NECESSARY FICTIONS:
THE U.S. NOVEL IN THE END OF IDEOLOGY

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My dissertation attempts to trace developments in U.S. literary production over the last two decades. I posit that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise to dominance of neoliberal globalization caused a shift in the structure of feeling that has characterized the educated U.S. classes. While the Cold War produced a certain apocalyptic anxiety, the hegemony of global capital engenders uneasiness precisely because the problems it produces seem endless and intractable without anything to oppose it. Consumerism, corporatism, atomizing individualisms, gentrification, legacies of violence and inequality abetted by neoliberalism: the contemporary U.S. intellectual has no answer to these issues.

In bringing together a group of authors usually considered separately, I demonstrate how these anxieties are reflected in this literature’s consistent use of the tragic view. I borrow this term from Lucien Goldmann, who used it to describe the outlook that produced Pascal’s wager. Each author that the dissertation analyzes makes wagers that hope to return meaning, hope, or possibility to a life that seems utterly overdetermined. I call these “fictions” because these writers, aware that poststructuralism has undermined the humanism these texts espouse, emphasize the use-value rather than the truth-value of their claims. What makes them “necessary” is that these writers see life dominated by nihilism and relativism without them.

In readings of major contemporary novels by David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Marilynne Robinson, Dinaw Mengestu, and Junot Díaz, my dissertation provides a much-needed political and economic context absent from other criticism on contemporary fiction. The study disputes the charge that contemporary literature lacks political content and has little regard for traditional humanistic concerns. In discerning the consistent ideological underpinnings across a disparate group of writers, Necessary Fictions takes an important step toward defining the literature that appears to be succeeding postmodernism.
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Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology

Preface: The Trouble with Foundations

“The true course is not to wager at all.

‘Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then?’—Blaise Pascal, Pensées

I begin with a generalization. Since Melville and Hawthorne (if not earlier), serious U.S. fiction has been critical of the status quo. By and large, the critiques these texts launched were rooted in positions that tended toward the political left. Authors of and audiences for innovative, complicated novels have tended to share at least a putatively progressive bent. A certain strand of U.S. white male writers—your Hemingways and Updikes, among others—may not be championed by the current academic left, but we ought not forget Hemingway’s work in the Spanish Civil War or Updike’s role in legitimizing frank depictions of sexuality. They looked progressive then, even if they may not now.

These two writers and other acclaimed, important novelists are traditionally reviewed in left-leaning publications like the New York Times, the New Yorker, Atlantic Monthly, and Harper’s. They are discussed on left-leaning media outlets like PBS and NPR. Readers are first exposed to them by left-leaning professors. While conservative novelists like Michael Crichton

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1 Readers deeply invested in left politics might be angered by my conflation of liberalism and leftism, which in the minds of denizens of either are far disparate. My excuse for this integration, also admittedly a generalization, is that all leftisms have been conflated in the public imagination. While academics might tussle over gradations in political ideology, the mainstream vision of what politics means is determined by what happens at the level of policy. The far end of the left has had little impact at this level, except for its usefulness as part of a caricature deployed by the right.
sell well and ones like Walker Percy merit critical applause, the awards, reverence, and lasting impact generally belong to their more liberal brethren.

What does serious U.S. fiction do, then, when U.S. liberalism is in shambles? The last two decades have made the notion of a U.S. left laughable to Europeans. Barack Obama’s first year in office, with a super-majority in the Senate and a democratic House, failed to produce anything that might plausibly be called liberal reform. Bill Clinton, who remains very popular with those who self-identify as liberal, pushed for significant reductions in welfare—the social program perhaps most closely identified with twentieth century liberal politics. The decade after Reagan pulled the nation right (so far right that left became center) saw no correction of the shift, and a decade after that, the U.S. left has yet to recover the territory it ceded.

In these decades, as U.S. liberalism’s decline became more markedly clear, notable literary critics were discerning a strand of serious fiction that, while clearly influenced by the high postmodern template, seemed intent on diverging from it. Near the start of Clinton’s second term, Tom LeClair published an article proclaiming William Vollmann, Richard Powers, and David Foster Wallace as inventors of a new kind of fiction, one that advanced the systems paradigm that LeClair influentially indentified in *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary Fiction* (1989).² Stephen J. Burn has traced the arrival of what he tentatively terms post-postmodernism around this same period, listing Powers, Wallace, Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen and others as the key figures in the movement.³ Robert McLaughlin suggested that Franzen and

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Wallace “have overtly broken their fiction from their postmodern forebears,” opening up a new space for significant literature (55). 4

Neither these critics nor the many others who have proclaimed the emergence of a new paradigm in fiction have tied the development to the cultural, political and economic changes that crippled liberalism, the default political orientation of the serious novel and its critics. 5 This study provides this vital context. My contention is this: contemporary left-liberal novelists still want to make a critique of the status quo, but they know they speak from a discredited position. Looking at how they make their case tells us about this literature’s politics, which I believe produces a supple critical apparatus for criticizing and teaching these texts. This approach also reveals compelling ways in which the ideological U.S. default might be shifted. By using these ambitions as a basis for examination, this analysis brings together authors normally considered separately. Doing so reveals connections across the contemporary literary production missed by studies that associate authors based on stylistic approach, gender, ethnicity, or artistic lineage.

The challenges these writers face are numerous and formidable. They must acknowledge the absence of visible alternatives to the status quo of globalized capitalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. They must wrestle with the fact that neoliberal marketing strategies bankrupted the rhetoric of the 1960’s and 70’s mainstream left, turning self-expression and self-fashioning into slogans for sodas and sneakers. Furthermore, anyone exposed to secondary education in the humanities over the last several decades could not fail to

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5 LeClair attributes the artistic shift to the immersion in information culture exhibited by all three authors, soon to be common to anyone growing up in the technocratic U.S. Burn sees exhaustion with high postmodern nihilism producing a need for a more character-centered fiction. For McLaughlin, post-postmodernism emphasizes reviving literature’s social significance. I do not disagree with these positions; I do feel that each is a bit guilty of treating artistic lineage as autonomous from the political and economic sphere. One aim of this study is to complement these other formulations by providing this absent context.
encounter high theory’s dismissal of foundations, which compromised the moral certainties so key to political commitment.

These complications were less of a concern for high postmodern literature, which (rightly or wrongly) has been said to celebrate foundationlessness and espouse apoliticality. For Thomas Pynchon or John Barth, exploding conventional categories was itself a political action. By the 1990s, however, such gestures were old news, and they had begun to be cast as politically regressive. Innovative fictions emerging in this time needed to do something more than continue to deconstruct the standing order. It had to begin within that foundationlessness and attempt to go somewhere. If high postmodernism aimed at exploding foundations, these texts must articulate what comes after the explosion—and, ideally, what ought to.

An alternative way of understanding this fiction’s function can be described borrowing from the vocabulary of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari use the term “deterritorialization” to denote the process through which fixed categories, codes, or definitions lose their determining power. To illustrate, one might imagine a piece of uncultivated, undiscovered land. Upon discovery, the land gets mapped, then developed, then turned into property, then given a monetary value, and so on. This process takes that space from land to territory, fixing that space and marking it as distinct. To deterritorialize would be to reverse that process, allowing the property to cast off its definitions and become something at least temporarily undefined. This moment of opening is necessarily followed by another moment of capture—or a reterritorialization; the land cannot remain undefined, or it becomes defined by its indefiniteness. Every deterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari explain, is followed up by a reterritorialization. To return to my discussion of fiction, then, if high postmodernism emphasized deterritorialization, this current mode focuses on reterritorialization.
Aiming at re-establishing foundations might seem a regressive or nostalgic project, especially after the radicalism that provokes the rebuilding. For these writers, working in the aftermath of postmodernism and during neoliberal hegemony, it is a necessary one. As Jodi Dean and Jeffrey Nealon have argued, neoliberal ideology has co-opted postmodernist and postructuralist premises to support its own agenda—globalized capital espouses future orientation, privileges openness, fluidity, flexibility, and hybridity, and opposes fixed categories. Global finance benefits when it opens new territories and markets. It thus thinks its way around obstacles, stretching the map for economic activity both globally and locally; just as you can find a Coke in the desert, you can buy a plane ticket from the bathtub. It paradoxically relies upon foundationlessness as an axiom—foundationlessness as the foundation—because it assumes everything is transformable.\(^6\) Futures are a tradable commodity, as are risk and debt. Individual parts of bodies are insurable. Clothes are billboards, and with tattoo advertising, so is skin. Public schools and manhole covers bear corporate logos. Stuffed animals have virtual online counterparts. Disgraced governors are smiling reality-TV stars. Whereas definitions were once presumed to be firm and fast, the secret of their arbitrary nature is not only out but is common knowledge. To assert a principle in this environment is to attempt to alter the culture’s inertia.

At the same time, the condition of the present complicates attempts to determine first principles. The relativism that pervades the U.S. liberal imagination seems a logical consequence of immersion in neoliberalism’s cultural logic. The writers I examine in this book therefore struggle to assert themselves with confidence because they understand foundations in ways recent philosophies have imparted them—as contingent, constructed, and unstable. At the same time, these writers see humanity in a precarious position, where bodies are threatened by an

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unstable environment and psyches are assaulted by a dehumanizing consumerist culture.

Invested in the liberal version of the human by inclination and education, they are compelled to speak about this condition and criticize the social forces that produce it.

In this respect, they share a version of the premise essential to Pascal’s position in this preface’s epigraph. Pascal’s imagined companion complains that “the true course” does not have to consider the question of God’s existence. Pascal does not oppose this position. In this course of life, though, one encounters the question. To pass through here, through this untrue course, one must select among ways to view life. If one chooses to believe that life comes with stakes, one gives life meaning. To choose as Pascal does necessitates struggle, as it gives one something to struggle toward. Though Pascal’s bet is often dismissed as crass pragmatism—you’re better off betting on God than betting against him, considering the payoffs—the text of the Pensees reveals Pascal’s investment in this wager as based on more than pragmatic grounds: life, for Pascal, becomes meaningful only if some struggle animates life’s significance. The choice means one can choose to grant meaning to life by believing in an end worth struggling toward.

The premise here, of course, is the same one that has defined U.S. progressivism since its inception. Progressivism believes that better things are possible through reform, making efforts at reform necessary. If Pascal needs God to give life meaning, the U.S. liberal needs a better and possible world toward which to strive. These texts must reinvent the possibility of that better world lest their authors allow relativity to swallow struggle’s significance.

Because of the world they are writing in and the audience they address, these writers must begin this reinvention at the personal level. They create characters who desperately seek to locate fulfilling, ethical, and sustainable ways of negotiating the present. In their creation of

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these ends, these writers suggest the worthiness of struggle locally, which invites us to consider it more broadly. To become too blatantly political would be to step outside the cultural sense that real political struggle is over. The terrain of the present seems to be personal—in 2006, *Time* magazine’s person of the year was “you”—so these texts must begin there.

This gesture becomes necessary in the midst of what has often been called “the end of ideology.” After Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history, serious ideological conflict seemed to be over; what remained was to choose amongst positions within a given ideology, not between significantly different ones. This book’s title, *Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology*, situates these novels “in the end of ideology” because I see the “end” declared by Fukuyama and felt by these writers as a period—an ending—rather than a single moment in time. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, ideology as we have known it changes under late capitalism. Reification is no longer necessary, as the current modes of capitalism and liberal democracy do not depend upon vast mystifications. Systems of repression no longer hide themselves. Suppressing awareness of power’s workings is no longer the concern of the powerful (if it ever was). I hesitate, however, to call the present moment “post” ideological, because it seems to me that the very belief that ideology is over may be this period’s key ideological construction. For the authors I discuss, the end of ideology means the stakes of political debate are low, as both they and the public sphere believe the big questions have been more or less decided. As a result, the texts take aim at the personal. They depict individual struggles to locate dignity, recover autonomy, and live ethically. In so doing, they hope to find ways to imagine that individual striving for something better can point to ends worthy of

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8 As Naomi Klein says of Fukuyama’s famous pronouncement, “he wasn’t actually claiming that there were no other [competing belief systems], but merely that, with Communism collapsing, there were no ideas sufficiently powerful to constitute a head-to-head competitor” with neoliberal globalization (309). *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Picador, 2007. See also Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Avon Books, 1993.
collective struggle. The necessity of these necessary fictions is that life without that a created meaning, as Pascal indicated, feels unbearable.

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*Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology* differs from literary criticism about contemporary fiction in a number of ways. I do not see these novels enacting something like “resistance” to the dominant order; they seek out an oblique position within the culture in an attempt to redirect its trajectory. In this respect my book differs from critical works like Samuel Cohen’s *After the End: American Fiction in the 1990s* and James Annesley’s *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market, and the Globalized Novel*. Cohen attempts to show that the use of history by several prominent U.S. novelists in the 1990s works to combat Fukuyama’s dismissal of widespread political struggle, while Annesley shows how contemporary U.S. fiction unwittingly offers diverse strategies of resistance to consumerism. I argue instead that these U.S. novelists accept the premise of the end of history—none of these texts believe that progressive change is on the horizon—and that globalization makes resistance indistinguishable from complicity. In assuming that conditioning into consumerism is automatic and that major political struggles are over, these narratives perform the logic of their time. While they might mourn the past, they do not do so to resurrect it.9

My examination also does not seek to laud these novels for their reflection of the real world’s complexity, as LeClair has, nor do I seek to explicate literature’s function in the technology-obsessed present, as have Joseph Tabb and Jeremy Green. Unlike Stephen doCarmo or Michael Greaney, I will not trace these books’ reaction to literary theory; in addition, I will

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9 Lyotard’s insistence that postmodernism was a phase of modernism might spring to mind here. If modernist art was characterized by a mourning for foundations and postmodernist art celebrated their absence, then how is this return to mourning any different than what Lyotard suggested? The texts I discuss do exhibit some affinities with both high modernism, but they clearly respond to a different set of ontological and epistemological dilemmas, as I will discuss. They share modernism’s mood but differ in what produces that mood and in how they respond to it.
not follow in the recent trend of using literature to support evolutionary understandings of the human. What I will do is offer readings of these narratives that consider their attempts at creating, through rearticulating, new foundations. Through this analysis I intend to evaluate what contemporary authors try to say when they believe literature’s most important social function has nothing to do with what is between its covers. By placing these literary efforts in a political, economic, and theoretical context, *Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology* helps to diagnose what has characterized fiction of the last two decades.

My first chapter expands on the context I sketch above. Here, I produce a reading of the present that emphasizes the challenges the liberal-left continuum faces after the advent of globalization. Life in the present means confronting serious issues—climate change, nuclear weapons, economic meltdown—but no crisis that opens the possibility for major change. Without a crisis to seize upon, the left cannot begin to fashion a means for regaining the ground it lost. I argue that this failure stems from two sources. First, neoliberalism’s rise to hegemony seems (by most accounts) to have occurred outside human agency, eliminating traditional modes of resistance. Second, the liberal-left’s relationship to the academic and cultural vanguard—the progenitors of the embrace of foundationlessness—alters their ability to assert priorities. Utilizing possible-worlds theory, I explain why narrative is a privileged location for examining the left-liberal understanding of and response to contemporary life.

After this opening chapter, each subsequent one will read narratives that confront the erasure of a foundation historically important to liberalism. The first two chapters address the omnipresence of contemporary consumerism, where the primary component of one’s subjectivity is consumer identity. Pop psychology, mainstream education, and the market alike implore the individual to shape a unique self, but any effort to do so is undercut by the nakedness of
commercial and political attempts to induce a sense of uniqueness for mercenary ends. Like
Yeats, who asked what separated the dancer from the dance, these writers struggle to see where
they begin and their social construction ends. David Foster Wallace, whose landmark *Infinite
Jest* (1996) I discuss first, was frustrated by the inevitability of a solipsism that results from a life
spent as a consumer. The novel posits that the disciplining into consumerism produces a
predilection toward addiction so intense that nearly all repeated behaviors look like addicted
ones. For Wallace, this orientation reduces already limited human potential. He attempts, albeit
tentatively, to envision a reorientation that aims at a more sustainable, nourishing subjectivity,
rather than the desubjectification of disciplined consumerism.

Richard Powers’ *Gain* (1998) produces a contemporary landscape that functions almost
entirely without individual agency. In the novel’s vision, late capitalism’s dictates organize
human life. These discipline the inhabitants of the globalized map, teaching them to desire what
the capitalist apparatus makes available. To its great credit, however, the novel presents
corporations as vulnerable to the same governing impulses as individual persons. Its
contrapuntal plot depicts the 150-year rise and imminent fall of a major multinational
corporation alongside a suburban divorcee’s battle against ovarian cancer. My third chapter
shows how *Gain*’s portrayal of the movements common to each—the corporation and the
suburban life—are sanctioned by inherited cultural models of gain and loss. In so doing it
invites readers to consider whether those models remain viable.

The subject of my fourth chapter, Marilynne Robinson, might seem an interesting
selection for this project, as she has written extensively and confidently about the importance of
a conservative approach to religion in creating ethical lives. The uncertainty of her fiction,
however, belies her nonfictional boldness, and reading the two against each other reveals an
ambiguity at work that makes Robinson a vital figure to consider here. Her two most recent novels trace a relationship between religion and lived experience that begins with religion’s foundationlessness—neither novel tries to convince us to believe in God, though preachers play central and sympathetic roles in each. *Gilead* (2006) and *Home* (2008) are companion novels, sharing characters, events and concerns; each meditates on questions about family, belief, and responsibility. The setting of each novel—in the Midwest of the 1950’s—situates them at a crossroads in American culture, when secularism increased its challenges to the supremacy of a religious United States. The novels, however, do not hinge on whether characters accept religion or reject it. Instead, the texts give us characters intent upon achieving standard of responsibility not based on sympathy or empathy. The vision of interdependence provides a useful counter to what she sees as harshly Darwinistic social and economic sensibilities.

In my final chapter, I examine three novels that push against the usual boundaries of “immigrant fictions.” Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2006), Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007) and *How to Read the Air* (2010) present the move to the United States as a move across the margins, rather than a move from the margin to the center. Each depicts a world where social mobility and collective possibility no longer seem viable possibilities. Globalization, gentrification, and inequality become historical curses characters understand as inviolable. Because they accept these troublesome axioms, they posit that a belief in self-determination is a necessary fiction. They embrace a belief that is hard for them to believe in because without it, the outlook for the future becomes bleak indeed.

As I have said above, the authors discussed in this book share a desperate desire to return some form of significance to life. In so doing, they posit a conception of the human whose roots
undeniably belong to the liberal-left tradition. As has been traditionally true of this lineage, they believe humans can make other human lives better and more dignified. This book argues that asking how to envision acting on this belief has become the central preoccupation of contemporary fiction.
Chapter 1: A Reading of the Present: Globalization and the U.S. Liberal

What we have now is something beyond a consumer revolution, something we may call a ‘revolution of consumption,’ in which consumption has become the principal work of late industrial society…The heart of this work is the social discipline of the imagination, the discipline of learning to link fantasy and nostalgia to the desire for new bundles of commodities—Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*

I get world sick every time I take a stand.—Kevin Drew, “World Sick”

In the first epigraph above, Arjun Appadurai offers a decidedly pessimistic understanding of Western life after globalization (or, if you prefer, after the advent of globalization as a social fact). In his reading, existence on the globalized map means automatic disciplining into consumerism. This discipline’s primary target is the human’s interior: the territory sought after by advanced capitalism is the imagination. Through the apparatuses of media and the structuring of society, one learns to process desire as desire-for-commodities. In theory, any objectless craving—the daydreaming at one’s desk, the wandering mind in the car—should become translated into a yearning satiable by something the market offers. We diagnose restlessness as a lack of ambition (self-help aisle), ADHD (Ritalin or Adderall), or evidence of a need for a vacation (Orbitz.com or Continental Cruise Lines). Trouble finding a relationship sends us to the gym, to the plastic surgeon, to dating websites. Dissatisfaction with the present becomes
nostalgia for an imaginary past, producing 1950’s themed diners, classic rock radio stations, Merchant-Ivory period dramas, and Woodstock II (and III).

Appadurai’s gloomy assessment implies that the desire-routing mechanisms of contemporary society function differently from those in the past. For him, global media homogenizes imagination. The seductive, omnipresent Western visions of beauty, success, and happiness communicated by film and television affect and rewrite those of the rest of the world. All this would perhaps not be so troubling if global media did not also inspire imaginations to believe in their own autonomy. Self-actualization is the end-point of nearly all pop culture entertainments and pop psychology interventions. You are supposed to have a self separate from the inscriptions of your culture. If the production of your fantasies and nostalgia are routed into cravings for “new bundles of commodities,” how do you know what your fantasies really are? How do you know what you miss so badly?

While one might rightly ask whether one’s fantasies and nostalgias were ever truly autonomous, what seems unassailable about Appadurai’s position is that this disciplining is undeniably more manifest than ever before. Characteristics of life in the present seem to reveal an intensification both of the desire-manufacturing and the visibility of desire-manufacturing mechanisms. To give just two examples, witness the incredible burgeoning of U.S. consumer credit-card debt, which speaks to how compulsive purchasing outstrips rational decision-making. Then consider how common conversation about focus group testing and other advertising strategies—the practices that abet compulsive purchasing—has become. Resentment toward those who compose our desires, however, does not seem to grow: advertising has gone from one
of the U.S.’s most distrusted and disliked professions to having the industry’s awards telecast nationally in 1996.10

The rise to prominence of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito as explicators of Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopolitics” also reflects the difficulty of separating internal motivation and external imperative. Though Agamben and Esposito’s positions differ—and they differ from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose *Empire* and *Multitude* attempt to affirm a positive potential in biopower—theorists of biopolitics agree with Foucault that modernity has overseen a shift in how apparatuses of power aim. The consensus in this field states that power is now less concerned with the actions of the body and instead seeks to manage the more abstract category “life.” Taxonomies for classifying and regulating human behavior multiply under the biopolitical regime, all of which attempt bring all human practice under the umbrella of comprehensibility. In so doing, power becomes more supple and efficient, reaching a point where it can constantly re-evaluate, rename, and recapture activity.11 These taxonomies help generate the quick translation of desire into desire-for-commodities I discuss above.

Esposito has recently linked this obsessive focus with categorization to medico-cultural discourses about maintaining health. When individuals are “constantly interpellated” to pay attention to the status of their bodies, the logical outcome is a political conversation that privileges protecting those bodies without regard to the consequences of that protection, or

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10 See “1996 Clio Awards,” Internet Movie Database. IMDB.com, n.d. Web. 1 June 2011. One might also think here of the critically acclaimed series *Mad Men*, which makes members of a successful Madison Avenue advertising firm its protagonists. Set in the early 1960’s, an episode entitled “The Hobo Code” has main character Don Draper respond to a beatnik’s allegation that he and his colleagues “make the lie...[and] invent want,” by saying “I hate to break it to you, but there is no big lie. There is no system. The universe is indifferent.” The show’s politics can hardly be called conservative: it decimates the right’s idealizations of the 50’s and early 60’s; it spends significant attention on the marginalization of minorities. That a beatnik gets verbally rebuked on an ostensibly liberal show indicates a shift in the cultural perceptions of inscription and resistance.

considering what gets sacrificed in its name.\textsuperscript{12} This emphasis on the body has led to the strangely moral discourse that surrounds exercising and eating right. Maximizing one’s potential physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, as the “be all you can be” messages seem to suggest, is posited as a unquestionably affirmative practice. A critical mindset remains suspicious when such affirmation like this is presumed. When one is exhorted so strenuously to reach one’s potential, one simultaneously strains to achieve that potential and secretly wonders to what end that straining is for.

The payoff of Appadurai’s assertion, then, is to say out loud what the self-aware consumer feels implicitly. For this U.S. consumer, for whom life off the globalized map is not a realistic option, separating the dancer from the dance is a persistent but obviously vain wish. One begins to understand one’s behavior as necessarily complicit with the greater system’s functioning. You work for The Man even when you are not working. Doing your leisurely consuming, which might have once seemed a way of escaping determination, is part and parcel of your principal task as a citizen.\textsuperscript{13}

The notion that contemporary economic and political systems have reduced human import to a role (that of consumer) belies the lingering vision of human dignity vitally important to left-liberal thinking. Though she does not address composition as a consumer per se, one can witness this concern over the ends that motivate behavior in a 2009 Margaret Talbot \textit{New Yorker

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\item[\textsuperscript{12}] Esposito, Roberto. “Totalitarianism or Biopolitics? Concerning a Philosophical Interpretation of the Twentieth Century.” Trans. Timothy Campbell. \textit{Critical Inquiry} 34 (Summer 2008): 633-644. Campbell, the translator of the bulk of Esposito’s work, summarizes his position as follows: “In perhaps more obvious fashion than has occurred in recent memory, liberty is spectacularly reduced to the security of the subject; a subject who possesses liberty is the secure(d) citizen” (18). See Campbell, “Bios, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito,” \textit{Diacritics} 36.2 (Summer 2006): 2-22.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] One thinks here of Rudy Giuliani telling New Yorkers to “go shopping” and applauding them for being “the best shoppers in the world” right after 9/11 (Murdock, Dero, “Giuliani’s Finest Hour,” \textit{The National Review Online} 14 September 2001). Tony Blair and George W. Bush each separately exhorted citizens of their countries to go shopping, as did many other politicians and public figures: see Vallardy, Jill and Chris Wattie, “Shopping is Patriotic, Leaders Say,” \textit{National Post} (Canada), 28 September 2001.
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article. The objection she has to the widespread use of stimulants like Adderall and Ritalin by students and young professionals is not related to health or ethics, but instead to what the practice suggests about the contemporary human’s orientation: “Neuroenhancers don’t offer freedom. Rather, they facilitate a pinched, unromantic, grindingly efficient form of productivity.”14 While perhaps overlooking the possibility that these drugs make work more pleasant (after all, users are high) because she is so focused on her interviewees’ stated reasons for taking the chemicals, Talbot sees “something dispiriting about the way the drugs are used—the kind of aspirations they open up, or don’t.” She finds dispiriting the notion that human capacities should be stretched for pragmatic or economic reasons—for mere “productivity” at work or at school. She sidesteps suggesting what kind of aspirations should be opened up, or what kind of freedom neuroenhancers should be offering. She is certain, however, that the human body should not be used as a tool for work alone. In this concern, Talbot dovetails with Appadurai’s displeasure with the disciplined human imagination, displaying fears that contemporary conditions tragically limit the human while they trumpet the extension of human capability.

These fears are common to all the authors I analyze in this study, and, by extension, also belong to their left-liberal audiences. The liberal-leftist under neoliberal globalization feels anxiety over the possibilities for progressive change under this regime, over the rerouting of human potential toward mercenary ends, over the co-opting of imagination. What intensifies these fears is this regime’s uncanny nature. It seems to have arisen autonomously and wields power irrevocably, largely because no one knows where, what or who the regime is.

This chapter will trace out this position’s contours and attempt to buffer my claims for the sensibility’s cultural prominence. Doing so will establish the grounds for and the necessity of the conversation between authors and audiences I see occurring in the last two decades. In the process, I will first discuss the humanism presupposed by the aforementioned anxieties. Locating what humanizes the human for the liberal-leftist helps show why these fears resonate so seriously. I then detail the components—specifically, neoliberal globalization and the collapse of the U.S. liberal-left—that make the conditions of the present feel permanent and the condition of anxiety endless. The public sphere understanding of the neoliberal regime’s bodiless omnipresence results in the sense that the only terrain for struggle is personal, but even personal struggles seem compromised by the collapse of agency. Throughout this chapter, however, I return to the axioms of left-liberal ideology that induce contemporary fiction to reassert possibility in the face of determination. This emphasis requires that, lastly, I articulate why literary criticism is a useful lens for examining these issues and why these authors are an especially rich resource for examination.

The Human, the Authentic Struggle, and the Temporality that Pains

In two remarkably similar passages, David Foster Wallace and Marilynne Robinson articulate definitions of the human as a body that constantly struggles for definition. In defining the human this way, the two retain traditionally privileged territory for the human—struggle remains struggle for, which makes the human capable of achieving something like significance. In doing so they differ from post-, trans- and antihumanist definitions, where one sees the human’s privileges reduced, eliminated, or altered. The species-being of the human, these other definitions have shown us, does not come accompanied with anything. Certain instincts might
convert the occurrences in a given human life into patterns that may be read as meaningful, but those readings, it has been shown again and again, are arbitrary. Even the idea of the human as a unified category has rightfully been called into question.

In spite of their acquaintance with these challenges, Wallace and Robinson insist upon giving their human a measure of agency. The key to their neohumanism is the limitations of that measure. The human does not strive toward godliness, or goodness, or completeness. It finds itself pursuing a trajectory about which it knows nothing other than that it must pursue it. They locate their impoverished measure of agency in how the being chooses to inhabit that trajectory.

Wallace offers his definition in explicating the bleak humor in Kafka. Readers who recognize Kafka’s comedy need to agree with the author’s take on the dark ironies of human life, two of which Wallace assesses before using a simile to prove his point:

the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey home is in fact our home. […] Imagine [Kafka’s] stories as all about a kind of door. To envision us approaching and pounding on this door, increasingly hard, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it; we don’t know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and kicking. That, finally, the door opens…and it opens outward—and we’ve been inside what we wanted all along.  

As I will discuss in Chapter 2, Wallace is particularly careful about how he uses the terms “want” and “need.” The compulsion to approach and to pound are experienced as needs—something that the human “feels” with enough “desperation” to make desire and need inseparable. Need does not emerge at origin, but rather from the frustration of expectations generated by orientation and inertia. We struggle ourselves into a desire/need for definition.

The journey generates the belief that there must be an end. The thing that animates the human, then, is the moment when an orientation imagines an end for itself. One can envision no essential need to call a journey a home; only when one thinks that journeys presuppose homes do they actually begin to. The struggle cannot be defined as a struggle to establish something until it is first not seen as an end in itself. In other words, the body that simply is somewhere and does something is not the human. The body becomes human when it struggles for definition and when it journeys for home. The conversion of desiring into desiring for is, for Wallace, the moment of the human advent.

Important to this definition, however, is that the desiring-for has an organic relationship to the platform that produces it: in Wallace’s example, the body wants entrance because it is at a door. In her third novel, *Home* (2008), Robinson offers a picture of the human that envisions another kind of organic desiring-production as a key component in its construction: “In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindness because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever has a home at all.”¹⁶ When used the way Robinson deploys it here, the expression “there is” does not have a specific locational referent. “There” creates an abstract space “where” the human is and where this sense also seems to be. Just like the “there” translated into Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein* (“being-there”), Robinson’s “there” spacializes existence so that this sense seems simply to be in the same distinct territory as the human. “The sense that things should be otherwise” accompanies humanness. The species-being becomes “more hauntingly human” through its inhabiting of the sense, which Robinson

poses as natural or essential. The sense exists destitute of a necessary “feeling or purpose” and comes instead along with the body’s animation.

The sense itself is a desire-for. It translates the condition of the body into a lack that Robinson says is not necessarily a lack. The soul finds a home if it has it, much as Wallace’s traveler is in the home he seeks. The animation of the body causes a necessary misinterpretation of its status. Just as Pascal’s embarked human must choose, Wallace and Robinson’s human must want something other than what it is.

Each passage’s references to homes, too, should not be overlooked. Wallace and Robinson’s human must feel unhoused. The human’s desiring-for produces (or perhaps reflects) a perception of dislocation. The human struggle against this dislocation in many respects defines the human. While the struggle is necessarily endless and fruitless, the struggle appears natural. They register the existential despair that life is really ultimately meaningless, but the struggle for meaning or for home is consistent with the body’s originary orientation.

This human threatens to forfeit its humanity when its orients its struggle in less organic or less natural ways. For each of these authors as well as the others I discuss, life under late capitalism induces this dehumanizing reorientation. I will use Avitall Ronell’s term “temporality that pains” to refer to Wallace and Robinson’s locating the human within an experience of time that tempts humans into inauthentic struggles. Ronell’s phrase suggests that living within this temporal framework hurts. In a temporality that pains, living is always enduring beyond the originary dislocation envisioned by Wallace and Robinson. While their humans crave homes, the human experiencing the temporality that pains just wants the pain to stop. In Ronell’s Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania, she uses Flaubert’s Madame Bovary’s immersion into a

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destructive relationship with desire to exemplify life within this temporality and to reveal how it induces bodies into dehumanizing struggles.

What can make the experience of time hurt? How is this hurt separate from the originary longing for home? When the human’s desire for something it cannot obtain intensifies, it metastasizes (one of Wallace’s favorite verbs). It moves into the production of multiple sites of desiring-for that compete. The human learns to want too many of the wrong things and too much of them. The basic sense Robinson refers to—that the human’s situation might be something different—becomes a demand for that something different, spurred by the feeling that the original situation is absolutely unbearable.

Like the authors I discuss, Ronell shows this insertion into the temporality that hurts occurring because of the combination of modern consumerism as well as the omnipresence of modern media. Ronell reminds us that Emma Bovary’s voracious novel-reading prefigures her fall into compulsive consumption. She “demanded hallucinatory satisfaction of desire in a zone that no longer distinguished between need and desire” (74), pursuing what she covets as though these wants were needs (much as Wallace’s human conflates want and need). For Ronell, the centrality of this “zone” to Bovary’s psychic life mirrors the ways in which modernity has made hallucinatory desiring into its defining condition. Life in a media-saturated commodity culture induces one to seek out this zone and exist as much as possible within it. What Ronell calls “the mind altering project,” or the craving to enter into this zone, “casts about for a premise of which it can presume an original purity of mind, a non-contaminated naturalness that would be in

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18 In Ronell’s formulation, satisfaction can only be hallucinatory insofar as the urge being satisfied is not extinguished in the way one might envision satiation. Like Appadurai, for whom “fantasy and nostalgia” are the key components of commodity-consumption, Ronell posits desire and its ends as spectral. Its existence is immaterial but undeniable. Satisfying a fantasy will not produce that fantasy’s erasure; instead, it will produce more fantasy-production and more urges to satisfy the fantastical need in different ways. In other words, desire places its own priorities in conversation with the body’s. Desire satisfying itself is experienced by that body only secondarily, as a “hallucination.” The important distinction to make between hallucinatory desire and the desire-felt-as-need mentioned by Wallace is that the former belongs to a psychic economy that occurs after socialization.
harmony with convention and lawful conduct” (99). The mind-alterer, fueled by the fantasies spurred by media and the easily availability of consumer commodities, imagines the unaltered mind as deficient or spoiled. Bovary’s boredom as she sits across from her husband presupposes that its own desire for excitement is natural.

At this point, we can intuit a separation between Wallace and Robinson’s desiring-for and Emma’s. Bovary’s desire is engineered socially, not organically. Because Emma’s susceptibility to “the sense that things should be otherwise” has been stoked by attractive visions of what that otherwise might be, she enters into an addictive relationship with those visions, one that deeply undercuts her ability to feel at peace within her limitations. For both Ronell and Appadurai, modernity incites the mind-altering project by offering “conventional and lawful” opportunities for attempting a return to what it posits as “purity” or “naturalness,” which are not pure or natural at all. To want to make yourself anew, you must first consider your old self undesirable and witness means for self-recreation that appear attractive. To exist within this zone, as Emma Bovary does, is to feel unhoused, but to experience that dislocation impatiently and combat it inauthentically.

Throughout this book, I will use “the temporality that pains” to refer to the sensation of existing within a time where one’s situation seems automatically and consistently unsatisfactory. Humanity’s homelessness, the modern sense of a disjointed present, and a consumer culture’s incessant inducements to remake the self combine the experience of this temporality prevalent. The reader might wonder how about the plausibility of my definition here—is the temporality that pains one choice among many, as though one had a temporality-catalogue to peruse? To move out of this temporality, one needs to get out of step with the Western world, which itself inhabits the temporality—but, these authors hope, such a gesture remains at least somewhat
possible. In a complex passage that reveals the relationship of this temporality and the social sphere, Ronell explains: “Like the Western world, there is no place or moment in the life of Madame Bovary that could be designated as genuinely clean or drug-free, because being exposed to existence, and placing one’s body in the grips of a temporality that pains, produce a rapport to being that is addictive, artificial, and beside itself” (104-105). Madame Bovary’s life must result in an inauthentic “rapport to being” because, first, of “being exposed to existence.” This part seems clear enough. The second condition, “placing one’s body in the grips of a temporality that pains,” makes Bovary’s immersion in this inauthentic rapport her own responsibility. She is the one who reads the novels, who has affairs, who goes into debt, and who thus is the agent of her own collapse. At the same time, the prepositional phrase that opens the sentence suggests that “the Western world” itself can never “be designated as genuinely clean or drug-free,” meaning that the West itself is “in the grips.” Ronell’s formulation proposes that one can refuse to place oneself in these grips, but the world’s own orientation makes such refusal difficult.

One’s insertion into the temporality that pains, then, seems largely preordained. The Western world has comported itself much like Emma Bovary: it lives beyond its means, conflates desire and need, and lets its imagination run wild. The Western world enacts a consumerism like Emma Bovary’s, an orientation toward existence that is “addictive, artificial, and beside itself.” To borrow again from Martin Heidegger, modern technology enabled the Western mind to view nature as “standing-reserve,” designed for use by humans, as opposed to the environment with which humans are interdependent (and perhaps inseparable). In the age of the modern world-picture, Heidegger explains, the world “is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets

19 Another “there is” complicates matters here. One can plausibly read the sentence so that the “like” in the opening phrase compares the Western World to “the life of Emma Bovary.” Either way, ultimately, Ronell’s sentence suggests that something about the Western World is tied up in this rapport.
In other words, modernity sees the human distinguish itself from the world. This gesture sets in motion the temporality that pains by redefining “natural.” Natural does not determine one’s relationship to life; instead, humans determine what to do to nature in the service of a relationship it chooses. Thinking in this way gives us a way of understanding Robinson and Wallace’s disjointed human. If the original species-being never developed the recursivity that makes existence into a journey or a struggle—a recursivity engineered by the modern relationship with the world—then perhaps the human might not feel unhoused. We might recall the “there is” phrasing in Robinson. Wherever the modern human is, there is this way of thinking. At the risk of using an imprecise cliché, it appears to be in the air. This dislocation, the affective interpretation that converts existence into the human struggle-for, is accelerated by the mechanisms of consumerist culture, moving the dislocation from being in the air to being inside our bodies, brains, and imaginations. The struggle then becomes a desperate desire to be something other than the struggling thing, a moment of translation that produces an inauthentic relationship to the self. This inauthenticity, I must underscore, is the target of the authors I discuss.

I will now address a slippage that the reader has likely noted. I have been guilty of conflating the paradigmatic Western individual with the Western world. Such a gesture makes two suspicious moves. First, it anthropomorphizes the world, making a world capable of doing and feeling in the ways that humans do and feel. Second, it reduces what is surely a complicated modern individual to determination by her environment. If one is born into this air and this temporality, what prevents us all from being Madame Bovary? Let me deal with each of these important objections individually.

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Personifying the West

My use of the word “world” in the preceding paragraphs and throughout this introduction should not be confused with the Earth. I do not mean to attribute agency to the planet itself. When I use “world” in the way that I have, I refer to the abstract terrain known as the West. The West has long since functioned as a signifier having little to do with direction; in fact, one might say that in many respects that parts of Japan in the 1990’s were more Western than anything happening in Europe or the U.S. I use “world” to refer to the propensity of the post-Enlightenment Western imagination to envision itself as the proper and ultimate metonym for the world. In so doing I echo Jean-Luc Nancy, who has argued that globalization is the actualization of Western delusions of grandeur. For Nancy, the making-global of the Western way of life means making the West into the world. Enlightenment ideology made claims to universality, paving the way for its globality: no “other configuration of the world or any other philosophy of the universal and of reason have challenged th[e] course” of this Western imaginary (34). If we follow Nancy’s generalizations here, the Enlightenment’s human becomes the world’s human. The systems of governance and economy that follow from that version of the human reify a local or regional conception into that which orders the world. Nancy usefully situates this Western vision as autonomous from the rest of the world and even from the grounds which produced it: “We can say as well that the [Western] world presupposes itself not as subjected to anything other, and that is the destiny of the so-called ‘modern’ world. We could thus say that it presupposes itself only, but necessarily, as its own revolution: the way it turns on itself/or turns against itself” (43).

21 Nancy, The Creation of the World, or Globalization. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. SUNY Series in Contemporary French Thought, Pettigrew and Raffoul, eds. Albany, New York: State University Press, 2007: 34. Though some Eastern philosophies (a la Buddhism) diagnose life in general, their prescriptions have not yielded expansionist practices on the scale of the West. Whether the difference in practice stems from material need, ideological basis or anything else is a subject for another book.
I borrow from Nancy to illustrate that what I am calling the Western world refers to the abstraction that has resulted from the massive, ideological and imperial Enlightenment project. It is an abstraction, however, that organizes what I have called the globalized map. In many respects this abstraction imagines itself as a human, as a thing that pacifies, civilizes, names, determines, and so on.

Of course, the tension between this strange abstraction and its human guise has always been visible. The project of imperialism was carried out by humans, but its edicts often seemed to emerge impersonally—think of Joseph Conrad’s “heart of darkness,” a heart that beats and resides nowhere, but that mobilizes bodies across continents. This tension has become especially resonant during the rise to hegemony of neoliberal economic policy and its concomitant social partner globalization. For left-liberals like Wallace and Robinson, the impersonal nature of a project that promises to enhance personhood calls even greater attention to the human’s lack of autonomy. The more autonomy ‘the world’ seems to have, the less belongs to its inhabitants. More importantly for this project, the agent that shapes the terrain for existence does not mask itself as a benevolent God or a progressive teleological force. The world’s orientation seems directed by the dictates of capital, issued without a voice or a face. At this point, I turn to a discussion of how globalization and neoliberalism appear from a pessimistic left-liberal position, to show that the left-liberal vision of the human descends and borrows from this pessimistic view of the world.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Globalization

The emergence of the term “globalization” as a mainstream media and public-sphere commonplace dates back to the middle of the Clinton administration. Whether or not the term is
an accurate description of the scale of economic and political change witnessed over the last several decades—whether the world is more globally interconnected now than ever before—globalization’s entry into everyday language converts our imaginary of it into a social fact. As this understanding continues to root itself in the public sphere, the thinking person’s ability to envision realistic alternatives to the global order wanes.

To give a recent example, the economic crisis of late 2008 and early 2009 might have offered an opportunity to alter social priorities away from the needs of finance capital. Worldwide, though, allegiance to (and being stuck in) neoliberal economic structuring caused governments to bail out banks with taxpayer money. Neoliberalism does not depend, as it turns out, on an absence of government interference; it requires government to provide it with whatever suits its needs.22 As Jodi Dean has put it, “neoliberalism doesn’t rely on preexisting conditions – it creates new ones, reformatting social and political life in terms of its ideal of competition within markets.”23 The renewal of economic order’s primacy under neoliberalism means everything else gets reorganized to suit finance capital’s desires, regardless of the veil neoliberalism wrapped itself in. That economic activity returned to business more or less as usual (Wall Street surges, Main Street struggles) by early 2010 proves that the visibility of the neoliberalism’s real allegiances does not particularly concern it.24 The crisis emerged and passed without the public sphere’s consent, dissent, or voice mattering terribly much. The clarity of this

22 Thomas Friedman and other self-identifying liberals in favor of globalization might bristle at my equation of neoliberalism (which, as Harvey and Klein point out, is called “neoconservatism” outside the United States) with globalization. I see globalization as the instantiation of neoliberalism, an economic policy that privileges the expansion of the market above all else. As Manuel Castells has shown, the communication technologies that enable global connectivity do not see usage explode until commercial interests underwrite them. The electronic linking of the world was financed by capital that expected (and received) a return on its decision to expand markets.


24 This idea was nicely illustrated early 2010, when reports of a resurgent economy had no effect on the highest unemployment rates in decades, severe crises in public education and health care, and stagnant worker wages. Increasingly, the “economy” does not refer to how people on the ground are doing. Instead, it refers to how well finance capital moves, a movement that has (disasters aside) has no direct relation to how the quotidian functions.
discrepancy did not, as leftists have long hoped, create massive antagonism toward the system. Instead, it reminded the liberal-left that dusty definitions of ideology are not what keep the system up and running.\(^{25}\) The system’s hegemony is not threatened by raised awareness.

The neoliberal, globalized economic system shifts the grounds for thinking about situatedness, and this fact further frustrates attempts to fashion challenges or envision alternatives. Though truly transnational corporations and individuals are more fictional than factual, the advent of their possibility stymies traditional modes of resistance. As one character, Don Bodey, says of Clare, the multinational corporation whose rise Richard Powers’ *Gain* (1998) traces, “[h]ow transnationals love to play the citizenship card whenever they’re looking for a protective break. But Clare is just like elites everywhere: the company keeps so many residences that it has no fixed place of abode.”\(^{26}\) Leftists and liberals might ultimately aim at universality, but the focus of their actions rarely exceeds the national level. Early claims that globalization would undermine national sovereignty have proven misguided; national borders still mean a great deal. However important the nation-state remains, the primary element of Western culture has been consumerism for at least half a century, a state that has of course been underwritten by and nourishing to corporations. These corporations’ resistance to traditional situating means that struggles against their dominance cannot occur through local or national

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\(^{25}\) The most common interpretations of the “false consciousness” of Marx or the “imagined relations to real conditions” of Althusser would have it that the masses are duped into complicity. If the veil-ideology theory were accurate, understanding the inequities of the system would dissolve the veil and, in theory, lead to praxis. The major holes in this theory can be intuited by pointing to one example: how often is the fact that the U.S. has the greatest income inequality among ‘developed’ nations cited, and what effect has its citation ever had? Here, I echo the decades-old revision of ideology spurred by Raymond Williams, Ernesto Lacau, Chantal Mouffe, Stuart Hall and others.

means. Protesting against what is essentially amorphous, everywhere and nowhere, proves a difficult proposition.

As I intimate above, the globalizing of this economic and cultural system took place without the expressed consent of the world’s population.\(^{27}\) As soon as the term emerged, its rise to power already seemed preordained, if not already complete. The idea of an unstoppable momentum seems built into the term itself. Globalization begins nowhere and immediately winds up everywhere, aspiring by its very nature to redefine what “everywhere” means. Because its existence requires major changes to governing orders, globalization is not something one dips one’s toes into and decides against.\(^{28}\)

For these reasons and more, the term is fitting, for it implies that the world as it was has been made into something different. To globalize is to make a globe out of whatever was there before.\(^{29}\) In the process, according to Nancy, “the world has lost its capacity to ‘form a world.’”\(^{34}\) For Nancy—to reiterate—the globalizing West thinks of itself as autonomously generating its rise and spread. In the process, the West wants to create only more of itself. It does not aspire toward making a world; it aspires toward making itself into the world.\(^{30}\) For this reason, Nancy calls the globalized world the “un-world,” one not decided upon by the majority of its inhabitants but instead by the runaway inertia of a lifestyle (37). For its critics, globalization

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\(^{27}\) I want to be careful to differentiate how I am characterizing the liberal-left vision of globalization from hard leftists such as Noam Chomsky or Barbara Foley. Consent here is not manufactured—it simply is not necessary. As I will go on to show, the position I am taking does not attribute systemic manipulation to a handful of plotting capitalists. What I am getting at is that the system’s rise felt and feels inexorable because it seemed to occur without humans.

\(^{28}\) This process has been memorably called “Shock and Awe” by Naomi Klein in The Shock Doctrine. Perhaps now is a good time to acknowledge that my tone and word choices in these paragraphs might lead the reader to believe I assume combating globalization is necessary or ethically good. I want to remind the reader that all this is stated to establish the grounding of the books I discuss, not to advocate a specific political position.

\(^{29}\) Again, I want to make a disclaimer here. I lack the space to rehearse the arguments of those who argue globalization differs merely in degree from what preceded it or those who assert a change in kind. What I am saying is that registering the social fact of globalization as an accurate description of the world as it stands produces effects in how the socius understands the world.

\(^{30}\) In French, the terms globalization and mondialization have very distinct denotations. Nancy uses the distinction to indicate that mondialization—the creation of the world—is not what has happened through globalization.
hastens ecological decay, ramps up economic inequality, and erases historical difference: it orients the world not toward greater habitability but towards its opposite—hence “un-world.”

Thus far, we have seen that globalization frustrates traditional models of resistance to power in three ways. First, it is not challenged by raised awareness because it did not ask for, nor does it depend upon, democratic consent. Second, it does not limit itself to borders within which it might be combated more effectively. Third, its arrival in the public imagination seemed coincident with its full, irrevocable realization. A fourth, and perhaps most essential, major complication is that globalization is not governed or directed by any person or group of people. Formulations of globalization and neoliberalism resist pointing a finger at anyone for responsibility over its rise. Nancy names no names. Polemics focused more on the ground than Nancy’s, such as Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*, David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), or Joseph Stiglitz’s *Globalization and its Discontents* (2003), also eschew assigning blame for the state of affairs. Stiglitz is particularly quixotic in this regard: “the IMF was not participating in a conspiracy” when it required desperate countries to commit to a suicidal series of reforms, “but it was reflecting the interests and ideology of the Western financial community,” who as a rule benefit from the liberalization of markets within a once-isolated economy.\(^3\) He makes a distinction here that keeps him from alleging a conspiracy of the super-wealthy, a gesture that might reek too much of now-discredited orthodox Marxism. Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* makes an arch-enemy of Milton Friedman, but clearly Friedman did not institute his own policies on local or national levels, and even if he promulgated his theories at the expense of the poor and marginalized, that fact makes him guilty of apathy towards his fellow humans at worst or a misguided hubris at best. We are not in the Adorno/Horkheimer realm here, where actions are traceable to a desire to oppress in order to maintain class relations.

In all three of these texts, whose desire is absolutely to attack the status quo, the writers seem capable only of pointing out symptoms or figureheads of the system at work—never attributing agency for the creation of the system.\textsuperscript{32}

What the accounts wind up attributing agency to is something like the “Empire” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discussed to great acclaim in their 2000 book of the same name. What replaces state-sovereignty and traditional class-rule is “a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm with its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.”\textsuperscript{33} One cannot ask “who” is Empire or “where” Empire is. It does things—“incorporates” and “manages”—but it does so without a face or home base. There is no Emperor.

All this means one has nowhere to throw a brick. \textit{Gain}’s Don Bodey, visiting the Clare corporation’s headquarters, realizes, “The truth of the matter is: there is no ground zero. Nothing an anarchist could ever hit, even in imagination” (\textit{GA} 257). One does not vote against globalization or set fire to Empire’s capital building, quite simply because these two are not situated anywhere physical and not traceable to any figures who might be challenged by these gestures. The vote and the brick can’t do a thing. Worst, it seems, is that this lack of a sense of agency extends all the way up the political ladder. Once the gates of neoliberalism were opened by Thatcher and Regan, “those who followed, like Clinton and Blair, could do little more than continue the good work of neoliberalization, whether they liked it or not.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} All three, Harvey most especially, point out that neoliberal globalization reintroduces the top-heavy class structure common to pre- or early-industrial societies. Wealth in the hands of a small few means concentrated power in the hands of those few. While wealth, and arguably power, tended to be more equally distributed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the neoliberal decades saw this distribution reverse. While Harvey bemoans this state of affairs, he does not say that the upper classes plotted to produce this redistribution.


