "weakness is provocative".[418] "Like the word 'violated,'" writes Takacs, "this statement links the terrorist attacks to rape . . . and implies that the US got what it deserved on 9/11 because it dressed improperly; its power was not sufficiently manifest."[419] The attacks were not seen as a reaction to aggressive US imperialism abroad, as Toh, Frankenberg, and Butler have observed, and thus as an occasion for serious pause and introspection. They were instead seen as an exploitation of American weakness, which therefore needed to be immediately corrected. The only way to "manifest" American power once more, in this binary, gendered logic, was to remilitarise, and so remasculinise, the national culture and identity. Consequently, as the National Security Strategy of 2002 made clear, "every other nation [had to] be effectively castrated".[420]

The casualties of America's remasculinisation project were not only the foreign nations mentioned by Takacs and Butler, or the foreign nationals mentioned by Grewal. Connor points out the ways in which "the poor of color" in America have borne the costs of America's foreign policy since 9/11, both through their diminished access to resources and through their invisibility within the armed forces:

> [T]he discourse of heroic sacrifice denies the all too real sacrifices of welfare, property, and life made by poor American communities of color, as unaccounted billions of dollars are funneled to the cycle of destruction and reconstruction in Iraq. Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans while National Guard troops, trucks, and logistical expertise were tied down in Iraq is only the most dramatic example. Media coverage aroused sympathy for the black poor of New Orleans, but not any suggestion that their suffering be viewed as a sacrifice for war.
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> Likewise, the disproportionate casualty rate for African-American and Latino soldiers goes largely unremarked in heroic discourse, most glaringly as politicians who gladly allow immigrant Latino soldiers to fight seek to militarize the US border with Mexico. The

[416] Stacy Takacs, "Jessica Lynch and the Regeneration of American Identity and Power Post-9/11", *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 299.
[417] Ibid.
[418] Julie Drew, "Identity Crisis: Gender, Public Discourse and 9/11", *Women and Language* 27, no. 2 (2004): 71–77; Andrew Bacevich, *Atnehcan Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Quoted in Takacs.
[419] Takacs, 299.
[420] Ibid., 300. See also Frankenberg, 556, for an account of the project of remasculinisation.

> discourse of heroic sacrifice hides the fact that war, while a raw deal for the white middle class, is a catastrophe for the poor of color.[421]

As Frankenberg notes, "when one set of actors and actions is placed in the foreground, others are more easily set aside."[422] These are the less publicised sacrifices of war.

As a mood of social conservatism took hold after 9/11, a special place was reserved for whiteness in the new patriotic imagination, and old gender norms were reinstated. The US Army capitalised on the new patriotic fervour, ramping up its recruitment efforts in preparation for the Iraq War. Patrick Tillman was a nationally acclaimed NFL defence back who, a few months after the attacks, "walked away from his $3.6 million contract with the Arizona Cardinals to enlist as an elite U.S. Army Ranger".[423] Although Tillman, the picture of white virility, "declined to serve as a poster-boy for military recruitment", the Pentagon and the conservative media focused a great deal of attention on his enlistment, with one commentator even glorifying Tillman as an "American original—virtuous, pure and masculine, like only an American can be".[424] When Tillman was killed in a violent bout of friendly fire, the Pentagon reported that he had been killed by Afghan militia and praised him as a hero, conferring on him a host of medals and decorations. It later emerged that Tillman's armour and uniform had been burnt by members of the Army to hide the signs of friendly fire.[425] The conservatism at the heart of the Army's public image, especially after 9/11, comes across even more strongly in the case of Private Jessica Lynch, who, like Tillman, was deployed to Iraq in March 2003. Lynch was badly injured when the Humvee she was travelling in strayed into enemy lines (an incident that the Army would later call an "ambush"). In April 2003, Lynch's wounded body was recovered by US Special Operations Forces from a local hospital, in a highly publicised and broadcasted rescue mission. Lynch's ordeal was framed by the Army and the media as "a parable of American innocence lost and regained through the intervention of military might".[426] Although Native American Lori Piestewa and African American Shoshana Johnson were also involved in the Humvee crash, Lynch was "selected for media stardom . . . because her race, age, and background identify her with the American heartland and connote the maximum vulnerability."[427] Cultural anxieties about "the presence of women in the military" were assuaged by repeated portrayals of Lynch's blondeness, her whiteness, her petite frame, and her rural origins, as well as by the dramatic way in which her "rescue" by the Army was staged.[428] The devastation

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[421] Connor, 101–102.
[422] Frankenberg, 556.
[423] Michael I Nieman, "Who Killed Pat Tillman?", *The Humanist* 66, no. 1 (2006): 4.
[424] Ann Coulter, quoted in Max Blumenthal, "A Cover-up at the Highest Levels", *The Huffington Post*, 26 September 2005, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/max-blumenthal/a-coverup-at-the-highest-_b_7878.html. Blumenthal said of Coulter's comment, "Can we have that in the original German, bitte?"
[425] Josh White, "Army Withheld Details About Tillman's Death: Investigator Quickly Learned 'Friendly Fire' Killed Athlete", *Washington Post*, 4 May 2005.
[426] Takacs, 297. See also Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb, "She Was Fighting to the Death", *Washington Post*, 3 April 2003. Referenced in Takacs.
[427] Takacs, 301.
[428] Takacs, 302. See also John Howard and Laura Prividera, "Rescuing Patriarchy or Saving 'Jessica Lynch': The Rhetorical Construction of the American Woman Soldier", *Women and Language* 27, no. 2 (2004): 89–98, and Deepa Umar, "War Propaganda and the (Ab)uses of Women: Media Constructions of the Jessica Lynch Story", *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 297–313. Cited in Takacs.

of 9/11 seemed to reinstate a conservative social order in which white men are heroes, white women are damsels in distress, and everyone else is not a star of the show.

George Lipsitz, in his book *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness*, argues that "white working-class men" in America tend to be represented as either "forgotten subjects unfairly victimized by politics or heroic subjects of efforts to restore American glory and power".[429] Behind this representation is "a conservative politics that recognizes class inequality but shifts blame for the unfair burdens borne by working-class whites into politics of resentment against women and minorities".[430] In this politics of resentment, the real political and economic burdens borne by women and minorities in America are transferred onto working-class white men, who feel themselves uniquely injured and oppressed, in much the same way that Robinson describes. Lipsitz traces the origins of this resentment back to Reagan, who

> mobilized a crossclass coalition around the premise that the declines in life chances and opportunities in the United States, the stagnation of real wages, the decline of basic services and infrastructure resources, and the increasing social disintegration stemmed not from the policies of big corporations and their neoliberal and neoconservative allies in government, but from the harm done to the nation by the civil rights, antiwar, feminist, and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.[431]

Lipsitz was writing before 9/11, but implicit in the Bush administration's claims that the country had become too feminine, too soft, and its valorisation of the whiteness and virility of the rescue workers, was a resentment of the progressive social and anti-war movements that had challenged and reconfigured the cultural framework of the country since the 1960s. The results have been the same ones that Lipsitz identified in the Reagan era: "national narratives of male heroism and patriarchal protection", expressed through "patriotic rhetoric and display".[432] (The additional parallels with the current Trump administration almost go without saying, although Trump's particular potency lay in his resentment campaign against not only minorities and women but *also* "the policies of big corporations and their neoliberal and neoconservative allies in government",[433] lending him the false populist appeal that eventually won him the election. In the postscript of this dissertation, I think through the contemporary political situation in more detail.)

The Pale King straddles both the Reagan and Bush administrations: the story is based in the 1980s era of Reaganomics, but it was written in the years following 9/11. When the novel mentions a climate of tax cuts and increased defence spending, it is gesturing to the Reagan era, but it also reflecting its own post-9/11 moment, which was marked by the very same political climate. The Bush administration offered tax breaks for the wealthy and for corporates, diverting funds away from welfare and social spending to finance its military campaigns abroad, as the

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[429] George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 72–73. Paraphrased by Connor, 96–97.
[430] Connor, 96–97.
[431] Lipsitz, 73.
[432] Ibid.
[433] See Lipsitz, 73, supra.

Reagan administration had done before it (see Figure 6). Reviews of *The Pale King* usually mention its Reagan-era setting but have for some reason glossed over the contemporary resonances of the book, missing the fascinating interplay between masculinity, the Midwest, and post-9/11 tropes such as heroism, sacrifice, and duty. I argue that this interplay is worth investigating for what it reveals about Wallace's personal politics in the last years of his life, and the complex, highly rhetorical way in which he communicated them to his readership. I am interested in the way Wallace offers, for the first time, a heroic "way out" for white masculinity—one that might redeem the failed/feminised men we see everywhere in his work. As we have seen in our discussion of post-9/11 race and gender politics, though, remasculinisation projects often lead to attitudes of aggression and exclusion, and *The Pale King* seems to fall into a similar trap, regularly deploying high-flown language that many commentators read as inspiring and utopian but that I read as borderline jingoistic and xenophobic. Given how easy it has been for scholars to misread Wallace's nationalism as feel-good humanism, I am equally interested in how Wallace absolves himself of any potential charges of conservativism by incorporating small doses of anti-conservative rhetoric throughout the book. I am interested in how his novel displays its fluency in feminist and civil rights language while still managing to ensure that the pale become kings in the end, and that the kings are all pale.

