Reconstructing Metafiction: Ethics, Politics, and Resistance in the American Century

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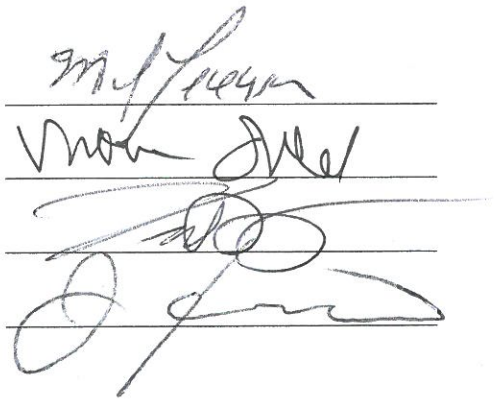
A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Virginia
April 2018



Abstract

"Reconstructing Metafiction: Ethics, Politics, and Resistance in the American Century" recontextualizes and retheorizes the relationship between self-referentiality and the capacity of fiction to contribute to ethical and political thought. Challenging the putative understanding that metafiction is merely symptomatic of either 1) abstract experimentalism or 2) deconstructive postmodernism, it traces an American tradition in which metafiction has served as a method for delineating and contesting limitations on discourse, political imagination, ethical engagement, and sexual and gender identity imposed under later-stage capitalism (from the Second Industrial Revolution through neoliberalism). The dissertation thus offers a genealogy of American metafiction spanning from 1919 to 2010—including works by Sherwood Anderson, Leslie Marmon Silko, David Foster Wallace, Sheila Heti, and Salvador Plascencia—demonstrating how a fiction that reflects on the conditions of fiction writing is also, at its most radical, a fiction primed to reflect on local, national, and global conditions for speech, thought, identity, and relationality. Two chapters illustrate metafictionally-driven challenges to economic constraints on queer subjectivity and anti-capitalist epistemologies. The final chapter and coda explore metafictional inquiries into the visibility of dominated others under U.S. imperialism and the role of postcolonial literature in building populist coalitions against neoliberal capitalism.

Acknowledgments

I owe so much of this project to the steadiness and grace offered by my director, Michael Levenson. His careful and generous attention made every word that follows possible and indeed better. Victoria Olwell provided me with criticism that was rigorous and precise, and I thank her for challenging me as an intellectual and guiding me in my professional development. Victor Luftig's criticism was equally essential; thank you for believing in me as a scholar and educator and for reminding me of that when I needed it most. Jack Hamilton was kind to serve as an extra-departmental reader, and I am fortunate to have received his advice on public intellectualism. I am grateful, too, to Jennifer Wicke for insisting that there was still more to be said about metafiction and for helping me to find my first words on the subject.

This dissertation would not have been possible without spending the summer of 2016 at the School of Criticism and Theory in Ithaca, New York. It was Warren Breckman's seminar and advising that pushed me to realize how metafiction could speak to political constriction and economic subjectivities. I thank SCT for a generous tuition scholarship, as well as the UVA English department for covering the remaining costs. I also had the privilege that summer of collaborating with Andrew Dean and Nicole Grimaldi, both of whom offered meaningful friendship and feedback essential to this dissertation.

I am deeply appreciative of Vassar College, which not only provided me freedom as an undergraduate to develop and sustain an interest in literary theory and English pedagogy but also granted me three fellowships for graduate study. Matthew Schultz, who supervised me at the Vassar College Writing Center years ago, gave key comments on this dissertation's first chapter, for which he deserves much appreciation. Paul Kane, it gives me such joy to call you my mentor. Thank you for teaching me humility, authenticity of thought, and seriousness of pursuit (and for reminding me to keep in view what truly matters).

Austin Hetrick, thank you for being my academic confidant and compatriot. Our friendship has been nothing but a privilege—and even better for having happened in graduate school. Becky McCann, thank you for your empathy and insight and for never letting me forget the importance of getting outside. Zachary Stone, Katelyn Durkin, Sarah Smith, Maya Hislop, Kelly Fleming, and Oliver Cross all made my time in Charlottesville more delightful and fulfilling through many years of conversations and meals. I thank David Gatewood for batting around the politics of the New Sincerity with me many times over. And my most heartfelt appreciation goes to Joseph Schiavo, Kara Voght, and Adam P. Newman for remaining steadfast friends and incisive readers.

The discussions held in my fall 2015 ENLT seminar, "Metafiction and the New Sincerity," became central to the second chapter of this project. The students of this course deserve recognition for their committed thinking and eagerness to wrestle with difficult texts and concepts.

I thank the Pruzanky and Manzi Center for Advanced Studies in Medicine and Literature for providing space to write and meditate for much of 2016.

Naveen Hattis was a superb working partner in the 2016-17 year, and we owe a great debt (figuratively, I think) to the baristas at Verve Coffee Roasters in Santa Cruz.

And finally, this project is dedicated to my parents, sister, grandmother Bobbie, and the memory of my grandfather Eugene Feldman. Not only have your love and support guided me through the most trying moments of this process, but you also taught me that learning is something to be celebrated and that curiosity is always to be followed.

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Introduction: Metafiction Beyond Narcissism

All that self-reflexivity seemed narcissistic to her and, well, too obvious.
–Dana Spiotta, *Innocents and Others* (2016)

In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (revised 1997), David Foster Wallace disavowed his earlier understanding of metafiction as a literature uniquely suited to conveying human commonality. By breaking the fourth wall, Wallace had once thought, metafiction could confront its reader with a question realism could only pose indirectly, a question Wallace phrased thusly in 1999's "Octet": "This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?"[1] In "E Unibus Pluram," however, Wallace exhibited a newfound pessimism toward metafiction's relational potential, which he made clear in a recapitulation of post-1945 American literary history:

> The emergence of something called Metafiction in the American '60s was hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form, literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious mediations on aboutness. Radical it may have been, but thinking that postmodern Metafiction evolved unconscious of prior changes in readerly taste is about as innocent as thinking that all those college students on television protesting the Vietnam war were protesting only because they hated the Vietnam war […] For metafiction, in its ascendant and most important phases, was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it.[2]

Wallace's hypothesis (that fictional self-consciousness can rarely be decoupled from writerly self-interest) is one that has lived many an afterlife, the most prominent of which may be in the

recent discourse on the moral and political involvement of Gen Xers and millennials. More precisely, Wallace's description of capital em "Metafiction"—a mode so attentive to its own components and possibilities, its bravado and dazzle, that it neglects the world at large—has seemingly evolved into the master language for highbrow critique of youth culture. While Wallace's main target in "E Unibus Pluram" was a commercially-obsessive subset of metafiction he called "image fiction," it would not be controversial to cast Wallace as both indebted to and advancing the now-familiar tradition of criticizing young and youngish Americans for their ironic style, apathetic temperament, moral evasiveness, and so on—a tradition that ranges at least from Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979) to Christy Wampole's "How to Live Without Irony" (2012, revisited 2016).

Indeed, self-consciousness registers among the most harshly denounced concepts in late-20th and early-21st century literary and cultural criticism. Take, for example, the Australian novelist Gerald Murnane, who argued in 2014 that while metafiction was indeed "briefly fashionable" in the 1970s and 1980s, one cannot read postmodern metafiction in the present day without sensing a kind of hostility: that the metafiction's author is one "for whom writer and reader are opposed to one another as the players on either side of a chessboard are opposed."[3] For Wallace and his inheritors, a fiction organized by game-like reader/writer opposition risks willful ignorance: every moment a writer spends looking inward—that is, reflecting on the concepts, procedures, or contexts of the narrative at hand or narrative and representation as such—is a moment the writer refuses to spend on the others, institutions, and environments that so desperately need our attention. Arguments such as this tend to rely on an optimistic understanding of the social potency of realism. Since the 19th century, the materialist argument goes, realism had engaged mimesis—what Georg Lukács described as the "dialectical process in

which reality is transformed into appearance and is manifested as a phenomenon"—to represent what is and therefore what must change.[4] Self-consciousness, contrastingly, signifies a tacit acceptance of the status quo. What use could a fiction about fiction offer social movements? The working class? The dispossessed? When a fiction exhibits self-consciousness, the anti-metafictionists claim, it turns its nose at the social capacity, and perhaps moral responsibility, of literature. Wallace was no activist but he was adamant that the experimental literature of his time had diverged from the real stuff of existence, the emotional and behavioral states that, when summoned in fiction, might bring readers to recognize what they have in common: pain, skeptical inclinations, and existential anxiety.

Among the more recent and widely read criticisms indebted to Wallace is the aforementioned 2012 takedown of hipster irony and apathy "How to Live Without Irony," written by Christy Wampole, a professor of French and Italian literature at Princeton University, and published in *The New York Times*' *Opinionator* blog. According to Wampole, an ironic disposition—defined by an inward orientation and eagerness to parody rather than celebrate—"allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic or otherwise."[5] While I find it easier now, in the Trumpian present, than when I first began this project to sympathize with Wampole's fears of political apathy, Wampole still strikes me as too quick to overlook the reasonableness of an apathetic disposition, of dodging social or moral responsibility. This is to suggest that if Wallace saw in metafiction the culmination of a culture of watching—the endpoint of an artistic sphere reshaped by televisual advertising—then Wampole's hipster is perhaps the embodiment of a 21st-century digital culture oversaturated with the image of atrocity. We might consider, for instance, the prescient words of a fictionalized Jack Ruby in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988)—"The truth of the world is exhausting"—in light of what Douglass

Rushkoff's calls "present shock," an affect experienced by social media users who necessarily come in contact with humanitarian and environmental horrors as computerized image, text, and activism.[6] There is of course an upshot to this digital "onslaught of everything that supposedly is" (one not far off from Lukács' take on the power of realism): in recent years, social media has become a de facto database for abuses of power and human rights violations that would otherwise go unrecorded and ignored (e.g. cell phone recordings and live-streams of African Americans killed by US police and photo-evidence of chemical warfare in Syria).[7] What this means, however, is that logging on can be a lot to take in; I don't think it unfair to argue that what Jodi Dean terms "communicative capitalism"—in which "communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance"—could well be enough to bring one to an apathetic, or even ironic, disposition.[8] So in Wampole's millennial we find metafiction embodied, the human rendered a creature of avoidance, looking inward to avoiding looking out.

I hardly wish to mark Wallace as my critical adversary; far from it, his early metafictions inspired this very project. At the same time, however, any argument that 20th- and 21st-century metafiction means *more* than abstract reflection on fiction writing, narrative, or representation—which I will argue in the following chapters—makes an implicit rejection of Wallace and his successors' claims regarding literary and cultural self-consciousness. It is with this tension in mind, between indebtedness and opposition, that I introduce this dissertation, "Reconstructing Metafiction: Politics, Ethics, and Resistance in the American Century." In the subsequent pages, I explore through exemplary cases the complicated relationship between self-conscious fiction and the viability of ethical and political thought and action over the last century of American literary history. I argue that in an understudied constellation of American metafictions, varying

forms of self-consciousness, rather than signaling only self-celebration, detached experimentalism, or moral evasiveness, facilitate the articulation and engagement of diminished or diminishing possibilities of identity, thought, expression, action, and relationality. At the heart of this effort is the "distribution of the sensible," a term coined by Jacques Rancière to describe the multitude of concepts available to a public at a given moment in history.[9] My ambition is to demonstrate how fictions that draw explicit attention to the conditions of their own production gain, by virtue of such self-consciousness, a productive sensitivity to the limitations of identity, speech, and action determined by capitalism—in the context of this project, from the Second Industrial Revolution onward—and its corresponding institutions. The metafictions I interpret promise an especially powerful response to the anti-discursive and epistemologically-restrictive principles of the late phase of capitalism known as "neoliberalism." Surveying works by Sheila Heti, David Foster Wallace, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Salvador Plascencia—as well as Sherwood Anderson, who serves as a formal, aesthetic, and critical forebear to these postmodern and contemporary writers—I contend that metafiction has been employed in the 20th and 21st centuries to spotlight limitations on thought, speech, and action, challenge those restrictions, and imagine other, more egalitarian frameworks for art, ethics, collective living, and politics.

Thus, in order to establish the groundwork for a metafiction conducive to these valences, I must first undertake three tasks: 1) answer the inevitable question, "what is metafiction?," 2) illustrate the relevance of the distribution of the sensible—and imaginative capacity more broadly—to recent ethical and political thought, and 3) clarify the restrictions imposed by neoliberalism on discourse, subjectivity, and epistemology.

What is Metafiction?

The existing scholarship offers variable answers to this question. As the title of her seminal work, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), suggests, Patricia Waugh underscores a concept I have invoked several times already, self-consciousness: the ways in which a fiction demonstrates an implicit or explicit understanding that it is, in fact, fiction. Waugh's account operates primarily on a linguistic register, which is to say that a work cannot exhibit awareness that it is fictional artifice without first exhibiting awareness that it is language. Waugh's argument is therefore shadowed by the pedantic suggestion that all fiction is to some degree metafictional, for all fiction is, to some degree, aware of and draws attention to the fact that it is made up of words, letters, punctuation, and so on. In the context of 20th-century metafiction (and in the context of pre-postmodern forbearers, including *Don Quixote* [1615] and *Tristram Shandy* [1759]), however, Waugh emphasizes a novel that more specifically "displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its conditions of artifice, and thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction."[10] A view such as this treads close to the hazardous grounds of intentionality, but Waugh moves forward nonetheless, claiming (rightly) that in the 20th century we can observe a significant rise in:

> an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form, and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive, or deceptively naïve style of writing.[11]

According to this rubric, the writer of metafiction often assumes the role of jokester or neurotic, adopting a self-conscious style (as Wallace and Wampole would argue, one potentially lacking values or commitments) to either burn the reader for their expectations of what a novel should resemble or hold the reader hostage to the writer's playful or aggressive manipulations (recall Murnane's Nabokovian theorization of metafiction as a chess match between writer and reader).

For Linda Hutcheon, who takes parody and mimicry as concepts fundamental to the postmodern deconstruction of historiography, such is the very definition of the "postmodern paradox," which is to say that the composition of self-conscious, parodic writing is an act "both to enshrine the past and to question it."[12] The danger, however, of Waugh and Hutcheon's combined arguments—that metafictions, by calling attention to the ways in which they are fictions, trouble the relationship between narrative, reality, and history—is that when taken as gospel, they may reduce metafiction to little more than symptom of a shallowly defined "postmodernism" or "postmodern condition" in which previously reliable epistemic, metaphysical, formal, and aesthetic concepts are revealed to be instable or foundationless. So while essential to any attempt at understanding metafiction, Waugh and Hutcheon's arguments risk wresting particular metafictions from their historical and political contexts and subordinating them to an all-encompassing historical/cultural dominant.

In terms of disciplinary history, it is difficult to speak of a fiction self-conscious of its own status as art, artifice, or language without also noting the proximity such fiction assumes in the mid-20th century to the academic study of literature. In a 1970 article entitled "Metafiction," Robert Scholes identifies in self-conscious literature a tendency to "assimilat[e] all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself."[13] Scholes in this way cleared a path for the more recent scholarship that approaches metafiction by way of the relationship between narrative and its institutional reception and production. At the forefront of this exploration is Mark McGurl, who echoes Scholes in his depiction of the metafictional attitude toward academia: "who needs criticism when literature adopts a critical relation to itself?"[14] McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) has caused a groundswell in the historicization of metafiction (which is not at all to suggest that McGurl gives

up close reading in the monograph), and while the scope of *The Program Era* ranges well beyond the formal and aesthetic—weaving together university expansion and patronage, Cold War prerogatives, and literary biography—it may be McGurl's arguments on the correspondence between metafiction and critical study that have proven most influential. His contention that metafictions secure "literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research" has prompted an eruption of scholarship on self-conscious fiction's intersections with theory and criticism, as well as metafiction's varying attempts to circumvent the procedures and expectations of such forces.[15] Nicholas Dames has argued in this vein that much 21st-century literature can be attributed to a "theory generation": a cadre of university-educated writers who embed in their works the longstanding dilemmas in literary and critical theory which they studied (beginning roughly at the onset of poststructuralism) and the conflicts of professional academic life they observed as students (and not infrequently as faculty).[16] Judith Ryan's *The Novel After Theory* (2012) embarks on a more precise examination of the relationship between fiction and theory also beginning at poststructuralism, and Ryan contends that the epistemological groundwork of post-1945 fiction cannot be grasped without first investigating how it is that novels demonstrate that (and what) they know about theory.[17] To speak in generalities, then, the discourse on metafiction has moved in such a way that the modality is no longer understood only as fiction self-conscious of its fictionality or participatory in a broader postmodernism but rather as fiction self-conscious of its embeddedness in the greater landscape of production and reception, a landscape that encompasses factors ranging from institutional patronage and interpretation to book production and the literary marketplace.

Still, the historicization of 20th- and 21st-century metafiction following McGurl has been relatively quiet when it comes to ethical and political implications (apart from a recent

theorization of 21st-century "post-postmodern" metafiction, the distinctiveness of which I will challenge in the first chapter of this project).[18] Given that scholarly practice and the production of literature have never, at any moment in their histories, been entirely apolitical, McGurl's thesis that we can understand the development of fiction in the postwar period through a predominant set of creative writing maxims (specifically, "show, don't tell," "write what you know," and "find your voice") may draw attention away from the ideological positions behind the institutions in which those maxims circulate. I depart, then, from the existing scholarship by rethinking how self-conscious—or, to shift now to my preferred term, "self-referential"—fictions have, in the last century of American literary history, deployed self-reference as method for delineating and troubling the outer boundaries of sanctioned identity and political and ethical thought.[19]

Like Waugh, I understand metafiction in a relatively broad sense: fiction that makes explicit attempts to underscore the processes and procedures of fiction writing or otherwise call attention to its own status as artifice, including but not limited to techniques of self-interpretation, the subgenre of the *Künstlerroman*, material experimentation (which highlights a text's status as physical object), depictions of fiction writing and its contexts, and the use of nested narratives (in which the creation of imaginative worlds functions as narrative content). Unlike Waugh, however, I hesitate to ascribe to metafiction any particular purpose or project; though certain metafictions have indeed troubled the distinctiveness of fiction and reality (typically by interrogating representation as such or resonances between fiction writing and historiography), I would hardly argue that a self-referential text must seek that end in order to attain metafictional standing. Instead, my approach to metafiction follows Philippe Lejeune's approach to autobiography, which hinges on the notion of "contractual effect."[20] My position is

that metafiction, like autobiography, cannot be reduced to any specific formal, aesthetic, or stylistic feature but instead involves a more contingent set of factors that culminate in an implicit or explicit pact between text and reader that text at hand is in fact "metafictional." Thus, for our purposes, a metafiction is a work that commits itself, evidently and beyond mere narrative dissemination, to reflection on its own production or the production of literature more broadly. And in total, the texts described and interpreted in this dissertation engage such a pact to contest the limits of political, ethical, and epistemic capacity in the contexts of 20th- and 21st-century capitalism and empire.

Occupy, Imaginability, and the Distribution of the Sensible

The notion of imaginative capacity—that is, the epistemic grounds for or restrictions on conceiving alternatives to the present order of capital, labor, and life possibilities—has, following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, been thrown into sharp relief. Refer, for example, to Joseph Stiglitz's 2012 excursus on the lopsided distribution of wealth in the United States, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, a work built from the premise that "[a]nother world is possible."[21] On the one hand, Stiglitz's emphasis on possibility comes with demoralizing implications: are the socioeconomic conditions of the 21st-century really so naturalized that we need this reminder? But on the other, if it is the case that radical politics requires an epistemic shot in the arm (which the neoliberal present, as I will argue in the next section, certainly indicates), then Stiglitz also insinuates the necessity of experimental art. Stiglitz asks: what *makes* another world possible? How might we think beyond what is framed as given? How might the public realize that the existing organization of resources, labor, institutions, bodies, and space is but one of many possible organizations? It is questions such as these that have led Fredric Jameson to the genre utopian science fiction—and, likewise, that lead

me to metafiction. For Jameson, who holds utopian sci-fi among the most politically potent literatures, fictions that think alternate worlds into being contest the fixity of the world we inhabit; a work of utopian sci-fi is vital insofar as it can spark "meditation[s] on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right."[22] To draw from the vocabulary of Peter Fleming, we might call utopian sci-fi—and, as I will argue, metafiction—acts of "capitalist *unrealism*."[23]

Thus, in Jameson's understanding, securing the plausibility of another world involves an intensely detailed representation, one not necessarily of *that* world, but an assertion of "radical difference from what currently is."[24] Jameson no doubt riffs on the Marxist aesthetics of Herbert Marcuse, and especially the last works of Marcuse's career. In *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1978), Marcuse complicates the notion that the radical potential of art lies in its autonomy from mainstream sociality, capitalist modes of production, and the like. Augmenting the Marxist perspective on realism and arguing that the demystifying powers of modernist and surrealist art stem from a counterintuitive avowal that "world really is as it appears in the work of art," Marcuse rethinks autonomy as an always relational concept.[25] "The qualitative difference of art," Marcuse writes, "does not constitute itself in the selection of a particular field where art could preserve its autonomy. Nor would it do to seek out a cultural area not yet occupied by the established society."[26] Rather, Marcuse claims:

> In its very elements (word, color, tone) art depends on the transmitted cultural material; art shares it with the existing society. And no matter how much art overturns the ordinary meanings of words and images, the transfiguration is still that of a given material […] This limitation of aesthetic autonomy is the condition under which art can become a social factor.[27]

At its most potent, then, art produces what Marcuse calls "counter-consciousness," which acts as a "negation of the realist-conformist mind" and, through a unification of form and content, makes thinkable suppressed historical pasts and potential futures composed of structural and material conditions dissimilar to those of an artwork's present.[28]

While traversing a similar terrain, Stiglitz's method connotes something of the opposite. In *The Price of Inequality*, another world manifests in bold policy proposals, through modifications to the political system we already know and inhabit. Stiglitz asks his readers to envision a United States guided by an unlikely set of ideological givens—the environmental ethic of Bhutan, for example—but one in which democracy has amended itself through the longstanding institutions and processes we already know and likely abide by. Whether Stiglitz ought instead to think past American democracy is certainly debatable, and his adherence to established practice is not entirely unexpected; Stiglitz's argument is about as radical as they come from former White House economists. Still, noting that inequality has only intensified after capitalism was brought to the brink a decade ago, it seems that policy proposals may not be the most expedient means of igniting the political imagination, that the time may be ripe for artistically inclined interventions of the Jamesonian, speculative sort.

Indeed, it would be difficult for Stiglitz to find a comfortable position in a movement such as Occupy Wall Street, which estranged traditional progressives by lacking any "one demand."[29] What some called inconsistency or incoherence originated in large part from Occupy's commitment to direct democracy, which was illustrated in painstakingly long general assemblies and difficult-to-reach decision-making by consensus. This was exactly the point; Occupy, as Nathan Schneider reflects on his experience in the movement, "made its demand a process, its goal a means of getting there."[30] Staging procedures of governance, Occupy played

the role of imaginative catalyst; rather than seeking any one particular amendment to US governance or the financial sector, Occupy animated an ambition simply "to carry out a process—one in which people could speak and money could not."[31] Guided the assumption that making demands of the state can only reinforce the state's authority, activists' intentions were necessarily abstract, oriented toward the *possible* ends that *could* follow from their democratic processes.[32] A performative and indeed self-referential phenomenon—one that called attention to group actions, procedural amendment, and ideological intention (meaning, we might say)—Occupy thus highlighted the vast distance between the world of direct democracy and the world we inhabit. Similar to Stiglitz, Occupy sought for the public to recover its "capacity to think beyond the constraints that ['the system' and its] corruption imposed on them"; but dissimilarly, Occupy was willing to interpret the present formation of American democracy—weighed down by the interests of financial institutions—as one such limitation.[33] Its purpose was to exhibit elements of another world *in action* and to reflect on them explicitly, to show the prospect of another world rather than advocate for specific political or legislative tenets, to secure means, not ends.

This is to say that Occupy and subsequent movements rightly or wrongly taken to task for vagueness—like Black Lives Matter (which did release a six point list of demands on August 1, 2016)—looked to shift the distribution of the sensible.[34] While factions within Occupy certainly had their own distinct visions of alternate worlds, most seemed to operate under the shared premise that the first step toward mobilizing an alternate was to challenge the intractability of the present organization of speech, labor, capital, and governance. For Rancière, such is the very definition of politics: not a transformative bill instituted by a governing body but a large scale shift in the landscape of imaginative availability, one that reveals, consequently, the contingency

of present strictures. Egalitarianism, Rancière argues, is not a framework in which individuals' life possibilities are more or less identical but one in which individuals are equally capable of realizing that another world is indeed possible; it is a framework in which people can "place in common their desire to live a different life" regardless of what exactly that life might look like.[35] The distribution of the sensible denotes, then, the guidelines of imaginability active in or organized by a historical moment regarding the fixity of that moment's social, economic, and epistemic paradigms—or, put otherwise, the cultural, economic, and institutional factors that bring us closer to or farther from the egalitarian ideal. In Rancière's words:

> I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.[36]

Thus, as a "polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in a space of possibilities," the distribution of the sensible indicates the purported reality or set of givens that politics (extra-systemic action, that is) must breach in order to make substantial change imaginable.[37] Politics, Rancière writes, begins when "uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives […] call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages."[38] Schneider, in few words, describes such action as a "rupture of the ordinary."[39]

In Occupy—which shares with metafiction an affinity for emphasizing the behind-the-curtain of intention and operational logic (regarding, in this case, collective deliberation rather than fiction writing)—it was art first and foremost that would energize collective challenges to the distribution of the sensible. Participants appeared well equipped with Marcuse's dictum that "that art as art expresses a truth, an experience, a necessity which, although not in the domain of radical praxis, are nevertheless essential components of revolution"; as Schneider writes, the movement "was art before it was anything properly organized," and activists knew that "[a]rtists specialize in making us imagine and realize a different kind of world."[40] Such principles help us to make sense of Occupy's public staging, how the movement seemed, by governing visibly and loudly at the epicenter of global capitalism, a democratically inclined instance of performance art. So if a shift in imaginative capacity was its endgame (or the endgame of the beginning of something much larger), then Occupy illustrates two of art's most essential utilities in relation to the distribution of the sensible: 1) to facilitate the possibility of perspectives, criticisms, coalitions, and processes absent from the present order, and 2) to sustain ethical, political, or ideological concepts actively discouraged or rendered otherwise epistemically unavailable. It is these principles that ground my ambition to reexamine the subject positions and ethical, political, and collective concepts engaged vis-a-vis metafiction in 20th- and 21st-century American literature and, more broadly, to describe how self-referentiality has been (and continues to be) mobilized against the imaginative restrictions deployed by neoliberalism.

An Epistemic and Ethical Understanding of Neoliberalism

In the last two decades, "neoliberalism" has become a suspiciously broad umbrella term for the array of cultural, economic, institutional, and moral ills related to free market ideology and its dogmatic status in US and UK policy. Daniel Stedman Jones is right to describe the

academic and intellectual usage of "neoliberalism" as too often "divorced from its complicated and varied origins […] too often used as a catch-all shorthand for the horrors associated with globalization and recurring financial crises."[41] Much scholarship in the last six years of critical theory has offered a corrective to this problem, especially insofar as critical theory has grounded the expansion of free market ideology and corresponding transformations of public resources and collective values as a historical phenomenon with specific (although heavily contested) definitions. Indeed, while there is little disagreement that neoliberalism came to prominence in the 1980s as the guiding principle of US and UK economic policy for the Reagan and Thatcher governments, a wide variety of factors account for what was ultimately an improbable ascent.

The great advantage to Stedman Jones' major work on neoliberalism, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (2012), is the precise attention it pays to the transatlantic network of universities and think tanks that facilitated the transition of neoliberalism from intellectual to policy circles. Driven by a pessimistic attitude toward human capacity to govern morally and effectively at large scale, claims Stedman Jones, neoliberal thinkers imagined free market capitalism as a guarantor of liberalism in the classical sense; they bet that the efficiency of markets and the rational self-interest of the autonomous, profit-seeking individual, *homo oeconomicus*, would be forces powerful enough to secure personal liberty.[42] In *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Chicago School economist Milton Friedman's maxims illustrate superbly the neoliberal outlook on governmental ability, none more striking, perhaps, than: "The power to do good is also the power to do harm; those who control the power today may not tomorrow; and, more important, what one man regards as good another may regard as harm."[43] So better, in Friedman's opinion, to scale back a central government's powers and diffuse them widely across locales. Still, convincing as Friedman's and his contemporaries'

arguments (Friedrich Hayek's, most notably) may have been to their inheritors at the University of Chicago and the London School of Economics, it was not until the coincidence of Cold War anxieties over communist totalitarianism and the 1970's stagflation crisis that neoliberalism emerged as a viable alternative to the Keynesianism that had driven US and UK economic policy since the New Deal.

Stedman Jones' analysis of this transition follows David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), in which Harvey interprets the government fidelity to free markets characteristic of neoliberalism, despite its anti-totalitarian origins, as something far more insidious than an economic support system for classical liberalism: "a *political* project to reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites."[44] Such an understanding, Harvey argues, allows us to see contradictions in "free" and "efficient" markets (and the governments that guarantee them) we might otherwise miss. For Harvey, neoliberalism is only neoliberal in the mode of Friedman and Hayek so long as it continues to entrench elites' economic and political power; once free markets threaten to upend the established order, governments are quick to forgo characteristically "neoliberal" principles. In other words, neoliberalism can more accurately be understood as an *ex post facto* means for justifying the preexisting class structure that is easily jettisoned in times of both opportunity and crisis. As Harvey posits, the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq (framed as a government led market reconfiguration) and stimulus package of 2008 (a market intervention) illustrate two striking examples of how willing, when the time is ripe to entrench the existing order, politicians we typically understand as economically hands-off neoliberals are to manipulate global and domestic markets. A view such as this has the additional upshot of explaining the unlikely bedfellows of free market ideology and American evangelical conservatism. This coupling,

according to Harvey, serves as yet another indication of the heterogeneous historical factors that had to coalesce in the late-20th century before neoliberalism could become viable electorally and as government policy.[45]

The socioeconomic hazards of neoliberal policy could hardly be more apparent in the now ubiquitous attacks on social welfare programs and efforts to regulate personal autonomy vis-à-vis moral arguments (e.g. neoliberalism's accommodation of religious conservatives' ambitions to restrict sexual and reproductive freedoms). The economic, however, only tells a portion of the story of neoliberalism's impact on domestic and international spheres. What the economic cannot describe is the method with which neoliberalism reinforces its own supremacy, how, as Fleming writes, neoliberalism necessarily reduces "*all* social life to the logic of profit-seeking behavior."[46]

To assert the logic of the free market as governing and ontological logic, neoliberalism instigates a shift in what Michel Foucault calls the "discursive formation"; it refashions the lens of economic evaluation as an exhaustive ethical, political, and social lens.[47] This is to suggest that neoliberalism implies two possibilities: 1) that a free market, and thus classically liberal, framework incents prosperous, cohesive, and moral activity (at minimum, that the free market disables the large scale immoralities that can be undertaken only by centralized governments), or, more dangerously, 2) that the unimpeded functioning of markets is itself the ultimate concern. Wendy Brown's recent monograph, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), which expands on Foucault's seminal, late-1970s Collège de France lectures, assesses these principles and their democratic and epistemic consequences masterfully. As Brown argues, neoliberalism's characteristic efforts to reposition elements of civic and personal life onto a market bedrock (i.e. the "financialization" of life) imbue "the market" with ethical principles

formerly belonging to public realms. Neoliberalism, Brown writes, at the same time "seeks to privatize every public enterprise"—from social security to public libraries—while "valoriz[ing] public-private partnerships that imbue the market with ethical potential and social responsibility and the public realm with market metrics."[48] This simultaneous veneration of the public (when, and only when, it is paired with the private) and insistence that public resources be intuited through economic valuation (e.g. "What do these resources cost? What benefit do I get in paying for a resource I do not use?") culminates in a grand act of conceptual displacement in which neoliberalism "absorbs into itself the broader purposes of and ethics previously positioned elsewhere."[49] Thus, when Margaret Thatcher remarked famously in 1987 that "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through the people, and people must look after themselves first," she signaled that the free-market-facilitated principle of individual autonomy was not one that could be countered by ethical or moral argument, that the free market is itself a moral and social paradigm deserving of absolute governmental and personal fidelity. As Friedman put it before her, "To the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above them."[50]

Thatcher's assertion also functioned as a political corrective to Richard Nixon's oft-cited concession that "we are all Keynesians now."[51] If instead we are all neoliberals now, then this description also implies, more strongly, that we are neoliberals *only*. Put otherwise, ideological exclusivity assures that the epistemic compression instituted by neoliberalism doubles as political compression. With the free market as bedrock, certain positions—anything that involves a broadening of the social safety net (to say nothing of the welfare state), reverence for public resources and institutions, notions of cooperative life—are banished from the realm of discursive

viability. Thus, neoliberalism assures its dominance through an epistemic repositioning that, by disseminating and revering profit-seeking logic, effectively restricts discourse on alternative configurations of governance, economics, and life. As Occupy did well to recognize, it is the very concept of a commons that neoliberalism will not tolerate, for the commons depends, as Elinor Ostrom writes, on a distinctly non-autonomous consideration of "what effects [individuals'] actions will have on each other and on [common-pool resources], and how to organize themselves to gain benefits and avoid harm."[52] That, however, is not the thinking of the rationally self-interested actor, of *homo oeconomicus*. From the neoliberal perspective, any social organization that involves the sacrifice of personal and economic autonomy—especially in which individuals must trust or rely on the actions and intentions of others—is simply a nonstarter.