\textsuperscript{34} Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: 63.
These components of globalization—its immediate omnipresence, its irrevocable effects, its everywhere-and-nowhere nature—foster a sense that major, determining events in the political and social sphere (unlike, say, earthquakes or tsunamis) occur outside human purview. Left-liberals have long believed that social forces were traceable to and manipulable by human design, separating themselves from conservatives and radicals, who believe in the market and teleological history, respectively. To lose the human from the center of the political equation is a devastating blow for the U.S. liberal left.

The position the perception of neoliberal globalization has forced liberals to take is more or less inseparable from the dehumanized world-systems theory that has become a popular academic presence, which voices economic determinism in a language difficult for the liberal-left to deny or to swallow. Immanuel Wallerstein, a key figure in the economic school, explains that “(f)or nomothetic positivism, the actor is the individual…For orthodox Marxism, the actor is the industrial proletariat. For the state-autonomists, it is political man….For world-systems analysis, these actors, just like the long list of structures that one can enumerate, are the products of a process.” He goes on to recuperate a small sense of autonomy for these individuals: “They are not primordial atomic elements, but part of a systemic mix out of which they emerged and upon which they act. They act freely, but their freedom is constrained by their biographies and the social prisons of which they are a part. Analyzing their prisons liberates them to the maximum degree that they can be liberated.”

All you can hope for, according to Wallerstein, is to understand the system that imprisons you.

Important to how dispiriting these conclusions are is that the liberal-left has yet to locate a response to them, in spite of the resilience of left-liberal arguments. Something seems to rebel against the status quo stretching out indefinitely, without human say, but attempts to articulate a

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platform for left-liberal recuperation have yet to find solid footing. I would like to trace briefly a few of these strategies in order to explain their shortcomings, all of which relate to the inability of left-liberalism to think itself out of its current state.

Wallerstein, who speaks so confidently (if glumly) about the space left for human agency, proposes that a moment of crisis is nigh—a place where that agency might be usefully deployed. He suggests that the key struggle of our time is “between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre,” or between neoliberal globalization and the demand for structural adjustment and change. Yet if we are “products of a process,” what measure of agency do we have in this struggle? In fairness to Wallerstein, he does present moments of crisis within any given system as a moment when change becomes possible, but he cannot provide a formula for that change in this instance. The same goes for Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude*, which proposes that the same communication technologies that enable global capitalism will eventually become the tools that allow the multitude (that is, the pluralistic mass of individuals repressed by Empire) to actualize. Hardt and Negri argue that the key historical development that will allow the multitude to realize itself is the rise to hegemonic centrality of “immaterial labor,” or “labor that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response.”

This labor corresponds to the dominance of service, rather than production, as the economic engine of the U.S. and many European powers. In fostering “communication” and “relationship[s],” it provides the laborers with the means for becoming a global collective. As Dean has pointed out, however, no one has presented a viable alternative for the now-connected world to gather around, and those communication technologies have yet

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to foster anything besides more conversation.\textsuperscript{37} If we are simply waiting for communication technologies to incite what Hardt and Negri call a latent “will to power” that will confront “global hierarchy,” (\textit{Multitude} 353), then even these two eminent thinkers, who have done so much to shape how we think about contemporary power, do not compel us to consider this historical moment a crisis where what we do, think, or profess has any immediate force.

One can find ample reason to doubt, too, the unstated implication of Hardt and Negri’s multitude: greater communication does not necessarily lead to greater collectivization. This assumption permeated a number of important academic arguments over the last decade-plus. In 1996, during an uncharacteristic flight into sheer speculation, Manuel Castells suggested that the commercialized Internet “would be closer to the historical experience of merchant streets which sprout out from vibrant urban cultures than to the shopping centers spread in the dullness of anonymous suburbs.”\textsuperscript{38} Castells’ Benjaminian faith here depends upon his ability to see certain kinds of communication as natural and fruitful. The organic terms he utilizes (“sprout,” “vibrant”) for the merchant streets naturalizes their activity as a life-affirming byproduct of human contact, unlike the dehumanizing imposition of shopping centers, “spread” by some invisible hand. This opposition relies on a belief in a continuum of consumer practices whose poles mark human vibrancy and human dullness. Castells’ sense that communication technologies will generate the former emerges from his belief that human interaction of an organic sort will necessarily enrich participants. Wallerstein, too, assents to this proposition: the current world-system’s yoking together of the planet has ensured that “people are more fully

\textsuperscript{37} See Jodi Dean, \textit{Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics}. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009: 4. Dean argues throughout \textit{Democracy} that these communication technologies produce a simulacra of democracy, where everyone has a voice, but each voice does not contribute to a broader conversation. It simply participates in circulation that benefits, rather than challenges, the standing order.

aware” of the inequalities that inhere to the system’s structure, and as a result they are “more willing to struggle for their rights, more skeptical of the powerful” (89). What undergirds this faith besides reliance on leftist teleology?

I would agree with Wallerstein that the result of immaterial labor, the Internet, and globalization has certainly lead to greater skepticism, but skepticism does not generate a propensity toward struggle. As Deleuze and Guattari memorably put it, “[f]ewer and fewer believe in [capitalism] but it makes no difference, since capitalism is like the Christian religion, it lives precisely from a lack of belief, it does not need it.”\(^39\) Conscious belief or assent does not fuel either institution; rather, they rely on practices that feel compulsory. The question of do-I-or-don’t-I believe matters much less that the fact that one performs capitalism into circulation. Even rejection of these practices generally emerges only after years of indoctrination whose imprint will never quite be removed, not to mention a social structure that infers citizens’ allegiance to both.\(^40\)

Rather than becoming dangerous, skepticism fomented when capitalism fails to deliver on its rhetoric gets re-routed back into the capitalist machine. Deleuze and Guattari explain how and why: “the capitalist machine thrives on decoded and deterritorialized flows; it decodes and deterritorializes them still more, but while causing them to pass into an axiomatic apparatus that combines them, and at the points of combination produces pseudo codes and artificial reterritorializations.”\(^41\) Here, the authors describe the remarkable ability of capitalism to recombine what it releases into more fuel for itself. Capitalism functions by taking “flows,” or pathways of desire, that were once tightly controlled and repressed and making them free. These

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\(^{40}\) No matter how widespread secularism might feel, I daresay that the God envisioned by every American president who has said “And God bless America” has been the Christian God.

\(^{41}\) Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 375, 374.
freed flows, however, are not allowed to run wherever they like. The apparatus seizes these freed flows and attaches them to the capitalist order, where they attach themselves to what capitalism has to offer. To illustrate, one might consider the rhetoric that surrounds Islamic women’s dress. After the “liberation” of Iraq, any number of news stories discussed Iraqi females’ delight at being able to buy fashionable, often revealing Western clothing. The freeing of their desire to avoid the confinement of the Baathist regime is replaced not with a free-floating desire, but with one transformed into craving for the goods available on the capitalist map.

But what happens to that skepticism that Wallerstein sees as so potent? It emerges in the smirk that Jim Halpert offers to the camera in every episode of the popular U.S. television show “The Office.” Jim is aware of the absurdity of contemporary office culture and of the strange hierarchies it creates. In nearly every episode, Jim makes eye contact with the would-be documentary camera during particularly ridiculous moments someone treats with deadpan seriousness. The look connects the viewer with Jim, the detached cynic who gets it, and the audience is invited to consider itself to have Jim’s heightened awareness. Skepticism gets routed into this shared ironic gaze, and then everyone goes back to work or back to consumption (your real work, one might say). Awareness of this sort, as we have seen, does not seem destined to metastasize into struggle, protest, or reform.

To summarize, the possibilities floated by respected figures for reacting to current hegemonic conditions fall into utopianism or forget the ability of the system to recombine resistance as it has traditionally been constituted. They seem to share faith in natural human propensities (realizing one’s exploitation will mean reacting against it; contact yields empathy and collectivization) that they should know better than to believe in any longer. Thinking in traditional terms, these examples show, remains habitual.
The left-liberal, hearing more traditional solutions to new and seemingly intractable dilemmas, sinks into the nihilistic, relativistic present, seeing more of the same and more of that on the horizon. Part of the intractability presumed by the U.S. left-liberal stems from what neoliberalism instantiates—a market with limitless consumer options for relatively cheap prices.

U.S. Individualism and the Logic of Whole Foods

As Cyrus Patell and Colin Hutchinson have discussed, the U.S. psychological investment in an ideology of individualism runs terribly deep. Hutchinson has pointed out the difficulty the far U.S. left had in drumming up anti-capitalist sentiment in the middle of the 20th century, as average workers enjoyed a far superior standard of living than they had known as children. Patell traces how a certain interpretation of Emersonian individualism became a profoundly pervasive ideology for which individual desire and potential became sacrosanct.

These interrelated points explain why none of the figures I list above advocates acting in a way significantly different from the way the consumer usually does. Compulsory consumerism, the condition made omnipresent by the hegemony of neoliberal globalization, hems in the political formation of resistance, because without abandoning creature comforts to which we have all grown accustomed, we cannot do without what the market offers. What should concern the left-liberal and the left-liberal thinker is that the near-impossibility of escaping consumerist imperatives does much more than anything else to ensure the continuity of the status quo. The most comfortable prospects for change present themselves through buying—“go green” is a lot easier to do than “go without.”

For this reason, U.S. liberalism has recently hung its hat on issues of consumer choice, rather than questions of sacrifice or community-orientation. As a result, U.S. liberals are more
readily identified by their consumer choices than by their political principles. The U.S. liberal is much more likely to buy a hybrid, those long-lasting lightbulbs, or see an independent film in a theater than agree on foundational logic. While these folks might nominally fall on the same side regarding health care, environmental worries, or gay rights, the reasons they do so are affective, not intellectual. These same affective cues are what pull the U.S. liberal into the cultural actions that, for better or for worse, define the position these days. The proof is in the half-hearted commitment to these points that feel necessary but are unlikely, in the long term, to prove effective.

To give just one example, Elizabeth Kolbert’s review “Green Like Me” explores several recent eco-memoirs, all of which make disclaimers about the smallness of any individual contribution to the problems facing the planet. Nearly every typical practice of American life leaves an ineradicable carbon footprint. If we were serious about cleaning up the world, Kolbert proposes, we could choose to live like the one billion individuals off globalization’s map, most of whom have a carbon footprint of zero. Kolbert’s unstated implication is that left-liberals, who are likely to espouse the importance of environmental responsibility, simply will not make that choice. The need to tailor the argument to the audience means that environmental messages ask one to turn off the lights, not to get rid of one’s car and grow one’s own food.

43 Certainly, plenty hear the less watered-down message. Witness Peggy Orenstein’s “The Femnivore’s Dilemma,” an article about several sophisticated, educated women who gave up jobs for full-time, totally green, organic backyard farming. The story, however, is sure to show these women do not escape potential unhappiness. The piece ends with this: “if a woman is not careful, it seems, chicken wire can coop her up as surely as any gilded cage.” Her point is ultimately that women do not necessarily escape marginalization because they do something eco-friendly. I cite the example to show that left-liberals seem more concerned about being eco-friendly than correcting the structural issues that lead to marginalization—if even the less watered-down message is still watered down. I hasten to add, also, that Orenstein’s subjects belong to families that survive on one income. The large majority of U.S. families could not say the same. Still, this movement does portend the possibility of material changes in consumerism, I admit. “Femnivore’s Dilemma.” New York Times Magazine 11 March 2010.
The accounting that requires this compromised message must consider the resistance the comfortable liberal-leftist has to conceptualizing major structural change. The mind reels when pondering the kind of changes that would free us from cars (wouldn’t that mean we were chained to our homes?). Still, the left-liberal’s wishful, seemingly indefensible faith in human-centered solutions to the world’s woes tend to make them obey (if not crave) moralistic behavioral dictates. That faith, however, competes with pragmatic, material exigencies to limit what those imperatives can realistically request.

A moment from Gain underscores this vexed condition. Main character Laura Bodey, who believes she is dying of cancer she got from exposure to the products of a chemical company called Clare, realizes “she cannot sue the company for raiding her house. She brought [their products] in, by choice, toted them in a shopping bag. And she’d do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to” (98). Powers’ use of indirect discourse, a practice I discuss at length in Chapter 3, demonstrates Laura’s paradoxical understanding of “choice.” She chose to bring the goods in. That she “[w]ould have to” do the same thing again does not make her feel less like she made a choice. She does not see the system as all-determining, in spite of her compulsory participation within it. Part of what is at work here is Patell’s “methodological individualism,” in which the U.S. citizen limits assessments of responsibility to direct action; Laura cannot blame anyone else for what she did herself, even though she intuits coercion (“would have to”). Powers’ novel tempts us with blaming Clare for what happens to Laura, but Laura perceptively understands that what we might call corporate coercion is enabled by tacit cultural approval. By and large, corporations enhance access to a greater quality of life as Laura

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44 Consider the opening of the 2009 Duncan Jones film Moon. The film opens with a commercial that asks two questions—“Remember when you had to feel bad about starting your car?”, “Remember how guilty you were when you left the lights on?”—that summons the affective response it anticipates its audience has to these dictates (and as a low-budget, high-concept, critically acclaimed independent film, it can make a good bet about who will watch it).
and most Americans understand it—values that are built into the term “quality of life” itself. The vast majority prefer (or at least think they prefer, if a difference between the terms exists) the world that corporations help provide over and above what they imagine is the alternative. Laura here refuses the easy, casual anti-corporatism so common to the liberal-left because she realizes she both would not choose otherwise and could not choose otherwise.

Laura’s example shows us the limitations of the making-cultural of liberal-leftist politics. Because structural change is off the table, the options available emerge from the standing structure. These options present themselves as more or less ethical—one could make ethical arguments about long-lasting bulbs and hybrids—but the social body is stuck with whatever ethical problems the larger structure allows. What do we know about the companies who make long-lasting bulbs and hybrids? What do we know about the long-term effects of the construction of each? We do not ask these questions unless we have to, because the material exigencies and the deep-seated cultural preferences leave us preferring not to consider them.

To illustrate what I mean here, one might take the rather entertaining fracas that developed after John Mackey, the CEO of Whole Foods, published an editorial in the Wall Street Journal denigrating President Obama’s healthcare plan and proposing more libertarian reforms to the system.45 Many accused Mackey of violating a trust formed between Whole Foods and its customers, and boycotts were organized and threatened.46 Customers of Whole Foods presumably choose the market because of its large selection of organic, local, and “fair trade” products as well as its reputation for treating its employees well. If the revelations in popular books like Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal (2001)

45 See John Mackey, “The Whole Foods Alternative to ObamaCare: Eight things we can do to improve health care without adding to the deficit,” Wall Street Journal 11 August 2009.
46 See “Whole Foods CEO John Mackey Out to Alienate Core Customers,” Seekingalpha.com., 12 August 2009 for the one example of the former, wholeboycott.com for the latter.
and Michael Pollan’s *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (2008) made left-liberals realize that their food-buying practices contributed to individual and social ills. Whole Foods offered an affective salve: by shopping there, you didn’t have to worry about the food thing anymore. Mackey’s declaration complicated matters, frustrating what was the obviously too-easy acceptance of that salve. The tenuous act of balancing ethics and practicality made it irresistibly tempting to assume an automatic association between the Whole Foods image—we can help you with that food thing!—and other liberal positions, which in more optimistic moments look like linked moral certainties. Whole Foods activates a naïve optimism about the possibility of an easy ethical consumerism, and the betrayal of that optimism is felt all the more keenly because of the activation: I daresay few are concerned with the politics of the owner of their local Chinese food restaurant or stance on gay marriage held by the proprietor of one’s pizza place. Those outraged by Mackey are angered because they have been reminded of what they knew all along—that choosing one store over another was not going to be a panacea, and that they feel they have no choice but to continue in the same way.

These three examples (Kolbert’s impotent eco-memoirs, Laura’s choice that is not a choice, and the Whole Foods fracas) indicate that left-liberal cultural practice is motivated by a strong desire to do the ethical thing in spite of these gestures’ obvious limitations. The bulbs and the hybrid might slow global warming, but how much? The people who farmed your coffee beans might have it a little better, but what if that means the stock boys have it worse? A side effect of globalization has been an increase in the awareness of human interdependence. We are reminded constantly that our local actions have global repercussions. Such acknowledgment complicates the continued commitment of the liberal-leftist to these cultural practices, especially because the good (lowering one’s own carbon footprint) is clearly far afield from the ideal
Actually reversing global climate change). Without structural change as a real or an imaginative possibility, though, the left-liberal is stuck with these limited cultural activities.

**The Common Good**

Still, this brand of do-gooding remains vitally important to the life of the left-liberal in the United States. To discuss why, I would like to begin by calling attention to a key movement in Wallace’s essay, “Host,” his profile of conservative talk show host (and now author, filmmaker and blogger) John Ziegler. Wallace traces the rise of radio stations exclusively dedicated to rightist or Republican-oriented programming as a result of a Reagan-era repeal of a law that forced talk radio to split time between the two sides of the political spectrum. The act that required equal airtime stemmed from FCC chairman Newton Minow’s belief in a distinction between “the public interest” and what “merely interests the public,” a distinction Wallace describes as “*itself* liberal…’liberal’ in the sense of being rooted in a professed concern for the common good over and above the preferences of individual citizens.” Legislating this difference requires someone “arrogating the power to decide what that common good is.”47 For Wallace, who by any definition was a U.S. liberal—though, as Adam Kelly has argued, Wallace’s nonfiction reveals his thorough interrogation of what that meant—liberalism requires a violence befitting the term “arrogating.” The contemporary political right decries the violence of the government’s expulsion of religion from the state, seizure of wealth through taxation, and punishing of ethnic majorities. The right’s position, insofar as it is at all coherent, seems to be that no one has the right to perform this arrogating (except that declaring this preference does its own arrogating, but I digress). Wallace acknowledges the real violence any imposed belief system generates, even one that aims for a common good.

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More importantly for this study, Wallace believes in something called “the common good.” What makes the position liberal is not that it identifies a common good, but that it privileges the common good over what might benefit individuals. That a common good exists never gets questioned. For the liberal, the necessity of upholding the common good justifies the violence of arrogation. The left-liberal who pays more for the eco-friendly or organic product or separates her garbage commits the violence of sacrifice to prove their commitment to this common good. Believing in it secures ethical value in one’s daily practices.

For Wallace, the prospect that one does not work toward a common good feels uncomfortable. In another essay, he asks the following series of questions: “Is the real point of my life simply to undergo as little pain and as much pleasure as possible? My behavior sure seems to indicate that this is what I believe, at least a lot of the time. But isn’t this kind of a selfish way to live? Forget selfish—isn’t it awfully lonely?” To abdicate the common good would be to become self-absorbed, removed from the social sphere, distant from the warmth of ethical certainty. That something like “the public good” exists ensures that something exists and is valuable besides one’s own narrow desires.

In the context of the human Wallace and Robinson describe, the notion of a public good legitimizes the conversion of being into struggling or striving. If all desiring must be desiring-for, then desiring for the good of the species necessarily feels like an ethical desire, perhaps even of the organic or authentic sort that these authors privilege. The question of how to locate this authentic desiring-for underscores all the novels I will discuss and, by extension, is an important one both for contemporary fiction and for fiction’s intended audience.

48 Wallace 2004: 261. The simplistic, naïve-sounding tone of these questions comes from the essay’s conceit, where Wallace intersperses discussion of Dostoevsky’s work (as seen in Joseph Frank’s biographies) with what seem to Wallace essential human questions that contemporary cynicism prevents us from asking.
The alternative to the right kind of desiring-for is entrapment within Appadurai’s pessimistic determination, where omnipresent global mediascapes rewrite imagination. It means the desperation of Ronell’s mind-altering project, the drive for self-escape that destroys Madame Bovary. Perhaps the best characterization of the prospects of desiring-for come from Agamben, whose essay “What is an Apparatus?” uses its ostensible project—defining what Foucault meant when he referred to an apparatus—to articulate the fear that undergirds contemporary left-liberalism. In keeping with poststructuralist tradition, Agamben sees the subject resulting from interaction with the public sphere, rather than preceding it. That sphere is made up of items and practices that make the user of the item or doer of the practice into a new subjectivity—“user of ‘x’” or “doer of ‘y.’” The pen turns the user into a writer, the cigarette user into a smoker, and so on. Agamben characterizes these interactions as “subjectifying,” producing a subject position that the doing or using body inhabits. Under normal circumstances, the moving in and out of subjectivities, or desubjectifying and resubjectifying, will result in a subject that can continue to evolve, exploring potentiality instead of wallowing in passivity. For Agamben, the body that does can become the writer, then the smoker, then the writer, then the reader, then the sleeper and maintain something like “its own truth” in the process of this resubjectifying that otherwise lost.

Agamben worries that the more recent versions of technological apparatuses fail to allow the resubjectification essential to the proper constitution of the subject:

what we are now witnessing is that processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to become reciprocally indifferent, and so they do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject….In the nontruth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake. He who lets himself be captured by the ‘cellular telephone’ apparatus—
whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him—cannot acquire a new
subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled. The
spectator who spends his evenings in front of the television only gets, in exchange for his
desubjectification, the frustrated mask of the couch potato, or his inclusion in the

The indiscriminate desiring-for elicited by the temporality that pains—get me something that
will make me feel better—combined with the passivity that technological apparatuses induce
leave Agamben worried. The subject can be “captured” instead of reforming in keeping with “its
own truth.” As Ronell says of crack cocaine, “Crack disappoints the pleasure a drug might be
expected to arouse … it is only about producing a need for itself” (25). It threatens to limit,
rather than to open up, possibility. The contemporary U.S., of course, is riddled with these
desubjectifying apparatuses (or, if you prefer, apparatuses that threaten to desubjectify). For
most U.S. citizens, geared towards self-gratification, the ability to distinguish between
desubjectifying and resubjectifying apparatuses has been compromised. Hallucinatory
satisfaction becomes the desired mode of satisfaction because desire is disciplined to want what
the market can provide, regardless of whether or not the satisfaction resubjectifies in appropriate
ways. In the vocabulary of this chapter, Agamben’s fear is that authentic or organic desires fare
poorly under contemporary capitalism. He sees an intensification of the same mechanisms that
capture Madame Bovary; one shudders to think how quickly she might have met her fate had she
been able to text Léon or buy dresses online.

The notion of the common good rescues the individual from the limitations of
desubjectification, from entirely self-oriented desire, from the morass of relativism. Defining the
common good becomes increasingly difficult when “the common” includes the planet. Manufacturing commitment to it gets complicated by the obvious distance between the good and the perfect. The advertising that bombards the individual in late consumer society threatens to put concepts of goodness to work toward mercenary ends. The massive, impersonal forces of neoliberal globalization seem a great deal more powerful than anything an individual or even a national collective might be. In this environment, anything claimed to be the common good is likely to be met with radical skepticism. For the left-liberal, though, life is meaningless without it.

A very reductive way of reading the last several paragraphs would see the whole point of contemporary liberalism and these novels is to influence individuals to make better choices. I admit a measure of truth in this reading, but I insist that the contemporary compromising of faith in anything like individual agency makes advocating anything like “choosing” an extremely complicated gesture. Think of the compromised position of Laura Bodey: she has to make the choices she does. What does choosing mean, in this context?

Answering this question requires re-establishing foundations and ethical hierarchies on those foundations, even after postmodernism taught us to distrust those gestures. The political gesture, Jodi Dean explains, requires making an assertion, regardless of the grounding of that assertion, and designing a case for that assertion’s value. In advancing beliefs like a common good and in trying to reformulate their audience’s default mode toward consumerism, these writers produce necessary fictions for sustaining their belief system. In so doing, the writers perform an act perhaps perfectly suited for a world that unwittingly inhabits Slavoj Žižek’s formulation of postmodern ideology, which he defines as the condition of knowing one’s real conditions and relentlessly forgetting or overlooking them. Even if the practice of rote ritual in
Western society is performed knowingly or ironically, the performance perpetuates the symbolic tapestry that maintains ideological consistency; if I pay for dinner and hold the door for my girlfriend, I’m working patriarchal ideology into reification, even though I teach my classes about feminism and patriarchy.\textsuperscript{50} This version of ideology seems particularly useful for describing the individual who knows his actions are largely overdetermined and unlikely to change the status quo, yet who persists—and feel he must persist—as though those actions were self-willed and aimed at truly ethical ends.

**Partially Complete Determination and the Value of Reading**

No formulation of hegemony suggests that its power is total. As Raymond Williams showed decades ago, hegemonic apparatuses must consistently deal with emergent and residual modes of thought and behavior that escape its capture. Hegemony has to shift strategy to deal with the movement of these modes. That it must shift tells us it is not total. As Michael Bérubé, quoting Stuart Hall, has recently pointed out, no one would be able to identify or theorize hegemony or ideology if it were as powerful as deeply pessimistic readings have it.

And here we see why we are not all Madame Bovary. Clearly, Appadurai’s imagination is not so disciplined as to keep it from recognizing its disciplining. Imagination, like desire, can be routed but not fixed. We see unpredictability occur all around us.

At the same time, globalization, neoliberalism, and the various apparatuses I discuss above incite a fear of homogenization, isolation, and erasure. We look around and see the same stores everywhere, the same television shows and movies, the same music. Whether these fears are justified or not—one wonders what is inherently good about heterogeneity, and one wonders

\textsuperscript{50} Žižek’s most focused and coherent articulation of this framework comes his introduction to *Mapping Ideology*, London and New York: Verso, 1994: 1-33.
why certain homogeneities (running water) are good and others (cell phones) are bad—they present themselves to the liberal-left as urgent. The crisis that has marked the liberal-left over the last two decades provides evidence that something not oriented toward the common good has taken over and should cause fear.

To return to a point I brought up in my preface, the longtime political orientation of both U.S. authors of serious fiction and their readers has been liberal-left, and I propose here that part of this link is related to the notions of striving for a “better” that I have discussed as part and parcel of the U.S. liberal-left’s sensibility. One can argue whether the notion that reading is “good” for you, often promulgated as though reading were like eating vegetables, is true or has benefitted the practice of reading in the United States. Nonetheless, it continues to mobilize readers, as Shirley Brice Heath has shown. Heath’s extensive research on individuals committed to reading what she calls “serious” fiction “uncovered a ‘wide unanimity’ among serious readers that literature ‘makes me a better person.’” Part of this making-better emerges because “reading serious literature impinges on the embedded circumstances in people’s lives in such a way that they have to deal with them. And, in so dealing, they come to see themselves as deeper and more capable of handling their ability to have a totally unpredictable life….Reading enables [the serious reader] to maintain a sense of something substantive” because literature serves as “the only place where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical dimensions of life that were elsewhere treated so simplistically.”

Importantly, Heath’s readers differentiate between the rewards they reap from literature and “instruction,” which they definitively do not believe they receive.

51 These quotations from Heath appear in Jonathan Franzen’s “Why Bother?” in How to Be Alone: Essays, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2003: 81-83. The first quotation above contains Heath’s words in single quotes amidst Franzen’s; the rest come directly from Heath. Franzen does not cite his sources, frustrating my ability to locate the original.
In other words, the feeling of engagement readers of serious fiction look for does not feel like an encounter with didacticism. Instead, the reader seeks to meet a text whose world presents itself as a “place” where “ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical dimensions of life” are treated with seriousness and complexity. I quote Heath at this length not because I believe these readers are necessarily correct in their assessment of what literature offers. I do believe, however, that the role of writer and reader in the social imaginary of the group I’ve discussed can be usefully understood through this dynamic.\textsuperscript{52} These readers come to these writers expecting something that eschews platitudes in favor of a more complicated offering—something that does not appear in the guise of the desubjectifying apparatus.

Reading, strangely, becomes rebellious for these readers: they turn to imaginary worlds for the substance that their actual world does not provide. The imaginary space of fiction, discussed by Ruth Ronen and Lubodomir Dolezel as “fictional worlds,” occupies unique ontological territory.\textsuperscript{53} Fictional narration inaugurates the creation of a world that may resemble but is not our actual world. The plane of existence on which the fiction occurs should be thought of as a world, however, because fictions offer themselves as totalities whose ordering is complete; the audience’s assumptions about the completeness of any world allow for the totality, which the fiction can only partly describe, to seem sufficiently world-like.\textsuperscript{54} To give an example, Homer describes the weapons and armor of just a handful of Acheans and Trojans. Readers give

\textsuperscript{52} For commentary on recent American novels that address the value of reading, the purpose of fiction, and the position of the author, see Jeremy Green, \textit{Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium}. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. Laura Savu reads the resurrection of author figures in contemporary narrative as a desire to restate the author with some cultural authority and to establish the significance of cultural memory in \textit{Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative}. Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.


\textsuperscript{54} An interesting illustration of the necessarily closed nature of a fictional world would be the ending of an inconclusive novel like Pynchon’s \textit{The Crying of Lot 49}. Though the book ends right before the moment that might provide the information that would resolve much of the novel’s mysteries, the world of \textit{Crying} is not unfinished simply for being inconclusive. One’s invitation to imagine the fictional world ends when the fiction ends; the uninvited imagining produces a different world, one whose composition changes utterly with a change in authoring.
weapons and armor to the rest of the warriors, even though soldiers may possibly be on the battlefield completely unequipped. We do so because all actions must take place in a world, and when the world seems to have a blank space, fiction expects us to fill it in with what we get in the actual world. To give another example, we may read that a person sits at a breakfast table, reading the newspaper. We do not need to be told that the room has four walls, or that the table has legs, or that the newspaper is written in a language the man can understand. When Clarissa Dalloway leaves Mrs. Pym’s store with her flowers, we assume she has paid.

The encounter with fiction is then an encounter where the process of world-making makes itself visible. As Deleuze and Guattari argue in Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature and John Johnston echoes in Information Multiplicity, fiction acts as a "slowing down" machine. The slowing down exposes connections and machinations that produce a world’s worldliness. The process goes like this: a work of fiction provides readers with the characteristics of its world that separate it from the actual world. Those characteristics might be major—humans are subservient to machines or animals; significant historical events never occurred or happened differently—or might be as small as the advent of a non-actual person presented as a person. Those differences, animated by narrativity, necessarily produce different systems and logics that the reader is invited to consider. As opposed to the givens of non-fictional discourse, fictions offer propositions that take on a life governed by whatever forces the fiction imports or invents.

The process of taking on a life can be best explained by Niklas Luhmann’s influential systems-theory, which proposes that modern society is “a network of interconnected social subsystems,” each of which “reproduces recursively on the basis of its own, system-specific operations.”\textsuperscript{55} Luhmann’s term “autopoiesis” refers to this tendency of systems to function

recursively, assessing their relation to their environment and pursuing a logic that keeps the system at its chosen level of stasis. Any totality is in fact an agglomeration of sub-totalities, all of which function as autonomous but interconnected systems. Fictional narration's privileged relationship to world-making allows it to produce worlds. Because that production is documented legibly and permanently within a text, fictional narrative can reveal the worldliness of worlds and the systematicity of systems. Reading, for Heath’s readers, feels substantive because it provides a richer interaction with a totality whose determining logic bears important resemblances to those of the actual world.

How substantive this encounter is obviously depends on the fiction. Fictions that provide conventional or traditional plotting or characterization do not reveal anything besides long-standing cultural modes of thinking. For Heath’s readers of serious fiction, however, they crave an encounter with the world that complicates or revises those long-standing modes in favor of something richer and more sophisticated. Unlike the novels that inflamed Madame Bovary’s imagination, these novels spur a desiring-production of the more authentic or laudatory sort. This desire, of course, recalls Lionel Trilling’s complaint about U.S. liberal fiction and criticism throughout The Liberal Imagination, where he bemoans fictions that give their audience exactly what they want—the world picture as they have grown used to seeing it—and critics who applaud them for doing so: “liberal criticism…which established the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty of resembling reality as much as possible, he is not really responsible for anything, not even for his ideas…they urge us to deal impatiently with ideas” instead of interrogating them carefully and intelligently.56 Literature for Trilling remains the site best capable for sustained interrogation of the liberal imagination, a position I do

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not care to defend or denigrate. I offer it because Trilling’s belief in it reflects that of Heath’s readers, for whom the best fictions produce this substantive encounter. To borrow from the terminology I will use in my discussion of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, these novels offer the chance to experiment with the self’s limitations rather than an opportunity to escape the self.

**Negotiation and the Tragic View**

Part of the substance of these novels derives from their willingness to begin inside a world without foundations. They accept the findings of systems theory and acknowledge the intervention of the high postmodernists. They recognize that the world cannot be understood in the terms available a generation ago, for subsequent decades have only intensified the academic rewriting of the available world-picture, especially as this world-picture begins to make its way from the academy into the public sphere. The liberal faith in progressivism gives sanction to higher education in the humanities as well as in the sciences. Liberalism believes that the more thinking goes into something, the more likely it is to generate means toward progressive ends. As such, it cannot engage in the turning away from these insights that the religious right or the firmly pragmatic realist might.

Each of the texts I discuss addresses the absence of a foundation that once undergirded the liberal-left ethical system. As a result, the texts deal with challenges to individual agency, subjectivity, identity, ontology, ethnicity, tradition, and the possibility of a universal ethics. They must do more, however, than simply reiterate the challenge. They need to articulate something that resurrects the possibility of a common good or gives struggle a meaning. For most of the novels, this effort at resurrection occurs at the individual level. Too tentative to consider collectivity, the texts make the terrain of their inquiry the personal.
All they aim for is making negotiation of that terrain dignified and livable. These novels, like a remarkable number of contemporary U.S. texts, depict quotidian existence in the stark terms of a survivor story, where mere perseverance is a worthy end-point. As a result, my readings of these novels will not hunt for “resistance,” the term so many critical texts have fetishized. Too much academic work assumes that resistance to power is automatically good, without considering whether what Rush Limbaugh is up to might also be categorized in this way. I follow Mahmood Saba in believing that scholarship too often superimposes a teleological politics over its subjects, ignoring the vital Foucaultian lesson that power and resistance are mutually constitutive. As Jeffrey Nealon has put it, in a memorable clause, resistance is not “a high-end or very expensive commodity, revealed magician-like by unique men and women, and available only at scarce or obscure locations, such as academic monographs.” Because the novels focus on negotiation rather than resistance or rebellion, I read them on the terms they present, and I try faithfully to intuit the way the audience would understand those gestures.

The project may seem regressive, in that I am not suggesting these novels present instances of rupture that might produce a different future. Because these novels presuppose the conditions of the present will extend indefinitely or get worse, I do not see their movements as suggesting a radical opening-up of possibility. I do so not to assess the truth-value of these movements but rather to understand what the social imagination on the left envisions as possible. In so doing I hope to offer a means of bridging academic and public understandings of progressive change together.

59 For a compelling argument of this sort, see Jeffrey Karnicky’s Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
The last gesture I will make before turning to the novels themselves requires me to invoke Pascal once again—or, more specifically, Lucien Goldmann’s reading of Pascal’s wager. I introduce Pascal here for two reasons. First, the form of crisis that I see at work in these texts is clearly not new. Like the authors I discuss here, Pascal did not believe that massive changes in the secular sphere were possible, and Goldmann offers a picture of Pascal’s world in great detail that reveals the incredible limitations of personal agency. Second, Pascal’s example (and what Goldmann does with it) illustrates the distinction between crass pragmatism and a necessary fiction. The works I discuss are deeply invested in the latter, and a brief discussion of Pascal and Goldmann help explain way.

Goldmann’s brilliant *Hidden God: A Study of the Tragic Vision in the Pensees of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* defines the tragic vision as a desire for “genuinely ethical norms” in a world where those norms are unrealizable. This world, the tragic vision says, will never be genuinely ethical because of its very nature, yet one ceases to become ethical when one ceases to desire those norms. This paradox is just one that Goldmann argues is essential to the tragic vision; to take another, God never appears to the secular sphere, but God’s appearance—his omnipresence—cannot be doubted by the tragic viewer. Rather than addressing this paradox, Goldmann views the tragic vision as built on a series of paradoxes that must be understood as axiomatic.

The interpretation Goldmann offers of Pascal’s wager utilizes the paradoxical construction of the tragic vision in order to show the wager’s avoidance of practical pragmatism: “Far from merely stating that it is reasonable to chance the certain and finite goods of this world against the possibility of gaining a happiness which is doubly infinite both in intensity and duration…this wager states that the finite goods of this world have no value at all, and that the
only human life which has any real meaning is that of a reasonable being who seeks God…. of whose final creation he has no certain proof.” In other words, Pascal is not suggesting that the wager is intelligent based on the possible outcomes of the wager. The wager’s truth-value is unverifiable. The gesture of the wager itself recuperates the possibility of meaning.

Recall the epigraph to the preface: “You are embarked. Which will you choose then?” To be human is to be given into existence: you do not embark yourself. Humans do not bring into existence the journey or path that “embark” implies and that defines their state; importantly, too, the phrasing poses one’s embarked-ness in the present tense—one is always embarked. At the same time, lacking control over one’s origins or position does not mean one entirely lacks agency. The discrepancy between the assertion of overdetermination—“you are embarked”—followed the offer of a choice—“Which one will you choose?”—reminds us of Laura Bodey’s paradoxical definition of choice, just as the “embarked” human recalls Wallace and Robinson’s humans, who begin homeless and struggling. The authors I discuss in this book, Wallace, Powers, Robinson, Dinaw Mengestu, and Junot Díaz, exhibit remarkable affinities with the tragic view of Pascal. They do not believe the world is savable. They believe individual lives, however, may have important choices. Like Pascal, they believe that meaning can be sustained if one inhabits authentic modes of desiring or strives toward the common good.

My use of the tragic view as a heuristic intends to diagnose what “supra-individual help” contemporary left-liberals “must wager” upon. Like Goldmann, I see the wagering these texts perform as less about the end of the wager—whether it is correct or incorrect—and more about how the choice to wager makes possible ways to “live and act” that reinvent “hope of a final success” (302). These writers are not concerned with whether heaven exists, but how to

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negotiate life on Earth. The wagers these texts propose for consideration by their readership consider themselves to be compromised. Robinson’s narrator in *Gilead*, a dying Presbyterian preacher, explains that he has no rational foundation for his understanding of grace; Eugenides’ transsexual narrator settles on an identity even after realizing that identities are fluid constructions (the same could be said for many of the characters in the novels I have chosen here). What “final success” means in all these texts is not the hope of eternal salvation but instead a life where perseverance—perhaps the most common desire that accompanies the journey, once we are embarked—means something more than simple survival.
Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology

Chapter 2: Consumption that Consumes: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

Drugs make us ask what it means to consume anything, anything at all.—Avitall Ronell, *Crack Wars*

Some persons can give themselves away to an ambitious pursuit and have that be all the giving-themselves-away-to-something they need to do. Though sometimes this changes as the players get older and the pursuit more stress-fraught. American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels. Some just prefer to do it in secret.—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The first decade-plus of literary criticism on David Foster Wallace has largely been guilty of two errors. First, academics have used Wallace’s non-fictional pronouncements as guidelines for reading his work, which often leads these readers into finding exactly what they expected to see. Wallace was an acute observer of U.S. social life, film, and literature, but he was not a great reader of his own work. The distance most criticism has failed to achieve prevented

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many readers from realizing that they, in T.S. Eliot’s old phrase, should trust the work and not the writer.

The second error I see in Wallace’s criticism is its adoption of Wallace’s vision of “postmodernism” in order to find Wallace’s work a complete break with his literary predecessors. Wallace often equated postmodernism with metafiction, not seeing that the latter was a hallmark of some postmodern artifacts but not necessarily all. In addition, he isolates postmodernism in literature from the social, political, intellectual, and economic factors that David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Linda Hutcheon have shown produced postmodernism as a cultural dominant. Critics have taken Wallace’s characterization of lesser metafiction to encompass all of postmodern literature. They thus imply that postmodern literature lacked sympathetic characters, did not desire to connect with its audience, and consisted exclusively of inhuman language game, claims that mischaracterize a movement whose heterogeneity certainly included these elements but also assume that literature of every period must share the traits of 19th century realism to matter. These misreadings have been driven by the understandable urge to uncover a new dominant in literature; writers as talented as Wallace, too, can easily excite overstatement.

I do not mean to say Wallace is not worthy of study or that his work should not be seen in conversation with postmodernism. I believe Wallace’s work amongst the richest and most vibrant of the last two decades, and I do believe his reaction to his predecessors deserves attention. What makes Wallace an exemplary figure is not that he made a break with his time period. Instead, I find him noteworthy for his attempts to negotiate a workable space within its dominant logic. Wallace’s profoundly pessimistic writing accepts and embodies many of the precepts I outline in the previous chapter: like the liberal under neoliberalism, Wallace sees no

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63 See “E Unibus” and the McCaffrey interview.
great change on the horizon—his work predicts massive ecological disasters, geopolitical dominance for the U.S. inconvenienced but not truly challenged by terrorism, and autonomous political and economic spheres that operate far from the will of the people.

Most importantly, Wallace believed the key terrain of contemporary struggles to be personal. Jeffrey Nealon has noted that neoliberalism’s push for economic privatization produced a cultural privatization of value.64 This reading sees the move from Keynes-ism to global capitalism, when public or national ownerships disappear in favor of privatization, inciting intensification of what Cyrus Patell has called “methodological individualism.” Patell’s term, borrowed from political philosophy, refers to a cultural tendency to understand “collective phenomena in terms of facts about individuals.” Patell’s observes that “the campaign rhetoric of American politicians—even those politicians who preach the value of family and community—invariably cites the experiences of particular individuals as if they were representative and therefore constitute proof of the validity or efficacy of social policy,” an especially valid point after the political battles of the early years of the Obama administration.65 For Nealon, methodological individualism is heightened by an economy that desires to penetrate inward. YouTube, Amazon.com, and Netflix not only bring you the entertainment you choose right to your door—they have recommendations just for “you” (and by “you,” they mean the series of clicks you’ve made that they have on record). Burger King promises to let you have it your way (and by “your way,” they mean your choice of toppings). The Army suggests it will let you be all you can be (no comment). To echo Patell, no political leader can advocate the value of social programs through citation of abstractions—he or she must appeal specifically to “the

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64 Nealon 2008: 85-90.
taxpayer.”\textsuperscript{66} This emphasis on choice-making as the key characteristic of individualism works to reify the Enlightenment notion of the individual as internal, consistent, and unique.

These developments were not invisible for Wallace. In \textit{Infinite Jest}, other fictions, and his essays, he satirizes the idea that more consumer choice means more freedom. He discusses and worries about the isolation that comes with the increasingly private lives and entertainments. As Adam Kelly has stated, Wallace’s non-fiction addressed the divisive partisan dogma that has dominated political debate in the cable-news era, all of which speaks as though methodological individualism was merely common sense.\textsuperscript{67} The irony, as Wallace noted again and again, was that the more choices the individual is given, the more “truth” cable news offers, the more alluring entertainments are available, the more alone the individual tends to feel.\textsuperscript{68}

For Wallace, however, this intense focus on the individual was not to be overcome through communitarianism or greater social commitment. Take, for instance, Wallace’s explanation of why the well-off should support welfare programs: “we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing self-interest that underlies all impulses toward economic equality.”\textsuperscript{69} The advice he gives in \textit{This is Not Water}, his well-known 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, aims not at producing communal feeling

\textsuperscript{66} An incredible number of liberal or leftist-leaning journalists averred that President Obama’s failure to get the country behind his health care legislation stemmed from his aversion to make a case that would appeal to said “taxpayer.” The common wisdom, it seemed, was that the traditional progressive appeals to collective value and to empathy were now passé. I see this process as evidence that methodological individualism has literally eroded the foundation of the left.


\textsuperscript{68} See Kelly, “loneliness, a state he saw common to all” (6); Wallace’s \textit{Salon} interview with Laura Miller, where he claims “there is this existential loneliness in the real world” (Miller, “The \textit{Salon} Interview: David Foster Wallace,” salon.com, 8 March 1996); or Thomas Tracey, who suggests that the Wallace’s early story “Lyndon” induces readers’ “gradual recognition…of [Johnson’s] undisclosed loneliness,” which they should perceive as akin to their own (“‘Like the Sky’: Responsibility in Wallace’s Early Fiction.” Talk delivered at Footnotes: Considering David Foster Wallace conference, December 6, 2009 [6]). Almost no critical text on Wallace goes very far without noting Wallace’s preoccupation with a loneliness he sees as endemic in the present.

\textsuperscript{69} Wallace 2004: 113fn. I would like to thank Adam Kelly for drawing my attention to this passage.
amongst his listeners but instead revealing the “power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type of situation” more pleasantly.\footnote{Wallace, \textit{This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life}. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2009: 93.} His diatribe against irony in “E Unibus Pluram” and in his often-quoted interview with Larry McCaffrey in the \textit{Review of Contemporary Fiction} posited that the big problem with irony was that it made one feel lonely instead of connected.

In citing these examples, I intend to show that while Wallace found cultural privatization worrisome, he did so because he saw increasing isolation leading to increasing unhappiness—a common-sense concern after cultural privatization. In other words, while he criticized the logic of his time, he also employed it. The critics that have argued Wallace worked against the logic of individualism forget that his solutions to the problems of individualism all appeal to the \textit{individual}, rather than to the collective. Take, for instance, the invocations of Wittgenstein common in Wallace’s early fiction, especially \textit{The Broom of the System} (1987). Boswell reads these to show that Wallace favors Wittgenstein’s communal theory of language over Lacan’s infinite regress. What Wallace states about Wittgenstein in the McCaffrey interview, however, reveals otherwise: “One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism. And so he trashed everything he’d been lauded for in the \textit{Tractatus} and wrote the \textit{Investigations}, which is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that’s ever been made.”\footnote{McCaffery 143.} For Wallace, Wittgenstein is an artist who does something “comprehensive and beautiful” because of how “horrible” solipsism would be. The exigency that pushed Wittgenstein, then, was how bad solipsism would be—not how poorly it explained life. I do not mean to suggest that Wallace did not believe in Wittgenstein’s conclusion, but it was a belief that he phrases on moral, not
philosophical, grounds. Based on this phrasing, we might call Wittgenstein’s communitarism a necessary fiction. Wallace’s adoption of it, as we shall see, shows real ambivalence about its applicability.

Still, critics want to see something in this adoption, riddled as it is with doubt. Perhaps the two best readers of *Infinite Jest* to date—Elizabeth Freudenthal and N. Katherine Hayles—come up with readings that locate an overtly oppositional politics within the novel. Meanwhile, Mary K. Holland and Timothy Aubry have shown how the novel’s own dependence on irony fails to achieve the sincerity of its putatively anti-ironic stance, and in recognizing this entrapment within what it would try to escape, the two effectively demonstrate the novel’s paradoxical relationship to its project of critique. At the same time, they do not connect Wallace’s failure to a larger cultural dominant—in other words, they do not see that for Wallace himself, *escape* from the dominant cultural logic was never possible, and it was never the point. As I shall argue, his aim was at exploring avenues for a healthy, nourishing existence within that logic.

My reading of the novel recognizes that the text views the individual as the terrain of possibility for action or change, and while the changes it advocates might lead to collectivization,

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72 For Freudenthal, *Infinite Jest* favors what she calls “anti-interiority” as a mode of subjectivity that can resist oppressive social regimes. Characters who successful resist the world’s patterning do so by acting compulsively and as though without essence, rejecting a self composed from inside out (the Enlightenment model) to the outside in. While I find Freudenthal’s argument compelling, her advocacy of compulsiveness forgets that examples of compulsiveness that she invites create oppressive results, and she also overlooks that several of the compulsive behaviors she lists are willed. One does not *will* oneself into compulsion. Freudenthal, ““Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*.” *New Literary History* 41.1 (Winter 2010): 191-211. Hayles suggests that *Infinite Jest* deconstructs the illusion of autonomy in favor of a vision of connectedness. Like Freudenthal, Hayles forgets that accepting a vision of connectedness relies on a degree of autonomy. The characters Hayles proposes as models act not out of a vision of world community but instead out of thoroughgoing self-interest. N. Katherine Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*.” *New Literary History*, 30.3 (Summer 1999): 505-508.

Wallace makes no promises that one leads to the other. Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace expresses worry that life under neoliberalism pushes individuals into unhealthy, unsustainable relationships with themselves. To recall the terms I employ in the last chapter, Wallace fears the desubjectifying apparatuses that heighten inauthentic, inhuman desire. More than that, he believes the default relationship to consumption common to late capitalism orients the consumer toward addictive behavior that deceptively promises a reprieve from the difficulty and loneliness of being human. This relationship reduces the human to a function—a consuming machine—instead of the being struggling for significance, the vision so important to the left-liberal.

The novel’s intervention, then, attempts to create a hierarchy of desires, preferring ones that lead away from compulsive consumption. Wallace sees consumption as axiomatic—there is no way out of it—and so espouses a less compulsive form of desire for consumption. He opposes this mode to one that relentlessly attempts to escape the self, which results in a passive, depressed, or suicidal self. In so doing, he asserts that the human (as he understands it) properly struggles for a dignified life, one that resists the inertia of compulsive consumption.

In what follows, I pursue this line of reasoning in Wallace’s landmark novel. First, I want to trace Wallace’s depiction of the sources of unhappiness common to the temporality that pains. I then turn to a discussion of why the novel objects to the sort of consumption this temporality engenders. Lastly, I articulate the function of Wallace’s hierarchy, his shaky faith in it, and the value of the intervention.
“These Troubled Times” and the Mind-Altering Project

The narration includes the above phrase or a slight rephrasing of it (once as “in these chemically troubled times) three times in the novel. Troubled they are, indeed. The dystopian elements in *Infinite Jest* include a U.S. executive branch run amok, several New England states ruined, looming ecological disaster, seemingly unstoppable foreign terrorists targeting U.S. civilians (perhaps with government assistance), rampant chemical abuse, serious family dysfunctionality, and a deeply isolated population. At least the TV is good.

In fact, the advance in viewing entertainment is one of only two technological developments *Infinite Jest* details that seem to have stuck. Set in 2009 as it may have been imagined in 1996, Wallace’s novel has James Incandenza, the father of one of the novel’s two protagonists, create U.S. energy independence through a complicated process called “annular fission.” More important to the novel’s central concerns is the evolution of home entertainment. A company called Interlace capitalizes on a crisis among the traditional television networks to produce something similar to a massive, on-demand cable system. Broadcasting and, with it, advertising recede in favor of a massive increase in consumer options. Viewers can elect for “spontaneous dissemination” of live events or to download programming from a vast number of choices. Wallace discusses Interlace’s victory over traditional broadcast powers, thanks to an “extraordinarily generous Justice Dept. interpretation of the Sherman statutes” (411) even though “Interlace was basically hopping up and down on the B.S. 1890 Sherman act with spike heels” (1031n165), as the result of the U.S.’s methodological individualism. The opening up of this super-cable attacked “right at the ideological root, the psychic matrix where viewers had been conditioned (conditioned, rather deliciously, by the Big Four Networks and their advertisers

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themselves) to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to be Entertained with all that was U.S. and true” (412). We see here Wallace satirizing the slippage between more options and more freedom that is common to U.S. ideological individualism.75 Audiences clamor for more choice not simply because they prefer a greater selection but because they believe they are entitled to the widest possible breadth of entertainment options. U.S. individualism, believing in the unique interiority in everyone, sees a greater possibility of more accurate expression of that interiority via more choices for expression, while overlooking that choosing a shoe, television program, or t-shirt someone else designed (and, of course, is available to all) hardly announces a unique essence.