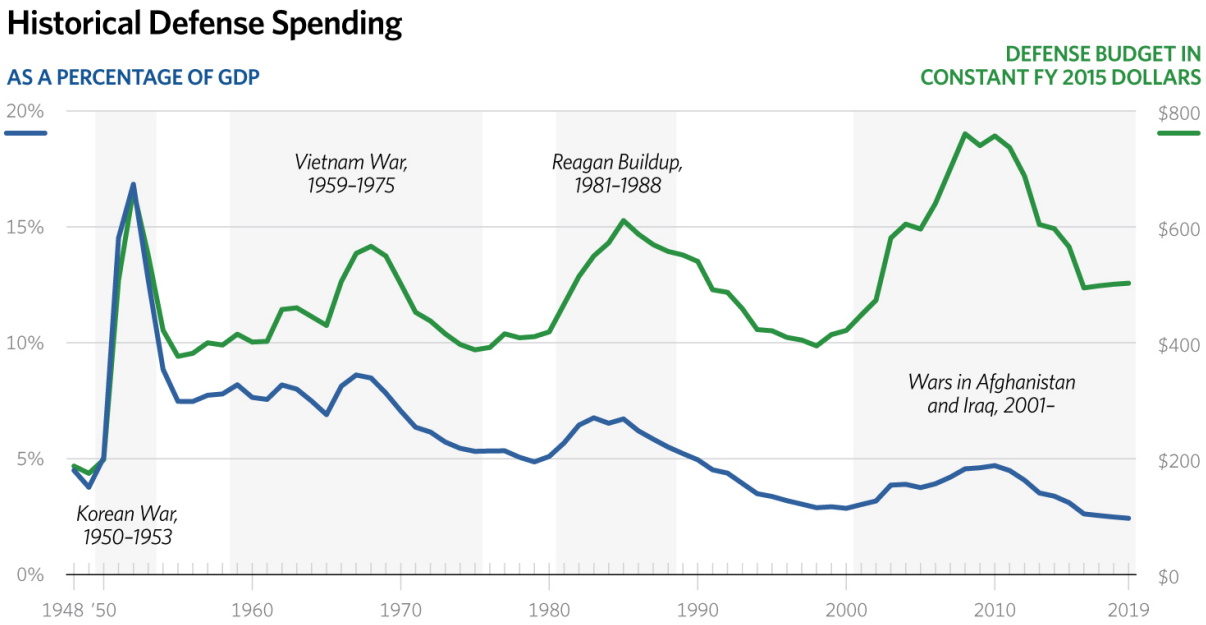

Figure 6. US Department of Defence, "National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2015", April 2014, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2015/FY15_Green_Book.pdf.

Reading *The Pale King* as a strictly post-9/11 novel negates the expansiveness of Wallace's concerns in this final, earnest text. But ignoring the novel's engagement with 9/11 means overlooking the subtle ways in which it participates in the remasculinisation and nationalism projects of the 2000s. My aim is therefore to build on previous discussions of the novel and introduce 9/11 as another important historical reference point—alongside Reaganism, neoliberalism, economic policy—and Midwestern masculinity as another major thematic cluster,

alongside boredom, civics, and the other "universal" themes that crop up in the literature.[434] If scholarly accounts of the novel tend to align Wallace with liberal critiques of the (neoliberal, capitalist) status quo, my reading has the opposite alignment at stake: what are the conservative investments of the novel, and how might these be linked to the racialised and gendered modes of nation-building that took hold after 9/11? In asking these questions, I extend the line of enquiry initiated by Mark McGurl and Samuel Cohen, who in separate essays called attention to the whiteness of *The Pale King*.[435] I am especially concerned, though, with how the novel's whiteness interacts with it its maleness, and with how both are functions of the novel's groundedness in post-9/11 Midwestern identity. At one point in the novel, a character named "David Wallace" says, with a touch of resignation, "We live inside bodies, after all."[436] "David Wallace" lives inside a body marked as male and white within America's "logic of visibility", and so does the author David Foster Wallace.[437] What happens if we listen to the embodied voice here, coming more or less directly from the author, and use it as a guide to read his final work? Perhaps more than any other piece in Wallace's output of the 2000s, this final novel must be interrogated for the themes it raises and the characters it constructs, since these themes and characters provide clues about Wallace's thinking and dreaming and sense-making during the protracted writing process that eventually, by some accounts, and in conjunction with the suicidal depression he had been battling since adolescence, pushed him over despair's vertiginous edge.[438]

"Other men's names"

Although the structure of the novel was determined not by Wallace but by his editor Michael Pietsch in the years following the author's death, the opening sequence happens to do a particularly good job of encapsulating the major thematic concerns I am curious about in this chapter: crisis, nostalgia, masculinity, and the Midwest. It begins like this:

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[434] See Marshall Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's The Pale King", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 468; Richard Godden and Michael Szalay, "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", *Textual Practice* 28, no. November (2014): 1273–1322; Ralph Clare, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 428–446; Michael Pietsch, "Editor's Note", David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), v–x; Michiko Kakutani, "Maximized Revenue, Minimized Existence", *The New York Times*, 31 March 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/books/the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace-book-review.html; Jonathan Raban, "Divine Drudgery: A Review of *The Pale King*", *New York Review of Books*, 12 May 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/05/12/divine-drudgery/.

[435] See Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program", *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27–54; Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace", *Postmodern Literature and Race*, eds. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 228–243.

[436] Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 191. Subsequent references to *The Pale King* are cited parenthetically as *PK*.

[437] Grewal, 548.

[438] See D T Max's comments about Wallace's suicide in John Williams, "God, Mary Karr, and Ronald Reagan: D.T. Max on David Foster Wallace", *The New York Times*' *Arts Beat* (blog), 12 September 2012, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/god-mary-karr-and-ronald-reagan-d-t-max-on-david-foster-wallace/.

> Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rist, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spinecabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your check … Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembles, shapeless. We are all of us brothers. (*PK*, 3)

McGurl calls this passage "a prose-poetic invocation of the landscape of the American Midwest".[439] It is unmistakeably nostalgic, with its gestures to maternal gentleness, masculine brotherhood, the "oldness" of the land. Horses, insects, and glittering dew, "[a]ll nodding", fill the rest of the passage, contributing to its lulling effect (*PK*, 3). I am reminded of the "dreamy, underwater" Benadryl-induced mood of "The View from Mrs. Thompson's".

McGurl wonders whether this opening is a sign that what we are dealing with here is "a belated work of midwestern regionalism", "a strategic reembrace of [a] rooted provinciality" not seen in literary fiction since the early twentieth century. But he quickly rejects this possibility on account of the scene that immediately follows it, which shows an IRS employee named Claude Sylvanshine having something of a panic attack as he travels to Peoria, Illinois, where he will be taking up a post at IRS headquarters. Alighting finally on the airport tarmac in Peoria, Sylvanshine experiences the Midwestern landscape not as a "warm embrace" but as an "occasion for terrifying exposure".[440] The supreme, sweeping flatness of the land creates "the specular impression of being in the center of some huge and stagnant body of water, an oceanic impression so literally obliterating that Sylvanshine was cast back or propelled back in on himself and felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him" (*PK*, 24). In McGurl's reading, this intrusion of an existential nothingness onto the pastoral landscape is a common feature of Wallace's fiction, with the author and his characters routinely turning to institutions as redemptive "safe spaces" that can save the day: "Perhaps we had better be getting indoors, under the shelter of institutions. Isn't this, after all, where we usually find Wallace?" As he explains: "[W]hether it is a nursing home, a halfway house, Alcoholics Anonymous, a tennis academy, mammoth federal bureaucracy, or the university, the 'institution' in Wallace is first and foremost a communal antidote to atomism, a laboriously iterated wall against the nihilism attendant to solitude."[441] In Wallace's fictional world, and in his personal world too (where he moved from one university to the next, unable to stay away from the comforts of academia for very long), social and cultural issues are "obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices". Redemption becomes about personal ethics rather than "political contestation", and personal transformation and a philosophy of kindness are substituted for a "thoroughgoing transformation of the social order". For McGurl, the conservatism at the heart of this approach "should mark a

[439] McGurl, 27.
[440] Ibid., 28, 30.
[441] Ibid., 30, 38.

limit to one's sympathy with Wallace's existentialism of institutions as a whole."[442] Indebted to McGurl for identifying the conservative undercurrents of Wallace's work, I nonetheless would like to redirect the critique towards the ways in which Wallace's vision of redemption in this novel as heroic duty to the state is complicit with the post-9/11 projects of white nationalism and remasculinisation. And I would like to keep the focus on the Midwest, because the sentimental pastoralism we see glimpses of in the opening vignette, with its gestures to rural innocence and traditional gender configurations, is the backdrop for those nation-building projects.

For what McGurl does not mention is that Sylvanshine's experience of "Total Terror and Disqualification" during his trip to Peoria—his fear of obliteration, nothingness, death—is integrally linked to his panic about the CPA (Certified Public Accountant) exam he is about to write, and that at the back of both these anxieties (existential and professional) is a crushing fear of emasculation. He fears disqualification *as a man*. The mean-looking old lady sitting next to Sylvanshine on the plane brings this underlying anxiety to the fore:

> the older lady . . . with her dark dress and staved-in face appeared more and more skull-like and frightening and like some type of omen of death or crushing failure on the CPA exam, which two things had collapsed in Sylvanshine's psyche to a single image of his silently, expressionlessly pushing a wide industrial mop down a corridor lined with frosted-glass doors bearing other men's names. (*PK*, 11)

Sylvanshine fears, above all, being nothing *as a man*—and in his emasculating failure falling short of "other men". The generalised crisis of nihilism that McGurl outlines is also a crisis of masculinity, of ending up as one kind of man rather than another, or as no kind of man at all.

That this is a crisis befalling Midwestern masculinity in particular is made clear through the images that float through Sylvanshine's mind on the plane: at one point, he recalls all the young fathers he has seen at different regional airports that day, men carrying the children while their wives strode ahead, "their wives in charge, the men appearing essentially soft or softened in some way"; later, he glances around at the "regional business travelers" and "homely midwestern men" on his flight, whose "soft faces" make them appear to Sylvanshine as "fish thrashing in the nets of their own obligations" (*PK*, 13, 18). Midwestern masculinity is in a sorry state, apparently, with all roads leading to emasculation of some kind. Looking on at his counterparts, Sylvanshine is struck by a wave of "Total Terror and Disqualification", which he imagines as a "bird of prey" that leaves him "stricken and paralysed" in its shadow (*PK*, 16). When a character named Lane Dean Jr struggles to tell his pregnant girlfriend that he wants her to have an abortion—they are both devout Christians—he imagines the "hell" he is going through in similar terms: "It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent . . . frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. Twohearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way" (*PK*, 40). Lane is paralysed, "frozen", by his inability to meet the challenge of fatherhood, and his equal inability to be "man enough" to tell his girlfriend the truth. Later, in a "*moment of grace*", he realises he is "not a hypocrite, just broken and split off like all men" *(PK*, 42). This last

[442] Ibid., 36.

statement nicely sums up the version of masculinity that Wallace is invested in. To be a man is to be "broken" and "split off", almost ontologically so.