It is not only, then, that neoliberalism models a political discourse akin to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's "culture industry"—in which choice is only possible between slight variants of the same product or political platform—but that it does so, in Brown's words, by modeling a subject who "approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; [who] cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way."[53] More simply, neoliberalism not only encourages a national-scale transformation of *homo politicus* into *homo oeconomicus* but makes that subject position mandatory. We can therefore regard neoliberalism—in what Stedman Jones describes as its second and third phases, having evolved beyond theoretical discourse and entrenched itself in think tanks, academic circles, and government policy—as an anti-discursive ideology, one which seeks to limit the of range ethical, political, and ontological concepts available to the public. Indeed, because democratic modes of deliberation threaten to challenge neoliberalism's status as the be-all-end-all of governing

rationalities and reveal neoliberalism as one of many ideological positions, they must be stymied at the epistemic level. So the most central of neoliberalism's contradictions, veiled by epistemic manipulation, is this: despite its emphasis on the virtues of economic competition and personal autonomy, neoliberalism is fundamentally noncompetitive; it will not allow for comparisons between itself and other economic frameworks and systems of evaluation.

Metafiction and Conceptual Possibility

In arguing that self-referentiality has armed a century of American fiction with a capacity to identify and trouble the limits of epistemic, discursive, and subjective paradigms, I follow Rancière's premise that transformations in an "aesthetic regime" carry the potential to reshape the conceptual landscape. Indeed, the wager that I place in this dissertation—supported, I hope, by the example of Occupy—is that shifts in forms of representation can effect tremendous repercussions on the availability of political, ethical, and collective thought (and thus the groundwork for action), what Rancière phrases as the "general order of occupations and ways of going and making."[54]

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Rancière describes how through a temporal relationship to its artistic predecessors, a given artwork may "devot[e] itself to the invention of new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been*."[55] We can observe in this light that metafiction forms a particular relation to the realist aesthetics of the 19th century, as well as to the impersonal (in the sense of T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919]), minimalist realism of the 20th century that spans from modernism to present day. The relationship I have in mind is this: if realism achieves political salience by representing the world as it supposedly is and therefore as it must be amended (Lukács' argument), then metafiction, by reflecting on the act of storytelling—and situating that act in

institutional, economic, political, and social contexts—reflects on and may challenge the limits of what can be thought and expressed.

I would argue, then, that even in the high postmodern phase of metafiction so often identified as abstracted from political and social life—in which metafictions seemingly abjure the world in order to reflect on the compositional process—close readings attentive to limitations on thought, speech, and action can reveal meditations more worldly and radical than one might expect. Take, for instance, Robert Coover's canonical metafiction, "The Magic Poker," from the collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969). Residing in the highly contained universe of an archipelago, the narrator begins his tale by crafting the story world before readers' eyes and allegorizing the magnitude of the literary author's creative power:

> I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees—pines and birch and dogwood firs—and cause the water to lap the pebbles of its abandoned shores. This, and more: I deposit shadows and dampness, spin webs, and scatter ruins. Yes: ruins. A mansion and guest cabins and boat houses and docks. Terraces, too, and bath houses and even an observation tower. All gutted and window-busted and autographed and shat upon. I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness. But anything can happen.[56]

There is no word more telling in this selection than "impose"; the narrator not only gives life to characters but throughout the story sets them on series of elaborate and pointless ruses. The narrator promises a degree of freedom to both characters and interpreters—"anything can happen"—but it is a freedom, given the narrator's world-creating powers, licensed explicitly by a superior force. Indeed, the narrator continually reiterates that the story-world and its elements are *his* creations and alters them frequently in a manner that seems to align authorship with

authoritarianism. The narrator's fixation on ownership and near-dictatorial rule thus introduce to an allegory of the creative process concepts also salient for the story's Cold War context: the manipulation of and surveillance over personal narratives, as well as the demands for subservience that characterize what Alan Nadel has termed the "containment culture" embedded in American postmodernism.[57]

Yet, at the same time "The Magic Poker" dramatizes the magnitude of the storytelling imagination, it also caricatures. The narrator's proclivity for sexual and excretory gags—indicated in the first paragraph with the eyebrow raising "gutted and window-busted and autographed and shat upon"—does not so much negate the metafiction's allegorical function as it does foreshadow the vulnerabilities that eventually manifest in relation to the fictional world's orchestrator. As "The Magic Poker" progresses, the story's self-referentially satirical aspects intertwine with characters' acts of resistance. Characters develop methods for evading the narrator's vision, and the narrator's world-building and world-altering powers diminish without warning. Once resistance is set in motion, the story, as the narrator describes, quickly "gets out of hand."[58] It is not long before the narrator admits:

> I am disappearing. You have no doubt noticed. Yes, and by some no doubt calculable formula of event and pagination. But before we drift apart to a distance beyond the reach of confessions (though I warm you: like Zeno's turtle, I am with you always), listen: it's just as I feared, my invented island is really taking its place in world geography.[59]

Thus, what is on the one hand a parable of interpretive ownership—like Donald Barthelme's high postmodern metafiction "The Balloon" (1981), a tale of the afterlives fictions live once possessed by audiences—doubles as a parable of the viability of protest within an authoritarian

state, even if authoritarianism will nonetheless be "with you always." The loss of control that unfolds over the course of the narrative functions as a testament to the enduring prospect of subversion in even the most rigid and absurd of circumstances, no small suggestion given the legacy of McCarthyism and ongoing FBI surveillance of fiction writers that contextualize Coover's late-1960s narrative. "The Magic Poker" demonstrates, then, how metafictions that treat directly the creation of worlds and characters are given, almost necessarily, to radical valences; a fiction that takes as its subject the generation and stewardship of story-worlds is also a story about power. It is no coincidence that so many of the seminal metafictions are also fictions of war and wartime, such as Jon Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968), which takes place on the World War II home front, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), which uses self-aware narration as a means for reflecting on the author's experience in the Vietnam War.

In the same vein, metafictions that depict experiences of creative labor—experiences situated in institutional, national, economic, and social environments—often invoke dilemmas of epistemic and expressive capacity that extend into ethical and political arenas. Put otherwise, works that depict creative processes tend also to reflect on the parameters for thought and expression active in the works' historical moments. A fiction that takes fiction writing, interpretation, or other creative action as its content is primed to spotlight, and potentially to subvert, the limitations of what art can possibly imagine, say, and put into motion. Because metafictions are fundamentally *about* expression (i.e. the expression of stories), they are vital tools for probing the epistemic and expressive confines of historical paradigms and thus the distribution of the sensible.

In metafictions of the post-1945 period, writers have often sustained such examinations

by reflecting on the creative conditions of the Program Era, which offers entry into a range of factors spanning from scholarly and public reception to institutional patronage. By the late-20th century, the campus novel had already become well-trodden territory. In *Pale Fire* (1962), Vladimir Nabokov sets the university as backdrop for his efforts to trouble the feasibility of psychoanalytic reading. Likewise, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) in many ways portrays a university where cultural studies has gone off the rails, not only in its department of "Hitler studies," but also in the "full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes."[60] More recently, we might speak of the "workshop novel," a subgenre reflective of the Program Era and the training and professionalization apparatuses that develop out of the MFA program's site-specific merger of fiction writing, the university, and the literary marketplace. Of the writers involved in this trend, David Foster Wallace, Sheila Heti, and Salvador Plascencia feature in this dissertation, although one could easily add to this list the company of Lauren Slater, Ben Lerner, Julie Schumacher, Theresa Rebeck, David Leavitt, and John McNally, to name only a few. Wallace and Plascencia both completed MFA programs, while Heti, who attended theatre school for playwriting, often defines her career trajectory in opposition to professional training (in one interview Heti registered her displeasure with MFA culture thusly: "Grad school has no allure for me […] has never had much meaning or allure. As well, I have known a lot of people in grad school and no one seems very happy about it").[61] In the texts I have included, the three authors portray writer-characters negotiating artistic environments driven by professional/academic training, competition for mentorship, and intense forecasting of public, critical, and market responses. This is to say, unsurprisingly, that for young writers enmeshed in a professionalized artistic context, the kinds of art and artistic techniques either licensed or discouraged by forces beyond the individual author become serious topics of interest. And as a result, notions of the

aesthetic regime and the distribution of the sensible are brought to the forefront of metafictions hypersensitive to the conditions of their own production, dissemination, and reception.

In the context of the Program Era, we can regard the workshop novel or institutionally-conscious metafiction as the entwinement of the *Künstlerroman* and the neoliberal university. Taking artistic maturation as its subject, the *Künstlerroman* frequently invokes the viability of expression under various ideological and social structures. James Joyce's masterwork of this subgenre, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), portrays through the young Stephen Daedalus the consequences of British colonialism and Irish nationalism and Catholicism on expressive capacity. At the novel's close, Daedalus' decision to self-exile represents a challenge to the range of expressions encouraged by and conceivable in an imperially administered Ireland and the desire for a dissimilar distribution of the sensible. The vagueness of Daedalus' concluding resolution, "I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning," shows just that: a yearning for a different distribution ("some mode of life or art"), one he has yet to experience, cannot define, but recognizes as essential to literary endeavor.[62] The young artist knows another world is possible but nothing of its constitutive elements.

For the fiction writer of the late-20th and early-21st centuries, the university, academic/institutional patronage, and the literary marketplace provide gateways into neoliberalism's economic and social dimensions. Needless to say, the MFA in creative writing has hardly been insulated from the reconfiguration of the university under neoliberal guidelines in the last four decades. Brown describes graduate education in the neoliberal university as a setting in which "students are professionalized through protocols and admonitions orienting them toward developing toeholds in [their respective] fields. This professionalization aims at making

young scholars not into teachers and thinkers but into human capitals who learn to attract investors by networking."[63] Such is the name of the game in what has been described as the "corporate university," a site where, writes Jeffrey T. Nealon, "any course of study that finds itself unable or unwilling to speak to the dictates of the contemporary 'market' will be downsized out of existence."[64] It should come as no surprise, then, that in a creative environment where concerns of craft are most viable when they are also concerns of how to make it as a professional (and when they do indeed produce writers who make it), dilemmas of professionalization often find their way into self-referential fiction. And as we will observe, narrative self-reference, when joined with the *Künstlerroman*, grants the anxiety-inflicted, MFA-educated writer a formidable method for probing a creative framework organized around educational, professional, and market demands.

In summation, then, self-referential fiction—by assessing the conditions of and concepts available for its own expression in a necessarily artistic, economic, and social sphere—offers a potentially transformative glimpse into the range of concepts viable in a given historical moment. It thus becomes possible—if we take seriously Alain Badiou's argument that "[t]here can be no economic battle against the economy"—that radical politics could look to art for insight into the parameters and vulnerabilities of neoliberal present.[65] As neoliberalism insists on the universal applicability of economic analysis and profit-seeking logic, metafiction emerges among the most potent forms of art for expanding the political and ethical imagination at a time of immanent compression. Self-referential literature offers a means not only for identifying the epistemic, subjective, and discursive principles that organize the 21st century but also, as I intend to demonstrate, making resistance conceivable.

A Summary of this Dissertation

The following chapters offer a constellation of texts that stage metafiction's capacity to trace and contest the ethical, epistemic, political, and subjective parameters of the 20th- and 21st-century United States and its sphere of institutional and imperial influence (it is by this logic that I include works by Sheila Heti and Salvador Plascencia, writers born in Canada and Mexico, respectively, but whose works are in-part defined by the largely American phenomenon of graduate-level creative writing). The arc of the dissertation leads from the general to the particular, from a metafiction that puts at stake the very principle of conceptual multiplicity to metafictions that work through concrete obstacles to the ethical engagement of marginalized others and coalition building in the contexts of postcolonialism and globalization. There are four major concepts put at stake by the metafictions I survey: *availability* (which kinds of thoughts can be conceived), *expressivity* (which ideas can be articulated), *criteria* (which lives count as lives), and *organization* (how bodies can gather and to what ends). In each chapter, I demonstrate how a given metafiction deploys self-referentiality to rework the meaning, usage, and viability of those concepts.

In the opening chapter, "Availability: Ethical Concepts and Identity in *Winesburg, Ohio*," my case study is Sherwood Anderson's 1919 short story cycle, which I argue lays the foundation for the constructive metafiction after 1945. In *Winesburg,* Anderson populates his Midwestern town with "grotesques"—like the physically repulsive Wing Biddlebaum and Wash Williams—rendered queer or effeminate by the Second Industrial Revolution. Anderson's critique of industry idealizes a normative masculinity he sees as fundamental to American individualism; the grotesques function as negative counterpoints in what Mark Whalan calls Anderson's "semiotics of fairiness."[66] In strange moments, however, Anderson ruptures his realist depiction of industry with metafictional speculation; he pauses to contemplate alternate versions of the

Winesburg tales. Relocated within a speculative arena, grotesques castigated for their queerness gain access, unexpectedly, to formerly prohibited standings (Biddlebaum, for instance, transforms from ghastly recluse to sagacious outsider). Drawing from Alain Badiou's work on the ethical consequences of contemplation, I argue that the metafictional destabilization of sexuality and gender is central to Anderson's contestation of industrial subjectivity and, further, animates metafiction's broader ability to trouble the limits of self-construction under capitalism.

My second chapter, "Articulation: Groundworks for Expression in 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' and *How Should a Person Be?*," reads two metafictions that challenge the naturalization of neoliberalism's epistemic tenets. In their 1989 and 2010 texts, respectively, David Foster Wallace and Sheila Heti describe parallel artistic settings warped by neoliberalism: university training and the creative economy. Both depict protagonists whose expressive capacities have been stunted by professional demands. For Wallace, there is Mark Nechtr, whose "oppressive self-consciousness" is intensified by the market-mindedness of the MFA in creative writing. For Heti, there is Sheila, whose obsession with celebrity produces an insurmountable writer's block. In tying creative inexpression to what Ivan Ascher calls "portfolio society"—a speculative sociality organized by future value—Wallace and Heti achieve a rare but vital perspective: they imagine neoliberalism as a contingent paradigm vulnerable to critique.[67] Likewise, when Mark and Sheila do recover their creative abilities, it is by way of metafiction, by constructing alternate creative frameworks within their texts. Mark regains his voice in a recursive story-structure, and Sheila in a genre she calls the "novel from life." I argue, then, that metafiction offers Wallace and Heti a tool not only for demystifying the permanency of neoliberal value systems but also for reclaiming the imaginability and expressiblity of alternatives.

The third chapter, "Engagement: Acknowledging the Other in *Ceremony*," investigates the challenge posed to U.S. imperialism by Leslie Marmon Silko in her 1977 novel as it manifests in the interplay between narrative and self-referential materiality. A WWII solider of Laguna Pueblo ancestry, Silko's protagonist Tayo finds himself incapable of killing a Japanese solider when he hallucinates the solider as his uncle. The ethical dilemma central to the novel is thus, to draw from Saidiyah Hartman, whether there can be an ethics that does not obliterate the identity of other, as settler colonialism had in dehumanizing the Pueblo and Native populations more broadly.[68] I argue that Silko forces a reckoning with this impasse through an underappreciated element of the text: its self-referential book design. In collages of visual elements—sketches, prose, and concrete poetry—that can be interpreted in multiple but mutually exclusive ways, Silko animates the problem of visibility through the act of reading. In this way, the book-object—and "self-reflexivity in book form," as Johanna Drucker would call it—becomes a powerful method for drawing attention to the implicit limitations of any one reader's sight.[69] What *Ceremony*'s reflexive materiality instigates, I claim, is a vital opportunity to identify what (or whom) we have been encouraged to see and when our training leaves us sightless.

The coda to this dissertation, "Organization: Postcolonial Fiction, Coalition Building and Radical Optimism in *The People of Paper*," examines the self-consciousness depiction of anti-hegemonic organization. In Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), a community of Chicano farmworkers gathers against the narrator of the novel. Plascencia's metafiction is also an allegory of postcolonial literature in late capitalism: waging war on the "commodification of sadness," characters rally not only against the tragic fates they have been assigned by their creator but also, at a symbolic level, against the commodification of postcolonial literatures in

imperial economies. Crucially, what motivates characters' opposition in this novel is their awareness that the story in which they exist is one still being written. So in seeking to reshape the groundwork of the novel—an aesthetic regime, in essence—characters model a radical optimism that, I argue, Plascencia sees as instrumental to rethinking postcolonial writing and the popular struggle against globalization.

* * *

The possibility of another world rests on the preliminary capacity to think past the givenness of the world we inhabit. This is a principle neoliberalism knows; as we have seen, a primary means for entrenching the existing order is to suppress the imaginability of concepts from which another world may be thought. Above all else, then, this dissertation demonstrates how self-referential fiction can introduce, revivify, or sustain concepts besides those active in historically specific organizations of government, economy, sociality, institutions, and self. To discern the transformative potential of literature, we must, as I aim to do in the following pages, describe how radically aware and capable of altering its environments literature has proven itself to be.

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[1] David Foster Wallace, "Octet," in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1999), 154.
[2] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 34.
[3] Gerald Murnane, *A Million Windows* (Jaffery: David R. Godine Publisher, 2016), 32, 33.
[4] Georg Lukács, "Marx and Engles on Aesthetics," in *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, ed., trans. Arthur Kahn (Lincoln: iUniverse Inc., 2005), 77.
[5] Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony," *Opinionator – The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/?mcubz=3.
[6] Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 445.
[7] Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 2.
[8] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 3-4.

[9] See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
[10] Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.
[11] Ibid., 2.
[12] Linda Hutcheon, "Intertextuality, Parody, and the Discourses of History," in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 126.
[13] Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *The Iowa Review* 1, no.4 (Fall 1970): 106.
[14] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 48.
[15] Ibid., 48.
[16] See Nicholas Dames, "The Theory Generation," *n+1*, 14 (Summer 2012), https://nplusonemag.com/issue-14/reviews/the-theory-generation/.
[17] See Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
[18] Monographs that approach metafiction in contexts apart from the Program Era and the postmodern-era English department often do better to describe the critical work self-referentiality can perform. One particularly good example is Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997).
[19] I prefer the term "self-referential" for the reason that "self-conscious" is often taken to be synonymous with narratorial self-consciousness (a narrator aware of the present act of narration). Self-referentiality certainly captures narratorial self-consciousness while doing better, I think, to group that feature with the material and thematic aspects of metafiction I will also examine in this project.
[20] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 30.
[21] Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012), 145, 266.
[22] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 232.
[23] Peter Fleming, *The Death of Homo Economicus: Work, Debt, and the Myth of Endless Accumulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 106.
[24] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xv.
[25] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Serover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), xii.
[26] Ibid., 40.
[27] Ibid., 41.
[28] Ibid., 9.
[29] Take, for instance, Nicholas Kristof, who, without mentioning the movement's possible implications on direct democracy or governing by consensus, wrote in a 2011 op-ed on Occupy for *The New York Times*: "Where the movement falters is in its demands: It doesn't really have any. The participants pursue causes that are sometimes quixotic—like the protestor who calls for removing Andrew Jackson from the $20 bill because of if his brutality to American Indians. So let me try to help." Nicholas Kristof, "The Bankers and the Revolutionaries," *The New York Times Sunday Review*, October 1, 2011,

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/opinion/sunday/kristof-the-bankers-and-the-revolutionaries.html?.
[30] Nathan Schneider, *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 185.
[31] Ibid., 56.
[32] Ibid., 58.
[33] Ibid., 86.
[34] See "Platform," *The Movement for Black Lives*, https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/.
[35] Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Polity Press, 2016), 117.
[36] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.
[37] Ibid., 42.
[38] Ibid., 40.
[39] Schneider, *Thank You, Anarchy*, 31.
[40] Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 2. Schneider, *Thank You, Anarchy*, 6.
[41] Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 2.
[42] This pessimism was well warranted by key neoliberal economists' experiences with fascism in the context of pre- and post-war Europe. Milton Friedman was born in 1912 to a Jewish-Ukrainian family that had immigrated to Brooklyn; Friedrich Hayek fought on the behalf of the Austro-Hungarian Army on the Italian front during WWI and regarded his scholarship as involved in an effort to avoid future wars.
[43] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.
[44] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19.
[45] Ibid., 50.
[46] Fleming, *The Death of Homo Economicus*, 3.
[47] Foucault identifies the discursive formation's four directions of analysis as "formation of objects, formation of subjective positions, formation of concepts, [and] formation of strategic choices." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 116.
[48] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 49.
[49] Ibid., 149.
[50] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 2.
[51] Quoted in Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 12.
[52] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 184.
[53] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 39.
[54] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22.
[55] Ibid., 25.
[56] Robert Coover, "The Magic Poker," in *Pricksongs & Descants Fictions* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 20.
[57] See Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
[58] Coover, "The Magic Poker," 30.

[59] Ibid., 40.
[60] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), 10.
[61] Jessica Loudis, "Should I Go to Grad School?: An Interview with Sheila Heti," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2014, //www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/should-i-go-to-grad-school-an-interview-with-sheila-heti.
[62] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 279.
[63] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 195.
[64] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 68.
[65] Peter Hallward, "Appendix: Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou," in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2012), 105.
[66] See Mark Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism in America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).
[67] See Ivan Ascher, *Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction* (New York: Zone Books, 2016).
[68] See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[69] See Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995).

Availability: Identity and Ethical Concepts in *Winesburg, Ohio*

There is a story.—I cannot tell it.—I have no words.
–Sherwood Anderson, *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921)

In January 1914, Henry Ford doubled the income of laborers at the Ford Motor Co. plant in Highland Park, Michigan, by instituting a $5 per day wage. While broadening the economic horizons of workers and their families, Ford paired this raise with a stipulation. To qualify, laborers would have to open their homes to inspection by the newly established Sociology Department, a subdivision that would employ nearly two hundred middle managers and physicians by December. According to the department's criteria, acceptable families would demonstrate temperance, orderliness, sexual normality, and well-spent leisure time. They would function something like assembly lines.[1]

In his first autobiographical work, *A Storyteller's Story* (1924), Sherwood Anderson ridiculed the impact of industrialism on American identity: "Surely individuality is ruinous to an age of standardization. It should at once and without mercy be crushed. Let us give all workers larger and larger salaries but let us crush out of them at once all flowering of individualities."[2] Anderson's corpus is replete with criticisms of the Second Industrial Revolution and its godhead, "the man Ford of Detroit," whom Anderson held responsible for the homogenization of a formerly individualistic American identity.[3] More specifically, Anderson saw in industry the deterioration of a heteronormative masculinity fundamental to the development of both individuality and agency. Industrialization, by Anderson's account, had rendered the American male "impotent."[4] As Mark Whalan has noted, Anderson sought to revive the masculinity of an idealized agrarian past through dalliances with a racist primitivism and, more visibly in his early fiction, tragic portrayals of men made "fairies" by industrial modernity. (In one story, for example, the Cowley father and son are literally made "queer" in the eyes of the town as they

transition unsuccessfully from agrarian to commercial labor.)[5] While recognizing the limitations of Anderson's social vision, I argue in this chapter that a critique of industrialism both more powerful and palatable may be found in Anderson's use of and innovation in metafictional narrative. Attention to the self-referential, speculative dynamics of his seminal short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), reveals a paradoxical destabilization of the very masculinist and homophobic frameworks on which Anderson's project seems to rest. And in establishing an unexpectedly flexible model of identity, I claim, Anderson marks his resistance to Fordist subjectivity as not only urgent but also deeply pertinent to our understanding of self-referential literature in the contexts of post-industrial society and late, neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout *Winesburg*, grammatical errors and temporal slippages facilitate self-referential speculation on the narrative's deficiencies and susceptibility to correction. Describing out of tense and time how the *Winesburg* tales fail to entice and might be improved on, Anderson's narrator stages the metafictional technique central to the text. We can attribute *Winesburg*'s self-referential faculties to Anderson's reverence for the oral storytelling tradition of the Midwest, which Anderson scholars of the 20th century associated with authenticity, however troubled that association might be. Anderson's sources, Horace Gregory wrote in 1949, "were the air he breathed, childhood memories of talk."[6] The title of *A Storyteller's Story* marks Anderson's priorities; stories are to be *told*, and Anderson, like his father, an uprooted Southerner, is a *teller*. Likewise, Anderson crafts in his *Winesburg* narrator "a major theorist regarding the way the Midwest is constructed and the way those constructions affect those who live there."[7] His stories are not *about* Winesburg but *of* Winesburg, voiced imperfectly although with ethnographic expertise. Orality often comes at the expense of narrative organization; it is not infrequent that Anderson's text appears to glitch out chronologically, jumping days, months,

or years as the narrator meditates on possible modifications to his tales. In his introduction to *Winesburg*, Malcolm Cowley identifies "time as a logical succession of events" as "Anderson's greatest difficulty in writing novels or even long stories." "He got his tenses confused," Cowley adds, and "carried his heroes ten years forward or back in a single paragraph. His instinct was to present everything together, as in a dream."[8] Whether erroneous or experimental, *Winesburg*'s peculiar temporality and self-referential digressions place Anderson in the good, anachronistic company of Miguel de Cervantes and Lawrence Sterne. He is, as Clarence Lindsay writes more recently, "a postmodernist completely at home" before postmodernism.[9]

To call Anderson a pre-postmodern in this way, as many Anderson scholars do, is to understand postmodernism—and its literary envoy, metafiction—as a formal phenomenon predominant in the late-20th century but with roots in exemplary texts scattered across the timeline of literary history. A view such as this, however, risks neglecting the material forces that distinguish the postmodern period, and Anderson's foresight, I suggest, bears on more than form alone. Anderson's depictions of how industrial subjectivity subsumes other subject positions—and culminates in a mode of "grotesqueness"—prepares a means for contesting not only industrialism but also the neoliberal subjectivity that emerges following the decline of American industry. In their rigidly singular approaches to self- and societal understanding, the grotesques of *Winesburg* foreshadow what David Harvey calls a "reorganization of international capitalism" that doubles more precariously as "a common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world."[10] Warped by industry, they are case studies in the transformation of the human into "human capital," a subject Wendy Brown describes as "tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive position and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues."[11] Though not yet the *homo oeconomicus* of the 21st

century, the grotesques have experienced a distinctly ontological decentering instigated by the elevation of economic priorities.

Reflecting self-consciously on his own tales—on the other lives characters might live in other versions—Anderson's narrator exceeds the mere representation of this transformation. By virtue of its self-referential proclivities, *Winesburg* generates a contemplative mode of narration resistant to singularizing models of identity and directed, surprisingly, toward the same normative models of gender and sexuality that Anderson so plainly idealizes. Analyzing *Winesburg* through Alain Badiou's work on the political and ethical consequences of contemplation, I will demonstrate how, for Anderson, metafiction animates a broader attempt to destabilize the ontological rubrics of industry by way of gender and sexuality. In doing so, I argue, Anderson aims to sustain concepts besides the economic for both communal- and self-understanding. And finally, given the continuing salience of his metafictional variations on normative identity, Anderson's atypically generative metafiction demands a retheorization of the uses of self-referentiality in the last century of literary history, as well as the conceptual boundaries that determine the modern, postmodern, and contemporary periods.

Truth and Grotesqueness in *Winesburg*

In his prologue to *Winesburg*, "The Book of the Grotesque," Anderson lays out the metaphysical scheme that governs the text. Before deciding on "Winesburg, Ohio" as the title for his short story cycle, Anderson had considered giving the title of the prologue to the text as a whole; accordingly, the prologue offers a cypher for the interconnected stories that follow.[12] In "The Book of the Grotesque," a carpenter visits the home of an aging writer. The writer had hired the carpenter to raise his bed so that he might gaze out his window onto the town as he rests. A book-in-progress, also titled "The Book of the Grotesque," lies on the writer's table,

indicating that the *Winesburg* stories that follow are, perhaps, of the old man's creation, and that we might interpret them based on the figures in his life.

The narrator describes these persons through a term central to *Winesburg*: "All the men and women the writer had ever known had become *grotesques*."[13] As Robert Dunne notes, it is in the latter half of the 19th century, and especially in the late-19th century of Anderson's adolescence, that the grotesque detaches as a concept from the fantastical or horrific—a physical manifestation of "devian[ce] from the social norm"—and becomes, as Anderson understood it, a "condition of modern life."[14] In his attempt to intertwine grotesqueness with industrial modernity, writes James Schevill, Anderson redefined grotesqueness as "essentially something we distrust, the hidden demonic fantasy that still torments and attracts us, the shadow we repress because we don't want to confront this central problem in our society."[15] A notion such as this often leads Anderson to favor the conceptual over the material; for Anderson, grotesqueness is a function of the motivations available to and adopted by individuals at a given moment in time. The narrator of the story describes:

> in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.
>
> The old man listed hundreds of truths in his book. I will not try to tell you all of them. There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful.

> And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.
>
> It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it, he become a grotesque and the truth he embraced become a falsehood.[16]

Grotesqueness, according to this mythos, aligns with a narrowing of conceptual possibility in relation to individual choice and masculine capability. Prior to industrialization, the act of forging a truth from a great variety of thoughts had offered "man" agency; it was in making the truths "himself" that man could assume individuality. Reflective of Anderson's masculinist vision, complications arise once the subject of the prologue shifts from the agential "man" to a collective and degendered "the people." While a comparably primitive, preindustrial man thrived in negotiating thoughts and building truths, the people seize on particular truths and eventually raise them above all others. Lacking the agency ascribed to man, the people are vulnerable to the seduction of truths already formed; with animalistic hunger they "snatch up" whichever truths come their way and avoid the difficult tasking of making a "composite" from thoughts. Although no truth had previously been false, when a truth is thrown into competition with others, applied "literally to the vicissitudes of everyday living," as Dunne writes, and assumed final by its bearer, it mutates into an individuality-quashing falsehood.[17] Man is left in equal parts emasculated and alienated—or, in a word, grotesque.

Anderson's backward gaze not only indicates his tendency to take the "preindustrial as a model for the regeneration of community" (a patriarchal community, at that) but also his place in the larger phenomenon of preindustrial idealization.[18] While *Winesburg* predates Anderson's

explicitly racialized explorations of primitivism in the 1920s, the text can be read in relation to a contemporaneous arts and crafts movement inspired by figures such as the designer, writer, and socialist William Morris. Although the American iteration of this movement was, ironically enough, accessible primarily to the bourgeoisie, who possessed leisure time to devote to hobbies, the late-19th and early-20th centuries saw more broadly a rising fascination with the preindustrial craftsman, whose work, as T.J. Jackson Lears describes, was understood as "necessary and demanding" and "rooted in a genuine community," providing "a model of hardness and wholeness."[19]

But while the arts and crafts movement assumed an antimodern posture by fixing its sights almost exclusively on the preindustrial, Anderson's idealization of the past depends on a persistent comparison with the tarnished present. As Susan Hegeman notes, Anderson joins a cast of American writers such as Jean Toomer, Waldo Frank, Hart Crane, and Nathaniel West in a modernism that experiments in form for the purpose of holding the "past and present, and center and periphery, in dialectical tension" while also "register[ing] the historical specificity of [its] moment."[20] In the context of European modernism, we can surely add to this list the likes of W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, H.D., and Ezra Pound, whose literary innovations arise from a complex relationship between old and new iterations of history, nation, religion, culture, and mythology. So while undoubtedly nostalgic, Anderson's drama is also, as Lindsay recognizes, "a drama occurring in time. Something true and beautiful becomes false and grotesque precisely at the moment an individual takes possession of a truth."[21] Despite the vague and conceptual orientation of the prologue, there is an unmistakable now—the present of 1880s small town Ohio, amid the Second Industrial Revolution—in which grotesqueness becomes epidemic. And it is only by understanding that moment in light of the

preindustrial that, for Anderson, both the (idealized) virtue of the past and the grotesqueness of the present become fully apparent.