That this technological advance succeeds while others fail speaks to the novel’s investment in interrogating a culture of watching. In “E Unibus Pluram,” his most-cited, if not most famous, non-fiction essay, Wallace offers a critique of the U.S. cultural relationship to TV. Both the essay and Infinite Jest depict a given mode of watching television as perhaps the key factor in predisposing individuals into mind-altering project. This project, the reader should recall, refers to the Western consumers’ sense that their quotidian experience denies them some degree of harmony to which they would, in a perfect world, be given. One can easily see how marketing heightens (if not creates) this lifelong feeling of lack. The mind-alterer indulges in consumption by chasing after the “hallucinatory satisfaction” that satiates this fantasy of harmony.

75 Patell makes a superb point about the teleological view of political liberalization espoused by the U.S. right under Reagan. Political freedom for the individual, the argument went, would naturally lead to respect for freedom for all individuals, thus paving the way for happy, healthy communities. John Cassidy makes the same point about Milton Friedman’s position: for Friedman, economic liberalism would lead to a rising tide for all (see How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2009], 72-84). Wallace’s criticism of what one might call the liberalization of choice also shows the weak logic of presupposed teleologies.
For Wallace, television is a key component in producing this hallucinatory desire. Long exposure to television conditions viewers to crave “some strangely American, profoundly shallow, and eternally temporary reassurance” from their viewing. This craving becomes compounded when television begins to make itself a source of self-reference, a process Wallace details convincingly in the essay. He argues that the popularity of television programming that relies upon pre-existing knowledge of television history demonstrate that “television, even the mundane little business of its production, has become my—our—interior” (EP 32). When self-aware television becomes prevalent, the viewer cannot help thinking of how such recursive programming anticipates, utilizes, and operates upon what you know because it makes those operations explicit. Wallace argues that, if polls suggesting that the average U.S. citizen watches six hours of television a day can be believed, the component of this viewer’s subjectivity that is called upon is her sense of herself as a viewer.

Watching of the six-hour-a-day sort imprints this hailing-as-viewer as a key signifier of value. You feel special because you get it; you are inside the joke. The odd intimacy of the relationship between watcher and screen makes this connection feel personal. Of course, the

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76 Wallace 1997: 75. Further references cited with EP. In this chapter’s introduction, I criticized other critics for borrowing from Wallace’s non-fiction in reading his fiction. Unlike most other readings, however, I do not borrow from Wallace’s analysis of the current state of U.S. fiction nor his desires for it (and, hence, how he reads his own intervention). Instead, I borrow from his very trenchant analysis of television, which comprises the first, criminally-overlooked half of the essay.

77 Wallace analyzes a re-ran episode of “St. Elsewhere,” broadcast right after an episode of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” where a character believes himself to be Mary Tyler Moore’s character from the latter show. Betty White, a performer on “The MTM show,” guest-stars on the same episode of “St. Elsewhere,” and is recognized as both the actress Betty White (who, acting in a role designed specifically for the episode, she claims not to be) and the Betty White character from “The MTM show.” Also important, Wallace suggests, is that we know “St. Elsewhere” was produced by Mary Tyler Moore. That these references are implicit tells us that the viewer is expected to know them. A good more recent example might be FOX’s popular “Family Guy,” which averages three to nine references to other television shows (some very arcane) or movies; see any episode on the Internet Movie Database for examples (www.imdb.com).

78 Strangely, Wallace continues to make this claim throughout the essay—that the six hours a day one spends with television is more than anything one does except for sleep. One could easily argue, however, that the average U.S. worker spends more time working than watching television, even if you count the hours of watching on the weekend—and thus the component of subjectivity called upon the most would be oneself as productive of labor-power. An interesting path the essay does not follow is how related the sense of passivity offered by television compares and works in concert with that often generated in the workplace.
“you” called upon has nothing to do with any other part of you beyond the aspect of yourself that stores television references—and the viewer somehow knows this fact. Television shows do not connect to the “real” you. That fantastic connection, however, overrides one’s actual knowledge of the distance between self and entertainment, creating the hallucinatory desire to be something other (special person who gets the joke) than what you are (person alone watching television). For Wallace, the medium of television itself—images beamed from a piece of furniture—helps heighten this contradictory sense of engaged isolation. He notes that “it’s interesting that so much classic voyeurism involves media of framed glass—windows, telescopes, etc. Maybe the framed glass is why the analogy [of voyeurism] to television is so tempting” (EP 23).

In invoking the screen as an important part of the affective experience of watching television, Wallace recalls Paul Virilio, the French cultural theorist who demonized technology for altering authentic human perception. The West’s absolute dependence on twenty-four hour news broadcasts during the first Persian Gulf War led Virilio to believe that live-broadcasted streams of vital information make the screen the “filter that does not allow the present to pass away.”79 The altered sense of temporality, which privileges “live” access through a screen as the most authentic sort available, helps to shift the understanding of spatiality. Virilio posits that the Western subject no longer considers herself participating in the “real world” unless it is through a screen, insofar as the screen presents itself as the site of “the production of a certain high-definition transmission of collective reality” (23). We place trust in screens to deliver what is truly, world-historically relevant in a way that we rarely trust our eyes alone; as Virilio has discussed, the “square” of the screen replaces the line of the horizon as the delimiter of the real

in reality (57). What occurs through this privileging of this mediation is a strange “passage” of our perception of reality “from something that is material to something that is not.”

Despite his broad overstatements, I introduce Virilio here because he so closely mirrors Wallace’s sense that television performs a conditioning that rewrites basic perceptual functions. Like Virilio, Wallace worries that the material television offers—more important news, prettier people, livelier lives—induces viewers to think the screen offers them privileged access to the world. The screen offers a means for imaginatively escaping one’s less significant or pleasurable existence, which is of course exactly the escape the mind-alterer relentlessly lusts after. Furthermore, because television plays such a large role in most U.S. lives, viewers grow susceptible to bringing the mode of screen-viewing into their everyday seeing: as Wallace says, “television in enormous doses affects people’s values and self-perception in deep ways…. [and] televisual conditioning influences the whole psychology of one’s relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes” (EP 53). In other words, the screen turns everyone into a professional watcher of screens, and the ability to switch to other kinds of watching recede—you watch what is not screened, including yourself, in the same way that you watch what is.

The transfer of screen-watching tendencies into actual-watching worries Wallace. His concern stems from television’s difference from classical voyeurism. The people behind the screen know that they are being watched and are in fact intent upon producing more watching. The viewer is not spying—the viewer is viewing, and what she watches are “performers behind the glass [who] are…absolute geniuses at seeming unwatched.” What results is “unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant quality of being truly alive is

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watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but *rooted in* the phenomenon of watching” (23, 26). Wallace’s oeuvre contains dozens of characters whose profound concern with their watchability causes them to suffer tremendously. Take, for instance, Neal of “Good Old Neon,” a story in Wallace’s last collection, *Oblivion*: “my own basic problem was that at an early age I’d somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life’s drama’s supposed audience instead of with the drama itself,” leaving Neal constantly “watching and gauging my supposed performance’s quality and probable effects,” even as he writes his suicide note.\(^8\)

Television actress Edilyn, the narrator of Wallace’s story “My Appearance” (1989) undergoes intense preparation for an appearance on the David Letterman show that aims to produce awareness of her watchability. Worried that the famously ironic Letterman will overwhelm the emotionally complicated Edilyn on-air, her presumably well-meaning husband and his friend tell her the outcome of her appearance will depend on “how your ridiculousness is *seen.*” She says she wants to appear sharp and relaxed—“‘*appear,*’ my husband corrected, ‘both sharp and relaxed.’” The trick, Edilyn hears, is to “make *yourself* look ridiculous, instead of letting *him* do it to you….Don’t look like you’re trying to be witty and clever….being seen as being *aware* is the big thing, here.”\(^9\) Edilyn’s repeated assertions of her identity punctuate the story, which she wants to claim as primary over the way she presents herself.\(^10\) The last one—“I am a woman who speaks her mind. It is the way I have to see myself, to live” (201)—indicates that Edilyn’s appearance on Letterman generated a shift in her understanding of watchability and identity. Her understanding of herself depends on how she sees herself as *seen.* Part of this phrasing, of course, depends on the tendencies of U.S. English, where “see” has become a stand-in for


\(^10\) 175 (twice), 178, 184, 191, 194, and 201 contain Edilyn sentences using the clause “I am a woman who” in order to describe herself (Wallace 1989).
“understand,” “cognize,” or “comprehend.” In a story about an actress who has to act differently in order to act like herself, all to be seen in the right way, Wallace’s emphasis seems intentional.

In *Infinite Jest*, the intensity of watchability-awareness is made most visible through the failure of videophone. Wallace attributes the collapse of this technology to “the way callers’ faces looked on their TP [video telephony] screen, during calls. Not their callers’ faces, but their own, when they saw them on video….Even with high-end TPs’ high-def viewer-screens, consumers perceived something essentially blurred and moist-looking about their phone-faces, a shiny pallid *indefiniteness* that struck them as not just unflattering but somehow evasive, furtive, untrustworthy, *unlikable*” (*IJ* 147). A survey reveals that “60% of respondents” found their TP visages “*untrustworthy, unlikable, or hard to like*…with a phenomenally ominous 71% of senior-citizen respondents specifically comparing their video-faces to that of Richard Nixon during the Nixon-Kennedy debates” (147). The narration’s comparison of these indefinite, unlikable visages to this historic moment in U.S. media history, when Kennedy’s greater watchability shifted the polls in his favor, underscores the link between watchability and value-judgment. The reference to a Presidency decided by the equation of watchability and likability explains the failure of this technology which, presumably, would be an advance over the telephone occurs. If watchability equaled likability and trustworthiness in 1960, how profoundly linked will these qualities be decades later?84

To put all this in the terms I established earlier, disciplining into the mind-altering project occurs largely through long exposure to television, where the subject learns that watching,

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84 Wallace also attributes videophony’s failure to the loss of the fantasy of another’s undivided attention. You could once convince yourself that the person on the other line was paying attention; video revealed them doodling, pacing, reading, etc. just as you were, “rendering the fantasy insupportable” (145-147). Still, Wallace does call the appearance issue the “real coffin-nail.” I should also note that the advent and success of Skype reveals something that Wallace missed: when you have something to watch, you move around less. Wallace failed to see that having visual stimulation so transfixes us that videophone would change our habits when on the telephone, an oversight that only supports his main point about the watching instinct.
judgment, and acceptance are inextricable. When fully engaged in the act of watching, the subject experiences the fantasy of escaping the self. The absorbed TV viewer is rewarded by TV for watching so much TV, a medium whose programming uses the same formulas again and again. At the same time, those formulas (watchability indicates likability or desirability) factor into equations made in the actual world, including the evaluation of oneself. The relationship to the self, who is most likely not perfectly watchable, becomes vexed by the transfer of this equation. Self-evaluation becomes self-watching, a relentless and dispiriting process of attempting to assess one’s value through stringent but deeply internalized criteria—if you fail to be interesting by television’s standards, you feel yourself insignificant, a failure at living up to watchable standards. As Wallace points out again and again, the best way out of this unhappy space is to turn on the television. In the terms this chapter uses, the way to assuage the discomfort of this gauging is to alter the mind.

Joelle Van Dyne, a key character in the novel, dramatizes the relationship between a traumatic dependence on mind-altering and a concern with watchability. Van Dyne is the only character connected to both of the novel’s main settings—Enfield, an upscale Boston tennis academy owned and operated by the Incandenza family, and Ennet House, the rehabilitation facility just down the hill from it. She is the ex-lover of Orin Incandenza, another important character and the eldest son of the aforementioned James. She stars in several of the latter’s movies after his foray into filmmaking, including the lethal *Infinite Jest* (about which I will have to say much more shortly). In addition, Van Dyne develops a romantic connection with Don Gately, the novel’s most heroic character, while recovering from her severe cocaine addiction in the facility. Her presence in both the privileged, upscale world of the Incandenzas and the
underprivileged space of Ennet House invites us to see her particular relationship with mind-altering as endemic to both social spheres.

For Van Dyne, who survives a four-year downward spiral into cocaine use as well as a suicide attempt, the experience of smoking cocaine (or “freebasing”) is “an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, attractive, sheltered by limits, deveiled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God” (235). The peak of the experience corrects several of the affective discomforts and intellectual binds that watching-conditioning produces. Rather than being the watcher, Van Dyne is “observed” and “watched for an instant by God”: she feels deliriously watchable, fulfilling a key barometer of the value she had been conditioned to credit. She feels “alone and sufficient” and “full” simultaneously—divorced of the interaction where value is conferred in favor of one in which it is simply felt. The limitations of her body shelter her, composing without confining.

Perhaps most tellingly, she feels “attractive.” In most of her scenes in the novel, Van Dyne wears a veil, a practice she explains results from her participation in the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.ID), a 12-step group that helps its members deal with their discomfiting appearances. The novel confirms at several points that Van Dyne was extremely beautiful before an incident with a jar of thrown acid changes her relationship with that beauty. It either destroys her attractiveness, mars it temporarily, or makes it somehow

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85 Many characters in the novel refer to drug use in terms that imply correction or aligning. Don Gately’s long-time drug use partner urges Gately “to get right with the planet” by indulging (933), and another character refers to life without marijuana as a kind of dislocation: “I was trying to align myself along some sort of grain in the world I could barely feel” (950). To mind-alter is to find this alignment or to get right in a way that ordinary experience disallows—or, in Ronell’s terms, search “for a premise for which it can presume an original purity of mind” (99). In the contradictory logic of the mind-altering project, one begins not right and has to get corrected through the altering; one accesses the “natural” state one supposes exists by doing altering the natural.

86 I have chosen to avoid making certainties out of the many inconsistencies in *Infinite Jest*, a practice common to other discussions of the novel. Those arguments that want to separate *Infinite Jest* from postmodernism often forget that Wallace’s myriad inconsistencies, resistance to closure, and contradictory narration remind readers that the world they experience is mediated. The long discussions of points in the novel that are incomprehensible miss the
more compelling—the result is left ambiguous, in no small part because of the veil (and in spite of the unlikelihood of the second and third possibilities). I call attention to this component of Van Dyne’s character because the presence of the veil dramatizes the instinctive gesture of assessment based on visual criteria: the veil, as does that of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s minister, both compels curiosity and prevents its satisfaction. We can recognize this through the eight pages of discussion on Van Dyne’s beauty on the Infinite Summer message board in spite of its being incidental to any of the plots themselves. Whatever the veil conceals, her experience of herself as truly attractive only occurs at the peak of mind-alteration. It is a vital part of the alterity to which she is addicted.

That our depiction of Van Dyne’s drug peak italicizes the word attractive indicates its affective centrality to the experience, even though the novel hints that her appearance retains remarkable power. Her ambivalence about her visage is also made evident through the veil. In a conversation about the U.H.I.D.’s reasons for suggesting its participants don veils, Van Dyne reveals that the group’s governing ethos treats watchability-judgment as a fact of social life that it simply accepts. Doing so exposes the perhaps well-intentioned fiction that appearance does not matter. Van Dyne explains that the veil releases her from the obligation to abide by that point—this world does not have to make sense. Thus I will not land on a side in the question of what, if anything, happened to Joelle Van Dyne’s beauty; instead, I will offer the position the text leans toward and admit other possible (both in this situation and others).

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87 Note the unnecessary commas around “truly” in the quote itself. The commas slow the modification of “attractive,” a gesture that insists upon the importance of the adverb, emphasizing the exhilaration of an actual assurance in one’s attractiveness. Considering that Van Dyne “had a brainy girl’s discomfort about her own beauty and its effect on folks” (739), which we hear was so intense that she was never approached by men prior to Orin, one can recognize how this sensation would overcome deeply felt ambivalences.

88 As I mention in the previous paragraph, Van Dyne might remain stunningly beautiful. She tells Don Gately, when he asks what is under her veil, that she is “so beautiful that [she is] deformed” (538) even after the accident, but a later comment suggests that she uses this excuse as a joke (940). The allure of her visage even after the accident, however, is essential to the film Infinite Jest’s lethal appeal: we learn that the elder Incandenza made deep compromises to make sure she would be in the movie (225, 790, 940), and we know that she appears “not exactly veiled” within it (939). The doctor who revives her after her unsuccessful suicide attempt “had looked upon her unveiled face and been deeply affected” (1025n134), and she contemplated “removing the veil” in order “to get away” from a U.S. official interrogating her (958). Whatever her face looks like, the term “attractive” seems less threatening or scarly potent than what Van Dyne knows her visage to be.
fiction: “you are supposed to be able to help how much you care about how you look. You’re supposed to be strong enough to exert some control over how much you want to hide” your unattractiveness. The veil lets you shield your appearance, protecting you from watching-judgment, without completely withdrawing from the world. The veil allows you “to hide openly,” whereas to pretend blitheness about one’s looks would produce a “shame-circle that keeps you from being really present” (534-535, 536-537). In other words, an un-veiled U.H.I.D. member would have to venture into the world pretending that they did not feel like hiding, when in fact they would like nothing more than to hide. The dissonance would render one so uncomfortable as to ruin the possibility of ever entering the public.

To be “really present,” then, means recognizing, acceding to, and being comfortable with the watching impulse’s utter authority. Once indoctrinated into this cultural way of watching, one loses the ability to delude oneself out of thinking otherwise. All this speaks to how deeply imbedded the watching-instinct is within Wallace’s vision of the social imaginary. Acceptance of one’s deformity is beside the point for the U.H.I.D. Real acceptance, the veil-practice suggests, would be impossible for those whose watchability falls so obviously short of acceptability. Since one cannot escape this shame, another coping mechanism becomes necessary. The veil leaves the cause unaddressed, thinking only the symptom fixable.89

In the same way, the mind-altering action leads only to causal correction. Neither TV nor drugs nor a veil even pretend to get at the root of the problem, which seems to the mind-alterer

89 Two quick notes here: first, Gately disagrees with the U.H.I.D. philosophy, stating that the program should address the shame it accepts as axiomatic (540). We should, then, not state that Wallace is advocating the U.H.I.D.’s approach. Through Gately, he articulates the best-case response to the watchability bind, but he certainly does not seem to hold the pragmatic impulse of the U.H.I.D. in scorn. Second, I should address the novel’s use of its most prominent female character to consider issues surrounding beauty. Doing so commits a tiresome fetishizing of a female’s aesthetic appearance while also calling attention to the reader’s participation in that fetishization—we, too, want to know what’s under the veil, all the more because Van Dyne is a female whose beauty might be interesting. Here Wallace engages in the complicitious critique Linda Hutcheon named a hallmark of postmodernism in The Politics of Postmodernism, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
rooted in simply being. The mind-alterer knows only that she wants out of the state that she always seems to be in. Because the cocaine affects Van Dyne on the biological level, the feelings of discomfort temporarily disappear, to her great relief. At the peak of her highs, Van Dyne always thinks of Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s “Ecstasy of St. Theresa,” which depicts the Saint’s face betraying the exquisiteness of suffering as a moment of transcendent ecstasy. The sculpture mirrors Van Dyne’s relationship with her entertainment of choice, which hurts her as it seems to heal her. This connection reveals that Van Dyne knows her use of the drug cannot last. The first time her “hands started to tremble” when preparing the cocaine for smoking “that she’d first known she liked this more than anyone can like anything and still live. She is not stupid” (236). The impulse toward this particular form of escape, however, outweighs her concern over the danger she has put herself in. This mode of escape recalls Wallace’s description of television’s conditioning, where the viewer desires the “eternally temporary reassurance” of television. The viewer returns to the TV, inhabiting the fantasy of participation in a richer, realer world; the user returns to the drug in order briefly to feel some way other than the way they’ve always felt.

To be reassured, after all, one needs to be troubled. These entertainments, the novel suggests, embed existence outside the cocoon of escape fantasies in the temporality that pains. The entertainment-seeker without his entertainment feels his unwatchability and resulting insignificance keenly, and thus he runs to the entertainments that assuage the pain of temporality. *Infinite Jest* betrays Wallace’s deep sympathy for the characters immersed in this bind. In an attempt to make their experience bearable, these individuals give themselves up to the mind-

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90 Many commentators would say that the sculpture depicts an orgasm. *Infinite Jest’s* own deployment of the phrase “an afflated orgasm of the heart” would buffer this reading. More important here, however, is that the narration transposes Van Dyne’s psychic experience of this “afflated orgasm” onto emotional terms: we are told how the drug interacts with psychic and emotional—rather than chemical or sexual—wiring.
altering project. Hoping to correct themselves—to feel the way that they believe they should—they settle for a necessarily temporary mind-altering, one that worsens everyday normalcy. In such a cycle, addiction seems imminent.

Wallace’s diagnosis of this cycle as the condition of contemporary consumerism is perhaps the key ethical insight of *Infinite Jest*. With the exception of one character, Wallace does not discuss the biological component of addiction and its companion, withdrawal. For Wallace, understanding the affective relationship one has to one’s consumption is more important than what one consumes. While Wallace would no doubt say that cocaine is more addictive than television, the text demonstrates anxiety about how we use cocaine and television—what affective responses we desire from them, what felt deficiencies they address—over and above the entertainments themselves.

As a result, *Infinite Jest* is littered with individuals who have compulsive relationships to whatever they consume. This compulsiveness eliminates what is already a reduced capacity for human potentiality in the contemporary regime. Van Dyne’s relationship to the cocaine she consumes becomes so extreme that she cannot envision stopping, even though “she is not stupid” and knows the cost of her behaviors. Ronell’s explanation of the negative side of addiction helps us understand this. Explicating Martin Heidegger’s concept *Dasein*, or “being” (being-there is its common translation) in its most basic sense, Ronell asserts that authentic being “needs to follow a type of repetition that is not burdened with compulsion in the original sense of the term… [as] force or coercion [even though Dasein’s] trajectory often mirrors addictive compulsion.”

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91 The same is true of Wallace’s depiction of clinical depression, also an important condition in the novel. His refusal to biologize these conditions further shows that Wallace subscribes to a model of the human whose interior primarily determines it.

92 Ronell 43.
distance, do not look all that different from addictions. An entirely alien form of being might look upon our eating, sleeping, eliminating, drinking, and copulating as equally pathetic and pitiful as the addict’s eternal return to substance looks to the non-user. The difference for Ronell is the degree of “force or coercion” involved in the compulsion, which in addiction as extreme as Van Dyne’s eliminates the possibility of prioritizing anything over the consumption of more cocaine.93 Once she learns to reframe her relationship with cocaine through her involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous and her experiences in rehab, she opens the possibility of doing other things. She can fall in love,94 she can think about removing the veil, she can learn to help other addicts. These were simply not options during the late stages of her drug use.

Many critics of the novel have mistaken the novel’s advocacy of AA as a privileging the principles of the program, most specifically AA’s insistence on sincerity. I see AA instead as a means of rewriting the default relationship the late-capitalist consumer has to consumption—as one useful but imperfect means among many others. Sincerity receives much attention in the novel’s treatment of AA, but sincerity-qua-sincerity does not reverse destructive dependencies, nor does irony produce them. AA insists upon a shift in one’s relationship to consumption and thus instantiates a rethinking of the state that the mind-altering project would have one escape. Wallace is far more interested is the ways to effect this change than in AA specifically.

93 The novel’s description of addiction at its most debased comes through the character of Poor Tony Krause, a heroin-addicted transvestite whose betrayal of his drug-using partners leaves him dangerously friendless. He undergoes a horrifying series of degradations in a public bathroom before having a seizure on public transportation (IJ 299–306), experiencing a profound humiliation in the process—Krauss’s vanity is severely undercut by his loss of bowel control, his lack of access to a shower, mirror, or change of clothes, and so on. In order to forestall withdrawal, Krauss consumes Nyquil by the bottle, which produces a different form of addiction that only intensifies his body’s dependency and ruin. As soon as he leaves the hospital after his seizure, however, he attempts to procure more heroin (683). Poor Tony’s trajectory has been completely overdetermined; it is his fate that Van Dyne escapes by entering rehab.

94 The novel does tell us, though, that AA suggests its participants avoid romantic involvement during their treatment, as such relationships can easily act as another form of self-escape (863).
To clarify what I mean here, I turn to Joelle Van Dyne again. The mind-altering she grows addicted to initially let her believe her original, everyday experience to be limiting, artificial, and deficient. If a key component of the temporality that pains is its posing of normalcy as lacking, mind-altering consumption seems to offer critical distance from that unhappy normalcy. After years of addiction, Van Dyne comes to the sad realization that “what looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage” (222). The cocaine “no longer delimits and fills the hole. It no longer delimits the hole” (222). Her decision to commit suicide, which these comments help explain, stems from her acknowledgment that what she thought was an escape was actually a trap. The repetition of “delimits the hole” indicates that Van Dyne rued the loss of the delimiting more than the filling. Cocaine initially allowed her to engage in a fantasy of escape that delimited her ordinary affective state as a “hole” as opposed to her whole. Drugs let her inhabit something else that affirmed her sense that ordinary being was lacking. When her addiction becomes so obviously coercive that she can no longer deny it, the most disheartening component of the realization is her awareness that escape did not get her outside herself. The narration tells us that Van Dyne is “excruciatingly alive and encaged” because for her alive and encaged are synonymous and both are excruciating (222). We might recall that Van Dyne’s highs make her feel “sheltered by limits,” which is certainly not what a cage makes you feel. The key, then, would be to rewrite the experience of existence as encaged. As one of the novel’s most enlightened characters explains, “You might consider how escape from a cage must surely require, foremost, awareness of the fact of the cage” (389).

The reader might wonder at this point what makes life into a cage in the first place. For several characters in Infinite Jest, it is not. The middle Incandenza brother, Mario, does not experience life as a cage, in spite of being profoundly disabled. Ted Schacht, a member of the
tennis academy, seems freed of the desire to escape himself by a knee injury that curtails his fantasies of becoming a pro. Unlike many of his classmates, Schacht shows little interest in mind-altering as a pursuit. Lyle, the guru I quote in the last paragraph, distinguishes between being alive and being encaged.

Still, for Van Dyne, as for many of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, early exposure to especially effective entertainment made her susceptible to the mind-altering trajectory that, as I discuss in the last chapter, the West itself has modeled. As Van Dyne prepares to commit suicide through a massive overdose of cocaine, the narration traces her history with what she calls “Too Much Fun.” Prior to ingesting cocaine, her only comparable experience of pleasure was going to see films with her father—specifically, the anticipation she felt in advance of entering the theater: “Standing in the placid line as he bought the cine-plex’s paper tickets that looked like grocery receipts, knowing that she was going to love the celluloid entertainment no matter what it was….she’d never so much again as in that line felt so taken care of, destined for big-screen entertainment’s unalloyed good fun, never once again until starting in with this lover, cooking and smoking it.” Nothing besides cocaine and waiting for the movies “made her feel” this addictively “taken care of…about to be entered by something that didn’t know she was there and yet was all about making her feel good anyway, coming in. Entertainment is blind” (237). The passage asserts entertainment’s benevolence. It offers an indiscriminate pleasure that feels like care. Like love, it is blind. Unlike love, entertainment offers care that does not stem from concern or affection, yet it is the experience which she seeks, without which she feels need of reassurance. Entertainment takes care of her by “entering” her, altering her habituation of herself, and enabling a view of that briefly-abandoned habitation as a confining limit, as not being taken care of. If we generalize this characterization, entertainment’s blindness means that
its interaction with you does not result from your individual characteristics. Its care for you does not stem from you, nor does the self it reveals by removing you from it benefit from the revelation. The self then craves the reassurance of this specific feeling of otherness, endlessly. Early access to these powerful modes of self-escape (big screen movies, television catered to young children) secures an appetite that haunts Wallace’s consumers throughout their lives.

Perhaps most unsettling about Wallace’s idyllic depiction of the young Van Dyne with her father is what turns out to be her father’s obsessive incestuous desire for her. The revelation of his illicit feelings five hundred and fifty pages after the movie-going scene colors a component of the experience very differently: her father, “always with a wooden match in the corner of his mouth, pointing up into the rectangular world at this one or that one, performers, giant flawless 2D beauties iridescent on the screen, telling Joelle over and over again how she was prettier than this one or that one there” (237). The innocent-seeming gesture intensifies Van Dyne’s pleasure in the experience; one’s immersion in visual entertainment, as I have discussed above, remembers a sense of the desirability of the watchable figures over and above one’s own. The dark impulse behind the senior Van Dyne’s role in creating the intensity of the pleasure underscores Wallace’s fears about the malevolent potential of entertainment this consuming.

In spite of these dangers, Wallace can only sympathize with the cultural turn towards entertainment, because he keenly understands the temporality’s pain.

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95 Van Dyne’s father’s incestuous love is explained by the unreliable Molly Notkin on page 793. Van Dyne’s reconsideration of her past does not reveal this component of her family life, but several other incidents in the novel confirm a deeply solicitous attentions paid by her father to Van Dyne. The novel hints at incest among the Incandenzas, as well (or at least incestuous desire, as Freudenthal has discussed). One might read this as another form of craving run amok in Wallace’s consumerist dystopia, but further analysis of this component is outside this chapter’s purview. On this note, much remains to be explored in Wallace’s anxiety about sexual desire, a project begun by Katie Roiphe’s “The Naked and the Conflicted,” New York Times Book Review 31 Dec 2009.

96 That said, we may want to distinguish between the statement’s source and its effect; Van Dyne did not feel illicitly desired, and Notkin’s story of the exposure of the incestuous sentiment highlights her father’s intense efforts to control his feelings (“he never touched her, wouldn’t, nor ogle, less out of a horror of being the sort of mid-South father who touched and ogled than out of the purity of his doomed love for the little girl he’d escorted to the movies” [793]).
“A quantifiable difference between need and strong desire”

Hal Incandenza, the youngest of the Incandenza brothers, abstractly wonders whether he can locate a clear distinction between these two closely-associated nouns. The mind-altering project’s reliance on obedience to impulse encourages conflation of these two; we might recall Appadurai’s use of the verb “disciplining” discussed in the previous chapter, where natural urges become converted into imperatives in a process applauded and encouraged by the market. Looking at how commonly characters conflate need and strong desire and the ways in which they do so reveals another characteristic of the temporality that pains—and why it pushes individuals into addictive consumption.

Take for instance the first death-by-entertainment in the novel. A stressed-out character “who needs unwinding in the worst possible way” (340) cannot find after-work entertainment that is up to the task. His furious search for “unwinding” leads him to watch an unidentified cartridge that unwinds him permanently. The metaphor “unwind,” deployed as it is commonly as a synonym for “relax,” implies that the work day produces a winding up that demands undoing. This character goes from a necessary winding to a necessary unwinding without a sense of agency in either activity. One does not wind and unwind oneself. The metaphor turns the human into a string or wire or something else that can coil but that does not coil itself.97

The contemporary figure “who needs unwinding in the worst possible way” has a very particular relationship to the word “need.” Like Ronell’s Madame Bovary, he experiences mental and bodily cravings for unwinding as indistinguishable from mental and biological necessities—he will pay and overpay for pleasure, he will search far and wide for it, he will not

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97 Because the novel links itself to Hamlet—Hal reads the play to help his brother with a film adaptation in the novel; the title, the retrieval of a skull from a casket, and the ghost of a dead father also reference Shakespeare’s tragedy (as many have pointed out)—one might be tempted to think of Hamlet’s “shuffle off this mortal coil.” In many respects the unwinding instinct, with its invocation of passivity, encodes a death-drive akin to Hamlet’s consideration of suicide.
consider the consequences indulging might produce. Once the craving and the possibility of its satiation occurs, shutting off the craving seems impossible, as it gets registered as a need. Ken Erdedy, an otherwise educated, successful white-collar worker, will regularly lock himself in his apartment and smoke thousands of dollars worth of marijuana. He shuts the shades, he lets the answering machine answer his calls, and he swears he will never touch marijuana again—even though he has made the same promise to himself before. Erdedy thinks of the indulgence as “shut[ting] the whole system of his life down” (22), as he loses relationships and risks being fired in lying to allow and then cover up this behavior. The overindulgence seems unworthy of the trouble. For Erdedy, however, the movement from the desire’s appearance to its satiation feels inevitable: “Once he’d been set off inside, it mattered so much that he was somehow afraid to show how much it mattered. Once he had asked [the dealer] to get it, he was committed to several courses of action” (19). The terms “mattered” and “committed” denote Erdedy’s absorption by this desire. Erdedy labels these cravings as significant before he contextualizes them even within the space of his own life. Registering this desire as need makes what happens after it a formality.

Foregrounding these modes of consumption, where bodies respond as though in search of basic sustenance rather than indulgences, engages readers to wonder along with Hal about the distinction between strong need and desire. If we think of “need” in a biological sense—as in the body’s need for food and water—then we realize that bodies (by and large) come equipped with the wiring necessary to experience need as the sensation that must compel action. As Ronell suggests, “[t]he structure of addiction, and even of drug addiction in particular, is anterior to any empirical availability of [any drug, all of which] respond to a fundamental structure, not the other way around” (103). In other words, the drug does not produce the addiction. The drug
reacts with the body’s structures to produce the addiction. The structure of the human body knows how to be addicted—a given catalyst vaults that knowledge into action.

At the same time, the body can resist its default reaction to given needs and begin to understand them as something other than that which incites commitment. For instance, severe anorexics, in prioritizing an end over the biological inclinations of the body, alter their interpretation of bodily signals. From this example we can see that need becomes that which compels action only when that need has a specific relationship to a desired end. If sustained survival is the default priority of the body, it comes with a given set of needs (a big “if,” perhaps); if something else becomes the priority, what is experienced as need changes. Need, then, always comes after strong desire for a given end has become the priority. In this formulation, need presents itself as need for. The stressed white collar worker comes home needing to unwind because he has been reoriented to desire the utter passivity of the desubjectified.

By calling attention to these conflations of need and strong desire, one sees how manipulating the machinery of want and need inscribes certain modes of consumption as absolute imperatives—manipulations that work very much in favor of the market. Increasingly, the marketing motives of the second half of the 20th century meant making the experience of need pliable. The more you could believe that something that felt like a need simply must receive satisfaction, the better a participant in the consumer economy you become. To hear “need” without hearing “need in order to” produces that pliability, where one learns that life absolutely requires the passivity of a few hours of TV, the embrace of a few beers, the comfort of fast food. Hal’s friend Michael Pemulis, despite the narrative’s clear affection for him, takes on the voice of this capitalist imperative. Hal, trying to stay away from marijuana, worries that
continued attachment to the drug would mean addiction. Pemulis speaks in the voice of the capitalist imperative: “What happens if you try to go without something the machine [that is the body] needs?... [I]f you’re the real thing and need it and just cut yourself off it altogether, you die inside. You lose your mind” (1065n321). Pemulis sees need as irrevocable. Once you have begun to need something, you will always need it, lest you wreck the machinery that produced the need. Hal’s worry that he has become addicted to substances hardly matters because “addict,” according to Pemulis, is “just a word” (1066n321). To be in a body is to be in machinery that has needs one must attend to. Needs might differ but do not figure into a moral hierarchy where some needs are “better” than others—once you feel like you need something, you better get it. If late capitalism’s drive is to discipline desire, one cannot think of a better tagline. The business of creating cravings was always marketing’s primary responsibility. If we learn to listen to these invented cravings as needs, the population’s compulsive consumption naturally follows. The anxieties and discomforts of the temporality that pains encourage us to desire something to address our needs, even if that thing looks like Too Much Fun.

The Entertainment: Consumption that Consumes

Even more potent than the young Van Dyne’s transforming experience of Too Much Fun is the film-within-the-novel, Infinite Jest (to avoid confusion, I will refer to the film as The Entertainment, the nickname often used for it in the novel). The lethality of James O. Incandenza’s final film, completed after four (or five) failed efforts, initiates the book’s third plotline.98 A group of Quebecois terrorists known as the Les Assassins des Fauteuils Roulants99

98 See 993n24. Wallace has great fun with Incandenza’s film career, using individual movies to discuss particular insights about U.S. culture(s) or simply for fun. Incandenza’s idiosyncratic approach to filmmaking meant that “certain of high-conceptual projects’ agendas required that they be titled and subjected to critique but never filmed,
hell-bent on independence seek to provoke its liberation through a series of creative insurgent acts. They believe that the temptation of the Entertainment, which so mesmerizes viewers that they lose the desire to do anything else but continue watching, will be so irresistible to the U.S. consumer that massive fatalities will result, compelling their desire to get their hands on it and force the U.S.’s hand. That their belief has any currency within the novel suggests that the inclination toward Too Much Fun encouraged by the mind-altering trajectory threatens the health of the entire body-politic. My last illustration of the mechanisms of the temporality that pains, fittingly, will occur through an analysis of The Entertainment.

The novel demonstrates the film’s potency through a typically Wallacean excess, combining comedy and horror. A medical attaché to a Saudi Prince, the first victim, of the Entertainment sits paralyzed by it, watching it on a loop that plays it again and again; his wife enters and looks in terror from her husband to the entertainment that transfixes him; the smell of their two rotting bodies draws in others, until eventually the room is filled with the following: “the Near Eastern medical attaché; his devout wife; the Saudi Prince Q---’s personal physician’s assistant, who’d been sent over to see why the medical attaché hadn’t appeared [when paged]…the personal physician himself, who’d come to see why his personal assistant hadn’t come back; two Embassy security guards….and two neatly groomed Seventh Day Adventist pamphleteers” who had happened by stand in catatonic attention to the Entertainment on-screen (87).

The corpses that pile up whenever the Entertainment hits a screen reveal its remarkable allure. It captures the devout wife of the attaché immediately, as with the religious solicitors.

making their status as film subject to controversy” (985n24). One can see the possibilities for humor available with a filmography like this.
99 The Wheelchair Assassins, so named because participation in the group seems to require sacrificing one’s legs to a train in a show of nerve (1057-1062n304).
The film incites a desire to watch so total that it eliminates other desires, where viewers decide that the only nurturing they seek comes from the screen. An A.F.R. member assigned to test the strength of viewer’s attachment to more viewing plays the film once. Additional viewings cost one finger each, removed with an orthopedic saw. The exercise’s “goal was to confirm with statistical assurance the Subject’s desire for viewing and reviewing as incapable of satiation” (727). Needless to say, the fingers come off, the seventh as easily as the first.

Details on the Entertainment’s appeal are sketchy, as viewers lose the capacity to do anything besides watch. Though many reviewers and critics have attempted to discern the content of the film, the text reveals that what transfixes viewers is the film’s visual style. Hugh Steeply, an agent with the United States Office of Unspecified Services (O.U.S.), explains to an A.F.R. double-agent that experimental findings hint that the immediate addiction stems from “visual compulsion,” that the film provides a “neural density” that “might be too much to take” (490-491). Van Dyne, the star of the film, explains that her “face wasn’t important,” even though the filmmaker insisted that her presence within it was necessary, because the filming deployed special lenses which were “supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field” (940). Viewers apparently experience the film in a style intended to reflect a very young child’s unstable, unfocused eyes. In the novel’s logic, this perspective somehow overloads the senses. For this reason, the A.F.R.’s leader “finds theories of content irrelevant” (491). That an instant of exposure to the film immediately and permanently alters audience makes Wallace’s creation akin to Homer’s sirens. The appeal has something to do with the basic wiring of human senses, overwhelming them in a way that over-determines any other impulse.  

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100 In addition to his filmic ingenuity and his invention of annular fusion, James O. Incandenza was also a master of producing innovative film lenses.  
101 Boswell, Burn, and others have spent significant pages attempting to tease out the film’s content, often trying to use Molly Notkin’s summary of the film’s themes as a jumping off point. These readings want to make much of
As we might recall from Ronell, the possibility of addiction precedes the encounter with the chemical. The Entertainment’s existence, then, should pose a threat to the entire human population, yet the A.F.R. believe its toxicity will erupt more explosively in the U.S. Marathe explains why this is so. While Steeply experiences his own temptation—he wonders “[i]f it’s that consuming. If it somehow addresses desires that total…” (508)—Marathe asserts that the stoic Quebecois “think of what ends the Entertainment may serve. We find its efficacy tempting. You and I are tempted in different ways” (508). For him, the U.S.’s rhetoric of individualism induces a predilection toward the kind of escape the Entertainment offers. He summarizes the U.S. position on making choices: “Maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure: result: what is good. This is the U.S.A. of you” (423).102 Because of the U.S. privileging of the individual self over and above the collective, “pleasure” is necessarily self-pleasure. The conflation of a multiplicity of choices with individual freedom, a gesture discussed above as the “ideological root” for the U.S. consumer, inherently makes indiscriminate, unfettered choosing an unalloyed good. Marathe argues that such a worldview means an inattention to the ethics of choosing: “How will U.S.A.s choose? Who has taught them how to choose with care?” (318). Because the individual’s right to choose goes unquestioned, “who could choose not to die for pleasure, alone?” (318). He takes the O.U.S.’s efforts to stop the spread of the Entertainment as evidence of the correctness of his intuition: “How could it be that A.F.R. malice could hurt all of the U.S.A. culture by making available something as momentary and free as the choice to view only this one Entertainment?” (433). Implicit to Marathe’s sarcastic question is that choices are never

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Incandenza’s decisions: why a child’s point of view? Why does Van Dyne apologize to the camera? Boswell uses these details to show the Incandenza’s immersion in a Lacanian paradigm of language and relationships, a reading which is persuasive in its own right. If my comparison of the Entertainment to the siren-song is apt, however, such readings are beside the point. It does not matter which songs the sirens sing.  

102 Wallace has fun with his foreign characters’ accents and sentence structures. As the reader will see when I quote from the German Gerard Schtitt or any other non-native English speaker, quotations from these characters will appear to confuse syntax.
as “momentary and free” as they seem. Choices in a market, presented to an individual with an extensive history of lived experience, do not take place in a vacuum. We are reminded here of Wallace’s own distinction between the public interest and what the public is interested in (see conceptual introduction, pp. 33). For Marathe, a difference clearly exists, and he and his colleagues intend to capitalize on the United States’ erasure of the former.

Whether a massive plurality of United States citizens would find themselves unable to resist a fatal pleasure like this is a fair question to ask. Individuals choose something other than narrow, selfish pleasures all the time. In the world of the novel, however, the Entertainment simply marks the far end of a continuum of possible entertainments, all of which offer a way out of the self’s difficult, endless, homeless journey. No contemporary U.S. citizen smokes a cigarette, snorts cocaine, or injects heroin without knowing these behaviors’ addictive potential. Increasingly, we grow aware of the addictiveness of high-fat and high-salt diets, of sex, of exercise, of the Internet, of shopping; we have long known about the tendency to watch too much TV, the workaholic phenomenon, helicopter parenting. The narration of *Infinite Jest* offers a list (perhaps somewhat prescient in 1996) of 12-Step programs available in the greater Boston area that speaks to the easy slippage between practice and addiction that the novel envisions: “yoga, reading, politics, gum-chewing, crossword puzzles, solitaire, romantic intrigue, charity work, political activism…ad darn near infinitium, including 12-Step fellowships themselves” (998n70). The items on this list (and I have left many out) indicates that the default tendency is to use practices as part of a desperate attempt to escape the self, no practice is benign. Even if the list is seems satiric, its presence in a novel so concerned with consumption indicates that individual’s relationship to practice and to choice, then, needs to be our focus of attention.
In the temporality that pains, the individual is inattentive to the way she practices or chooses, because she feels keenly the compulsion to escape the self—and, as Marathe says, she is never taught otherwise. Doing so results in the reduction of possibility and the giving over of the self into an inertia that eliminates choosing, looking only for more self-escape. This inertia desubjectifies by turning the individual into a function whose potential to do something else is blunted. The tendency toward desubjectifying apparatuses, then, reminds us of the difficulty of more authentic struggles, which the mind-alterer abandons for the safe certainty of passivity.

The Entertainment is so essential to Wallace’s novel because it announces itself as the act of consumption that completes the mind-alterer’s project of self-escape. To consume the Entertainment immediately dissolves the possibility of further consumption. Through this narrative device, we see again that desiring itself is not the problem. Desiring that aims at the cessation of desire—of escape from the desiring, struggling self—finds its ultimate aim within the Entertainment, the frontier of desiring-production. It extinguishes the drive toward the invigorating experience of new desiring because it does not allow the reinvention of another end. It refuses to be temporary. The ultimate form of self-escape, the Entertainment effectively erases the self. Steeply describes one surviving viewer of the film as “an empty shell…You look in his eyes and there’s nothing you can recognize in them” (508). The eyes look “as if there were something [the viewer] had forgotten,” without hope of recovery (647). What has been forgotten is the machinery that makes the human into the Human: the desiring-machinery, which animates the species-being into humanity. For Wallace, the Entertainment is the late-capitalist

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103 Freudenthal’s reading of this moment focuses on the recoverability that “forgotten” implies. The self of this character has not been “eradicted” but is “dislocated” (203). In this interpretation, the film intensifies the subject’s attachment inside a radical interiority imposed upon it. Freudenthal’s reading does not explain how capture by something external produces a predatory interiority, nor does it help us understand why viewers’ catatonia appears irreversible.
dream and nightmare. It is the ultimate desubjectifying apparatus, that which incites desire by promising to end it. Watching it is the consumption that consumes.

Being tempted by the consumption that consumes requires the relationship to practice and choice that Wallace shows such concern over. We see the importance of the relationship to consuming over what is consumed through the fact that all the behaviors listed above (yoga, shopping, etc.) can become modes of consumption that consume. Whether Americans en masse would flock to the Entertainment is less important to Wallace than the fact that we flock to entertainments en masse, even though we seem more unhappy than ever. Avoiding the slippage into dependency, into the inertia of mind-altering, means rewriting what the text poses as the default U.S. modes of consumption that both result from and reinforce the temporality that pains. Doing so requires the advent of the novel’s central necessary fictions. After dealing with these components of the temporality’s painfulness—the entrapment of the watching-instinct, the early exposure to powerful modes of self-escape, the conflating of need and want, the mechanisms that change desire into wanting not more desire but desire’s cessation—I now turn to Wallace’s tentative outline for a more healthy relationship to contemporary consumerism and, by extension, contemporary living.

The subject who causes, but is not caused

Enough of Wallace’s characters dwell on linguistic constructionism that we know he took the concept seriously. Broom of the System’s Lenore Beadsman wonders repeatedly whether she is a person or someone else’s invention. “Good old Neon”’s Neal explores the question of whether there is anything outside language. “Greatly Exaggerated,” Wallace’s review of H.L. Hix’s Morte d’Author: An Autopsy, demonstrates his familiarity with the poststructural critique;
so does *Infinite Jest*’s invocation of Gilles Deleuze (792) and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*’s recalling of Foucault. In *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza vacillates as to whether his internal and external selves are coherent. Though on the novel’s first page, he insists, “I am in here,” his internal sensations and his external actions throughout the novel are often distinct (“Hal feels at his own face to see whether he is wincing” [342]; “He hated it that she could even dream he’d be taken in...and then that he’s always so pleased to play along” [524]; in first person, “The distant way in which this fact appalled me itself appalled me” [898], to name just a few). I mention these points because clearly Wallace understands that the coherent, autonomous Enlightenment subject was a social creation. *Infinite Jest* asks its readers to bring back the subject from its banishment for utterly pragmatic reasons. We see how this operates through the novel’s rehearsal of several AA edicts. AA “stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member” even though “the will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago” (356, 357). To become sober, the individual AA participant must make use of the “.1%” of life that is “under [his/her] control in order “to accept... [his/her] inevitable powerlessness of the other 99.9%” (1004n100). Accepting powerlessness acts paradoxically to recover a measure of autonomy. Doing so makes changing the inertia of active addiction possible, making one something other than a consuming machine. The AA gesture of accepting powerlessness resurrects the possibility of encounters with potentiality, even while espousing a lack of power.

In the same paradoxical logic, AA pushes its participants to inhabit a subjectivity that is not traceable to a cause, but that nonetheless causes. The text is blatant about the pragmatism of this suggestion: “an appeal” by the addict “to any exterior *Cause*” for his/her addiction “can

slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse* [so] that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished” (374), lest the excuse become justification for the salve of substances. The addict, then, is not caused. At the same time, the AA participant must take responsibility for what he or she causes, as one of the 12 steps requires taking accountability for behaviors committed while using: “It’s not like Boston AA recoils from the idea of responsibility, though. Cause: no; responsibility: yes. It seems like it all depends on which way the arrow of presumed responsibility points” (376). The gesture of looking ahead from the self is antithetical to the mind-altering project, which eschews thinking of consequences beyond immediate gratification. The mind-altering project presupposes that the present mind must need correcting. To consider oneself incorrect is to envision oneself as the product of a flawed process. AA’s subjectivity forgets about the process leading up to one’s behavior in favor of acknowledging what emerges from it.

Through AA’s vision of subjectivity, then, we get a subject who must be responsible and must have autonomy, even though these subjects cannot cite what is responsible for them and must admit their powerlessness. The explicitness of these paradoxes makes clear their status as constructed, not given, concepts. Again, AA also does not assert these truths as grounded in anything other than pragmatism—“you do it or you die” (357). For addicts at the end of their ropes, the truth-claims of AA’s edicts matter less than their use-value. Characters in the novel complain about AA’s dogmatism and its refusal to respond to criticism with anything other than more dogma, yet many of those characters stick with AA because it prevents them from much worse alternatives.105

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105 As Ronell says, “‘To get off drugs, or alcohol…the addict has to shift dependency to a person, and ideal, or to the procedure itself of the cure” (25). Critics who have written of Wallace’s use of AA include Boswell, Aubry, Petrus van Ewijk (“‘I’ and the ‘Other’: The relevance of Wittgenstein, Buber and Levinas for an understanding of AA’s Recovery Program in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest.*” *English Text Construction* 2:1 (2009): 132-145; and
Many of AA’s edicts seek to undo the cultural conditioning *Infinite Jest* sees as prevalent in late capitalism. While the epoch’s imperatives encourage a conflation between desire and need, AA asks the addict to consent to the opposite—to a set of rules that are externally generated and run counter to the impulses of the body. It tells you what you need is not what you desire. Complying with AA, as Freudenthal makes clear, means going through motions that re-indoctrinate from the outside in. In an oft-cited example, Don Gately has to act first before he can internalize the reasons for his actions: “he takes one of AA’s very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through the day clean” (433). Gately does not sense the presence of a higher power, but he prays regardless, giving himself over to a process whose logic escapes him. He affirms the practice, however, because he understands his other option as equivalent to ontological erasure (recall “do it or die”).