The scene between Lane and his girlfriend is unmistakeably poignant, but I am interested in how Wallace is able to transform an abortion drama into an occasion for exploring the difficulty of being a man—in how he skews the poignancy towards masculinity, again and again. A similar distortion occurs in a distasteful, largely footnoted scene between a former IRS employee named "David Wallace" and a heavily caricatured Iranian immigrant named Chahla Neti-Neti, who also works for the IRS. Like many of the other Midwestern male characters in the novel, David Wallace suffers from an intense physical affliction that the reader is meant to understand as a kind of disability.[443] He has "very bad skin—very, very bad, as in the dermatological category 'severe/disfiguring'" (*PK*, 286). His face is covered with unsightly "blebular cysts and scabs", and he is prone to obsessive skin-checks and suicidal ideation (*PK*, 291). Crucially, he tells us that the worst discrimination he ever received about his "disfigurement" was from his "Pakistani roommate" in college, who "christened [him] with the unkind name that followed [him] throughout the next three semesters, 'the young man carbuncular'" (*PK*, 286). This random detail holds significance for me: "David Wallace" is attacked by the brown-skinned immigrant, his own whiteness covered up with blebs and boils. Samuel Cohen points out that references to people of colour are almost non-existent in this "book filled with white people", and argues that the novel is instead interested in exploring forms of "raced whiteness": the evangelical Christian whiteness of Lane Dean Jr, for example, or the "trailer trash" whiteness of the mysterious Toni Ware. I am more concerned with how people of colour, when they do appear, are mobilised to affirm or "race" the white suffering that Wallace is so eager to foreground. This pattern of victimised whiteness and masculinity continues when David Wallace arrives at the IRS regional headquarters in Peoria for his first day of work. He is met by an "ethnic-looking woman", an "exotic-looking female", a "visibly ethnic" "creamily dark Persian woman" whom he at first guesses is "upper-caste Indian or Pakistani" (*PK*, 284–285). The woman is Ms Chahla Neti-Neti, a kind of double for his oppressive Pakistani roommate. The photo on her IRS badge reminds David Wallace of a "feline predator", and indeed the rest of his interaction with Neti-Neti positions him as her prey/victim (*PK*, 289). David Wallace notes twice that Neti-Neti does not offer to help him with his bags, despite the fact that he has been lugging and "clunking" them around for the whole day, causing "swelling and flamboyant bruising" to his knees, and putting him in the same position as the bruised-kneed Skip Atwater (*PK*, 287, 291, 294).[444] He attributes Neti-Neti's failure to offer help to "gender codes", which he knows are "especially rigid in the Middle East" (*PK*, 294). In other words, in this distorted set-up, the group that receives the raw deal of traditional "gender codes" are not women but men (who do not receive help with their bags).

Neti-Neti, it turns out, is an actual victim of political violence and instability. She grew up amid the "Iranian upheavals of the late 1970s", and had to sell her body to save her family: "like many other nubile younger Iranian women with familial connections to the existing government,

[443] For example, the character David Cusk suffers from bouts of excessive sweating that are debilitating and socially paralysing to the point of suicidal depression, and an unnamed boy character with "congenital" asthma develops an uncontrollable physical urge to kiss every part of his body, resulting in a spinal deformity (*PK*, 91–99, 394–407).
[444] Admittedly, this repetition may have been removed had Wallace had the chance to self-edit.

[she] had to basically 'trade' or 'barter' sexual activities with high-level functionaries in order to get herself and two or three other members of her family out of Iran during the tense period where the displacement of the shah's regime was becoming more and more certain" (*PK*, 308). This situation becomes the basis for a chauvinistic joke among male IRS employees: Neti-Neti is given the sobriquet "the Iranian Crisis" for her slutty behaviour, and David Wallace notices that she "seemed to emerge from a different wiggler's housing unit almost every morning" (*PK*, 294). Most uncomfortably, David Wallace himself falls "prey" to her "sexual activities" after his arrival at the IRS, when Neti-Neti mistakes him for a higher-ranking official with a similar name. Told to extend "every courtesy" to the new arrival, a "loaded and psychologically charged term" for the Iranian immigrant, Neti-Neti backs him into a "dark electrical closet" and administers "a rapid, almost woodpeckerishly intensive round of fellatio, this apparently being the preferred method of pleasuring government functionaries from whom one sought favor but upon whose face one did not wish or could not bear to look" (*PK*, 308). Much like Skip's dalliance with Amber in "The Suffering Channel", the encounter here is framed as "really exciting" and "vivid[ly] sensuous" for the male subject, but also one in which he is almost assaulted by the foreign woman, whose "woodpeckerishly intense" sexual fervour he is helpless to resist (*PK*, 308). Neti-Neti's own political helplessness, which the narrator has outlined in detail, is diffused, reversed, and turned into a cheap gimmick about blowjobs.

Cowboy redemption

If victimhood is reserved for the white Midwestern male in this novel, so too is redemption. The redemption thread of the narrative is developed mainly through the character of "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, another Midwestern man whose sprawling one-hundred-page autobiographical account of how he ended up working for the IRS operates as a kind of *bildungsroman*-style novella within the larger novel, which it occupies a huge chunk of. Fogle describes his journey from "wastoid" stoner and serial college-dropout to devoted IRS agent, a journey that pivots on an encounter he has with a substitute accounting lecturer one semester during college attempt number three. In this narrative thread, we see Wallace feeling his way out of the masculine inertia and impotence he has been painstakingly constructing in his heartland stories since 9/11. The vision of redemption he offers leverages all the discourses of post-9/11 nation-building—heroism, remasculinisation, civic duty, nationalism—but modified to suit the failed, feminised "white nerd" figure whom Wallace's aesthetic is built around.[445] Wallace cleverly incorporates feminist and 1960s-era liberation discourse to shake off the conservative baggage of the discourses he employs, all the while advancing his goal of offering the white-collar Midwestern man (and, as it turns out, him alone) a shot at "true heroism".

When Fogle accidently stumbles into an Advanced Tax class at his college, thinking it is his American Political Thought class, he ends up staying put instead of slipping out, because an air of reverence, almost religiosity, within the classroom compels him to. Fogle knows that this

[445] See McGurl, 44.

particular accounting course at DePaul University is usually taught by Jesuit professors (*PK*, 215, 220, 190), so when he refers to the substitute teacher in his story he calls him by a host of different names, some religiously themed, some not: "the substitute", "the substitute Jesuit", "the substitute accounting teacher", "the substitute father" (*PK*, 215, 176, 217, 176). While this last designation is intended to simply indicate that the teacher was substituting for the regular "Catholic father" teacher, it carries a double meaning. Fogle lost his father in a freak and gruesome subway accident the year before this episode in the Advanced Tax classroom, and so he ends up looking to this inspiring accounting teacher as a kind of "substitute father". The Catholic air surrounding the teacher is also significant—not only because Fogle's own father "was raised as a Roman Catholic", but also because the teacher's austere demeanour, appearance, and belief-system reflect the same conservative values that Fogle's father embodied while he was alive (*PK*, 190). The teacher is an obvious stand-in for the dead father, picking up where he left off, and pointing the way for the abandoned son. This alone should grab our attention: Wallace does not usually restore dead fathers or come to the rescue of abandoned sons. We are in new, redemptive territory here.

Importantly, Fogle clashed heavily with his father while he was alive. He tended to side with his radical-feminist mother in rejecting the old-school version of manhood that his father represented. Recalling his childhood, Fogle describes his mother's rebellion against the highly traditional structure of her family and marriage, which led to his parents' divorce. The mother's "consciousness-raising" involvement with "the women's lib movement of the 1970s" saw her turning to lesbianism and moving in with a woman named Joyce, with whom she "co-owned a small feminist bookstore" (*PK*, 160, 165–166). The two women would smoke pot, talk openly about their "early childhoods", and offer each other extensive "emotional support" (*PK*, 166). Fogle recalls their enthusiastic radicalism:

> I remember the feminist tennis player Billie Jean King beating what seemed like an old and feeble man player on television and my mother and her friends all being very excited by this. "Male chauvinist pig," "women's lib," and "stagflation" all seemed vague and indistinct to me during this time, like listening to background noise with half an ear. (*PK*, 157)

Growing up in this environment, Fogle interpreted his mother's actions as "giving [his] father the finger, symbolically" (*PK*, 166). He thought of his father as being "barely alive, as like a robot or slave to conformity . . . uptight, anal, and quick with the put-downs . . . a hundred percent conventional establishment, and totally on the other side of the generation gap" (*PK*, 167). His mother, on the other hand, possessed a "hatred of traditional institutions and authority", and Fogle remembers her "fighting the bureaucracy of the school district" when he had some learning difficulties as a child (*PK*, 160–161). His father stands for institutionalism; his mother stands against it. His mother voted for Democratic candidate George McGovern against Nixon in 1976. His father voted for Reagan in 1980, "even sending their campaign a donation" (*PK*, 158–159).

Fogle does not entirely fit in with the lesbian couple: he feels awkward smoking pot with them, and he does not see what the big deal is in Billie Jean King beating "an old and feeble man player". But he is much more closely aligned to their political world than to his father's, which he

understands as fundamentally "uncool". The "business hat" that his father wore every day of his life becomes the symbol of this paternal uncoolness in the narrative. "Hats were things to make fun of", Fogle tells us of this era. "[G]uys were essentially uncool if they wore a hat" (*PK*, 159). The father's dress sense was similarly old-fashioned: "[H]is body seemed designed to fill out and support a suit. And he owned some good ones, most single-button and single-vent, understated and conservative" (*PK*, 175). In Fogle's adolescent worldview, conservativism is something a man wears on his body in the form of suits and hats. Patriarchy has a style.