Nevertheless, "The Book of the Grotesque" lacks a robust historical vision. What interests Anderson throughout much of *Winesburg* is how those already grotesque fail in communication, understanding, and, in effect, sympathy. The *Winesburg* tales, like those of Joyce's *Dubliners* (1916), describe cases of intrapersonal paralysis: characters come to the verge of articulating who they are, what they desire, and how they perceive one another, but because they have affixed themselves so tightly to dissimilar truths, they fall short of both expression and comprehension. The Andersonian character, writes David Anderson, has "encountered something that he feels is vital and real within himself that he wants desperately to reveal to others, but in each case he is rebuffed, and, turning in upon himself, he comes a bit more twisted and worn spiritually."[22] Consequently, the men and women of the town disqualify themselves from the possibilities of compassion and communication facilitated by sexuality and romantic love. As Thomas Yingling argues, the one "sameness of human existence" that remains in *Winesburg* is, ironically, that of sexual repression, the rendering of sexuality "a private experience complete separate from all other social questions."[23] *Winesburg* is a tragedy in the mode of Stanley Cavell: once spurned, characters stage the consequences of "the attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation."[24] Thus Dr. Reefy, who would rather write than voice his thoughts and who pockets the "paper pills" to mitigate the risk of misunderstanding; thus Kate Swift, the unmarried schoolteacher who, despite being "the most eagerly passionate soul" in Winesburg, is seen "a confirmed old maid" bereft of "all human feeling"; thus Enoch Robinson, the struggling artist who "wanted to talk too but he didn't know how," who "was too excited to talk coherently" due to the intensity of his passions.[25]

Still, a different form of recognition becomes possible by way of grotesqueness. Because the figures from the writer's life register as grotesques, they become candidates for literary representation and receive a special kind of attention from the writer and, potentially, his readership. The narrator clarifies:

> The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful, and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness. When she passed he made a noise like a small dog whimpering. Had you come into the room you might have supposed the old man had unpleasant dreams or perhaps indigestion.[26]

If the effects of grotesqueness on the writer mirror those he hopes to impart through (or at least capture in) his manuscript, then this much becomes clear in the Andersonian vision: while grotesqueness amounts to a fallen-state of individualist agency, it also offers appreciation. The Andersonian character, by virtue of his grotesqueness, becomes a magnet for aesthetic treatment and narratorial sympathy. The crux of *Winesburg*, writes Haiyoung Lee, is that "if a person can penetrate the surface, he can see the beauties which are latent in the truths of the grotesques."[27] Grotesqueness, argues Ralph Ciano, is "a sign of worth elevating [Anderson's] characters above the rabble […] As their dreams are beautiful, so most of the grotesques are beautiful."[28] Or, as Anderson himself puts it, "In the world of fancy, you must understand, no man is ugly. Man is ugly in fact only. Ah, there is the difficulty!"[29]

The Industrial Origins of Grotesqueness

In the prologue and initial stories of *Winesburg*, few concrete factors emerge that account for the epidemic of grotesqueness. Despite Anderson's unabashed disdain for industrialization, the material conditions that cause a character to adhere to a single truth go unacknowledged until

"Godliness," the longest and only story in *Winesburg* broken into distinct sections. A historical record of industrialization rooted in Anderson's idealization of the preindustrial manifests through the tale of the Bentley family farm and the eldest remaining Bentley, Jesse, who "had grown into maturity in America in the years after the Civil War" and "like all men of his time, had been touched by the deep influences that were at work in the country during those years when modern industrialism was being born."[30] In charting Jesse's biography, the narrator sustains several meditations on the changes wrought by industry in the Midwest:

> It will perhaps be somewhat difficult for the men and women of a later day to understand Jesse Bentley. In the last fifty years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people. A revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from overseas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farmhouses, and now in these later days the coming of automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America. Books, badly imagined and written though they may be in the hurry of our times, are in every household, magazines circulated by the millions of copies, newspapers are everywhere. In our day a farmer standing by the stove in the store in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men. The newspapers and the magazines have pumped him full. Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever.[31]

Anderson's use of the term "revolution" would achieve new salience in the 1960s when the phrase "Second Industrial Revolution" became ubiquitous in historical scholarship on 19th-century America. Like many Midwestern towns approaching the *fin de siècle*, Winesburg would have been transformed by this force but never fully industrialized; it would have served the urban center by supplying agricultural products and raw materials but lacked modernized infrastructure and up-to-date consumer products. As Lears explains, new "canals, telegraphs, and railroads had extended the web of the national market to remoter rural communities," yet it was infrequent that this network improved its farthest nodes.[32] Prior to the New Deal, Hegeman notes, "fewer than 5 percent of farms in the South and Great Plains were on the electrical grid."[33] The map of *Winesburg* that follows "The Book of the Grotesque," sketched by Harald Toksvig for the 1919 first edition, is telling in this regard:

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No evidence of electrical infrastructure appears, yet the rail line that bisects Main Street marks the presence of what Alan Trachtenberg calls "the most conspicuous machine of the age: the steam-driven locomotive, with its train of cars." The railroad makes industry in Winesburg as "a physical presence in daily life" in Winesburg, but it is hardly a presence that benefits the

townspeople in any material sense.[35] A farmer who has borne witness to both the pretext and consequences of industrialization, Jesse thus embodies Hegeman's contention that modernization, instead of "reflecting a seamless parade of jazz, cars, and steel, is, rather, marked by a perception of uneven development, and even friction."[36] Winesburg evokes in this way the broader economic paradigms associated with colonialism; like Joyce's Ireland, the town is a site held in arrested development through its mandatory standing as exporter.

While Anderson is nothing if not contemptuous of industrialism, the strange concept of "old brutal ignorance" that the narrator articulates in relation to Jesse frames the preindustrial as neither as any more moral nor just than the present. As "The Book of the Grotesque" describes it, the preindustrial is a glorified site of competition; individuality and agency arise in the preindustrial through the difficult task of negotiating a multiplicity of thoughts and forming truths from them. Elements of brutality and ignorance clarify that the ethical repercussions of those truths are of little importance. Rather, it is the way in which technological development hastens the compression of guiding principles and denies individuals the choice between truths that preoccupies Anderson. In his historical synopsis, the narrator singles out information technology: cheap books, magazines, and especially newspapers, which were produced in exponentially greater quantity following the advent of the rotary printing press in 1865. Depicting these sources as ruinous to independent thinking, *Winesburg* would later find resonance with the criticism of Walter Benjamin, who in "The Storyteller" (1936) expresses comparable sentiments: "Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation."[37] For Anderson and Benjamin alike, it is not simply that information

disseminates more rapidly and widely through industrialized printing but that these materials rob individuals of the chance to form their own conclusions.[38]

More so than information technology, however, it is the mechanization of manual labor that warps the spirit of the Bentley patriarch. Through Jesse, Anderson alludes to procedures of automation not unlike those of the assembly line, which Ford would implement fully in automobile construction in 1914, five years prior to *Winesburg*'s publication.[39] Jesse's use of agricultural machinery facilitates a further exploration of the metaphysical and ontological conditions for grotesqueness:

> [Jesse] began to buy machines that would permit him to do the work of farms while employing fewer men and he sometimes thought that if he were a younger man he would give up farming altogether and start a factory in Winesburg for the making of machinery. Jesse formed the habit of reading newspapers and magazines. He invented a machine for the making of fence out of wire. Faintly he realized that the atmosphere of old times and places that he had always cultivated in this own mind was strange and foreign to the thing that was growing in the minds of others. The beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world, when wars would be fought without patriotism, when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions, was telling its story to Jesse the man of God as it was to the men about him. The greedy thing in him wanted to make money faster than it could be made tilling the land.[40]

In *A Storyteller's Story*, Anderson describes the moment he first sensed the dominance of "but

one direction, one channel, into which all such young fellows as myself could pour their energies," namely "material and industrial progress."[41] While no young fellow, Jesse finds himself swept by the same current.

Although his farm remains under family control, the profit-driven mentality that machinery unleashes in Jesse emblematizes Trachtenberg's concept of the "incorporation of America," which describes how the advent of the corporate structure reconfigured the United States' economy and culture. Incorporation emerged on a minor scale in the 1850s through the railroad industry and the creation of national markets in which companies could raise capital by selling shares to the public. In the 1880s the laws governing the granting of charters were loosened, and by 1904 incorporation had altered vastly the structure of business ownership. At that time, Trachtenberg writes, "about three hundred industrial corporations had won control over more than two fifths of all manufacturing in the country, affecting the operations of about four fifths of the nation's industries."[42]

Most important for reading *Winesburg*, incorporation transformed labor and its shared ambitions. The corporation, according to Trachtenberg, "embodied a legally sanctioned fiction" in which:

> an association of people constituted a single entity which might hold property, sue and be sued, enter contracts, and continue in existence beyond the lifetime or membership of any of its participants. The association itself was understood as strictly contractual, not necessarily comprised of people acquainted with each other or joined by any common motive other than profit seeking.[43]

With financial gain deployed as both organizing principle and ontological motivation, incorporation engendered a substantial and also paradoxical shift in subjectivity. Incorporation

was, on the one hand, sympathetic to a 19th-century ideology of entrepreneurship in which enterprises represented by names like Carnegie and Rockefeller modeled the vast wealth an intelligent, motivated, and cunning enough individual could achieve. This "autonomous self" held the cultural status of a "Promethean figure, conquering fate through sheer force of will."[44] But the ideal of self-made entrepreneur was starkly dissimilar to the reality of industrial labor and eluded, as it does now, most who sought it. Lears describes how once workers were assigned to routine, singular tasks, they "could neither envision the larger purpose of their labor nor exert much control over their working lives."[45] The lived experience of 19th-century industry, as Marx recognized, was one of estrangement and compartmentalization—dedicated to the production of a part rather than a whole—that no doubt amplified the sense of alienation in the modernist period.

While Anderson is usually keen to distinguish the Midwestern townsperson from his urban counterpart, "Godliness" indicates a shared spiritual reconditioning established by the linked factors of industrialization and corporate sensibility. "The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of the cities," the *Winesburg* narrator hypothesizes, "and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all."[46] In *A Storyteller's Story*, Anderson dwells further on this commonality: "haven't we Americans built enough railroads and factories, haven't we made our cities large and dirty and noisy enough, haven't we been giving ourselves to surface facts long enough?"[47] As with Jesse's "greedy thing," these "surface facts" reference the emergence of capital as the central concept for American subjectivity—or, in "The Book of the Grotesque's" terms, the assertion of monetary accumulation as the ultimate truth.[48]

What Anderson, like the antimodernist strain of the arts and crafts movement, observed was that the promise of autonomy more often than not veiled methods of fragmentation designed

to maximize the productivity and profit of a corporation. Jesse Bentley's hunger for capital, let loose by the machine power of industrialization, illustrates Lears' historical contention that "the emerging ethic of an expanding commercial society was less a framework for values than a means of doing without them."[49] With his commitment to the truth of wealth intensified by industrial development, Jesse is "creaturely" in accordance with Eric Santer's theorization: "expos[ed] to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity."[50] Embracing industrial priorities, he has made himself unavailable to others; single-minded profiteering has left him unable to share meaning. In the two most striking illustrations, Jesse's attempts to introduce his grandson to his strange, self-designed religious activities result in unintentional destruction. In the first instance, he fails to inaugurate David into his practice; "terror seize[s] upon the soul of the boy," and he gashes his head after falling.[51] In the second, years later, it is David who wounds Jesse by hurling a stone.

That Anderson declined the linearity of the novel in favor of the short story cycle represents a strategic decision to craft a text that is itself reflective of industrial alienation. As J. Gerald Kennedy explains, the short story cycle promises two possibilities in depicting characters who occupy the same locality but, unlike their novel counterparts, do not make contact consistently with one another. First, it may constitute a community, despite the potential heterogeneity of its voices, articulating "the stories that express its collective identity."[52] But second, in a text like *Winesburg*, anchored in expressive and relational incapacity, the short story cycle can instead "evoke the sharpest sense of mutual estrangement" and situate "figures who walk the same streets and whose stories appear side by side [but] nevertheless remain oblivious to each other and unconscious of parallels between their own situations."[53] The character in *Winesburg* who links these separate but parallel lives is the young reporter George Willard, who,

as Yingling points out, plays the recurring role of "confidant, someone to whom others speak."[54] In Willard's presence, the grotesques open themselves up, almost miraculously, to reveal their core beliefs and the intricacies of their inner lives. These revelations come, however, with the serious caveat that Willard is bound to the same cultural and economic forces that Anderson (and his narrator) abhors. Willard, Kennedy writes, "strives to build community by passing along the stories the grotesques themselves are powerless to communicate, but as a newspaper reporter, he himself is complicitous in the circulation of a meaningless language."[55] And yet, if we entertain the likely, metafictional possibility that the writer featured in the prologue is in fact Willard himself, nearing the end of life, then Willard's complicity becomes a more complicated matter. In settling on a different, more fragmented genre—one better suited for capturing the beauty in grotesqueness—Willard appears to have disowned his early, journalistic attempts at stitching together the lives of others in a cohesive form. *Winesburg* thus describes not only the alienated lives within an unrecoverable community but also what David Shields describes in reference to the short story cycle as "authorial obsession"; it is as much a text "about watching a writer work and rework his material until he simply has nothing more to say about it."[56]

So in warning through both form and content, as Molly Gage argues, "against the network, suggesting that while it may offer the only means by which a community can be connected, that community is not only monstrous and deformed, but functions as a trap," Anderson's vision is as pertinent to the postindustrial era as it is to Fordism.[57] If Anderson's fear is that a world connected by industrial systems and objectives will leave Midwesterners, like city dwellers, vulnerable to the seduction of single truths, then he is also prescient of the neoliberal paradigm that would emerge most forcefully in the late-20th century. While the deification of free markets that characterizes neoliberalism did not drive government policy until the 1980s via the

Reagan and Thatcher governments, the effects on subjectivity that follow neoliberal transformation could hardly be described in terms more cogent than Anderson's. Neoliberalism—as described by thinkers such as Harvey, Brown, and Daniel Stedman-Jones—shares the genetic code Anderson ascribes to industrial profit seeking: the submission to a singular and totalizing logic. While it is unimpeded entrepreneurial competition, rather than profit as such, that organizes neoliberalism, neoliberalism's subordination of traditionally noneconomic spheres to a market framework echoes Anderson's articulation of that "one direction, one channel" which subsumes all others. In this way, the dissemination of neoliberal rationality, as Brown puts it, of the "*model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*" might well be regarded as an advanced stage of the conceptual narrowing that Anderson saw permeating American self-construction and culminating in grotesqueness.[58] "[A]t once in charge of itself, responsible for itself, and yet a potentially dispensable element of the whole," the neoliberal subject, like the grotesque, is sentenced to an isolated, alienated, and incommunicative existence.[59] Epistemically, neoliberalism seems, in the Andersonian sense, to set the truth *of a plurality of truths* against the singular truth of the market. Once "return on investment" has been established as the ultimate principle, the subject morphs into a unit who understands and can be explained only by an economic master language.

The resonance between grotesqueness and neoliberal subjectivity makes Anderson's attempt to rupture industry's homogenization of identity all the more salient for the 21st century. What *Winesburg* demonstrates is the role of fiction in ideological resistance: how narrative can

destabilize the rubrics that make imperceptible the greater multiplicity of truths—both economic and noneconomic—that might motivate our lives and those of others.

"Truth*s* in the Plural"

In view of the shifting grounds they inhabit, Anderson's grotesques can be characterized through what Alain Badiou calls an "event": a situation in which the established modes of being or response suddenly do not hold. "Events," Badiou writes, "are irreducible singularities, the 'beyond-the-law' of situations" that "brin[g] to pass 'something other' than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges."[60] While events "can only be something that *happens to you*," they are not, in Badiou's understanding, circumstances or transformations carried by the inevitable momentum of history; the event is instead a "flashing supplement" that comes to name the "plentitude" of a situation's specificity.[61] Although industry and incorporation are still far from their apex in 1880s Winesburg, the circumstance Anderson depicts is one that has become suddenly untenable; the preindustrial subjectivities and modes of being can no longer facilitate expression, understanding, or community. With the greater array of thoughts compressed into an economic singularity, individuality has become a null prospect. To be rendered grotesque in *Winesburg* is to be the subject of the industrial event: to be demented in failing to think beyond the subject positions of both the past and present.

Given his rigorous examination of "truths" and the conditions in which they might become universals, Badiou positions himself as a fitting (albeit unexpected) ethicist for Anderson's fiction. Like Anderson and Benjamin before him, Badiou takes a keen interest in how one might transcend the constrictions imposed by self-securing rubrics. He frames his work in response to how governmental, cultural, and economic regimes ("the state") encourage values meant only to uphold their own supremacy; he contests "the basis from which our parliamentary

regimes organize a subjectivity and a public opinion condemned in advance to ratify what seems necessary."[62] While Badiou's allegiance to the possibility of universal truths in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2012) cuts against the grain of recent ethical thought, the universals Badiou seeks are never grounded in prescriptivism. Holding that "[t]here is no ethics in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation," Badiou deploys the universal as a means for responding to precise circumstances.[63] A truth is universal only insofar as every individual has the capacity to abide by it in certain spaces and at certain times; the Badiouan truth is therefore a "universal-singular."[64] Badiou's ethics, like the world Anderson desires, is an ethics "of truth*s* in the plural," and ethics "of the labour that brings *some* truths into the world" without asserting generalities.[65] For this reason, Badiou finds both ethics founded on blanket principles (which he locates in Immanuel Kant) and ethics founded on reverence for the unknowability of the other (which he locates in Emmanuel Levinas) incapable of altering the spectrum of ethical possibility. He seeks instead an ethics capable of transforming modes of being and eventually the circumstances of the world itself.

One's role as subject of an event and task of forging a new mode of response or being can be fulfilled, Badiou proposes, through "fidelity." This concept moderates the temptation to return to the comfort of preexisting knowledges or reactions and instead tasks the subject with continuing to stand by the "real break (both thought and practiced) in the specific order within which the event took place."[66] In this way, fidelity invokes transformative contemplation; it primes subjects to think even the most challenging of situations "*right to the limit* of the possible" and exceed their responsive capacity.[67] In Badiou's words, "To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplanted, by *thinking* (although all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event. And this, of course—since

the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation—compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation."[68]

We approach, then, the maxim on which Badiou's ethics, an ethics of possible universals drawn from particular situations, rests: "Keep going!" When one finds oneself the subject of an event, Badiou advises that one "[c]ontinue to be the active part of that subject of a truth" that one has "happened to become," for it is only by faithfully sustaining one's place in a situation and thinking to its supposed limit that an alternative, universal-singular method of response will emerge.[69]

The grotesques of *Winesburg* fall short of fidelity; they settle into familiar modes, shun the event, and propel their tragic plotlines. Grotesqueness is also passivity: with minds "filled to overflowing with the words of other men" and hearts seduced by single truths, the grotesques settle into the comfort and despair of repetition, the familiarity of repression. And yet the narrator of *Winesburg*, intimately acquainted with the degradation of the town but distanced from it, relates distinctively to the "regular laws of the situation" and, by virtue of his storytelling project, offers grotesqueness an incomparably committed mode of thought.

"Hands" and the Destabilization of Truths

Perhaps most emblematic of Anderson's pre-postmodern status is his anticipation of what Brian McHale calls the ontological dominant of postmodernism, in which the depiction of many coexistent realities takes precedence over the depiction of the real.[70] Speculating metafictionally on future modifications to his tales, Anderson makes his prescience clear, and yet, given his penchant for oral storytelling, the persistent reflexivity of *Winesburg* is rather easily accounted for. More striking than Anderson's metafictional foresight is its function: how self-referentiality comes to trouble the heteromasculinist rubric that both Anderson's critique of industry and his

redemptive project require. Grotesqueness only becomes Andersonian—something "almost beautiful"—through a paradoxical and self-referential complication of the text's normative stance on sexuality and gender. Metafiction therefore operates in *Winesburg* as a means for negotiating the limits of industrial subjectivity and thereby thinking through the possibility disparate paradigms of identity. Nowhere is this technique more apparent than in the narrative of Wing Biddlebaum, whose story, "Hands," follows "The Book of the Grotesque" and begins the *Winesburg* tales.

Before he was "Wing Biddlebaum" of Winesburg, he was Adolph Meyers, a schoolteacher in an unidentified Pennsylvania town. "[M]eant by nature to be a teacher of youth," Meyers had found his singular purpose and he was "much loved by the boys of his school."[71] In committing so fervently to the education of boys, however, a darkly sexual aspect emerges (one that, in Yingling's reading, even Meyers himself is unaware of, having so "successfully repressed" his own desires).[72] Meyers' pedagogy is reminiscent of religious awakening but also borders on pederasty:

> As he talked his voice become soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds. By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself. He was one of those men in whom the force that creates life is diffused, not centralized. Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began also to dream.[73]

Meyers' soft voice, caresses, and strokes represent in this uneasy paragraph what Whalan describes as Anderson's "semiotics of 'fairiness,'" a characterization that not only illustrates the

corrosion of masculine individuality prompted by industry but also claims homosexuality, queerness, or effeminateness as counterpoints to the masculinity Anderson seeks to recover.[74] After a student "enamored of the young master" relays to his mother and father the "unspeakable things" Meyers had done to him, the "tragedy" ensues. The boy had only dreamed these events, but being "half-witted," he fails to distinguish between reality and imagination.[75] Other parents question their children, the boys describe Meyers' actions, and shortly thereafter the proprietor of the town saloon beats Meyers within an inch of his life.

Meyers flees to Winesburg and lives the next two decades as Wing Biddlebaum, a man whose hands garner both abhorrence and renown:

> In Winesburg the hands had attracted attention merely because of their activity. With them Wing Biddlebaum had picked as high as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day. They became his distinguishing feature, the source of his fame. Also they made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality. Winesburg was proud of Wing Biddlebaum in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White's new stone house and Wesley Moyer's bay stallion, Tony Tip, that had won the two-fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland.[76]

Despite their celebration, Biddlebaum finds his hands profoundly shameful, preferring "to keep them hidden away" when they are not at work.[77] Hegeman interprets Biddlebaum's hands as metonyms for his bifurcation and communicative inability: "Wing's strangely mobile hands are the signs, simultaneously, of his frustrated sexual desires, and of his related, and hence tragic, transcendent love for humanity."[78] For Whalan, Biddlebaum "marks the boundary of the geography of desire" in both the town of Winesburg—given Biddlebaum's self-imposed exile to

its outskirts—and in Anderson's social vision.[79] We might add, too, that Biddlebaum's hands emblematize Michel Foucault's theorization of the "dissociated self," in which the "body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)."[80] Biddlebaum's hands mark not only his grotesqueness but also, as "the piston rods of his machinery of expression," the normative, material, and historical forces that have made him so.[81]

While Biddlebaum's aberrant physicality offers a crucial element for reading his marginalization, his permanency as a character is a more nebulous matter, and it is also essential to understanding the relationship between grotesqueness and metafiction in *Winesburg*. In a series of self-aware digressions, the narrator clarifies that he is not the first to tell the story of Biddlebaum and that the full significance of the tale belongs to a teller of another time. "The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands," the narrator describes, "[t]heir restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name. Some obscure poet of the town had thought of it."[82] This poet plays no minor role in "Hands"; as *Winesburg* progresses, his specter reappears continuously to index the possibility of other, richer versions of the tales that have already been or might someday be composed. The prospect of generic shift from storytelling to verse suggests too that the *Winesburg* stories are neither the final nor most meaningful versions of what once took place in the Ohio town, that the narrator's distinctive orality will never be enough to capture the reality or essence of Winesburg. That work is reserved for a genre unconstrained by teleology and narrative expectations.

And yet the poet never arrives. His mention, more often than not, serves to denigrate the *Winesburg* tales and specify the ends they will not reach. Contrasting "Hands" with the story's hypothetical revision, the narrator implies its deficiencies: "The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself. Sympathetically set forth it would tap many strange, beautiful

qualities in obscure men. It is a job for a poet."[83] As instrument of speculation, "the poet" is emblematic of what Katherine Biers calls a "virtual modernism" that, through the language of potential, "carve[s] out a value for the literary" amid a modernizing culture industry.[84] At the same time, however, the poet's deferred presence disqualifies *Winesburg* from such a category; powerful outcomes are imaginable but always beyond the text's reach. "Hands," as a central example and the first *Winesburg* story, is "but crudely stated. It needs the poet there."[85] Still, the narrative must continue to be related, for the tale of Biddlebaum might "arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story of the influence for which the hands were but fluttering pennants of promise."[86]

Badiouan fidelity, responsive to the industrial crisis of Winesburg, permeates these metafictional passages. Self-demeaning conjecture on the effects of the future book suggests how art might transform both the representation and real experiences of those, like Biddlebaum, demented by the advent of industry. Clarifying what his tales *will not* achieve, the narrator gains an opportunity to imagine the "beyond the law" of a Winesburg corrupted by industrial truths. An aporia emerges between the said and the conceivable, between the Biddlebaum who is and the Biddlebaum who might be in another's telling. And in effect, Biddlebaum's queerness is thrown into new light; the character edges toward the essential and unexpected beauty that distinguishes the Andersonian variation on grotesqueness.

Indeed, the prospect that a future book of Biddlebaum would enliven "[s]trange, beautiful qualities in obscure men"—in real individuals beyond the text—seems an unlikely one for Anderson, yet the persistence of metafictional narration in "Hands" secures its viability. The superior, poetic version of "Hands," in which the queerness of Biddlebaum is captured with adequate sympathy, promises to recognize or in some way make visible ("tap") the queerness of

men in the world. In this way, the fidelity the narrator grants Biddlebaum by meditating on alternate incarnations threatens to fracture the heteronormative masculinity that grounds Anderson's oeuvre. Following this brush with self-aware, speculative storytelling, grotesqueness transcends its standing as symptom of an industrially diminished masculinity; what makes Biddlebaum grotesque in the Andersonian sense—beautiful and a catalyst for sympathy—is how his metafictional engagement confounds the masculinist expectations that Anderson simultaneously projects.

After its emergence in "Hands," the metafictional digression recurs throughout *Winesburg* with greater efficiency. There is, for instance, Wash Williams, a grotesque described through the effeminate, who alters dramatically in the space of two paragraphs:

> Wash Williams, the telegraph operator of Winesburg, was the ugliest thing in town. His girth was immense, his neck thin, his legs feeble. He was dirty. Everything about him was unclean. Even the whites of his eyes looked soiled.
>
> I go too fast. Not everything about Wash was unclean. He took care of his hands. His fingers were fat, but there was something sensitive and shapely in the hand that lay on the table by the instrument in the telegraph office. In his youth Wash Williams had been called the best telegraph operator in the state, and in spite of his degradement to the obscure office at Winesburg, he was still proud of his ability.[87]

Williams' grotesqueness emerges in his dual-gendered appearance. The depiction of Williams as "dirty" is uncharacteristically summative for *Winesburg*; no specific grime is detailed. Rather, it is the incongruity of masculine immensity and feminine feebleness that causes the narrator to designate Williams "unclean." And yet, this portrait of Williams is as conditional as it is hasty.

No sooner than Williams materializes is his image is destabilized by self-conscious commentary: the paragraph breaking "I go too fast," which ushers an acute revision. Following this confession of hurried description, the same characteristics that had denigrated Williams transform, like Biddlebaum's hands, into emblems of renown. Self-consciously reworking the elements of his tale, the narrator "keeps going" in the Badiouan sense to rethink Williams' duality; the "sensitive and shapely" hands that had previously left him "unclean" become supple and noteworthy. No longer the "ugliest thing," Williams is left venerated for his hybridity by this metafictional rupture; he is both feminine and, as described only two paragraphs later, "a man of courage."[88]

Betraying, in this way, the heteromasculinist guidelines that had dictated the narrator's handling of characters, Anderson animates a procedure that is not so much anti-essentialist but that instead experiments with the formations in which identities are positioned, articulated, and embodied. To borrow from Jasbir K. Puar, the thinking and rethinking of identity staged in *Winesburg* takes place at the level of the "assemblage"; through metafictional procedures of contemplation, Anderson is able to interrogate and contest "how societies of control tweak and modulate bodies as matter, not predominantly through signification or identity interpellation but rather through affective capacities and tendencies."[89] As "The Book of the Grotesque" demonstrates in mythologizing the unsteady grounds on which identities become viable, the question that drives Anderson is not one of how identities function but rather one of "what is prior to and beyond" their establishment.[90] Anderson's interest lies at the intersection of epistemology, lived experience, and the material conditions that, depending on their configuration, allow for certain categories of identity to align or come into being. And his method—for thinking through the preconditions and limitations of varyingly queer identities—is a metafiction energized by fidelity and conjecture.

Still, while Anderson's affectively charged experimentation with normative gender and sexuality is far more radical than we would expect, not all queered characters are afforded the opportunity for metafictional reconceptualization. Willard, for instance, negotiates a normative desire for masculinity that is repeatedly complicated by the romantic and sexual incapacity endemic to Winesburg. Willard's desire for masculine maturation is described on a performative level; he is "but a man ready to play the part of a man" and left emasculated in several instances following romantic or sexual miscues (most intensely in "The Teacher" when Kate Swift rejects his advance after inviting it).[91] Nonetheless—and due, perhaps, to his function as bonding agent in the *Winesburg* tales—Willard is denied the metafictional treatment given to figures such as Biddlebaum and Williams. Neither are the women of Winesburg, who are almost uniformly characterized by sexual repression, offered access to the metafictional register. As Yingling observes, female sexuality in *Winesburg* is situated largely in relation to the social institutions (e.g. "courtship, marriage, motherhood, teaching") that determine its expression or repression, as is certainly the case for Elizabeth Willard (mother of George), Kate Swift, and the forlorn wife, Alice Hindman.[92] To alter these women and the plotlines they follow with metafictional experimentation would surely border on the contestation of those institutions, and while Anderson is eager to depict the propagation of sexual repression, he appears unwilling to advance any farther. But queer desire—which in Winesburg lacks an institutional framework—offers Anderson a subject that, while non-normative, does not necessarily critique the structures that frame heterosexual romance. It appears, then, that even at his most radical, Anderson never truly abandons his masculinism.

Yet, at the moments it occurs in *Winesburg*, metafictional speculation achieves significant and powerful destabilizations. While Anderson tends to describe the conceptual

compression of industry with resigned finality—like the "beautiful childlike innocence" of the preindustrial past, he sees noneconomic truths also "gone forever"—the capacity of metafiction to bend and reshape the rules of the text indicates an unanticipated optimism. In thinking through, teasing, and amending its own normative framework, *Winesburg* introduces an otherwise-occluded possibility of transfiguration to industrial identity. Modulated by self-aware, speculative storytelling, grotesqueness exceeds its function as counterpoint to preindustrial masculinity, and the grotesques, by virtue of who they could be, reintegrate into the primary narrative as beautiful figures whose lives are worth living as they are and who may be repositioned in other contexts of identity formation. Characters such as Biddlebaum and Williams, once castigated for their visible and repressed queerness, become valuable both as they are and as they might appear in a different light (or, indeed, in many different lights). Despite its inequitable distribution, there is no force more transgressive for Anderson than speculation.

In summation, *Winesburg* demonstrates how metafiction—through fidelity and self-conscious commentary—can address the viability of identities that governing paradigms neglect (or chastise) to the point of repression. *Winesburg* offers a master class in how careful, self-referential speculation on the procedures of storytelling can probe ontological and subjective frameworks, its most radical act being to envision that which is seemingly unthinkable under the regime of singular truths. Anderson's metafiction colors the industrial ethos with contingency; providing a platform for extra-narrative contemplation of how stories might be told and queer lives represented, Anderson not only interprets the material and metaphysical conditions of his time but also underscores the variability and vulnerability that industrialism refuses to admit. In the context, then, of an art seeking to resist neoliberalism—an ideology that models a subject who "approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct" and who "cannot

think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way"—*Winesburg* offers auspicious grounds for expansion.[93]

Ethical Metafiction, Postmodernism, and Periodization

Through his tales "told and untold"—a conjunction of metafictional narration with the ontological dominant—Anderson unknowingly positioned himself as a pre-postmodern.[94] It is difficult, however, to describe *Winesburg*'s transgressive approach to gender and sexuality through the models of metafiction that postmodern theory provides. Anderson's interest lies in neither the constructedness of knowledge and culture nor the deconstruction of literary form; despite the many realities he imagines, Anderson puts his fiction in service of the real Midwest—its history and inhabitants—and the heterogeneous identities, both normative and non-, that he hopes to sustain through an industrial era. At formal and thematic levels, *Winesburg* clears the way for a century of American metafictional works from high modernism (e.g. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936]) to postmodernism (e.g. Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* [1986]) and through to the contemporary period (e.g., the skeptical, withdrawn characters of David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan). And yet, the major concepts of postmodernism fail to describe Anderson's method and role in this lineage.

Indeed, the list of all things *Winesburg* defiantly isn't makes for a negative encyclopedia of late 20th-century thought. *Winesburg* is historically oriented insofar as it stems from the history of industry in the Midwest, yet its oral style orients the text away from parody, mimicry, and the critique of historiography (Linda Hutcheon).[95] While *Winesburg* fractures epistemological frameworks, it neither reveals nor diffuses of its own indeterminacy (Ihab Hassan).[96] In speculating on alternate realities, *Winesburg* neither substitutes nor replaces the real (Jean Baudrillard).[97] Although a model of authorship and interpretation that would sever the

meaning from intention (e.g. T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919]) developed contemporaneously with *Winesburg*, Andersonian metafiction demonstrates no defensiveness toward critical readings (Robert Scholes and Mark McGurl).[98] Anderson's metafiction does not turn from the incomprehensibility of capitalism to revel in surfaces (Fredric Jameson); it meets industry head on, seeking to understand and assuage its effects on subjectivity.[99] While advocating for a plurality of what we might call "metanarratives," the threat Anderson sees posed to that plurality is hardly one of incredulity (Jean-François Lyotard).[100] *Winesburg* has no interest in troubling the distinction between fiction and reality (Patricia Waugh); it deploys the former in its efforts to transform the latter.[101] Anderson's turn to the procedures of storytelling is no narcissistic ploy for attention (Christopher Lasch).[102] And though he pens a literature of possibilities, Anderson sees the stories of the world he inhabits as plentiful, not exhausted (John Barth).[103] *Winesburg* is simply a metafiction of a different stripe.