Both Freudenthal and Hayles have effectively argued that part of AA’s function in the novel is to disrupt the association of the subject with an autonomous, isolated interior. Unlike the subject under late capitalism, who comes to believe her desires generate with her and to feel an absolute loyalty to said desires, AA operates on a subject defined by its exteriority. I depart from these readings in believing that in the process AA reifies a slightly modified version of the same subject these two critics would see it eliminate. The emphasis on exteriority recuperates the notion of a single, uninterrupted self. The novel refers to half-hearted AA’ers attempts at recovery as efforts to “avoid the mirror AA hauls out in front of them” (863). Unlike the mirrors of postmodernity, always cracked and revealing a fragmented, disconnected self, AA’s mirror

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reestablishes a solid subject. It does so, however, because the fragmented self without a memory of its consistency is raw meat for the capitalist apparatus. In order to develop the nurturing relationship to consumption Wallace espouses—even to privilege nurturing—he must resurrect a figure whose continuance matters.

The novel mediates its cynical readers’ responses to Gately’s unquestioning adherence by offering us cynical AA’ers unwilling to subject themselves to anything but their own desires. Their positions might be more true, but they do not help them get better. The same goes for the program’s insistence on sincerity. Still, we might want to consider AA’s resubjection more closely, as evaluating practices based only on their results can be terribly dangerous, for separating outcome from process is worrisomely Machiavellian.¹⁰⁶

Gately’s resubjectification by AA sounds an awful lot like the process of subjectification detailed by Louis Althusser. For Althusser, the individual becomes the subject when he begins to believe that he does what the apparatuses of power tell him to do of his own volition. Ideological state apparatuses produce the subject by inciting individuals to act themselves into subjectivity: you have to do what the doctor, the teacher, and the policeperson tell you to do, but you believe that you do it because you want to. These gestures teach the individual that she is autonomous in spite of her subjection. The subject necessarily “submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission.”¹⁰⁷

Imagine a small child whose parents ask her to recite the alphabet. The child claims to have done it “all by his/herself,” forgetting that the action is authorized by the figure of power. The illusion of autonomy discussed at length by Hayles begins here: subjects forget the fundamental

¹⁰⁶ I thank my colleague Lynne Feeley for showing me the importance of this notion.
interdependency of all social behavior, including its sources in social ritual and imperatives, in favor of an isolated agent.

AA resubjectifies in the same way that Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses do—by operating on an individual until the individual operates that way herself. At the same time, Althusser’s apparatuses behave in order to reproduce the ideology that ensures the division of labor, while AA has a much more benevolent purpose. Of course, AA recuperates subjects only in order to make them functioning members of society again—people who will pay taxes and get jobs. AA does not promote a revolutionary agenda; its subjectivity is virtually identical to that of mainstream society. It produces no material change in how the subject behaves. For these reasons those who have suggested that Wallace’s AA gets us out of postmodernism or points toward some kind of resistance overstate the case. AA is an example of one way of reinventing the self so that the self no longer tends toward the desubjectification of the mind-altering project. In so doing, AA models a means of disrupting the inertia that unreflective consumption generates. At the same time, one remains in a state of subjection—“to get off drugs,” Ronell explains—“the addict has to shift dependency to a person, an ideal, or to the procedure itself of the cure.” That one can shift dependency, however, means that one can reopen oneself to closed-off lanes of potentiality. AA acts as a resubjectifying apparatus by inducing the self to choose amongst possible ways of being over limiting oneself to a function.

Orienting the self toward these resubjectifying experiences is, I argue, the ethical intervention of the novel. I now explore means outside of AA (after all, we cannot all join

108 Here, my position closely resembles what Jeffrey Karnicky avers in his chapter on Wallace in *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007: 91-124). Karnicky locates moments of escape in *Infinite Jest* that resemble “mutant subjectivities,” or modes of being that point to a possibility of disrupting hegemonic patterning. I differ from Karnicky, however, in that I do not see each of his examples of “stasis”—his term for these interruptions—as equivalent in the logic of the novel. He cites several examples of “stasis” that I see as compulsive consumption, one of which I will discuss below.

109 Ronell 25.
Alcoholics Anonymous) that *Infinite Jest* offers for more fruitful relationships to self and to consumption.

Very early in the novel, the narration explains that many of the students at the tennis academy start to experiment with drugs and alcohol, some quite heavily, in their teen years—experimentation that takes place in spite of their rigorous physical training. The narration denotes these actions as forms of “giving away.” Intoxication is one form of giving away amongst a host of others that U.S. citizens tend toward. We are told that some students “can give themselves away to an ambitious pursuit” like high-level junior tennis “and have that be all the giving-themselves-away-to-something they need to do” (53). Notice the use of the word *need*, obviously an important one in the novel. Getting intoxicated or training for pro athletics are somehow forms of *giving away* which feel essential for their participants. The continuum spreads beyond the activities of teenaged tennis players, as this chapter’s second epigraph reveals: “American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels” (53). Here the narration ties together exposure to U.S. culture with a “virtually unlimited” tendency toward these depleting practices, ones that suit a desired end enough to be called “needs.”

Near the novel’s close, Hal, the second-ranked player at the academy, states through first-person narration: “We are all dying to give ourselves away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidentally to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what…[and] [t]o what purpose?” (900). The novel never provides Hal with an answer. “The will to give oneself away” seems to come with existence in the contemporary U.S.
The use of the term “giving away” to describe so many enterprises in the novel speaks to an anxiety about erasure akin, again, to Agamben’s notion of desubjectification. Giving away, after all, presupposes some kind of plenitude that gradually gets depleted. “Flights-from” and “escapes” populate the novel without ever establishing a safe haven where the flights-from and escaping stop. The repeated use of this language coupled with Hal’s sense of its endlessness and pointlessness indicate that the novel sees all these pursuits, when engaged in without the proper orientation, threaten to desubjectify the human, limiting its access to the possibility of “occurring,” the term the novel counterposes to giving away. For most U.S. citizens, geared as Marathe says toward self-gratification, the ability to distinguish between desubjectifying and resubjectifying apparatuses—or using resubjectifying apparatuses in a way that sharply reduces potentiality—has been compromised.

To counter the cultural tendency toward the mind-escaping project, Wallace suggests that readers interpret the stimuli that generate the flight-from tendency differently. As we saw with the need/desire conflation, the market benefits when felt needs are reacted upon uncritically. Wallace insists on the possibility, if not the benefit, of abiding within the moment of desiring rather than simply responding to it. The narration, describing a lesson one learns in rehab, explains that “you can all of a sudden want to get high with your substance so bad that you think you will surely die if you don’t, but [you] can just sit there with your hands writhing in your lap and face wet with craving, can want to get high but instead just sit there, wanting to but not, if

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110 The latter, much more than the former, punctuate the novel. Addiction is described as “one long flight from pain” (348). Training for tennis “until everything runs on autopilot and talent’s unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself” (173); cliquish alliance and exclusion and gossip can be forms of escape (202); recovery addicts very advanced in their self-discipline learn to pare away “escape after escape” (998n70); Orin Incandenza finds that in a football stadium’s roar “his own self transcended as he’d never escaped himself on the tennis court” (296); a guru equates the desire for fame with an “escape from the cage” (389); a character explains a fictional Deleuzian thesis as follows: “post-industrial capitalism, whose logic presented commodity as escape-from-anxieties-of-mortality-which-escape-is-itself-psychologically-fatal” (792); Orin’s refusal to contact his mother is described as an “escape” from her influence (1048n269).
that makes sense, and if you can gut it out and not hit the Substance during the craving the craving will eventually pass, it will go away—at least for a while” (202). A sentiment like this one resonates when compulsive consumption occupies the foreground of readers’ attention, both because of consumption’s centrality in the book and because the act of reading the novel itself becomes compulsive for many readers, as Tim Aubry and Frank Louis Cioffi have stated. Abiding the desiring moment allows one critical distance from that desire, allowing one to see it as something other than a need. Wallace here counsels patience that one-click ordering argues against. While consumer society does as much as possible to reduce the time necessary to go from craving to doing, the novel argues that inhabiting a craving is not only possible but can change the nature of consumerist subjectivity.

Our best example of enduring and abiding comes from Don Gately. More than any other character, Gately counters Pemulis’s logic of the immutability of need. Gately hopes that his endurance of significant pain might allow him to emerge from his pain as an individual whose priorities are not yet decided. Gately’s addicted days left him on “an extremely rigid physical schedule of need and satisfaction” (57) that led him to a life of crime and eventually, to an inadvertent murder. Gately’s desire to get clean is informed by guilt over his abandonment of responsibility during his active addiction as well as his fears that incarceration or worse will result if he returns to drugs. Even more, however, sobriety becomes its own reward, one that opens Gately up to avenues his addicted life closed down. For these reasons, Gately refuses pain medication in spite of searing nerve-damage pain from a gunshot wound in what many consider

\[\text{Aubry and Cioffi have written the two best reader-reaction pieces about Wallace’s novel, which often compels an intense loyalty among its readers. As Aubry points out, many Amazon reviewers discuss the book in the same terms drug users feel about drugs—“I couldn’t put it down,” “I wanted stop reading but couldn’t stop.” Aubry and Cioffi both suggest that the narrative’s technique of forestalling complete satisfaction (resisting narrative closure, disrupting flow, destabilizing information) embodies the chemical logic that compels repetition—in so doing, each does an interesting update of Peter Brooks’ Freudian logic of reading’s pleasure. See Aubry or Cioffi, “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s \textit{Infinite Jest}.”} \textit{Narrative} 8.2 (May 2000): 161-181.\]
the novel’s climax. Gately decides that “he could do the dextral pain…. [by] Abiding. No single instant of it was unendurable” (860). Gately so fears a lapse into addictive patterns of behavior that he refuses chemical comfort. His struggle to keep his doctors from giving him narcotics that they believe he needs and his body tells him he needs indicates that he has the critical distance from “need” Wallace sees as essential to escaping compulsive consumption.

A life of active addiction without this distance from compulsion is a “death in life” or makes one “undead” rather than alive (346). These terms, variations of which appear throughout the novel, associate the inertia of desubjectification, where the instinct to give way feels like a constant need, with a zombie-like existence that eschews authentic struggle for self-escape. To abide desire makes one alive instead of being a function of the desiring impulse. Unlike Interlace, which offers unlimited choices for television programming but keeps one watching television, Gately’s choice to remain sober is a choice that truly opens options. Choosing in the Interlace sense reifies inertia toward a given mode of consumption; choosing in Gately’s sense means opening access to a series of trajectories

**Experimenting vs. Altering**

Thus far I have discussed Wallace’s pragmatic reassertion of the subject and abiding within desire as two means of revising the mind-altering project. The third means I shall discuss chooses to experiment within the limits of the self rather than attempt to escape them. Like abiding desire, this approach acknowledges that the self is immanent—that there is no outside of subjectivity. In accepting this notion as an axiom, self-experimentation tries to see where the self can go rather than try to leave the self behind. As we have seen throughout this chapter,
such an approach privileges openness to potentiality over and above the desubjectified numbness of compulsion.

The most overlooked attempt at reworking U.S. individualistic-ideology rewriting in the novel is Gerhard Schtitt’s tennis program, installed at the Enfield tennis academy. Mark Bresnan has written that the role of play in the novel as it is understood among the tennis players is toxic. Many characters grow unhealthily obsessed with where they rank among the school’s players, and the turn many of the players make toward mind-altering substances speaks to the pressure that reaching what they call “The Show” places on them. Bresnan’s argument places what the students learn at Enfield against what Gately learns at Ennet house, suggesting that one form of play opens more doors than the other.112

Gerard Schtitt’s program at Enfield carries out his “Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship” (82). By the time his students reach him, Schtitt sees individuals who have a deeply unhealthy relationship to choosing because of both an abundance of choices and a misunderstanding of what comprises a self. Like Marathe, Schtitt—who is also not native to the U.S.—characterizes the problems of the nation as rooted in its conception of desire: “A U.S. of modern A. where the State is not a team or a code, but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears, where the only public consensus a boy must surrender to is the acknowledged primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness” (83). Reversing the results of this “surrender” means teaching his charges to forget “straight line pursuing” and the kind of goal-orientation envisioned by the U.S. notion of

112 See Bresnan, “The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest,” Critique 50.1 (Fall 2008): 51-68. For Bresnan, the tennis program offers “a naïve idealization of play as a haven for autonomy, free from the regulatory structures of everyday life” (66). While Bresnan’s argument undoubtedly accounts for why several characters are traumatized by their experiences with competitive tennis, Bresnan fails to recognize that the program attempts to address those “regulatory structures” and potentially rewrite their programming. If the program fails it does so because the structures are too difficult to counteract, not because the program is “naïve.”
“personal happiness.” The novel offers the example of James Incandenza, whose tremendous personal successes in three different fields fail to make him feel fulfilled or complete. Once he achieves a goal, he moves relentlessly toward another, hoping finally to achieve satisfaction. Incandenza’s severe alcoholism and eventual suicide speak to the despair induced by the straight-line, goal-to-goal path. Instead of this trajectory, Schtitt’s program favors envisioning a recursive path of experimentation and return.

The key to this experimentation remaining nurturing is that it remains intentionally immanent, as opposed to attempting to escape the boundaries of subjectivity. For Schtitt, tennis provides “an excuse or occasion for meeting the self.” Though the game requires an opponent, the opponent is not “the enfolding boundary” that one competes against, “which is why tennis is an essentially tragic enterprise….You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place. It is tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely.” In this vision, tennis resembles struggle as Wallace positions it in his definition of the human I cite in the last chapter (see pp. 7-8): “All life is the same, as citizens of the human State: the animating limits are within, to be killed and mourned, over and over again….life’s endless war [is fought] against the self that you cannot live without” (84). Schtitt’s philosophy sees tennis as modeling the encounter with the self one needs to engage in again and again. The process of resubjectifying requires these repeated confrontations. Life begins with a set of “animating limits” that make it other than anything else; it is distinguishable from death, it is embodied in our species-form, it is experienced through the senses. These limits animate it but delimit it, prevent it from being something other than what it is. As we have seen for Wallace, the experience of certain forms of entertainment create an inauthentic relationship with one’s limits—recall Van Dyne’s sadness that cocaine “no longer delimited the hole.” Schtitt’s tennis
forces one into a recognition and acceptance of one’s limitations as essential to one’s being.

While one attempts to “vanquish” those limits, the game simultaneously understands its reliance on some form of limits. The effort here is not aimed at the reassurance, safety, and security of fantasy but instead a drive to experiment and to explore immanent potentiality.

One might say the distinction I’m drawing is rather slender. One can surely have a self-experimental experience with television and movies, and one can play tennis in order to escape the self. I cannot argue against either of these sentiments because they underscore my point. Through Schtitt, Wallace argues that at issue is not the activity so much as the relationship one has to the activity. When an interlocutor asks Schtitt to explain the difference between tennis and suicide—after all, all the talk of killing, war, and vanquishing augur a violence toward the self—Schtitt responds by saying that there is no difference, “except the chance to play…No? Yes? The chance to play, yes?” (85). Tennis functions as training for the nurturing resubjectification because the game has limits as a game. To play with one’s subjectivity in the sense that the game allows requires a return to the self’s animating limits with a different understanding of one’s relationship to those limits. You get a chance to become something other than your usual understanding of yourself but you remain within yourself, equipped with a perspective that does not shift the boundaries but shifts the terms of the debate within those boundaries.

The training aims to expose students to a possible way of approaching life in the consumerist U.S. that might make their limitations more bearable. Schtitt’s brutal, exhausting demands hope to result in a healthier relationship with goals, so that “you can then, maybe, if you get there, live with” the goal you have been slogging toward, as opposed to feeling the disappointing erasure of straight-line achievement (434). The narration at one point suggests that
the Schtitt program “is supposedly a progression toward self-forgetting” (635), but it is a self-forgetting that has a direct relation to the self one cannot forget. Schtitt’s advocacy of seeing the court as a “second world inside the world” allows the player to experience “something else,” but unlike the fantasies of self-escape, the second world gives the player “a chance to occur,” to experiment with limitations. The imaginary space of the second world facilitates the experimentation, because players can attempt to imagine themselves outside their ordinary means of doing so. One does not need the illusion of the second world in order to occur, but it helps. Creating this mental flexibility militates against the compulsions essential to the mind-altering project. It gives you a way of managing the pain of this temporality.

Tennis therefore is a form of giving away, but it is also a form of getting back. While in tennis you hope “to send from yourself [in the ball] what you hope will not return,” I do not see this sending away in the same sense Hayles does (176). Hayles reads tennis as akin to the political givings-away in the novel, where the U.S. exports its garbage and its dirty work to Canada. Tennis differs in that while the ball may not return, you have to expect that it will. In the same way, AA’s 12th step is “Giving It Away,” but we learn that adherents “give it up to get it back to give it away” because “sobriety in Boston is considered less a gift than a cosmic loan. You can’t pay the loan back, but you can pay it forward” (344). AA asks you to tell your story—to give away the message—so that others will give you back a story that reminds you of AA’s message, helping to nurture your recovery. Both forms of giving away envision a future in which the desires and doings of the present will resonate in the future.

Ultimately, this future-orientation ties together all the concerns I discuss above. The invention of the AA subject reinvents the self to save the self; abiding the moment of desire avoids the inertia of desubjectification; self-experimentation helps nurture the relationship with
the self instead of escaping it. Wallace’s great fear was that the U.S. would destroy itself by privileging the right to choose (and thus to consume compulsively) over thinking intelligently about how to choose—in other words, for protecting what would be interesting for the public over the public interest. *Infinite Jest* focuses so heavily on consumption because Wallace saw compulsive mind-altering as the defining condition of late capitalism. He gives us characters like Steeply’s father, whose obsession with *M*A*S*H* causes him to shut out the rest of his life. Jeffrey Karnicky’s reading of this character sees the kind of creative interaction that I pose tennis as above. The elder Steeply holds off an impending heart attack because of his intense immersion in the show, which keeps him firmly in his easy chair, shutting out family and losing his job. Karnicky sees Steeply’s absorption as a potentially anti-hegemonic gesture, a moment of stasis that might generate something outside the status quo. What this reading forgets is that Steeply’s absorption completely deletes access to other potential avenues for exploration. He ceases to evolve in favor of becoming increasingly desubjectified. Like a viewer of the Entertainment, he wants to be—and is—consumed. Wallace’s novel argues against such absorption in myriad ways.

This is not to say that Wallace does not sympathize with the desire to become utterly passive. Kate Gompert, whose profound depression seems to have no solution in the novel, is offered a chance to trade her unhappiness for a viewing of the Entertainment, and I daresay readers would not blame her for escaping her searing unhappiness in this way. Furthermore, he recognizes how difficult altering the cultural inertia toward compulsive consumption can be: many characters exhibit difficulty enacting AA’s edicts and many of the tennis players wind up burned-out husks. His faith in the hierarchy he asserts is tentative and his confidence in his prescriptions for the culture is equally shaky.
Yet he feels it vitally important to make this intervention, which Wallace poses as resurrecting morality after we learned to disdain it. We see this through Joelle Van Dyne’s reading of James Incandenza’s film *The Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*. The alcoholic protagonist who is featured in every shot in the film disappears for four minutes, when the camera turns to the same “Ecstasy of St. Teresa” that Van Dyne thinks of every time she gets high. The film’s intense focus on its sad-sack main character who tries to escape his unhappiness through the drinking that is killing him is replaced with a patient meditation on a work of art. For Van Dyne, “the film’s climactic statue’s stasis presented the theoretical subject as the emotional effect—self-forgetting as the Grail—and—in a covert gesture almost moralistic…presented the self-forgetting of alcohol as inferior to that of religion/art” (741). Though Incandenza could never find a way to place religion or art over his own alcohol abuse and eventually kills himself, he offers this vision to his viewers, hoping that they might consider their own relationship to self and self-forgetting.

Wallace’s far more overt gestures are more loudly moralistic: he posits that certain ways of negotiating the world are simply better than others. Doing so risks the scorn of relativists. As Jodi Dean and Jeffrey Nealon have pointed out, however, postmodern and poststructuralist logics, which so successfully criticized mid-century hegemonic morality and rationality, are now embodied within neoliberal ideology. Nealon, paraphrasing Antonio Negri, states that “contemporary global capitalism produces its effects—totalizing or otherwise—only through embracing the event of dispersion, differentiation, and singularization, rather than fighting against this open-ended state of affairs.”113 In other words, deconstruction’s deterritorializing trajectory has shockingly become the preferred technique of neoliberalism, which as I have said

in the preface deconstructs in order to find new territories to “free,” in the neoliberal-capitalist denotation. The individual has been opened up to whatever she prefers to do, whatever mode of consumption in which she wishes to engage. Whether she is better off for being liberated from the restrictions of earlier regimes of power is less important matter here than what one should do under the current one.

Wallace’s turn toward certain necessary fictions—the resurrection of the subject, the reassertion of morality—can seem nostalgic. This impression causes Timothy Jacobs to assert that “Wallace’s point throughout his essays and fiction [is that] contemporary American culture has lost something important.”114 Wallace’s program is hardly revolutionary, and in many respects it reifies Patell’s concept of methodological individualism through its intense focus on the self. As Nealon says, however, if we are to diagnose ways of negotiating the present, “one would almost have to turn to an examination of our relations to ourselves—precisely to see where this mode of ethics might be able to take us, or where it might trap us” (2008: 90).

Wallace would not have the world return to the conformist 1950’s or 1960’s, and he fears the neoconservative fetishizing of that era, as Adam Kelly has shown. If he borrows from the past, he does so in order to see where these ideas “might be able to take us.”

In concluding, I would like to point to one component of the novel I have failed to address (and there are many). Wallace’s dystopian U.S. future was steered by Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner, a character Wallace said in interviews was based on Ronald Reagan. Gentle, a Vegas-style singer with crippling obsessive-compulsive disorder, becomes President after anti-incumbent anger at both major parties creates an opening for independents. Despite coming

from entertainment a la Reagan, contemporary readers will note greater affinities between Gentle’s administration and that of the second George Bush. Under each president, the executive branch operates with seeming autonomy and without needing to justify its actions. In the course of Gentle’s time in office, he reconfigures the North American map, forcing Canada to take possession of several destroyed states in New England whose ruin is traceable to Gentle’s fear of germs (he disposes of toxic waste underneath the ground that he eventually gives away—the kind of giving away Wallace of course disdains). The U.S. draws its energy independence through the giant wasteland Gentle’s action creates, but massive environmental problems result from it, and the cleanup effort itself, in a gesture called “myriadly ironic” by one character (556), helps to uglify the U.S. landscape. How the greater U.S. benefits from Reconfiguration is never revealed, nor is Gentle’s ability to stay in office ever explained (we are told that Gentle was “roundly disliked for over two terms now” [385]). To pay for the massive changes he has wrought, Gentle sells the rights to the American year to the highest bidder, producing the strange year-names in the novel (i.e. The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, the Year of Glad, etc.), and an indignity that pleases the foreigners in the novel is the sight of the Statue of Liberty holding or clad in whatever commodity is advertised in that year’s name.

The methods of the Gentle administration are depicted, however, less cartoonishly than it may seem. Many of Gentle’s tactics reflect what Naomi Klein regularly attributes to the neoliberal regimes of the 1970’s onward—“disaster capitalism.” Gentle’s meeting with his cabinet in which he explains his plan for continental reconfiguration demonstrates that the

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115 The novel is dotted with references to the thundering sounds of “ATHSCME fans,” whose working keep the toxic fumes from leaving the Concavity, the hole where several New England states used to be (287, 456, 475, 488,772). Garbage is shot into the Concavity using giant catapults: the sight and sound of one of the packages moving through the air is described as Van Dyne attempts suicide (237). Dumpsteres designed to contain the garbage Gentle fears (and whose fears become the nation’s) so terribly appear consistently as well (428, 540). The presence of these entities and the sights and sounds they create are described as part of the landscape, a necessary inconvenience imposed by the political sphere.
policies he has created have generated an “unprecedented but not unopportune crisis” (400). The changes his secret burial of toxic wastes has wrought necessitate the drastic actions that follow, just as the drastic economic changes of the 1980’s in America require the liberal government that followed to behave in certain ways. In addition, the Gentle administration places a great emphasis on pageantry and rhetoric. Gentle’s career as a singer make him a natural for the stage, and he continues to “stage” events throughout the novel to fix the terms of the debate in a way that pleases him. He frames the forcing of the wasted area on Canada a gift-giving. He calls what’s clearly a form of imperialism “interdependence.” When New England is evacuated, the administration pays great attention to ensuring that the visual representation of the evacuees can avoid being associated with “refugees” (404). All this calls to mind the second President Bush, who became president twice in spite of being “roundly disliked” and who took advantage of an “unprecedented but not inopportune crisis” to advance a very specific, highly disadvantageous (for the rest of the U.S.) agenda. As we saw during the Bush administration, no effective internal resistance was organized or even conceptualized, as the political sphere seems increasingly distanced from individual agency—and Infinite Jest imagines the same state of affairs. Because the world is increasingly determined, even down to a narrator needing to note trademarked terms, even when the calendar is commercialized, the only realm for effective action takes place at the personal level.\footnote{A reference to Seldane on page 60 yields the following note: “Trade name of terfenadine, Marion Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, the tactical nuclear weapon of nondrowsy antihistamines and mucoidal desiccators” (985n22). See also 984n12, “Mepereredine hydrochloride and pentazocine hydrochloride, Schedule C-II and C-IV narcotic analgesics, respectively, both from the good olks over at Sanofi Winthrop Pharm-Labs, Inc.” On a different note, a recent advertisement shown in Loews Movie Theaters aimed at reducing consumer development of global warming tells viewers that they should see what they can do to keep junk mail from being sent to them, as junk mail produces thousands of tons of waste a year. No one should be surprised that the ad targets the receiver of junk mail, though she hardly can be blamed for its existence. To suggest action by the producers of this junk mail has not been the sort of gesture common to recent environmental movements largely because that effort seems fruitless, if not downright damaging.}
The text’s liberalism, then, comes in its desire to make this terrain consider its interests over what it is interested in. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism privilege the rights of individuals over what the results of those rights’ exercise will predictably generate. Wallace intervenes against this tendency in order to produce a more sustainable, healthy individual who will avoid compulsively functioning in the manner that benefits hegemony.

*Infinite Jest* creates a world where the most authentic mode of human struggle is set against what dominant imperatives might tend us toward—passive, desubjectifying pleasure. The desubjectified human becomes a living being whose agency is erased. One might argue in a Deleuzian vein that desubjectification on a massive scale will undo the structures *Infinite Jest* sees as responsible for the troubles of the present; one might ask Wallace what makes the human subject important enough to revive. Hal, unable to inhabit the second world of the court during a certain match, is told “You just never quite occurred out there, Kid,” and this “choice of words chills Hal to the root” (686). Perhaps Hal should not worry about occurring because he is already occurring—to hierarchize one kind over another is to impose a morality that we know can only have debatable foundations.

For this novel and its liberal readership, this radical relativity has produced unhappy results. Humans without direction feel a dispiriting lack of significance, and going on without meaning lets one feel reduced to a function. *Infinite Jest* suggests to its readers that to occur is to find a nurturing relationship to the self that is composed as a consuming machine first and foremost. To occur is to engage in forms of giving away that plan a return to the self that remain cognizant of the limits of the self even while experimenting with—rather than trying to escape—them. This logic emphasizes the fundamental isolation of the individual, and it recognizes its plight as never-ending and tragic. Wallace’s novel pushes us to see that this plight remains
preferable to an even worse desubjectification into a machinic tool of hegemony. In so doing, he offers a means for thinking our necessary condition differently.
Chapter 3: Corporatism and its Discontents: Richard Powers’ *Gain*

I suggest that, for us, the sense of sickness has replaced the sense of sin, to which it was always
near allied, and that while we are acutely aware of the difficulties surrounding notions of good
and evil, we ignore, though they are manifest, the equally great difficulties surrounding notions
of sickness and health, especially as these judgments are applied to behavior.—Marilynne
Robinson, “Facing Reality,” *The Death of Adam*

Joined by the other three members of the court’s liberal wing, Justice Stevens said the majority
had committed a grave error in treating corporate speech the same as that of human beings.—

Power, in Case’s world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shape the
course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a
kind of immortality. You couldn’t kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there
were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of
corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn’t like that, and he sensed the difference in the
death of its founder. T-A was an atavism, a clan.—William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

In Paul Maliszewski’s article “The Business of *Gain,*” he praises Richard Powers for choosing to
make a corporation one of his two protagonists.117 A noted novelist himself, Maliszewski

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suggested that Powers’ treatment of Clare as a character is the novel’s most notable contribution to postmodern literature, solving the problem of how to treat an entity that is an individual only in legal terms by accepting it on those terms.

Maliszewski is perhaps a bit overzealous in seeing Powers’s gesture as an entirely innovative. Speculative and science fiction has long given readers corporations that have this peculiar abstract embodiment, imagined as organisms rather than inanimate totalities. My third epigraph comes from Gibson’s classic *Neuromancer*, which gives readers a compelling picture of a family so intent on maintaining control of the corporation that shares its name that they keep themselves alive across generations through incest and cloning. Gibson’s vision of corporate futures envisions not just their domination of the landscape—Case registers power as “corporate power”—but the machinations they will deploy to stay alive and in control. Frank Kermode’s 1999 observation that corporations “have a kind of immortality since they survive their mortal members” becomes disproved here: someone needs to be a member of a corporation in order to make it run.118 In *Neuromancer*, a family gives up its claim to ontological humanness in order to maintain the corporation in the form they have given it. Tessier-Ashpool wants to remain a clan, but corporations do not determine their own fate. Wintermute, the artificial intelligence who breaks the code designed to limit his ambitions, successfully has Case and others crack into T-A’s security frame and allow Wintermute to end the family’s control of him. Still, subsequent novels in the series show that Tessier-Ashpool the corporation lives on, while the Terrier-Ashpool family, who once thought they embodied the corporation, does not.

Strangely, then, the corporation is a body that has to be piloted by entities that are not essential to itself. That Tessier-Ashpool is maintained by a family that keeps itself artificially

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intact indicates just how powerfully they want the company to be indistinguishable from
themselves. Case’s own evaluation makes this point. They differ from other organizations in
that they have rigged nature to keep their preferred hierarchy in place. Still, the corporation is
simply a form, what Powers continually refers to as an “invention” that allows certain things to
happen. While that form retains formal recognition as a body, it can continue to operate (or be
operated). Gain is notable not simply for having a corporation as a character, but for dramatizing
how the strange body that is the corporation is akin to the strange body that is the human,
showing that each has a different form of piloting from any we usually imagine.

Gain devotes half its attention to the Clare company, which begins as a small, family-
owned candle and soap maker. After rising to the status of a powerful multinational, it ends the
novel in seemingly terrible health. Near the conclusion, Clare’s CEO believes a hostile takeover
bid from Big Tobacco is impending—an ironic twist, considering Clare’s stock drops because of
a costly cancer-related settlement—and, in the last we hear of Clare, it has “announced a massive
corporate reorganization involving the sale of the Agricultural Products Division” (GA 354).
Clare’s reorganization will be “massive and massively expensive,” and he predicts “the
management group will make an offer to spin off much of the company,” which will mean
“chopping up the firm” and will cost shareholders dearly (350). It will certainly take a different
form than it has had, though its most recent guise is only another permutation.

In showing us a corporation from its rise to its fall—which might simply be another
reorganization--Gain avoids the typical representation of the corporation. Gain demonstrates
that it behaves like an organism, one whose body is animate but whose composition can and
must change vastly. Clare has nothing essential or proper to it. At a certain point, Clare decides
that it will let parts of itself compete internally: “Direct competitions between brands within
Claire could only serve to strengthen the firm in the most desirable possible manner: from the inside out” (236). By letting parts of itself compete, the organism shows that no one of its parts is vital to its existence.

In addition, while the Clare family seems inextricable from the corporation in its early stages, we see that it is ultimately not. Samuel Clare, the last survivor of three brothers who began the company, realizes that while “composite bodies might still need a titular head….a corporation’s president had precious little to say about the firm’s development….a good one could do no better than unleash the collective enterprise. The best ones no doubt came to believe that the will of that collective was their own will” (181). The reflections of the aging Samuel remind us that, strangely, though these “composite bodies” may not be original to the body, this composite nevertheless develops a will. Corporate presidents can only pretend to full control. Though more Clare generations do run the company, this quote indicates that their stewardship is less authoritative than we might imagine.

Clare’s last CEO, Franklin Kennibar, admits something similar to himself: “It has always amused him, drawing the salary he does, how little say a CEO has about anything. The corporation’s point man, the passive agent of collective bidding….In reality, there is nothing but a series of little Clares, each with its own purpose, spreading down the fiscal quarters without end” (349). Kennibar posits that imagining Clare as an actual collective is an error. These little Clares are what are real. The titular head does not rest on one body but on a series of them, loosely and temporarily knit together, or imagined to be that way.

Gain’s other plotline follows Laura Bodey, who at forty-two contracts ovarian cancer. A real estate agent and divorced mother of two children, Laura differs from many of Powers’s
protagonists, as Joseph Dewey has shown.\textsuperscript{119} While Laura is less dazzlingly brilliant than Powers’s usual characters, I disagree with Dewey that this makes her unremarkable. Powers does not condescend to Laura for her ordinariness. Instead, he gives her a compelling and relentless interior monologue that shows a restless intelligence and a capability for—and a wariness of—pushing beyond the obvious. In a moment that feels entirely extraneous to the plot, Laura freezes when a cashier asks her whether she would like paper or plastic. Powers produces real closeness to Laura’s thinking, framing her thoughts and, at times, adopting her voice to articulate them: “What is she supposed to say? Liberty or death? Right or wrong? Good or evil? Paper or plastic? The one kills trees but is one hundred percent natural and recyclable. The other releases insidious fumes if burned but requires less energy to make, can be turned into picnic tables and vinyl siding, has handles, and won’t disintegrate when the frozen yogurt melts” (27). Quickly Laura cycles through her options, realizing that neither is ideal. Note that she considers both environmental costs and personal perks (‘has handles’). The binaries she runs through suggest that she wishes to have more stark, obvious distinctions between her choices; one imagines that she feels a bit guilty for worrying about which item makes toting groceries easier. She would like one to stand out as obviously preferable to her. Unfortunately, neither does: “‘Whatever is easiest,’” she tells the bagger, who grimaces” (27). Here we see that Laura does not know how to make this choice. Ultimately, it isn’t much of a choice. The bags go home either way, and the environment suffers either way. Laura realizes that making the choice would really not be making a choice at all. Here and throughout the book, we see that Laura’s relationship to agency, much as we have seen with Clare’s presidents, is troubled.

Laura’s plotline consists of increasingly futile attempts to manage her cancer as well as the anguish her treatment causes her while she tries to run her household. She spends a minor amount of time attempting to determine what causes her cancer, but the cause ultimately becomes less of a concern for her, though the critical discussions of the novel have obsessed over this point (which I will touch on shortly). Laura’s sections primarily chart how she deals with the diagnosis of cancer, the invading cells that threaten to overthrow the operating system of her body, while the Clare sections show the business trying to survive across two centuries as it constantly adapts to its circumstances.

This pairing has led many readers to see an antagonistic relationship between Laura and Clare. Clare’s agricultural headquarters is housed in Laura’s hometown of Lakewood, where she grew up, went to college, and raised a family. Her home is filled with Clare products, too. When a fertilizer she uses regularly shows up on a list of potential cancer-causing consumer items, readerly suspicions about Clare’s role in Laura’s cancer seem confirmed.120

As a result, most analyses of the novel have attributed blame to Clare for Laura’s death. Joseph Tabbi makes this claim: “the cause of her illness has been isolated” in the aforementioned fertilizer and Clare is “the source of the chemical that kills her.”121 Even when critics have acknowledged that the novel never makes a causal link explicit, they nevertheless point to the corporation as a danger to the citizen. Charles B. Harris asserts that the false body of the corporation always presents a threat to the body of the human citizen, warning that “individuals and individualism itself will be subsumed” by the insatiable appetite of the corporation (102).

120 In addition, the town librarian has a file prepared with research about carcinogens, chemical companies, and cancer clusters, as so many local visitors (like Laura) come hunting for this material. Laura intuits the presence of cancer in dozens of fellow visitors to the county fair (213). The class-action lawsuit filed by Laura and fellow cancer-sufferers against Clare is settled out of court, an implicit admission of some degree of fault (333).

Ursula K. Heise admits that “there is no way of being sure” of the cause of Laura’s cancer, but she is certain that “the corporation as a social form…kills Laura Bodey.” Bruce Robbins observes that “the novel has suggested that the real villain is the corporation.” Stating his summary of the novel’s position more dramatically (and echoing Harris), A.O. Scott states that the corporation and the human can face each other only antagonistically: Laura’s “part of the story is about what can happen when a corporate body and a human one converge: one of them dies.”

These reflections make a kind of sense. *Gain* does give us reasons for thinking that Laura has gotten her cancer from this corporation. At the same time, to imagine that Powers’ message is that corporations are deadly overlook what Laura ultimately determines: “It makes no difference whether this company gave her cancer. They have given her everything else” (320). Though she does join the lawsuit against Clare, Laura feels ambivalent about the vengefulness that she is expected to feel. She realizes—as these critics overlook—that the corporation is an essential part of the terrain of her life, if not its most important feature. This life has not been an unhappy one.

In this chapter, I will argue that *Gain* troubles simple understandings of the human and of the corporation. Powers pairs the two together in order to point to surprising affinities common to both. In so doing he demonstrates that inertia drives human and corporate behavior in ways that problematize agency and also show knee-jerk anticorporatism to be naïve. Harris’s inexplicable claim that corporations will ruin individualism forgets how much corporations have done to enable what we think of as individualism, while they of course also make determining

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individual choice more complicated. Harris wants an “authentic” form of desire (not unlike Wallace) that Powers demonstrates is indistinguishable from constructed or imposed forms of desire. Throughout the book, Clare is upfront about its mandate both “to make things that people desire” and to “make people desire things” (349), and as the text shows, it is equally adept at both. Before we can begin to think about what to do with the corporation, we have to figure out where the corporation ends and we begin, if that line can actually be drawn—for Gain shows that corporatism has both enabled versions of the human to obtain while making plain that these are marketing fictions.

Powers’s tragic view recognizes that naïve anti-corporatism will not bring our sense of agency back, and no course of action will allow versions of humaneness and justice to carry on without the corporation. To think otherwise is to continue an addiction to agency-based explanations rather than structural ones. The tragedy in Powers’s tragic view emerges from his recognition that corporate hegemony does far more to overdetermine us than we can do to determine it, or, in other words, that structure overwhelms agency. The wager Powers offers is that this recognition itself may provide us a means of doing something to that stranglehold. Gain presents us with an attempt to imagine the conditions that would allow action within dominating structures without resorting to some radical and inaccessible outside.

**Causality, Cancer, and the Inevitability of Risk**

Leonard Mlodinow’s best-selling *The Drunkard’s Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* is one of a host of recent popular texts that exposes the limitations of traditional causal models. Existing thinking about causality, Mlodinow tells us, reveal more about our preference for causal explanations. His book makes the reasonably obvious case that unpredictable or unnoticed
factors play major roles in any development, and thus the prediction and explanation business is more difficult than the innumerable public experts in each would indicate.

Particularly germane to a discussion of *Gain* is an example Mlodinow deploys to discuss what he calls “the sharpshooter effect,” which refers to an apocryphal story about a riflemen who draws his targets around the bullet holes left by shots he already fired. Attempts to determine environmental causes for cancer follow the sharpshooter’s *ex post facto* targeting: “first some citizens notice cancer; then they define the boundaries of the area at issue.” Because “the development of cancer requires successive mutations,” the presence of the disease can only be generated by “very long exposure” to or “highly concentrated carcinogens.” As a result, drawing a straight line between any one carcinogen-producer and a cluster of cancer cases is a difficult proposition (184). In other words, what we find when we locate clusters is a desire to find clusters. We see Clare’s chemical plant in the middle of Lakewood, and we see sick people. We do not notice the narrowness of our gaze. Linking these two based on proximity would overlook genetic factors, diet, exercise, other exposure to carcinogens; we would have to do so without any agreed-upon tools for measuring the environmental impact of major corporations. Furthermore, the novel’s suggestion that the gardening product Laura uses is responsible for her cancer only confuses attempts to assess accountability. The product is distributed everywhere;

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126 To prove my point here, let me quickly cite an example from my own reading. Nan, the closest friend of Laura’s daughter Ellen, dies very early in the novel. I assumed that her death was from cancer, based on Laura’s sense of the disease’s prevalence in her community. Even after multiple readings of the novel, I never noticed that the text provides no clues that Nan’s illness was cancer. My inclination to see all illness as cancer can be seen as part of a cultural tendency to want to see cancer clusters in order to blame a given source. I thank Kathryn Hume for clarifying me on this point.
the cancer cluster that Laura intuits is specific to Lakewood. Such complications make attribution complicated.\footnote{\textsuperscript{127}}

In this section, I want to argue that Powers’s use of cancer both tempts us into agency-based explanations and show us their insufficiency. The critical desire to blame the corporation for Laura’s cancer reflects a tendency toward causal explanations that route back to an individual agent. This position overlooks the fact that that cancer is essentially structural to advanced capitalism. To paraphrase a favorite line of a colleague, it is a feature, not a bug, though our society treats it like the latter.

We feel the compulsion to link cancer to specific causal agents when in fact the agglomeration of Western capitalist practices, acting in concert, are (if this term can be used) responsible. The 2008 American Cancer Association annual report announces that U.S. males “have slightly less than a 1 in 2 lifetime risk of developing cancer; for women, the risk is a little more than 1 in 3.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{128}} Estimates suggest that one-third of U.S. cancer deaths cancers are related to obesity issues, and another third are linked to tobacco use. The other third fit into the strange category known as “unpreventable cancer.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{129}} Much of the rhetoric about cancer in the U.S. focuses on preventability, and indeed one can see prevention as a noble goal. Still, pragmatic emphases on prevention lead to assessing certain cancer-causing possibilities as unpreventable.\footnote{\textsuperscript{130}} These carcinogens simply come with the territory of living in an industrialized

\footnote{\textsuperscript{127} Tobacco companies use this very indeterminacy to avoid responsibility in legal actions against them. I am in the uncomfortable position of miming this point. I do want to say that tobacco has had a much clearer impact, measured over a far longer time, than the sort of products Laura uses.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{128} “Cancer Facts and Figures 2008.” American Cancer Society. Atlanta, Georgia: American Cancer Society, 2009: 2.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{129} The ACS asserts that most of these unpreventable cancers are hereditary. The World Health Organization, in a more bleak estimate, suggests that only 30% of the world’s cancers are preventable, as of February 2009. “Cancer: Fact Sheet No. 297,” World Health Organization, February 2009.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{130} Witness this strange sentence in the ACS’s report: “Moreover, relying upon epidemiological information to determine cancer risk does not fulfill the public health goal of prevention, since by the time the increased risk is
country. The unpreventability of this cancer is accepted as axiomatic in a Clare press release, which attempts to combat allegations of corporate negligence: “Some chemical emission is an unavoidable by-product of any vigorous and viable economic activity conducted on so large a scale” (261). This sentence articulates the point I want to make: if we participate in a way of life that requires vigorous and viable economic activity—and we do—then our world will have chemical emissions. The point is absolutely axiomatic to industrial capitalism. Realizing this essential point in *Gain*, Laura Miller asked: “How much would you sacrifice for a substantially reduced risk of cancer? Makeup, clean clothes, cheap bug-free food, antiperspirants, automatic dishwashers, mosquito repellent, medicine, indoor toilets, electricity?”¹³¹ These questions become explicit through Powers’s deployment of cancer as Laura’s disease.

As far back as 1978, Susan Sontag stated with confidence that “cancer is a disease of middle-class life, a disease associated with affluence, with excess. Rich countries have the highest cancer rates, and the rising incidence of the disease is seen as resulting, in part, from a diet rich in fat and proteins and from the toxic effluvia of the industrial economy that creates affluence.”¹³² As globalization has produced greater access to middle class life across the planet, it has brought cancer with it. The rise of cancer throughout the world reveals that cancer rises along with not so much simply affluent lives but ones in industrial spheres, according to the World Health Organization.¹³³ Along with tobacco and diet, the “toxic effluvia” seem to have a lot to do with the disease’s spread.

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¹³³ “As developing countries become urbanised, patterns of cancer, particularly those most strongly associated with diet and physical activity, tend to shift towards the patterns of economically developed countries. Cancer rates also change as populations move between countries and adopt different dietary patterns.” World Health Organization, “Cancer: Diet and Physical Activity's Impact.” World Health Organization: Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity, and Health: 2.
These structural issues receive less attention than ones related to individual agency. After all, telling individuals to avoid smoking or fast food sounds a lot more doable than escaping the environmental factors that would probably appear most anywhere on the globalized map. Jean-Luc Nancy, the reader might recall, argued that the term globalization helped solidify the globalizing apparatus’ desire to see the Westernized way of life as the world’s. No doubt this is the world Sontag referred to when she asserted that cancer “is thought of as a disease of the contamination of the entire world” (*Illness* 70).

The *world* in this last sentence denotes the world of globalized culture. This same culture resists understanding a necessary but vague relationship between itself and its illnesses. As the epigraph I borrow from Robinson indicates, contemporary biopolitical society registers sickness as we used to register sin—the sign that something outside a hegemonic norm is occurring, something calling for intervention and correction. When Gain’s Laura Bodey recalls a funeral from her childhood, she remembers believing that “*disease is just a passing holdover from when we lived wrong. It’s all been a terrible mistake. My parents and their friends: the last generation that will have to die*” (GA 13; italics in original). These sentiments are described as a “girl’s thought,” but upon introducing Laura to the reader, the narrator—presumably miming Laura’s self-conception—says “her life has no problem that five more years couldn’t solve” (13, 8). Whether Laura still thinks disease solvable by living “right” instead of “wrong,” the narration makes her existence inextricable from the sense that the problems that face her (and by extension most people) are solvable. Both diseases and problems are, like sin, something our natures might tend us toward but which we can teach ourselves to avoid.

As we saw in my first chapter, biopolitics describes the attempt to categorize more and more human life in terms of its distance from a norm. Instead of seizing and arresting difference,
a biopolitical regime aims at diagnosing and regulating. In such an environment, we resist believing that cancer can simply occur. Because it is a deviation from the norm, cancer must be caused, and its cause will be something clearly traceable and, ideally, fixable. The emphasis on “preventable” cancers speaks to this. Sontag’s invaluable discussion of cancer revealed that the rhetoric surrounding the condition nearly always attributes its arrival to some personal deficiency. When the cancer sufferer is neither a smoker nor visibly overweight, Sontag proposes that other explanations exist that convert the illness’s progression into a morality tale: “Many believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger,” and she later mentions the “peculiarly modern predilection for psychological explanations of disease, as of everything else” (Illness 21, 54). We see Laura enact this logic, worrying that “she has brought this disease on herself, by being unhappy….because she doubted, took her eyes off the road, let negative thoughts poison her” (GA 317). These concerns confirm Sontag’s suggestion. Failing an immediate physical cause, we look for hidden ones—but only those traceable back to individual action. Doing so relaxes us, by showing that derivations from a happy norm stem from our errant choices, rather than being an environmental given.

Gain ultimately shows searches for direct accountability for cancer to be a fruitless activity that is largely beside the point. Laura’s oncologist, vocally conservative and largely unsympathetic, refuses to give Laura the comfort of solid answers. When she asks whether cancer can have environmental causes, he answers “Cancer, my dear, is not cancer, is not cancer.” He explains that her kind of cancer does not cluster, adding sarcastically that “there is

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134 One is reminded of Patell’s methodological individualism. With the biomedicalization of illness, perhaps Sontag’s claims seem a bit dated. Only a small minority would blame the clinically depressed individual for doing it to himself. Still, the emphasis on preventable cancers I discuss on page 10 indicates that cancer remains a different animal, a disease where fault-hunting seems necessary.
no evidence of ovarian cancer being caused by anything you might have read in the newspaper” (191-192). We dislike the doctor for his condescension to Laura. We want to believe, like Laura, in something like a cluster, something that would make sense of her plight. As the doctor suggests, however, something more general about life in the United States is more likely at fault for cancer in its population than any one agent. In a seemingly random aside, he says, “Immigrants to this country do show higher incidence rates [of cancer] after living here about twenty years” (192). The doctor, interestingly, speaks against the biopolitical imperative to explain discrepancy. “Living here” does something that he cannot explain but can only deal with. At the same time, the American Cancer Society does not say that “living here” is cancer-causing. To do so would be to admit the inevitability of certain kinds of risk in any cultural environment.

Even the moment that many critics point to as confirmation of Clare’s culpability is, upon closer examination, ambiguous. Laura’s immediate reaction to hearing the name of the herbicide she uses on the list of potentially contaminating products—“Sue them, she thinks. Every penny they are worth”—initially seems to affirm their responsibility. This response gives way to acceptance of a more philosophical vision of causality—“It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it in every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining” (320). By dismissing the source of the cancer as insignificant (“it makes no difference”), Laura implies that isolating this one effect among many misses the forest for the trees. Surely the “business” and the “they” referred to in these sentences denotes more than Clare, or at least it does after the first sentence. The abstract collective that has “given her everything else,” “taken” and “molded her life” must include more
than one company. Late capitalist culture in the U.S., dominated as it is by corporations, is what gives, molds, and takes. It gives cancer along with everything else.

The choice of *cancer*, too, over heart disease or any other ailment common in the U.S. functions as part of Powers’ interrogation. The public-sphere understanding of cancer, Sontag explains to us, poses it as “the disease of the Other” that “proceeds by a science-fiction scenario: an invasion of ‘alien’ or ‘mutant’ cells, stronger than normal cells” (66). Cancer invades the body like a hostile corporate takeover. The governing system of the body gets supplanted by something originally foreign to it.

The desire to hold this disease at arm’s length prevents recognition that this would-be Other moves like the West itself. To borrow from Sontag again, advanced capitalism’s chaotic movement “depends on the irrational indulgence of desire,” which just like cancer follows a pattern of “unregulated, abnormal, incoherent growth” that “destroys the body’s normal cells, architecture, and function” (*Illness* 62). Sontag points us to an important tendency of any biopolitical regime. By Otherizing the chaotic and lethal movement of cancer, the West masks its own move into the permanent instability of advanced capitalism.

Biopolitical narratives help make the West’s trajectory look like consistent progress by presenting chaos as alien. As a result, Laura grows up with the sense that living “right” will protect her. By living right, she merits continued possession of a normal bodily architecture and function. When the cancer takes over her body, she originally believes she must have done something wrong, and then readers want to believe something wrong has been done to her.