Fast-forward to the Advanced Tax scene, where the description of the substitute teacher's appearance makes his function as a paternal double absolutely clear. The teacher "wore an archaically conservative dark-gray suit", as well as a "topcoat and hat", resembling "someone in an archaic photo or daguerreotype" (*PK*, 217–219). Now, though, his father dead and his adolescence behind him, Fogle does not find this archaic and conservative way of dressing uncool. Instead, he sees in it a "box-like solidity" that he admires (*PK*, 219). Fogle proceeds to describe the substitute teacher in terms that highlight his authentic manliness: "One way to explain it is that there was just something about him—the substitute. His expression had the same burnt, hollow concentration of photos of military veterans who'd been in some kind of real war, meaning combat" (*PK*, 220). It is precisely the substitute's resemblance to manly, warring men that lends him his special aura in Fogle's eyes ("there was just something about him"). This association between the substitute teacher and military-style manliness is confirmed later in the section, when Fogle comments on the substitute's posture, which looks "something like the 'parade rest' military position", and on his ability to "look at you no matter what angle you faced him from", like "that trick in Uncle Sam posters" for military recruitment (*PK*, 227–228). It seems more than accidental that, when Fogle eventually signs up to join the IRS, the recruitment station is located in the same office as a US Air Force recruitment station. As Chris speaks to the IRS recruiter, "martial music" from the Air Force station wafts through the room, which is covered in American "flags" (*PK*, 243–244). In signing up for the IRS, then, Fogle is also subscribing to a particular mode of masculinity. Tied to traditional gender roles, in which men fight, protect, and serve, it is the same mode of masculinity that he and his mom had vehemently rejected in his father only years before.

In addition to his commanding patriarchal presence, the teacher's "paleness" also draws Fogle to him. The teacher looks like "someone who had rarely been out in the sun", and the acute whiteness of his skin makes him glow: "[I]n the room's bright lighting he looked pale in a way that seemed luminous instead of sickly" (*PK*, 217, 226). More than that, though, the teacher "seemed at home in thrifty, institutional fluorescent light" (*PK*, 226). The natural inhabitant of the institutional environment is the white male: he alone is "luminous" there, and "at home". It is an almost technical matter of skin colour and light.[446] Fogle's demographic summary of who else was in the classroom that day makes it absolutely clear that this is a white and masculine institutional space: "To the best of my recollection, nearly everyone in the room was male. A handful were also oriental" (*PK*, 217). The reference to "oriental" students makes them visible and highlights the whiteness of everyone else, in a way that recalls the post-9/11 orientalism that Grewal speaks of.

[446] See Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), for a discussion of how lighting and whiteness have historically been intertwined.

Similarly, the narrator uses blackness to communicate the teacher's "extreme" whiteness: "The whites of his eyes were extremely white, the way usually only a dark complexion can make eyes' whites look" (*PK,* 226). Racial others are introduced to mark the boundaries of a dominant whiteness. Their brief narrative appearance only reinforces their relative absence, both in this institutional space and in the novel as a whole.

While "orientals" may have greater access to American institutions on account of their "model minority" status and their particular immigration trajectory, they, like "blacks", are excluded from the category of "Americanness" developed in *The Pale King*.[447] The construction of Americanness in this section occurs along distinctly post-9/11 lines, registering the same discourse of heroic sacrifice and patriotic duty, but now adapted to Wallace's "white nerd" demographic. The substitute teacher becomes a mouthpiece for these values, as an excerpt of his speech makes clear:

> "I wish to inform you that the accounting profession to which you aspire is, in fact, heroic . . . The truth is that what you soon go home to your carols and toddies and books and CPA examination preparation guides to stand on the cusp of is—heroism.
> . . .
> "Gentlemen", he said, "—by which I mean, of course, latter adolescents who aspire to manhood—gentlemen, here is a truth: Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today, in this world neither I nor you have made, heroism. Heroism.
> . . .
> "By which", he said, "I mean true heroism, not heroism as you might know it from films or the tales of childhood. You are now nearly at childhood's end; you are ready for the truth's weight, to bear it. The truth is that the heroism of your childhood entertainments was not true valor. It was theatre. The grand gesture, the moment of choice, the mortal danger, the external foe, the climactic battle whose outcome resolves all—all designed to appear heroic, to excite and gratify an audience . . . Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality—there is no audience.
> . . .
> "Gentlemen, you are called to account."

The speech, aimed at boys "who aspire to manhood", boys "nearly at childhood's edge", reads like part of a rite of passage or initiation ceremony. Through this speech, Wallace develops a mythology of white Midwestern masculinity that transforms the nerdy civil servant into the nerdy civic hero who serves the nation with balance sheets and income statements. If the "military veteran" fighting

[447] See Frieda Wong and Richard Halgin, "The 'Model Minority': Bane or Blessing for Asian Americans?" *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 34, no. 1 (2006): 38–49; Samuel D Museus and Peter N Kiang, "Deconstructing the Model Minority Myth and How It Contributes to the Invisible Minority Reality in Higher Education Research", *New Directions for Institutional Research* 142, no. 1 (2009): 5–15; Bob H Suzuki, "Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education", *New Directions for Student Services* 97, no. 1 (2002): 21–32.

in "real wars" performs his masculinity outwardly, sacrificing his life and his body, the hero-nerd performs it quietly, sacrificing his mind and "enduring tedium" for the greater good. And he is the greater hero, the greater "man", because of it.

The conservativism of this speech, implicit in its "men only" language, is confirmed by the colonial imagery and heartland nostalgia that Wallace draws on to define what he means by heroism. "Yesterday's hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made, brought things into being", says the teacher. "In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated. Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation" (*PK*, 232). "Yesterday's hero", in other words, was the pioneer, the pilgrim, the conquistador, the cowboy—the white man, expanding westwards. If the cost of the old heroism was the enslavement and exclusion of black and indigenous populations, what is the cost of the new heroism, with its accountants and institutions? The teacher's choice of words answers the question: "You have wondered, perhaps, why all real accountants wear hats? They are today's cowboys. As will you be" (*PK*, 233). His "you" is directed at the local white men in the room, who alone can identify with the cowboy reference. As Fogle notes, "[I]t was hard to imagine the remaining orientals making much sense of cowboys and pies, since they were such specifically American images" (*PK*, 232). Of course, in the critical multicultural paradigm, the definition of "specifically American images" would not be limited to cowboys and pies. But the Americanness being constructed here is a conservative one, in which white cultural images like cowboys and pies are placed at the centre of authentic national identity, and everything else is pushed out to the periphery. And so Wallace, no doubt despite himself, ends up mirroring the post-9/11 nationalist tide, in which the hyphenated, robust identities of critical multiculturalism are melting-potted into one patriotic, flag-bearing, terror-busting whole.

On account of his ideal skin colour and gender, Fogle's transformation from college slacker to civil servant is effortless. It is a simple matter of getting a haircut and trading his "painter's pants and untied Timberlands" for "a dark-gray ventless wool suit with a tight vertical weave and double-pleat trousers, as well as a bulky box-plait jacket with wide notched lapels", as he promptly does during his summer vacation (*PK*, 213, 218). He dons the proverbial hat of the cowboy-accountant, the one he once thought was so uncool. Looking pretty much identical to his father and "substitute father", Fogle also starts listening to the same "dry, conservative" radio station that his father preferred, and it is here that he first hears of the IRS's recruitment programme (*PK*, 238). A few weeks later, he is in, with martial music providing the soundtrack to his entrance into civil service. Strikingly, when Fogle's father dies, his mother falls apart. She splits up with Joyce, sells her share of the feminist bookstore, moves back to her ex-husband's house, and becomes "a virtual shut-in", obsessed with feeding birds (*PK*, 207). Joyce, meanwhile, falls in love with a (male) attorney and has two children (*PK*, 207). They both end up returning to heterosexuality and domesticity, and their affair, their pot-smoking, their feminist "consciousness-raising" are implicitly written off as a brief, trifling "phase". Wallace, then, absorbs feminist discourse into his heroic masculine mythology, to make it more digestible for the postmodern reader. He converts feminism into a rhetorical device that functions something like this: even the radical, raging feminists return to old-

fashioned cultural values in the end, which means you, reader, can too. The progression he advocates is from feminism to traditionalism, rather than the other way around.

In one of the last scenes of the novel, a character named Shane Drinion becomes so immersed in a conversation with his IRS colleague Meredith Rand that he literally levitates off his chair. Drinion is described as the IRS equivalent of "a cowboy or mercenary", and indeed this image of him levitating represents the embodiment of Wallace's hopes and fantasies about white masculinity (*PK*, 459). Drinion is the nerd-cowboy that the substitute teacher described, and we see him here in all his heroic glory. But if we look a little closer at the scene, we see that the conversation between Drinion and Rand centres on *her* mistrust of "artificial", self-serving institutions, and on *her* struggle to love her female body in a society that views her as "a piece of meat": "Really desirable meat, but also that you'll never get taken seriously and never, like, be the president of a bank or something because no one will ever be able to see past the prettiness" (*PK*, 488, 484). Rand talks, and Drinion listens, and as he listens he ascends to spiritual heights (while she remains very firmly on the ground). The impassioned feminist and anti-institutional discourse in this section is nothing more than background noise, like the background noise of Fogle's mother shouting "women's lib" throughout his childhood, deployed as fuel for Drinion's moral and literal elevation. It signals that Drinion is the kind of modern cowboy who has sympathy for the plight of women and racial others, even as he leaves them behind on his way up. Drinion becomes a metaphor for the novel's vision of redemption, delivered by the substitute teacher and subscribed to by Fogle.

"An imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism"

The "elevator scene" of the novel has received a great deal of attention, because it contains the most direct treatment of the topics of civic responsibility, citizenship, and capitalism that Marshall Boswell, Ralph Clare, Richard Godden, and Michael Szalay all single out for investigation.[448] Conversely, I am interested in how Wallace builds on his rhetorical deployment of feminism by using concepts from critical race theory to add nuance and "flavour" to another conservative sermon, this time delivered by the novel's chief authority figure: IRS director DeWitt Glendenning, known throughout the Service as "The Pale King". Glendenning's sermon in the elevator scene is essentially a call to patriotism, duty, and nationalistic sacrifice, very much in line with the kind of message being spread after 9/11. The scene takes place in the early 1980s and involves twenty pages of unattributed dialogue between Glendenning and three of his underlings, in a presumably broken-down elevator. The dialogue is all over the show, and hard to make sense of; it is an amalgam of clashing attitudes and convictions about corporations, government, and citizens in America. But Glendenning is without doubt the ultimate authority. It is clear most of the time which voice is his, because the other characters keep deferring to him. His voice, with its self-effacing prescriptivism, also sounds the most like Wallace's. As Boswell points out,

[448] See Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship"; Godden and Szalay; Clare.