Moreover, for the same reasons *Winesburg* resists pre-postmodern classification—its self-conscious meditations on the viability of queer identities and their positioning amid unstable material and social conditions—the text also anticipates what has been categorized recently as "post-postmodern metafiction," a genre understood through its constructive, rather than deconstructive, self-referentiality. In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013), for example, Mary K. Holland identifies a subset of post-postmodern metafiction that "while holding on to postmodern and poststructural ideas about how language and representation function" employs those ideas in service of a humanism that takes seriously "relationships, emotional interaction with the world, meaning."[104] Similarly, Mitchum Huehls calls attention to the 21st-century "post-theory theory novel," a work that "bear[s] the markings of prototypical metafiction" but rejects the impulse to critique in favor of

"incorporate[ing] the word into the world, using language to build new, idiosyncratic notions of the real."[105] And in *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016), Lee Konstantinou charts a post-postmodern family of metafictions, including works by David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers, "designed to spur belief" as such: the capacity for belief rather than any belief in particular.[106] Yet if what distinguishes contemporary metafiction from its postmodern predecessor is a repurposing of self-referentiality in service of ethical capacity, then the contemporary is also a doubling-back, a 21st-century variation on the metafictional principles established in Anderson's modernist approach to queer identity. The contemplative reflexivity that typifies *Winesburg* is, like Badiou's ethics and the "post-postmodern" current of contemporary fiction, a technique devised for expanding rather than problematizing the possible range of responses, both individually and cooperatively, to situations in the world. With this commonality in mind, we have good reason to question the supposedly-emergent nature of post-postmodernism.

To add to the classificatory confusion instigated by *Winesburg*, the speculative properties of the text do, however, lend themselves to an ethical question key to the postmodern period. In her 1978 *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt questions whether a contrapositive may exist to the "banality of evil": an evil that manifests in the guise of thoughtless subservience. While the concept of "postmodernism" is of little importance to Arendt (given her debt to Kant, she would likely oppose it), her inquiry into the ethics of both thoughtlessness and thought alike carries distinct repercussions for how we understand the social and cultural conditions of postmodernism. "Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity," Arendt asks, "be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or

even actually 'condition' them against it?"[107] Let us assume that Fredric Jameson is correct (as I believe he is) to understand postmodernism by the incomprehensible scope and span of global capitalism, a feature that results in the avoidance of thought and subsequent replacement of depth "by surface, or by multiple surfaces."[108] With this characterization in mind, the ethical status of thought itself becomes vital to unlocking the ethics of postmodernism and its aftermath.

Winesburg would respond to Arendt resoundingly in the affirmative. While no single contemplative instance in *Winesburg* offers a definitive ethics, the wandering, self-aware storytelling imagination—fixated on the other lives and timelines its queer figures might inhabit—manifests as a distinctly ethical instrument that, through sustained contemplation, releases identity from the normative rubrics of economy and culture. Arendt's description of thought as temporal aberration—an "out of order" "*stop*-and-think" that "inver[ts] all ordinary relationships [… and] annihilate[s] temporal as well as spatial distances"—could hardly do better to describe Anderson's tense-bending, self-conscious fiction, wherein ethical possibilities emerge from the rupture of linear narrative.[109] What Epifanio San Juan understands as Anderson's "imperative need for constant inquiry, perpetual examination of principles, and endless pursuit of other modes, more organic and integrative, of self-expression" culminates in an ethically oriented method of contemplation made visible, and hence exemplary, by self-referential narration.[110]

We have been asking "what was postmodernism?" for almost three decades.[111] In his metafictional treatment of queer identities and the conditions that dictate their viability, Anderson intensifies the already increasing porousness of the boundaries between modernism, postmodernism, and the contemporary. Understanding *Winesburg* not simply as a seed of postmodernism but also as groundwork for subsequent metafiction—itself a Badiouan pushing-

forward of limits—presents a major opportunity for charting a new family of ethical metafictions and, in effect, reworking the periodization of pre- and postwar American literature. Like Eric Hayot, who urges us to question "the concept[s] at the heart of period-based work," an understudied Andersonian tradition throws into question both the distinctiveness and conceptual organization of the last century of American literary history.[112] I believe, then, in light of *Winesburg*'s influence at a series of historical points and its resonance in our present, that in texts we had previously seen as reflective of a deconstructive, apolitical, or exhausted postmodernism, we may now find participation in a continuing lineage of ethical metafiction, components of which I will examine in the following chapters.

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[1] Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 47-48.
[2] Sherwood Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story: The Tale of an American Writer's Journey Through his own Imaginative World and Through the World of Facts, with many of his Experiences and Impressions among other Writers—told in many notes—in four books—and an Epilogue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 195, 196.
[3] Ibid., 195.
[4] Ibid., 195.
[5] Mark Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism in America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007). Sherwood Anderson, "Queer," in *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 190-201.
[6] Horace Gregory, "An American Heritage," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), ed. John H. Ferres, 302.
[7] Clarence Lindsay, *Such a Rare Thing: The Art of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2009), 2.
[8] Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson, 4.
[9] Lindsay, *Such a Rare Thing*, 18.
[10] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19, 3.
[11] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 10.
[12] Cowley, "Introduction," 16.
[13] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 22. Emphasis added.
[14] Robert Dunne, *A New Book of the Grotesque: Contemporary Approaches to Sherwood Anderson's Early Fiction* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2005), 1, 2.
[15] James Schevill, "Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht, and Williams," *Twentieth Century Literature* 23.2 (May, 1977): 299.

[16] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 23-24.
[17] Dunne, *A New Book of the Grotesque*, 9.
[18] Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 11.
[19] T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 60. A caveat: in the context of European modernism—and with attention to the influence not only of William Morris but also of John Ruskin—it is more difficult to ascribe an antimodern sentiment to the broader arts and crafts movement. As a phenomenon of decadence situated in the aesthetics of the *fin de siècle,* the arts and crafts movement also set the stage for modernism's heightening and stylization of the pragmatic, everyday object. In this way, decadent aesthetics can be seen as one of the origin stories for literary modernism, especially when one takes into account a figure such as Oscar Wilde.
[20] Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 24.
[21] Lindsay, *Such a Rare Thing*, xv.
[22] David D. Anderson, "The Grotesques and George Willard," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, 424.
[23] Thomas Yingling, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience," in *New Essays on* Winesburg, Ohio, ed. John W. Crowley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 114.
[24] Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 286.
[25] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 162, 169.
[26] Ibid., 23.
[27] Haiyoung Lee, "Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*: Alienation vs. Imagination," *The Journal of English Language and Literature* 31.5 (1989): 103-04.
[28] Ralph Ciano, "'The Sweetness of Twisted Apples': Unity of Vision in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *PMLA* 87.5 (Oct., 1972): 996.
[29] Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story*, 78.
[30] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 80.
[31] Ibid., 70-71.
[32] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 9.
[33] Hegeman, *Patterns for America*, 22-23.
[34] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small Town Life* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1919), front endpaper, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
[35] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 57.
[36] Hegeman, *Patterns for America*, 22. For Jonathan Flatley, the culture of modernism is best understood as unfolding in the gap between "modernity" and the lived experience of modernization. Flatley argues that a more holistic view of the early- to mid-20th century that addresses this disparity in legal, international, political, economic, linguistic, and technological spheres allows us to recharacterize modernism as referring "not to any one thing in particular, but to the wide range of practices that attempt in one or another to respond to the gap between the social realities of modernization and the promises of the project of modernity." *Winesburg*, needless to say, makes a strong case on Flatley's behalf. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping:*

Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 32.

[37] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Keskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books: New York, 1986), 89. We might add, too, that Benjamin's depiction of a man of "practical interests" who "has counsel" for his audience and "stay[s] at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions" relates superbly to the local, ethnographically-schooled narrator of *Winesburg*. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 86, 84.

[38] While he was no ardent supporter of cosmopolitanism, we can imagine Anderson directing a similar critique at the "Ford English School," a program at the Highland Park plant reflective of Ford's belief that linguistic homogeneity (i.e. English) is an essential component of the industrial machine. To this end, as Joshua L. Miller has argued, Ford not only mandated that the plant's largely-immigrant workforce learn English in the school but also encouraged them to forget their native tongues. Thus, according to Miller, the Ford English School was a central example of how in the early-20th century, American "anxieties regarding racial heterogeneity stoked fears of national dissolution and impelled efforts at social control within which linguistic alterity became understood as surrogate for race and class difference." Joshua L. Miller, *Accented America*: *The Cultural Political of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36, 56.

[39] Smith, *Making the Modern*, 21.

[40] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 81.

[41] Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story*, 219

[42] Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 6-7, 4.

[43] Ibid., 83

[44] Ibid., 18.

[45] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 60.

[46] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 71.

[47] Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story*, 100.

[48] For Smith, nowhere was this transformation more evident than in the architecture of Ford's Highland Park plant. The single-story, horizontal structure of the plant and its circulation matrix indicated, as Smith writes, a "commitment to infinite growth, its ability to extend in directions yet to be perceived, its declaration of a fundamental order." For Trachtenberg, an earlier architectural transformation foreshadowed the coming industrial revolution. The "rapid appearance of grain elevators after the 1850's" signaled an injection from the international commodities market of "cosmopolitan character" into the Midwest. Smith, *Making the Modern*, 38. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 20-21, 21.

[49] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 25.

[50] Eric Santer, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xix, 12.

[51] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 101.

[52] J. Gerald Kennedy, "From Anderson's *Winesburg* to Carver's *Cathedral*: The Short Story Sequence and the Semblance of Community," in *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 194.

[53] Ibid., 196.

[54] Yingling, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience," 125.

[55] Kennedy, "From Anderson's *Winesburg*," 201.

[56] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 141.

[57] Molly Gage, "Winesburg, Ohio: A Modernist Kluge," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5.2 (2011): 3, http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/2/000093/000093.html
[58] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31.
[59] Ibid., 110.
[60] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2012), 44, 68.
[61] Ibid., 51, 72-73.
[62] Ibid., 30-31.
[63] Ibid., 16.
[64] Peter Hallward, "Translator's Introduction," in Badiou, *Ethics*, ix.
[65] Badiou, *Ethics*, 28
[66] Ibid., 42
[67] Ibid., 15.
[68] Ibid., 42.
[69] Ibid., 91.
[70] Postmodern questions of the ontological dominant, according to McHale, are akin to the following: "What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on." Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10.
[71] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 31.
[72] Yingling, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience," 115.
[73] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 31-32.
[74] Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 44.
[75] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 32.
[76] Ibid., 29.
[77] Ibid., 28-29.
[78] Hegeman, *Patterns for America*, 156.
[79] Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 47.
[80] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 83.
[81] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 28. Yingling adds, "When we learn that Wing has taken his pseudonym from 'a box of goods seen at a freight station as he hurried through an eastern Ohio town' […] his abjection and anonymity are ironically answered by a system of exchange that (only slightly less literally) defines and alienates all of its subjects." Yingling, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience," 116. For an excursus on the significance of hands and handiwork in the late-industrial and postindustrial Midwest, see Carlo Rotella, *Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesman, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
[82] Ibid., 28.
[83] Ibid., 29.
[84] Katherine Biers, *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3.
[85] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 31.
[86] Ibid., 31.

[87] Ibid., 121-122.
[88] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 122.
[89] Jasbir K. Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *PhiloSOPHIA* 2.1 (2012): 63.
[90] Ibid., 63.
[91] Anderson, *Winesburg*, 165.
[92] Yingling, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience," 116.
[93] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 39.
[94] Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story*, 60.
[95] See Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time'," in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 105-23.
[96] See Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 84-96.
[97] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[98] See Robert Scholes, "Metafiction" *The Iowa Review* 1.4 (Fall, 1970): 100-15; and Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[99] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
[100] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[101] See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[102] See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978).
[103] See John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
[104] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 8, 2.
[105] Mitchum Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," *Contemporary Literature* 56.2 (Summer 2015): 306, 288.
[106] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 166.
[107] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 5.
[108] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 12.
[109] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 78, 85.
[110] Epifanio San Juan, Jr., "Vision and Reality: A Reconsideration of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, 469.
[111] The earliest instance of this question I can identify appears in William V. Spanos, "What was Postmodernism?," *Contemporary Literature* 31.1 (Spring, 1990).
[112] Eric Hayot "Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time," *New Literary History* 42.4 (Autumn 2011): 745.

Articulation: Groundworks for Expression in 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' and *How Should a Person Be?*

The "New Sincerity" is thought both a predecessor and key component of our present mode, a forbearer that arrived at the zenith of postmodernism in the mid-1980s and a current that continues to run through contemporary fiction.[1] Opposed to apathy, self-aggrandizement, and above all else *irony*, the fiction writers assigned to this multimedia amalgam sought or still seek to elevate the act of creative expression (and its related anxieties) above the technical virtuosity and cool dispassion that had characterized so much of postmodern media. Fictions of the New Sincerity tend to accentuate vulnerability and sentiment, and they often do so in an apparent minimization of authors' literary know-how or deftness. While varying in their contempt for recent culture, New Sincerity writers (including Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Dana Spiotta, and Rachel Kushner) consistently dramatize what they see as the major impediments to sincere communication—to achieving the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" Lionel Trilling once described—in the contexts of late capitalism and the information age.[2] Consequently, New Sincerity novelists are often seen as inaugurating a retreat from postmodern reflexivity (often synonymous in New Sincerity discourse with "metafiction") to an aesthetic of realism (a "hysterical realism," even, as James Wood describes it) more appropriate for the 19th century than the 21st.[3]

If the dilemmas of expression and emotionality that engross the New Sincerity are tethered to a globalized phase of capitalism—which, as Fredric Jameson theorizes, privileges surface-level meanings—then it may seem strange that when the New Sincerity materialized three decades ago in the Austin, TX, punk scene, it did so in a manner outwardly ambivalent about commercial context.[4] The Reivers, a four-piece indie band that was first to receive the

"New Sincerity" moniker, described their intentions thusly in a 1985 interview on MTV's *The Cutting Edge* (a survey of local scenes):

> A lot of places, people expect everybody to be able to play the exact right notes all the time. In Austin, they're just looking for energy or a new sound or people who like to do what they like to do. You don't have to be perfect the first time or even the hundred and tenth time, thank god, and people will still like you.[5]

The antagonist implicit in this statement is the commingling of instrumental showmanship (e.g. Van Halen) and "blank parody" (e.g. Devo) that had swamped 1980s rock and pop.[6] So with what Barry Shank describes as an "amalgamation of punk with country with blues roots" augmented with a "do-it-yourself ethic," The Reivers zagged opposite the frontrunners of their time.[7] The band neither adorned its compositions in jaw-dropping solos nor disguised them in the mimicry of other genres. Reivers tunes are bright, frenetic, impassioned—and designed to communicate that same enthusiasm. Underscoring intention and its transmission, the band laid the groundwork for the more renowned New Sincerity songwriters of 1990s and early 2000s, including Elliott Smith, Conor Oberst, and Cat Power, for whom sincerity meant an entwinement of passion and apprehension made evident in brittle vocal styles and understated chord progressions. While they depended almost uniformly on independent labels, New Sincerity musicians seldom emphasized the markets in which their records circulated. That, after all, was the point of accentuating the expressive self. As the late Chris Cornell put it in 2015, "[m]aybe sincerity is the new punk."[8]

On the other hand, the New Sincerity also engendered a sharply political criticism machine (the blueprint of which was laid out in New Sincerity wunderkind Jedediah Purdy's 1999 manifesto, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*). Like

the fiction of the New Sincerity, this critical apparatus—which Lee Konstantinou calls a "cottage industry dedicated […] to attacking the hipster"—links an ironic disposition, typically located in youth culture, with political apathy.[9] Recall, for example, the semi-viral op-eds indexed in the introduction to this project: Christy Wampole's 2012 "How to Live Without Irony" and 2016 follow-up, "How to Live Without Irony (for Real, This Time)." In the former, Wampole derided the hipster for his "deep aversion to risk."[10] The latter represents Wampole's contribution to a genre of 2016 election post-mortem that challenges the impulse of leftist intellectuals to critique ironically—or, more dangerously, to parody—rather than meet far-right threats with constructive visions. In "For Real, This Time," Wampole also clarifies the thrust of her preceding essay: to describe how "*apolitical* irony […] most clearly expressed in the rise of hipsterism […] represented a surrender to commercial and political forces that could lead to an emptiness of both the individual and collective psyche"—and it is here that Wampole demonstrates just how vulnerable the priorities of the New Sincerity are to the coopting powers of neoliberal capitalism.[11]

Case in point: the "honest self-inventory," which Wampole's prescribes for the irony-afflicted in the 2012 version:

> Look around your living space. Do you surround yourself with things you really like or things you like only because they are absurd? Listen to your own speech. Ask yourself: Do I communicate primarily through inside jokes and pop culture references? What percentage of my speech is meaningful? How much hyperbolic language do I use? Do I feign indifference? Look at your clothes. What parts of your wardrobe could be described as costume-like, derivative or reminiscent of some specific style archetype (the secretary, the hobo, the flapper, yourself as a

> child)? In other words, do your clothes refer to something else or only to themselves? Do you attempt to look intentionally nerdy, awkward or ugly? In other words, is your style an anti-style? The most important question: How would it feel to change yourself quietly, offline, without public display, from within?[12]

How exhausting! In describing this introspective procedure, Wampole invokes (by my count) eighteen second-person pronouns and possessive pronouns or first-person equivalents meant to address the reader. "Commercial and political forces" are nowhere to be found. And neither, it seems, in Wampole's attempt to reenergize millennials—so that they might confront the economic and political institutions which benefit from apathetic speechlessness—is there any clear place for the collective or demos.

Consider, then, the concept of neoliberal "responsibilization," which Wendy Brown defines as an insistence on a "singular human capacity for responsibility" that leaves governing powers "nowhere in discursive sight."[13] By positing the free market and the economic competition it facilities as the purest manifestation of freedom (i.e. the freedom to emerge deservedly a winner or loser), neoliberal institutions redefine liberty, as Adam Kotsko argues, in terms of blameworthiness. Given the neoliberal individual's subject position, in Michel Foucault's seminal formulation, as "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself and his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings," neoliberalism models a sociopolitical logic and subjective framework in which, to borrow again from Kotsko, citizens are "free enough to be to blame" for their socioeconomic misfortunes but never "free enough to have any power over [their] collective fate."[14] See, for example, the hipster vis-à-vis Wampole, who is the sole party responsible for his expressive incapacity, and whose expressive reclamation depends entirely on isolated soul-searching. While Wampole needs no

special justification for drawing attention to the political and commercial forces that benefit from apolitical irony, she fails to recognize that those same forces orchestrate the production of civic disengagement.

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2016), Rachel Greenwald Smith articulates a more robust version of this critique in the landscape of recent literature—one, I would add, that is deeply suggestive of the ideological dangers implicit in New Sincerity fiction from the late 1980s to present day. By depicting the hazards inherent to 1) communicating one's emotional inner-life to another, and 2) attempting to do so without falling prey to misunderstanding, New Sincerity novels risk invoking what Smith calls "personal feelings." Smith has in mind feelings susceptible to privatization or commodification, feelings that are "personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self […] are managed by the individual but […] augmented by connections with others" and "enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion."[15] She submits that fictions guided by personal feelings not only neglect the extra-personal production and consequences of emotions but also frame the reading of literature as a transaction in which readers' personal, moral, or emotional development is promised as a return on their investment of time and attention. Smith understands this process as an extension of neoliberalism's broader effort to reprocess traditionally noneconomic spheres through an all-encompassing economic rationale, an effort that in the last four decades has justified the diminishment or privatization of formerly public resources and occluded ontological motivations apart from financial gain.

So the central question of this chapter: if Wampole is right (despite the neoliberal undertones of her essays) that there is an untapped politics in sincere expression, then how can fiction writers aid in the recovery of sincerity without reinforcing the very logic they mean to

disrupt? Smith's answer lies in "impersonal feelings," which deny easy relations between characters and readers and catalyze affective responses that, because they cannot be coded in the language of neoliberalism, challenge our established subject positions and epistemologies.[16] While Smith's framework does allow us to discern how contemporary literatures both absorb and, in a few exceptional cases, subvert neoliberal logic, I fear that the personal/impersonal feelings dichotomy might cause us to reject literatures that, while animating or depicting personal feelings, establish other responses to neoliberalism that remain both active and powerful. The fictions of the New Sincerity are especially susceptible to this threat; in representing (or even instigating) personal feelings—as they pertain to the expressive dilemmas endemic to late-20th- and early-21st-century sociality—New Sincerity novels may well implicate themselves in a transactional structure of affect.

I propose, however, that within the New Sincerity, an understudied set of texts cuts against this grain. There are fictions that, in dramatizing personal feelings, find a technique for sidestepping transactionalism and, in effect, for contesting the encroachment of neoliberal values on creative expression. The texts I have in mind are among those most difficult to place in the larger New Sincerity: narratives that are indeed fixated on expressive dilemmas (as is typical for the movement) but that unexpectedly refuse to cast off the metafictional forms understood as symptomatic of self-serving experimentalism and ironic quietism. In doing so, I argue, the oddly metafictional texts of the New Sincerity add a critical dimension to the New Sincerity's already complicated and variable relationship with late capitalism. For the fiction writers I will address, David Foster Wallace (in his early career) and Sheila Heti, metafiction offers a method for probing the limitations of expression under neoliberalism and, concomitantly, for refusing responsibilization. In Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) and

Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), self-referentiality allows the writers to interrogate neoliberal parameters for expression—as well as the personal feelings they rely on—and to think through the possibility of alternatives otherwise foreclosed under the epistemic guidelines of an economic sociality. The outcome, then, of engaging sincerity-focused metafictions to delineate the boundaries and vulnerabilities of a neoliberal creative regime, I claim, is to dethrone neoliberalism as the only conceivable rationale, to reveal neoliberalism as *but one* ideology and logic, contingent as any other.

The Neoliberal Presence in New Sincerity Metafiction

The essay most indicative of Wallace's foundational status in the New Sincerity and less-than-admiring take on late-20th-century metafiction is 1993's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," published originally in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* and revised for Wallace's 1997 essay collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. In brief, Wallace admonished writers of 1980s metafiction for reverting, in the face of advertising and televisual culture, to self-referential flattery of readers and technically elaborate self-congratulation. Because advertising had learned, perhaps *from* metafiction, to speak of itself coolly in the third person, Wallace argued that metafiction could no longer parody advertising or visual media with any subversive or demystifying effect, as had the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and, to an extent, John Barth. Instead, as Wallace demonstrates through a reading of Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990), metafiction had evolved in the 1980s to reflect the "poker-faced silence" of an apathetic generation.[17] Thus, Wallace urged writers to forgo the once-potent bite and more recent self-shielding that metafictional techniques offer and seek instead a "[b]ackward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic" fiction capable of "treat[ing] plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction."[18] And in

prophesizing a coming generation of literary "*anti*-rebels," whose resistance would lie in outmoded explorations of emotionality and inner-lives (subjects supposedly neglected by postmodern media and consumerism), Wallace cleared way for the realism central to the New Sincerity (and for critiques such as Wampole's).[19]

And yet, Wallace's contemporaneous fiction—as well as Heti's two decades later, which evolves "Westward's" critical project with interrelated but inverted techniques—does not reject self-referentiality by and large. Instead, the two writers sustain aspects of metafiction that they find particularly advantageous for tracing and explicating the expressive conditions of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Rather than allegorizing fiction writing (as in the world-creating narrator of Robert Coover's "The Magic Poker" [1969]) or undertaking defensive self-interpretation (as in the mock-scholarship of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* [2000]), Wallace and Heti turn to the *Künstlerroman*, a subgenre that portrays young writers (often semi-autobiographical figures) in their complicated, developmental journeys. For Wallace and Heti, the *Künstlerroman* offers an instrument for articulating and responding to the many dimensions in which neoliberal rationality and institutional frameworks impede characters' artistic willingness and expressive capacity. And while high literary art is a commodity of little concern or value to neoliberal capitalism, the representation of creative processes contaminated by neoliberalism's entrepreneurial subjectivity becomes, in "Westward" and *HSAPB*, a point of access to the modes of political imagination which neoliberalism aims to deny.

For Wallace, neoliberalism manifests in the prerogatives of institutionally sponsored creative writing. By placing his protagonist in "Westward," Mark Nechtr, within the demands of the MFA in fiction—a setting Wallace sees infected by an obsession with scholarly attention—Wallace depicts how professionalization can nullify art's empathetic potential. For Heti,

neoliberalism takes shape in the experience of the creative economy. While Sheila, Heti's semi-autobiographical counterpart (hereafter referred to as "Sheila"), reveals few financial concerns, her efforts to distinguish her artistic identity stem from an obsession with brand and celebrity intensified by masochistic and entrepreneurially-inflected self-comparison with the members of her artistic coterie.[20] Enmeshed in what Loren Glass describes as a modern but enduring "authorial star system in which the marketable 'personalities' of authors [are] frequently as important as the quality of their literary production," Sheila devotes the majority of her creative labor to assuming the monumental personhood she takes as precondition for writing.[21] The plotlines of both works trace the characters' experiences with writer's block, and it is a range of metafictional techniques branching from the Künstlerroman that gives Wallace and Heti a means for depicting the limitations of professionalized fiction-writing under late capitalism and, in effect, meditating on the prospect of alternative motivations and frameworks for literary expression.

Critical approaches to New Sincerity fiction have centered on themes of expressive capability, a feature that tends to emerge at the level of the inner-life. Likewise, the major conflicts in "Westward" and *HSAPB* stem from anticipatory states pertaining to potential failures of sincerity: moments when characters come to terms with how easy it is not to say what they mean, when they encounter the astonishing difficulty, as Ian Williams describes, of "discover[ing] if it is possible for an individual to sincerely communicate and empathize with another."[22] The expressive anxieties depicted in New Sincerity fiction involve the fear that one's "sincerity" is really what Katherine Bergeron calls a "sincerity effect" or, as Trilling puts it, that one is only "sincerely act[ing] the part of the sincere person."[23] In its most vicious form, speculative apprehension incites a feedback loop in which anxiety over the reception of one's

written or verbal expression can warp the intended statement or, more dangerously, the self that would articulate it. Adam Kelly was among the first to locate this pattern in the New Sincerity, and his summation remains paramount; for Kelly, the interest of Wallace in particular lies in "what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal states and instead become effects of anticipatory logic."[24] So as they depict the inner-lives of writers negotiating and confronting the anticipatory cycles propelled by professional and commercial values, Wallace and Heti are ever-shadowed by the specter of personal feelings; their central predicament is whether a writer can ever stage the transcendence of transactionalism without inadvertently instigating an affective transaction.

As it appears in "Westward," anticipation is a function of the relationship between fiction, literary criticism, and the adaptation of creative writing for postgraduate study. "Westward" is at once critique and extension of Barth's seminal metafiction, "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968); Wallace adapts Barth's semi-autobiographical bildungsroman hero, Ambrose Mensch, as Dr. Ambrose, Ph.D., professor of creative writing at the "East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program" (at the time of "Westward's" publication, Barth was teaching at Johns Hopkins University).[25] In the same way that the program's acronym makes sly commentary on Wallace's just-completed MFA training at the University of Arizona, the intertextual relationship with Barth clarifies "Westward's" opinion of what Mark McGurl has coined the "Program Era," the post-WWII timeframe in which American creative writing is reborn as institution through university sponsorship (coinciding also, three to four decades after the war, with the "corporatization" of the university).[26] In the context of Cold War—and, in some cases, with financial support from the Department of State—creative writing programs

were easily assimilated into English departments as "shrines to vivacious American individualism."[27] On the subject of metafiction, McGurl contends that "[f]lagrantly reflexive displays of power and fabulation were first and foremost an assertion of professional potency"—in other words, however vivacious those shrines to individualism might have been, newly-minted professors of fiction writing nonetheless found it necessary to borrow from the (relative) institutional security of English through self-aggrandizing, metafictional integrations of literary criticism into fiction.[28] Given Wallace's observation that the bulk of late 20th-century metafiction amounts only to a desperate cry of "'Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like* me!'," we would be safe to imagine Wallace holding sentiments similar to McGurl's.[29]

As ambassador of institutionally-acclimated and commercially-successful creative writing—having not only settled in the university but also selling the funhouse concept from his famous story as a sort of discotheque—Ambrose does little in his teaching to inspire the attempts at empathy that, for Wallace, distinguish worthwhile fiction. Wallace's early career ideal is often reduced to a vague humanism represented by the ever-quotable declaration: "Fiction's about what is to be a fucking *human being*."[30] (Despite the universality of Wallace's phasing, the identity of that human and the realm of his or her concerns is not entirely inclusive, skewing more often than not toward the white middle-class.) More precisely, Wallace sees fiction as a means of liberating the reader, who is often "marooned in her own skull," from the solipsism of postmodern culture by highlighting the common humanity between reader and writer: a commonality that is, ironically enough, the reader's and the writer's shared susceptibility to solipsism (as Wallace puts it in a later story, a "This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?" sort of feeling).[31] Stanley Cavell's concept of "acknowledgment" is salient for understanding the interplay between skepticism and Wallace's

efforts to provide the reader with "imaginative access to other selves" (and it is worth noting that during his stint as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, Wallace had hoped to claim Cavell as his mentor).[32] For Cavell, recognizing the humanity of another is a matter of experience, perception, recognition, and practical knowledge; he understands ordinary responses such as "pain-behavior" as immediate, self-justifying mandates to identify and treat others as human despite one's skeptical inclinations.[33] Cavell's attempt to shirk traditional philosophy's requirement of proof (in this case, of humanity) and turn instead to an ethics based on acknowledgment—based, that is, on the fact of suffering and the demands of its recognition—echoes the empathetic charge at the heart of Wallace's oeuvre, how fiction, as Wallace sees it, can make immediate the humanity signaled (but never verified) by behavior.[34]

Not so much, however, for the adapted Ambrose, whose concerns center on the inevitability of academic analysis. The narrator, a member of Mark's cohort, recalls:

> He told us all right before Thanksgiving to imagine you're walking by the Criticism Store and you see a sign in the store window that says FIRE SALE! COMPLETE ILLUMINATION, PAYOFF, UNDERSTANDING AND FULFILLMENT SALE! EVERYTHING MUST GO! PRICES GUTTED! And in you scurry, with your Visa. And but it turns out it's only the sign in the window *itself* that's for sale, at the Criticism Store.[35]

Despite the confidence Ambrose exudes in his attack on criticism (that criticism is an explicitly commercial affair, and the only thing one buys at the criticism store is brand equity), he cannot exorcise his scholarly demons. "Criticism: it never left him alone," we learn of the good professor, who shares a semblance of Wallace's occasional anti-intellectual posturing.[36] In Ambrose, Wallace offers one of his most striking illustrations of the recursive pathology central

to the New Sincerity. More than criticism itself, it is Ambrose's uneasiness with his own response to the inevitability of reception that dogs him; he is "clearly obsessed the way you get obsessed with something your fear of which informs you."[37] And as visionary metafictionist, the only therapy Ambrose knows is to embrace anticipation with literary treatment, with determined, vigilant, and self-aware extrapolations that, while keeping criticisms' barbs at bay, entrench scholarly attention (and the disciplinary capital it provides) all the more deeply in the artistic consciousness.

The hypersensitive, self-interpretive strategies Ambrose stages for his "academic heirs" originate in his decades' experience in what Chad Harbach (like many others) calls "the professor's publish-or-perish bargain," an impact-oriented setting that Harbach has categorized, along with the New York publishing industry, as one of the two most transformative forces in postwar fiction.[38] In this way, Ambrose brings to mind the (usually unfair) caricature of the creative writing professor bent on producing "'MFA-style writers,' robots churning out technically perfect but emotionally dead stories."[39] It is significant, however, that Wallace varies the stereotype by casting Ambrose as godhead of metafiction rather than of minimalism in the mold of Raymond Carver, which is often pegged as the most teachable (and therefore the most often taught) aesthetic of creative writing. Indeed, Ambrose's curriculum more often involves hyperbolic warnings than it does formal or stylistic prescriptions. A more nuanced perspective on Ambrose and the academy can thus be found in Wallace's experience with "trickle-down aesthetics," a framework Alexander Rocca uses to describe how well-endowed, bureaucratic institutions (such as, in Wallace's career, the university and the MacArthur Foundation) transfigure the priorities of art by virtue of their potential and actual patronage.[40] As the mode of literature closest in proximity to scholarly interpretation, metafiction allows Wallace an

unparalleled vantage on the relationship between art and its institutional lifeline.