Laura’s sensibility persists because it is in part correct. Living “right” *does* bring us some benefits. I have argued that life on the globalized map in the contemporary world, underwritten by the spread of these corporations, is somehow especially toxic. At the same time,
the corporation must be owed some credit for making the world especially less toxic in the process of its underwriting—after all, people in industrialized nations live longer than ever. Still, the movement has hardly been even or straightforward, and new risks arise when old ones are eliminated. We no longer worry about polio. We do worry about cancer.

Cancer’s prominence in and resemblance to late capitalist societies contradicts its treatment as an exception, a paradox that highlights Western culture’s desire to see itself as ever-improving. Instead, Powers suggests that the West may not be improvable in the cost/benefit terms we have inherited. In the 1840s, one of the original Clares “read of the collapse of a nearby mill on the Waltham model. Two hundred girls died inside. He could not keep track of the accelerating factory explosions in Brooklyn and Baltimore. He only noted that the industrialists always managed to escape prosecution on the grounds that their works had done more cumulative good than harm” (GA 68). By setting this observation decades prior to legal, limited-liability incorporation, Powers demonstrates that the fact of incorporating itself did not eliminate corporate culpability or produce reckless experimentation.

He also shows that the dangers facing life in industrial society are certainly nothing new. While Heise suggests that “the real poison” in Gain “lies not in any concrete substance but in the complex technoeconomic system that has evolved over more than a century to deliver chemical products to the individual” (766), the novel proposes instead that exposure to risk is always more structural than incidental. Cancer comes the way industrial accidents did—with the territory.

Laura, Consumerist Ideology, and Agency
A.O. Scott, among other critics, has indicated that Laura Bodey’s last name underscores how important her embodiment is to the novel. Powers regularly reiterates how cancer alters her awareness of her body and then makes her feel distinct from it. After her first chemotherapy treatment, the narrator writes, “No one really knows their real body. Hers has turned electric, buzzed, frizzy. Her internal organs go some horrid shade of Naugahyde. No one knows what food really smells like. Well-being is nothing but an impostor, a beautiful girl who turns into a hag at nap tide when the spell breaks” (114). Further into the chemo, Laura’s “body scares her now. Alien infestation. A pink, bare, cave newt, bald down to her plastic pubes….Whatever the cause, she no longer recognizes the scraps of person left to her” (227). Her cancer acts to defamiliarize her to herself. This process allows Powers to trace how Laura’s ideological faith in the consumerist logic of correction becomes undone, a narrative of agency replaced by a narrative of overdetermination.

As is often said of chemotherapy, at times it seems to Laura that the cure is worse than the disease. Gain’s invocation of and dwelling within chemotherapy highlight the discrepancy between mainstream beliefs in progress and contemporary society’s continuing investment in experimentation and risk. In her essay on the novel, Heise borrows Ulrich Beck’s concept of “recursive modernity,” where, unlike earlier periods, modernity does not react to inherited crises like scarcity. Instead, it largely reacts to problems created by itself. Because its responses to those inherited crises have produced consequences both beneficial and dire, it has to do what it can do deal with the latter. These second-stage responses unleash even greater unpredictability, perhaps best modeled in environmental crises like global warming (757-758).

135 Scott 38.
136 Unlike Heise, however, I do not see a significant moral difference accompanying the forces that govern these modernities. While recursive modernity unleashes uncertainty, previous epochs dealt in hard-to-accept certainties like issues of scarcity. I do not see a necessary hierarchy that posits starvation, say, as ethically preferable to
Powers’ attention to Laura’s chemo reveals this cycle: “They pump her with one drug to destroy and another to rebuild. Next she’ll have to take something to correct the Neupogen, and another to correct the correction” (229). The logic here relies on axioms that feel unquestionable. It is better to be healthy than sick, better to be corrected than be in error. Living for longer is good. A parent should stay alive to nurture young children. A person has a right to the best medical care possible. Even when Laura is nearly ready to give up on the treatment, her doctor “orders a second-look surgery.” The narrator then follows Laura’s reaction to the order: they will proceed “because the procedure is available to them. Because it is all that’s available to them. Because we have to do all the things we know how, do anything that might help, however little. Because we cannot stop until we have done all we can possibly do” (306). The repeated use of “because” in these sentences indicates a kind of desperation. Medical care continues long after hope recedes; the obvious question, why one should bother, calls forth all these answers, none of which seem particularly sufficient. The turn from “them” to “we” implicates the reader as well as Laura and the speaker. Who, after all, would not “do anything that might help” for dying person?

In its depiction of chemotherapy as well as Laura’s faith in “living right,” Gain links the reflexive drive for correction to consumerist practices. Laura, like many consumers, justifies her consumption by instinctively associating it with maintaining functionality. Through showing her relationship to commodities and to consumerism, Powers demonstrates how naturalized this belief in correctability has become and how hollow that faith ultimately is.

industrial accidents. A strange tactic common to literary criticism is to suggest that pre-Enlightenment or pre-industrial sufferings were somehow preferable to contemporary ones, perhaps because they might be seen as more natural or more authentic. Part of the moral failing attributed to the apparatuses of recursive modernity stems from their putatively “unnatural” makeup. While starving may be more natural than cancer caused by smoking, I am not sure that makes it automatically more preferable.
"Gain" is a novel littered with hundreds, if not thousands, of references to the consumer commodities that decorate and facilitate Laura’s life. The narration consistently calls attention to these products as well as marketing for more. A typical passage mentions ten in eleven sentences:

She should switch to decaf, but doesn’t. She cleans the counter, waiting for the Peruvian beans to brew. She wipes the diet pop rings and the bits of Pop-Tarts rind…When the coffee is ready, she pours it into a [cup with her realty company’s logo on it] that reads ‘Own Your Dream.’ Adds a slug of milk—2 percent, for the heart. Then some brown sugar. Life is short. Who’s counting?

She sits at the butcher-block table that gave her so much pleasure when she bought it…She takes the credit card calculator from her purse and sticks it under the fake Tiffany lamp, to activate the solar cell. She tears the top Post-It off the cube by the fridge and picks up the magnetized flower pen (102).

Notice how Laura’s recognition of several commodities is accompanied by her justifications for consuming them. She got the milk that is better for the heart. The sugar gives the pleasure called for by life’s brevity. The table briefly seemed to do the same. To Laura, the purchase and consumption of these commodities promised to offer her means for a happy and functional life. Consumerism is performed in the service of a self that comes to understand its desire for consumer goods as basic self-interest. Even when the modes of self-interest conflict—the 2 percent milk is aimed toward health consciousness, whereas the sugar does the reverse—they all fit under the umbrella of a self-fashioning that feels like improvement. The cultural assumption that one ought to improve one’s life mobilizes consumerism as part of an ethical imperative. In the same way that we must help the cancer patient, we must try to make our lives better—and for
the contemporary consumer, commodity consumption seems a natural means toward that end. “Own” your dream has a different valence than simply “having” one (though of course, in context, the dream referenced is a consumer commodity).

Through much of the novel, Laura’s relationship to her consumption is uncritical. Her cancer dislocates her just enough from her everyday life to allow her some distance from it. She becomes aware of her immersion in the consumerist cycle of desiring-creation and hallucinatory satisfaction. Importantly, this awareness does not and perhaps cannot liberate her from the cycle. While Laura might see herself as trapped, she is unsure of whether she even wants to be freed, whatever that might mean.

In the passage I excerpt below, we will again see Laura applying mainstream causal logic as she attempts to locate what behaviors exposed her to carcinogens. In the process, she attempts to bargain her way out of culpability for her cancer and complicity with the cancer-causing mode of life. Laura’s reliance on the rationalizations she used to justify her consumption in the first place eventually begins to feel impotent. As the section begins, Laura reviews what edicts she has heard that may have produced the cancer. In weighing them against her lived experience, Laura at first demonstrates a firm sense that the social acceptability of her behavior mediates against their potential harmfulness:

Avoid meat and fat. Don’t smoke or drink. Limit the time you spend in the sun. Don’t expose yourself to toxic chemicals at home or at work. Do not indulge in multiple sexual partners….

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137 She engages in these attempts a number of times throughout the novel, even though we learn from Don that Laura had long espoused a kind of fatalism. He “once tried to explain” his devotion to diet and exercise to Laura, “using statistics,” but “You can’t change your number coming up, she kept saying” (40). Laura’s reversing-thrust on this fatalism could be traced to cancer having the moral weight Sontag cites. All other ends might be traced to the cosmic lottery, but cancer’s particular cultural position makes it a different animal.
Well, she’s had sex with three men in her life, and one had trouble with intercourse. Sure, she drank a lot in college, with the girls. But these days, she could probably have had half a dozen more glasses of red wine a week and still come in under the guidelines. She smoked for maybe three years, now and then after dinner, just to be sociable. But, ludicrous or no, she never really inhaled. Her diet’s not perfect, but because of the kids, she’s always been more careful than anyone else she knows. Don’t expose yourself to toxic chemicals at home or at work. There’s the catch. They might as well say: Don’t get cancer. Well, she hasn’t exposed herself. She hasn’t, knowingly or otherwise, as far as she knows. She hasn’t even been exposed. No Three Mile Island across the river. Whatever she’s getting by chance or proximity is no more than anyone else in the known world is getting (283).

When she encounters a potential site of exposure, Laura immediately produces functional justifications for her behavior. She did what was expected of her in college and thus refuses to countenance those practices as the culprit; smoking is explicable by its (now outdated) sociability; she was less than promiscuous; she has been sufficiently attentive to food. Laura has behaved more or less according to code, and as a result she can be cynical (“They might as well say: Don’t get cancer”). By reference to her functionality—she did these things because they made life workable, not because she was overindulgent—she attempts to defend herself, not yet realizing that her very typicality is what determines her susceptibility. As if to dramatize Laura’s desperate attachment to this mode of self-defense, we arrive at a contradiction whose paradoxicality does not stop Laura: “She hasn’t [exposed herself], knowingly or otherwise, as far as she knows.” Laura wants to believe in her ability to account for her unknowing exposure; she wants other-than-knowing (“otherwise”) to fit into “as far as she knows.” The next sentence
underscores her conviction, taking the liberty of reversing the agent. She has not exposed herself or been exposed. For Laura, the typicality of her life as she understands it should shield her from concern.

As her search through potential causes continues, Laura’s justification feels less confident and more resigned. The tone alters, revealing something akin to resignation. Powers’ narration follows her

…counting in her head all the things she’s done wrong in her life. All the little carcinogenic amenities, the dangers she’s known but risked anyway, because the odds seemed so small or so hard to work around. From hair spray to charred barbecue burgers. The paints and paint strippers. The hair color treatments, so crucial to her self-image. The maraschino cherries she used to reward herself with, for being so good. All the diet sodas, which she loved, because they made her feel that she could drink as much as she liked while burning more calories consuming them than she was consuming. (GA 282-283)

Again, Laura attempts to make her behavior uncarcinogenic by making them seem explicable. She consumed or used these things in accordance with justifications that smack of either necessity or contemporary psychologizing. The first four items (hair spray, barbecued meat, paint and paint remover) could hardly be more ubiquitous in late-century suburban U.S. life. The use of the other three accords with values the U.S. consumer has learned she requires in order to maintain functionality—sufficient self-esteem, rewards for good behavior. To avoid these items, Laura would have had to divorce herself from the value system of her culture. She would risk not feeling good about herself, repressing what have become naturalized as human urges.
What we see in this second section of the passage, however, is the weakening belligerence of her defense. She has done things that are “wrong,” despite the distance from incorrect behavior she thought her generation gave her. The amenities this time are “cancerogenic” and are clearly “dangers.” Drinking diet soda, the last practice she reviews, fits her behavior into less of a moral frame and into one that sounds more self-indulgent. The sentence implies that her love was less about the quality of the product itself than in her ability to consume it without thinking about her consumption. At the same time, even the very name of diet cola indicates a drinkers’ desire to fit within “healthy” desire. It is the soda that the conscientious soda-drinker drinks, the one that recognizes the relationship between indulgence and obesity. Drinking it attempts to frame one’s consumption as sacrifice: you drink the soda that has less of what makes soda soda because (ostensibly, at least) you are savvy about what uncritical consumption can do. Laura admits that this consumption is less about the improvement than about the illusion of oneself as the savvy consumer. What she loved was the product’s ability to make her into a self who could congratulate herself for doing what she wanted to do.

This recognition forces Laura to admit the insufficiency of the defense strategy she has been practicing. In the next section of the same passage, Laura learns from a book called *Shopping for Safety* that a number of everyday household items and foods she never expected could be carcinogenic were in fact dangerous. The inescapability of exposure tells her “nothing is safe. We are all surrounded….The whole planet. A superfund site. Life causes cancer” (284). After coming to this conclusion, Laura tries to make amends: “she could learn to buy only those goods that are above reproach. How hard could it be, to change a few habits? No beef, no chemical toothpaste, the right brands of polish…Nothing she would miss. Buy her way back to
health, by choosing the recommended items” (284; ellipsis in original). Being a good consumer should prevent her from being a consumer who merits “reproof” for taking part in the contaminated world. At first, the increased awareness the book affords her not only does not erase but in fact reinforces her sense that there are ways to be safe.

Ultimately, her ability to make the argument that she can escape risk through conscientious consumerism is undercut by the inescapability of carcinogens in industrial cultures. We see Laura give up the fight: after a momentary consideration of the possibility of “buying herself back to health,” “the brief fanatical fantasy dissolves on her like pixie dust. She’d need a lot more health than she has to pull it off. And every plastic bottle of water she bought would just spew poisons somewhere else” (284). Making herself and her children safer can easily expose others and their children to more risk. Prioritizing means, literally, picking one poison over another: a more dangerous product or a more endangered environment. Either way, Laura and her children will never be as safe as she once believed they were.

The word choice “fantasy” denotes Laura’s revelation that buying one’s way back to health is wishful thinking. The logic of the fantasy is akin to the desire to escape from the temporality that pains, failing to comprehend that one remains always within that temporality. Laura will return to the sort of buying she has always done, now cleansed of believing these behaviors safe. This awareness cannot free her precisely because Laura has to go shopping. She has to make choices, regardless of her awareness of their inadequacy. She lacks the time, the energy, the funds, and the know-how to grow her own food, let alone knit her own clothing, make her own cleaning products, and so on.
Not long after this moment, the text provides us with the only vision of agency available to the contemporary consumer that both recognizes the consumer’s complicity and her inability to be anything but complicit. This passage, too, deserves quoting at length:

Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count. And any spray she might use to bomb the bugs would have to be Clare’s, too….And wasn’t she born wanting what they were born wanting to give her? Every thought, every pleasure, freed up by these little simplicities, the most obvious of them already worlds beyond her competence….The newspapers, Don, the lawyers: everybody outraged at the offense. As if cancer just blew in through the window. Well, if it did, it was an inside job. Some accomplice, opening the latch for it. She cannot sue the company for raiding her house. She brought them in, by choice, toted them in a shopping bag. And she’d do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to. (GA 304)

At this point, Laura has accepted the premise that her use of Clare’s products might have something to do with her cancer. Throughout these sentences the narrator articulates her inability to separate her complicity from theirs. She does not worry where her desire for Clare’s products began; she knows simply that she always has wanted what late capitalism’s apparatuses have offered her. Whether her desires are organic or not, she understands them as hers. Though she now understands that her environment has always been toxic, she still sees herself as an agent within that environment.

As a result, in spite of her growing awareness, Laura proclaims that she would both choose to do as she’d done before and would have to, which we presume means it is not a choice. She does not see the coercion of the choice—“would have to”—as changing the nature of the choice itself. She chooses against understanding herself as completely lacking agency.
For if she is not responsible, then the corporation does everything—it composes and satiates her desire, it brings its products into her home and makes her consume them. To save the self she must have, she has to have a say in the choices she makes, even if she really has no choice.

Coercion, Inevitability, Structure

Clare’s first move into diversification is emotionally painful for the sons of Jephthah Clare, the first of the Clares we meet in the novel. Jephthah dealt exclusively with transporting and selling goods, not their manufacture. When his sons employ Robert Ennis, a skilled Irish immigrant candle maker, to make candles and soap that they will trade, the narrative tells us: “At least death spared the old man the indignity of his sons’ fall. He did not have to witness Abomination drive a flourishing trading family into bastard handiwork” (31). As the novel shows, Jephthah’s generational prejudice against manufacturing gives way to the necessity of a successful company’s integrating as many components of the production and sale process as possible.

While the stigma attached to handiwork and manual labor certainly still exists, the old way of looking at ownership and management died a slow death.

I mention this development in Clare’s growth because the brothers bring in the Irishman when the family’s fortunes had reached their lowest ebb. The Clares know of no other way to negotiate their world than to engage in business this way, in spite of the prejudice against their behavior. In so doing, they exploit the labor of an immigrant Irishman, who also sees no better option than to be exploited. Even from the company’s very start, we see characters mobilized not so much by desires basic to themselves as by their circumstances.

Throughout Gain, Powers shows us moments when Clare seems destined to collapse. In its first guise, it nearly collapses after a settlement in a copyright infringement claim (108); they
suffer during each of the mid-19th century’s recession (“in ’37, ’43, ’57, ’60, ’65”) (180); “in the general collapse of business in the 1870s, the firm fell into a downward slide” (194). In the end of the century, “Clare’s choice was a simple grow or die” (234). All American business is threatened by the growing radicalism of the 20’s and the 30’s. This radicalism “would have prevailed, society would have transformed itself at last, had not Roosevelt come along and stolen the best lumber out from underneath the militant Socialists and turned it into mainstream party planks” (306). The environmental movement of the 1960’s hurts public relations: “The public had turned not against Clare but against all industry and enterprise. Now that business had delivered people from far worse fates, people turned against the fate of business” (336). He depicts Clare’s development not as an unbroken series of successes but rather as the story of a struggle to evolve and remain prosperous.

Many have noted how the narrative’s focus places more attention on the biographical details of the founding Clare family than corporate heads after them, providing less detail with each passing generation. While this technique is often seen to exemplify Powers’ increasing disdain for the corporation, I see the transfer of agency to the business itself as part of Powers’ broader strategy of showing that inertia means that structures matter more than agency. As Maliszewski suggests, “the business seems to run the business” increasingly as the novel goes on (169). Rather than saying that the early Clares had more control than, say, Kennibar, the nod toward Kennibar’s powerlessness proposes that businesses, like all systems, tend to function autopoietically—that is, the system itself takes over, forever seeking a level of acceptable stasis using its own volition. The Clares do what they have to do to keep the company alive and growing, as does everyone after them. They are mobilized by imperatives that work upon them and all others in the social sphere, leading to largely predictable behaviors.
The small business that the Clares begin with Ennis seems far more susceptible to contingencies than the corporation that Clare becomes. The difference, however, is not in vulnerability: as we see throughout the threats that befall Clare, to incorporate is not to become invincible. Instead, Clare can do more things. Incorporating is adding a prosthesis. The corpus of a corporation, Powers tells us again and again, gives humans a force their actual bodies do not. In inventing the corporation, “civilization had stumbled upon [an] institution, one that might take it anywhere at all. The race had learned how to build a combine to do the endless bidding of existence. And the work of this compound organism *outstripped its cells*. Enterprise’s long-evolving body now assembled goods beyond any private life’s power to manufacture” (155, my emphasis). I stress Powers’s use of “cells” because of the explicit connection it makes to cancer. The body of enterprise takes on a different organizing system than the one that produced it. It is an entity that can do more than the entities that constitute and inhabit it. Indeed, the laws that governed incorporation allowed for this widening of potential avenues. “Once upon a time, a company chartered to spin silk could not also make muslin. But now the law let Clare” produce “a charter so wide even a room-sized kettle could not fill it” (157). As a result, the company’s drive ultimately shifts. It becomes an entity not aimed at the production of commodities or even the churning of profit. By the early 20th century, the narrator makes its actual orientation clear: “The company was no longer a band joined together for a common purpose. The company was a structure whose purpose was to make more of the same” (273). By articulating the drive in this way, Powers indicates that the corporation has taken on the most basic imperative of any animate organism. This makes it like Laura, whose can find her only reason for continuing to live as habitual: “She’s gotten into the habit of existing. She likes being here. She doesn’t know what
else she would do” (243). The treatment of corporate personhood allows it to take on more and more characteristics of actual personhood.

*Gain*’s narrator avers that “such pure acts of idealism” as the fifth and fourteenth amendments, whose phrasing allows the corporation’s legal protections, “never know their practical ends.” What results from the advent of this legal individual changes the course of human history: “the limited-liability corporation: the last noble experiment, loosing an unknowable outcome upon its beneficiaries. Its success outstripped all rational prediction until, gross for gross, it became mankind’s sole remaining endeavor” (159). The language at work in these sentences certainly authorizes a pessimistic reading of incorporating. That the experiment becomes the “sole remaining endeavor” suggests that all other pursuits have fallen by the wayside in favor of the corporation’s pursuit of “an unknowable outcome.”

While we cannot know what “the noble experiment” will bring and it has outstripped everything else, we cannot absolutely declare the corporation at fault for what it does. The experiment—a noble experiment—does the “loosing” here, not the corporation itself. The term “loosing” implies that a force was unleashed. This force’s emergence produces irresistible pressure not only on nature but on the social sphere.

Powers’s narration spends considerable energy framing the consequences of this loosing as inevitable. Doing so does not obscure the fact that ideological and structural foundations are what allow these changes to occur: it turns those foundations into the natural environment that business, like climate, works upon. As a result of the steam engine, “the week vanished into hours” (67). The telegraph meant that “time was dead: things could be known in the moment they happened” (91). The advent of the futures market around the turn of the century meant that “crops dissolved into the idea of produce” (208). In phrasing events in this way, Powers gives
agency to technology and business that simultaneously anthropomorphizes and naturalizes it.

We learn that “rail steadied the farmer’s year like a hand laid upon the turbulent heel of heaven. It standardized by fiat, without recourse to Congress, the countless different times the nation had run on” (207). Powers’ use of the term “fiat” to describe this standardization indicates the autonomy and power of an abstraction like “rail.” Rail cannot speak, but rail can dictate. Later, business’s realization of the utility of the eight-hour day meant that “business had worked another change upon time” (273).

In this last quotation, business changes the experience, understanding, and apportioning of time, not time itself. Rail both is and is not an abstraction—railroad barons existed and did exert power through typical human means. Still, the consistency with which Powers positions these movements indicates his desire to depict the passage of the past two American centuries as a story that proceeds inevitably.

That the corporation wants to seem like a force of nature complicates our ability to interpret Powers’ gestures. As part of a promotion, Clare’s first marketing director chooses a poem that unites soap with the development of America from a wilderness to a world leader: “It seemed to capitalize on all Clare’s preexisting advertising, to unite the firm with inevitability’s other nameless forces, and to render all mention of the grand manufacturer conspicuous in its absence” (280). Clearly, Clare’s best interests are served by making itself seem essential to human life. This desire for mystification is perfectly in keeping with conventional understandings of ideology—the making-natural of what is in fact manufactured.

In miming the corporation’s and corporatism’s preferred narrative of its rise, Powers does what Leerom Medovoi has explained is inevitable about the rise of neoliberal, globalized hegemony. Whenever we trace how history unfolds, we wind up producing a narrative that
makes contingent happenings sound fated. The systems it depicts mobilize bodies in largely predictable ways. Doing so is obviously a tricky move. A naturalistic depiction of globalization is exactly the story that the agents of globalization would like to propagate. The gesture therefore mimes the ideal neoliberal narrative, yet in so doing, it stresses the ongoing nature of that narrative. As Medovoi has suggested, speaking the story as neoliberalism tells it may open the chance “to rewrite it.” At the same time, we must admit that Powers poses little difference between the pressures of systemic coercion and the forces of inevitability. He makes the corporation and business an agent that can work changes upon basic elements of life, but as we have seen, we cannot always tell whose bidding a corporation is doing. The corporation acts like a natural force but, interestingly, its forcefulness only emerges from social structures, not earthly or cosmic ones. Perhaps Powers’s intervention is to remind us of this difference—that it is very easy to think the corporation a kind of force that it is not.

The Question of Collective Response

In a masterful reading, Bruce Robbins has argued that the novel actually argues that our ability to respond collectively to global injustice and corporate hegemony is right in front of us. Robbins shows that Powers’s lengthy, careful depiction of the manufacture of a disposable camera reveals the remarkable amount of global cooperation that enables such a product to be created so cheaply. Robbins proposes that we “take [the creation of the camera] as a poetic metaphor, a metaphor that stands for how the nations of the world might join together in some way other than via the profits of the American multinationals, and what we might do with each other, and for each other, if we could” (90). This assertion wants to see the novel’s primary purpose as

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intervening, as showing that the means for global collective action are already at hand, here
echoing Hardt and Negri. Placing this incident so close to the novel’s ending, one assumes,
emphasizes the importance of this message. Robbins, like Tabbi, seems to be saying that Powers
shows us this fatalistic world view in the hope that our ability to change the world-picture will be
consequently heightened.

As much as I sympathize the impetus motivating these readings—to resurrect some hope
of major change—they each overlook Powers’ inclusion of a very similar passage from the
preface of Samuel Griswold Goodrich’s *Enterprise, Industry, and Art of Man: as Displayed in
Fishing, Hunting, Commerce, Navigation, Mining*. The two paragraphs Powers quotes detail the
process of making a piano:

its rosewood covering was violently torn from its birth-place in the forests of Brazil; its
massive legs of pine grew in the wilds of Maine; the iron which formed its frame was dug
from a mine in Sweden; its strings were fabricated at Rouen; the brazen rods of the pedals
were made of copper from Cornwall mixed with silver from the mines of Potosi; the
covering of the keys was formed of the tusks of elephants from Africa; the varnish was
from India; the hinges from Birmingham, and the whole were wrought into their present
form at the world-renowned establishment of Messrs. Chickering & Co., Washington
street, Boston (79).

Goodrich’s language, though more terse, resembles the narrator of *Gain*, listing the locations
required for the camera: “ingredients gathered from Russia, Arizona, Brazil, and underwater
seabeds, before being decanted in the former DDR….trees from the Pacific Northwest and the
southeastern coastal plain. Straw and recovered wood scrap from Canada. Synthetic adhesive
from Korea. Bauxite from Australia, Jamaica, Guinea. Oil from the Gulf of New Mexico or

One might argue that the piano requires less global integration than the camera. Additionally, the disposability of the disposable camera is important to the passage—the narrator mentions that “the entire engineering magnificence was designed to be pitched” (348), and the passage also includes the environmental woes that stem from “metal from the flash battery” (347)—while Goodrich’s piano is no doubt sturdy and built to last. Still, the fact remains that each is obviously a commodity built “for the profits of American multinationals,” and knowing that said commodity depends upon worldwide cooperation did not make a dent in hegemony during the middle of the 19th century. Why would the camera-passage, obviously intended to resemble the piano-passage, be expected to do anything different?139

We have no good reason to think that telling the story again will produce different results. Robbins’s optimism is not the novel’s. He is right, however, that this incident does force us to wonder about collective impulses. So, too, does Franklin Kennibar’s last impression. Reflecting on an expedition one of the original Clares took to the arctic, looking for a “hole at the pole,” Kennibar grimly says to himself, “They only looked...We made one” (353). Kennibar’s joke is ironic: the hole in the ozone layer is obviously not the hole Ben Clare searched for. His tone is hardly triumphant, either.

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139 For this reason, the popularity of ostensible exposés like Steve Ettinger’s Twinkie, Deconstructed: My Journey to Discover How the Ingredients Found in Processed Foods Are Grown, Mined (Yes, Mined), and Manipulated into What America Eats, Plume: New York, 2008, which does for Twinkies what Goodrich does for the piano and Powers for the camera, is more about raising curiosity than creating change. Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser may have altered the way we think about food and eat, but they have not opened up thinking about structures or subjectification. I am not saying these latter two ends are necessary, but they seem to be what Robbins and Tabbi see Gain reaching for.
While he is ironic, Powers’s inclusion of this sentence is not: it feels tragic. In my reading, Powers does not have nearly so revolutionary an agenda as Jeffrey Karnicky and others have attributed to him. I do not believe he expects his readers to behave much differently than Laura or Kennibar or the first Clares. He understands the structures that set subjectivity in motion to generate even the mere fantasy of agency or change. The move is not away from the subjectivity we inhabit, but rather to inhabit that subjectivity more cognizant of its production and motion.

While he allows certain characters to voice ideological presuppositions we are surely meant to question, he places these characters within a narrative that suggests more than ideology motivates them. He proposes that the contemporary order is an inevitable consequence of events set in motion some time ago. While he does predict an eventual breakdown of the system—“when the strained chains of infrastructure next crack, history will return to those long centuries after the Empire packed up, when a farmer’s scythe falling down a well meant a permanent farewell to iron” (347)—he again makes the prospect sound fated, and the picture is not necessarily pretty.

At last I want to return to Laura, who adopts this tragic view. The reader may find me guilty of asserting that the tragic view gives her equanimity toward her world. While this might be fair on a philosophical level, Laura remains intensely attached to her environment. She worries about her children. She frets about money. She wishes she liked television as much as she used to. In these details, Powers reminds us of the absolute difficulty of integrating such an abstract perspective into everyday life. Her anger at Clare, which becomes (as we have seen) a stand-in for all the corporations that have determined her life, manifests itself in a dream she has not long before her death. In it, Clare is a “male, in mid-life, handsome, charming, well built,
well meaning. He comes with an armload of flowers, thoughtful gifts, even a poem. He comes again and again, always finding her at home. But always, the night of romantic dancing turns by evening’s end into desperate caresses, a brutal attack, date rape” (344). This moment is by far the harshest response that Laura has to Clare and to her cancer. No reading of the book can overlook what is said here—Laura recognizes corporate regime’s giving is inseparable from its taking, and in this passage the taking is premeditated and profoundly cruel. In this characterization we see that Laura’s aerial view does not absorb her anger and disappointment. Dying young is not what she expected, and no amount of perspective will act as solace in a case like this.

In grasping corporatism’s premeditation, she sees that the part of her world that delivered her culture’s pleasures to her also intended to gain from that delivery. One is reminded of Joelle Van Dyne’s realization that entertainment is blind, not caring about you but still pleasuring you. Readers should also remember that Laura also realizes the reverse—that the individual’s desire to be pleased plays a role in the corporatism of the present. I absolutely do not mean to say that Laura was asking for it in her dream, and I do not mean to suggest that the power in consumerist society is balanced. In one of the last lines she delivers, however, Laura relocates the fault from the figure in her dream to individual humans at large: “People want everything. That’s their problem” (343). By and large, individuals and corporations want what the other offers, without particular regard for the other itself.\(^\text{140}\)

\(^{140}\) Hardy Green’s review of the novel for Business Week, a conservative economic magazine that chose Gain as one of its “10 Best Business Books” of 1998, lauds the novel because it avoids placing blame on the corporation explicitly and indicts civilization more generally. While one person’s reading is obviously not clear proof of a position, that Green could come to this conclusion shows that the anti-corporate position is not the necessary conclusion one would draw from an encounter with the text. See Green, ”People Want Everything. That’s Their Problem.” Review of Gain by Richard Powers. Business Week 3588 (July 27, 1998): 12.
The complicated relationship to desire posited by Laura serves as one of the self-defeating yet self-making tendencies of the human as *Gain* presents the species. In one of the novel’s dozens of heartbreaking moments, she looks at Tim, who she loves dearly but with whom she has no connection: she experiences the frustrations of her parenthood as a microcosm of human struggle: “She wants to pet down his cowlick, but does not. Endless civilization advances, and we can do everything but live” (203). The book’s questioning of correction—ultimately futile, of course, as any alteration of correction would in fact be a correction—suggests that we will always have trouble simply living. One is reminded of Wallace’s human pounding on the door when we encounter another of Laura’s remarkable ideas about the species: “Weird ideas come to her at three or four in the morning. There is no history. Everything already is. Humanity is a child locked by accident in a library, reading its way through the permanent collection, looking for a way out” (113).

In these sentences, Laura’s ideas come to us through the narrator, who quickly and regularly slips into indirect discourse. Powers’ sympathy with his characters is expressed in the way he shares their thoughts, imbuing them with a richness not commonly found in everyday language. Powers fills many of the novel’s pages with these intensely poetic sentences that defy easy interpretation. I suggest that in this sympathy, we see Powers’ great contribution to contemporary literature. His sense that determination invades and governs all life on the Western map leads not to a relativism but to a profound sense of empathy. Powers worries about humans the way one would worry about a child locked in a library with no sense of how to get out. The metaphor speaks to Powers’ sense that literature is not the avenue for finding a way out. To do justice to the novel, then, we should recognize that it tempts us with easy political solutions only to show us that our desire for those solutions is in fact part of our limitation.
Instead we might walk away by starting with our limitations. If we think as Laura, as the consumer who chooses though the choice is already written, what can we think? What can we envision from there? Powers gives us her embrace of the bothness—both determined and choosing—not as ironic but tragic. We choose hoping that it is our choice, hoping that we’re making the right one. This is the wager. We realize that the law now views corporate speech as citizen speech, as we have seen in the Citizens United decision (see my second epigraph). With Powers’s wager, we might hope for something new to come out of this recognition.

Near the end of Neuromancer, the liberated Wintermute tells Case: “Things aren’t different. Things are things.” In some ways, things will get better; in others, worse—what is more likely is that they will probably be just about the same. Powers’ advocacy of this worldview is driven home by the novel’s last word, “incorporate.” Years after his mother’s death, Tim and the research group with which he works locate something that may lead to a cancer cure. With his money from the Clare settlement, Tim suggests that he has the funds necessary to start the company up. On the one hand, we have a cancer cure, and such a development could hardly be “bad.” On the other, the world receives another corporation, likely only to feed corporate hegemony. As the Who once put it, meet the new boss—same as the old boss. Or as Kafka had it, there is hope, but not for us. We will never live right or live wrong. If we are lucky, we will simply live.

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Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology

Chapter 4: Condemnation, the Sacred, and Health Care: The Works of Marilynne Robinson

I have no nostalgia for the world before secularism.—Marilynne Robinson, “Wondrous Love”

The global is specifically not the universal, but ‘only’ its translation. One can recognize the echo of the original in it, but not the original itself. The world in its universalist sense is dead. The global world is the form of its afterlife.—Boris Buden, “Strategic Universalism: Dead Concept Walking: On the Subalternity of Critique Today”

In the article from which I draw the second epigraph above, Boris Buden explains why he considers the “strategic universalism” of Paul Gilroy to be a “dead concept walking.”142 For Buden, the “revolutionary meaning of the old concept of universalism,” which for him is the now-discredited Marxist teleology, had the “practical aspiration to change the world.” Strategic universalism, on the other hand, admits its compromise within its very title. It professes that concessions must be made. In spite of this gesture, Buden does not see greater efficacy generated by this compromise, for he places critique and praxis in discrete categories. The gesture of adding “strategic” to “universalism,” just as when Gayatari Spivak called for “strategic essentialism,” does not make the philosophy more practical: instead, it proves “the paradox of the globalized world, in which everything can be changed except this world as world.” In other worlds, globalization renders the fantasy of revolution obsolete by making

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compromise seem necessary, though the compromise will not lead anywhere.\textsuperscript{143} “The world in its universalist sense,” as Buden puts it, no longer seems accessible, for we do not think of the world as unified by truths about the human population. In the global world, we make universalist statements only about capital itself.

I begin this chapter with reference to Buden because he articulates the sense of reduced possibility that globalization inaugurates in the Western imagination. I have argued that \textit{Infinite Jest} and \textit{Gain} register this reduction as an unassailable and dispiriting fact. Seeing the workings of a consumerist society as dehumanizing, they turn to the terrain of the individual as the only space where change might begin. Wallace advocates attempts to alter the self-destructive relationship late capitalism encourages individuals to have with themselves; Powers proposes that adopting the aerial view allows one to reconfigure one’s indoctrination into functionality. Each sees these limited gestures as the hope for a more liberal, less autocratic way of life.

For Marilynne Robinson, all we have ever had are limited gestures. Robinson also recognizes the slender possibilities for radical change, but she believes radical change has always been essentially impossible. The current liberal-left positions sees politics as the most important sphere of human concern, but it also considers politics to be out of the hands of the standard citizen—an unfortunate and frustrating state of affairs, indeed. Robinson sees the situation differently: “I think that politics in Aristotle’s sense or anybody’s sense subsequently is a fairly reduced form of thinking. At its very best I think that politics is management of the cruder

\textsuperscript{143} One thinks here of Bruno Latour’s argument that revolution is itself a modern conception, belonging to the sphere of thinking that would set the human apart from the animal and physical world. The move from the universal to the global in Buden might then seem akin to Latour’s move away from modernity. See Bruno Latour, \textit{We Have Never Been Modern}. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993 (originally published 1990): 141.
Robinson dislodges politics as the highest concern for individuals, simply because she does not see the human as an animal who is political first and foremost.

As a result, Robinson’s fiction offers a very different response to the crisis in liberal and leftist thinking that has heretofore been the focus of this book. Undaunted by anti-foundationalism, postmodernism skepticism, or radical relativism, Robinson’s novels engage in a form of advocacy that Wallace argued was banished from serious contemporary fiction. Her works, contra Walter Benn Michaels’ assertion about contemporary cultural production, privilege belief over experience. Robinson’s companion novels *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008) present readers with characters attempting to live up to a rigorous ethical standard they consider axiomatic. The novels prove the usefulness of that axiom, reversing thrust on the deterritorializing impulse of postmodernist fiction.

In what follows, I will begin by briefly tracing the initial critical reaction to Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping* and the subsequent revision of that trend. Doing so will foreground the tendencies of contemporary literary criticism—which I see as deeply related to the crisis in liberalism—and Robinson’s departure from the paradigm best-suited for that criticism. I then turn to Robinson’s more recent novels, each of which amplifies the articulation of the ethics Robinson advocates. I show how these texts emphasize the centrality of suffering to human

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144 Schaub, Thomas. “An Interview with Marilynne Robinson.” *Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (Summer, 1994): 244.

145 In Wallace’s review of Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky biographies, he asserts that a contemporary novelist could not write Dostoevsky-like theological and philosophical meditations into a novel without “be[ing] (and this is our age’s truest version of hell) laughed out of town” (Wallace 2004: 273). While Wallace’s point might be a more accurate description of the cultural landscape before 9/11’s ending of irony, we should bear in mind that Wallace’s definition of a Serious Novel would exclude works that would engage in such advocacy uncritically. The problem for Wallace was that critical awareness made confident advocacy near-impossible.

146 I refer here to Michaels’ *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004. Michaels proposes that the neoliberal valorization of identity relegates belief to a product of experience, preventing it from being arguable. This state of affairs obviates universals, which robs oppositional politics of their ability to make claims. Any number of examples could disprove Michaels’ thesis, but Michaels, like Wallace, points out a tendency in contemporary literature to avoid outright ideological warfare. Robinson, as we shall see, places belief prior to experience, and in so doing opens the space for argument.
existence in order to underscore the political dimension’s ultimately limited potency. The necessary presence of suffering, however, requires humans to recognize their responsibility to one another. Robinson makes this responsibility dependent upon both the acceptance of asymmetrical relationships and the unknowable nature of other individuals, an acceptance that is essential to acknowledging and protecting innate human value. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of Robinson’s ethics before reasserting the ways in which her fiction provides an invaluable challenge to liberal and critical thinking.

Homes, Hegemony, and Robinson’s (Anti-) Politics

Starting in the mid-1990s, the critical reaction to Robinson’s first novel began to shift. The first decade and a half of criticism hailed *Housekeeping* as an example of feminist resistance. Early articles applauded the novel’s detailed attention to the transience of not only the social world but selves, bodies, and ideas. This focus seemed to match postmodern dismissals of foundations and essences. In the novel, narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille together experience a series of traumas that produce different reactions in each of them.147 After they lose three guardians in relatively short order (their mother commits suicide; their grandmother dies; their great-aunts pass them off), their aunt Sylvie comes to take care of them. Sylvie’s strange ways include a penchant for wandering off, sometimes sleeping on benches or outside, and a mode of domesticity that involves stacking newspapers from floor to ceiling and eating with the lights off. Lucille finds herself drawn toward conventionality, so she eventually leaves Sylvie and Ruth to live with her home economics teacher. As these conventional representatives of normativity

threaten to separate Ruth from Sylvie, after whom Ruth has begun to pattern herself, the two abandon their family’s home, setting it on fire and leaving for a life of unsettled drifting.

Throughout the novel, Ruth’s eloquent, haunting narration meditates on loss, longing, and transience. In one of the most oft-quoted of Ruth’s statements, she asserts, “It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing.” Lines like these seem to support the counter-hegemonic reading of the novel, which would use the text to argue against the Western privileging of property or possessiveness. These readings overlook that Ruth draws this conclusion only after she believes she has been abandoned yet again, as Sylvie disappears during an expedition the two undertake. Just a page before, the frightened and cold Ruth recalls herself (the narration is past-tense, though it makes present-tense claims) reaching a new awareness:

Once alone, it is impossible to believe one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an absolute discovery. When one looks from inside at a lighted window, or looks from above at a lake, one sees the image of oneself in a lighted room, the image of oneself among trees and sky—the deception is obvious, but flattering all the same. When one looks from the darkness into the light, however, one sees all the difference between here and there, this and that. Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch (157-158).

If we realize that Ruth’s decision that “it is better to have nothing” stems from her “absolute discovery” of loneliness, we realize that we do not need to agree with Ruth. One need not believe it “is better to have nothing” simply because all things will end. We should recognize, as Thomas Schaub has pointed out, that Ruth’s perceptions do not have to be our own. Schaub’s

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insight concurs with those of critics like Karen Kaviola, Christine Caver, and Stefan Mattessich, all of whom argue that, contra the first fifteen years of *Housekeeping*’s reception, Ruth’s affirmation of a transient existence does not equal the novel’s or Robinson’s advocacy of the same.

Rather than see Ruth as a suffering human, the literary-critical inclination sees Ruth as a female enacting resistance to hegemony. Schaub’s reading demonstrates that Robinson views art as space for operating outside hegemonic or ideological boundaries.\(^{149}\) Robinson does not envision social forces as potent or as omnipresent, unlike much contemporary theory. She does not think that disembodied hegemonic apparatuses mobilize or influence every human thought and behavior. As we shall see, Robinson considers politics the realm that governs material forces, which is why she claims politics manages the “cruder aspects of existence.” For her, what goes on in our brains, hearts, and bodies is not political.

Christine Caver notes that readers might understandably take Ruth’s claims at face-value, for “Ruth's interior monologue…is so controlling and eloquent that readers are invited to identify with her rather than question her interpretive powers.”\(^{150}\) Robinson’s two more recent novels leave the interpreting to figures trying to understand abjection and trauma of the sort Ruth endures. As a result, the novels avoid having the same ambiguity *Housekeeping* produced, though their thematic concerns overlap. Even the practice of looking in windows from outside, which Ruth mentions in the passage above, reappears in a conversation between Jack Boughton and Lila Ames near the end of *Gilead*.


\(^{150}\) Caver 119.
[Jack] said, ‘When I was young I thought a settled life was what happened to you if you weren’t careful.’

[Lila] said, ‘I always knew better than that. It was the one thing I wanted. I used to look in people’s windows at night and wonder what it was like.’

He laughed. ‘That’s how I was planning on spending this very evening.’

‘Well,’ she said, and her voice was very gentle, ‘well, Jack, bless your heart.’

As Laura Tanner has pointed out, Robinson provides the conversation with a minimum of commentary or qualification. She invites us to hear these reflections of two adults, each of whom knows the experience of the loneliness and longing that comes from being unsettled.

Robinson’s portrayal of this discussion reminds us of Ruth, who would no doubt want the settled life Lila now enjoys. We see, when comparing even these two brief conversations, that Robinson wants readers to remember that humans want homes to stay in at night. They prefer security, even if it is only a flattering deception, than the anger in their hearts.

Rather than bringing the political lens to this scene and to her work more broadly, Robinson invites readers to consider elements and concerns more basic to the human condition. Doing so would allow us to recognize many of the destructive and isolating tendencies that develop when we forget these concerns in the service of what she has called contemporary society’s “autoimmune deficiency,” echoing (surely coincidentally) recent writing by Roberto Esposito on the biopolitical regimes of the present. In her 2002 article “Heresies and Real Presences,” Robinson claims that the notion of “heresy” haunts the Western imagination. Heresy

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151 Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004): 200. Further references will be cited as GL.
152 Laura F. Tanner has written eloquently about this scene, focusing on how the elderly narrator’s depiction demonstrates the changes in perception brought on by impending death. I will depart from her reading by analyzing the content of the dialogue in relation to a larger ethical project. See Tanner, Laura F. "Looking Back from the Grave: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead.*" *Contemporary Literature* 48. 2 (Summer 2007): 227-252.
has always been thought of as a disease that threatens to go viral. It must be identified, quarantined, and destroyed, for it represents the element within a body that threatens the rightness of that body. Paradoxically, Robinson sees the dominant tendency in post-Nietzschean thinking as an enactment of heresy-hunting. The interrogation of post-Enlightenment liberal philosophy and politics seeks to purge the modern self of the very components that made it modern. In so doing, Robinson argues that we are too quick to dismiss the thoughts of our most influential predecessors because they contain some sort of malignancy that is newly worrisome. Her non-fiction attempts to argue that in pushing aside John Calvin for his involvement in the burning of one heretic or Thomas Jefferson for sleeping with his slaves, we erase their vital contributions in favor of a harmful vision of purity: “Our agonies of self-attack, of rejection and purgation, together with our more ordinary maladies, are taken to confirm the diagnosis that is the disease.”

At the risk of minimizing the complexity of either the early critical appraisals of Housekeeping, post-Nietzschean thought, or Robinson’s argument, we might think of the critical praise of transience as part of this auto-immune deficiency. That we would so easily dismiss domesticity is far more troubling to her than the tradition of homemaking.

For Robinson, if we are too quick to be counter-hegemonic, we grant a top-down version of hegemony more uniformity and potency than it has. In our rush to think politically, we foreground politics over the most basic and universal facets of existence—for instance, praising the hoboes’ resistance while demonizing cravings for security and safety. I do not want to imply that Robinson writes Gilead and its companion novel, Home (2008), to scold the literary critics who misread Housekeeping (nor is that the aim of this chapter). Rather, Robinson’s fictional project reveals that the gesture common in these criticisms is a symptom of the liberal tendency to overlook the actual in favor of the abstract. Gilead and Home intensify Housekeeping’s

concern with the abject figure—in both books, this figure is Jack Boughton—and in so doing advocate an ethics that makes an interesting departure from conventional thinking on the liberal-left today. Robinson’s ethics might sound similar to the ethical turn now prevalent in literary theory, but Robinson’s firm emphasis on foundations and fundamentals (like houses) gives her the means for using the imperative voice so much liberal-left writing fears. In so doing, Robinson makes an early case for establishing what Buden might call global universals.

“That Odd Capacity for Destitution”: Robinson and the Suffering Human

Jack Boughton’s return to the dusty Iowa town of Gilead after twenty-five years away is the central event of both *Gilead* and *Home*. As Rebecca Painter, among others, has pointed out, Jack’s situation resembles that of the prodigal son. Having rejected his family for a life of dissolution, Jack’s father, godfather, and sister all would like to welcome him home. Jack, for a variety of reasons, resists welcoming. His troubled childhood included a series of reckless pranks largely aimed at his godfather, Lila’s husband John, before he began to drink and engage in petty theft as a teenager. Before leaving for college, Jack impregnates a girl from a proud but impoverished family. His refusal to acknowledge the child prevents the more well-off Boughtons from caring for the child, and she dies very young from exposure to unsanitary conditions. Prior to the child’s birth, he leaves town, spends time in prison, runs up debts, and never speaks to his family, not returning even for his mother’s funeral. His inability to provide for his common-law wife and the child he has with her finally sends him back to Gilead, to see whether he might make a home for his new family there, since a combination of factors (his

154 In a reading of *Housekeeping*, Handley asserts that the novel’s theological resonances remind us of theology’s “wiliness to speak in the imperative,” which gives it a singular importance in ecological debate. Handley’s insight about the imperative voice of theology certainly aligns with what I suggest here, but he directs the impact of the imperative to different operations. See Handley, “The Metaphysics of Ecology in Marilyynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 55.3 (Fall 2009): 502.
drinking problem, his trouble keeping a job, and anti-miscegenation laws) might be overcome there. Upon his return, Jack feels his dissolution and disappointment keenly. His memories of his early transgressions, his strained relationships with his father and godfather, and his troubled relationship with himself make him remote and brittle. The novels each orient around attempts by other characters, who have ample reason to dismiss Jack, to encounter Jack in a way they feel is ethical and welcoming. Though Jack frustrates nearly every attempt to do so, the novels emphasize the absolute importance of the continuing effort.

_Gilead_ consists of a series of letters John Ames, seventy-seven and dying of a heart condition, writes to his seven-year-old son Robert. Ames’s narration meanders, mixing stories from family history, bits of autobiography, and meditations on theology (Ames is a Congregationalist minister) until rumors of Jack’s return disturb the narrative’s ruminations. In addition to providing Robby with information about his father, Ames also uses the letters to provide his son with an ethical model of living. Ames consistently counsels against judgment and holding grudges, yet of Jack, Ames announces, “I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (GL 164). The tension in_Gilead_ emerges from Ames’s struggle to locate a method of encountering Jack that squares with the model he wants to provide for his son.

_Home_ occurs in the Boughton home. Jack’s father Robert, Ames’s closest friend and a Presbyterian preacher, is also in declining health, his condition much more advanced than Ames’s. Glory, the youngest of Boughton’s eight children, returns to take care of her father after the humiliating end of her relationship with a married man. The novel, focalized through Glory, spends significant time on her attempts to make herself equal to the task of comforting Jack, even when Jack does not know how to accept comfort.
In making Jack central to both plots—how do these characters become the individuals they need to be to encounter Jack ethically?—Robinson requires that her characters accept an asymmetrical relationship.\textsuperscript{155} None among Boughton, Ames, or Glory expects Jack to become equal to them. Instead, they must achieve an ethical standard that none of them questions. This standard demands that they recognize the suffering human and attempt to find the balm for that suffering. As we shall see, the novel takes seriously the possibility that Jack may simply be one of the damned. When he tells Glory, “Sometimes it seems as though I’m in one universe and you’re in another. All of you,” (HM 267), he describes a feeling he has always had. Jack never felt home in his home, and this particular version of homelessness means that Jack had early on made the “absolute discovery” of loneliness that Ruth describes.\textsuperscript{156}

Earlier chapters in \textit{Necessary Fictions} made much of Avital Ronell’s concept of “the temporality that pains.” Ronell, Powers, and Wallace assert that consumer culture invents and then intensifies a particularly restless self-dissatisfaction, one that depends upon the easy availability and desirability of mind- and self-alteration. By setting these novels in a small Midwestern town in 1956, Robinson places her characters far outside the sphere of unmitigated consumerism, yet an experience of time that simply hurts is not foreign to these figures—and to Jack especially. Jack has trouble believing in Heaven, but “perdition is the one thing that made sense to me….on the basis of my experience”; he admits to being “tired of [him]self”; quoting

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{155}In insisting upon this asymmetricality, I of course echo Emmanuel Levinas. Painter has also twice indicated that Robinson’s ethics have Levinian overtones. While she has insisted that Robinson advocates a “respect” for the Other, however, I believe “respect” implies a more level playing field between self and other than I think Levinas allows. As her references are as brief as mine, I do not want to make much of the discrepancy. See Painter, “Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s Fiction,” \textit{Christianity and Literature} 59. 2 (Winter 2010): 339n7 and “Virtues and Passions in Literature: Excellence, Courage, Wisdom, Fulfillment.” Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. \textit{Analecta Husserliana: Yearbook of Phenomenological Research}, Vol. XCVI, series ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Heidelberg, Denmark: Springer, 2008: 105.