Glendenning is portrayed "as, overall, a positive figure . . . the bulk of whose views Wallace appears to advocate" (*PK*, 470–471).

So what is Glendenning's argument? In a nutshell, his view is the quintessentially conservative one that the 1960s marked the beginning of America's "decline into decadence and selfish individualism—the Me generation" (*PK*, 132). He thinks that when 1960s youth "questioned authority", they put "their individual moral beliefs about the war" above "their duty to go fight if their duly elected representatives told them to" (*PK*, 132). He thinks that this prioritisation of "selfishness" and "personal advantage" over "duty" and "the common good" is "what's going to bring us down as a country" (*PK*, 134). In the past, he maintains, American citizens felt "part of Everything" and believed "the common good was in fact made up of a whole lot of individuals just like them" (*PK*, 139). Today, though, citizens no longer feel "*personally* responsible" for the common good. They act like corporations, serving and profiting only themselves (*PK*, 137). The past "utopia" that Glendenning is nostalgic for here is more specifically the first "two hundred years" of the nation's existence, as he goes on to make clear: "I think the Constitution and the *Federalist Papers* of this country were an incredible moral and imaginative achievement . . . I'm speaking of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, the real church Fathers . . . their profound moral enlightenment—their sense of civics. The fact that they cared more about the nation and the citizens than about themselves" (*PK*, 133). He concludes his reverie: "They were heroes . . . They were heroes" (*PK*, 133, 134). Wallace has Glendenning throw in little rhetorical concessions and qualifications: for example, about how the 1960s "did a lot for raising people's consciousness in a whole lot of areas, such as race and feminism" (*PK*, 132). These statements are meant to signal that Glendenning is self-aware and not a bigot, even as he proceeds to bash the 1960s and glorify the good old days of colonialism.

But Wallace goes further in his construction of a progressive façade for the sermon. He has one of Glendenning's unnamed interlocutors provide an alternative, critical-race history to Glendenning's selective Euro-American one, correcting and subverting Glendenning's claims with the following interjections:

> "Jefferson supposedly boinking his own slaves and having whole litters of mulatto children."
>
> . . .
>
> "An educated landowning *white male* electorate, we should keep in mind."
>
> . . .
>
> "Doesn't sound all that new or experimental to me, Mr. Glendenning."
>
> . . .
>
> "No, the Fourteenth Amendment was part of Reconstruction and was intended to give full citizenship to freed slaves."
>
> . . .
>
> "It's certainly an imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism, that's for sure." (*PK*, 133, 134, 140, 134)

But this subversive voice is never developed. It simply recedes into the background whence it came, as Glendenning continues to deliver his "civics class" (*PK*, 131) for pages and pages, interrupted here and there by other peripheral voices that, like the voice above, Wallace relies on to make Glendenning's message less off-putting and dogmatic-seeming. In the end, the novel chooses Glendenning's social attitude over that of the unnamed dissenter. In the Chris Fogle section especially, it returns to the "good old days" that Glendenning longs for and the 1960s tried to topple: the days of old-fashioned heroism and patriotic devotion. Heroism is still reserved for "the *white male* electorate", but now it is a white male electorate well-versed in feminist and 1960s discourse. It is the same message, only differently packaged.

Glendenning "voted for Ford" and will "likely vote for Bush or maybe Reagan and . . . feel solid about [his] vote" (*PK*, 134). When one of the interlocutors calls him "a conservative", another one responds, "But that's just a put-down. There are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve" (*PK*, 132). Both Boswell and Adam Kelly take this retort at face value: conservativism is not really conservativism, or, in Kelly's words, "Wallace is not particularly interested in dividing the positions of his characters into traditional liberal/conservative or left/right binaries".[449] Boswell, meanwhile, recalls the 1993 TV essay and Wallace's inversion there of the conservative–progressive binary: Wallace in the essay predicts that "anti-rebels" who return to "single-entendre principles" and "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" will become the true literary "rebels" of our time.[450] The old-fashioned approach might just be the most rebellious one, is the essay's overall message. This formulation is well and good insofar as the use of irony and sincerity in postmodern literature is concerned,[451] but in relation to civics and politics in the post-9/11 context of *The Pale King* it has a different set of implications. As I hope this chapter has shown, single-entendre principles such as "sacrifice", "duty", "heroism", "heartland", and "nation" are part of the melodramatic moral economy (good versus evil, innocents versus villains) that was mobilised from the ruins of 9/11 to shore up the national psyche, but that had the effect of racialising, gendering, and excluding bodies that were not considered typically or adequately "American". Wallace seems to use these principles somewhat uncritically in *The Pale King*, as part of a mythology of redemption for the white male nerd, with their nationalist, xenophobic connotations conveniently scrubbed away. I conclude with McGurl's final assessment of the novel:

> [T]he conservatism of Wallace's embrace of institutional authority does point to some obvious limitations in the perspective taken in his last novel, which, given the nature of the organization at its center, cannot help but come off as narrowly nationalist in focus, a regression of sorts from the weird new map of North America imagined in *Infinite Jest*. Set in the white heartland, the more recent novel accepts the nation as a naturally bounded

[449] Adam Kelly, "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas", *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 278.
[450] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 192-193.
[451] And yet, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick has pointed out, it claims to "discover" the new literary mode of sincere realism, which has in fact been used in women's and minority fiction all along. See Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 218.

> unit of mutual obligation, as expressed by the payment of federal taxes, while the rest of the world more or less falls away.[452]

It has been my intention to contextualise the "regression of sorts" that McGurl points to here, by showing that the literary turn towards a narrow nationalism and the white heartland does not come out of nowhere in the 2000s. Rather, it comes directly out of "the Horror" of 9/11, and represents a missed opportunity to use the vulnerability that the attacks engendered to widen the spheres of empathy, both at the level of foreign policy and at the level of the white male narrative, as it spills out on the postmodern page.

[452] McGurl, 50–51.

Postscript
Back to the future

Looking at Wallace's political engagements through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s invites curiosity about what his stance might have been in the present decade, and in the particularly weird and strained climate of America's most recent election. One of the intentions of my dissertation has been to show that we need to look deeper than Wallace's official stance on political matters if we are to understand his work. Often the substance of his arguments and fictional worlds betrays loyalties to the status quo and anxieties about social reform that are easily missed on account of the keenly perceptive, progressive, likeable, and overtly liberal voice that dominates his writing. This voice tends to take up a universalising discourse, concerned with "America" and "being human", that obscures its specific investment in white upper-middle-class culture and masculinist narratives. So a distinction needs to be made between what Wallace's rhetorical "stance" on current US politics might have been and where his deeper political affiliations and inclinations might have lain, and the possibility of a disconnect between the two should be allowed for. In more concrete terms, Wallace's admirers might guess that he would have voted for someone like Bernie Sanders, but I would invite readers to think about whether his work might nonetheless have contained an undercurrent of sympathy for the rogue "anticandidate" that was Donald Trump,[453] and for the largely Midwestern and Christian white working-class demographic that makes up Trump's support base.

Of course, such a thought experiment is necessarily speculative. It is based on a set of observations made about Wallace's work from the mid-1980s to the late 2000s, and, just as the finer points of his discursive emphasis and style changed over that period, it is entirely possible that his writerly efforts might have taken a direction that we cannot predict. Even the act of projecting Wallace onto future time is, in a sense, an absurd and futile conceit, for with this suicide he removed himself from time altogether, and imagining his future stances or opinions in a sense negates the unlivability of his pain and the finality of his death. But part of imagining Wallace into the future is asking what the relevance or place of his work is in the wildly strange and unpredictable world of the late 2010s. This is the important question that stimulated my investigation into Wallace, and it is the question that I would like to close it with, too, as a way to open up the conversation for other scholars and citizens reading Wallace's work today.

As it turns out, the thought experiment about Wallace and Trump has already begun. A number of essays have sprung up online since Trump's campaign and subsequent election, praising in near-perfect unison the prescience of *Infinite Jest* in "predicting" the rise of Trump.[454] The

[453] Gary Legum, "Prime-time Drama: Clinton and Trump Have First Joint Forum This Week—and It's as Crucial as the Debates", *Salon*, 6 September 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/09/06/prime-time-drama-hillary-and-trump-have-first-joint-forum-this-week-and-its-as-crucial-as-the-debates/.
[454] John Michael, "Donald Trump Is Ushering in the *Infinite Jest* Apocalypse", *The Huffington Post*, 20 October 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-michael/donald-trump-is-ushering-_b_8334542.html; Duncan White, "The Five Impressive Ways David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Predicted the Future", *The Telegraph*, 1 February 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-5-impressive-ways-david-foster-wallaces-infinite-jest-predic/; Michael Maiello, "Infinite Winter: President John Gentle and the Rise of Donald Trump", *Dagblog*, 11 March 2016,

authors all point to the figure of Johnny Gentle, who is the president of the novel's futuristic version of America. Wallace's Gentle is a former hit singer who in later life becomes a "sterile-toupee-wearing promoter and entertainment-union bigwig, Vegas schmaltz-broker", and the leader of a "tanned, gold-chained" TV entertainers' guild.[455] When Gentle forms his own fascist-environmentalist party, with the aim of militantly ridding America of its rising waste and toxicity levels, the party "suddenly swe[eps] to quadrennial victory in an angry reactionary voter-spasm" (*IJ*, 382). Gentle, meanwhile, becomes "the millennium fulcrum of very dark times, [in] national politics" (*IJ*, 382). Gentle's "Clean US Party" is described as "a surreal union of both Rush L.- and Hillary R.C.-disillusioned fringes that dr[a]w mainstream-media guffaws at their first Convention (held in a sterile venue)" but that eventually secure the vote of "an increasingly . . . pissed-off American electorate" (*IJ*, 382). When Gentle is elected president, he becomes "the first U.S. President ever to swing his microphone around by the cord during his Inauguration speech" and "say shit publicly", telling the American people to "sit back and enjoy the show" (*IJ*, 382–383). Sound familiar?