Reflective of Wallace's belief that MFA programs, rather than "train[ing] professional writers, in reality train *more teachers of Creative Writing*," Ambrose's emphasis on the critical apparatus does better to equip his students to credential themselves according to the interests of the academy than to produce meaningful art.[41] More specifically, his critically-conscious fictions evince complicity in "academic capitalism," a term coined by Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter to index the professional and fiscal rationale of the academy in the ongoing aftermath of the Cold War. Drawing from data about the shifting cost of education (between the federal government, state governments, and students) and the developing partnership between corporate interests and academic research, Rhoades and Slaughter call attention to the ways in which "private sector logic has increasingly come to shape human agency in and the political economy of the academy."[42] While pertaining most directly to the relationship between scientific inquiry and consumer potential, Rhoades and Slaughter's contention that the university has sought progressively to "commercialize the values informing academic research" also does well to characterize the MFA in creative writing, the institutional standing of which is fortified by producing writers who attain faculty positions, garner critical renown, or achieve market success (this final aim being a less than likely prospect for writers of literary or experimental fiction and, perhaps, subordinate given the general dearth of popular-fiction writers on MFA faculty rosters).[43] Thus, as Wallace sees it, "the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a 'good' story works" that is more likely tethered to the values of critics and hiring committees than to aesthetic, empathetic, or anti-solipsistic priorities.[44] For Ambrose, this set of principles is synonymous with a writing that both anticipates and cultivates the interest of scholars, one

diligent and paranoid enough to incorporate interpretive vantages into narrative itself: metafiction. But for Mark, Ambrose's star pupil, it means an oppressive self-consciousness that feeds his preexisting "solipsistic delusion," a program-induced "standards problem" that renders him the least productive member of his cohort and creatively "blocked."[45]

A crucial subplot of "Westward" follows the psychological drama involved in Mark's ongoing failure to compose his ideal fiction, a work that, as he hopes, "treat[s] the reader like it wants to… well, fuck him," a story that is capable of affective impact by way of seduction, love, and betrayal.[46] The pressures of the creative writing program align with Mark's "professionally diagnosed emotional problems" so as to intensify the alienation Mark already feels from his own inner-states and, in effect, the raw material for his fiction.[47] Yet, more so than in portraying Mark's psychological tribulations, it is in teasing the possibility of Mark's unwritten story that Wallace tiptoes across the boundaries of personal feelings most precariously. Almost immediately in "Westward," expressions of gratitude for the reader's attention—of the "I'll say that I'm sorry, and that I am acutely aware of the fact that our time together is valuable" variety—allude to the possibility of affective payout; the narrator, in painstaking repetition, breaks the fourth wall to recognize and assure returns on the reader's investment.[48] In this context, Mark's literary quest seems to amplify the remunerative prospect; it carries the implication that if Mark does eventually achieve the story he envisions—and, most importantly, its affective ends—then so too will "Westward" at the moment it manifests Mark's narrative. The writer's block Mark experiences thus facilitates, along with the deferred presence of Mark's story, Wallace's implicit (and even explicit) pledge to pay dividends on the reader's capital.

Published two decades after "Westward," Heti's *HSAPB* furthers the depiction of artistic self-consciousness and careerism in a neoliberal context, capturing recursive anxiety as it

pertains not to the academy but instead to pressures of self-distinction in the creative economy. Heti often makes a point of her opposition to university training, despite having attended theatre school briefly for playwriting (a program she differentiates from the norm because its cohorts were small and its structure individualistic).[49] On the subject of her decision not to pursue an MFA, she remarks that graduate training "has never had much meaning or allure. As well, I have known a lot of people in grad school and no one seems very happy about it."[50] Of the brief mentions of the MFA within the text, the most meaningful appears via citation; Sheila reads from a 2006 *New York Times* interview of the visual artist and Yale graduate Ted Mineo, who, then twenty-five years old, synopsizes the trajectory of his career: "You get your B.F.A. and then you get your M.F.A. You move to New York, you have a show, and it's like being a lawyer or something else."[51] One can plausibility connect Heti's distaste for university sponsorship with her aversion to the grandeur perhaps implicit in writing works destined to be classified as literary fiction, a narcissism she tracks back to the early-20th century. Reflecting on the composition of *HSAPB*, Heti notes, "One of the things I wanted to kill in myself when I wrote this book was this modernist artist […] the one who tries to create one great monument."[52] Likewise, Sheila's attempt to murder her own inner modernist forms the central crisis of what Heti subtitles her "novel from life," a work which is, however, hardly identifiable as anything but literary fiction in the tradition of experimental autobiography (following in the wake, for example, of Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* [2001]).

HSAPB describes Sheila's many failures to eschew monumentality, and the *Künstlerroman* offers a trajectory fitting for portraying the artistic roadblocks that follow an authorial obsession with individuality, recognition, and achievement in the 21st-century economy. After being commissioned by a feminist theater company, Sheila attributes the

insurmountable writer's block she faces to her fixation on a writerly pantheon. For Sheila, the question of how a person should be is synonymous with the question of how to become one of those "people whose learning is so great, they seem to inhabit a different species-hood entirely […] filled with history and legends and beautiful poetry and all the gestures of all the great people down through time."[53] This premise, coupled with her insistence on "writing a play that is going to save the world," instigates the creative paralysis that stalls Sheila but fuels the plot of the novel.[54] James Wood summarizes Sheila's most fundamental questions thusly: "How talented am I? Do my gifts merit the luxury of dedicated labor? How on earth did the great artists get so much done? Why were they so bloody good?"[55] Insisting in this way that her work must culminate in impact and distinction, Sheila reflects what Brown identifies as neoliberalism's constitutive "emphasis on entrepreneurship and productivity."[56] Sheila's approach to artistry in the 21st century is part venture capitalist, to whom the only worthwhile returns are those of inconceivable proportions, part free-agent athlete, whose services are reserved for the highest bidder. Her unconscious habit of writing "*soul* as *sould*" is telling in this regard; throughout the novel, Sheila, however frustrated, awaits the very best opportunity in which she might invest (or sell shares in) her being.[57] Yet unlike the venture capitalist—who has attained a large enough resource pool to make an array of bets (and could not care less about dramaturgy)—Sheila conserves her resources in hopes of allocating them at the right moment and to the right project only, a time and place that never come.

What differentiates Sheila's experience from the (comparably) ahistorical anxiety of influence is Sheila's willingness to amend her very being for the sake of monumentality, the various strategies she pursues for claiming the artistic standing she considers prerequisite for creative output. The principal characters of the novel are drawn from Heti's years in the Toronto

art scene—the visual artist Margaux Williamson, the writer Misha Glouberman, the multi-medium artist Sholem Krishtalka—and Heti models much of the novel's dialogue from taped conversations and its plot on personal experiences.[58] This material makes fertile ground for Sheila's attempts to absorb the productivity of her more prolific friends, either by osmosis or by pilfering elements of their identities. The central example involves Sheila's belief that "talking with Margaux, and sharing a studio with Margaux" would eventually "make me a genius in the world."[59] So Sheila attaches herself to Marguax at the hip, and, while undoubtedly meaningful, their friendship is soured by several parasitic moments. Sheila's imitative tactic comes to a symbolic boiling point in an instance that underscores the centrality of consumer choice in Sheila's self-construction. Traveling with Margaux to an art festival in Miami, Sheila purchases the same dress Marguax had first selected. Margaux later emails Sheila: "i really do need some of my own identity. and this is pretty simple and good for the head."[60] Devastated, Sheila comes to the realization that she "had used *her* words, stolen what was *hers* […] had plagiarized her being."[61] And so she goes back to the drawing board.

Sheila's second, more prominent method of self-distinction comes in the form of "competitive abjection," a term coined by medievalist David Wallace and applied to digital environments by journalist Eric Andrew-Gee to describe a "putting on display sordid or pathetic aspects of one's life with a kind of abashed defiance, to pre-empt feelings of embarrassment or the possibility of scorn."[62] For Andrew-Gee, social media offers the primary site for such behavior, a statement one can verify with a quick search of #meIRL. Yet, for Sheila, whose life is strangely non-digital in *HSAPB* (including only a few email exchanges and a viewing of a celebrity sex-tape), abjection means giving up her search for "this idea of one Platonic person" and instead dedicating herself to life "without any clothes on."[63] Embracing creative incapacity

as if it were her nature, Sheila resolves through this concept to martyr herself as a different Platonic form, to find resigned usefulness in casting herself as a pedagogical example of how *not* to be. "Most people," Sheila philosophizes, "live their lives with their clothes on, and even if they wanted to, couldn't take them off. Then there are those who cannot put them on. They are the ones who live their lives not just as people but as examples of people. They are destined to expose every part of themselves, so the rest of us can know what it means to be human."[64] Putting this belief to work, Sheila devotes herself to a submissive sexual role with another patron of the Toronto art scene named Israel. She is at times thrilled by the ulterior productivity she finds in their erotic dynamics, happy to be "working on my blow jobs, really trying to make them something perfect," and at others deeply ashamed, none more so than when she flashes a child inadvertently while writing a "cock-sucking letter of flattery" at her partner's behest.[65]

While on the one hand a not-so-virtuous form of procrastination, the competitive abjection Sheila undertakes through her relationship—and also in her extrication from it, when she resolves "to be so ugly that the humiliation I have brought on myself would humiliate him, too"—offers a robust sense of individualism that not only differentiates Sheila from those within her artistic coterie but also encodes Sheila's long expressive struggle into a commercial metalanguage.[66] Seeking a monumental identity, either by mimicking the habits of friends or amplifying her own, Sheila in both instances integrates herself into the logic of late capitalism, according to which, as Jameson describes, individuals' "personality traits" are rewritten "in terms of potential raw materials."[67] Laboring in service of an identity distinct enough to merit creative output—in taking charge, that is, of the raw materials of her identity and altering them for the sake of commercial necessity—Sheila detaches herself and her hypothetical artwork from exigent purposes and entertains instead an effort centered almost exclusively on personal

branding. Through Sheila's subsequent modifications to her relationships and ontological motivations, Heti constructs in her autobiographical counterpart a case study in how neoliberalism, to quote (an older, wiser) Purdy, both "render[s] the self a flexible commodity—a platform for a suite of apps—and strip[s] relationships to instrumental transactions" for the sake of competitive positioning, in art as in entrepreneurship.[68]

So when Sheila arrives, finally, at the all-important realization that her "life need be no less ugly than the rest," that a remarkable personality is no criterion for art, she has already contaminated the affective structure of the text with a transactional rationale.[69] We have good reason—especially in light of Julia Kristeva's contention that abjection is "*a precondition of narcissism*"—to question whether Sheila's epiphany is simply the endpoint of a narrative in which the struggle for self-acceptance becomes itself a kind of badge that both warrants and promotes Sheila's expressive reclamation.[70] What feelings Sheila expresses, in other words, cannot at any time be severed from the entrepreneurial and radically-adaptable subjectivity that grounds the majority (if not the entirety) of *HSAPB*.

The Workshop as Site of Recovery in "Westward"

It should be clear by this point that "Westward" and *HSAPB* are narratives riddled with personal feelings. The utility of those feelings, however, emerges as a factor more complex and contradictory in terms than we might anticipate. While promising affective payouts, the narratives simultaneously invoke personal feelings to stage the specific anxieties, motivations, and behavioral patterns commanded by a neoliberal creative regime. From one perspective, this mimetic function would be enough to evince the complicity of New Sincerity metafiction in neoliberal rationality. Having classified "Westward" and *HSAPB* as metafictions by way of the *Künstlerroman*, a subgenre defined by narrative and thematic rather than formal properties

(though marked by a distinct trajectory), one may be tempted to concede this point and understand the narratives in much the same way Georg Lukás argued that Marx and Engels understood the works of Honoré de Balzac: as powerful insofar as they are reflective of what must inevitably collapse.[71] Yet, in both New Sincerity texts, when expressive recuperation occurs, it is at moments of unexpected formal transformation, when the *Künstlerroman* coincides abruptly with metafictional reflection not on creative context but instead on narrative scaffolding. In these climactic instances, "Westward" and *HSAPB* exceed the representative function as they shed light on a notion actively obscured by neoliberalism: the possibility of disparate conditions for thought and expression.

To this end, Wallace employs in "Westward" a hallmark technique of postmodern metafiction (and of many metafictions designated "pre-postmodern," most famously *One Thousand and One Nights*): the nested narrative, or, as Brian McHale puts it, "the Chinese box of fiction."[72] By making explicit both the composition and incorporation of one narrative within another, writers of postmodern metafiction, according to the major critical accounts, sought to underscore the material circumstances and inherent arbitrariness of the creative process and its eventual products.[73] Portrayals of compositional activity and narrative embedding serve as reminders that the text is neither holy nor ephemeral, crafted by a professional, like any other product, through skill and labor. With the procedures of artistry placed center stage, themes of authority, subservience, and resistance tend to lurk in the shallow subtext or, in some cases, emerge at the forefront of the metafictional text (for example, the character rebellions in Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* [1979] and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* [2005]). For Wallace, however, the nested narrative offers a curative to the institutional framework and,

through fiction highlighted as fiction, a means for expression uncontaminated by professionalization.

For all the attention Wallace offers the critical sphere, it is telling that the term "criticism" makes no appearance in the statement of intent he articulated in his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery: to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans."[74] (Smith would likely take issue with Wallace's terms.) It can be suggested, then, that Wallace circa 1989-1993 saw two mutually exclusive possibilities available to metafiction: estrangement, as in the case of Ambrose's critically-obsessive fictions, and empathetic relationality. While Wallace is quick to describe how metafiction can amplify a writer's worst approval-seeking tendencies, he also believes, by virtue of its intrinsic heteroglossia—its ability to speak for/as character, narrator, writer, and reader—that metafiction holds an unexploited potential for acknowledgment. To achieve this end, Wallace triggers in "Westward" what he describes as "Armageddon-explosion."[75] Wallace may have had in mind Patricia Waugh's seminal monograph, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), and in particular Waugh's argument that reflexivity is itself no advance but rather clears way for the next aesthetic or formal development in literary fiction.[76] Yet, in his attempt "to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it," Wallace makes a departure.[77] His is an apocalypse that sets metafiction as grounds for reclaimed expressivity.

So Wallace's answer to apprehension in "Westward" is not less metafiction, but more. Like Wallace (or, according to Marshall Boswell, as "*Wallace*'s own Ambrose"), Mark sees in late-20th-century metafiction a correspondence between self-reference and self-centeredness.[78] Mark interprets metafiction as an elevation of writerly ability above meaning; he sees even the

most impressive metafictions as spectacular, even beautiful, but eminently transfixing (an affect Wallace would investigate throughout his career, most prominently in *Infinite Jest*'s [1996] "the Entertainment"):

> Solipsism affects [Mark] like Ambrosian metafiction affects him. It's the high siren's song of the wrist's big razor. It's the end of the long, long, long race you're watching, but at the end you fail to see who won, so entranced are you with the exhausted beauty of the runners' faces as they cross the taped line to totter in agonized circles, hands on hips, bent.[79]

At the same time, however, a small inkling of Mark's sets him apart from the Wallace of "E Unibus Pluram." In response to the narrator's opening query in "Lost in the Funhouse"—"For whom is the funhouse fun?," which resurfaces throughout "Westward" to probe metafiction's empathetic potential—Mark suspects the only "way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside."[80] According to Mark's vision, a literature is possible in which the construction of interior narratives, rather than highlighting artificiality, would instead facilitate emotional interchange between writer and reader (for Konstantinou, such is a "credulous metafiction," which rebukes deconstructive epistemology by fostering the reader's capacity for belief as such).[81] Still, Mark has his doubts. A story of this sort "would NOT be metafiction," he makes clear, "[b]ecause metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object."[82]

If metafiction, as Wallace insinuates, is indeed symptomatic of anticipation and approval-seeking, then it may seem counterintuitive that Wallace would turn to metafiction, even in the nested form. At the same time, however, Mark's distinction suggests that the most hazardous qualities of metafiction stem not from self-reference alone but rather from the marriage of self-

reference and a defensive or even paranoid disposition (the professional advantages of which we see emblematized in Ambrose). It is according to this framework, I suspect, that Wallace finds justification for locating Mark's narrative in the long conclusion of "Westward." There, Wallace embeds Mark's finally-written short story, a sentimental (even melodramatic) tale about Dave, whose lover, L, kills herself during one of their frequent arguments. Dave, after unexpectedly pleading guilty to murder, is regularly abused by his cellmate, another Mark, who later escapes from prison. After Mark's escape, Dave is left with a final decision: either to rat Mark out or, for what Dave describes as reasons of honor, keep silent.

Unexpectedly, the MFA workshop, perhaps the central site in Wallace's career for the infusion of neoliberal prerogatives into fiction, disseminates Mark's draft. The narrator, present at the workshop ("Didactic little fucker, too. Nechtr. But Ambrose was being indulgent that seminar day. We could tell he loved the kid, deep down"), summarizes the draft in an offhand but detailed manner.[83] On occasion, he interrupts his synopsis to describe Ambrose's professorial judgments, and it is in these instances that we are able to gauge both the workshop and Mark's story in relation to institutional pressures on creative expression. The difference between this discourse and Ambrose's earlier diatribes is remarkable. The concerns Mark encounters in the workshop are not so much "what will scholars think?" as they are "does it work?" For example, Ambrose's interjection regarding Dave's speech on honor to the prison warden:

> Ambrose invites us to listen closely to the kidnapped voice here. This Dave guy is characterized very carefully all the way through the thing as fundamentally *weak* […] Is this the real him, bandaged, prostrate before ideas so old they're B.C.? That shit with [the warden]: that was just words. Could a weak person *act* so?

> Debate, before the bell rings, is vigorous and hot. The ambiguity is the rich, accidental kind—admitting equally of concession and stand.[84]

Note the choice of "listen closely" as opposed to "close read." While the feedback of a writer's contemporaries can be just as vicious as any critic's (which Wallace had learned from his often excoriating correspondence with Jonathan Franzen), neither these imagined colleagues nor their criticisms threaten to corrode the writer's psyche.[85] Rather than exaggerating the deleterious aspects of institutional fiction writing—patronage, aesthetic standardization, and professional insecurity—the workshop engenders a new (albeit imagined) sphere of expression, one more conducive, it seems, to creative expression. In this arena, seemingly quarantined from the toxicity of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, the discourse in which Ambrose guides his students alters; once he has shifted from lesson to workshop, his words are brought more closely into the orbit of the empathetic humanism Wallace idealizes (however problematically). A different Ambrose, undisturbed by criticism, asks his pupils a different sort of question: whether Mark has rendered his characters recognizably human, enough so to inspire belief in them as thinking, feeling beings. And Mark, despite his institutional trepidations, finds the workshop a site in which creative risk-taking and empathetic ambitions become both sanctioned and plausible. Paradoxically, it is only within the heart of the neoliberal academy that the developing writers, even (at times) Ambrose himself, can conceive of literature as a means for achieving the same "pathetically unself-conscious *sentimentality*" that would eventually characterize the New Sincerity.[86]

But more significant than the draft's moral intensity and overwrought emotionality is that it appears at all. In other words, if Mark's expressive reclamation can only take place behind closed doors, in an environment central to but quarantined from professionalism and

cultural/academic capital, then "Westward's" own aesthetic and formal daringness follows a similar, inward trajectory. Gone, after the appearance of Mark's draft, are the insistent mediations on the efficacy and affective incapacity of metafiction, the interruptions that made explicit the narrator's gratitude for readers' time and attention, the dwelling on institutional demands. The most telling features of Mark's draft, especially when compared to the shell narrative, are its absences. And what follows, aside from Ambrose's occasional interruptions, is character-driven, sentimental, gimmick-free, linear narrative: one that tells rather than shows, but that is also unmarked by fourth-wall ruptures, commentary on the makeup or significance of the fictional world, and defensive self-interpretation. After a hundred pages of incessant reflexivity, a story, once placed inside another, that is expressible as nothing but a story.[87]

It should be apparent, then, that the indirect manifestation of Mark's draft constitutes a final payoff. Yet, the corresponding shift in form and aesthetics signals a destabilization of context that complicates the transaction's terms. In moving from surface narrative to another, submerged level, Wallace demonstrates a sensitivity to speech contexts reminiscent of his major philosophical influence, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose investigations into the circumstances that govern meaning have offered philosophers like Cavell an anti-skeptical method that does not rely on philosophy's traditional toolset. Like Cavell's, Wallace's response to a problematic paradigm is not to argue against its tenets or assumptions, but to propose a different paradigm altogether. It is in this way that "Westward" refuses to rebuke institutionality. Instead, Wallace instigates a shift in parameters, summoning an environment hospitable to conceptual flexibility and expressive vulnerability. While an institutional rubric may demand intense forecasting and defensiveness, the institution also becomes, in its metafictional treatment, an enabling condition for the very kind of writing it would otherwise deny. Though critical and even at times parodic,

Wallace's most meaningful response to the creative-writing apparatus is to instrumentalize it as a tool for formal transformation, not to resist the workshop, but to reframe it as a vehicle for the very plotlines, styles, and structures of feelings it deters.

Object Lessons in Heti's "Novel from Life"

If Wallace's method in "Westward" is to transverse toward (but never truly meet) an interior level of fictionality, then Heti demonstrates something of the opposite: an emergence outward away from the imagined and in the direction of the real. Unlike "Westward's" Mark, Sheila never completes her creative task; as with Heti's own experience (in authoring *HSAPB* after her play received an underwhelming reception in New York), the grant from the feminist theatre company culminates in a product of another genre.[88] At the climax of *HSAPB*, Sheila faces an exasperated Marguax's ultimatum that she shed her artistic apprehensions and "answer your question—about how a person should be—so that you never have to think about it anymore."[89] Sheila submits, but only with the sly caveat, "Does it have to be a play?"[90] The suggestion behind this provocation—like in Philip Roth's *The Ghostwriter* (1979), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), and (depending on how you read it) Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* (1986), among countless others—is that the book at hand represents a character's product, Sheila's substitute for the unfinished drama. While chronicling Sheila's struggles, the text serves doubly (and has served all along) as record of its own production, its mimetic elements born in self-reference. In this way, Heti's narrative reconceptualization is clever, cheeky, and self-congratulatory, but it is also the novel's most important critical mechanism, the technique with which Sheila reconfigures her relationship to market demands.

The effect of this virtuoso deployment of what Johanna Drucker calls "self-reflexivity in book form" is for Heti to establish the genesis of *HSAPB* as an exploitation of the same anxieties

that had plagued the novel's protagonist.[91] Attributing Sheila's social and psychological impediments to her own description indicates an implicit but powerful amendment to the expressive conditions that had silenced the writer; adopting a self-referential mode of fiction and trajectory toward the real, Sheila signals a successful (albeit unspoken) transmutation of apprehension into art. This goes far in explaining Heti's "a novel from life" subtitle, a description that marks fictionality as only a byproduct, a result of the human tendency, as Sheila suggests, to "pick certain dots and connect them and not others."[92] By Heti's own oft-cited account, her propensity for the real hinges on little more than personal preference: "Increasingly I'm less interested in writing about fictional people, because it seems so tiresome to make up a fake person and put them through the paces of a fake story. I just—I can't do it […] I love being in the world, I love being among people, writing is the opposite of that."[93] And yet, given the centrality of economy, recognition, and branding in Heti's text, the substitution of fiction for reality brings a distinctly political salience; it animates, in a context where marketability commands subjectivity, the enduring capacity of the individual to transcend the expressive and epistemic limitations of her environment.

We can surmise, then, that to reject fictionality for its proximity to what Glass identifies as the "model of the author as a solitary creative genius," is, by Heti's design, to engage in an alternative mode of writing capable of repurposing the quieting pressures of brand and canonicity.[94] With this paradoxically metafictional "renunciation of metalanguage," as Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan describe—and without what Wood calls in his reading of *HSAPB* the "false, lying, artificial" elements of fiction—the sincere transmission of intent becomes all the more possible, even in a setting that demands a self more malleable than principled.[95] Sheila's narrative need only edge closer and closer to the real, toward a literature

that, while not exactly autobiographical, can be characterized as a radically public display of subjectivity contrary to the creative economy from which it emerges.

What Sheila evinces, then, in assuming the depiction of her prolonged bout with writer's block—in capturing what Kristeva describes as the self's realization that "all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being"—is not so much the inexpression so often synonymous with hipsterism and postmodernity as it is a variation of irony akin to Richard Rorty's: the willingness to amend one's innermost assumptions.[96] Sheila's reconsideration of the monumental personhood and personal brand required for artistry, instigated by metafictional technique, is also, to apply Rorty's vocabulary, a surge in her "power of redescription," which is to say an openness to reshaping her epistemic foundations.[97] As metafictional book-object, *HSAPB* clears space for Sheila to contemplate the anxieties specific to her experience in the creative economy and, in doing so, to represent in public facing art both her mimicry and abjection—or, in her words, "all the molecules of shit that were such a part of my deepest being."[98]

More charitably, we can understand *HSAPB* through Jill Bennett's understanding of sincerity's 21st-century modality: the demonstration of a palpable "struggle with the feeling or experience of something we might call insincerity."[99] In claiming the representation of this tension, Sheila demonstrates how irony does not prohibit intense periods of inexpression but rather mandates them. One can distinguish a generative irony of this kind, writes Jonathan Lear, by "a breakdown in *practical intelligibility*: I can no longer make sense of myself (to myself, and thus can no longer put myself forward to others) in terms of my practical identity."[100] On an affective register, he adds, irony is "species of uncanniness" capable of disrupting one's underlying expectations of world and self and, consequently, leaving the self in an extended state

of shock.[101] Heti is careful to describe her protagonist in such a tumult, introduced in the throes of writer's block, breaking down in intelligibility. We thus encounter in Sheila's pseudo-physical production a testament to both the coherence of irony with sincere expression and the capacity of metafiction to think beyond neoliberal logic. Like the emergence of Mark's narrative within the shared space of the MFA workshop, Sheila's eventual, paradigm-shattering composition relies on a turn to sincerity that, for Heti, is best facilitated by the self-referential representation of speechlessness.

New Sincerity Metafiction and the "Distribution of the Sensible"

The terrain on which Wallace and Heti confront the anticipatory states instigated by neoliberal capitalism is one that allows for strange paradoxes and conspicuous absences. In animating and negotiating the pressures of neoliberal institutions and markets, "Westward" and *HSAPB* follow opposite vectors: the former toward fictionality, the latter away. For both narratives, however, a critical perspective is made possible by carefully plotted, self-referential reckonings with the anxieties endemic to the production of literary fiction. In each text, variations on metafictional prose offer method for illustrating and eventually coopting the apprehensive states inflicted on their protagonists. As Mary K. Holland argues, this "post-postmodern" evolution of metafiction fulfills, unlike its postmodern predecessor, the "formerly 'realist' goal of making the author and text feel intimately present for a reader whose participation in that act of humanism the text depends."[102] But if there is a humanism implicit in New Sincerity metafiction, it is also bound up in a sharply political project—one without mandatory shape or form—that highlights the otherwise occluded contingency of neoliberalism and the limitations it enforces on ontology, epistemology, and expression.

From this perspective, the vague and incomplete nature of Wallace and Heti's politics comes into focus within a broader critical logic. "Westward" and *HSAPB* address the formal at the expense of the practical, indexing few (if any) particulars when it comes to alternative expressive or subjective paradigms. I read this absence, however, in light of Ernesto Laclau, who in his writings on signification in populist movements claims that "'vagueness' and 'imprecision' […] are inscribed in the very nature of the political," that the function of ambiguity is to conjoin social demands.[103] The challenges thrown down by Wallace and Heti are therefore challenges at a foundational level, matters of subject, not of efficacy. They bear less on neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial subjectivity it propagates than they do on the permanency and exclusivity which neoliberalism ascribes to those elements. This, I believe, despite the absence of a positive vision, constitutions its own kind of political intervention. To destabilize the exclusivity of neoliberalism, for Wallace and Heti, is to fracture its epistemic bedrock.

As Brown reminds us, neoliberalism depends on modeling a subject who "approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct," who "cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way."[104] The neoliberal subject has assumed an economic system of evaluation that, by virtue of its universal applicability, eliminates the prospect of ontologies motivated by noneconomic concepts. This is to say that neoliberalism depends on a specific "distribution of the sensible," a term of Jacques Rancière's that describes particular "system[s] of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously disclos[e] the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."[105] "Politics and art," Rancière argues, "like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done."[106] Broadly speaking, the

distribution of the sensible helps us to understand how politics and art circumscribe not only the range of concepts, perspectives, and actions one can engage at a given time and place in history but also those available to the public imagination. We can thus add to our description of neoliberalism an epistemic and ontological framework that secures its preeminence through a recursive cycle in which neoliberal subjects—who understand resources and self as nothing but economically grounded and financially quantifiable—build the very discourses and cultures that render inconceivable alternative subject positions, rationalities, and social structures.

This means that to treat neoliberalism as malleable, even within the relatively minor contexts of MFA training and the creative economy, is a more radical act than it may appear. As Rancière might argue, metafictions such as "Westward" and *HSAPB* theorize a writing that, even while grounded in institutions, reflects on its own conditions as a way to "loosen up this relationship between art, the market, and politics; and to say that, despite all we know about the institutions and the market [… to] suggest different ways of making different realms today."[107] Depicting artists for whom self-referential transformations in form reenergize creative willingness, Wallace and Heti posit that even within an environment effectively sealed from noneconomic concepts, literary experimentation can provide a method for restoring the plausibility, and therefore conceivability and expression, of alternate paradigms. This is one aspect of what Judith Butler has in mind when she refers to the power of art to disrupt "framing" apparatuses. Self-referentiality, in these novelists' employment, not only "call[s] certain fields of normativity into question" (i.e. the givenness of expressive configurations) but also provides a vantage from which a seemingly inexhaustible neoliberalism can be understood as contingent, one context for subjectivity, sociality, thought, and labor among others.[108]

Though far from manifestos, the metafictions of Wallace and Heti suggest that if it is possible, as Konstantinou argues is imperative in a newly post-ironic culture, "to dismantle the power of those whose strength partly depends on our cynicism," then such an effort begins with an energization of imaginative capacity.[109] It is for this reason that Wallace and Heti's formal experimentations—and the personal feelings that undergird them—amount to such untidy outcomes (on both affective and political registers). The upside of refusing particulars and locating metafiction at the level of expression and conceptual availability is to understand resistance as an act predicated on the recognition of ideological impermanence. It should be no surprise, then, that "Westward" and *HSAPB* come replete with personal feelings; the psychological dramas motivated by writer's block are essential to how the two writers realize variability. Yes, the introspective intensity of the New Sincerity—and with little doubt "Westward" and *HSAPB*—is an emotional indulgency that risks absorption into transactional frameworks. Yet, in coupling these thematics with self-referential forms, Wallace and Heti achieve a political salience crucial for a time in which neoliberalism is becoming visible, finally, as something besides an inevitability.

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[1] While the monograph that theorizes the New Sincerity as the definitive mode of "post-postmodernism" has yet to be written, the movements is well recognized among the major candidates, including (but hardly limited to) "neosincerity," "neorealism," "metamodernism," "postirony," and "post-postmodernism" proper. See, for example, the following references to the New Sincerity in scholarship, journalism, and cultural criticism: Stanley Fish, "'Les Misérables' and Irony," *Opinionator – NYTimes*, January 28, 2013, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/28/les-miserables-and-irony/; Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos," *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/; Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); AD Jameson, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the New Sincerity, Part 1," *HTML Giant*, June 4, 2012, http://htmlgiant.com/haut-or-not/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-the-new-sincerity/; AD Jameson, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the New Sincerity, Part 2," *HTML Giant*, June 11, 2012, http://htmlgiant.com/haut-or-not/what-we-talk-about-when-we-

talk-about-the-new-sincerity-part-2/; Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131-46; Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: David Foster Wallace and Lionel Trilling," *Post45*, October 17, 2014, http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/; Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); R. Jay Magill, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion That We All Have Something to Say (No Matter How Dull)* (New York: Norton, 2012); Jedediah Purdy, "The Accidental Neoliberal: Against the Old Sincerity," *n+1*, no.19 (Spring 2014); Joseph Witek, ed., *Art Spiegelman: Conversations*, 1st ed, Conversations with Comic Artists (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Jesse Thorn, "A Manifesto for the New Sincerity," *Maximum Fun*, March 27, 2006, http://www.maximumfun.org/blog/2006/02/manifesto-for-new-sincerity.html.

[2] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.

[3] James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman," *The New Republic*, July 23, 2000, https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman.

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 12.

[5] Boredmonkey, "Zeitgeist A.K.A The Reivers I.R.S. The Cutting Edge," filmed 1985, YouTube video, 1:47, posted May 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC45D9-bt_s.

[6] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 12.

[7] Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1994), 249, 148.

[8] "'Maybe Sincerity is the New Punk': Chris Cornell on Embracing Space," *NPR*, September 13, 2015," http://www.npr.org/2015/09/13/439262615/maybe-sincerity-is-the-new-punk-chris-cornell-on-embracing-space.