\textsuperscript{156}I underscore this point in part because my description of Jack might make him seem a self-indulgent or reckless troublemaker or an unrepentant criminal. Robinson goes to great pains to show that Jack does not know how else to function in the world, though he would desperately like to improve himself. Michiko Kakutani’s characteristically acid review suggested that Jack is “terribly self-absorbed” misses this point entirely. “Family Tries Reassembling the Shards of its Past,” \textit{New York Times} 8 September 2008.
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the Biblical verse about the offensive eye or hand, he states, “I offend me—eyes, hands, history, prospects.”

Glory recognizes Jack’s difficulty at merely inhabiting himself. In his wary expression, she discerns that he had “no notion at all of possible refuge” (76); knowing how hard he was on himself, “there was seldom much reason to believe that rescue would have any particular attraction for him” (248); she too observes that “(h)e was so tired of himself” (257).

After Glory interrupts Jack’s suicide attempt, he asks her to clean out a space he made for himself in the family’s barn. As she looks at the books and alcohol bottles and crudely created accommodations, she is stunned, “amazed at what was before her, as if it were the humblest sign of great mystery, come from a terrain where loneliness and grief are time and weather” (286).

This last line makes for a useful understanding of Jack’s experience of life. The determining elements of Jack’s existence are loneliness and grief.

Jack is not alone in his extended experience of unhappiness. In Gilead, Ames spends time detailing the difficult and lonely years he had between the death of his first wife and child and the arrival of Lila late in his life. Home has Glory castigate herself for foolishly investing so much of herself into her long, failed relationship. Ames admits that, for most of his life, “I didn’t feel very much at home in the world” (GL 4), and Glory is kept awake at night when “the sense that everything could have been otherwise [felt like] a palpable darkness” (HM 20). While Robinson includes the struggles of all her characters to make their way in the world, she also insists that for some the struggle is worse than others. Unlike Jack, Ames and Glory can negotiate their passages of despair, largely because they find enduring uses for themselves that give their lives value.

For Ames’s grandfather, who receives significant textual attention in Gilead, finding a use for himself that assures his value is an impossible task. The same is true of Jack, but Ames’
extended reviews of his grandfather’s travails give special insight into Robinson’s view of suffering. The eldest Ames was a fiery abolitionist, who moved his family to Iowa to help make it a free state. He also rides with and provides cover for John Brown, making his son an accessory to murder in the process. He has visions of Christ descending upon him, loses an eye in the Civil War, and preaches sermons wearing a bloody shirt with a gun in his belt. Ames describes him: “My grandfather seemed to me stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning…. He was the most unreposeful human being I ever knew” (GL 49). The eldest Ames’s profound disappointment about the end of radicalism in Iowa haunted him, especially when life did not improve much for the formerly enslaved: “The waters never parted for him, not once in his life, so far as I know. There was just no end to difficulty, and no mitigation of it. Then again, he always sought it out” (GL 90). In a particularly telling passage, Ames attempts to make a comparison between his grandfather’s never-ending difficulty to an incident at a baseball game they attend together that is ended early by a rainstorm. The rain, too, ends their chances of seeing a great play by the main attraction, a player on the home team who has a nondescript game. Ames sees the disappointing game as “one more terrible frustration for the poor old devil” that is also a metaphor for his unhappiness:

I read somewhere that a thing that does not exist in relation to anything else cannot itself be said to exist. I can’t quite see the meaning of a statement so purely hypothetical as this, though I may simply lack understanding. But it does remind me of that afternoon [of the cancelled game] when nothing flew through the air, no one slid or drifted or tagged…It seems to me that the storm had to put an end to it, as if it were a fire to be put

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158 Christopher Leise discusses Ames’ grandfather as an example of the New England tradition of Calvinism, one that was more militant than its Midwestern cousins. See Leise, Christopher, “That Little Incandescence: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead.” Studies in the Novel 41.3 (Fall 2009): 348-367.
out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity... My grandfather had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it in himself. That was a great pity (47).

Robinson often has Ames narrate in this way, bringing together ideas whose relationship is oblique. The association is perhaps emotional. His grandfather’s courage became something else when it entered into the flawed, morally complex world. His would-be heroism cannot simply convert itself into virtue because the pure form of his potential virtue becomes compromised by the contingencies and ambiguities of the quotidian world. Ames regales his son with stories of his grandfather’s excessive generosity, sometimes stealing the family’s laundry just as Ames’s mother placed it on the line to dry (30-31). His automatic willingness to give to those who ask caused Ames’s mother great vexation, as the family’s resources were already limited. These semi-comic incidents presage a more serious one, when the eldest Ames’s disproportionate attention to other families causes him grievously to neglect his own wife’s failing state (90). The pity is ultimately that this excess of virtue helped make him less than virtuous. These incidents demonstrate that Ames’s grandfather’s ferocious desire to do right by God—the “strenuousness in ethical matters” that Ames attributes to him—is annulled by what Ames sees as necessary compromises we must make in the world. The eldest Ames’s boundless courage is akin to the baseball game that never happened and to the potential feats of Bud Fowler. Their potential greatness never has the chance to materialize.

Ames reports that his grandfather left Iowa for Kansas just before the Civil War “to make himself useful to the cause of abolition. To be useful was the best thing the old men ever hoped for themselves, and to be aimless was their worst fear” (GL 49). The figure with courage to

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159 In this case, Robinson’s decision to associate Ames’s grandfather with Brown is especially resonant. Brown’s special place in U.S. history, as a domestic terrorist using Biblical justifications for an essentially liberal cause, makes him a complicated figure to sympathize with for any end of the political spectrum. Brown’s certainty in his correctness licenses his use of violence, a transaction that, as we shall see, is very troubling for both Robinson and Ames.
spend but nowhere to spend it is like the individual who wishes to be useful and ends up aimless. The eldest Ames’s last appearance in the novel comes when, decades after the war and as one of Gilead’s aged patriarchs, he is given the chance to speak at a Fourth of July celebration. He uses the opportunity to castigate the audience for failing to fight injustice: “The President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes” (*GL* 176). Half the crowd ignores him and the other half resents him. As the grandfather descends the stage, he “shook his head and said, ‘I doubt it did much good’” (176). Here we see the eldest Ames once again condemned to realize that the world’s limitations will always blunt his ferocious hopes for its improvement.160

Robinson lets Ames linger for quite a long time on his grandfather, though not nearly as much as Glory thinks about and interacts with Jack. The attention on each character allows each novel to meditate on sorrow, grief, and loneliness. Ames tells his son Robby, “Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life” and that Christians “do believe there is a sacred mystery in it….there is a dignity in sorrow simply because it is God’s good pleasure that there should be” (*GL* 104, 137). Ames’s comments help explain the centrality of sorrow in all three of Robinson’s novels. This sorrow’s source often goes unexplored. We never know why Ruth and Lucille’s mother kills herself. Jack cannot explain his childhood mischief nor his more serious adult misdeeds. Ames respects Lila’s decision never to speak about her difficult past. The eldest Ames simply smolders himself into a husk. The narration of all three novels speculates on these figures and their sorrows. Jack’s suffering, especially as depicted in *Home*, is almost palpable. Robinson’s project insists upon the undeniable omnipresence of human

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160 The reader might note affinities between the unbearability of the self experienced by Ames’s grandfather and Jack and the frustrations of Wallace’s characters in *Infinite Jest*. In both cases, the cultural availability of a concept of a better self impacts the limited self with which we are stuck. The differences deserve more space than I can afford them here, but suffice it to say that Wallace’s consumer world multiplies the inputs offering self-escape—a condition Jack, for instance, might see as a blessing and a curse.
suffering, loneliness, and grief. We will not understand it nor do we know how to address it. We must, however, register its indelible presence. This registering generates two very different implications.

First, the necessary existence of suffering means we should ignore utopian thinking that would imagine it either eliminable or unnecessary. Like Ames’s grandfather, we encounter a world that will never meet our demands on it and was never intended to. For Robinson, we overlook these facts all too often: “There is a tendency among committed democrats like us to believe all significant problems must be somehow suited to our solutions….It is a very comfortable thing to think that the greatest threat to the world is a decision still to be made, which may never be made…. Sadly, the truth is quite otherwise.”

In this quotation, Robinson references the anti-nuclear war rhetoric, which focuses on the prevention of future problems, ignoring the incalculable environmental damage caused by the disposal of nuclear waste she discusses in her 1989 book-length essay *Mother Country*. The notion that humans “should be suited to living happily…is a stroke of thinking so remarkable in a supposedly nontheological context that it takes my breath away….Humankind has adopted and discarded civilization after civilization and remained itself.”

She asks whether we might “not all have been kinder and saner if we had said that discontent is our natural condition, that we are the Ishmael of species, that while we belong in the world, we have no place in the world….not because something went wrong, but because of the peculiar terms of our rescue from extinction” (*DA* 165). Echoing both Saul Bellow and James C. Scott, Robinson proposes that the social structures we have

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established to govern us will never change the fundamental nature of human experience. Here we see again that Robinson plays down the general weight given to the political sphere. The key to her intervention, then, would be to make us all “kinder and saner.” If we might abandon utopian wishes for happiness and perfectibility in favor of recognition of “discontent [as] our natural condition,” we can realize that collective efforts should aim at assuring well-being, not happiness.

What would it mean to be kinder and saner? In answering this question, which brings us to the second implication of recognizing sorrow’s centrality, I return to a quotation I included in this book’s first chapter. In it, the narrative departs from Glory’s perspective (as it only occasionally does). In the previous lines, the narration, focalized through Glory, articulates the difficulties of having family troubles in a town like Gilead. Glory realizes that she will not be able to avoid her neighbors’ concern, for her suffering, like Jack’s, will be palpable. The possibility of being the object of this solicitous attention—“Dear God, she saw concern in their eyes, regret. Poor Glory, her life had not gone well. Such a nice girl, and bright. Very bright” (HM 282)—leads the narrator to assert the following:

That odd capacity for destitution, as if by nature we ought to have so much more than nature gives us. As if we are shockingly unclothed when we lack the complacencies of ordinary life. In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindness because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would

\footnote{Bellow’s \textit{The Dean’s December} compares contemporary to archaic standards for living. The archaic standard never utilized personal happiness as a criterion for assessing the quality of one’s life. Scott’s \textit{Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) argues Robinson’s point almost exactly—his title says it all.}
be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever has a home at all.

At first, this passage might seem to contradict Robinson’s assertions in the last paragraph. If we ought simply to accept our discontent, then the contents here, where the human wants succor and solace, is part of the affective response we should dismiss. Still, we should remember that the narration is not focalized through Glory here. A disembodied narrator always lays claims to objectivity, at least within a fictional world. We are thus asked to consider the human more human when “vulnerable to kindness” or when “in destitution…of feeling or purpose.” What makes the human more human is the desire for “things” to “be otherwise.” For our narrator, that we should hope for, imagine, or expect alleviation and restoration is “odd,” because nothing about our or the world’s nature promises us anything. The desire for things to be better makes the human more human because we can name no grounds for the expectation that this desire will be met, yet the desire remains. While we should not let this discrepancy affect us at the level of public policy—there, one imagines, the rules are different—Robinson’s protagonists in Gilead and Home recognize it as the reason they must remain kind and sane. Ultimately we belong here but have no place here, and we have homes that do not feel homely. The consequent responsibility we must assume toward each other should grasp that acknowledging these facts does not diminish our sense that things should be otherwise. Recall Glory’s own troubling inability to locate this sense (“a palpable darkness”) would keep her up at night. She needs this sense in order to get by, even if she does not live her life invested heavily in the hopes it creates.
Fusing the Secret and the Sacred: Mystery and Responsibility

The last section of this chapter endeavored to show that Robinson makes suffering a central part of her fictional project because she sees it as an essential characteristic of the human condition. Part of the sacredness of sorrow, however, is that it generates the longing for solace that Robinson sees as the most human characteristic. In what follows, I want to explore a different component of suffering’s mysteriousness, which for Robinson is closely related to its sacredness.

We learn that the young Glory “confused, in fact fused, the words ‘secret’ and ‘sacred,’” but then the narrator amends the statement, suggesting that she confused/fused these two terms for “the whole of her life” (HM 15-16). For Glory, this conflation means that she “loved tact and discretion better than she should” (16), but Home and Gilead imply that the two are inextricably connected.

The unknowable totality of an entity, human or otherwise, is what assures its singularity. An entity that has secrets has hidden parts of itself. That part of itself that it keeps or hides might prevent us from having a full grasp of it, but such a sentence presupposes that a full grasp is possible or desirable in the first place. Robinson makes much of the unknowable nature of another’s sorrow, but she spends equal time tracing the futility of any attempt at knowing. By asserting this unknowability as axiomatic, she generates two important implications: first, the subject needs to recognize the limitations of her ability to perceive and understand, and second, she must recognize the sacredness of the other, secured by her inability to grasp it fully.

Very early in Gilead, Ames announces the importance of the gap between perceiving with the senses and grasping in totality. “Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear

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but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times
as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can
know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it.” Interestingly, Ames
cites a scriptural command that he deploys as descriptive. The imperative not only directs but
accurately describes action. You are both not meant to be and are incapable of perception and
understanding; while your perceptive tools will seem to promote perception and understanding,
those certainties are not what they generate. Interestingly, although Ames has an outstanding
grasp of the Bible, he decides to paraphrase the line, emphasizing the relentlessness of seeing
and hearing. The subject is forever fed information that she wants to compile into certainties, but
she must not and cannot believe in those certainties.

In spite of his own limited understanding of the saying, Ames quotes it, even preaching
on it. In the worldview these novels promote, comprehension need not precede or result from
contemplating, considering, discussing, reviewing, or teaching. The impossibility of a complete
understanding should not close off the subject’s desire to ponder or consider. Ames enjoys
contemplation, for, like Boughton, he realizes that often “to conclude is not in the nature of the
enterprise” of consideration (GL 152). Ames reiterates the clause “that is a remarkable thing to
consider” (or a close variation) five times in the novel (GL 45, 49, 136, 154, 193).

This allowance for consideration opens the door for appreciation. When Ames writes of
intellectual dilemmas he encounters, he shows Robby something besides frustration—instead,
Ames feels something like wonder. For instance, Ames asserts that often times “when we think
we are protecting ourselves, we are struggling against our rescuer. I know this, I have seen the
truth of it with my own eyes, though I have not myself always managed to live by it, the Good
Lord knows. I truly doubt I would know how to live by it for even a day, or an hour. That is a
remarkable thing to consider‖ (GL 154). Because he grants paramount significance to modeling an ethical way of being for his son, Ames uses the epistolary form to display moments like these. Here, as Ames works through his antagonism toward Jack, he tries to recall the truisms that act as ethical guidelines even when he does not feel capable of living up to them. In writing, he converts what must be frustration into cause for stunned contemplation. By concluding on this sentence, Ames makes his inadequacy something to study. Our inept perceptions are the only ones we have: Ames explains that “you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed or certain nature” (GL 95). Ames models a way of interacting with his uncertainty that marvels at it, rather than finding it an occasion for frustration. He assumes that even the curiosities that produce frustration have value, simply by existing as curiosities.

In an essay on Darwinism, Robinson complains that Darwin’s essentializing competition among species and naturalizing a hierarchy based on merit erases the possibility of inherent value.¹⁶⁵ Without feeling assured of every living thing’s sacredness, we cannot be assured of any living thing’s significance. For Robinson, the erasure of inherent value allows inhumane treatment of others to occur, enabling the rejection of our basic responsibility to each other. As she articulates it in her novels, the wonder we ought to experience at strangeness can work to restore this value. Rather than waiting for the strange figure to prove her worth, we might assume that her worth is secured by her strangeness. Ames articulates this position when explaining to Robby that the content of his parishioner’s “confessions” or “unburdening[s]” concern him less than the marvel of their manifest selves: “When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the ‘I’ whose predicate can

¹⁶⁵ Robinson, “Darwinism,” Death of Adam: 28-76. Specifically, she asserts that if “survival is always a matter of relative fitness,” then “there is no such thing as intrinsic worth” (32).
be ‘love’ or ‘fear’ or ‘want,’ and whose object can be ‘something’ or ‘nothing’ and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around ‘I’ like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful” (*GL* 44-45). The language his parishioners deploy does not “really matter.” The speaker’s attempt to signify—to explain or account for itself through language (I loved him; I feared it; I wanted that)—animates the subject’s presence. Ames is careful to add on “quick,” “avid,” and “resourceful,” which point to the self-preserving that in part motivates any attempt at “emanating itself.” He does not want to suggest that the “I” is without self-interest or cunning. Those qualities reveal the vitality of presence. This description takes a moment that might usually be thought to be of real import and turns it into a scene of gushing wonder. The things that the parishioner would come to say, the language that presumably would make the exchange meaningful, matter less than the subject’s animating itself through an impossible desire to signify.

In other moments, Ames of course does pay attention to the content of what people say and the actions they perform. I highlight this description because it nicely encapsulates how Ames reframes the encounter with the absolutely inassimilable Other (to borrow another concept from Levinas). We ought to envision our asymmetricality as an occasion for affection and enlightenment rather than a cause for feeling isolation. Ames realizes that other interpretations of this relationship are possible: “In every important way we are secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to
live” (*GL* 197). Once again, we see the invocation of secrets. Something will not translate when each of us has a separate language. He worries relentlessly that Robby will not understand him or that he will not communicate what he hopes to: “It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for” (*GL* 114). Nevertheless Ames’s own attempts to achieve communication emanate a self that Robby cannot help learning from, hearing, imagining, and inadequately and incompletely knowing. We see Ames again and again try to “satisfy” and “struggle to live” up to his “notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable.” Though we are not equal (for better or worse) to Ames, we are struck by the intensity of his desire to communicate himself through these pages. That we might be estranged from his actual intentions ought not make us distance ourselves from him—it should, in fact, assure us of his value.

An individual’s remoteness from us and his failure to do what he intends, then, secures his sacredness. In the case of an individual like Jack, whose private language shares so little terminology with his family or with Ames, the task of greeting becomes especially complicated. Glory, for instance, realizes that while she can offer food, encouragement, and patience to Jack, things that “must have been some comfort to him, she [also] knew no comfort was ever sufficient” (*HM* 101). Jack’s wariness, especially upon his return to Gilead, leads to a stiff formality that occasionally seems satirical. His elusiveness about the twenty-five years of his absence extends the distance between him and those who attempt to encounter him. At the same time, they must find a way to continue to make themselves available to him even when what they offer may be unwelcome or insufficient. As they recognize it and as readers are invited to reckon, they see a person whose destitution of purpose and whose paucity of comfort has damaged his ability even to believe things ought to be otherwise. At his lowest point, Jack tells

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166 Tanner is very good on this point. She explores the complexity of Ames’s task, especially as a literary endeavor.
Glory, “I think hope is the worst thing in the world. I really do. It makes a fool of you while it lasts. And then when it’s gone, it’s like there’s nothing left of you at all…except what you can’t be rid of” (275). For such a remarkably estranged figure, the imperative of responsibility requires others to do whatever they can to help him locate some form of comfort.

As a result, the plot of each book is not so much about forgiving Jack, though his transgressions are multiple and grievous, as it is encountering him ethically. Still, forgiveness is a necessary part of creating this encounter, but Robinson’s novels attempt to alter how forgiveness is understood. Traditionally, forgiveness implies hierarchies, where those with the moral high ground benevolently bestow their good will—something you have that someone asks you for and you give. Ames and Glory are after something far more profound, something that alters the potency of forgiveness as a concept. The important element toward which each character strives is what forgiveness enables. Glory, summarizing Boughton’s oft-stated sentiment, explains this point: “There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, as Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding.” The giving in “forgiving” refers less to a granting than the opening up that the gesture of granting forgiveness allows: “If you forgive, we would say, you may still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace” (HM 45). Ames is a Congregationalist minister, while Boughton is a Presbyterian preacher. Though we hear of them quibbling over certain theological tenets, they agree on the primacy of the stance of readiness-to-understand over and above attempts to understand. You forgive not because you understand but because you do not and you may not; you offer the other your incomprehension as a part of your willingness to receive or welcome

167 I should note that these two denominations, both of which Robinson affirms her affection for in her non-fiction, are notably non-doctrinal as she depicts them. Robinson evades the complications of more stringent religious folds by choosing these two.
them. In turn, you receive not so much the benefit of peace or tranquility, but of relocation:

“grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (GL 161). To forgive is also to restore is also to liberate: while these certainly carry hierarchical implications, we should realize that the “restoration” referenced in the last clause does not involve the figure that has been forgiven. The posture of grace is the restoration of ourselves to ourselves. As it is invoked here, grace refers to the capacity for an individual dislocated from herself to feel restored, or, in the parlance of the novel, at home.

Because we have been trained by Richard Dawkins to use “the selfish gene” as the heuristic through which all behavior must be interpreted, the reader might see the last paragraph as posing forgiving as a selfish act.\(^\text{168}\) We should not forget that the forgiving individual first offers restoration and liberation. The forgiving individual opens herself to understand. In so doing the forgiver welcomes the offender, affirming the value of their presence and vitality.

During a discussion of the fifth commandment, Ames considers to honor as a verb, as something one does: “Every human being is worthy of honor,” Ames explains, and “at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object” (GL 139). The commandment, of course, exhorts us to honor our parents, and the importance of this particular form of honoring occupies the bulk of Ames’s attention. The formulation he offers above, however, gives the term a flexibility that makes it applicable not simply for one’s parents or at an

\(^{168}\) Robinson attacks the Dennet/Dawkins deconstruction of generosity and altruism in her Darwinism essay. The selfish-gene explanation for sympathy across distance is, of course, that we perform generous acts because we would want generous acts to be performed for us. This observation is often taken to change the other-directed definition of generosity to something else entirely. Robinson refutes this point: the action never changes; the framework for interpretation does. She asserts that the work done by these writers is more rhetorical than scientific. See “Darwinism,” *Death of Adam*, 52.
awards ceremony. We honor others by affirming their sacredness, something everyone is “worthy of.” For this reason Ames asserts that the act of blessing “doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it” (GL 23). Blessing and honoring and forgiving are, then, all of a kind. Each begins with recognition of the absolute distance between individuals. The moment of affirmation occurs when the subject embraces that distance as the guarantor of sacredness. This gesture allows the subject to affirm the other because of her mysterious singularity. That doing so also affirms the self does not change the nature of the act.

Robinson gives us protagonists who accept the interrelated premises I have discussed thus far—the centrality of suffering to the human condition; the human tendency to believe things might be otherwise; the fusion between secret and sacred—as tenets of an ethical life they must make themselves remember. In addition to these, Robinson has Ames (and, to a lesser extent, Boughton and Glory) repeatedly de-emphasize the importance of symmetry in any relationship. For this reason, Gilead and Home are less about the development of sympathy or empathy, where the subject tries to feel or understand what the other feels, than about a commitment to the other, even if that person is totally unlike me.

Ames articulates this incommensurability often when talking about love. He divorces loving or appreciating someone from the content of their personality or the sum of their behaviors. The model for this sort of affection is divine: “I have said at least once a week my whole adult life that there is an absolute disjunction between our Father’s love and our deserving. Still, when I see this same disjunction between parents and children, it always irritates me a little. (I know you will be and I hope you are an excellent man, and I will love you absolutely if you are not.)” (GL 73). While Ames again indicates the difficulty of retaining the understanding of asymmetry he should have, he also embodies the asymmetry himself. Robinson’s selection of
the epistolary form coupled with the exigency of Ames’s impending death allows sentiments like that in the parentheses to appear regularly without feeling painfully sentimental. This formal frame permits Robinson to have this figure speak about the ethical love she advocates: “It’s your existence I love you for, mainly….You see how godlike to love the being of someone. Your existence is a delight to us” (GL 53, 136). The very nature of love, Ames argues, exceeds the logic of causality: “Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters….There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal. So how could it subordinate itself to cause or consequence?” (GL 209, 238). Ames imports this asymmetrical model of love—God is of a different order than humans, yet he can and does love them—and divorces that love from content and hierarchy. Godly love here has nothing to do with acts or worthiness; we must assume, then, that human love should be no different.

Just as important is that suffering does not follow a logical model, either. Boughton tells his son, who repeatedly emphasizes that he does not merit the kindness and patience of his family, “Nobody deserves anything, good or bad. It’s all grace. If you accept that, you might be able to relax a little” (HM 271). When Jack asks whether a person who grows up outside Christendom might be punished for improper worship, Boughton tells him, “The grace of God can find out any soul, anywhere. And you’re confusing something here. Religion is human behavior. Grace is the love of God. Two very different things” (HM 220). Because it belongs to a different ontological realm—what Ames refers to as “eternal breaking in on the temporal”—the ultimate arbiter of human value cannot be understood using the perceptual tools that belong to
this one. The novels push readers to think outside a mathematical logic of deserving and the causal model of love.

**Anti-Meritocracy and Essential Imperatives**

In so doing, Robinson’s work militates against the guiding principles of neoliberalism, which she sees as a direct descendant of Darwinism. Her critique differs from those of Wallace or Powers, or even that of the liberal public sphere. Before returning to Robinson’s fictional dramatization, I want to connect what I have discussed above with Robinson’s view of contemporary politics and reasoning.

As we have seen, Robinson privileges a model of the human that secures its inherent value. She does so partly because she sees a necessary relationship between Darwin’s framing of evolution—perhaps the only teleology the left still believes in—and the structures and axioms of neoliberalism. Darwin, Robinson argues, does not displace human essence. Instead, he replaces it. Humans become beings who most essential characteristic is the unfettered desire for survival. The most natural social structure, then, would allow competition to flourish. To Robinson, social, political, and ethical Darwinism is the only possible outcome of basic Darwinism because it makes the human the competitive animal, the animal whose value is confirmed only after it proves it.

Consequently, generosity and charity become unnatural. A theorist as far afield as Henry Giroux makes a similar point: “With the advent of neoliberalism, or what some call free-market fundamentalism, we have witnessed the production and widespread adoption throughout society of what I want to call the politics of economic Darwinism. As a theater of cruelty and a mode of public pedagogy, economic Darwinism undermines all forms of solidarity while simultaneously
promoting the logic of unrestricted individual responsibility.”¹⁶⁹ Like Robinson, Giroux sees the naturalizing of competition as the defining characteristic of existence spilling over into the current economic organization. For Robinson, the logic at work here suggests that the current hierarchies are right, that those at the top of the economic pyramid have proven their worth, because “whatever is” the status quo “is the product of raw struggle” (DA 43-44). These organizing principles convert generosity and charity into defects or into something that aids us in our own struggle.¹⁷⁰ Making the governing order of existence into a meritocracy, as Robinson sees Darwinism doing, effaces our ability to recognize inherent value and our consequent mutual responsibility. What we see is not the methodological individualism I discuss earlier in the chapter, where all one’s failures are one’s fault. The emphasis is on the mutual nature.

This critique questions the fetishizing of the incentive in a meritocracy. Much public and academic discourse about the ways to mobilize individuals assumes the importance of incentives, a practice no doubt supported by experience within a capitalist society. To presume that we must have incentives in order to progress, however, overlooks that progress can be its own reward—or that rewards might take a different form than the public-sphere or economic trimmings we normally associate with the idea; it also makes a reward something someone else must give you. In Mother Country, Robinson traces the long history of British welfare. She shows that policy decisions regarding charity toward the poor nearly always believed that “dependency easily became habit, that charity demoralized its recipients. Every worker was a potential pauper, and

¹⁶⁹ See Giroux, “The Disappearing Intellectual in the Age of Economic Darwinism.” Truth-out.org. 12 July 2010. ¹⁷⁰ Wallace’s awkward defense of welfare in “Authority and American Usage” is made weak by its deference to this axiom. After describing both the left and right’s failure to think about welfare incorrectly, he explains that “we who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people’s sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing self-interest that underlies all impulses toward economic equality” (2004: 113n). We might see Wallace’s failure to think outside self-interest as a result of entrapment in individualistic ideology. Why must all impulses toward economic equality relate to my being frightened and lonely and narrow? Do we make a calculation about our self-interest when we offer change to a destitute person on the street?
every pauper was a burden.”\textsuperscript{171} Needing to provide the working class with an incentive to keep working, the ruling class gave themselves license for centuries of mistreatment of the poor. To motivate the poor, the ruling class assured their destitution. Proposing something like unqualified charity or generosity became the morally suspect. The same logic operated during the Clinton administration’s cessation of “welfare as we knew it” or Barack Obama’s advocacy of merit pay for teachers (one of his few programs applauded by the right and left). Robinson believes that such a long-running rhetoric has convinced us that clear incentives always motivated humans, even though these sorts of causal models have long been made suspect. As Bruno Latour has said, “action is not transparent.”\textsuperscript{172} To suggest otherwise is to imply a human that can be explained by simple recourse to biology or psychology. Reducing the human in this way is simply unacceptable for Robinson.\textsuperscript{173}

We see, then, why Robinson spends so much textual space establishing the human as mysterious and sacred. We see why generosity and charity become axiomatic. Her fictional world orients around figures who believe in these axioms and in this version of the human because she intends to reveal the unassailably ethical way in which these beliefs cause them to act. In so doing she offers a potent example of a way of living that completely ignores the Darwinistic, neoliberal logic of the present.

\textsuperscript{171} Robinson 1989: 40.
\textsuperscript{173} In an interesting rejoinder to the dominance of evolutionary-psychology in U.S. academic rhetoric today, Sharon Begley notes how profoundly important the U.S. undergraduate population has been to evolutionary-psychology experiments: “When psychologists discover something in lab experiments,” which tend to rely upon undergraduate volunteers, “the findings often make their way into journals, textbooks, and popular lore as aspects of human nature: universal and the result of evolution.” Recent studies with other populations have shown such findings to be utterly unrepresentative. One wonders whether such findings will undercut the persistent truth-claims evolutionary psychology continues to make. See Begley, “What’s Really Human? The Trouble with Student Guinea Pigs,” Newsweek 2 August 2010: 30.
Her path for doing so must also resist the relativism that openness to otherness invites. As I have described it thus far, Robinson’s ethical system aligns with what we see discussed in the works of Kwame Anthony Appiah or Judith Butler. Each of these important figures argues for an inflectionless openness toward the other, favoring particularisms over universals, partial truths over Truth. We see this ethics dramatized in the literature John McClure has usefully called “postsecular.” McClure explains that postsecular literature, including the post-1990 works of such resolutely intellectual writers as Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison, expresses disgust with secularism and invites a spirituality that troubles the certainty that comes with rationality’s triumphs.174

McClure also notes that this literature lacks a clearly defined political program. Like the philosophies of Appiah and Butler, these works evade the imperative voice. As Jodi Dean has argued, the academic left’s recent emphasis on “ethical sensitivity,” which we can see reflected in postsecular literature, eliminates “the division necessary for politics.” Too great a “generosity to difference and awareness of mutual vulnerability” sacrifices the power to condemn.175 For Robinson to avoid simply lapsing into relativism, she needs to seize the power to condemn. She requires the willingness to divide herself from others. She needs, as Ernesto Laclau has asserted, to assert universals that bear in mind the hard-won particularisms of the past generation.

In many respects, Robinson satisfies these conditions. In her non-fiction, for instance, she is loudly polemical, condemning with alacrity. She begins her introduction to Death of Adam by asserting that “the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong” (DA 1). Mother Country and Death of Adam rail against environmental irresponsibility and neoliberalism, respectively. We can see how each of her two most recent novels, with their

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175 See Dean, Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies, 123, 136-143.
advocacy of an ethics of interpersonal responsibility, condemns any morality that would be antithetical to the openness of her system.

What much of my audience will find problematic, certainly, is that she bases this condemnation on her interpretation of the Christian God. I imagine my readership will dislike this association. As a thoroughly secular individual, I feel equally uncomfortable with ethical arguments that use such an abstract basis. Robinson rescues herself from this secular criticism by basing her defense of these Christian-derived ethics on entirely pragmatic grounds. She asserts the use-value of this foundation over its truth-value. She is not afraid to admit the foundationlessness of her belief in this foundation—“faith is called faith for a reason” (DA 32), she asserts—and in so doing she invents what secularists might call her necessary fiction.

In Gilead and Home, Robinson produces texts that foreground the usefulness of imperatives about ethical behavior. In so doing, they enact a more muscular criticism of existing liberal orthodoxies than McClure’s postsecular novels. Instead of a weak spirituality suggesting the limitations of our ability to know, Robinson builds an ethics out of those limitations, one that appeals to a common-sense version of pragmatism. As she writes in “Onward, Christian Liberals,” which Wallace selected for the 2007 Best American Essays, democratic guarantees of political equality “have to be enabled and respected in society if they are to exist in fact. For example, they more or less require that one come through childhood in a reasonable state of health.”

In other words, this theological basis for a relativistic-seeming ethics easily translates into a liberal politics, one with the power to condemn and advocate. Our respect for this unknowable Other means we should provide for their health care, plain and simple.

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Secularism, Imperatives, and Use-Value

I now return to the novels with three goals in mind. First, I want to review the way they ground their spirituality in use-value over truth-value. Second, I will turn to how the imperatives that come out of that spirituality reveal their value in Glory and Ames’s self-scrutinizing. Finally, I will discuss the intensity of the characters’ commitment to use-value in order to underscore the novel’s ultimately secular emphasis.

Glory, re-reading the Bible, remembers a “comfort” in reading Scripture “she had not really been conscious of until she left it behind” (HM 101-102). She describes the church with reference to God but not as the house of God or the center of worship: “For her, church was an airy white room with tall windows looking out on God’s good world, with God’s good sunlight pouring in through those windows and falling across the pulpit where her father stood, straight and strong, parsing the broken heart of humankind and praising the loving heart of Christ. That was church” (HM 50). Ames speaks of caring for Robby—worrying over sadness, hoping for gladness—as being akin to praying for him (GL 19). Ames slyly justifies his love for the secular world in theological terms: “I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it….I don’t imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forgives me to try” (GL 57).177 Even in many of the statements I invoke earlier, humans experience and give grace to one another. Grace becomes the medium for producing ethical human interactions. God becomes a model for a love that is kind and sane. His ontological difference from humans reminds us of the limitations of our

177 I follow Leise in these observations. He too indicates the degree to which Ames is of and in the world. Todd Shy has intelligently explained Robinson’s unorthodox Calvinism, insisting that Robinson’s Calvin is much more rooted in the secular than the historical one. See Shy, “‘Religion and Marilynne Robinson,’ Salmagundi 155-156 (Summer-Fall 2007): 251-64.
perception. The invocation of religion in both Robinson’s fiction and nonfiction does not argue that morals or ethics regarding the fact of belief but instead the results of belief.

The universals that this foundation creates generate an ongoing sense of responsibility in its adherents. As I have stated repeatedly, both Ames and Glory believe in an ethical system they relentlessly attempt to live up to. We see this reflected in their relentlessly self-scrutinizing natures. Struggling mightily with how to handle his antagonism toward Jack, Ames tells Robby he feels “That old weight in the chest, telling me there is something I must dwell on, because I know more than I know and must learn it from myself” (GL 179). Both characters believe that consideration and reflection on their own behaviors against what they know they ought to be is required of them. Ames and Glory notice when they have surprised themselves and evince frustration with the gap between their desires and their actions. Upon seeing Ames after her return to Gilead, Glory “tried not to wonder what he knew” (HM 26). Jack’s elusive behavior in the home “was more than an irritation. He makes me feel like a stranger in my own house. But this isn’t my house” (HM 45). Of her own compromised existence in her parents’ home, “Glory thought, Why am I here? How cruel it would be to ask me that” (HM 63). When Jack returns home after an evening wandering, “she did not intend to notice now that nothing suggested he had been drinking….She was afraid to be angry, and that made her angry” (HM 67). Because the narration hews so close to Glory’s consciousness (consider the use of indirect discourse in the quote from 45), we assume that the narrator offers us these insights as Glory comes to them. She wants to control herself in ways that she consistently falls short of, and in revealing this struggle to us, Robinson exemplifies both the individual’s inability to understand fully or control completely herself as well as the admirable and absolutely necessary attempt to try. Glory does not want to be a person who suspects Jack. She does not want to be afraid or be angry.
Robinson reveals these components of her character to us in order to underscore the impossibility and necessity of her efforts to improve. ¹⁷⁸

Both novels’ deeply recursive, seemingly repetitive structures work toward making this point. Ames returns to incidents in his life a number of times, re-narrating or referring to the same scenes on a number of occasions. A particularly profound incident in Ames’s relationship with his father came when, while the senior Ames and men and women from the town set about cleaning up a thunderstruck church on a rainy day, his father fed Ames a biscuit covered in ash. The scene, reminiscent of communion, is first related on 69-70 and is revisited on 95, 96, 103, 114, 127, and 149. As Ames touches on the incident, he seems troubled by its changing, inexplicable meaning: “I can’t tell you what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can’t tell myself what it has meant to me. But I know how many things it put altogether beyond question, for me” (GL 96); “the bitterness of that morsel [of bread] has meant other things to me as the years passed. I have had many occasions to reflect on it” (GL 103). Ames’s consistent attempts to articulate the memory’s resonance to Robby—as a moment between father and son; as a moment whose mysterious symbolic value is more dear for its mysteriousness—finally leads him to admit that he wants “to give [Robby] some version of that same memory” (GL 103). Ames’s awareness of his own motives leads him to make a presentation of those motives. For Glory, too, her analysis of her own tendencies and inclinations cause her to reflect on them, to attempt to understand herself. Each character recognizes his or her imperfections and struggles against them.

¹⁷⁸ Ames is no less rigorous, especially as he has to narrate his actions to his son. Attempting to mollify his own anger by rationalizing it, Ames writes, “it is seldom indeed that any wrong one suffers is not thoroughly foreshadowed by wrongs one has done. That said, it has never been clear to me how much this realization helps when it comes to the practical difficulty of controlling anger” (GL 194). After thinking of his desire to ease Jack’s mind with his own actions, Ames acknowledges “Theologically, that is a completely unacceptable notion. It happened to cross my mind. I apologize for it” (GL 201). The letters at times seem almost like a diary, where Ames keeps a record of his thoughts as they unfold to him. The pressure of being a model for Robby, especially posthumously, requires an especially complicated negotiation.
The operating imperatives that mobilize each character are grounded in the conditions of Robinson’s fictional world. One has a responsibility toward the suffering other. One must recognize the limitations of one’s ability to know the world. Furthermore, this responsibility is intensely pragmatic. In both novels, again and again, we hear of the importance of being useful. The characters want to find employment in helping or comforting others both for providing solace to that other as well as for the peace such directedness offers them. Disappointed at having to return to her home without a family of her own, Glory says to herself, “[a]t least I know what is required of me now, and that is something to be grateful for” (HM 33). She recognizes that “[i]t calmed [Jack] a little to know he had been useful” (HM 177). After Jack decides to leave, Ames worries about Glory, who without Jack is “left alone to tolerate all that tactful and heartfelt kindness” of her six brothers and sisters, all of whom have their own families, “with no one there even to smile with her at the sheer endlessness of it. And no one there for her to defend—which is the worst kind of abandonment. Only the Lord Himself can comfort that” (GL 245). In one of his very last addresses to Robby, Ames subjugates courage to usefulness and equates usefulness with generosity:

Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is great harm. And therefore this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing…. I’ll pray that you grow up to be a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful.
In the first passage, Ames articulates a number of the tenets I have discussed in this chapter. We need bravery to admit our limitations and to recognize and honor the sacredness of even the quotidian. The “and therefore” after this second sentence links these acknowledgments with “mak[ing] ourselves useful.” The connection posits that in order to be properly useful, we must know our place and our limitations. Then we might recognize the uses to which we should be put—and those uses will be generous: they will honor the sacred. Doing so will revere the value in all things.

We see, again, that the ethics expressed and followed by the protagonists in Robinson’s two most recent novels follow imperatives that prevent the world from becoming a meritocratic competition. If our primary goal is to honor, we can condemn a politics that denies inherent value. For instance, Robinson claims that neoliberalism “subordinated practical concerns apparently so close to the heart of Christ, the feeding and clothing, the tending to the sick and respecting the humanity of the imprisoned” in favor of the freedom of markets. George Handley points out how Robinson’s Housekeeping acts as an eco-critical demand for honoring the planet. Home on multiple occasions condemns the male-centered world of the U.S. in the first half of the century: for instance, Glory recalls the stifling realization that “women were creatures of a second rank,” preventing her from entering the ministry as she once dreamed of (HM 20). These political condemnations emerge from what seem to be an otherwise relativistic ethics.

Here we must acknowledge the limitations of the ethical framework. The novels, as I have said, retain the right to condemn, but they also warn against judgment. The difference, as always, is difficult to locate. We see this difficulty enacted in each novel’s problematic

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treatment of civil rights and slavery. Ames explains that his grandfather’s “errors were mainly the consequence of a sort of strenuousness in ethical matters that was to be admired finally” (GL 90). Such ethical strenuousness, though it should be admired, is not to be emulated in the novel. Ames’s father and Ames each seem wary of the eldest Ames’s involvement with John Brown, and the profound pacifism of Ames and his father would seem to argue against something like the Civil War. In Home, Boughton repeatedly dismisses Jack’s concern over the civil rights struggle in the U.S. South, and Ames does not take a firm stand on civil rights either. Jack’s repeated insistence on the hypocrisy of Southern Christians is met with invocations not to judge (HM 218). We are forced to recognize that paradigms of Robinson’s sort lack teeth. Without ethical strenuousness, how does slavery end? Without strong condemnation—which seems inseparable from judgment—how do we decry injustice loud enough for change to occur?

Predestination and Globalization: Structure and Agency

A.O. Scott and Rebecca Painter suggest that these limitations, especially as expressed through the novels’ relative withdrawal from civil rights, demands that we criticize the worldview of Ames and Boughton. Scott, in particular, is harsh in his denunciation, proposing that the novels show an absence of “moral courage” on the part of the two clergymen. Betty Mensch, who denounces much less harshly, notices that over Ames’s lifetime, “complacency sets in” for both the preacher and his parish, “or a preoccupation with the personal rather than the political.”

In order to answer these criticisms, I want first to explore another strange feature of Robinson’s liberalism, which will help orient us toward a response. As Todd Shy has noted,

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“Robinson is a self-proclaimed liberal jealous for that pet project of conservatism, tradition,” though, paradoxically, she reframes much of what she retrieves from tradition “in very modern terms.”¹⁸² She is a believer in democracy—not radical democracy, not utopian democracy, but something kind of like U.S. democracy, only better. Unlike the Manichean left or the apologetic liberal, Robinson affirms the experiment of U.S. democracy: “the United States of America has done many things right. It is not especially decadent, as modern societies go, and the notion that it is is tendentious and uninformed. I think our democracy has in most cases served us well—this again by the standards that obtain among human societies, which is the only reasonable standard to bring to bear on it.”¹⁸³ Rather than measure it against its rhetoric or its ambitions, Robinson asserts that we should assess how well U.S. democracy does against how well other systems have done. This kind of democracy is no doubt flawed. She argues in *Mother Country* that the utter lack of transparency with which governments act eliminate any notion that our democracies will be like the agora so prized by radical democrats. Still Robinson believes that democracies offer us the closest political form of the ethics of honoring that her fiction outlines: “To the extent that it throve here and spawned important institutions like public education systems, the genius of democracy was always respect for people in general.”¹⁸⁴ This “respect for people in general” includes respect for their inadequacies, as we have seen.

For this reason Robinson’s novels provide a defense for their characters’ shortcomings that the political criticisms of Ames and Boughton overlook. The troubles in Birmingham may not occupy their attention. They are not, however, without their political concerns. The two priests argue about John Foster Dulles and quibble over whom to vote for in the 1956 election. They differ on whether a strategy of containment is akin to provocation. I do not mean to excuse

¹⁸² Shy 252, 254.
¹⁸³ Robinson 2009: 213.
their inattention to an important social struggle, but I believe Robinson would say their struggle does not need to be excused. They are good men in their own right, trying very hard to live up to their ethical standards, which are, by any measure, ambitious. The ethics the novels ask us to accept would argue against locating a lack of moral courage in others.

To return to points I made in this chapter's introduction, we see again that Robinson believes in material forces. She insists on the significance of, among other things, health care, for certain basic material needs require meeting for “well-being,” a term Robinson returns to again and again in her non-fiction, to be assured. Her belief in social forces, however, is different from the usual liberal. She does not seem to believe that hegemony or ideology is as contagious as the left might fear. Her insistence that fiction not need be political—in fact, in one essay, she claims to not be “ideological”—underscores her distinction from the thinking that sees the political everywhere.

Robinson’s cosmology buffers her claim. Recall the earlier discussion of the eternal breaking in on the temporal. Robinson imagines a universe that includes at least two different realms—that of God and that of the human. Ames criticizes Feuerbach for his inability to “imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality embracing this one but exceeding it….If you think how a thing we call a stone differs from a thing we call a dream—the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know are very extreme, and what I wish to suggest is a much more absolute unlikeness, with which we exist, though our human circumstance creates in us a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is” (GL 143). Robinson can place herself outside ideology because her primary concerns are not limited to the terms presented by contemporary politics. Politics can enable something like universal health care, which would bring us closer to completing the ethics Robinson favors. In the greater
scheme, as she views it, health care might be the stone while at real issue is the dream. Robinson wants to remind us of these limitations. We might think of the scientists Galileo encountered, who told him of the impossibility of anything existing outside our perceptual range—what use would it be if we couldn’t see it? In a more contemporary turn, we might think of the comparison Jon Stewart made during Robinson’s visit to The Daily Show, where he pointed out the comparative thinness of proofs of God and of dark matter.\footnote{The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Comedy Central, 8 July 2010.}

The structuring element of Robinson’s cosmology cannot be grasped by that cosmology. This unknowable thing shapes agents out of the bodies inside it, defining and limiting them. In a sense, we might compare the Wallace/Powers vision of globalization, the indomitable faceless force, as akin to Robinson’s eternal, which shapes but is not included in the temporal. Each is shrouded in a mist. As we have seen, globalization is not anywhere, yet impacts everywhere; no one works for globalization, yet everyone works for it.

I might illustrate this comparison more usefully through another extended example. A conversation between the major characters who appear in each novel—Jack, Boughton, Ames, Glory, and Lila—discuss predestination. The two longtime ministers (Boughton is now retired) dislike the topic. They each inherit Robinson’s reformed Calvinism, so in spite of being from two relatively flexible denominations, they concur on this seemingly most stringent component of theology. Predestination offends us because it suggests that some humans never have a chance. It makes free will into an utterly cruel fiction. Both Boughton and Ames resent Jack bringing up the subject because they anticipate the conversation it generates will be unpleasant: it will give the modern non-believer, no doubt well-versed in the importance of fairness, fuel for considering God cruel and heartless. Meanwhile predestination’s defenders must remind that it is God’s willingness to save anyone that constitutes His grace. In Gilead, Ames writes that
predestination is “probably my least favorite topic of conversation in the entire world. I have spent a great part of my life hearing that doctrine taught up and down, and no one’s understanding ever advanced one iota” (149-150). In *Home*, where the conversation is presented in much more detail, Jack starts the discussion by asking about Biblical discrepancy in punishment—whether the sins of the father will be, as it is written, visited upon the son. As Scott notes, neither Ames nor Boughton realizes that Jack is making a sincere inquiry into his own position in the divine order: did his unacknowledged daughter live a short, unhappy life because of him? Do his struggles to make a secure life with his common-law wife and son stem back to his transgressions?

The conversation is reported differently in each novel. Ames’s version is more truncated. He leaves out material the omniscient narrator includes; Ames omits several comments by Jack that indicate the latter’s utter seriousness. In *Home*, Jack explains that “If I had your history with the question,” acknowledging his father and godfather’s reticence, “I’d be sick of it, too, no doubt. Well I do have a history with it. I’ve wondered from time to time if I might not be an instance of predestination in my own person. A sort of proof. If I may not experience predestination in my own person. That would be interesting, if the consequences were not so painful. For other people. If it did not seem as though I spread a contagion of some kind” (*HM* 225). Jack’s earnestness here does not appear in Ames’s letter. We might account for its absence, in spite of myriad other overlaps, by pointing to exigencies of plot—this sort of naked plea for succor would shorten Ames’s process of healing himself toward Jack considerably and thus end the novel. A more compelling explanation might also note that Ames potentially considered these statements less noteworthy than *Home*’s narrator. *Home* spends much more time with Jack, circling around his strangeness and his loneliness. Ames needs to learn to accept
these characteristics as a reason to greet Jack generously, rather than cautiously, while *Home*
dramatizes the necessity and difficulty of maintaining that standard of generosity—as well as
Jack’s own ceaseless abjection. Scott’s reading, which poses Jack as perhaps the most moral
character of all, admits “Nothing in the novel rules out the possibility that Jack might exist
outside the grace of God, and that this spiritual condition, as much as any psychological
disposition, might explain his loneliness and estrangement in the bosom of such a warm and
blessed family.” *Home* wants to put us in the sphere of someone who might be “outside the
grace of God,” forcing us to sit facing his unhappiness. The tension in *Gilead* is whether Ames
will reconcile with Jack. The tension in *Home* is how Glory learns to encounter Jack continually,
as a sibling, in much the same intimate relation as the reader.

The most unquestionable authority figure in either novel grows so frustrated with Jack’s
inquiries that he ends the conversation. In both novels, he has irritated reactions: “I’m not going
to apologize for the fact that there are things I don’t understand. I’d be a fool if I thought there
weren’t. And I’m not going to make nonsense of a mystery, just because people always try to do
when they try to talk about it. Always. And then they think the mystery itself is nonsense” (*HM*
226). The door is shut on the point. Predestination exists, and we cannot purport to
understand its workings. As with the eternal breaking in on the temporal, we haven’t the
language or the perceptual capacity for comprehending these workings. Jack’s desire for
comfort simply cannot be met with anything that will satisfy him. Like the starkest moments in
*Gain* and *Infinite Jest*, structure does the work without agency having any say.