Several commentators have taken the parallels between Trump and Gentle quite literally, pointing out that Trump, too, washes his hands a lot.[456] The problem with aligning Trump to Wallace's apocalyptic vision, though, is less about the factual discrepancies between Trump and Gentle and much more about the easy conclusion that such a comparison invites: Wallace would have hated Trump. It is worth bearing in mind that the description of Gentle could just as plausibly be applied to Ronald Reagan—far more plausibly, in fact, given Wallace's actual knowledge of the Reagan presidency—and that Wallace's stance on Reagan was far from clear-cut. For example, although he offers not-so-subtle jibes at Reagan's tax cuts in *The Pale King*, he also gives pro-Reagan characters the last word in several scenes, and, according to his biographer D T Max, he actually voted for Reagan while at college.[457] Max writes that Wallace was on the whole "politically fairly conservative", and that he "came to combine midwestern conventionality with girlfriend-pleasing campus liberalism".[458] In my dissertation I have a similar claim, but in stronger terms: was Wallace's special brand of liberalism not perhaps also about pleasing the *reader* (inspired by the need for a different kind of love, as Elaine Blair suggests), and about remaining relevant as a young white male writer in an increasingly multicultural, cosmopolitan literary world?[459] Either way, by bringing Reagan into the mix I am hoping to show that Wallace's ridicule of a certain species of rogue conservative demagogue does not necessarily preclude sympathy with the very same political

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http://dagblog.com/infinite-winter-president-john-gentle-and-rise-donald-trump-20467; Christopher Z F, "What If Donald Trump Is Really President Johnny Gentle?", *The Stake*, 10 August 2015, http://thestake.org/2015/08/10/what-if-donald-trump-is-really-president-johnny-gentle/; Pat Tomaino, "Do Not Go 'Gentle': A DFW Primary Primer", *Open Source*, 8 August 2015, https://medium.com/o-s/do-not-go-gentle-5c0bf6cec51c#.82a4g69f8.

[455] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1996), 381. Subsequent references to *Infinite Jest* are cited parenthetically as *IJ*.

[456] Michael.

[457] Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011); D T Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 259. Subsequent references to *The Pale King* are cited parenthetically as *PK*.

[458] Max, 259.

[459] See Elaine Blair, "Great American Losers", *New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/03/09/great-american-losers/.

figure. Fast-forward to the 2016 election, and Wallace may well have been horrified by the self-tan-spraying, reality-TV-starring, might-as-well-be-a-toupee-wearing Trump, but this is not necessarily where the story ends.

We need only look to Wallace's essay "Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate", in which he recounts his first-hand impressions of John McCain's dazzling 2000 presidential campaign, to confirm that there is more to the story of Wallace's liberal politics. Right at the beginning of the essay, Wallace states explicitly, "I, the author, am not a Republican, and . . . actually I ended up voting for Sen. Bill Bradley (D-NJ) in the Illinois Primary".[460] He also assures the reader that, "even though parts of [the article] might appear to be pro-McCain", there is in fact no "conservative agenda" behind the piece: "It's not [pro-McCain], though neither is it anti-; it's just meant to be the truth as one person saw it" ("US", 157). But despite Wallace's "official" position as a Democrat, and despite the fact that he repeatedly points to the "*extremely* scary right-wing stuff" McCain says on the campaign trail ("US", 185–186), his overall sympathies pretty clearly lie with McCain in this piece. If Wallace distances himself from "Ralph Reed's far-Right Christians", he is just as quick to distance himself from the "sensitive men and angry womxn of the PC Left" ("US", 188). And while elsewhere he explains his aversion to political correctness in very liberal terms,[461] anti-PC sentiment (and of course the classification of feminists as "angry" radicals) is strongly associated with the Right. In fact, it is now most famously associated with the so-called "alt-right" that brought Trump to power, and under whose hashtag "tweets deploring political correctness mingle with ones asserting that 'diversity is white genocide,' denouncing Jews, or lamenting miscegenation."[462] So placing Wallace on either side of the Left/Right (anti-McCain/pro-McCain, or Sanders/Trump) divide is, from the outset, no simple matter.

In his appraisal of McCain, Wallace regularly indulges the kind of conservative cultural nostalgia that we surveyed in the previous chapter. For example, he describes the candidate's appeal as "something old and maybe corny but with a weird achy pull . . . something that would make us hear clichés as more than just clichés and start us trying to think about what terms like 'service' and 'sacrifice' and 'honor' might really refer to, like whether the words actually *stand* for something" ("US", 166). This fascination with what is essentially patriotism and old-school masculinity is the same fascination we encountered in certain sections of *The Pale King*, where it was linked to colonial, nationalist, and post-9/11 discourses. How different is this nostalgia really from the Trumpian promise to "make America great again", which is necessarily nostalgic for some lost glory of the nation's founding years, and necessarily white and masculinist, because returning to the past for most minorities and gay people, and for some white women, would mean returning to slavery, subordination, and second-class citizenship (although how much these things have really changed, especially for minorities and gay people, remains debatable).

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[460] Wallace, "Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate", *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 157. Subsequent references to "Up Simba" are cited parenthetically as "US".

[461] Wallace, "Authority and American Usage", *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, 110–113.

[462] Cathy Young, "Anti-PC for Anti-PC's Sake", *New York Observer*, 6 September 2016, http://observer.com/2016/09/anti-pc-for-anti-pcs-sake/.

But McCain's main appeal for Wallace is precisely his status as an "anticandidate", as Wallace calls him—the same term used to describe Trump during his campaign.[463] Wallace sees McCain as "the great populist hope of American politics", a man whose "piss-and-vinegar candor" places him outside "the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties" and makes him unafraid to speak truth to the lobbyist power, "self-interest money", and "well-known campaign-finance scams" that "control[ ] Washington", earning him votes from across the political spectrum and making him a hit among young voters ("US", 160, 162, 185, 207, 160). While this description of straight-talking populism may very well sound like Bernie Sanders, it is equally reminiscent of Trump—especially because Wallace admits that "the ability to finally really fucking *cheer*" at a populist candidate is often more important than what the candidate is actually saying or how "*extremely* scary" his attitudes might be ("US", 190, 185–186). As he explains: "Even in AD 2000, who among us is so cynical that he doesn't have some good old corny American hope way down deep in his heart, lying dormant like a spinster's ardour, not dead but just waiting for the right guy to give it to?" ("US", 189). Wallace is "cynical" enough to identify the problems with McCain's socially regressive ideas, but he is conventional (or Midwestern) enough to also be excited by them, on some level.

That Wallace officially endorses Bill Bradley but appears to think McCain is the proverbial "right guy" speaks to a doubleness in his writing that I have tried to draw out throughout this dissertation, with different (often conflicting) political positions and rhetorical strategies constantly abutting one another in the same text. Wallace keeps drawing the reader's attention to the "right-wing" character of McCain's policies (anti-Martin Luther King Day, anti-abortion, anti-environment, pro-guns, and so on), but he also keeps returning to McCain's populist, anti-establishment appeal ("US", 189–190). The right-wing label is not enough to repel him completely, and before the reader knows it she, too, is sympathising with an ultra-conservative candidate, having signed up to read an article by a Bill Bradley supporter. Wallace's announcement of his vote for Bradley at the beginning of the article is meant to signal that the piece does not have a "conservative agenda", but I am trying to suggest that a writer can still have conservative tendencies without them necessarily amounting to a conscious agenda, and without them being immediately visible beneath the trappings of a young liberal thinker. Part of Wallace's doubleness has to do with the tension that exists between his feel-good language (who would not be drawn in by his talk of "good old corny American hope"?) and its political implications (i.e., the good old corny clichés that enthral him—service, sacrifice, honour—have historically been mobilised for xenophobic ends). Another part has to do with the careful rhetorical hedging he enacts against his conservative sentiments: in *The Pale King*, for example, adding caveats about the overt racism of the Founding Fathers even as he praises their civic virtue and advocates a return to pre-1960s traditionalism, through the exalted figure of DeWitt Glendenning (the novel's very own and very white Pale King).

In short, a writer like Wallace might seem to be rooting for a Bradley (or a Sanders) but he might be equally capable of admiring a McCain (or, quite possibly, a Trump), with the help of some rhetorical manoeuvring. Wallace is clearly not a straightforward Republican—not even

[463] See Legum.

close—but it is also too simplistic to label him a straightforward Democrat. Of course, there is nothing wrong with occupying a complex political position. My difficulty lies with Wallace's attempts to cover up his political entanglement and present himself as part neutral observer ("It's not [pro-McCain], though neither is it anti-; it's just meant to be the truth as one person saw it"), part left-leaning Democratic with enough good will and open-mindedness to see the appeal even of "scary right-wing" candidates. This self-presentation obscures the fact that Wallace might be drawn to McCain and his patriotic nostalgia not because McCain's personal appeal and charm are "the truth" about him but because Wallace's own white, masculine, Midwestern cultural position prime him to *see* that as the truth, in a way another reporter on the scene might not—just as Chris "Irrelevant" Fogle is primed by his upbringing and the death of his ultra-conservative father to be drawn to the accounting teacher's conservative vision of white civil servants as modern-day colonial cowboys, while the Asian kids in the classroom are not. Naturally, it feels good to hear an author tell us he is neither pro- nor anti- an issue, that he is just telling "the truth" as he saw it, but we need to move beyond how Wallace's writing makes us feel to what it is he is actually saying or endorsing. We need to get more comfortable with the fact that Wallace's "truth" might not be a neutral no man's land, as it were—that it might in fact be pro-McCain at times (or, in the imagined future, pro-Trump), and at other times decidedly anti-McCain (or anti-Trump), and for very specific personal or rhetorical reasons.