[9] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 273.

[10] Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony," *Opinionator – The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/?mcubz=3.

[11] Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony (for Real, This Time)," *The Stone — The New York Times*, December 19, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/opinion/how-to-live-without-irony-for-real-this-time-.html. Emphasis added.

[12] Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony."

[13] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 133.

[14] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226. Adam Kotsko, "Neoliberalism's Demons," *Theory & Event* 20, no.2 (April 2017): 506.

[15] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

[16] Ibid., 2. In theorizing "impersonal feelings," Smith acknowledges her debt to Sianne Ngai, and in particular to Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005). However, Smith also distinguishes impersonal

feelings, based on their resistance to categorization, from the affects captured in Ngai's more taxonomic approach, which is better emblematized by Ngai's subsequent book, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012). Smith attributes her comparably non-taxonomic approach to her "interest in the distinction between two different types of literary feeling, one that can be more easily felt, described, and therefore traded and valued, and other that is less immediately palpable and codifiable." Ibid, 18.

[17] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 65, 49. Wallace is preceded in this contention by one of postmodern culture's most vociferous critics, Christopher Lasch, who argued that the late-20th century metafictionist aims only "to seduce others into giving him their attention, acclaim, or sympathy." Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 21.

[18] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 81.

[19] Ibid., 81.

[20] For book critic Christian Lorentzen, the blurring of writer/character and writer—and the implications of that act for contemporary "challenges of artistic creation"—classifies *HSAPB* not as metafiction but rather as "autofiction," a subgenre of authenticity-focused fiction marked by "an evident hostility to many of the tidy conventions of literary fiction." In this subgenre, he adds, "[p]lots are submerged beneath the unruly flow of time. Characters other than the protagonist may be reduced to the status of spokes, of interest only in terms of their connection to the central figure. The set piece gives way to the essayistic digression or the journal shard." Lorentzen's distinction stems from an understanding of metafiction that is limited to intertextuality, parody, and self-conscious allusion. I, for one, prefer Patricia Waugh's comparatively broad vision: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." While I contest the centrality Waugh ascribes to the fiction/reality paradigm (as self-referentiality has troubled more than that that one boundary), the upside of Waugh's understanding is that it allows us to draw lineages of metafiction that reach beyond relatively short-lived periods, such as postmodernism. For this reason, a definition such Waugh's does better, I think, to encapsulate the intertextuality that Lorentzen privileges—a feature which is key to a text like Heti's, given the dialogue Heti establishes in *HSAPB* with literary modernism. Christian Lorentzen, "Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama," *Vulture*, January 11, 2017, http://www.vulture.com/2017/01/considering-the-novel-in-the-age-of-obama.html. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

[21] Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 2.

[22] Iain Williams, "(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's 'Octet'," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no.3 (2015): 302.

[23] Katherine Bergeron, "Melody and Monotone: Performing Sincerity in Republican France" in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, eds. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 53. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 11.

[24] Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity," 136.

[25] David Foster Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 233.

[26] On the subject of the corporate university, I recommend Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson, *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Education, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). I would also call attention to two particularly novel and seemingly oppositional approaches to imagining a university after neoliberalism. For an argument on how the neoliberal university might be amended, perhaps oxymoronically, through an intensification of market-based evaluation, see Jeffrey T. Nealon, "University. The Associate Vice Provost in the Gray Flannel Suit: Administrative Labor and the Corporate University" in *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 66-86. For a set of democratic guidelines that might supplant those of the neoliberal university, see Michael Rustin, "The Neoliberal University and Its Alternatives," *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 63 (Summer 2016): 147-70.

[27] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 265. See also Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); and Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

[28] Ibid., 236. Additionally, D.G. Myers on the status of creative writing in the academy: "The idea of hiring writers to teach writing has never won unquestioned acceptance nor has creative writing—the classroom subject—progressed much beyond apologizing for itself." D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1996), 3.

[29] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 130.

[30] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 131.

[31] Ibid., 127. David Foster Wallace, "Octet" in *Brief Interview with Hideous Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 131.

[32] Ibid., 127. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 132-33.

[33] For Cavell, to deny pain-behavior as indicative of another's life-status is to deny the practical knowledge one uses to participate in the world: "A question whether we know what pain-behavior means? What question? Whether we are ignorant of this fact? Or have forgotten it? It is only the knowledge that a body which exhibits its pain(-behavior) is that of a live creature, a living being. Not to know this would be the same as not knowing what a body is. And yet this seems to be the knowledge that Wittgenstein takes philosophy to deny." In this sense, we need not argue against skepticism as the skeptical position is nullified in the face of suffering. That we recognize suffering as such does not rebut the skeptic's argument but it does allow us to "know" in every practical sense of the word the humanity of the sufferer: "your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your or his) being in pain' means." Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 340, 263.

[34] Note that for Wallace empathy does not mean epistemic access to the inner lives of others. Wallace concedes that "true empathy's impossible" and describes that in fiction empathy is more "a sort of *generalization* of suffering." McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 127.
[35] Wallace, "Westward," 293.
[36] Ibid., 239.
[37] Ibid., 293.
[38] Ibid., 310. Chad Harbach, "MFA vs NYC" in *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, ed. Chad Harbach (New York: n+1/Farrar, Straus and Grioux, 2014), 16.
[39] Maria Adelmann, "Basket Weaving 101" in *MFA vs NYC*, 45.
[40] Alexander Rocca, "I don't feel like a Genius": David Foster Wallace, Trickle-Down Aesthetics, and the MacArthur Foundation, *Arizona Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (Spring 2017).
[41] David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Future and the Conspicuously Young" in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 60.
[42] Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter, "Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Privatization as Shifting the Target of Public Subside in Higher Education" in *The University, State, and Market: The Political Economy of Globalization in the Americas*, eds. Robert A. Rhoads and Carlos Alberto Torres (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 117.
[43] Ibid., 118.
[44] Wallace, "Fictional Futures," 59.
[45] Wallace, "Westward," 305, 326.
[46] Ibid., 331.
[47] Ibid., 303.
[48] Ibid., 236.
[49] Jessica Loudis, "Should I Go to Grad School?: An Interview with Sheila Heti," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2014, //www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/should-i-go-to-grad-school-an-interview-with-sheila-heti.
[50] Ibid.
[51] The full quotation from Mineo: "I'm glad to be making art, rather than having to sculpt toys all the time. But on the other hand, it's like: 'Is this based on reality? How long is this going to last? And is the level of artwork benefiting from this? […] I guess it does create a level of professionalism among people: There's a career track. You get your B.F.A. and then you get your M.F.A. You move to New York, you have a show, and it's like being a lawyer or something else. And that doesn't entirely square with the romantic ideal of being an artist, living in isolation and being the avant-garde hero." Heti appears to have omitted Mineo's self-conscious reflection on the professionalization of art—one that includes but also goes beyond institutional training—as well as, and more importantly, his especially Heti-like meditations on reality and authenticity. Meredith Kahn Rollins, "The Debutant's Ball," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/arts/design/03kahn.html.
[52] David Naimon, "A Conversation with Sheila Heti," *The Missouri Review* 35, no. 4 (2012): 117.
[53] Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?: A Novel from Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2012), 187.
[54] Ibid., 87.

[55] James Wood, "True Lives: Sheila Heti's 'HSAPB??'," *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/25/true-lives-2.
[56] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 65.
[57] Heti, *HSAPB*, 186.
[58] Lauren Elkin, "*How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti," *The Quarterly Conversation*, June 6, 2011, *http*://quarterlyconversation.com/how-should-a-person-be-by-sheila-heti.
[59] Ibid., 94.
[60] Ibid., 116.
[61] Ibid., 179.
[62] Eric Andrew-Gee, "Pathetic and Proud: A Young Generation Finds Freedom in Humiliation," *The Globe and Mail*, March 9, 2017, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/pathetic-and-proud-a-young-generation-finds-freedom-inhumiliation/article34208101/.
[63] Jackie Linton, "Sheila Heti's Hysterical Realism," *Interview Magazine*, June 20, 2012, http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/sheila-heti-how-should-a-person-be/. Heti, *HSAPB*, 60.
[64] Heti, *HSAPB*, 60-61.
[65] Ibid., 155, 226.
[66] Ibid., 271.
[67] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 270.
[68] Purdy, "The Accidental Neoliberal," 6.
[69] Heti, *HSAPB*, 274.
[70] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13.
[71] See "Marx and Engles on Aesthetics" in Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, ed., trans. Arthur Kahn (Lincoln: iUniverse Inc., 2005), 61-88.
[72] McHale's take on the utility of this structure: "a functional equivalence of between strategies of self-erasure or self-contradiction and strategies involving recursive structures […] hav[ing] the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction." Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 111-12.
[73] See Waugh, *Metafiction*; and Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).
[74] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 142.
[75] Ibid., 142.
[76] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 64.
[77] McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 142.
[78] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 106.
[79] Wallace, "Westward," 303. If metafiction is, in this sense, missing something vague but essential—a humanism or human resonance—then the significance of Mark's name also comes into focus. As Marshall Boswell has recognized, the surname "Nechtr" is a play on how "Ambrose" is "two letters short" of "ambrosia." Given Mark's status as Ambrose's favored student and, by virtue of their nominal relation, inheritor, then so too will he be defined by an

experimentalism that also lacks: a clever "h" but conspicuously absent vowel. Boswell, *Understanding*, 105.
[80] John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Anchor, 1963), 72. Wallace, "Westward," 331.
[81] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 41, 183.
[82] Wallace, "Westward," 332.
[83] Ibid., 367.
[84] Wallace, "Westward," 370.
[85] On Wallace and Franzen's competitive friendship, see "Into the Funhouse" and "Please Don't Give Up on Me" in Max, *Every Love Story*, 89-176.
[86] Wallace, "Westward," 370.
[87] Wallace arrived for his MFA training at the University of Arizona (which had offered him a more generous financial package than the Iowa Writers' Workshop) under the impression that the faculty would be more receptive to experimental fiction than the typical program of the 1980s. This was true, but only to the extent that the faculty at Arizona had a relatively modest appreciation for postmodern forms and aesthetics. The secondhand summary of Mark's draft thus subverts the "Show, don't tell" adage Wallace would challenge (and be rebuked for challenging) throughout his time in the program. See Max, "Westward!" in *Every Love Story,* 50-88.
[88] Michelle Dean, "Sheila Heti on Reviving Her 'Failed' Play: It's like … a near Death Experience," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/20/sheila-heti-reviving-play-all-our-happy-days-are-stupid.
[89] Heti, *HSAPB*, 262.
[90] Ibid., 262.
[91] Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), 161.
[92] Heti, *HSAPB*, 279.
[93] Sheila Heti, "Interview with David Hickey," *The Believer*, November/December 2007, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200711/?read=interview_hickey.
[94] Glass, *Authors Inc.*, 6.
[95] Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, "Notation After 'The Reality Effect': Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti," *Representations* 125, no. 1 (February 2014): 82. Wood, "True Lives."
[96] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.
[97] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989), 89.
[98] Heti, *HSAPB*, 277.
[99] Jill Bennett, "A Feeling of Insincerity: Politics, Ventriloquy, and the Dialectics of Gesture" in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, eds. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 199.
[100] Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 18.
[101] Ibid., 19.
[102] Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism,* 166-67.
[103] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 99.
[104] Brown, 39.

[105] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.
[106] Ibid., 39.
[107] Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Polity Press, 2016), 176.
[108] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 24.
[109] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 288.

Engagement: Reading and Acknowledgment in *Ceremony*

Perhaps the key ethical impasse in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) occurs early in the novel, when Tayo, a half-blood Laguna Pueblo, and his full-blood, elder cousin and adoptive brother, Rocky—both American soldiers in the Philippines—capture with their World War II battalion a Japanese unit. Instructed to execute the enemy, Tayo faces what we might call a dilemma of recognition, the force of which originates in what a particular being is *seen as*:

> When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. The fever made him shiver, and the sweat was stinging his eyes and he couldn't see clearly; in that instant he saw Josiah standing there; the face was dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo. So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah; and even after Rocky started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was *still* Josiah lying there […] Rocky made him look at the corpse and said, "Tayo, this is a *Jap*! This is a *Jap* uniform!" And then he rolled the body over with his boot and said, "Look, Tayo, look at the face," and that was when Tayo started screaming because it wasn't a Jap, it was Josiah, eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death.[1]

The moment Tayo perceives the Japanese solider as his uncle Josiah—the moment he recognizes kinship with the enemy—an ethical demand emerges. Noticing the face of Josiah "dark from the sun" and finding himself unable to do violence, Tayo recalls a central imperative of Emmanuel Levinas: that in the face of the other "is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.'"[2] Yet,

although it is the face of the other that strikes Tayo, Silko's protagonist neither adheres to a Levinasian ethics of epistemological distance—an ethics founded on insurmountable unknowability—nor to any simpler moral dictum. Rather, the demand Tayo faces—and his ensuing "flash of compassion," as Mascha N. Gemein describes it—stems entirely from his hallucination of the soldier as the familiar (and familial) Josiah.[3]

Despite the specificity of this encounter, interpreters of *Ceremony* have taken Tayo's resistance as indicative of an ethics of universal human sameness articulated from the cultural vantage of the Laguna Pueblo. Louis Owens reads the scene thusly:

> Although Tayo's vision of Josiah is dismissed as "battle fatigue," as Tayo comes to understand the world according to Pueblo values, he will realize that in a crucial sense the executed man actually was Josiah, that all men and women are one and all phenomena inextricably interrelated.[4]

Indeed, Tayo's traumatic experience with an unfamiliar other in an unfamiliar locale makes a strong allusion to the vision Silko aims ultimately to impart to her readers in terms of the relationship between local violence, imperial conquest, and international conflict. As Gay Wilentz describes, *Ceremony*'s most essential function may be to illustrate the linkage of "the degradation of the indigenous people of this hemisphere to the consequences of the atom bomb [… and the correspondence] between individual illness and a diseased world."[5] Still, crucial (and remarkable) as Silko's global but simultaneously local perspective may be, it does not leave an ethics organized around universal sameness impervious to critique. If we are all potential Josiahs, we might ask, can we account for difference?

To approach this question, it is necessary first to interrogate the dynamics of Tayo's hallucination and the ethical undercurrent the sets in motion Tayo's resistance to violence. As

readers like Owens suggest, the perceived kinship may allude to metaphysical commonality, an ethical responsibility rooted in shared humanity or essence. It is appropriate, after all, that Tayo—a hybrid figure whose white and Native American ancestry centralizes the novel's many dilemmas of difference—should sense this exigent but unspeakable bond. And it is all the more urgent, perhaps, that he senses the bond far from home and, as literary instrument, introduces it to an audience almost surely implicated in a global capitalism dependent on the violent but veiled exploitation of non-Western bodies. Such is the argument of Jane Sequoya Magdaleno, who writes that the veteran, mixed-blood protagonist is "constituted by the postmodern condition of partiality [and thus] particularly adapted to mediate the global-systemic effects of the 'difference producing set of relations' in which the mainstream reader also participates."[6] Yet, in seeing the solider as his uncle, Tayo taps into something more precise than universality; he seizes on elements immediate to his circumstance and thought process. While metaphysical, whatever unity Tayo senses is also a matter of epistemology: Tayo "*knew* it was Josiah."

"To know" is the verb most crucial to this early scene, and, as we will see, knowledge registers among the most fiercely interrogated concepts in Silko's novel. In this particular instance, *Ceremony* throws knowledge into question by comingling it with a seemingly incompatible metaphysics, a vision and feeling, notes Sean Kicummah Teuton, that "cannot be empirically verified."[7] Tayo's ethical obligation originates both in certainty and spirit; the perceived kinship is located precisely "inside [Tayo's] skull," described as "the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more."[8] That Tayo later in the novel switches terms as he recounts the moment of the soldier's death—"I *feel* like he was there. I *feel* like he was there with the Japanese soldiers who died"—is no authorial

oversight; rather, the shifting terminology—of sight, certainty, and sensation—reinforces the immense difficulty of putting this categorical and ethical interplay into language.[9]

It is the untidiness of Tayo's impulse that Rocky will not allow. As Rocky implores Tayo to realize the Japanese solider as the enemy, one of *them*, he aims to throw doubt over Tayo's sureness, to inspire in Tayo a dubiousness toward metaphysically tinged knowledge and reprocess Tayo's impulse through a singularly epistemological framework. "Rocky had reasoned it out with him," the narrator describes in no epistemically uncertain terms.[10] In assuring Tayo that Josiah is "probably up some mesa right, chopping wood," that it would be inconceivable for Tayo to see the Japanese solider as family, Rocky makes logic his weapon.[11]

How might Tayo respond? The rules Rocky lays out leave no room for rebuttal. Tayo has no evidence to offer. His knowledge is not knowledge enough for Rocky; it cannot count as knowledge if it is locked inside of Tayo, inexorably private. Whatever Tayo knows is too metaphysical, intuitive, and perceptive to meet the standards of deductive reason. Tayo cannot share a knowledge that begins in both his mind and the face of the other, that is inspired by those "eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death." It is only when Tayo sees the eyes of the other as the eyes of his uncle that his moral obligation becomes viable, and Tayo has no means for adapting his vision into Rocky's parameters. Thus, according to Teuton, Silko's groundwork for the novel is best described as a deployment of "the tradition of opposed twins so evoked so frequently in Native oral traditions" reconfigured as "a comparative framework through which to engage Western and Indigenous models of inquiry and ways of knowing."[12]

The face Rocky sees, however, is not a different face altogether. Rather, the half-brothers' divergent accounts of the body that lies dead before them—whether Josiah or Jap—

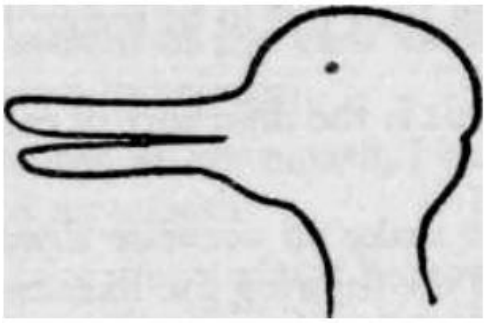
indicates the immense variability embedded in the recognition (or non-recognition) of another's candidacy for ethical treatment. The half-brothers *see* differently, and from each position a divergent ethics follows. To apply the vocabulary of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his philosophical inheritor Stanley Cavell—whose ethical principles we have already seen mobilized in the oeuvre of David Foster Wallace—Tayo "notices" or "sees an aspect" of the other's humanity (or many aspects: the other's face, eyes, and appearance as Josiah) and responsively "acknowledges" the soldier's demand for compassion and viability within an ethical purview. Tayo does so without tangible evidence, without proof, and without analytical justification. Rather, in Cavellian terms, the soldier's final, suffering, fearful moments "make a claim" on Tayo—evinced in Tayo's epistemic and metaphysical compulsion—and leave Tayo with no option but, instinctively, to acknowledge the solider.[13] Even amid the dehumanization of military conflict, the soldier's dying expression (albeit with distortion) brings the protagonist to deem the solider kin. Contrastingly, Rocky, ever the good infantryman, sees no aspect indicative of the other's status as Josiah or, more realistically, as a life worth sparing. Without perceiving the soldier's suffering as such, Rocky cannot acknowledge the other as anything besides "enemy." And free from the demands of recognition, Rocky can mandate from Tayo something entirely analytical: an argument counter to his position that a foreign uniform denies the other humane treatment.

In this way, Rocky's call for empirical counterevidence sets his procedures of recognition on a foundation of skepticism, a reason-driven incredulity toward the interiority of others resultant in a solipsism not unlike the rational self-interestedness constitutive of neoliberal subjectivity and logic. Although Rocky's claim is an unsophisticated one founded on the roles assumed in military engagement, he implies on philosophical level that Tayo's only possible counterargument would involve tangible confirmation that the solider is anything besides enemy.

If the solider can indeed qualify as kin—or if an underlying commonality between the Americans and Japanese forces does exist—then Tayo will need to prove it with something both evidential and well reasoned. Thus, as philosophical emissary, Rocky demonstrates how the analytic tradition, to quote Cora Diamond, "characteristically misrepresents both our own reality and that of others."[14]

In generic form, the skeptic hopes for respondents to doubt their abilities to know with certainty that others are in fact human. For the skeptic, no knowledge short of 100% certainty can be called "knowledge"; one cannot "know" without being "sure." This is an intrinsically impossible demand; it allows nothing but empirical verification of another's internal state—psychic entry into the inner-life—into the argumentative arena. In dialogue with the skeptic, then, all potential knowledge of the humanity of others erodes into uncertainty. The skeptic's epistemic game, like Rocky's, offers no winning move.

Yet, in his visceral reaction, Tayo signals that he is not in the business of rebuttal; he does not admit that his method of recognition is flawed but instead indicates that it operates on a different register. We can better understand Tayo's response through Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's "duckrabbit," an illustration that highlights, as Karin Kukkonen describes, "what we usually cannot see about the world, namely, the very fact that we perceive things from a certain perspective":[15]

 [16]

For Cavell, the duckrabbit illustrates how noticing (and, to a certain extent, interpreting) an

element of human behavior clears a pathway out from the skeptical dilemma. In the Cavellian/Wittgensteinian model, the treatment of visual and behavioral cues—as opposed to arguments in defense of certainty—dictates the recognition of ethical standing. The crux of the illusory duckrabbit is that the mind can process the image only as an exclusive disjunction; the viewer can perceive the image *as* one creature or another, but never two concurrently. It is in this way that "notion of noticing an aspect"—an instance, in Wittgenstein's words, when "I *see* that [an image] has not changed; and yet I see it differently"—is fundamental to Cavell's description of how perception bears on ethics.[17] The factor that joins the image of the duckrabbit to the matter of another's status as human, and thus ethical viability, is that the transformation from hare to fowl, like the transformation from Japanese solider to Josiah, is internal. Duck becomes rabbit and rabbit becomes duck through an amalgamation, according to Cavell's description, of "imagination, interpretation, experience, impression, expression, seeing, knowing, mere knowing, meaning, [and] figurative meaning" that can only be pinned down insofar as we know the image itself has remained static.[18] "[T]he change," Cavell writes, "is in you," just as the demands imparted by the Japanese solider take shape in Tayo.[19] So contrary to Rocky's demand for certainty or verifiable evidence that the Japanese solider is in fact deserving of compassion, Tayo holds that his perception of an aspect—the suffering that stems from the "black light" of the soldier's eyes—is justification enough to determine the other as kin and thus beyond murder. Tayo cannot help but hold this position, distinct as it is from what analytic philosophy might call "knowledge."

Cavell's thinking is again crucial on the status of knowledge as it relates to Tayo's compulsion to nonviolence. Even if it were possible to acquire the "knowledge" the skeptic requires, Cavell surmises in the mode of ordinary language philosophy, it would be unlike

"knowledge" in any sense of the word we are familiar with. Put otherwise, "knowledge" of another's inner-life would exceed anything one has ever "known," at least in terms of how speakers use the word in instances of communication. Cavell posits, then, that "to speak of seeing human beings as human beings is to imply that we *notice* that human beings are human beings […] it is essential to knowing that something is human that we sometimes experience it as such."[20] To experience behavior with the senses, Cavell writes, is enough "to imagine it as giving expression to a soul."[21] Although it is family rather than the broader category of "human" that generates Tayo's ethical impulse, we can best describe his experience as one that originates in noticing.

To delineate failures of acknowledgment—as we might identify Rocky's failure—Cavell turns to a language of blindness. This is not to cast certain individuals as incapable of ever recognizing others as within an ethical purview but instead to describe how we might find ourselves in a given moment "soul-blind" to the aspects that would otherwise incite acknowledgment.[22] Soul-blindness lies in the *a priori*, long before a moment of rejection is possible. It is not so much that skepticism encourages us to refuse humanity as it is that skepticism discourages us from sensing the claims indicative of ethical standing in the first place—to leave unregistered, for example, the pain in the eyes of the sufferer. In an instance of soul-blindness, Cavell describes, "[t]he figure to which I am blind is dark to me. The figure of which it is an aspect is opaque to me."[23] Thus, when Rocky confronts Tayo with an argument the soldier is nothing more than enemy, the eyes of the man indicate nothing to him. The divergent ethics of this scene are tied to the difference between blindness and sight, even if both brothers see in uniquely distorted ways.

Indeed, for Tayo to see differently than Rocky does not guarantee an ethics free from

complication. While recognizing the Japanese solider as kin offers Tayo a momentary means for compassion, the mutation of identity Tayo perceives can be understood as violence of a different kind. At the moment he sees the solider as Josiah, Tayo commands epistemic ownership of the soldier's identity; in pleading to Rocky that the solider is their uncle, he makes a claim to absolute knowledge, even if that knowledge is motivated by only sight and feeling. As Tayo falters, compassion comes at the expense of difference. There is a voyeuristic dimension to Tayo's witness; an empathy such as Tayo's, to draw from Saidiyah Hartman, while preventing violence can simultaneously mutate the other into little more than "opportunity for self-reflection."[24] An empathy that places one in the position of the sufferer, Hartman argues, "is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration."[25] It is for this reason, Hartman writes, that empathy often "fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead."[26] Indeed, an ethics based on such transformation—or the substitution of the strange for the familiar—risks what Charles Taylor calls "misrecognition," transformations of identity that, when mirrored back at the perceived, can cause "real damage" through "confining or demeaning or contemptible picture[s]."[27] So while Tayo is admirable in refraining from violence, his hesitation offers little pedagogical utility.

What, then, does *Ceremony* offer beyond the mere representation of competing, and differently problematic, ethics? My ambition in this chapter is to demonstrate how by synthesizing a mode of metafiction largely dissimilar to those surveyed so far in this dissertation—a self-referential book design and reference to the novel's status as book-object—with a familiar metafictional mode we have seen animated in the previous chapters—commentary on the procedures and implications of storytelling—*Ceremony* embeds dilemmas of recognition, much like those faced by Tayo in the Philippines, into its own reading process and,

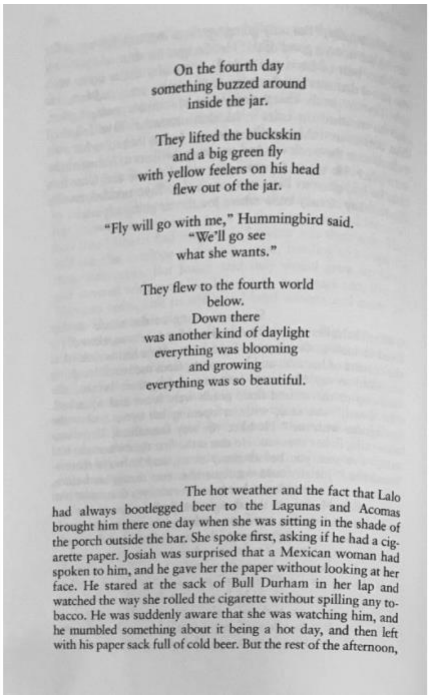
in effect, makes those dilemmas visible, actionable, and pedagogically salient. By incorporating recognition and select complications into literary narrative and book-object, *Ceremony* generates distinct, metafictional opportunities for readers to reckon with their own inevitably limited capacities for the acknowledgment of lives within ethical paradigms. The novel's contribution to ethical thinking can thus be found, I argue, in the means by which it renders abilities in and methods for recognition contingent and malleable across persons and cultures implicated differently in United States imperialism and the marginalization of Indigenous populations. Through a metafictional materiality, *Ceremony* makes clear the many ways and contexts in which lives can be seen (or fail to be seen) as lives—or, put in the language of recent activism, how lives can be said to "matter."

Representation and the Dangers of Self-Reference in *Ceremony*

It is only for a moment that *Ceremony* portrays military conflict. The subject does make an important introduction to what Cavell calls "criteria": matters of who or what counts or comes to be counted as a human, life, or candidate for ethical treatment. Needless to say, representations of war have the advantage of literalizing matters of inclusion and exclusion. War, for example, allows Emo, a full-blood Laguna close in age to Tayo, an entryway for accommodation into mainstream US identity. Through his military standing (what Michael D. Wilson calls the "strategic differences of the uniform" marshalled in the novel), Emo internalizes a dominant but nondescript personhood previously out of reach.[28] Fighting on behalf of the military, Emo felt that he "was the best; *he was one of them*. The best. United States Army," aligned clearly on the side of that which holds the power to deem him either "us" or "other."[29] But *Ceremony* is not a war novel. The problems relating to criteria extend further than battle and take place as definitively in national as in international scenes, and on registers both narrative

and interpretive.

After Tayo and Rocky illustrate their differing capacities for seeing an aspect, another kind of perception is put at stake: the reading of the novel. For the majority of *Ceremony*, Silko separates the storyline of Tayo from stories drawn from Pueblo cosmology into distinct and irregularly aligned parcels of prose and verse, respectively. As a general rule (though not without a few meaningful deviations), Tayo's posttraumatic experience appears in blocks of prose, and narratives of Pueblo mythology appear exclusively in centered columns of free verse, like so:



On the fourth day
something buzzed around
inside the jar.

They lifted the buckskin
and a big green fly
with yellow feelers on his head
flew out of the jar.

"Fly will go with me," Hummingbird said.
"We'll go see
what she wants."

They flew to the fourth world
below.
Down there
was another kind of daylight
everything was blooming
and growing
everything was so beautiful.

The hot weather and the fact that Lalo had always bootlegged beer to the Lagunas and Acomas brought him there one day when she was sitting in the shade of the porch outside the bar. She spoke first, asking if he had a cigarette paper. Josiah was surprised that a Mexican woman had spoken to him, and he gave her the paper without looking at her face. He stared at the sack of Bull Durham in her lap and watched the way she rolled the cigarette without spilling any tobacco. He was suddenly aware that she was watching him, and he mumbled something about it being a hot day, and then left with his paper sack full of cold beer. But the rest of the afternoon,

30

A major implication of this formal device is that readers must discern how seemingly distinct elements of the text inform or subordinate each other. As Robert M. Nelson writes, *Ceremony* confronts readers continually with the question: "which of the literary traditions, Western or Native, is functioning as context for the text being read at any given moment?"[31] It is the responsibility of the novel's readers (both Native readers and non-Native), argues James Ruppert, "to create meaning form [sic] the various discourse elements in the poetry and prose sections. Both audiences must begin a mediational process to appreciate a new discourse field, to

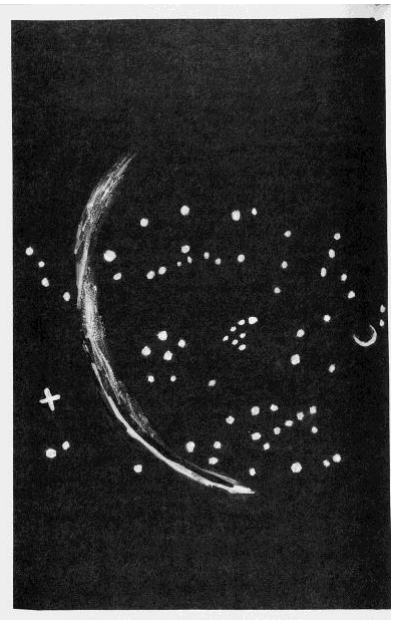
change their sense of what is real and what is meaningful."[32] My suggestion in this chapter is that if *Ceremony* does effectively test readers' capacities for recognition in ways that mirror Tayo's own perceptual development, then wrestling with the design of the novel makes for a crucial method. To learn to interpret *Ceremony* as the novel demands, I argue, is to augment one's abilities in seeing an aspect through metafictional exercise.

As Ruppert notes, the novel's "poetry is at first thematically separate from the prose, just as Tayo's past is cut off from his present," meaning that for "the non-Native implied reader, the familiar war story discourse is cut off from the exotic discourse in the poetry, a discourse that expresses another level of the life and experience of Laguna Pueblo."[33] So while formal, the division between poetry and prose is also epistemic and cultural; it marks an apparent boundary between Western readers' familiar literary experience and inexperience with the Pueblo cosmology. (A fitting strategy, we might say, given *Ceremony*'s wide placement in high school and university curricula, as well as its sale of three quarters of a million copies.) Still, whether the novel actively polices this boundary—or whether the boundary is itself enough to discourage the underqualified from interpreting its verse sections—is another matter. It is also a source of serious concern on the part of the novel's Native receivers, who have taken issue with Silko's public representation of the sacred and withheld. Yet, before taking this perspective into account, it is necessary first to more rigorously interpret the implications of *Ceremony*'s reoccurring formal division.

Having seen the ways in which Silko's opening scenes animate ethical dilemmas of skepticism and knowledge (especially as they relate to dilemmas of sameness and difference), we can suggest that Silko ties the novel's physical attributes to an interpretive soul-blindness reminiscent of her characters'. Put otherwise, through its formal parameters, the novel may

exhibit awareness that a major portion of its readership is unequipped and unqualified, like Tayo looking upon the Japanese solider, to exercise interpretation.