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186 In *Gilead*, Ames reports his statement slightly differently: “I’m just trying to find a slightly useful way of saying
there are things I don’t understand. I’m not going to force some theory on a mystery and make foolishness of it, just
because that is what people who talk about it normally do” (152). One of only a few incidents that receive extended
attention in both novels, Robinson’s decision to report the dialogue differently is interesting. Again, one might
chalk the difference up to the more fallible, self-interested Ames’s narration and the putative objectivity of the *Home*
narrator. A more thorough comparison, however, is beyond the purview of this chapter.
Lila stays quiet through most of the conversation. Only when Ames seems to end the dialogue does Lila interrupt. She asks first about “being saved.” If everything is fated, as Ames and Boughton suggest, “if you can’t change, there don’t seem much point in it” (*HM* 226). Neither preacher can explain the relation between worldly salvation and predestination; Jack’s evincing frustration causes frustration, and the conversation nears an unsatisfying close again. Lila ends both versions. In *Gilead*, she never looks at Jack; in *Home*, she does. In each, she says, “A person can change. Everything can change” (*GL* 153/*HM* 227).

Lila’s last word insists upon the secular importance of the possibility of change. Here we see the second step of the necessary fiction asserted. The structure may be unmoved. Lila and Jack—not to mention Glory and Ames and Boughton—require the possibility of a change that matters: Ames tells Jack that a change in behavior does not mean a change in nature, but Lila’s statement augurs otherwise. The gravity of her statement, which goes unchallenged, seems to resurrect the possibility that Jack can change. It assures, too, that her own change matters, not only her circumstances but herself. She needs to have become someone who looks out from windows instead of looking into them. She needs to have become the Lila that can bless Jack instead of aching for blessing.

This conversation reminds us of the importance of the political sphere. To make changes in the governing order and its social vision would be to make changes like Lila’s or Jack’s. They do significant work. They help put people inside windows. They ensure well-being. Still, the structure remains off-limits. What we alter are our circumstances, not our destinies. These alterations must remain contextualized: in the broadest sense of the term, these operations are still local.
The novels thus reserve a space for agency vital for Robinson’s ethical message. I want to turn to one more example to discuss how vital and how contextualized these ethics are—and how differently they think about politics from the way our liberalism or leftism does. *Gilead* ends as we might expect. Ames finds his way toward an equitable relationship with Jack. He offers Jack some measure of the comfort the other lacks.

In *Home*, however, the equation is not quite as simple. Boughton’s dementia increases. He rejects Jack’s final overture, when Jack’s misguided attempt to lie about accepting God and feeling His presence backfires. With Boughton’s end nigh, Glory invites the other six siblings home. They will arrive with their children and their happiness and the odor of their settled lives. Both Ames and Glory realize that their presence will be too much for Jack to take, and Jack decides to leave. When Glory repeatedly catches Jack memorializing his childhood home, studying it as if to record its nuances, Glory uncovers her responsibility—“Dear Lord, he is missing it all in anticipation. She thought, as long as he is alive in the world, or as long as no one knows otherwise, I will probably have to keep all that sour, fierce, dreary black walnut. That purple rug. And if he dies I will still have to keep it, because I have seen him look at it that way” (*HM* 299). Glory will not only have to remain living in the home she desperately wishes to depart, she will have to retain its outdated, unappealing furnishings, and she will have to do so because it means something to Jack. Its existence is something worth remembering—something that will cause someone to miss it. She must ensure its continuation in order to substantiate these feelings of attachment, among the very few strong feelings Jack might enjoy.

After Jack’s departure, his common-law wife and son visit the home briefly. The curiosity Jack’s son Robert shows about the place tells Glory that Jack had spoken of the place, “had sanctified it to that child’s mind with his stories,” and even though Jack cannot know of
Della and Robert’s visit, “she knew it would have answered a longing of Jack’s if he could even imagine their spirits had passed through that strange old house” (*HM* 323). Imagining a potential future, when Robert might visit the home again, Glory realizes she needs to be there: “Maybe this Robert will come back someday….And I will be almost old. I will see him standing in the road by the oak tree….And he will be kind to me.” Robert’s exploration of the place would match the memories Jack had “sanctified.” Glory then says, “I will think, He is young. He cannot possibly know that my whole life has come down to this moment./That he has answered his father’s prayers./The Lord is wonderful” (*HM* 324-325). Painter notes that many early readers of the novel felt certain that these lines were ironic. Here is Glory affirming God’s goodness when she has reduced her life to one hardly-likely potential moment. She will protect the domestic hearth on behalf of a wayward man. She does the opposite of what Sylvie and Ruth do—can the author of *Housekeeping* deliver a woman to this fate willingly?

In Glory’s decision, we see that Robinson does not see every decision and every moment in the same political coloring. The terms she brings to her decision do not include the term feminist, nor does the notion of hegemony play a role. The framework for interpreting Glory’s decision to make herself useful for her brother ought not measure her against the leftist value system that makes agency something more than it is.187

In her article tracing the influence of Jonathan Edwards on *Gilead*, Betty Mensch notes a similarity between Edwards and Robinson that helpfully describes the ethical and political gap I am trying to articulate: for each, “salvation is about the surrender of illusions of selfhood, not about the self as historical agent and subject of a life. The latter is a modern idea, not shared by (pre-modern) Edwards or (post-modern) Robinson” (222). In other words, the modern narrative of an individual coming to self-awareness or realizing her agency is not of interest to Robinson.

187 Here again I am indebted to Mahmood Saba’s *The Politics of Piety.*
Glory’s decision does not have anything to do with the political definitions of the subject or the self as they are discussed in the contemporary U.S.

My audience might remain troubled by Robinson making God the basis of this foundation or of making God the example we ought to follow. As my first epigraph states, however, Robinson does not fear secularism. The Christian God is useful for establishing certain axioms, but as I hope I have shown, those axioms can be replaced by others. *Gilead* and *Home* instrumentalize religion, demonstrating its use-value as a counterforce. The key point seems to be a return of an innate human value. If Robinson did not announce this as a theological precept, surely we could grasp it as a secular one.
Globalization is not something we can hold off or turn off…it is the economic equivalent of a force of nature—like wind or water.— Bill Clinton, Speech in Vietnam, Nov. 17 2000

But as far as I am concerned, I did not demand freedom either then or today. Incidentally, among human beings people all too often are deceived by freedom. And since freedom is reckoned among the most sublime feelings, the corresponding disappointment is also among the most sublime.—Franz Kafka, “A Report to the Academy,”

Strictly speaking, time does not exist (except within the limits of the present), yet we have to submit to it. Such is our condition. We are subject to that which does not exist. Whether it is a question of passively borne duration—physical pain, waiting, regret, remorse, fear—or of organized time—order, method, necessity—in both cases, that to which we are subject does not exist. But our submission exists. We are really bound by unreal chains.—Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace,

In this chapter, I will examine the novels of Junot Díaz and Dinaw Mengestu, both young, critically acclaimed, and moderately successful commercially. Like the other writers I have discussed in this book, Díaz and Mengestu offer narratives framed by the tragic view. The tragic vision contains several precepts: humans do not have access to totality, and we cannot claim to
understand singular instances within the totality because we lack a conception of the big picture. Action within the world has no hope of changing the world. Goldmann sees Pascal’s wager arising from this disenfranchisement: rejecting pragmatism and rationalism, the wager assigns value to human life by seeking God and eschewing the valueless material of the world. For Díaz and Mengestu, like Powers, Wallace, and Robinson, disenfranchisement takes a different form. So, then, do their wagers.

The novels of Díaz and Mengestu feel particularly fraught with disenfranchisement, even on the level of the narrative itself. Each destabilizes its own narrative authority. Both present protagonists who feel utterly overdetermined by their circumstances. The books imply that macropolitical changes—even the possibility of meaningful, collective action—feel fanciful.

Because Díaz and Mengestu work within the subgenre David Cowart has called “immigrant fiction,” their pessimism in these matters becomes particularly interesting. Cowart has shown that immigrant fictions have historically traced a shift from a global margin to the hegemonic center. As a result, complying with or resisting the homogenizing push toward assimilation has historically been an important point of tension in the subgenre. As we might also intuit, Cowart notes that one feature of U.S. immigrant writing has been eventual empowerment by U.S. identity after a period of struggle (8). Aspiration toward this kind of empowerment and success is a “national shibboleth” (17) that immigrant fictions have generally addressed, even if those aspirations are foiled. These features are conspicuous by their absence in the novels I will discuss, Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), Mengestu’s The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears (2007) and How to Be Alone (2010). Aspiration and

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empowerment fail to attach to our protagonists, and assimilation does not register as a major concern.

Brian Lennon has called the U.S. “the very center of the overdeveloped world.”\textsuperscript{189} Lennon’s use of the term “overdeveloped” indicates the nation’s fullness. Whereas once immigrant narratives featured characters that wished to make a place for themselves in the U.S., this overdevelopment means that room to develop is profoundly limited.\textsuperscript{190} Díaz and Mengestu’s novels reflect this feeling of living amidst overdevelopment, and they indicate a link between this overdevelopment and its consequence, overdetermination. The narratives offer environments that seem to determine the lives and construct the imaginations of their characters, denying individual agency any real force. The protagonists of these novels simply want to negotiate, rather than succeed within, their social environment.

Surprisingly, then, each work ends on moments of individual, personal affirmation. These endings would not seem so unlikely if they did not come at the end of books that have worked hard to convince us that personal salvations are short-lived and relatively insignificant.\textsuperscript{191}

I will argue that this turn toward the personal becomes explicable if we understand these works’ investment in the tragic view. Like Pascal, they wager on something that resurrects meaning, precisely because their world has robbed their experience of real meaningfulness. They register disenfranchisement as a given: the question becomes what we do now that we are disenfranchised. As with my other authors, they then offer a necessary fiction.

\textsuperscript{190} Suzanne Oboler, among others, has pointed out the profoundly harsher environment that immigrants to the U.S. have faced since the mid-1970s. Structural shifts in employment opportunities, taxation policies, and living conditions in urban areas limit opportunities for entry into the middle class for economically disadvantaged, working-class migrants, whereas earlier generations had an easier—though by no means simple—time achieving financial prosperity.
\textsuperscript{191} I acknowledge that publishing pressures may have influenced Díaz and Mengestu to end on upbeat notes. Still, we can only evaluate the finished product. I will argue that the turn toward personal affirmation seems less tacked on and more in keeping with a tragic narrative strategy.
Each hypothesizes that whatever small value we can attached to these successes is still value. In so doing they knowingly and ironically embody the spirit of the age they would criticize, giving in to its dominant logic in an attempt to avoid acknowledging complete overdetermination. I want to stress that these novels seems utterly aware that their embrace of traditional closure runs counter to the texture of the narrative worlds they have created. My argument posits that this embrace is the necessary fiction.

Once again, we are reminded of Slavoj Žižek’s assertions about postmodern ideology: we know what we’re doing is socially constructed and false and in keeping with hegemony and repressive and all the rest—but we still do it. Díaz and Mengestu remain notable within this framework because the resurrected possibilities they produce do not emerge from the U.S.’s or capitalism’s benevolence, from spirituality, from love, from the moral fiber of characters, or any other usual source of redemption. They simply occur. While not as mystical as John McClure’s “postsecular fictions,” these novels produce moments when positive changes simply arrive. The message is that we simply must believe in the prospect of their arrival. I see this approach reversing Žižek, to some extent: first as farce, then as tragedy. The embrace of possibility is less ironic than tragic.192

Before turning to the novels themselves, I want to contextualize these works within a particular moment in U.S. and world history. Then I will briefly consider three arguments about postmodernist literature’s relationship to mainstream politics in order to situate these three novels amidst debates about what literature has been doing and ought to do. In the readings themselves, I will use the concept of “fukú,” a supernatural curse central to Díaz’s novel, as the heuristic that links Díaz’s depiction of the legacy of European arrival in the New World to Mengestu’s treatment of gentrification and African political strife. Each of these becomes tragic

inheritances that limit the horizon of possibility. I will then demonstrate how each novel’s concluding embrace of personal affirmation demonstrates a tragic sensibility appropriate to their worldview.

**The Very Center of the Overdeveloped World**

Throughout this text I have explored the humanist tendency to find globalization dispiriting. Jean-Luc Nancy sees the process disallowing more nurturing forms of world organization from emerging. Lee Medovoi demonstrates that globalization’s preferred narrative of itself—its unfolding as inevitable and unstoppable—is built into its very title. Boris Buden, whom I discussed in the first section of Chapter 4, sees the making-permanent of the globalized world finally severing critique from praxis: “everything can be changed except this world as world.”

We can see this perspective reflected in this chapter’s first epigraph. Speaking in Vietnam near the end of his presidency, Bill Clinton likened globalization to “wind or water.” A “force of nature” is not to be quibbled with or undone.\(^{193}\) While economists and social scientists still understand globalization as a positive process for capitalism (comparing it to isolationism), humanists tend to see this force of nature producing profound damage.\(^{194}\) Responding to this very Clinton quotation after 9/11, Walter Kalaidjian has said that “a specter of disaster has increasingly overshadowed if not entirely displaced globalization's purchase on capital's utopian future.”\(^ {195}\) In other words, this force of nature now seems like the harbinger of further disaster.

We ought not to forget that globalization refers to economic practices. To compare the consequences of economic shifts to natural processes makes them essentially irresistible. Macro-

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\(^{195}\) “Incoming: Globalization, Disaster, Poetics,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (Fall 2007): 829.
and micro-politics might impact forces of nature in moderate ways, but they cannot counteract them. The economic imperatives grouped under the title globalization go unquestioned and largely dictate the political order. Michel Foucault asserted that neoliberalism oversaw the establishment of the economic market as “the site of verdidiction”: rather than actual nature, religion, or the sovereign functioning as the makers and legitimizers of truth, we instead believe in the market. Politics responds to what the market demands. The ideological shift that would allow globalization to seem “a force of nature” stems logically from a society that sees liberal economic practice as “the founding and legitimizing principles of the state,” and “the economy must have its own rules and the social must have its own objectives… [which] must be decoupled so that the economic process is not disrupted or damaged by social mechanisms and so that the social mechanism has a limitation.” Foucault’s prescient reading of neoliberalism explains why the social mechanism has no means for responding to the economic even after the economic order seems destined to produce more disaster. The social sphere ought and does not produce imperatives that can impact the economic. Clinton’s famous declaration—it’s the economy, stupid—articulates exactly this point. The culture wars will never count the way the market does.

All this has led to the intensification of ideological individualism. Foucault tells us that the state’s role under neoliberalism is to ensure that the economic game has players: “It is up to society and to the rules of the game imposed by the state to ensure no one is excluded from this game,” whether the players want to play or not. All persons in a market economy must feel that they have stakes in the game, and this produces ideological structures that reify the individual. Everyone has a shot at making it big: ever Oscar winner tells us so. Under

neoliberalism, the focus must be on the “everyone” rather than the relative odds of that shot succeeding.

The result has been a change in what ideas have legitimacy in the social imagination. Writing about these shifts over the past thirty years, Daniel Rodgers notes that “strong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones. Imagined collectives shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out.” Because of this weakening, “identities were more openly imagined” and “a broader range of being human was tolerated than before,” but “words for society were thinner….Older solidaristic terms like ‘race’ and ‘sisterhood’ had partially unraveled; others, like ‘class,’ had virtually fallen out of use.” More identities become acceptable because new identities do not threaten the viability of the market, and allowing those identity positions to flourish meant more players could consider themselves at the table. The weakening of connections to collectives denoted by Rodgers’s metaphor of “thinner” indicates that these terms circulate and signify but have less potency. While globalization became a force of nature, human collective possibilities first seem less forceful and then less useful and finally less imaginable.

Díaz and Mengestu receive and portray their worlds from this ideological viewpoint. For all Díaz’s attention to Dominican machismo, the novel does not posit a relation to national or ethnic identity as particularly important for understanding its narrative. In Mengestu’s first book, his characters do strongly identify as Africans, but this identification does not factor into the novel’s central concerns, and the first-generation American narrator of How to Be Alone does not consider his national background at all. The characters do not perceive themselves as part of a collective in ways that might produce political action or even political victimization. Though

199 Rodgers 270-271.
both authors understand the world as off-kilter and humans as prone to suffering, they do not see either of those facts impacting one group more profoundly than others—and if it does, each attributes this imbalance to the way the world works. If their ethnicities or nationalities produce negative reactions in others, these prejudices are not the primary reason for their disenfranchisement.200

Abjection becomes the condition, rather than their condition. Moving to the U.S. is movement within the margins rather than going from one space to the other. Lennon explains that U.S. overdevelopment means “nothing and no one dead or alive, in it, escapes its entanglements, howsoever such entanglements be conceived. Not only is there truly no such thing as Society, here in the capital of the capital of the world—there is nothing outside the manifold that is only in motion.” Echoing Margaret Thatcher, who infamously asserted that there was no such thing as society, Lennon articulates the sense Mengestu and Díaz share that living in the U.S. means entanglement in a “manifold” that entangles everyone.

Here I want to reference my second epigraph. Jonas Woldemariam, the narrator of Mengestu’s How to Be Alone, jokingly refers to the elite Manhattan private school where he teaches part-time as “The Academy.” Imagining a conversation with his recently-deceased father, Jonas says, “I’m the only one who calls it the academy. That’s not its real name. I stole it from a short story by Kafka that I read in college—a monkey who’s been trained to talk gives a report to an academy. That’s the title of the story: ‘A Report to an Academy.’…I used to wonder if that was how my students and the other teachers, even with all their liberal, cultured learning,

saw me—as a monkey trying to teach their language back to them.” Here, one might suggest I have overlooked the importance of ethnicity and race to the novel. Jonas’s sense that the presumably Caucasian faculty and student body imagine him as an under-evolved animal who can do a parlor trick references the long history of anthropological and biological justifications of racism. The bitterness in Jonas’s tone belies his narrative tone, which is tame and circumspect. Only one other moment—to be discussed shortly—has the same tone of frustration regarding racial presumption. Others, such as when Jonas encounters a wary security guard at a minor historical monument, he seems more forgiving—“I want to do my part in easing some of the collective tension as best I can,” he says, acknowledging the general tentativeness of post 9/11 America. He and his wife Angela have lighthearted fun at the way they’re able to manipulate people at parties because of their skin color, but they also discuss how their backgrounds are from different parts of Africa, and Angela’s ancestry goes back far longer in the U.S. Their blackness does not come up more than occasionally: while I do not want to suggest that it does not play a role in shaping Jonas’s experience, the text makes clear that other inheritances are more significant.

For all the quotation’s bitterness, Mengestu’s reference to “The Academy” imbeds more than resentment at being the object of racial and species discrimination. Kafka’s ape does not feel any anger at his audience. He understands why he is an object of curiosity. “A Report” is far less invested in diagnosing human capacities to discriminate and far more interested in

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202 Díaz makes this point more openly in *Oscar Wao*. The adult Oscar becomes a teacher at his former high school, where he finds “some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change,” but the nature of one kind of oppression does: “Every day he watched the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay….In the old days it had been the whitekids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color who performed the necessaries” (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007 [264; further references cited in-text]). Self-hate might motivate this behavior, but the violence is not necessarily white-other.
thinking about cages of various sorts. The ape explains that he learned to speak—Jonas’s verb “trained” gets it wrong; no such systematic operation occurs—because he realized that speech could get him out of his cage. He desires a way out of the cage that will not be an act of despair. In the epigraph, the ape explains that he does not believe in freedom, as none of us can any longer. As Lennon indicates and as critical theory has long shown, there is no outside. We are beyond the disappointment of realizing we are not free, for as the ape suggests, we have learned that a belief that freedom is possible inevitably yields to recognition that it is available. Instead of decrying the absence of our freedom or celebrating our freedom from freedom, we want, as does the ape, to find a way out of our cage that is not an act of despair: “There is an excellent German expression: to beat one’s way through the bushes. That I have done. I have beaten my way through the bushes. I had no other way, always assuming that freedom was not a choice.”

Like many of the protagonists of the novels I discuss, he craves the existence of an escape route, whether or not that route’s pathway is all that worth taking.

Referencing Kafka’s story is more complicated than it appears. While Jonas may only see himself taking the position of the ape addressing the academy from the subaltern position, Mengestu’s allusion allows readers to see Jonas participating in a similar effort to escape his cage—my audience might recall the crack-addicted Joelle van Dyne in Infinite Jest, whom Wallace describes as “excruciatingly alive and encaged”—not to achieve freedom but to create a different experience within the manifold. When we believe that globalization is driving us to disaster and not much can be done to stop it, such limited ambitions are perhaps all that are available.

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“Magical” Thinking and Micropolitics

This limited thinking is what troubles Sean McCann and Michael Szalay about high postmodern fiction. They argue that the major works of Toni Morrison, Don Delillo, and Thomas Pynchon advocate a politics that disallows progressivism because of their mistrust of collectives. Postmodernist skepticism about dogma and discipline make the unity required for progressive action impossible. These works “deride progress, enlightenment, and reason; each reveres the unknowable force of mystery; and each suggests that the most appropriate attitude toward mundane political conflict or social tension is the effort to transcend it.” For McCann and Szalay, these political conflicts and social tensions cannot be transcended, and literary thinking must find ways to address them.

John McClure responded to Szalay and McCann three years later using arguments that later appeared in the postsecularism book. He argued that the “magical thinking” skewered by the Yale Journal article provided a “turn away from certain enlightenment assumptions and toward certain religiously inflected perspectives and practices....shaped by broadly progressive commitments and [that] is consistent with the progressive project.” He complains that McCann and Szalay rely upon antiquated notions of what can comprise a collective, asserting that postmodernism attempts to imagine new possibilities rather than returning to the standard terms of the debate. For McClure, the turn against rationalist secularism witnessed in postmodernist literature tries to make progressivism more progressive, or, in the words of Jerry Varsava, “more generous and more humane.”

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gesture: “The micropolitical tendencies of postmodern American fiction are not symptomatic of depoliticization and withdrawal…but the manner in which political engagement manifests itself in literature in an age where the fundamental debate in First World Countries is no longer (at least for the moment) macro-political, no longer about the best political system.”

Though McClure’s postmodernism is more removed from the public sphere than Varsava’s—McClure’s advocacy of “escape” would not fit the latter’s paradigm—each believes that being political does not require taking a position for or against liberal democracy itself.

The stinging point of McCann and Szalay’s response to McClure is that McClure overlooks the failure of these local, individual stories of retreat or self-remaking to metastasize into an answer to political conflicts and social tensions. We have had forty years of postmodernism’s magical thinking, and where has it gotten us?

I bring up the debate between these critics because I believe it anticipates a problematic within the argument I make about Díaz and Mengestu. When they settle for something else, something they embrace ironically and tragically but embrace nevertheless, aren’t they settling for complicity? In making a case for their value, am I not simply applauding figures for following the logic of their time? Why highlight stories that end with “the triumph of spiritual redemption in its typically Protestant form of personal salvation,” which Robert A. Morace has derided as a “decidedly and perniciously American” feature of the realist drama?

As I will argue in the conclusion, I do find Díaz and Mengestu’s characterization of their worlds worrying. Yet I find it no less worrisome than the mainstream logic they interact with. If there is in fact no getting outside the manifold, then wrestling with mainstream logic would be an

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207 Varsava 188.
entirely sensible gesture for these authors to make. Their tragic position begins with the recognition that capitalist, liberal democracy is axiomatic, and they believe (even more pessimistically than Varsava would have it) that becoming more humane and generous will be tough to do. They do not want to “transcend” political conflict or social tension: their novels register the consequences of political conflict and social tension on the characters themselves, but they do not see their role as countering conflict and tension on the grounds that those tensions also seem axiomatic. To assert this is not to transcend or to celebrate. Counter to Samuel Cohn’s argument about post-9/11 literature, we are also not seeing a naïve, merely recuperative fantasy that aims at healing. For Cohn, fiction “that asserts the possibility of self-determination after 9/11 can be seen as making a certain kind of sense,” in light of the therapeutic model of trauma that dominated the 2000s. Cohn sees notable examples of middlebrow mainstream literature pushing this model too far, performing not only “a tying up of loose ends but also foreclosure,” an unnecessary closing-down of possibility that he sees as overcompensating for trauma.

Cohn’s assertion that the novel wants to “assert the possibility of self-determination” does not feel quite appropriate to Díaz and Mengestu, for as I say above, the books spend substantial space showing us that self-determination is not a coherent concept. Instead of asserting, what we see is something more like an ironic or desperate assertion, one that embeds its insufficiency. They try to stand without foundations. I argue that they have to assert the possibility of self-determination because, without self-determination and without macropolitical possibility, the forecast is dire indeed.

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211 Cohn 173.
“fukú believes in you”

Yunior, the exuberant and charismatic primary narrator of Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, begins the text by introducing the concept of “fukú.” Fukú refers to a supernatural curse that began with the first European settlements in the Western hemisphere and continues into the present. Yunior assures his readers that understanding fukú will be essential to understanding his story, though he anticipates resistance. In fact, he imagines a squabble with his subject, Oscar, about this very question: He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, [and he] believed that was the kind of story we were all living in.” Yunior, claiming the long view, asks, “What more fukú?” (6).

The first section of the book repeatedly insists on the curse’s existence and potency. Yunior tells skeptical readers that “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (5). Yunior uses his narrative authority to establish fukú as an important concept within this fictional framework. Doing so causes the story of an unhappy Dominican-American boy’s life and early death to become heightened in its significance—his life is not merely an unhappy life. Fukú becomes the heuristic that makes Oscar’s story into a tragedy. Yunior instantiates the tragic view as the necessary framework for interpretation.

Yunior gives us fukú as responsible not only for Oscar’s abbreviated life but a wide variety of events. To name just two, the struggles of the Kennedy family and errors by the Yankees are attributed to fukú’s reach. In addition to giving it such a wide range of targets, Yunior establishes fukú as having a long history, concurrent with European colonization:
They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the
death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it
was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in
the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially—fukú—generally a curse or a doom
of some kind; specifically, the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the
fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great
European victims…In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end,
would call the Ground Zero of the New World)…to say his name aloud or even to hear it
is to invite calamity on the head of you and yours. No matter what its name or
provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú
on the world, and we’ve all be in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú’s
Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it
or not. (1-2)

First contact between the Europeans and the natives of the Antilles opens up “a nightmare door,”
unleashing a curse that put us “in the shit ever since.” Yunior’s “we” (“we’ve all been in…we
are all of us”) gestures to a possible readership also within the fukú’s reach. Our narrator would
have us believe that the contemporary state of affairs has been determined not simply by a
human-generated chain of cause and effect but a supernaturally determined “doom.” In many
respects, this explanation of “fukú” recalls the definitions of globalization offered by the
theorists and critics I mention above. Like Clinton’s faucet, fukú got turned on and cannot be
turned off. Here globalization becomes the name of a curse inaugurated centuries ago and has
put us all in the shit.
As my colleague Adam Haley has said, heuristics are future-oriented. The existence of a heuristic promises that future events will become legible through its lens. Fukú-as-heuristic generates future tragedies as much as ones anterior to its arrival. Later in the novel, Yunior seems to forget his insistence here. Discussing the fate of Beli, Oscar’s mother, who loses an unborn son during a terrible beating by thuggish Dominican police, Yunior refuses to invoke fukú. He explains his refusal thus: “The world is full of tragedies enough without niggers having to resort to curses for explanations” (152). The world does not need more tragedies, because resorting to curses would produce more of them. The tone of Yunior’s protest implies that one might be justified in using the curse-heuristic here, but one should avoid doing so out of compassion. Strangely, this is precisely what he has invited us to do—to view what happens to Oscar, the Kennedys, and the Yankees as effects of the curse, which frames these events as tragic. They don’t occur randomly or result from poor decisions. They come because these figures are doomed.

Yunior’s allusive universe contains many references to figures of tremendous size or power. By introducing villains of such large scale, Yunior prepares readers to understand evil figures who possess huge, incredible powers. I see this gesture supporting a cosmology that allows fukú/globalization to emerge as a force of (super)nature. The novel’s list of references is diverse and impressive indeed, but I want to highlight a few recurring ones that speak to this point. The novel’s first epigraph comes from an early issue of Marvel’s The Fantastic Four, when the impossibly large Galactus, who needs to consume the energy of entire planets to survive, asks, “What are brief, nameless lives….to Galactus?” Galactus survived the explosion of his planet, and through exposure to radiation, becomes more than planet-sized and unimaginably powerful. The quote Díaz uses to open the novel comes from when Galactus
arrives at our planet, ready to consume Earth. He offers this line to counter pleas for mercy. In a fuller articulation of his pitiless logic, Galactus explains himself to Norrin Radd, a young astronomer who eventually becomes the Silver Surfer:

If your own life depended upon stepping on an ant hill, you would not hesitate! In order to live, Galactus must have energy….energy which only a healthy planet can provide! If some must fall so that Galactus may endure…it is lamentable! But since time immemorial, is it not always the ants who fall?²¹²

Invoking Galactus invites readers to imagine a force of this type. Galactus’s justification of his behavior tellingly alludes to “energy”: considering the role of oil and other natural resources as drivers for globalization in its most recent guise, Galactus’s size and the size of his need metaphorizes the scale at which the capitalist machine operates. We hear environmental concerns echoed in the in subordination of “a healthy planet” to the needs of one entity; we hear rationalizations for capitalism in Galactus’s admission that all this is “lamentable”; the suffering of the ants appears to us inevitable.²¹³ The allusion tells us that the universe of the novel is populated with at least one figure whose appetite requires and embeds suffering (though, of course, the Four foil Galactus’s plot with the Silver Surfer’s help), and Galactus embodies the systemic demands of capitalism that sound a lot like fukú. Galactus looms large over the novel because of this early quotation. Still, the figure of evil that Yunior references most is Sauron, the dark force in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy, who comes up eight times. Other super villains make multiple appearances.

These figures of vast and unspeakable evil are explicitly compared to Trujillo.

Yunior/Díaz borrows the epigraph of the second section from La Nacion, which called Trujillo “a cosmic force.”\textsuperscript{214} We hear of Trujillo and fukú—“them two was tight.” We hear that “Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily,” that his evil lingers after his death. Yunior goes so far as to say Trujillo’s magic was more powerful than that of Tolkien’s Sauron (156). When Yunior begins to trace the trouble in Oscar’s family back to Oscar’s grandfather, he explains that “shit was so tight that many people actually believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers…that he was protected by the most evil fukú on the Island” (226). Neither Yunior nor the narrative he relates does much to dispel this superstition.

The utter intractability of Trujillo’s power, ownership and authority dominate Yunior’s narrative of Oscar’s family’s past. Trujillo’s unquenchable desire for every attractive woman in the Dominican Republic is the crux in the chain of events that eventually breaks up his mother’s family,. Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather and a successful, prosperous doctor, desperately wants to keep his beautiful teenage daughter away from the dictator. His attempts to do so take dozens of pages for Yunior to narrate. That Trujillo will get what he wants seems inevitable. An exchange with a neighbor suggests that Abelard should know better than to resist a cosmic force, precisely because of his acquaintance with “history”:

\begin{quote}
What can you do?…Trujillo’s the president and you’re just a doctor. If he wants your daughter at the party you can do nothing but obey.
\end{quote}

But this isn’t human!

\textsuperscript{214} Notably, Díaz drops several modifiers from the original in his epigraph. German E. Ornes’s Little Caesar of the Caribbean quotes La Nacion more fully: “He is a political force. An economic force. A social force. A cosmic force” (6). These other qualifications soften the impact of “cosmic” somewhat. That Diaz skips these indicates that he wants readers to encounter “cosmic” forcefully. Ornes, German E. Trujillo: Little Caesar of the Caribbean. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1958.
When has this country ever been human, Abelard? You’re the historian. You of all people should know that (229).

Here, Abelard’s status as a student of history suggests that he should understand the limitations of agency and decency. Simply because he does not want his daughter raped by the dictator does not mean that his version of what is human has any force, ethical or otherwise. Throughout the section, Abelard’s inability to fight off the dictator allows Yunior to speculate about Trujillo’s power: referring to a possible cause of Abelard’s bad luck, he mentions rumors about a book he was allegedly producing: “Abelard’s book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!” (245). The conflation of “fact” and “principle” does the same rhetorical work that Yunior does, convincing readers to see the domination of a dictator or the legacy of Caribbean colonization as a curse rather than a consequence of continuing human action. For most readers, whether Trujillo is in fact from another world is not at all akin to accepting that he was from another world “in principle.” Remember, too, that this is a rationalist doctor and a student of history. The Trujillo we receive will best be understood as something other than merely human.

While we might want to dismiss Yunior for making so much of supernatural claims, Díaz takes steps to confirm Yunior’s narrative authority. He delivers pieces of Dominican history with an expert’s flair and confidence, assuming that his audience has far less acquaintance with this material than he does. We get asides like these: “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” before he tells us about Trujillo for the first time (2); “You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you
have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either” (19); “Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq” (4). Though without citations, he offers encyclopedia-like entries about important Dominican historical figures, replete with quotations that indicate he has done research. In “Aguatando,” one of Díaz’s stories in Drown (1996), the narrator offers no explanation of who Porfirio Rubirosa after dropping his name: “while these Porfirio Rubirosas waited outside” for his mother.\(^{215}\) In Oscar Wao, a reference to Rubirosa requires a half-page footnote explaining who he is (12). By intervening in these ways, Yunior makes himself indispensable to his audience, who he presumes cannot read the novel correctly without him. When he tells us that Oscar’s family begins the story of his death with his grandfather’s crime against Trujillo, Yunior demurs, but before relating their version, he adds, “There are other beginnings, certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards ‘discovered’ the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916” (211). By telling us this is a fukú on the novel’s first pages, Yunior has already made these claims, but here he arrives to remind us of their importance. He makes himself a greater authority than Oscar’s family on their story.

Even Yunior’s narrative excesses help establish his authority. His meta-narrative interruptions acknowledge when his story might strain credulity: “A Note from your Author,” a short section that appears late in the book, anticipates that his readership will not believe in the character of Ybón, the gold-hearted prostitute who eventually falls for Oscar. Miming a skeptical reader, Yunior asks, “A puta and she’s not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable.” After running through several more realistic possibilities that he might do, he refuses: “But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this

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is supposed to be a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (284-285). He quotes Oscar’s great-aunt, who offers a different account of Ybón and Oscar’s first meeting than the one Yunior has narrated for us (289). He explains that his lover corrected an error on his first draft—she “pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa,” where an important incident takes place, so Jarabacoa becomes the more appropriate Samana. He follows this by admitting that he ignored another of her edits, leaving in an inaccuracy for aesthetic reasons: she “informed me that the perrito (see the first paragraphs of chapter one, ‘Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World’) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me!” (132). This compelling metafictional moment has Yunior make a frank admission of his lover’s superior knowledge of “all things Dominican” as well as pointing to an actual inaccuracy.

These very admissions indicate that he wants us to see the rest of the text as rock solid. Because he gestures toward an error, he implies that everything else is suitably correct. He has had an expert vet his claims. The overt gesture toward admitting fictionality actually serves to solidify his authority. His reference to himself as a Watcher, another figure from the Marvel Fantastic Four-Silver Surfer Universe, indicates that he oversees actions but is not allowed to interfere. This comparison comes in spite of his own presence within the narrative as a character. He is Oscar’s roommate during their time at Rutgers, and he has an on-again, off-again relationship with Oscar’s sister Lola, with whom he shares the narrative (she narrates two sections of the book in the first-person).

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216 In a similar gesture, Yunior offers personal testimony as evidence of other extreme claims: “The father of one of my friends spent eight years in Nigua for failing to show proper deference toward the Jefe’s father” (250); “I lived in Santo Domingo only until I was nine, and even I knew criadas,” the Dominican term for orphans forced in to de-facto slavery (253).

217 He knows what “Watchers agree” upon (19); he states that Oscar went to “another Watcher” (20), though the text never names one except him; “Even your humble Watcher” is struck by the beauty of a Dominican” (92); “Even your Watcher has his silences,” he tells us (149); “Only some final things to show you before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty,” he explains at the end (329).
Of course, Yunior does manipulate our reception of this narrative. In keeping his character, he acknowledges this himself, stating that the disdain dictators feel for writers occurs because “[d]ictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like” (97). The comparison posits that writers zealously possess and mobilize their readers, acting as a cosmic force of sorts for the characters within their narratives—making their bodies move, making their mouths open. No doubt this moment gestures toward our captivity by Yunior, whose breathtaking ability to move between vernaculars and allusive registers indicates an exuberant intelligence.218

I call attention to Yunior’s narration for two reasons. First, Díaz seems intent on proving Yunior’s narrative competency. His wide range of reference, code-switching, and citations of research make him seem a capable and entertaining guide. His excesses and admissions of fault serve only to enhance his credibility, for admitting what he does while he’s doing it shows he is unafraid of honesty. These features combine to tell us that Díaz wants us to listen to Yunior, not to dismiss him, and we are thus invited to take fukú and the text’s other supernatural inventions seriously—or we must believe that Yunior, whom we should take at least semi-seriously, takes his own work very seriously.

Second, Yunior seems to me the most important character in the book. As we move later in the novel, Díaz ensures that Yunior becomes more fully embodied. Though Lola, Beli, and Oscar—even to some extent Abelard—have more of their lives narrated to us, Yunior comes across as a more complicated and interesting character. He has habits he wishes he could break: his serial infidelity ruins his chances with Lola, whom he claims to love; he regrets losing

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218 His effortless code-switching, a feature wildly praised in reviews of the novel, gets referenced when describing Oscar’s inability to do the same: “Perhaps if like me he’d been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would’ve been easier for him, but he couldn’t. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber” (21). In these sentences Yunior uses a simile that deploys a classically nerdy reference to Star Wars (Jedi, light saber) while showing off his proclivity with Spanglish (“otakuness”) and swearing with the aplomb of the well-practiced.
patience with Oscar when the latter’s self-pity and absence of self-control become too frustrating (181); he tells us that Oscar’s travails impact him: “I thought about my own fears of actually being good” (198). He offers us glimpses of the past that explain his flaws: “A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things” (185). Though we do not know about his upbringing in the detail he offers for Oscar, the novel’s last section shows Yunior gainfully employed, married, and a father. His evolution from womanizing, drug-using adolescent to responsible adulthood is important enough for Díaz to include.

Yunior’s relationship to the story he tells emerges as the most important tension in the text. The central drama in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao—what appears on descriptions and summaries of the book—is that Oscar’s difficulty losing weight and his immersion in what Yunior capitalizes as Genres (science-fiction and fantasy, most specifically) make him unlucky in love. When Oscar is rejected for the nth time, he tries to commit suicide. When that doesn’t work, he stumbles through adult life, finally meeting and falling for an alcoholic prostitute in the Dominican Republic. A jealous boyfriend of the escort has Oscar beaten, and when Oscar returns to try to convince her to live with him, the boyfriend has Oscar killed. Yunior intersperses sections focused on Oscar with others about Lola, who struggles with her mother’s overbearing personality and learns to love herself in the Dominican republic. He also discusses Beli’s difficult family circumstances, which leave her to an extremely difficult life of near-slavery until she is found by her aunt, the saintly La Inca. If we understand Oscar’s life and death as the primary components of the text, we wind up with a family drama about an unfortunate individual and his family’s struggles. What makes Oscar Wao a far more interesting work comes from Yunior’s treatment of his source material. Yunior’s processing and
presentation of the material do the actual work in the story: he filters Oscar’s experience for us, framing it as tragic instead of a random and unfortunate series of events.

Yunior’s reception of the story as a tragic emphasizes his preference for the tragic view as a heuristic over the postmodern paradigm he believes his readers will bring to their encounter. Indeed, any number of reviewers cited the postmodern characteristics of the novel—its digressiveness, its mixing of high and low cultural references and styles, its conflation of history, fact, and fiction. Yunior’s two invocations of this other heuristic insist upon its insufficiency.

When La Inca, Beli’s aunt, stands with other matriarchs praying for Beli’s life, Yunior explains, “We postmodern platanos tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the olden days, but it’s exactly at these moments, when all hope has vanished, that prayer has dominion” (144; my emphasis). Yunior’s use of the first-person plural yokes his audience together with him as the skeptical postmodernist, so that he assumes both reader and writer consider this kind of faith “atavistic.” What this postmodern perspective fails to recognize is that prayer has “dominion” in moments of hopelessness (like the truism that there are no atheists in foxholes). Both prayer and the logic that motivates the practice dominate spaces, suggesting somehow that postmodern palatano-ness has dominion—only in more hopeful moments. In the midst of actual conflict and tension, however, something else is called for.

Postmodernism’s shortcomings are reiterated in Yunior’s second invocation of the term. The Capitan, the corrupt, sadistic military police officer who eventually orders Oscar’s death, we hear is “one of those bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away. He’d been young during the Trujillato, so he never got the chance to run with some real power, wasn’t until the North American Invasion that he earned his stripes” (294). Again, postmodernism cannot do something here. It cannot explain this particular kind of badness “away.” One might rightly
wonder whether that end was ever in postmodernism’s mission, but the version Yunior receives and espouses to his audience imagines it doing two things: expressing skepticism toward prayer and failing to explain away real badness.

One might say that Yunior’s fukú-driven tragic view fits into the “magic postmodernism” that McClure defends in his debate with McCann and Szalay, but fukú does not open possibilities for belief in the way McClure’s postsecular fictions do. The divine does not emerge as a counter to enlightenment assumptions: instead of being postsecular, fukú is profoundly atavistic and superstitious. We should recognize that in spite of Yunior’s protestations otherwise—“I posted the thread fukú on the DR1 forum, just out of curiosity….The talkback blew the fuck up. You should see how many responses I’ve gotten. They just keep coming in….There are a zillion of these fukú stories” (6)—fukú is not commonly-deployed term. Google searches turn up, unsurprisingly, references to The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and then to a style of Japanese dress. Díaz has apparently been mum about whether he drew the term from his experience growing up in the Dominican Republic or whether it is simply useful for the novel.219 That Yunior makes story of Oscar’s life and death a fukú story is not a throwback to an existing tradition. Instead, it is a suggestive provocation about how we think of the world we have received and how to negotiate that world. We are compelled to ask how Yunior can make sense of a world that tells us our existence is cursed.

What fukú does allow is zafa, the “counterspell” that Yunior suggests certain old-school Dominicans will deploy when they sense the presence of a fukú. Yunior calls his novel “a zafa of sorts,” his “very own counterspell.” Of course, if zafa were as “surefire” as Yunior suggests, the curse of the Admiral—the curse of globalization, of European touching down—could be reversed. Zafa’s thin prospects for counteracting fukú help us understand how the turn to

219 I want to thank José David Saldívar, who shared this with me at the 2011 MLA conference.
personal salvation in the novel’s conclusion becomes a logical endpoint. The very incommensurate fukú/zafa relationship parallels the structure/agency paring that seems so very important to the tragic view. If we recognize that nothing can be done about the structure, we wonder what we can do with our agency. Nothing major, unfortunately. What the novel does is offer us a zafa, some small assertion of agency, that we realize at the conclusion.

Yunior gives us one seemingly final moment before actually ending the narrative. Each of the last two chapters ends on allusions. In the order of these allusions and their form, we see another example of supplementing postmodernist practice and logic with an ironic but necessary invocation of an earlier paradigm. This second allusion feels a bit like zafa, like an attempt to produce a counterspell to the curse of history.

The first sequence occurs as Yunior summarizes his experience chronicling Oscar’s life. He has inherited Oscar’s books after the latter’s death. Oscar’s knowingly suicidal decision to chase after the Ybón, the prostitute-girlfriend of the Capitan, eventually kills him. As Yunior reflects on his adult life, which he feels is profoundly indebted to Oscar, he explains that Oscar has circled a panel in Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen*, though Oscar’s respect for literature meant he rarely defaced books. Yunior provides a brief contextual background for the exchange: “The panel where Adrian Veidt and Dr. Manhattan are having their last convo. After the mutant brain has destroyed New York City; after Dr. Manhattan has murdered Rorschach; after Veidt’s plan has succeeding in ‘saving the world’” (331). This summary assumes at least some familiarity with *Watchmen*’s plot. No mention is made of Veidt’s pragmatic calculus, where he decides that the destruction of New York’s population is a lesser evil than the start of nuclear war between the U.S. and the USSR. The grim but undeniable value of Veidt’s decision makes for the *Watchmen*’s own morally ambiguous conclusion—Manhattan kills Rorschach because
Rorschach, who is much closer to the usual comic-book ethos of swift, thorough, and bloody retributive justice, and who believes that Veidt’s decision must be made public; Veidt “saves the world” by killing millions—stuns us with its resistance to easy categorization. Few of us could do what Veidt does, but it’s also hard to argue against his logic. The panel Oscar circles features Veidt asking Manhattan whether he had done “the right thing” because “it all worked out in the end.” Manhattan, whose exposure to radiation extends his vision across time and space, making him a figure of terrifying insight, says, “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (331).

Here we have what seems to be an ending on an allusion to another text that says nothing ends. What does it mean to invoke Oscar’s own circling of this scene? If we recall that Oscar had “developed a growing obsession with the End of the World (No apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played….)” (23), we get an interesting paradox. Apocalypses are, of course, never what they seem to be: apocalyptic narratives presuppose the end of a given world or world-organization, not the literal end of the Earth. Here, though, the apocalypse-excited Oscar, after his own end, is revealed to have revered—or at least noted—something affirming endlessness. To end on this allusion to a classic postmodern text (one heavily invested in deconstructing myths) feels profoundly postmodern, at least in the terms Yunior has given us. The invocation of infinity makes the question of rightness moot. Unlike the hospital room where prayer did have dominion, it lacks it hear; infinity cannot be dominated.

In the novel’s second conclusion, entitled “The Final Letter,” supplants the penultimate chapter’s postmodern reference with an ironic modernist one. Oscar’s last piece of correspondence details his first sexual encounter. He sleeps with Ybón, though Yunior finds out only in this posthumous note. Oscar offers standards platitudes about the experience—“it was

really the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated” that truly highlight the experience, not the physical act itself—before affirming his satisfaction: “He wrote: So this is what everyone’s always talking about. The beauty! The beauty!” (335). Díaz’s closing echoes Marlowe’s haunted repetition of Colonel Kurtz’s dying words in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The horror becomes the beauty.

Surely, this attempt at producing a happy ending *must* be in some senses ironic. Díaz’s novel feels too sophisticated to suggest that Oscar’s life can be called “wondrous” simply because he finally had sex or finally felt intimacy. He is dead, the curse lives on, we’re all still “in the shit.” The conclusion offers Oscar’s satisfaction in a way that feels profoundly uncharacteristic: the circled *Watchmen* panel feels far more appropriate to Díaz’s narrative than this moment of cliché affirmation.

The ironic allusion to a modernist text replaces a straightforward inclusion of a postmodern text, suggesting that somehow the older paradigm, even if invoked ironically, gives us something more appropriate to the novel we’re reading. I want to suggest that Díaz *must* offer us this conclusion *even though* his entire narrative argues against its viability. Again, Oscar is still dead at 23, having thrown away his life on a love that could never endure. The system that allows men like the Capitan to subjugate Ybón and kill indiscriminately remains in place. The structures that produce marginalization of the very painful sort Oscar experiences are not at all threatened by Oscar’s experience of success. The articulation of “beauty,” even though we must recognize it as ironic—the echo of “the horror” requires us to—does give us *something*. It provides Oscar with a reward for an assertion of agency, doomed though that assertion was.

Like the story its title alludes to, Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* features the death of a protagonist before
his time. If Francis’s life can be called “happy,” the courage he shows in his second attempt to
kill while on safari asserts his manhood. He feels complete when his wife shoots him dead. This
letter tells us that Oscar feels the same way. When Yunior imagines Oscar’s last moments, he
envisions Oscar behaving with bravery and courage he never had before; like Macomber, he uses
his second near-death encounter to prove himself to himself. Both allusions to modernist texts
are ironic and tragic because they tragically recognize that the wagers they make are limited,
doomed, and insignificant. They give us something more, though, than another affirmation of
endlessness and meaninglessness.

Díaz’s decision to have Yunior seal up his narrative shows us that Yunior’s tragic view
requires a necessary fiction to sustain him. We might wonder how someone who believes in
fukú can let his story end with the beauty. The beauty is a weak counterspell to the horror, a
very weak one indeed. But it may be all we have—it is all, at least, that Yunior can muster.

The Children of the Revolution

Near the end of The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears, narrator Sepha Stephanos describes
escalating tension regarding the gentrification of his Washington, D.C. neighborhood. He is in
love with his neighbor, a Caucasian professor of American history and single mother named
Judith, who bought an abandoned building and spends lavishly to gut and rebuild it. Sepha’s
feelings for Judith are not the only reason he does not view her as a villain in the urban-renewal
conflict. In purchasing the space for his failing corner store and living in a cheap apartment next
door, Sepha casts himself as an earlier, less threatening invader: “I hadn’t forced anyone out, but
I had never really been a part of Logan Circle either… I had snuck into the neighborhood as

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221 We should not forget, too, that Yunior’s imagining this behavior. We have no idea whether he actually behaved
that way or not. It is important for Yunior that the death occurs in this way.
well. I had used it for its cheap rent, and if others were now doing the same, then what right did I have to deny them?” (189). He is not one of those who has resided in the area for long enough to think it his: anti-gentrification claims that rely upon identification with an area that Sepha does not feel. Mrs. Davis, an elderly widower who spearheads the effort, clearly envisions Sepha as part of this community. Whether her belief stems from Sepha’s race, they are both black, though only Mrs. Davis is born in the United States, or from his years spent as a local shopkeeper and resident, Sepha shuns this identification. When Mrs. Davis asks him to keep a stack of flyers for the community meeting, our narrator thinks back to his own flight from Ethiopia, which was hastened by his production of other anti-government handouts. Sepha explains that he “had never understood until then…how insignificant a role we played in creating” our circumstances. After explaining that Mrs. Davis is refusing to grow old passively—she is “committed to battling any and every obstacle that approaches [her], regardless of how ridiculous or impossible”—Sepha throws out the flyers (194-195).

In this section, I will argue that the vision of gentrification offered by Sepha and by the novel can best be understood as a kind of fukú. Sepha presents gentrification as a curse. If we cannot—and I’m not advocating this or disavowing it—blame individuals for pursuing economic imperatives like low rents, we will find it very hard to locate a stance either for or against the gentrifying of neighborhoods. Sepha and his neighbors offer “the passive and helpless observations of people stuck living on the sidelines,” for they are not the individuals who shape the world (23). At the same time, Sepha does not portray Judith as a world-shaper, either. She too seems to do what her circumstances dictate. Judith explains, “If I had lived here as long as they had, I’d be angry too….I’m embarrassed to say what I paid for this house. Even after all the

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repairs. I can’t pretend that there’s anything just to it, but there’s nothing evil to it either” (205). She makes this statement after she is shouted down at the community meeting: she does not even receive a chance to speak, and Sepha depicts her plight with sympathy: “When the speeches came back to the neighborhood, the people’s anger was barely disguised. I don’t know who used the word ‘they’ first….Once the word entered the meeting, it seemed to trail onto the end of nearly every sentence. I don’t know who they think they are. What are they doing here anyway. They have their own neighborhoods and now they want ours too.” Judith “was implicated in every recrimination. No one addressed her directly, but more than a few of the people who spoke that evening turned toward her” (200). Those who would incriminate Judith do so on the premise that they belong where they are by virtue of having been there longer, by having a more authentic claim to ownership. This position is no more substantive than Judith’s, ultimately: both are motivated by ideological understandings of property and entitlement. This is the position taken by Sepha, who refuses to identify with either side.