These views will perhaps be unwelcome within the community of Wallace scholars and readers. In general within this community, which, admittedly, is still in its formative stages, I have struggled with what I perceive to be a tendency to efface Wallace's doubleness and reduce his political complexity (and difficulty) to a single liberal-humanist message. So *Infinite Jest* is often reduced to a message about addiction, entertainment, and the importance of individual agency, *The Broom of the System* to a message about language-use and the power of words, *The Pale King* to a message about boredom, civic-mindedness, and taxes, and the whole oeuvre to a message about loneliness, postmodernity, and the possibility of connection/communion. It feels good, but is this really who Wallace was as a writer? I think here of Jonathan Franzen's earnest comments, discussed in the introductory chapter, about the disconnect he noticed between the "adulatory" public narratives of Wallace as a "unitary . . . beautiful and supremely gifted human being" and the troubled, guileful, and deeply flawed friend he had known and loved.[464] He talks about how readers took Wallace's "laborious hyper-considerateness and moral wisdom at face value" despite the preponderance of "dissemblers and manipulators and emotional isolates" in all his work—part of the doubleness I am getting at.[465]

Wallace comes close to showing us what this more nuanced and doubled way of reading his politics might look like just once in his work. (There may be other instances, but this is the one I have found.) In his essay "Authority and American Usage", he offers the reader his views on abortion. At first he presents his views as the views of "any reasonable American" (that disembodied universal entity), using strictly rational, "neutral" terms to make his case: he is pro-life on account of the principle that says, "When in irresolvable doubt about whether something is a human being

[464] Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away: 'Robinson Crusoe,' David Foster Wallace and the Island of Solitude", *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-jonathan-franzen.
[465] Ibid.

or not, it is better not to kill it"; but he is also pro-choice on account of the principle that says, "When in irresolvable doubt about something, I have neither the legal nor the moral right to tell another person what to do about it, especially if that person feels that s/he is *not* in doubt".[466] This perfectly sound and balanced opinion, with its almost classically liberal logic, leads the author to the following conclusion: "Every time someone I know decides to terminate a pregnancy, I am required to believe simultaneously that she is doing the wrong thing and that she has every right to do it."[467] In other words: I will not tell you what to do, but I think you are wrong. This view is basically conservative, with a "nice guy" twist. And while the tone that Wallace assumes here is laboriously measured and "neutral", the deeper question is, of course, this: is it even possible to talk about abortion in a disembodied way when the matter is something so intensely embodied, and when the grounds for what is right or wrong about the decision extend beyond principles and into the life, the flesh, the interior world of the woman herself? My intention is certainly not to debate the ethics of abortion. It is rather to suggest that the very act of "debating" abortion (or Martin Luther King Day or welfare or gay marriage) in and of itself requires the privilege of not being the particular body involved.

Astonishingly, Wallace himself has a similar realisation. Later in the passage, he admits that his attempt at neutrality may have limits. He writes, "I have encountered only one serious kind of objection to this Pro-Life + Pro-Choice position. But it's a powerful objection. It concerns not my position per se but certain facts about me, the person who's developed and maintained it."[468] In other words, it concerns not the "principles" behind the moral position Wallace has taken, but the particular subject position that would lead him to equate or involve principles and morality with a woman's right to her body in the first place.

The purpose of this digression into the tricky territory of abortion is the same purpose behind my analysis of the McCain essay: to foreground the way Wallace's personal nodes of identity (his manhood, his whiteness, his heterosexuality, his Midwestern origins, his Christian background, and so on) are unavoidably tied up with his perspectives on things, even when he lays claims to objectivity. (Later in the "Authority" essay he makes a distinction between "small-*o*" objectivity, which he understands to mean "disinterested", "reasonable", and "capital-*O*-type" Objectivity, which he understands as something "metaphysical", but in the strict sense there is no difference between the two, since both presuppose a perspective beyond the interested and embodied self.)[469] Overall, I can imagine Wallace voting for a candidate like Bernie Sanders in the primaries and proclaiming his horror at Trump's displays of misogyny, xenophobia, racism, chauvinism, and general arrogance, but also expressing his commiseration with the poor white Midwestern majority of Trump's support base, and possibly expressing his interest in Trump as an anti-establishment populist, especially against a "special interests", "entrenched Establishment" candidate like Hillary Clinton ("*US*", 162, 207). I imagine him framing all of this as a balanced, reasoned opinion, and expressing it in the dependable, good-humoured tone of most of his writing. And I imagine myself being drawn in by the rhythmic hum of Wallace's prose and then suddenly

[466] Wallace, "Authority", 82.
[467] Ibid.
[468] Ibid., 83
[469] Ibid., 119.

thinking to myself: Where does this author actually stand on the issue? And how neutral is his opinion, really?

Wallace had his own "special interest" in the Midwest, having grown up in Illinois and returning there in his thirties to teach writing at a local college. Especially in his post-9/11 work, he homes in on the white working-class Midwest, rendering this population with extraordinary complexity and richness. We have already discussed the ways in which Wallace's vision of redemption and heroism is skewed towards white men and comes at the cost of an inclusive postcolonial, multicultural, feminist-humanist community. Here, and in conclusion, I would like to briefly think through Wallace's general concern for the white community of the Midwest and what it means in light of the recent US election.

For the most part, Wallace's concern manifests simply in his literary portrayals of ordinary (white) Midwesterners and their daily grace or suffering (as the case may be): the old ladies in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's"; the Father and Mother in "Incarnations of Burned Children"; Brint and Amber and Skip in "The Suffering Channel"; Claude Sylvanshine, Chris Fogle, and Lane Dean Jr in *The Pale King*. But there are a few moments where Wallace hints at the changing economic landscape of the Midwest and the effect that these changes are having on the community he is invested in. Because it is so important, I quote the most notable instance of this economic commentary in its entirety. The passage, from *The Pale King*, alludes to the impact that first mechanisation and then globalisation (among other historical forces) have had on the region: specifically, the way once-thriving industrial towns and communities in the Rust Belt have withered under the twin pressures of increased automation within manufacturing processes and increased competition from other parts of the country and world.[470] The passage also reviews the various failed attempts to revive the flailing Midwestern cityscape, using the novel's base-city, Peoria, Illinois, as a case study:

> Peoria had come in 1980s to assume the same basic doughnut shape as so many other formerly industrial cities: The downtown center was empty and denuded, all but dead, while at the same time a robust collection of malls, plazas, franchises, businesses and light-industrial parks, town house developments, and apartment complexes had pulled most of the city's life out into an exurban ring. The mid-1990s would see a partial renaissance and gentrification of the riverside downtown—some of the factory and warehouse sits were converted to condos and high-concept restaurants; artists and younger professionals took some others for division into lofts, & c.—though much of this optimistic development was spurred by the establishment of riverboat casinos just off what has been the main industrial set of offload docks, casinos that were not locally owned and whose base revenues Peoria never even got a plausible cut of, the entire downtown rejuvenation spurred by incidental, small-potato tourist spending . . . viz., on the part of people who came for the casinos, which, since casinos are in the business of separating people from the cash they would

[470] Steven C High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Richard C Longworth, *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Matthew Stedi, "The Global Midwest: Interview with Richard C Longworth", *Chicago Policy Review*, 9 April 2012, http://chicagopolicyreview.org/2012/04/09/the-global-midwest-richard-longworth/.

> otherwise use to shop and dine out, meant that the actual relationship between casino revenues and tourist spending was inverse, which, given casinos' deserved reputation for extreme profitability, meant that any levelheaded person could have predicted the steeply declining revenue curve that within just a few years caused most of the "New Downtown" renaissance to sputter, especially when the casinos (after prudently waiting a decent interval) all opened their own restaurants and retail shops. And so on . . . the same basic thing played out in cities all over the Midwest. (*PK*, 272)

City managers attempted to "rejuvenate" the inner city by bringing in alternative revenue generators, such as casinos, but the revenue never made its way to the communities and local businesses that needed it, and the city returned to its previous state of economic disrepair. In a similar passage in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", Wallace describes how the arrival of big corporates like State Farm to the region at the end of the twentieth century has brought the illusion of prosperity but has really only marginalised the working class, who benefit little from the corporatisation of the economy.[471]

The above critique is presented in a novel that centres on the Internal Revenue Service (the IRS, or "the Service"), which represents one way of taking care of citizens who have been battered by the economy. On paper, Wallace seems to be a strong advocate of welfare, having himself benefitted from the welfare system as a young adult, as we saw in the first chapter, during his heavily subsidised recovery from addiction and mental illness.[472] On paper, too, *The Pale King* comes out strongly against the Reagan administration for slashing tax rates and forcing the IRS into the same corporatisation model seen elsewhere in the Midwest. As Mark McGurl argues, the book "would, on this level, seem to present a straightforwardly liberal critique of Reaganomics as promoting an ethos of rampant marketization and social irresponsibility".[473] Indeed, "a book celebrating the secular culture of IRS bureaucracy could hardly [be] more resistant to contemporary right-wing sensibilities", since the organisation is by definition a feature of the liberal welfare state.[474] But as we have seen throughout our doubled reading of Wallace in this dissertation, and as McGurl himself agrees, the verdict on the book's politics cannot simply end there. Wallace is far from decided on Reagan, just as he is undecided on McCain, and in his last novel he participates (however briefly) in a cultural fantasy in which the beleaguered (white male) Midwestern subject can become heroic through submitting to institutional authority, serving the nation, making personal sacrifices, and refashioning himself as a modern-day cowboy for the system. In the previous chapter, we considered how this fantasy shares a vocabulary with the post-9/11 military and security frenzy, but in the 2017 context it also has the faintest echoes (and perhaps they are barely even echoes) of the "make America great again" cultural fantasy that propelled Trump to power.

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[471] Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", *Consider the Lobster*, 133.
[472] See McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Programme", *boundary 2* 41 no. 3, 50.
[473] McGurl, 49.
[474] Ibid.