Or so we might say for the novel's first 165 pages. After engaging Tayo in a ceremony for the warriors killed in the world war, the medicine man Ku'Oosh sends Tayo for further healing to the outcast spiritual-practitioner Betonie, who sees signs of Tayo's metaphysical recovery in the stars. From that point on, notes the narrator, Tayo made a habit of "watch[ing] the sky every night, looking for the pattern of the stars the old man drew on the ground that night."[34] Later, as Tayo encounters Ts'Eh, an embodiment of "The Woman," a sacrosanct figure in the Pueblo cosmology, Betonie's prophecy sets in motion. At a crucial moment, a sketch of the night sky, identified by the narrator as "Old Betonie's stars," breaks the barriers that, with only minor deviations, held strong for the first half of the novel:[35]



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Silko's full-page sketch of the night sky, the only illustration in *Ceremony*, is also the only page in the novel absent of language. For this reason, the illustration not only disrupts the dissemination of narratives vis-à-vis language but also the white space that marked an effective border between literary and traditionally-oral narratives. On this page, then, a new set of

interpretive guidelines may be said to emerge. As Claudia Eppert suggests, audiences will have little trepidation speculating on the spiritual significance of the night sky as they find themselves "gazing *alongside* Tayo"—which is to say that readers may be encouraged to regard themselves as present with and participatory in, rather than distanced from, the scene's ritual activity.[37]

The magnitude of this shift in parameters cannot be overstated. While the text does not define the exact ceremonial or symbolic meaning of the stars, readers, by sharing Tayo's vantage, are given good reason to consider themselves involved in an instance of ritualistic significance, albeit a highly adapted one. A prospect such as this is surely secured by Betonie's progressive take on ceremonial evolution, his non-traditional view that "growth keeps the ceremonies strong."[38] Indeed, as a mixed Native American like Tayo and Silko herself, Betonie emblematizes both the dilemmas and potential for cultural hybridity posed by *Ceremony*, both the efficacy of adaption and the condemnation it invites. And if a ritual must adapt to endure, as Betonie professes, then restrictions on participation may too open to reconsideration, rendering previously guarded ceremonial practices available, perhaps, to the cosmopolitan present.

Paula Gunn Allen, a Sioux writer and critic raised in the Laguna Pueblo tradition, critiques *Ceremony* vociferously on the grounds that its representations of culture, spirituality, and cosmology may implicitly license the same anthropological approach to Native cultures that laid the groundwork for exploitative resource-extraction on Native land. "I could no more do (or sanction) the kind of ceremonial investigation of *Ceremony* done by some researchers," writes Allen, "than I could slit my mother's throat."[39] Recognizing that the mythologically and cosmologically oriented poetry that shadows Tayo's transformation are stories belonging to specific clans—and therefore the most seriously restricted narratives—Allen reminders readers of *Ceremony* that "a person who told those stories might wake up dead in a ditch somewhere."[40]

Allen, of course, has not herself been free from criticism in Native studies discourse; Teuton, for instance, associates Allen with a broader "essentialist conceptio[n] of American Indian life" that "often did not consider more complex accounts of the diverse and changing tribal consciousness in North America."[41] Nonetheless, Allen's concerns regarding cultural availability and participatory gestures are justified by the ways in which scholars have received *Ceremony* and its metafictional or reader-involving aspects. Elain Jahner, for example, validates essentialist fears in writing that the "reader [of *Ceremony*] can *see* with the protagonist—the people, animals, landscape, all that is part of the novel and the ceremonies within it.[42] Wilentz's major claim operates on similar terrain: "Tayo's healing ceremony affects us as readers, for as we participate in this ritual process, we feel better, just as Silko did, and like our protagonist, we gain cultural knowledge through this literary chant."[43] Thus, taken to its extreme, *Ceremony* may invite an approach to the sacred reminiscent of what Magdaleno describes as "the already alienated context of anthropological archives," which, he adds, may result in a reading experience no better than "textual necrophilia."[44]

Nonetheless, the essentialist critique of representation (if Teuton is right to identify Allen's position as such) must be taken, like the fictions of David Foster Wallace and Sheila Heti, in light of the demands of the 20th- and 21st-century literary market. Native writers face a publishing sphere infrequently sensitive to cultural exclusivity; As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn writes, it is only a matter of time before a publisher asks the Native novelist the inevitable questions: "How can you make this story more accessible to the 'general American reader'?" and "don't you think you should have a glossary at the end of the manuscript?"[45] One has to wonder, then, how the Program Era mandate of "write what you know" should be negotiated by those who do indeed know, and wish to explore in fiction, the standing of ritual in local and national contexts.

Moreover, as scholars have argued, it is often hybridity, adaptation, and collision with white America that has marshalled postcolonial recuperation and resistance in the post-1945 Native novel. Teuton, who reads *Ceremony* in the context of the late-1960's Red Power movement, argues that when Native writers of that time:

> imagined a new narrative for Indian Country […] they did so neither by longing for an impossibly timeless past nor by disconnecting Indians' stories from the political realities of their lives. Instead, writers of the era struggled to better interpret a colonized world and then offered this new knowledge to empower the people.[46]

A literature that comingles perspectives of the knowledgeable and authorized with those of the outsider is thus fitting, continues Teuton, for a movement that was "young, urban, intertribal, and ready to confront an imperialist world with a full range of spiritual, physical, and intellectual weapons."[47] It is inherent in the genre, argues Wilson as well, that "indigenous resistance writing uses both the conventional language and form that is acceptable to a general American readership, essays, histories, newspaper writing, sermons, autobiographies, short stories, and novels."[48]

Still, if *Ceremony* does to some degree construct what Magdaleno calls "a generally accessible structure of identification for the mainstream reader," then the essentialist position that Silko goes unnecessarily beyond the minimum market-standards of accessibility and involvement becomes all the more salient.[49] Indeed, the pages of *Ceremony* that follow the astral sketch intensify prospects of readerly inclusion. Three pages after the appearance of the astral sketch, another moment of ritualistic significance upends the formal boundaries of the novel. After the Laguna Pueblo myth of the Gambler concludes as it began in poetry, *Ceremony* makes

a formal cross-stitch by depicting Tayo's interactions with Ts'Eh in verse. (Further, given Ts'Eh's status as mythological figure, her placement within the prose narrative already represents a bending of the novel's guidelines.) In accordance with Betonie's imperative that rituals must augment according to the needs and dilemmas of present, Tayo voices an improvised version of the sunrise song, tailored to his emotional and spiritual state. And in the formal transition, as the novel presents Tayo's recitation as a kind of prayer book, Silko's audience finds itself sharing more than a gaze:

> [Tayo] stood up. He knew the people had a song for the sunrise.
>
> Sunrise!
>
> We come at sunrise
>
> to greet you.
>
> We call you
>
> at sunrise.
>
> Father of the clouds
>
> you are beautiful
>
> at sunrise.
>
> Sunrise!
>
> He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones, feeling that they were right, feeling the instant of the dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together—the last stars, the mountaintops, the clouds, and the winds—celebrating this coming. The power of each day spilled over the fills in great silence. Sunrise. He ended the prayer with "sunrise" because he knew the Dawn people began and ended all their words with

"sunrise."[50]

The appearance of Tayo's prayer in verse may well represent an invitation to (or mandate for) recitation: a call to prayer *with* Tayo. Like the shared gaze facilitated by the astral sketch, readers, through little more than internal monologue, partake in Tayo's extended ceremony at the moment his actions leap the formal barrier.[51] To this end, the prose exposition that follows Tayo's prayer seems to lift elements from what had previously been a restricted domain to a widely accessible one; and that Tayo articulates the prayer in English (like most other Pueblo cultural elements in the novel, with a few exceptions) underscores an increasing level of cultural availability. To be clear, Silko refrains from describing the meaning and significance of spiritual practice; however, the visual and perhaps oratory situation that accompanies Tayo's spontaneous decision-making allows the audience an unmistakable level of entry into an action that, if not traditionally specific, is nonetheless drawn from traditional elements. After gazing upon Betonie's stars—with, alongside, or *as* Tayo—the epistemic boundaries that had previously governed the novel seem to collapse.

Knowledge and Participation in Material Metafiction

By posing an interpretation attentive to the metafictional elements of *Ceremony*, I hope to challenge the universalizing ethical and interpretive valences outlined in the previous readings. Increased attention to the self-referential aspects of the novel, I argue, brings to light not only dilemmas of recognition as they manifest in reading *Ceremony* but also how the novel stakes out occasions for meditating on such dilemmas as they emerge in worlds narrative, material, and extra-textual. This effort mandates a departure from narrative to the physical page; to assess *Ceremony*'s responsiveness to its own problematics of recognition requires reconsidering the ways in which the astral sketch, and other illustrative features of the novel, implicates readers in

the narrative world, inflects readers' capacities for recognition, and draws on a broader cannon of physically experimental metafictions.

An essentialist critique of *Ceremony* would be right to suggest that the astral sketch invites readers to share Tayo's perception. At the same time, however, in its reproduced form—with unmistakable brushwork, moon and stars dramatically out of scale, and a puzzling crosshatch—the sketch leaves unmistakable traces of the artist. As opposed to a recreation of Tayo's vision, then, the sketch frames itself specifically as artifice, as *representation*: not what Tayo sees, but a definitively handmade adaptation of that sight. The sketch operates, we might say, as "paratext," an element, in Gérard Genette's formulation, that the recalls the book-object's status as such and "ensur[es] the text's presence in the world."[52] In effect, the sketch operates on two different world registers; it references both the narrative world containing Tayo's gaze *and* the world of object-production in which the visual artwork has been incorporated into the literary text. This is to say that at the moment the sketch authorizes readers to assume Tayo's vantage, it simultaneously indexes the extra-narrative reality in which *Ceremony* exists as a material thing. The most apposite concept for describing *Ceremony*—given the centrality of the astral sketch and the interpretive conundrums it manifests through white space—is thus what Johanna Drucker terms "self-reflexivity in book form," a mode of metafiction (which we have seen before in Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* [2010]) that exceeds narrative self-reference by recalling the artistry (and perhaps economy of production) involved in the book-object.[53]

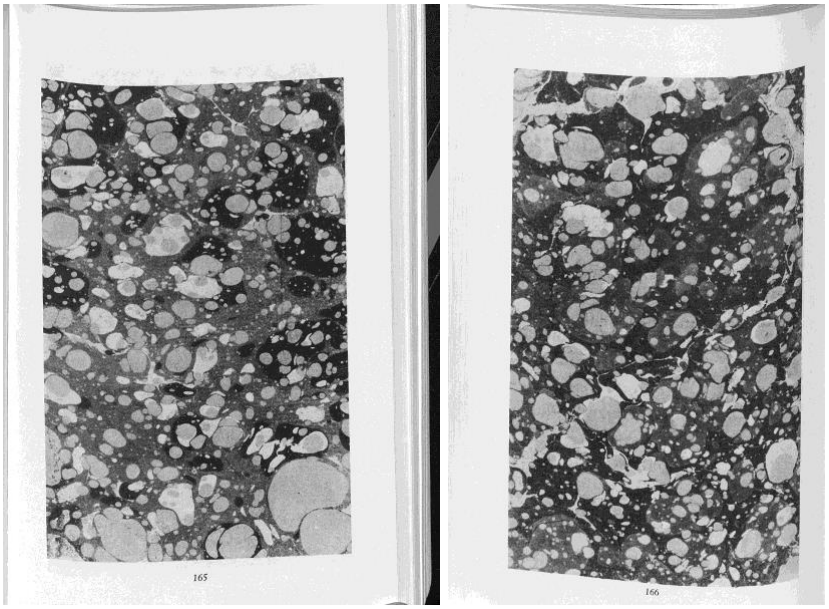
At the same time, however, *Ceremony* is no less metafictional in terms of narration and narrative scaffolding. Susan L. Dunston is right to argue that, from its onset, *Ceremony* adopts a "recursive structure (and presentation of time)."[54] Taking "Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman," spider-figure, and creator of the universe in Pueblo (as well as Hopi and Navajo) mythology as

its point of origin, the opening incantation begins: "I'm telling you the story / she is thinking."[55] Thus, writes Nelson, we can understand *Ceremony* as "a novel, created to function as a print text, albeit perhaps a print text 'about,' *inter alia*, oral performance […] a reflection of, both Native American oral and Western written literary and cultural traditions."[56] The narrative of Tayo is, by way of an oral-storytelling framework, in essence a nested narrative, a story within a story. Like Wallace, who engaged the nested narrative in service of expressive and epistemic capacity in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," and Sherwood Anderson, who seized on oral-storytelling to trouble the boundaries of sexual and gender identity amid industrialization, Silko takes direct attention to orality as means for articulating and mobilizing the cultural and anti-imperial potential of written, spoken, and hybrid narratives. Stories, continues the opening incantation, are "all we have to fight off / illness and death."[57] Likewise in the interior story-world, when Tayo bolsters his battalion's will while the carrying the corpse of Rocky through the Philippine jungle, he "made a story for all of them, a story to give them strength," one described by the narrator as "pebbles and stone extending to hold the corporal up to keep his knees from buckling, to keep his hands from letting go."[58] In the broadest sense, then, *Ceremony* is Silko's ambitious attempt to tether together and make critical three often distinct metafictional modalities: material (astral sketch, formal boundaries), recursive (story within a story), and self-interpretive (broad claims on storytelling and claims local to the story at hand).

Understanding *Ceremony* as a text deeply and varyingly involved in metafiction makes available an unusual but productive territory of interpretation. More precisely, sensitivity to the novel's threefold metafictional involvement grants us license to think the novel both in and beyond its 20th-century context, in light of the long history of self-referential narrative. If *Ceremony* is indeed a novel that—through material, narrative, and interpretive self-reference—

joins dilemmas of recognition with dilemmas of reading, then it becomes appropriate to consider how the novel draws from and adapts preceding metafictions that have also treated epistemological conundrums or concepts with self-reference.

A resemblance can be drawn, then, between *Ceremony* and the work Patricia Waugh has deemed "the prototype for the contemporary metafictional novel," Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* (1760).[59] In their full-page scale and narrative disruption, Betonie's stars resonate[60] vibrantly with the famous marbled pages of Sterne's text:



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Given that marbling typically ornaments a book's covers, the strange and disruptive placement of these pages in *Tristram Shandy*, like the astral sketch, calls attention to the book as object by confusing standards of inside and outside text. The visual interjection demands equal reflection on material (what does this mean for the text as a book?) and metaphoric levels (what does this image mean for the narrative at hand?); the marbled pages underscore the text as physical artifact while at the same time demanding attention to the relational mystery between image and the sluggishly developing narrative of Tristram's life.

Yet, unlike the night sky's participatory (and, perhaps, anthropologically inviting)

gesture, *Tristram Shandy* tends in the opposite direction, toward the impossibility of gathering definitive meaning from constructions of language, especially self-referential ones such as autobiography, the project of the novel's eponymous protagonist. Stern's novel hinges on interruption and incompleteness—whether in Tristram's own hardly-starting life's tale or his father Walter's never-written encyclopedia—features that ultimately reinforce the novel's view that any expression of language engenders, inevitably, an infinite and in effect incomprehensible range of meanings. In their nebulousness, the marbled pages emblematize in pre-postmodern fashion the indeterminacy of language and irresolvable vagueness inextricable from works of fiction. The haze of marbling, as Waugh describes, makes a visual culmination of the "self-regarding *discours* which never quite manages to get the story told" and thus cautions that whatever role an audience plays in the construction of the text will remain, however instrumental, imperfect.[62] The pages' chaotic density, Waugh concludes, intimates that "[t]he mind," whether character's or reader's, is anything but "a perfect aestheticizing instrument."[63]

No doubt as disruptive as the marbled pages—paratextual and equivalent in scale and plot breaking power—might Silko's astral sketch also contain traces of Sterne-like indeterminacy? Might the astral sketch that make apparent the reader's interpretive and therefore participatory limitations? Nelson gives good reason to explore this prospect in his interpretation of the stars as signifying "the event or *process* of constellation."[64] At the onset of *Ceremony*, Tayo embarks on what we might call an ordering of the world, beginning with the incoherent experience of military engagement and ending with the reconceptualization of how his traumatic and post-traumatic journeys figure into violence on scales both international and local, military and personal. The astral objects, then—unmapped, not yet a constellation but enumerating all the requisite elements—can be read as indicating Tayo's still-unfinished task. Indeed, the precise

constellations envisioned by Tayo (and charted first by Betonie) are beyond the image, withheld from shared perception, inaccessible. The metafictional image underscores our presence as readers in Tayo's reality, but, given the image's paratextual status and undisclosed meanings, an unbridgeable distance remains. Thus, the position in which Silko places her readers may best be articulated as *witness* rather than participant: a "witness to history," as David L. Moore writes, and to a project that "reveal[s] the mythic dimension of modern history and the historical momentum of ancient myth."[65]

In offering an unmistakably artistic representation of Tayo's vision, one that is reader-implicating but not knowledge-offering, *Ceremony* continues a broader attempt to ensnare its audience in the same ethical conundrum of recognition, knowledge, and skepticism it manifested first in the encounter between Tayo, the Japanese solider, and Rocky. A return to the novel's opening poem makes apparent the amalgamation of unknowing and involvement at play. Reading from the essentialist position, the use of Ts'its'tsi'nako to form its nested structure ("I'm telling you the story / she is thinking") may imply a serious cross-cultural violation in the implicit assumption of the mythic figure's consciousness. As the reader voices the self-referential announcement of oration, Silko seemingly shifts Pueblo mythology from a local, oral tradition to the universal: a speech act readily available to anyone with the book at hand. Like the sunrise prayer, the audience must voice the thoughts of the Spider Maiden as internal recitation and consequently may claim epistemic authority over the interior narrative world—a world that contains no shortage of ritual.

From a different angle, Nelson argues that Silko's use of the nested narrative amounts to a kind of protection by layers, that the nested narrative is a means for setting select spiritual elements within the purview of Ts'its'tsi'nako and keeping them, in effect, "under ceremonial

control."[66] Similarly, Magdaleno understands "the narrator's identification with the Laguna creatrix" as feature that "authorizes the novel's representation of the Laguna Pueblo oral tradition" so that instead of "constituting an object of critical inquiry in relation to its ostensible referent […] the assimilation of sacred to secular standpoints is generally not recognized as such."[67] Arguments such as these, however, tend to hinge on abstract conceptualization. Attractive as it is to take these perspectives as viable alternatives to the essentialist's, they do little to dispute the arguments (and historical evidence) that underlie the essentialist's critique; it is hard to say more than that the two camps read the novel differently. I propose, however, that attention to novel's metafictional aspects, and material aspects in particular, offers a way out from this impasse.

That the reader has been implicated as world-creator does not guarantee that the reader can sense every aspect of the world he or she has helped to bring into being (or even those most anthropologically telling). David E. Hailey Jr.'s scholarship on the embedded iconography in Silko's poetry is especially salient in this regard. Hailey Jr. notes the presence of three distinct mythic figures of Laguna mythology implanted visually throughout *Ceremony* in the free-verse poems: the Spider, the Maiden, and the Spider Maiden. To those unschooled in the Pueblo tradition, the figures are effectively opaque. While the oratory and world-creating implications of the poem may suggest a high degree of readerly participation, few readers will detect the totality of what they have created (moreover, while the reader can be said to think literary worlds into being, typesetting is an aspect of the book well beyond the reader's control):

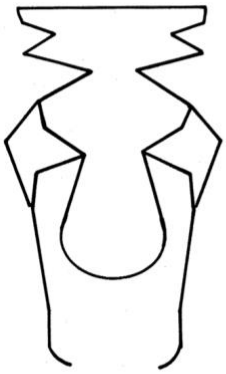

Fig. 1

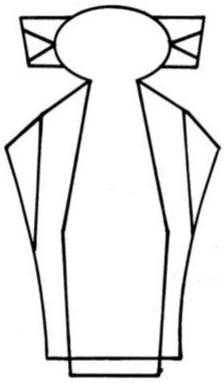

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

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Concrete poetry such as this, Drucker writes, "embed[s] its verbal complexity in a material, visual form from which it cannot be separated" and "forge[s] inseparable bonds of meaning and presentation through visual form."[69] In this particular case, self-referential language pairs with an equally self-referential materiality; as the poem builds an interior layer of storytelling in which Tayo's narrative will proceed (again, "I'm telling you the story / she is thinking"), so too does the shape of the poem reassert the physical and artefactual status of the book-object. The three figures thus extend to each multivalent level of the novel while locating the reader at each possible juncture. A major function of Silko's concrete poems, in other words, is to highlight the reader as at the same time generator of the story-world and possessor of the material thing, to acknowledge, as Linda Hutcheon writes on metafiction, "the fictionality of the world" while also reaffirming the book-object as semi-distinct from that imagined realm.[70]

So as the poem draws the reader into the fictional world, it stakes out epistemic barriers; while indexing the creative (and creational) power of those reading the text, a moment of interpretive soul-blindness is likely to occur. To all but those trained in Pueblo cosmology and iconography, the three figures of the opening poem are imperceptible *a priori*; the novel's audience can give the embedded figures neither the chance to be seen nor to be discounted. The

figures, while present, are to most readers, like the eyes of the Japanese solider to Rocky, indicative of nothing; what the poetry signals will go unnoticed. The paratextual gesture therefore implicates readers in the story world (vis-à-vis dues paid to the reader's imaginative power) but distances readers from the culture that the story-world and the poem reference, even if (for now) readers are unaware of their restricted position. Although recognized as creators of and witnesses to Tayo's experience, readers are left without epistemic and anthropological authority.

Which is not to say that the veiled presence of mythological figures is enough to absolve Silko of essentialist critique (one could suggest the opposite, that including these figures is yet another representational step too far). What this valence helps to elucidate is the ethical framework that arises through the four variable manners (non-symbolic, spider, maiden, spider maiden) in which the poem can be read, especially insofar as the metafictional entanglement—of knowing and unknowing, sight and opacity—makes soul-blindness inseparable from reading and interpretation. That the reader is unlikely ever to process two or more images (poem as poem, poem as narrative world, and each variation of the poem as mythological figure) puts at stake, like Wittgenstein's duckrabbit and Tayo's hallucination of Josiah, the subjective limitations implicit in an ethics (and reading process) centered on the noticing of aspects. The grand culmination of *Ceremony*'s many self-referential dynamics is to align the procedures of interpretation with the ways in which others—like the Japanese solider, like Tayo himself—can be included among the human, counted as lives, left unseen, or effectively distorted.

Reading the Rhizome

Still, that *Ceremony* takes into account or adapts the limitations of its audience as readers and cultural outsiders does not itself amount to an incitement of ethical development. To write

alongside, with, and beyond soul-blindness offers little in the way of utility if readers are not pushed to reckon with their limited capacities for sight. It is not enough that the novel is aware of its readers' likely blindness; if *Ceremony* does promise grounds for coming to terms with one's relationship to criteria and noticing (or glossing over) aspects, then it must also bring readers to a heightened awareness their own sight and sightlessness. It is in this regard that Tayo's spiritual and psychological affliction, as well as renewal, carries implications for interpretive method.

When he returns from the South Pacific, Tayo doubles over his experience and its spiritual/psychological aftereffects in an analytical method coherent with Rocky's skeptical demands. Tayo struggles to sort and make sense of his memories and uncontrollable flashbacks, "to pull them apart and rewind them into their places."[71] "[T]here would be no peace," Tayo first believes, "until the entanglement had been unwound to the source."[72] Stability, singularity, rationality, and order—reflective of the "books and scientific knowledge" that Rocky relies on and in one scene rebukes Josiah for discounting—are the only remedies Tayo is equipped, initially, to imagine.[73]

In metaphors extended throughout the novel, *Ceremony* pairs Tayo's analytical but anguished thinking with an approach to knowledge bent on organization, stasis, and conclusion (echoing as well the neoliberalism capitalism's emphasis on rationality). Ts'Eh warns Tayo, as he searches for and attempts to reclaim Josiah's stolen cattle, that a knowledge privileging resolution may correspond with his own demise:

> They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away. The violence of the struggle excited them, and the killing soothes them […] they'll hunt you down, and take you any way they can. Because this is the only ending they understand.[74]

In relaying to Tayo is that his death would be another act of "unwinding to the source," Ts'Eh intimates that the demand for conclusiveness Tayo once sought amid his post-traumatic illness is itself bound to the same violence from which Tayo's affliction stems.[75] At the level of interpretation as well, Ts'Eh's message is thinly veiled; she implies, concurrently, that to hold Tayo, his narrative, or perhaps any element of the text with a sense of epistemological closure would risk adherence to the violence of finality—and would leave readers no better than the military doctors who early on in the novel reduced Tayo to little more than a diagnosis.

To search for an alternative method returns us to the wisdom of Betonie, who imparts to Tayo the knowledge that "things which don't shift and grow are dead things," that contingency and evolution characterize the living.[76] This is to say that in light of the interpretive gauntlet Silko throws down for readers vis-à-vis metafiction, it is essential to read Betonie's ontological proposition as a one bearing just as seriously on critical practice as it as it does on the rigidity of an essentialist approach to ritual and culture. Indeed, in its resistance to the definite, orderly, and resolute, Betonie's model of ceremonial augmentation offers a framework for reading reverent of the compound epistemic/metaphysical entanglement at work in Tayo's hallucinated vision of the Japanese solider and in Tayo's later epiphanies. Betonie prompts us to understand interpretation as an unstable, shifting, growing thing in its own right.

From the vantage of critical theory, the rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri provides a useful point of comparison with Betonie's multivalent approach to spirituality and culture. As with Ts'Eh's warning, the rhizome, as epistemic framework, is described by Deleuze and Guatarri expressly as entanglement and in contrast to (though still enmeshed with) Western thought's insistence on a "linear unity of knowledge."[77] More specifically, a rhizomatic approach to culture and history is non-narrative in method and assumptions; to think rhizomatically is to

resist the language of rationality, origins, and endings—the "sedentary point of view" on which ethics of universal sameness and the continuation of a "unitary State apparatus" depend—in favor of impermanence and overlapping growth.[78] The rhizome is an epistemology of activity and revision, "perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again" (and in this way not far removed from Sterne's understanding of literary language).[79] In terms of practice, then, a rhizomatic reading decenters superficially singular instances of language in order to make viable the plethora of entry points for concepts, influences, and propositions in any act of language.

Like the rhizome, Betonie's perspective—what sets him apart from both essentialists and those insistent on linear, unified knowledge—centers on adaptive growth, efforts to bring ritual the vitality and disorder of the living. Betonie's philosophy hinges on continuation, a concept we might describe through Deleuze and Guatarri's articulation of "a middle (*milieu*) from which [the rhizome] grows and which it overspills."[80] And when Tayo reaches the zenith of his spiritual reclamation—the conclusion of an extended ceremonial journey—his epistemic/metaphysical epiphany represents an affirmation of Betonie's rhizomatic vision:

> [Tayo] cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time.[81]

Recovery, for Tayo, is ultimately a reconfiguration of the relationship between knowledge and narratives on personal, cultural, and national scales, an affirmation that to participate in a story "still being told" is by nature a disorderly process, but that disorder is its own kind of epistemic

equipment.

If Tayo's newfound appreciation for the coherence of instability and disorder with knowledge is in fact instructive for the reader's interpretation of the novel (and linked to the reader's prospects for developing more responsible methods of interpretation), we must ask: does Tayo's epiphany change in any way his capacity for recognition? Does it direct him away epistemic dominance? Given that Tayo's climatic action in the novel is, in fact, inaction—stopping himself from intervening as Emo and his friends torture Harley and eventually murder him in an attempt to lure Tayo out of hiding—the novel does not provide an easy answer. In the same scene, however, an evolution in Tayo's perspective is apparent. Recalling Ts'Eh's association between conclusions and violence, Tayo realizes how his intervention would make an ending itself to a familiar story. If he were to challenge Emo, Tayo accepts, he would position himself in a formulaic role—"another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud"—that would consequently reinforce the white population's easy dismissal of intertribal conflict and refusal to admit complicity in settler colonialism.[82] Thus, Tayo's recognition of the link between conclusive thinking and how stereotypical narratives are deployed to enforce subaltern status is, too, a recognition of the soul-blindness of others: not just that others will see "*only* the losses," as he puts it, but also that they are not equipped (or have not equipped themselves) to see anything else.[83]

So in the climax of *Ceremony*, like in its military opening, Tayo again withholds from violence, but his action is predicated on far different grounds. Indeed, even while Harley dies a brutal death—in a scene that is, while brightly epiphanic, morally ambiguous and even troubling—Tayo demonstrates a significant change in perceptive capacity: as Harley is beaten, Tayo sees him as no one else. To discern his own moral position and responsibility, Tayo need

not project the known identity of another. Needless to say, Harley is not unfamiliar in the same way that the Japanese solider was to Tayo; he is a childhood friend, a person to whom Tayo was already ethically obligated. And yet, in his earlier allegiance to Emo and complicity in Emo's efforts to turn Tayo over to the police, he has also proven himself strange, strange enough, no doubt, to be categorized as enemy. But in spite of this betrayal, Tayo sees Harley only as Harley, and in the response to Harley's suffering—the suffering of one whom Tayo could easily wish harm—a demand emerges. Tayo, the narrator describes, "could not endure it any longer."[84] At the sight of violence and pain, Tayo felt that "[h]e was not strong enough to stand by and watch any more. He would rather die himself."[85] And though he does not sacrifice himself for Harley, Tayo reveals in his inaction that he has given up an ethics founded on epistemic dominance.

If Tayo's shift in perceptive and ethical capacity does in fact signal principles for the interpretation of *Ceremony*, then it is appropriate, in this light, to reevaluate the astral sketch and subsequent dissolution of boundaries. Most important for rethinking the spatial gaps between prose and poetry, and their disappearance, is Tayo's reconceptualization of a world constituted not by "boundaries," but instead by "transitions through all distances and time." Indeed, Tayo's late, multivalent approach to knowledge, history, identity, and narrative encourages us to understand the astral sketch as an essential component to the novel's epistemic shift from boundaries to transition, from interpretable segments—vehicles for the conclusive, analytic knowledge Tayo once sought—to patterns and entanglements. It is no coincidence that the onset of this transformation occurs at the height of *Ceremony*'s metafictional involvement; it is only when readers are most deeply implicated in the story-world, witnessing with Tayo, that the novel begins its progression toward a dynamic, contingent, and evolving framework for interpretation and ethics. It is only after assuming seeing with Tayo that the novel considers its readers

equipped to process his epiphanies, realizations that bear no less crucially on the necessary connectedness of life stories, cultural mythos, ethics, and epistemology.

Thus, having implicitly and explicitly expressed its intentions to tangle, as we might borrow from Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, "connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles," *Ceremony* throws down a challenge to recognize not only the limitations of interpretation but also the impermanence of the inferences generated by such practice.[86] To see the world as organized by transitions is, fundamentally, to trust that not all meanings, as they emerge both perceivably and unperceivably—like the figures embedded in Silko's poetry—are fully knowable or perpetually coherent with a given rationality (in terms of both particular literary/critical approaches and the logics of imperialism and late capitalism). Moments of interpretive sureness and uncertainty are therefore denoted—and denoted urgently, given the metafictional implication of the reader in world-creation—as opportunities to stake out limits of one's understanding. Readers are pushed to realize themselves as implicated in something far grander and far more intricately woven than they could ever have expected, cautioned from epistemic claims over that which they cannot fully grasp, however interpretable it may first appear.

Receptivity and Criteria

"The eye for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers," Tayo contemplates in the aftermath of his ceremony, the experiences that culminate in his rejection of the epistemic and narrative expectations that would hold his death the tragic end of a predictable story.[87] The significance of his own narrative, he realizes, is a proposition beyond his capacity, an inaccessible knowledge. After receiving

Betonie's teaching and experiencing his vision, the entanglement of epistemic and metaphysical impulses that in the Philippines manifested a moral imperative—albeit an imperfectly founded one—is no longer cause for distress; it is key to an ethics that celebrates the vitality, movement, ephemerality of the living.

We are not passive observers to Tayo's ethical and epistemic transformation; a major virtue of *Ceremony*'s threefold narrative, interpretive, and material self-reference is the implication of the reader within Tayo's perceptive augmentation, and, ultimately, an occasion for readers to come to terms with the inevitability of their own perceptive and thus ethical blind spots (their susceptibility to what Judith Butler refers to as the "schemas of intelligibility [that] condition and produce norms of recognizability.")[88] Through metafictional instances that locate readers in the world of the text as much as they draw attention to the location of the text in the reader's world—a strategy that entwines the Western novel and Pueblo oral tradition—*Ceremony* makes clear its understanding of the reader's placement in that same entanglement of knowledge frameworks.[89] This is to suggest that an inability to perceive the mythic figures embedded in Silko's poetry is bound up in the same ethical process that invites readers to assume Tayo's vantage of the night sky. *Ceremony* wagers that if we are read in a mode that is both ethically responsible and interpretively salient, we must also rethink what signs we have been trained to intuit and the limitations of that training. In other words, we must cultivate reverence for conditional signification—no easy task, given, as we have seen, neoliberal capitalism's insistence on rational self-interest as epistemic and ontological bedrock.