The anti-gentrification protests eventually drive Judith from her home. After the meeting, someone throws a brick through her car; another individual sets the house on fire. She is eventually driven from the building she has purchased, stripping Sepha both of her companionship and ending his tender relationship with Judith’s daughter. While this moment might seem a successful example of tenacious community resistance, the invading hordes continue. In the novel’s present—Sepha’s story of his time with Judith is presented as a flashback—he explains that “[o]n a good day I have forty or maybe fifty customers. Most of them are stay-at-home moms or dads who’ve moved into one of the newly refurbished homes surrounding Logan Circle” (4). Before Judith and these visitors, “the only reasons white people had ever come into the neighborhood” were to buy drugs or locate prostitutes (18). These
newcomers generate pressure on the longer standing residents: around the time Judith is driven from her home, Sepha observes, “Rents had been on the rise for over a year, but it was only now, in the past six months, that you began to see the effects. Evictions had become common” (189). Not long after her departure, Sepha himself is touched by the rising rents: “the tide has turn since” the days when his landlord did not mind a few missed payments, “and I have failed to keep pace” (68). The novel’s present-tense storyline centers on Sepha’s eviction from his convenience store and his mutedly hysterical reaction to it.

While the neighbors see Judith as the symbol of this tide-turning (if not the force causing the tide to turn), Sepha sees a woman simply trying to make her way, worthy of his attention and love. Even after he stands to lose his livelihood, his position does not change. Judith is wry about her own good economic fortune: “Inheritances,” she says. “They can kill you” (86). The natural gesture here might be to blame the system, but Sepha makes no macropolitical observations or claims. He does not want to intervene even at this local level, refusing to make any judgments at all.

Instead, Sepha offers dozens of statements like the following, uttered as he listens to young neighborhood children chanting protests:

We all essentially wanted the same thing, which was to feel that we had a stake in shaping and defining what little part of the world we could claim as our own. Boys even younger than the ones standing outside had fought and killed one another all over Addis for that exact reason, and they were at it again now throughout more of Africa…At least here, in America, they had this corner to live their lives as they pleased, and if a few of them took to throwing bricks through windows, then we could not judge them (211).
For Sepha, the neighborhood boys are comparable to the boys who fought and killed in Sepha’s native Addis because both sets want to feel that their agency has force. The desire to believe one’s wishes mean something overrides Sepha’s ability to distinguish between very disparate circumstances; while he does say that America gives them more freedom, his overriding claim is that we cannot judge people for acting on the desire to feel oneself meaningful. We cannot be sure which boys in Ethiopia’s Addis Sepha references—the ones who overthrew the standing government? The ones rebelling against those revolutionaries whom Sepha joined with? No matter what the target of their anger, uprisings are really about agency-grabs. They are about performing as though one “had a stake in shaping and defining” one’s world, hence Sepha’s explicit use of the word “feel.”

Sepha does not seem wholly convinced that even powerful men control their circumstances. He mocks his friend Kenneth for a belief that they do have such power: “This is what he believes men in power can do. They can dismiss with a wave of the hand and never think twice about it. There are those who wake each morning ready to conquer the day, and then there are those of us who wake only because we have to….we wake to sleep and sleep to wake” (35). Though Kenneth’s ambition pays off financially, Sepha implies that he is not convinced men in power actually are able to wave things away. Kenneth believes some people have power and some people do not. Sepha does not believe in the distinction. We all essentially want the same thing, as he said above.

If we follow Sepha, what we wind up with is a frustrated sense that one ought to act but that one cannot. This vexed position is articulated by Sepha’s other close friend, Joseph. Joseph makes a comparison between the anti-gentrification movement and the revolution which drove him from Zaire: “As an African, you should understand what’s happening here,
Stephanos….there’s nothing these people can do. Look at this place. All of the marches in the world won’t change anything anymore. We were at our best in the sixties. Africa was free. America was free. Everyone was marching to something. Now look at us” (220). Joseph first posits that a change in power structures means that nothing can be done to change the standing order. At one point—perhaps in the 60’s—marches had efficacy; now they do not. At our “best,” we were free and we were marching. Now “we” are free and not marching. But what would the point of marching be if we do not believe it accomplishes anything? Joseph’s complaint seems to be both that we can’t do anything about our circumstances and that we should still be doing something. His sense that Sepha should understand, like Abelard’s neighbor, appeals to an experience of this same bind. As an African, Sepha should get it.

Among Sepha and his two friends, to be African is to have privileged understanding of social strife and social restructuring. The three often play a morbid game, taking turns naming coup de états: “So far we’ve named more than thirty different coups in Africa….Name a dictator and then guess the year and country. We’ve been playing the game for over a year now. We’ve expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerilla leaders….No matter how many we name, there are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them” (8). Kenneth, Sepha, and Joseph drink heavily and name dictators. They do not seem to prefer certain “coups,” “rebellions,” or “insurrections” over others. The game speaks to the three’s resigned sense that revolutions occur like seasons, one after another, not signifying much.

This understanding of revolution leads to skepticism and cynicism much as we saw in Sepha’s reaction to the gentrification of his area. Speaking to this point, the three consistently play the U.K. band T. Rex’s 1976 hit “Children of the Revolution” at the jukebox in their
favorite bar. The ritual’s meaning for them shifts over time: “we had been in America for only a couple of years when we first heard it, and we did believe that we were children of a revolution, and not only because we were willing to be grand. We all had stories of families we missed and would never see again. We spoke in our broken English of Africa’s tyrannies, which had yet to grow tedious. And we had our own stories of death and violence to match” (48).

Later, after their acculturation, they still sing along with the chorus, but Sepha explains that “it’s hard not to laugh at our misplaced enthusiasm” (48). What ends for them is the thrill of identification. Once they felt “grand” for being the products of important turns in history. The preening, swaggering vocals and the song’s chorus—“you won’t fool the children of the revolution”—makes their position sound grand. After time, they realize that the song does correctly diagnose their inheritance: their cynicism and skepticism. You won’t fool the children of the revolution because they know better. This gloomy worldliness does not merit real enthusiasm, as Sepha notes.

To emphasize their position as children of the revolution once again tells us something about the novel’s fixation on inheritances and curses. The revolution-begets-revolution political environment they cynically document in their game produces a world in which instability is normative and where hope for positive change through revolution gets muted. To be a child of the revolution in this sentence is to resent the very concept of revolution, to be skeptical about claims for hopefulness.

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223 The novel’s UK title is “Children of the Revolution.” No doubt part of the name-change rationale was the song’s greater popularity in T. Rex’s native England, but making this reference into the title points to its significance to Mengestu’s operation.
Of the three friends, only one does not carry this skepticism into his day to day life. Kenneth’s ambitions for making himself successful in the United States pay off. Joseph’s social mobility has stalled, as has Sepha’s. For Sepha, achieving success was never the point:

I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm (41).

Certainly, we can read Sepha’s desire “to persist unnoticed” as a consequence of his teenage trauma. “To do no more harm” refers to his father’s brutal murder, which occurs because revolutionary police find out about Sepha’s involvement with a counter-revolutionary group, and his father takes the blame. Shortly after this, the young Sepha leaves Ethiopia, never to return. One way of interpreting these statements is to identify Sepha’s survivor guilt and link it to his utter passivity. To do so, however, makes him representative of a model of trauma that he overcomes by book’s end, when he affirms that he must begin taking control of his life. If we explain Sepha in this way, he becomes a fairly standard character, someone who learns to self-actualize in productive ways.

We ought to remember that this quotation references Sepha’s lack of interest in the American dream. Here we have an immigrant novel where our primary character does not even seek empowerment by U.S. identity, which I attribute to his belief that empowerment is always fictional. His readings of both gentrification and revolution dourly imply that each simply

\[224\] While Kenneth does become financially successful, he does not seem terribly happy. He shows the same problem-drinking behaviors as Joseph and Sepha, and when we see him trying to buy a new car, he is ignored by the salespeople because of his appearance.
occurs: neither is an object worth evaluating ethically or morally. Indeed, they both seem like fukú. In this way, Sepha’s pronounced pessimism strikes me as akin to Yunior’s, insofar as each believes that “we are all in the shit.” That Sepha does not distinguish between himself and Judith, disadvantaged, dark-skinned immigrant and well-off Caucasian professional, speaks to this point.

Mengestu’s turn toward an ending filled with personal affirmation then feels less like a conventional upbeat conclusion and more like the ironic and tragic embrace that ends Oscar Wao. Each plot line ends with unsatisfying outcomes. Judith leaves the neighborhood, their relationship never having blossomed, but the neighborhood still gets gentrified. Sepha finds out his store will need to close, and he runs throughout Washington, D.C., reviewing his history; he fails to reach out to his one family member in the city, and he evinces the same disappointment at the circumstances that caused him to leave Addis. The novel’s last lines, then, do not feel fitting these two storylines:

What was it my father used to say? A bird stuck between two branches gets bitten on both wings. I would like to add my own saying to the list now, Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough….It is always the first and last steps that are the hardest to take. We walk away and try not to turn back, or we stand just outside the gates…we stumble blindly from one place and life to the next. We try to do the best we can (228).

He ends up affirming his ownership of the store, something he is “happy to claim entirely as [his] own” (228). Here we recall Sepha’s statement about pride of ownership (briefly, when the store is doing well, “I felt the pride of ownership that Americans always speak of with such reverence”), when he assumes the position of the American with property that might likely
secure prosperity, or at the very least that ownership equals a form of participation. But only a page before, Sepha writes in a letter that he never sends to Judith’s daughter Naomi that “there wasn’t much point in holding on to a store, in holding on to anything, if in the end it didn’t matter to at least one person other than yourself” (227). Our ending reverses thrust on this point. Sepha’s “entirely my own” indicates that, in some way, holding on to the store (or at least claiming it) does do something worthwhile.

At the same time, the store is not entirely Sepha’s own. His ability to own the store is afforded by a loan he has not paid back and by his now-foreclosed ability to rent the space. The ending seems to forget that he will in fact lose the store. A few pages before, we hear that Sepha can barely pay the rent. What does this assertion in his pride of ownership worth?

*The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* prepares us for its conclusion by offering Joseph’s rewrite of *The Inferno*. When Dante and Virgil emerge from Hell, they are utterly relieved to see the earthly manifestations of God’s grace. Joseph adores the lines Dante offers for their relief: “Through a round aperture I saw appear/Some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears/Where we came forth, and once more saw the stars.” Joseph, an aspiring poet, struggles to produce the same impact in the conclusion of his epic poem about the Congo revolution of 1960. Transitioning the emergence from Hell into the end of revolution, Joseph explains that the key difference between his work and Dante’s is that his characters “begin in hell, they come out for just a moment, and then they return.” For this reason, his first draft offers a tentatively celebratory ending: “The last traces of a permanent twilight have faded and given way/To what we hope is nothing short of a permanent dawn.” Later versions eventually diminish to a terse “Patrice./Are we ready?” This last line, Sepha tells us, has had a number of narrators: one version “was told in the voice of a mutilated plantation worker staring at his severed hands lying
in a basket already full of hands. And yet another was in the voice of an orphaned child witnessing the birth of a new nation” (169-170). That Joseph cannot reproduce Dante’s sense of wonder no doubt comes because Joseph is no Dante, but Mengestu’s use of the Dante closing as his novel’s title draws our attention to Joseph’s continual compromising of post-revolutionary hope. The ending question—“Are we ready?”—coming from either a worker without hands or an orphaned child does not seem confident that the answer is yes. Nevertheless, we can hope that it is.

The children of the revolution are left without hands or parents; they certainly do not have unbounded hope in the possibilities ahead. However unlikely the answer of yes might be to this question, the answer is not yet written. I see this conclusion preparing us for Sepha’s, where he seems to see a way out of his current frustrations through self-affirmation. Though he has shown us that the challenges to self-determination are formidable (and that its consequences are perhaps not very significant), Sepha’s zafa would be this statement, so absurd on its face, that he can pretend so self-possess more completely.

**Lies and Bullshit**

In Mengestu’s second novel, the setting moves from Washington, D.C. to New York. Like Sepha, first-generation American narrator Jonas Woldemariam moves between time lines. He tells the story of a trip his parents take from Illinois to Nashville that goes terribly awry; this earlier story occurs while he is in utero. Disasters mar the trip, several of which only increase and solidify the resentment his parents feel for each other. Jonas tells this story as he re-enacts it himself, following in their footsteps. We come to understand that Jonas’s tracing of their path is an attempt to encounter his parents not as the bitter individuals who raised him but as
sympathetic humans. By doing so, he wants to produce the empathy that will allow him to move past the passivity in order to self-actualize.

The other primary storyline follows Jonas’s courtship, marriage, and eventual divorce of an African-American lawyer named Angela. They meet while working at a law center for refugees seeking asylum; after a short stretch there, Angela becomes a more successful attorney while Jonas remains treading water. Angela’s boss helps Jonas get a job teaching part-time at the “academy” I discussed above. His own incredibly limited ambitions and profound passivity frustrate Angela and cause Jonas to lie to cover up for his lies, ultimately spelling their relationship’s doom.

Jonas begins retracing of his parents’ fateful journey just after his separation from Angela is final. On the trip, his mother Miriam tries to run away from Jonas’s father twice, found first by him and then by the police, who return her to her husband without asking whether she’d like to be returned or not. This second, more consequential foiled escape comes after Jonas’s father Yosef strikes Miriam in the face—not the first time Jonas tells us Yosef has punched his wife. Miriam responds by forcing the steering wheel left, leading the car off the road. Yosef is seriously injured and knocked out; Miriam seizes her chance to be free. When she is returned to him, Yosef’s resentment and hatred is compounded by his sense that she tried to kill him and left him to die, and she is again stuck with this violent man she disdains.

Jonas believes that understanding this event is necessary in the aftermath of his own failed marriage. As he follows their pathway, he has to invent their interior monologues and their conversations, though bits of it have been passed on to him by his mother. His narration regularly indicates when he begins fabricating: “What happened here between my parents late on a September afternoon thirty years earlier is, I have to admit, largely a matter of wild and
perhaps even errant speculation” (135); “while I know it’s not geologically possible in this part of the Midwest, I’d like to grant them an elevated plateau from which they could round a bend” (221). In narrating their story and adding what seem fitting details, Jonas knows he has departed from what is (within the fictional “true”) accessible to him. He seems to need to polish the story in order for it to provide something he hopes to get from it.

He regularly references these and other fabrications. At the refugee center, his bosses ask him to revise asylum applications so that they will be more likely to get accepted. As I mention above, he lies to Angela to sustain their relationship. In the novel’s most accomplished section, Jonas tells his students the story of his father’s flight from Ethiopia to Sudan, his passage from Sudan to Europe, his brief imprisonment and eventual arrival in the U.S. These are the details his father has offered—“‘I went to Sudan,’ was all he said when [Miriam] asked him where he had disappeared to. ‘Then I took a boat to Europe’” (268)—plus Jonas explains that his father did occasionally reference an Abrahim whom he met in Sudan (208-209). Jonas’s version spans dozens of pages, and he makes up not only his character’s interior lives but world-historical events, including a civil war in Sudan that never happened.

Jonas places readers in the strange position of hearing these events that we understand he has fictionalized. He consistently presents these embellishments without apologizing for them and, at times, without explaining why he needs to add details or alter timelines. These strategies feel related to Jonas’s sense that the world is a profoundly unsafe place. He demonstrates this point when he visits a fort that was the site of a historical battle between Tamora Indians and European settlers. The fort failed because it had not been adequately secured, and Jonas notes historical confusion about why Jean-Patrice Laconte had “construct[ed] a fort where it was all but impossible to kill your enemy as he advanced” (136). Jonas posits that Laconte saw the
peaceful beauty of the field and let down his guard. He inevitably had to pay for doing so. Jonas’s defensiveness, he believes, will keep him from committing the same mistake.

This constitutes Jonas’s fukú: he believes we are all cursed by living in a world full of hidden and terrifying dangers. He inherits parents ruined by historical circumstances whom he believe have ruined him. Like Sepha, Jonas views the world’s cruelty as part of its nature, not something to be argued or rued. He views the process of gentrification neutrally. He makes this point as he and Angela leave the “last takeout Puerto Rican restaurant left on our block” where “there had once been, or so we were told, close to a half-dozen such places in the neighborhood.” These changes strike the Angela “as further proof of a widespread cultural loss happening through New York,” but Jonas “considered the disappearance of such places entirely irrelevant,” because in a city “change was not only constant but inevitable,” and that a “relentless process of renewal” was what kept cities alive (187). This renewal ought not be judged or inveighed against. As we have seen with other instances of fukú, it simply occurs.

Jonas’s recognition of our tragically limited ability to impact our world results in a more cynical wager than either Yunior or Sepha eventually make. Jonas believes in negotiating one’s way through the world’s dangers to locate a temporary version of peace. He does not distinguish between different kinds of negotiation, which we can see in his belief that all flights from the truth are essentially the same. The novel eventually sees him alter this perspective, believing that certain forms of negotiation—in this case, of fiction-making—are ultimately more ethical and sustainable than others. In this way, *How to Read the Air* makes a more nuanced wager, one more canny about placing faith in the fictional.

Before Jonas learns to distinguish in this way, he is almost painfully passive. Mengestu fills Jonas’s narration with clichés and rote observations whose triteness Jonas does not register.
At the same time, Jonas does recognize that he often resorts to cliché as a mode of protection. His wife dismissively promises to “compile the Jonas Woldemariam Book of Clichés” (156). In another expression of her frustration, Angela says: “I’ve concluded that you’re an alien, not the illegal or legal kind, but a real alien who’s decided that the easiest way to get by in life is not to say or do anything that might blow your cover.” Jonas does not reply, but instead offers the following to the reader: “I wanted to but could hardly disagree with what she said. I sought out peace wherever I could and often earned it with my silence” (104). Jonas tells us that he had no definition of who he was: “for so long I had concentrated my efforts on trying to appear to be almost nothing at all—neither nameless nor invisible, just obscure enough to blend into the background and be quickly forgotten.” This strategy “had begun with my father, who I had always hoped would never notice me…I realized [at a certain point] all I had to do to avoid him was blend into the background. That knowledge followed me from there so that eventually I thought of my obscurity as being essential to my survival” (101). Jonas’s desire to be obscure helps him protect a hidden self from the outside. To offer banalities and clichés is to speak in an already-spoken voice. Knowingly doing so allows Jonas to avoid using his own voice.

In this desire, Jonas resembles scores of other fictional characters. Why Jonas remains interesting in spite of these banalities and clichés is that he is so up-front about his investment in lying. When we first encounter Jonas, we hear that his position at a refugee law firm stems from two abilities. First, the head lawyer believes the largely African client base will be put at ease by Jonas, whose appearance (never described) hints at someone without ancestral U.S. roots. The second comes from his background in English, which he uses to help improve the narratives of refugees seeking asylum. Jonas “took half-page statements of a coarse and often brutal nature and supplied them with details that made them real for the immigration officer who would be
reading them….It was easy to find the necessary details; they resurfaced all over the world in various countries…what could not be researched could just as easily be invented based on common assumptions that most of us shared when it came to the poor in distant, foreign countries” (24). When Angela finds out about Jonas’s embellishments, she objects, not “because [Jonas] had invented a new history for someone, but because [he] seemingly had no problem doing so” (26). Jonas tells us that Angela is disquieted by “the ease with which [he] could lie,” but she is not dissuaded from entering into a romantic relationship with him even though he tells her directly, “Lying comes naturally to me” (27).

Beyond the aforementioned clichés, part of Jonas’s self-effacing strategy is to tell these lies. In writing for the refugees, he draws upon the Western imaginary’s set of images of suffering to make asylum a more likely outcome. His lies borrow from the understanding that the world contains a great deal of suffering in order to make believable narratives out of those imaginings. Interestingly, he compares these lies to casual mistruths he tells to his students: “The stories came naturally, just as I had shown myself more than capable of coming up with last-minute narrative fillers for the asylum applications” (97). When he tells them the longer story of his father’s emigration, he makes the comparison again: “And so I continued with my father’s story, knowing that I could make up the missing details as I went, just as I had once done for Bill and his brood of migrants at the center” (170). The connection he posits between these instances boils down to a certain proclivity for knowing what details will work and for generating them on the fly. He does not consider the distinctions between circumstances—whether, for instance, one situation might call for embellishment more than others.

At his teaching job, where most of his students come from Manhattan’s elite, he avoids becoming a part of their “Save Africa Now” campaign. Part of his objection no doubt stems
from the inefficacy of their actions: “I never asked them how they planned on ending the 
violece that had recently upset them; letters and more rallies were somewhere in the plan, 
money would surely be raised and sent—the fact that action was being taken was enough to 
ensure that whatever they did was right” (98). He also mocks the fuzziness of their target: “they 
had recently heard someone say that Africa was more than just the sum” of “war first, hunger 
and poverty second” (98). While his decision to absent himself does not seem peculiar, his 
excuse does: “My family’s Irish….I’d feel like a fraud if I joined” (98-99). Here, when his 
background seems to make him “a natural ally,” he chooses a nationality that would make him 
unsuitable and thus ignorable. Though Jonas explains that he often plays with his students’ 
understanding of who he was (97-98), here he disdains identification with his continental 
background. When asked by an interviewer where his accent is from, Jonas replies, “Peoria” 
(54). I do not mean to suggest that Jonas should identify with Ethiopia, Africa, or anywhere else, 
and he did grow up near Peoria. Still, his resistance to what he identifies as a “natural” 
connection emerges as another attempt to obscure himself, as it does not seem rooted in anything 
other than a desire to misdirect his audience.

The central fictionalized narrative that he offers to his students is his expanded version of 
his father’s emigration. He takes several class days to tell his students about his father’s life, 
inventing nearly all the details. Using his inventive skills, Jonas knows exactly how much detail 
to include and how to appeal to his students’ prejudices, which Mengestu correctly assumes will 
also be the prejudices of the reader. Not for nothing did these pages appear in the New Yorker 
(12 July 2010), where the same elite Manhattan attitudes are entertained.

Jonas’s invention of his father’s story can hardly be called truthful, but it has a force. His 
students learn something from listening. When an administrator finds out about Jonas’s
departure from the curriculum, he does not seem particularly concerned. Jonas tells him that “almost none” of what his students have reported about the historical record is true, but their false statements are based on their good-faith interpretation of his: “I had made up most of what I told them—the late nights at the port, and the story of an invading rebel army storming across the desert….Had he called me a liar directly I would have been braced for that” (246). Instead, the administrator explains that “it’s good to hear them talking about important things” (246). Jonas seems surprisingly bitter about this response, considering he has been let off the hook:

And that was all it came down to: I had given my students something to think about it, and whether what they heard from me had any relationship to reality hardly mattered; real or not, it was all imaginary for them. That death was involved only made the story more compelling. Had I taken that away I could have easily imagined a certain level of outrage at my distortion of history and geography, but there was just enough suffering to claim that neither really mattered.

I suddenly felt disappointed that I hadn’t taken my story further. I could have given my students a full-on massacre in which hundreds of thousands of imaginary Africans were killed, and for that I would have been commended. (246-247)

Jonas feels frustration that this administrator can excuse Jonas’s actions on the grounds that he does. From this official perspective, that the children are exposed to one kind of narrative (of African suffering) is preferable to what it replaces (student gossip in the hallways). Instead of feeling anger that Jonas is not telling the truth—or is diverging from his task—the administrator implies that Jonas is somehow *doing* his task by inventing a particular narrative. That the narrative involves “suffering” ensures that the “mattering” fits into a moral paradigm.
Jonas’s unexpressed outrage stems from the interpretation the administrator offers. He does not want his invention of suffering to suit some kind of sensitizing purpose, as if to remind the students that their privilege and relative security was not shared by all. The mattering he wants to produce is entirely personal. He invents and offers this narrative out of exclusively selfish impulses. In other words, he does not tell his father’s story to provide an exemplum that can be translated into a lesson about tolerance or world violence. While his motives here appear opaque, we can see that the administrator’s sense that he knows why Jonas has behaved as he has bothers him profoundly.

This exchange tells us that Jonas does not want his lies appropriated for ethical or moral purposes, at least not the aims articulated here. At other times, his lies provide him with a sense of direction that he otherwise sorely lacks. Jonas regularly tells his wife Angela that he plans on applying to a Ph.D. program in English. This possibility redeems Jonas’s current employment—assisting at the refugee center, part-time teaching—by signaling that greater things are to come. For Angela, this prospect rescues Jonas from the shiftlessness she sees in him every day. After a long stretch when his long-promised plans fail to materialize, the relationship suffers. Jonas begins to lie to regain ground with Angela: he tells her that the private school is allowing him to teach more classes and to make them of his own design. He then uses this lie as scaffolding: “There had to be a bigger ambition and a better ending than the one I had come up with so far, and gradually, I supplied it.” He tells her, “I’m thinking now that these classes could be part of a bigger research project I undertake someday. I mean of course it wouldn’t be exactly like this, but it would be related. Modern American poetry, or maybe American poetry between 1930 and 1950, when it was great and inventive…I was thinking that with all the work I put into my classes now, I can use it later for a dissertation” (204-205).
To prove that he is moving forward in his career and toward his Ph.D., Jonas takes out books from the library and sits up late at night, playing at taking notes and gathering material. One night in particular he comes across William Carlos Williams’s “Pastoral,” a poem that he says he “tried to commit to memory but always forgot after the first three lines”: “When I was younger/It was plain to me/I must make somethin’g of myself.” Williams’s short and potent poem, which describes the speaker looking at impoverished homes in Paterson—an ironic invocation of the pastoral landscape, now replaced by urban deprivation—ends with “no one will believe this of vast import to the nation.” In other words, the poem shows the speaker confronting the failure of his attempt to make something of himself. The enterprise that he did follow with his life is precisely the piece of evidence he offers of its insignificance: “no one” will think this task meaningful in the larger scale. That Jonas is unable to memorize the poem seems odd because it is short and striking: that he forgets the undoing of this ambition is utterly in keeping with his character. Jonas feels certain that all attempts at doing anything will ultimately come undone. For this reason, he does not consider the long-term consequences of this behavior, largely because he believes no matter what happens, it will not be good.

The lines cause Jonas to assert that, in lies he tells Angela, he was engaging in the self-creating that Williams craved: “I was making something of myself while I was still young, and even if that something was little more than an ever-growing lie, it was still something to which I could claim sole credit and responsibility. I was, however wrong it may have been, making a go of things” (206). When he begins to hatch this plan, he connects his behavior to the city’s constant self-renewal: “If ever there was a perfect place and time to reinvent oneself, this was likely it. On some days it seemed as if half the tenements surrounding us were being taken down and replaced with something new that, at least on the surface, promised to be significantly
better” (184). By lying, he is renewing himself. Yet some of his lies seem intent upon unmaking a self or upon hiding one. The lies he tells in the classroom certainly are not the reinventions happening here. He realizes, too, that lying to Angela, who relies upon him, is taking advantage of her weaknesses and is unsustainable: “If she’s ever had an addict in her life, this is what he must have sounded like. Always this promise of renewal” (189). His speculation about Angela’s difficult upbringing aligns him with figures who must have relentlessly disappointed her. While he lies to make something of himself, he realizes that he sounds like an addict to her.

Robert Solomon’s essay “Self, Deception, and Self-Deception in Philosophy” can help us take apart Jonas’s strange conflations here. For Jonas, the lying he did on the refugee applications is no different from the lying he did in front of his students, and he considers a lie a proper foundation for “making a go of things.” To lie in these ways is to self-renew in the way a city self-renews. Solomon explains that “the need to fool ourselves coupled with the strong temptation to deceive others about ourselves is always with us. The various social conventions that dictate the rules about lying and deception are the same conventions that dictate the acceptable nature of one’s self. What gets praised as good character and what gets condemned as deception are part of the same system of valuations.” Angela’s approval of Jonas’s ambitions signifies “praise” of “good character,” though we as readers might recoil from the dishonesty of his gesture. Solomon points out that at times “we fool ourselves in order to fool others,” while at different points “we fool others in order to fool ourselves” (26): Jonas seems guilty of both. Harry Frankfurt calls the liar who does not self-deceive in the process of lying “a

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Frankfurt describes the bullshitter as someone who “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.” This definition usefully distinguishes between the lies Jonas tells Angela, where he seems lies in order to establish a self she can love and that therefore becomes lovable for him, and the lies he tells everyone else. Here Jonas’s lying involves a fooling-himself that seems understandable, given the absence of a sense of self that his parents’ coldness produced. Angela realizes this: “You think you can lie….But you really can’t. You’re terrible at it,” but she also recognizes that he lies because she doesn’t want anyone “to ever be angry” or “say something that will make” him upset (253). Her diagnosis, though, refers to only one kind of Jonas’s lies—the lies he tells her. At other points, Jonas is just spewing bullshit.

Jonas’s most damaging lie comes when he meets Andrew, Angela’s boss with whom she has had an affair. Andrew’s demeanor toward Jonas induces him to become extremely defensive, and he behaves like a person cornered: “He acted immediately as if he knew me, a privilege that affluent white men always seemed to grant themselves when it came to me” (226). After Andrew, whose position as a board member at Jonas’s school helped him get Jonas the job, asks about Jonas’s teaching, Jonas launches into an even more aggressive and damaging version of the lie he told to Angela: “I’m being promoted. I’m going to be teaching some of the more senior-level English classes, hopefully a course on literary modernism in American poetry” (227). He adds that he has applied to Columbia and Yale, also.

Jonas has two interesting reactions to this incident. First, he offers his own analysis: “I would ask myself several months later if I didn’t know exactly what I was doing when I said all of that to Andrew….The best answer that I’ve been able to come up with…is that it doesn’t

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228 Frankfurt 47.
matter whether or not I had examined the consequences beforehand—I said what I did out of necessity. I had met my challenge head-on” (227). Jonas knows that Andrew will find out his statement is false: as a board member, he would be apprised of changes to the faculty (something he notes during their conversation). Clearly, too, he has told a different set of lies in front of Angela, who is present during this discussion. Jonas’s analysis of his behavior excuses this bullshitting—a lying without an attempt at self-deception—as a requirement based on the rhetorical situation. The affluent white man’s privilege-toting and his too-friendly series of questions would require Jonas to state the truth of his situation, confirming whatever picture of Jonas Andrew brought to the conversation. Here Jonas’s evasion seems like telling his students he is Irish. He is trying to evade one version of himself being identified as true.

Just after he offers this reading, Jonas faces Angela. When she asks why she never knew any of the things he told Andrew, Jonas makes the moment about Angela’s lack of courage: “it was my chance to dare her to tell me I was lying…..I stood there and stared at Angela and waited to see if she had the courage to say that I had lied, or at the least stretched the truth as she knew it….Only after I was confident that she wouldn’t, and that we were both culpable…was I more convinced than ever that we were going to be okay” (228). Frankfurt explains that discovering that we have been lied to “exposes to us something about ourselves….it reveals that our own nature…is unreliable, having led us to count on someone we should not have trusted” (40). For this reason Frankfurt understands lying to be “a holistic” phenomenon, something that involves both liar and believer of the lie. When Angela does not acknowledge that Jonas has been lying to her, Jonas seize upon this as evidence that she wants to continue with this willful collective deception. She too buys into the versions of Jonas and their relationship that Jonas has been inventing. Armed with this knowledge—*in spite* of the fact that the lie seems increasingly
unsustainable—Jonas finds himself believing that the relationship has a bright future. He does not know how to have confidence in the relationship without understanding their mutual cowardice, their shared investment in an obviously fictive narrative.

Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” long ago dispelled the illusion that distinguishing between the truth and lies depends upon one’s willingness to understand socially constructed truths as truths and those statements that depart from social sanctioning belonging to different categories. He asserts that “things do not proceed logically when language comes into being,” for then “every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent.” For this non-logical system of non-equivalence to persist, human societies require an “obligation to be truthful which society imposes in order to exist…[and] the obligation to lie in accordance with firmly established convention, to lie en masse and in a style that is binding for all.” Jonas is correct to say that self-creating is hardly different from lying, because any version of self-creation will mean bringing something out of nothing. We are forced to distinguish between this kind of lie, which is “binding for all,” and when Jonas departs unethically from “firmly established convention.”

At times, his lies seem far more understandable than others. We have lies as help in the case of the refugees, for instance. His rewriting of the story of his parents’ fateful trip hopes to produce a version of these two people, one dead and one estranged, that he can reconcile with. The lies to Angela take a different form: here we have a deception whose consequences cannot be imagined positively in the long run. This lie fails to seem ethical precisely because it is not

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230 Nietzsche 145.

231 Nietzsche 146.
sustainable. Jonas’s reading of his confrontation with Andrew forgets “consequences” and thus produces a lie not in keeping with the forward-thinking that the novel ends by promoting.

Before turning to this conclusion, I want to once again consider the narrative of his father’s departure from Ethiopia that Jonas delivers to his students. Because the two primary characters in this narrative, his father and his Sudanese friend Abrahim, find themselves in absolutely dire circumstances, they cannot afford the passivity and alienation so common to Mengestu’s characters in both of his books. Yosef leaves Ethiopia after a stretch in prison. His involvement in the Marxist left made him a criminal, and he does not believe that his release from prison signifies freedom from trouble. He escapes to Sudan, where he hopes to make enough money to leave Africa for Europe or America. The Sudanese Abrahim befriends Yosef and encourages him with stories of European and American prosperity and comfort. Even while the made-up episode of Sudanese civil war rages on around them, Ibrahim seems an altruistic godsend. We find out that Ibrahim has paid for Yosef’s passage on a trade ship, where Yosef will have to hide inside a cargo box—Ibrahim has him stretching constantly so that his body will fit the box’s tiny shape—and then ask for asylum when he arrives in Europe. In exchange, he wants Yosef to tell European authorities that Yosef left his wife behind: though Yosef is already married to Miriam, Ibrahim gives Yosef a picture of Ibrahim’s own daughter to claim as his bride. When the embassy sends for her, she will escape the war-torn land.

Ibrahim’s stories of European benevolence turn out to be ill-founded. The Italian prison where Yosef winds up features guards who humiliate him and inmate violence. Abrahim had said “they will take you to a jail that looks like Heaven…Tell them you were fighting the Communists and they will love you” (236). Obviously, this is not Yosef’s experience. Jonas, however, forgives Abrahim his fancies: “what else was there to believe in. When it came to
Europe or America, men supposedly hardened by time and experience like Abraham were susceptible to almost childish fantasies. They assigned to these faraway lands all the ideals of benevolence and good governance lacking in their own, because who among us doesn’t want to believe that such places exist” (238). Later, Yosef’s experience of the United States is hardly heavenly. He feels mocked at work and uncomfortable in his home. He and his wife feel massive mutual resentment, and his violent temperament makes both of them miserable. He has little faith in U.S. democracy or in other forms of government: “American politicians were all liars; the former Soviet Union was full of fucking liars, and all of Western Europe was bullshit. The deaths of great leaders “proved what he had known all along about corruption, power, and the hidden forces who really governed things. He was fond of saying that he was certain to see some sort of coup take place in America during his lifetime” (212).

Within Jonas’s made-up narrative, Yosef appears as a desperate man, one whose desire to stay alive and find safety animates him enough to do nearly impossible things—to curl up inside a box, to work sixteen hour days while saving for the trip, to exile oneself from wife and family—and Abraham as a figure with a similar sort of desperation. They make a bet on possibility. Though Yosef finds Abraham’s optimism unrealistic and downright foolish later, at the time, it animates possibility: it makes escape from a war-torn place desirable and imaginable. While Jonas’s anger at the administrator shows that he wants to resist evaluating a narrative based on its consequences for his audience, we ought not necessarily dismiss it for the same reasons. We should not forget that Jonas’s class is an English class, where made-up narratives are studied and interpreted, where their force is measured, discussed, and evaluated. We also should not forget that Mengestu published the narrative as a coherent piece in a major

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232 This immigrant bitterness with U.S.-style politics also appears in The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears, where Sepha finds earnest letters his uncle has written to a series of U.S. presidents that grow increasingly despondent over myths of U.S. participation.
Something about this story lingers. It is a fiction whose positive effects are not erased by the revelation of its fictiveness. As we hear from the administrator, the authenticity of the story is not the guarantor of its value.

As simple as this may sound, the story’s value is that it is a good story. It reminds us that humans behave in interesting and often brave ways during difficult situations. When Yosef tears up the picture Abraham gave him of his daughter along with the rest of the documents essential to Abraham’s plan, we perhaps understand why Yosef feels that “a man could easily be crushed under an obligation like that” (282). We see the beginnings of his eventual disillusionment with life when he mentally upbraids Ibrahim: “There were no rewards in life for such stupidity, and he promised himself to never fall victim to that kind of blind, wishful thinking” (290). We see how extreme circumstances brought out the good in one person and came close to extinguishing it in another.

My purpose in surveying this component of How to Read the Air is to show that certain fictions have a more nurturing and positive impact than others, even when those ends might reiterate traditional findings. As a result, Jonas’s invocation of a different cliché at the end of the book might be interpreted as something other than a disappointing return to cliché affirmation. Much like The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears, Mengestu delivers a conclusion whose transparency is proved on the previous page. Jonas’s mother temporarily tries to run from his abusive father after he is knocked out in a car accident. She is returned to him, closing down the only chance she has to escape. Her frustration at her inability to enact an escape is underscored by her sense that “not even a footprint” of her walk toward freedom “could be found” (304). These lines reassert much of what I’ve shown has been a consistent focus throughout both of

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233 In How to Read the Air, Jonas’s narrative spreads over 130 pages, interspersed among the other two plot lines, his re-imaging of his parents’ trip and the story of his relationship with Angela. In The New Yorker, these pieces are gathered into 13 pages.
Mengestu’s novels: a sense of human impermanence, whether one talks about a neighborhood, a relationship, or a self. The world does not record our existence or our important moments within it. The universe, as Don Draper put it, is indifferent.  

The last sequence of the book has Jonas comforting a hurt Angela by insisting upon the opposite. Angela feels concern that losing the person who cared about her most will mean she will start to disappear. This fear is met with Jonas’s upbeat rejoinder: “We do persist, whether we care to or not, with all our flaws and glory. If Angela, my mother, or even my father were here,” he would remind them of their persisting—“the one thing that has to be true” (305, my emphasis). Jonas’s “has” fits in with the other necessary fictions I’ve discussed above. We do not persist: the last page shows us that. But Jonas’s logic suggests that whether or not it is actually true matters less than whether certain imperatives make its truth feel necessary. The fictions Jonas tells that emerge from a desire to feel empathy or to demonstrate common human struggles allow more positive things to happen.

Overdevelopment and Determination

The three texts that I have read in this chapter confront a structure/agency dilemma. Fukú, gentrification, and other inheritances doom characters to a limited scope of possible behaviors. The passivity of the main characters is in many respects produced by this understanding of structural inviolability. Moving to the United States, which has at least historically enabled an agency grab, now means moving into the “very center of the overdeveloped world.” The closure of an outside means that the inside is structured and its subjects are determined. This problem has haunted characters weaned on fantasies of autonomy throughout this book.

The “necessary” part of these “necessary fictions” intend to rescue some version of self-determination from its erasure. Doing so resurrects the possibility of meaningful progress or change: it means that the kinds of selves we fashion matter. Oscar’s embrace of courage, Sepha’s of self-ownership and Jonas’s avowal of persistence are not cliché instances of redemptive salvation but ironic, reluctant embraces of fictions. The embrace desires the return of meaning. As Pascal says to his interlocutor, the truth of the proposition matters less than what the proposition does.

I do not want to suggest that this embrace of phantom concepts is without holes. The primary crux of McClure’s defense of postmodernist fiction—indeed, much of the justification for critical theory in the first place—is that the deconstruction of Enlightenment concepts like rationality and autonomy will build as-yet unseen local communities unified on their own private terms. As for embracing what are clearly fictions, let me quote Hannah Arendt: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

We should realize that accepting the permanence of given structures—posing Trujillo as a cosmic force, believing colonialism is a curse—naturalizes them. After all, Trujillo’s overthrow was carried out by humans. His ideal subjects were those who believed he could not be overthrown. On this note, Arendt seems absolutely right. Fukú and the tragic view believe this world unchangeable. They thus become ideal subjects for totalitarian rule, whose claims to power will not be combated by those who retreat from this world. For this reason, these necessary fictions are not without their danger.

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Perhaps we should not take Clinton on his word about globalization’s lack of an “off” switch. To let economic imperatives be free of ethical or moral evaluation, as Mengestu’s two novels do with gentrification, means giving in to the dominant logic of our time, of the economization of logic diagnosed by Foucault and Jameson. Still, the scope of the current economic paradigm and the world it has wrought feels like a Galactus rather than a Trujillo. Trujillo could be gunned down.

Here I turn at last to my final epigraph. Weil correctly diagnoses that the parameters we call “existence” do not stretch to include gravity, time, or other forces that operate upon us. We are never free of determination by that which is outside our purview or reach. Structurally, we are limited by that which we cannot vote on. Kafka’s ape recognizes that only partial freedoms are available to him: what he wants is a better path to follow, something other than a cage. The impulse is largely recognizable in contemporary fiction.

I wrote above about Díaz’s playing with postmodernism as a heuristic. In each of Mengestu’s novels, he includes references to perhaps the most famous postmodern declaration—Lyotard’s assertion that grand narratives had collapsed. Sepha’s antidote for his listlessness, he decides, is “(n)arrative. Perhaps that’s the word I’m looking for. Where is the grand narrative of my life?” (147). Jonas, walking through immigrant New York neighborhoods, uses the term with a different valence: “Whatever real histories any of the people I encountered had were forfeited and had long been before I came along, subsumed under a vastly grander narrative that had them grateful just to be here; it was only a matter of whether they knew or not” (204). The first time around, Sepha wishes for a grand narrative, some unifying teleology that would direct him; in the second, Jonas sees grander narratives homogenizing the immigrants into a framework that isn’t theirs. Though of course the uses differ significantly, both invocations must be self-
conscious, ironic, and tragic. Like the other embraces I have discussed in this chapter, they grasp at a hope they cannot fully believe in, but since they cannot believe in nothing, they wager.
Necessary Fictions: The U.S. Novel in the End of Ideology

Conclusion: Fiction and Humans

In a 1993 interview, Larry McCaffrey drew the following oft-quoted response from David Foster Wallace. McCaffrey pressed Wallace on the latter’s claims that fiction needed to do more than simply reflect the difficulties of contemporary life. Wallace’s answer made clear that literature has to have an ameliorative function:

I don’t think I’m talking about conventionally political or social-action-type solutions. That’s not what fiction’s about. Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are real things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still are human beings. Or can be.236

For Wallace, fiction that simply shows us how badly off we are does not fulfill its obligations. Doing that, as Wallace points out in the interview, is the easy part. In addition, showing humans how bad they are and how bad the world is “panders shamelessly to the audience's sadism for a while, but by the end it's clear that the sadism's real object is the reader herself.”237 If you fail to show that the obstacles to being “a real human being” can be overcome, you treat your reader sadistically.

We should notice that Wallace makes slippery conflations here. The “fucking” human being in the third paragraph becomes the “real human being” in the fourth, and then the modifiers disappear in the last invocation. We might read the move from “still are human

236 McCaffrey. 131.
237 McCaffrey 130.
beings” to “or can be” as part of this distinction: a significant difference exists between being and potentially being. One says the obstacles (“there are real things”) have failed, while the other says they have not. Perhaps Wallace’s last move indicates the difference between a human being and a “real” human being, one that has the species-form to one that has, in Marx’s old phrase, species-being. As I wrote in my conceptual introduction, distinguishing between these two is terribly important for Wallace: the human body that does not desire to become human and struggle to become human is not fully or “really” human.

So where does the “fucking” come from? Wallace’s use of the expletive seems designed to indicate that McCaffrey is overlooking something painfully important. It anticipates that McCaffrey should damn well know what a fucking human being is. Suggesting that something like “solutions” should be the province of fiction rather than human beings produces a frustration that merits the intensity of this response, as do the italics. Wallace has this phrase stressed in two ways.

Wallace’s “fucking human being” calls upon the common-sense definition of the term. This human being is the Enlightenment human being, the one we default to in everyday interaction. Fiction is about what it is to be that, even though some things make being that way hard, right now. Here we must turn to Wallace’s other sneaky assumption in this paragraph. “Most of us” agree that the contemporary U.S. produces obstacles to becoming a real human being. This same “us” must have the same common-sense understanding of “human being” for Wallace’s use of “fucking” to feel appropriate.

Clearly, Wallace’s sense of what fiction should do comes from a particular understanding of him and other readers of serious fiction. He presumes that they share a sense that post-industrial, globalized, neoliberal, consumerist society threatens to dehumanize us, producing
passive, isolated individuals who crave escape instead of social engagement. Wallace’s sense that we know what a fucking human being is, that we know it’s under assault, and that we know we should struggle toward becoming one anyway emerges from this set of presumptions.

The authors that I have analyzed in this study share many commonalities with Wallace. Their works do not confront U.S. life on a macropolitical level, nor are they philosophically interested in questioning what the human is or why we might want to be human (or not). Instead, they confront conflicts that are dispiriting only if you believe that being an Enlightenment-style human is the right way to be. The institutional structures that Louis Althusser called “ideological state apparatuses”—schools, hospitals, churches, and the like—still operate to make belief in this human a difficult thing to avoid, though an education in the humanities will often trouble these assumptions.

One might say that worrying about being a real human being is perhaps the signature gesture of being a “fucking human being.” The authors prove themselves human by fearing that we’re not human enough. They provide their audience with the same rewards, redeeming their sense that presuming that proceeding along the status quo is not sufficiently human.

For Wallace, too many of the activities that occupy the contemporary American work against the struggle to become more human, pacifying us into giving it up. Powers demonstrates that separating “authentic” from constructed or imposed forms of desire is impossible, and he shows that corporatism has both enabled the human to persist while revealing it as a fiction. Robinson believes the atomizing imperatives of the neoliberal era prevent us from recognizing our fundamental responsibilities to one another. Díaz and Mengestu posit that cultural, economic, and political inheritances delimit the possibilities for agency.
As I have shown, each author wagers on some way of achieving human meaningfulness in spite of these obstacles. They fulfill the definition that Wallace offers above by doing so. My argument throughout this study has insisted that they know the versions of human they wager upon are fictive and foundationless. In many respects, the wager has always been imperative to definitions of the human, because these definitions were always constructions, guesses, hypotheses. In making wagers designed to resurrect humanness and rescue meaning, these authors do what definers of the human have always done.

I do not make these claims in order to denigrate these efforts. This definition of fiction’s imperative is not unique to Wallace. Frank Kermode’s The Sense of an Ending argues that fiction has always existed to turn *chronos* into *kairos*, to present meaningful time instead of the simply chronological. “To make sense of their span,” Kermode writes of humans, “they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.”

Kermode’s book implies that fiction serves the human purpose of offering the possibility of ordering an existence that, in our darkest (or perhaps clearest) moments, we realize is random: “To see everything as out of mere succession is to behave like a man drugged or insane. Literature and history, as we know them, are not like that; they must submit, be repressed.” If we imagine everything we see as having the same degree of orderliness and meaning as we do inside a novel, then we wind up paranoid and terrified. Literature and history must submit to *kairos*. Kermode argues that literature helps by modeling this organization for us.

In producing this organization, fictions need to avoid being naïve or dishonest: Kermode calls for “a fiction which is not fraudulent.” While even the most intentionally disorganized fiction, as Kermode shows of Burroughs’s cut-up method, concatenates into a meaningful order

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238 Kermode 7.
239 Kermode 57.
240 Kermode 147.
(even in a rejection of meaning), Kermode believes that we can distinguish between fictions of good and bad faith.

My necessary fictions have been adequately up-front about their investment in fictive wagering to fit into the former category, for, as we have seen, each work spends significant time exploring and establishing foundationlessness. Their wagers avoid utopianism or promises of political or ethical solutions, as we have seen with Wallace, because these would be fraudulent fictions, not necessary ones.

I insist about the necessity of these necessary fictions because of the context in which these authors write. As I discuss in the conceptual introduction, the liberal-left continuum in U.S. life has been stymied by the frustrating co-opting of their argumentative premises. The trouble with liberalism appears to be its inability to present a version of individualism that also allows for collective action and commitment to the social. The individual, on which liberalism hung its hat, is now the absolute center of American economics and politics. After valorizing the individual, we have struggled to return to the collective. Tony Judt nicely articulates this frustration:

[When first teaching] I spent most of my time explaining to would-be radical students just why [commitment to Marxism or Socialism] was not a good thing. Thirty years on, my young audience is simply mystified: Why would someone sell his soul to any idea, much less a repressive one? By the turn of the twenty-first century, few of my North American students had ever met a Marxist. A self-abnegating commitment to a secular faith was beyond their imaginative reach. When I started out, my challenge was to
explain why people became disillusioned with Marxism; today, the insuperable hurdle one faces is explaining the illusion itself.  

In “the age of fracture,” as Daniel Rodgers has called it, Judt’s students have traded one illusion for another. The radical faith in Marxism and Socialism that animated Judt’s students decades ago now presents itself as a radical faith in individualism. This latter faith, though, would not understand itself as radical. Notice that Judt switches from “challenge” to “insuperable hurdle.” This shift indicates how much more deeply rooted and sensible individualism feels in Western societies than “self-abnegating commitment to a secular faith.”

This ideological faith in individualism, which is of course also a belief in neoliberal capitalism, generates profound anxieties about what should happen were the individual to give herself over to the collective. One can sense these anxieties in the anti-government sentiment rippling through the United States. We still fear totalitarianism more than more unfettered individualism. Daniel O’Hara has argued that fear of changing the course we are on in any way, whether it might be ceasing the war on terror, letting corporations that are too big fail, or other significant changes is the key ideological straightjacket of our time. In neoliberalism, “anxiety must saturate the field and horizon of existence to such an extent that no possibility of change can even begin to be imagined without invoking anxiety.”

Here we see why arguing against individualism feels like such an “insuperable hurdle.” We feel both that the structures that govern us are inviolable and that changing them might produce an even worse outcome. Globalization is inevitable and driving us toward our doom, but it is also the only choice we are comfortable with.

242 Unless, one would like to correct Judt, we call that faith “nationalism.”
To shake free of the limitations this framework puts us into—a necessary gesture, not only to resurrect meaning on an individual level but to even *begin* to move toward a collective—my authors make their wagers. Macropolitically, they acknowledge, we do not know what to do or to say, and that may not be the venue of fiction anyway. What the novels I have discussed allow us to do is think what more local changes we should consider. We then might allow ourselves to escape our ideological limitations, once we believe we can.
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