It is by now something of a platitude that the Midwest "won" Trump the election.[475] Why? An anecdote from journalist John Elledge summarises the phenomenon. Elledge describes meeting a "trucking magnate" and lifelong Republican in Pennsylvania in the weeks leading up to election who told him "he admired Trump's stance on avoiding taxes, on the grounds that it was what any sensible businessman would do".[476] Coming from a moneyed executive, this pro-business, anti-tax attitude is not surprising; it is precisely the attitude that Wallace is challenging in *The Pale King*. But in Youngstown, Ohio, the very heart of the Rust Belt, Elledge speaks to a man named John—an Italian America "blue-collar non-graduate" who had not only voted Democrat his whole life but was also precisely "the kind of unionised worker who has traditionally made up the Democratic Party's base".[477] Now, though, John was voting for Trump. The reason? "[T]he tycoon's comments about changing the rules of trade in order to bring back American jobs resonated" with him. And he "didn't like" the Clintons: they were "too establishment".[478] Staff at *The New York Times* wrote after the election that, after an "explosive, populist and polarizing campaign", Trump had won because of his "unvarnished overtures to disillusioned voters" and his "powerful rejection of the establishment forces that had assembled against him, from the world of business to government, and the consensus they had forged on everything from trade to immigration".[479] By all accounts, then, blue-collar non-graduate Italian American John turns to Trump out of frustration at the economic devastation that Wallace describes in Midwestern cities like Peoria, and at the perceived elitism, disingenuousness, and deception of US politics that Wallace describes in his McCain essay. In fact, John is exactly the kind of figure I can imagine in Wallace's fiction. And, limited to this framework and logic, Trump's enchantment of the Midwest, and his appeal to a man like John, seems entirely "reasonable".

The position John takes comes at a cost, however. Note, for example, what happens when Elledge presses him about Trump's reputation as a misogynist: "And Trump's comments about women? Well, Bill Clinton has his issues in that area, too, John said, and he was a great president. (The more we talked, it became clear that when John said he didn't like the Clintons, he meant one Clinton in particular.)"[480] In order for someone to endorse a candidate like Trump and buy into his proclaimed vision for taxes, job-creation, and so on, a certain trade-off must take place, with other national priorities (such as fair treatment and equality for women) assigned less value

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[475] See Nate Cohn, "Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites", *The New York Times*, 9 November 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html; Sean Trende and David Byler, "How Trump Won: The Midwest", *RealClearPolitics*, 19 January 2017, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/19/how_trump_won_the_midwest_132834.html; Richard C Longworth, "Disaffected Rust Belt Workers Embraced Trump: They Had No Other Hope", *The Guardian*, 21 November 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/21/disaffected-rust-belt-voters-embraced-donald-trump-midwestern-obama.

[476] John Elledge, "How Donald Trump Won the Midwest—and What It Means for the North of England", *New Statesman*, 17 November 2016, http://www.newstatesman.com/2016/11/revolt-rust-belt-0.

[477] Ibid.

[478] Ibid.

[479] Matt Flegenheimer and Michael Barbaro, "Donald Trump Is Elected President in Stunning Repudiation of the Establishment", *The New York Times*, 9 November 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-president.html.

[480] Elledge.

in the hierarchy. It has very quickly become clear which national priorities matter to the Trump administration, and which matter less or not at all—and, by extension, which citizens matter or do not. Shortly after his election, Trump named January 20 (the day of his inauguration) "Day of Patriotic Devotion". Unlike Patriot Day, established by President Obama as an annual commemoration of September 11, the Day of Patriotic Devotion is tied to a specific personality—Trump—and strikes a "flowery, vaguely compulsory" note.[481] In fact, the phrase "patriotic devotion" is a regular feature of North Korean state propaganda media, posters, and speeches.[482]

But the concern runs deeper than a personality cult taking root in America. The official "proclamation" of this national holiday uses the same language of the early white Christian settlers in America, who believed in their "manifest destiny" as the rightful owners of the land. Trump (or most likely Steve Bannon through Trump) writes in the proclamation, "A new national pride stirs the American soul and inspires the American heart. We are one people, united by a common destiny and a shared purpose. Freedom is the birthright of all Americans, and to preserve that freedom we must maintain faith in our sacred values and heritage . . . There are no greater people than the American citizenry, and as long as we believe in ourselves, and our country, there is nothing we cannot accomplish."[483] Who, exactly, is included in the terms "common destiny", "shared purpose", and "our country", and who count as "the American citizenry"? Thomas Ross, writing about whiteness after 9/11, argues that the notion of a "special national destiny" has historically always been embedded in a "racialized sense of national identity".[484] He explains:

> As we marched across the North American continent in pursuit of our "manifest destiny," coupled with our genocidal program for the indigenous people encountered along the way, many understood this phenomenon as the White man's God-given mantle of duty. In his book, *Race and Manifest Destiny,* Reginald Horsman described the sense of destiny held by many eighteenth-century White Americans[:] "[They understood] the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continent and to the world." (Hauntingly, if you strike the term "Anglo-Saxons" from the passage, it could easily be part of the President's next State of the Union address.)

Ross's parenthetical aside was directed at President Bush's upcoming State of the Union address in 2005, not four years after 9/11 and at height of the Iraq War, but is the passage not even more haunting in 2017? After all, Steve Bannon, Trump's chief campaigner and now chief strategist, is on record as saying that foreign students should return home after studying in the country: "When

[481] Andrew McGill, "What Does Trump's 'Day of Patriotic Devotion' Really Mean?", *The Atlantic*, 23 January 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/what-does-trumps-day-of-patriotic-devotion-really-mean/514196/.
[482] Justin McCurry, "Donald Trump's 'Day of Patriotic Devotion' Has Echoes of North Korea", *The Guardian*, 24 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/24/trump-national-day-of-patriotic-devotion-echoes-north-korea.
[483] Executive Office of the President, "National Day of Patriotic Devotion", *Federal Register*, 24 January 2016, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/01/24/2017-01798/national-day-of-patriotic-devotion.
[484] Thomas Ross, "Whiteness after 9/11", *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy* 18 no. 1: 228.

two-thirds or three-quarters of the CEOs in Silicon Valley are from South Asia or Asia, I think . . . A country is more than an economy. We're a civic society."[485] Which is to say that democratic-sounding phrases like "civic society" can just as easily be co-opted for a white nationalist identity. Given that "civics" (and "civic decline") was a major concern of *The Pale King*,[486] we need to think carefully about where we place Wallace's work in relation to the current troubling rise of nationalist discourse, presented as a solution to job losses among a "forgotten" white electorate. It is not enough to read the author's Johnny Gentle parody and assume that the matter is decided. There are layers, complications, and old habits that need first to be untangled.

Finally, if we forget for a moment these wider ripples of cost and harm, how "reasonable" and beneficial is John from Youngstown's voting decision for John himself? Thomas Frank opens his 2004 book *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* with the following reflection: "The poorest county in America isn't in Appalachia or the Deep South. It is on the Great Plains, a region of struggling ranchers and dying farm towns, and in the election of 2000 the Republican candidate for president, George W. Bush, carried it by a majority of greater than 80 percent."[487] This discovery "puzzles" Frank and his acquaintances, who have always understood the Democratic Party to be "the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and victimized". As a friend of his half-jokes, "How can anyone who has ever worked for someone else vote Republican?"[488] Frank goes on to explain that the "self-denying" Republican votes of the working class "have helped put the Republicans in charge of all three branches of government" (virtually as true now as it was in 2004),[489] and that Republican rule has helped the wealthy hold onto their wealth by doing away with estate tax and so-called "confiscatory" income tax, crippling the labour unions and banking regulators, and implementing the very "laissez faire" economic policies that have laid waste to Midwestern cities and industry since the 1980s.[490] John's Republican vote would seem to only cripple him further.

In trying to make sense of this counterintuitive voting trend, Frank points to what he calls "the Great Backlash", which he describes as "a style of conservatism that first came snarling onto the national stage in response to the partying and protests of the late sixties".[491] Importantly, the backlash's "basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern—that

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[485] Ashley Carman, "Trump's Chief Strategist Steve Bannon Suggests Having Too Many Asian Tech CEOs Undermines 'Civic Society'", *The Verge*, 16 November 2016, http://www.theverge.com/2016/11/16/13653490/steve-bannon-trump-presidency-chief-strategist-breitbart-tech-visa; David A Fahrenthold and Frances Stead Sellers, "How Bannon Flattered and Coaxed Trump on Policies Key to the Alt-Right", *The Washington Post*, 15 November 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-bannon-flattered-and-coaxed-trump-on-policies-key-to-the-alt-right/2016/11/15/53c66362-ab69-11e6-a31b-4b6397e625d0_story.html?utm_term=.3bb92a9ea637.

[486] See especially *PK* 144.

[487] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 1.

[488] Ibid.

[489] Geoffrey Kabaservice, "When Republicans Take Power", *The New York Times*, 12 November 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/sunday/when-republicans-take-power.html; Julie Hirschfield and Mark Landler, "Trump Nominates Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court", *The New York Times*, 31 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/us/politics/supreme-court-nominee-trump.html.

[490] Frank, 2, 4–5.

[491] Ibid., 5.

Values Matter Most, as one backlash title has it".[492] And so, as the poor's economic frustrations are channelled into "explosive social issues" like abortion and immigration, the party establishment quietly couples this cultural outrage with a string of "pro-business economic policies" (rather than anything remotely pro-poor).[493] Frank's overall point is this:

> Old-fashioned values may count when conservatives appear on the stump, but once conservatives are in office the only old-fashioned situation they care to revive is an economic regime of low wages and tax regulations. Over the last three decades they have smashed the welfare state, reduced the tax burden on corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the country's return to a nineteenth-century pattern of wealth distribution. Thus the primary contradiction of the backlash: it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people.[494]

In 2017, as poor and working-class whites in the Midwest already look set to lose the Obamacare-based health benefits that brought their demographic's uninsured rate down from 25% in 2013 to 15% in 2016,[495] and that for the most part they themselves voted to repeal,[496] Frank's words are uncannily prescient, relevant, and chilling. Indeed, they may prove to be the words we need as we grapple with the changing face of America's political landscape. They may even be helpful to Wallace scholars interested in placing the author's work within this new landscape, especially given the eerily "values"-driven quality of so much of his writing.

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[492] Ibid., 6. See Ben J Wattenberg, *Values Matter Most* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
[493] Ibid., 5.
[494] Ibid., 6.
[495] Greg Sargent, "Obamacare is Probably Toast, and a Lot of Poor, White Trump Voters Will Get Hurt by It", *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2016,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/11/29/obamacare-is-probably-toast-and-a-lot-of-poor-white-trump-voters-will-get-hurt/?utm_term=.927fbeca83f8.
[496] Jonathan Cohn, "Obamacare Benefits Plenty of People in States Donald Trump Won", *The Huffington Post*, 24 November 2011,
http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/entry/obamacare-repeal-states_us_583331a9e4b099512f83f93f.

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