A task such as this—to augment a Cavellian ethics of acknowledgment with self-consciousness attuned to the instability of signification and the inherent shortcomings of subjective perception—mandates a heightened sense of what Nikolas Kompridis calls

"receptivity": "a form of *agency* through which we are responsive to something or someone in an attitude of *answerability*."[90] To take receptivity seriously is to hold one's susceptibility to behavioral claims above one's preexisting conception of what counts as a life, to cultivate an openness, to learning new modes of acknowledgment and ethical treatment that may at first seem unfamiliar or strange. In *Ceremony*'s terms, if stories do have to capacity "to fight off / illness and death"—insofar as they may aid our efforts to realize our shortcomings in recognizing the lives of others—then they cannot perform this work without also aiding an audience in the development of interpretive sensitivity, not without offering an experience in the pliancy of analysis and sight.

Reflecting on her experience writing the novel, Silko makes clear its ritualistic dimensions:

> Writing a novel was a ceremony for me to stay sane […] So my character is very sick, and I was very sick when I was writing the novel. I was having migraine headaches all the time and horrible nausea that went on and on […] So here I was in my novel working on my character every day, and I was trying to figure out how some stay sane and some don't [after war], and then I realized that the one thing that was keeping me going at all was writing. And as Tayo got better, I felt better.[91]

Thus, reads the third of the four incantations that open the novel, "The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony, / that's what she said."[92] The methodological attunement *Ceremony* facilitates by way of metafiction is itself a related ceremony, one distinct from Tayo's but reinforced by the final utterance of the sunrise prayer that begins ("Sunrise") and eventually bookends the novel ("Sunrise, / accept this offering, / Sunrise.").[93] Indeed, this circular gesture—and the implicit

proposition that interpretive growth has, in turn, generated ethical growth—is performative at its heart, language that does as much as it means. (J.L. Austin, to whom we owe the concept of the performative, often refers in *How to Do Things with Words* [1962] to performative acts of language as "ritual" and "ceremonial.")[94] Concluding with the sunrise prayer is a final instance of the same self-referentiality that secures the novel's developmental potential, a reassertion of the vital proposition that if we are to envision an ethics unanchored by universal sameness, then such an ethics will be a necessarily unfinished affair, that there can be no final or ideal sensitivity to the contours of expressive behavior.

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[1] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 7.
[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 199.
[3] Mascha M. Gemein, "'Branched into All Directions of Time': Pluralism, Physics, and Compassion in Silko's *Ceremony*" in *Leslie Marmon Silko:* Ceremony, Almanac of the Dead, Garden in the Dunes, ed. David L. Moore (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 71-72.
[4] Louis Owens, "'The Very Essence of Our Lives": Leslie Silko's Webs of Identity' in *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony: A Casebook, ed. Allen Chakvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 98.
[5] Gay Wilentz, *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 81.
[6] Jane Sequoya Magdaleno, "How (!) Is an Indian? A Contest of Stories, Round 2" in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 291.
[7] Sean Kicummah Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 121.
[8] Silko, *Ceremony*, 6.
[9] Ibid., 114. Emphasis added.
[10] Ibid., 7.
[11] Ibid., 7.
[12] Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power,* 130.
[13] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 397.
[14] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no.2 (June 2003): 11.
[15] Karin Kukkonen, "Adventures in Duck-Rabbitry: Multistable Elements of Graphic Novels," *Narrative* 25, no.3 (October 2017): 334.
[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 204e.

[17] Ibid., 203e.
[18] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 355.
[19] Ibid., 354.
[20] Ibid., 379. While Cavell relies on a human-centered vocabulary in describing the perception of pain-behavior and the demands that follow, it would not be outlandish to apply a Cavellian framework to the non-human. Surely, to suggest that the observation of pain-behavior allows us to include the pained within an ethical purview is a suggestion inclusive of the pain expressed in the behavior of animals.
[21] Ibid., 355.
[22] Ibid., 378.
[23] Ibid., 388.
[24] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.
[25] Ibid., 19.
[26] Ibid., 20.
[27] Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.
[28] Michael D. Wilson, *Writing Home: Indigenous Narratives of Resistance* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 28.
[29] Silko, *Ceremony*, 57. Emphasis added.
[30] Ibid., 76.
[31] Robert M. Nelson, *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony*: The Recovery of Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 17.
[32] James Ruppert, "No Boundaries, Only Transitions: *Ceremony*," in *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony: *A Casebook*, 180.
[33] Ibid., 180.
[34] Silko, *Ceremony*, 165.
[35] Ibid., 167.
[36] Ibid., 166.
[37] Claudia Eppert, "Leslie Silko's 'Ceremony': Rhetorics of Ethical Reading and Composition," *JAC* 24, no.3 (2004): 749. Emphasis added.
[38] Silko, *Ceremony*, 116. Note that disagreement between traditionalists and those accepting of ritual and cultural adaptation is not a recent phenomenon for the Laguna communities. As early as the 1870s, writes Florence Hawley Ellis, "Protestant-White influence was one of the strongest forces affecting the already existent factions of Laguna toward the break in which the most conservative families took their ceremonial paraphernalia and left, part to settle in the eastern Laguna village of Mesita and part to go on to Isleta." Florence Hawley Ellis, "An Outline of Laguna Pueblo History and Social organization," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15, no.4 (Winter, 1959): 328.
[39] Paula Gunn Allen, "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Ceremony'," *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no.4 (Autumn, 1990): 383. Allen has in mind the correspondence between anthropological inquiries into Laguna culture and the advent of uranium mining on Pueblo land. She recalls: "I was told that an anthropologist, Elsie Clews Parsons, had come to Laguna to collect material for her study of Pueblo religion and social culture. [The Laguna] had given her information readily enough and everything seemed fine. But when Parsons published

the material, Lagunas say how she treated their practices and beliefs, and they were horrified. In accordance with her academic training, she objectified, explained, detailed and analyzed their lives as though they were simply curios, artifacts, fetishes, and discussed the supernaturals as though they were objects of interest and patronization. Her underlying attitude for the supernaturals, the sacred, and the people who honored them didn't evade notice. The Lagunas were 'red-haired' as my mother would say. Coincidently (or not so coincidently) the terrible drought deepened—the same drought Silko Depicts in *Ceremony*—and in its wake many other ills visited the Pueblo. Personal horrors and society-wide horrors ensued; the discovery of uranium on Laguna land, not far from where the giantess's head and her headless body had been flung by the War Twins, the development of nuclear weapons near Jemez, the Second World War, jackpile mine, water and land poisoned by nuclear waste, the village of Paguate all by surrounded by tailing-mesas almost as perfectly formed as the natural mesas all around. It's hardly any wonder they shut it down." Ibid., 383-84.

[40] Ibid., 384. To this end, a 1959 anthropology article describes clan-held information as among the most "difficult-to-discover." Ellis, "An Outline of Laguna Pueblo History," 330.

[41] Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power*, 11.

[42] Elaine Jahner, "The Novel and Oral Tradition: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko" in *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Ellen L. Arnold (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 49.

[43] Wilentz, *Healing Narratives*, 86.

[44] Magdaleno, "How (!) Is an Indian?," 292. To clarify, Magdaleno does not endorse this point but rather raises the possibility of such an interpretation.

[45] Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty," *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 80.

[46] Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power*, 2.

[47] Ibid., 2-3.

[48] Wilson, *Writing Home*, ix.

[49] Magdaleno, "How (!) Is an Indian?," 292.

[50] Silko, *Ceremony*, 169.

[51] One might consider this possibility in light of Ursula K. Le Guin's argument that "[r]eading is not 'interactive' with a set of rules or options, as games are; reading is actual collaboration with the writer's mind." Ursula K. Le Guin, "Staying Awake: Notes on the Alleged Decline of Reading," *Harper's Magazine* (February 2008), https://harpers.org/archive/2008/02/staying-awake/.

[52] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

[53] Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), 161. See also Frederick D. King and Alison Lee, "Bibliographic Metafiction: Dancing in the Margins with Alasdair Gray," *Contemporary Literature* 57, no.2 (Summer 2016).

[54] Susan L. Dunston, "Physics and Metaphysics: Lessons from Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 66, no.4 (2010): 137.

[55] Silko, *Ceremony*, 1.

[56] Nelson, *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony, 2.

[57] Silko, *Ceremony*, 2.
[58] Ibid., 10-11.
[59] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 70.
[60] I take this concept from Wai Chee Dimock's "A Theory of Resonance" (1997), which proposes resonance as a model of interpretation based on how texts endure through long-scale timeframes and variations in reading practices. Resonance across temporal boundaries makes a compelling approach to the interpretation of metafiction, not only because metafictive instances crop up so frequently in the broad history of literary development, but further because reflexivity is itself a resonant element: components of the text come into harmony with one another outside the spectrum of linear time. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no.5 (October, 1997): 1060-71.
[61] Lawrence Stern, *Tristram Shandy: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: Norton, 1980), 165-66.
[62] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 52.
[63] Ibid., 24.
[64] Robert M. Nelson, "The Function of the Landscape of *Ceremony*" in *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony*: A Casebook*, 136. Emphasis added.
[65] David L. Moore, "'Linked to the Land': An Introduction to Reading Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Leslie Marmon Silko:* Ceremony, Almanac of the Dead, Gardens in the Dunes, 9, 13.
[66] Nelson, *Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony, 15.
[67] Magdaleno, "How (!) Is an Indian?," 294.
[68] David E. Hailey Jr., "The Visual Elegance of Ts'its'tsi'nako and the Other Invisible Characters in 'Ceremony.'" *Wicazo Sa Review* 6, no. 2 (1990): 2.
[69] Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, 233.
[70] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 30.
[71] Silko, *Ceremony*, 6.
[72] Ibid., 64.
[73] Ibid., 70.
[74] Ibid., 215-16.
[75] Hence the apparent disorder and circularity of *Ceremony*. As Wilson writes, "Indigenous fiction that focuses on conflict and resolution, then, may tell much less about the cultural narratives of an indigenous community than they tell about the necessities of the literary form—in other words, fiction that is not 'true to life' so much as it is 'true to form.'" Wilson, *Writing Home*, xii.
[76] Ibid., 116.
[77] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.
[78] Ibid., 23.
[79] Ibid., 20.
[80] Ibid., 21.
[81] Silko, *Ceremony*, 229.
[82] Ibid., 235.
[83] Ibid., 231.

[84] Ibid., 234.
[85] Ibid., 234.
[86] Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," 7.
[87] Silko, *Ceremony*, 236.
[88] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 7.
[89] Silko's understanding of the novel's compatibility with Pueblo oral tradition is also relevant: "People often ask me about my use of the novel; they assume that the novel is not a natural form for the Indian. By the cycles of stories in the oral traditions were like a novel. I just continue the old storytelling traditions." Jahner, "The Novel and Oral Tradition," 47.
[90] Nikolas Kompridis, "Recognition and Receptivity: Forms of Normative Response in the Lives of the Animals We Are," *New Literary History* 44, no.1 (Winter, 2013): 20.
[91] Dexter Fisher, "Stories and Their Tellers—A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko,* 24.
[92] Silko, *Ceremony*, 3.
[93] Ibid., 4, 244.
[94] See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Organization: Postcolonial Fiction, Coalition Building, and Radical Optimism in *The People of Paper*

At face value, Salvador Plascencia's seminal (and thus far only) novel, *The People of Paper* (2005), operates on a narrative terrain well-trodden in the last century of self-referential fiction. In waging a military campaign against the "writer" and narrator of the novel, Plascencia's protagonist Federico de la Fe recalls the familiar, interactive author/character dynamic of works such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979). It is easy to mistake Plascencia's novel for a shallow rehearsal of this tried-and-true metafictional framework updated with the visual playfulness of McSweeny's Publishing (the text alternates between standard paragraphs and up to three columns, reads vertically and horizontally, and includes small illustrations). Ask book critic Steven Pool, who reviewed *The People of Paper* in 2006 for *The Guardian*:

> There is also a Baby Nostradamus, whose contributions are blocks of grey ink. Inked-out pages! Sterne, thou shouldst be living at this hour. It becomes clear that *The People of Paper* is an "experimental" novel in a very conventional sense. (Everything changes but the avant-garde.) Inevitably, therefore, the author himself appears.[1]

From Pool's perspective, the plethora of metafictional writing clichés demonstrated in Plascencia's novel instigates an ironic displacement; by sacrificing the voice of the author for "the voice of 'creative writing'," Plascencia inadvertently assures the death of the author in a work that, at the same time, places the author front and center as he battles insubordinate characters.[2] Harrumph.

And yet, to identify "the author" simply as "the author figure" in *The People of Paper* is to neglect the complex assortment of elements that Plascencia builds into his semi-fictionalized

persona and, more crucially, their ramifications for the social and political capacities of metafiction in the 21st century. By virtue of an extensive autofictional conflict—a life or death struggle between writer and protagonist—Plascencia carves out, I argue, a series of opportunities to assess the critical efficacy of postcolonial literature in an era he understands as characterized by immanent literary depoliticization. And in doing so, I claim, Plascencia finds a metafictional method for theorizing an affective framework capable of reclaiming what social and political potency he sees lost to the demands of neoliberal economies and structures of artistic patronage.

Most immediately, "the author" appears in the novel as "Salvador Plascencia," a writer at work on the novel that would grow out of his MFA thesis at Syracuse University and arrive presumably in the reader's hands. He wavers between writing, and likewise warring, against his characters to spite his former lover, Liz, and losing creative energy to a romantically-inflected depression. But to his characters, Plascencia is "Saturn," a name that denotes the surveillance-capabilities of a celestial body and, as Plascencia describes in an interview, "the Roman mythology of Saturn as a creator who eats his children."[3] The name first appears in the text to denote sections expressed in omniscient (but not objective) narration, and the first character to speak it is de la Fe who, like his author, has been abandoned by his partner. Migrating northward from Las Tortugas, Mexico, with his child, Little Merced (named after her mother), de la Fe blames the collapse of his marriage on his unshakable bedwetting habit—though, in another doubling of Saturn/Plascencia, it was, unbeknownst to de la Fe, a competing lover who seduced Merced—and he curses Saturn for being voyeur to his tragedy.

Once he arrives in El Monte, a predominantly Chicano city just east of Los Angeles (as Plascencia describes in one interview, a "gateway for thousands of Latinos and Asians into an American life"), de la Fe is initiated into and assumes leadership of the El Monte Flores (EMF),

a gang of carnation farmers that both venerates and satirizes the cholo culture of Southern California.[4] Froggy El Veterano, who occasionally recounts the campaign against Saturn from decades in the future, describes how de la Fe's cooption of the EMF was made possible by "crazed speeches" centered on "dignity through privacy and the right to be unseen."[5] Saturn/Plascencia is quick as well to validate de la Fe's suspicions; he narrates early on in the novel that "For years [de la Fe] had sensed something in the sky mocking him as he peed in his bed and dreamed of dress factories and of his lost Merced" and admits to "following him whenever he went, budging a half a space centimeter for every five hundred land miles de la Fe and Little Merced traveled."[6] Once in El Monte, de la Fe discovers that from inside the lead shell of a mechanical tortoise—a fleet of which are also progressing north from Mexico—he can escape Saturn's gaze. De la Fe shares his revelation with the EMF and convinces his similarly lovesick compatriots to replace the roofs of their houses with the same material. With Saturn's surveillance for a time subverted, he instigates a violent campaign against the characters' creator and spectator.

Thus, the political salience of Plascencia's metafictional, author-versus-character framework: in positing "Saturn" as adversary and gathering a diverse range of characters from a community against him, de la Fe asserts himself at the head of what in many ways resembles a populist struggle against central authority. Not only does de la Fe repurpose the EMF to organize the powerless against the force that determines their life-possibilities, but in doing so his metafictionally-colored campaign also explores how one might construct a "people" where one had not been before.

"Constructing the people" is of course a key phrase (if not *the* key phrase) in Ernesto Laclau's groundbreaking analysis of populist politics, *On Populist Reason* (2002), and it is

certainly appropriate (if not serendipitous) that Laclau offers a lens instrumental for interpreting Plascencia's metafictional assessment of postcolonial literature in the 21st century. While the metaphysics of a universe in which author and character clash (the former more often entering the latter's world) is hardly the context of Laclau's scholarship, his theorization of the preconditions for and operations of populism expressed in *On Populist Reason* corresponds well to the struggle organized by de la Fe against his creator and helps to contextualize Plascencia's understanding of how postcolonial literature might reclaim its capacity to contribute to social movements.

Laclau's account of "a process of political construction" involves a demarcation drawn between those demanding of power and those identified as responsible for dispossession.[7] The identification of an antagonist within populist logic, according to Laclau, works at multiple scales; the target of demands can be as particular as a city council or as complex and unwieldy as an ideology. Plascencia's Saturn is somewhere between the two, tangible while also allegorical, human but possessing inhuman abilities, and it is fitting to frame the oppositional dichotomy de la Fe inaugurates though what Laclau's describes as "the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power."[8]

Most useful for literary analysis, Laclau's contribution to political theory takes place in the domain of semiotics. For Laclau, the people constructed in a populist movement are joined by a nominal and symbolic act that bonds often unrelated social demands; a people emerges when heterogeneous demands are joined and mobilized by an affect which "constitutes itself only through the differential cathexes of a signifying chain."[9] Put otherwise, the people perform the operation of synecdoche, announcing themselves, to borrow from the vocabulary of Jacques Rancière, as "both part and whole," a "community that defines itself as being excluded."[10] In

Laclau's terms, an equivalential chain of demands assumes the status of empty signifier, embodying "an unachievable fullness" that provides "a horizon and not a ground."[11] Ultimately, he suggests, in constructing a people through bonded but dissimilar demands, the signifying chain loses much of its specificity; in order for a popular identity to expand, writes Laclau, it must "dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous."[12] To manifest a popular identity or lay claim to a social totality, a chain of demands must become an empty signifier, functioning primarily to "*represen*[*t*] an equivalential chain" rather than emphasize or make coherent varied demands while accounting for their specificity.[13]

When de la Fe takes the surveillance of Saturn as organizing principle, he seizes on this logic; underscoring the intrusive gaze of an omniscient narrator allows de la Fe to capture a plethora of demands involving the multitude of what characters wish to render unseen, from bedwetting to sex and the conditions of labor. "Saturn," however, is not the only name de la Fe articulates in reference to his antagonist and in the construction of an antagonistic frontier. Equally prevalent in the novel—and, I suggest, most essential for intuiting the critical evaluation of literature Plascencia facilitates vis-à-vis metafiction—is what de la Fe calls "the commodification of sadness." Like the name "Saturn," the "commodification of sadness" joins a host of social demands (or, more accurately in some cases, fears). Unlike "Saturn," however, the demands indexed by "commodification of sadness" reach well beyond the characters of Plascencia's novel into an ambiguous, uncertain, and explosive political arena suggestive of a metafiction both inflected by and critical of neoliberal capitalism.

Immediately, the phrase refers to production of literature from heartbreak and it does so on two metafictional levels. First, there is the sadness that makes the metafictional *fabula* of the

novel: how Saturn/Plascencia, by imagining and instigating plot-events in the character-universe and assuming narrative surveillance, appropriates his characters' sadness as storytelling content. Froggy describes de la Fe's suspicions of as much retrospectively:

> As we put the dominoes away and got up to leave, Federico de la Fe asked us to sit back down and began showing us schematics of the universe and plans for the war he was asking us to join.
>
> He said it was a war for volition and against the commodification of sadness. "It is a war against the fate that has been decided for us," he said.
>
> I asked who had given us the fate. Federico de la Fe shook his head and said he was not entirely sure. All he could tell us was that it was something or someone in the sky, hidden and looking down on us safely from the orbit of Saturn. And that entity had driven his wife away and cursed him with a perpetual sadness that was alleviated only through fire. And everybody else in El Monte was subject to the temper and whims that emanated from Saturn.[14]

De la Fe's articulation is a classic act of metafictional cognizance; describing the agency he claims to have lost—the fate "decided" for him—he exhibits an awareness not only of his and others' shared status as characters but also, and more crucially, the theft of their misfortunes for use in another's literary plotlines. "Saturn," de la Fe describes by riffing militarily on Freytag's triangle, "wants to move us into the peaks and then into denouement. And we must stop before our lives are destroyed."[15] Later in the novel, when a character from the Plascencia-universe refers to "the war against the commodification of sadness" as synonymous with "the war on omniscient narration," de la Fe's metaphysical interpretation of the character-universe is only reinforced.[16]

De la Fe's argument is catching; the individuals of El Monte readily reframe or intensify the feelings that follow from their own losses—as Froggy does after the loss of his lover Sandra, as Little Merced does when the onset of first period signals the loss of her childhood—through concepts of surveillance and authorial/authoritarian control. Likewise, and more strangely, the commodification of sadness also provides a means for understanding Saturn/Plascencia's sadness after Liz severs their relationship. Saturn/Plascencia too understands melancholy as an affect having little to do with his own actions, and his avowal of responsibility is a frequent point of contention between himself and Liz in their phone calls and letters. Saturn/Plascencia imagines Liz and her new, white lover's romance as an act of colonialism; he refers to the man as "John Smith," "the white boy who colonized his memories […] spread his imperialism everywhere."[17] So while de la Fe and Saturn are parties anything but sympathetic to each other, the commodification of sadness, from the reader's vantage, seems to bond even antagonist and populist challenger in the same network of grievances and demands.

This is all to suggest that calling attention to the instigation and appropriation of sadness for compositional purposes does more in *The People of Paper* than rehearse a clichéd deployment of self-reference. Rather, when Plascencia dramatizes the appropriation of sadness for novelistic content—when he repurposes the poverty and environmental hazards experienced by the EMF, as well as the populist struggle they initiate against him—he continually recalls the status of postcolonial literatures necessarily commodified and likely depoliticized under neoliberal capitalism (a phenomenon the editors of *n+1* identify as the defining situation of "global" literature).[18] As Kevin Cooney puts it, the warning Plascencia articulates in *The People of Paper* is that "a postcolonial model of political resistance and ethnic identity has itself become commodified [… such that] postcolonial assumptions may prove self-defeating, not only on the

pages of the novel, but also in a city as alert to the fictions it produces as Los Angeles."[19] Plascencia's major literary political realization, writes Ramón Saldívar on the novel, is that "neither literary realism, nor modernist estrangement, nor postmodern play, nor magical realist wonder can suffice as formal stand-ins for the concrete content of justice."[20] Metafictional struggle between author and character is thus Plascencia's means for questioning whether modernist, postmodern, and contemporary postcolonial literatures—when dependent on neoliberal patronage structures for both their production (e.g. MFA programs and grant funding) and continued circulation (e.g. scholarly interest and longstanding curricula)—have anything left to offer in terms of building peoples or contributing to populist movements. In Plascencia's usage, metafiction grounds an ambitious effort to think through the assumptions and vulnerabilities of a neoliberal system of labor and exchange in which 1) life-possibilities are predetermined by economic forces and national borders (as Judith Butler would say, "foreclosed"), and 2) the literary representation of such predetermination can only take place within the same economic, social, and epistemic parameters.[21]

Predetermination in regards to neoliberalism emerges in *The People of Paper* through a magical-realist approach evocative of the novel's major source-text, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).[22] Like Marquez, Plascencia figures the encroachment of settler colonialism and capitalist forces through registers both realistic and fantastic, through the actual conditions of carnation farming in El Monte and through the slow migration of mechanical tortoises. Among the more overtly political instances of magical realism is the transformation of El Derramadero, a diminutive town located two miles north of Las Tortugas. After a woman residing in one of the town's eight structures drops a cube of chicken bouillon into boiling water, "the disintegration" begins. Metals rust and whither, hillsides crumble, and clothing dissolves.

The only substance to withstand the disintegration is plastic, and seeing the catastrophe as "simply something to be endured," the locals reconstruct El Derramadero and their everyday lives from the material.[23] Men are described as "[s]hrouded in trash bags"; the townspeople melt "slabs of plastic" into "cutting shanks for butchering and for[m] forks and spoons."[24] Given the novel's reflection of a late-20th and early-21st century defined by trade agreements such as NAFTA, which advantage many U.S. exports against their Mexican-made counterparts, Cooney is right to interpret El Derramadero and the disintegration as emblems of "the growing homogeneity of place as the third world is rapidly being remade in the image of the first."[25] Julieta, the only named resident of El Derramadero to resist its plastic reincarnation, leaves for El Monte, and in her trail the disintegration follows.

Plascencia's major problematic of representation (i.e. the situatedness of literature within neoliberal capitalism) is also secured at a literal level in *The People of Paper* by way of the "Ralph and Eliza Landin Foundation," which provides the grant funding for Saturn/Plascencia's side of the war and, through only the thinnest of veils, the composition of the novel itself. As Saldívar describes, Plascencia's novel "exemplifies the contemporary institutionalization of Chicano letters and the relationship of ethnic literature to what Mark McGurl has called 'the Program Era,'" and the Landin Foundation illustrates Plascencia's awareness and exploitation of his novel's Program Era context.[26] The foundation makes a fictional double for the George and Daisy Soros Foundation for New Americans, of which Plascencia is the first fellow in fiction. Ralph doubles as the Jewish, Hungarian-born George—having "once spooned swastika soup in his native Hungary" and "spent two years of his youth covering his ears from the deafening thunder of cannons and crumbling walls"—and offers a portrait of both philanthropic generosity and the limitations of an environment in which writers of resistance-literatures must depend on

patronage from institutions and individuals aligned with the very ideologies they mean to challenge.[27]

While Ralph recognizes "that Saturn's war was different, that it was somehow about love," his foundation's lawyers take a less sympathetic approach to patronage.[28] Following the Landins' decision to finance Saturn/Plascencia's conflict, their lawyers:

> went through everything, page by page, with a mechanical counter in hand, clicking for every instance of sadness and using tally markers for happiness. Even those things that were only slightly evocative of melancholy, like origami hearts and the empty shells of tortoises, were recorded. And only after quantifying the breadth of sorrow and calculating the probability of Saturn's martial success was the contract drafted and the money allotted.[29]

Immediately, the passage reflects an injection of neoliberal quantification into the realm of the professional humanities and creative labor, a logic of "efficiency" that, as Jeffrey T. Nealon writes on the neoliberal academy, is often deployed to justify "downsized departmental staff and faculty, furloughs and pay cuts for tenure-line faculty, not to mention less influence concerning university policy, higher teaching loads, intensified tenure requirements, and ruthless exploitation of part-time instructors."[30] At a deeper level, the subordination of the Landins' good intentions to their lawyers' calculations signals in terms of creative production and distribution many of the same concepts Plascencia animates in his magical-realist approach to El Derramadero and the disintegration. The lawyers are not venture capitalists, but that they are compelled to process the numerical aspects of Saturn/Plascencia's war/manuscript through formulas that determine the likelihood of its "martial" (not far removed from "market") success indicates how the patronage structure seeks either 1) to gain assurances that its investments will

return scholarly or cultural interest, or, more dangerously, 2) to remake literary products in its own ideological image. Patronage, in Plascencia's view, may act as a depoliticizing force, one that will only advance ideologically critical literatures if they have been validated by their institutional benefactors.

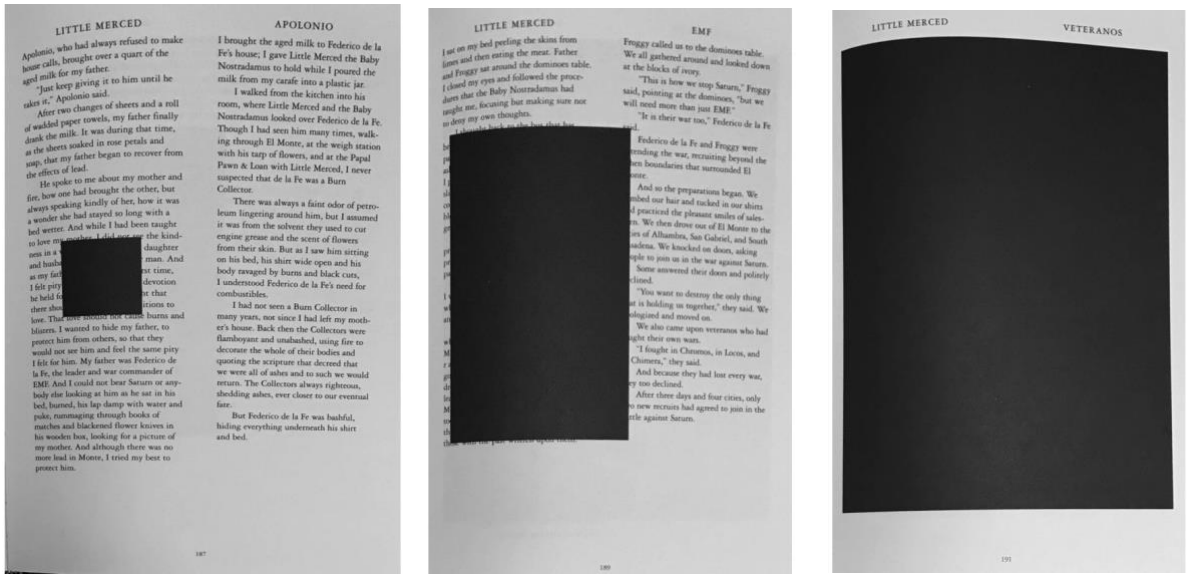
Eventually, the Landins gain an awareness of literature's critical potency. A section from their perspective late in the novel illustrates:

> We came to see the war that we funded. We read the field reports; with our fingers we followed the path of Saturn over maps that illustrated the topography of land and the perilous terrain of love.
>
> But that was on paper. And if we had learned anything from this story it was to be cautious of paper—to be mindful of its fragile construction and sharp edges, but mostly to be cautious of what is written on it.[31]

The lesson learned by the Landins—"to be cautious" of a text that first seemed only to suggest romantic and military conflict—is firstly a rudimentary one that literature can mean and do more than it appears to. It is a lesson hard-earned for the Landins; six pages before the novel's conclusion, they inform Saturn of their withdrawal of support for his campaign. The reasons the they provide for their retraction—Saturn's use of "falsified wedding certificates" to reserve a married-only hotel and the "nests of honeycomb" leftover from his lover's self-inflicted beestings—are technicalities the Landins attribute to an ill "character" which their foundation cannot support. Though the statement is attributed to the Landins themselves (specified by the section header), it is inflected with legalese (e.g. "regretfully inform," "several items have been brought to our attention," "behaviors the Landin Foundation wishes to promote") indicating that the Landins' true intentions go unstated.[32] It seems, then, that the novel's not-so-subtle

associations between despair, neoliberal capitalism, and the critical capacity (or incapacity) of literature are simply too hot for the fictionalized patrons to handle.

A key aspect of Plascencia's novel—much like David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) and Sheila's Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010)—is therefore to rewire metafictional narrative such that reflection on the conditions for literature's production as narrative and as object/commodity engenders a critical vision of literature's capacity to critique the forces that make composition, publication, and circulation possible (especially as those forces are embedded in the same economic logic that dispossesses minority and distant communities, as represented by the EMF and El Derramadero, respectively). Plascencia does not paint a rosy picture; "the commodification of sadness" is not a force that meets its demise. Until the novel's climax, the greatest success attained by EMF characters is the evasion of Saturn's gaze. Though the lead walls and roofs of El Monte are removed after they are found to be toxic, another evasion-technique is taught to Little Merced by the clairvoyant Baby Nostradamus. Little Merced learns to make her thoughts "impenetrable" by spreading a layer of black over them; and she successfully obscures much of her interior monologue.[33] In select instances, her unintelligible marks expand to protect the words of others:



34

Though Baby Nostradamus' and Little Merced's surveillance-blocking represents perhaps the most promising means for preventing the usurpation of one's inner-turmoil for artistic and commercial ends, its success in the novel is limited; it neither resolves nor halts the military conflict.

In the novel's final scenes, Saturn, after suffering a bout of exhaustion, rededicates himself to the war against the EMF. He surveils the major characters unimpeded, peering into their affairs and heartbreaks one after another. Yet, when Saturn invades Baby Nostradamus's thoughts and resultantly sees into his own future, he momentarily loses focus. De la Fe and Little Merced seize on the opportunity and "wal[k] south and off the page, leaving no footprints that Saturn could track."[35] The moment does ascribe to de la Fe a minor victory over the surveillance of Saturn, but to what end? What ramifications can we draw from de la Fe and Little Merced's flight? Despite their improbable escape, the novel continues to rest in the reader's hands; a commodification of their sadness has inarguably taken place. Although the characters flee their textual environs, Baby Nostradamus's one spoken prediction, "It is Saturn who wins the war" remains true as ever.[36] Thus, a deeply felt pessimism emerges from the novel's end: even to opt

out of the literary project is no winning move.

To call *The People of Paper* a fundamentally pessimistic novel—despite the good reasons we have to do so—is, however, to read the novel on only one metafictional register. This is to say that at the same time the commodification of sadness directs readers to a crucial, extra-narrative level—bearing on the depoliticization of postcolonial literature in the context of neoliberal valuation and patronage—one cannot neglect the novel's other metafictionally-grounded struggle: its plot. I want to suggest, then, in closing this dissertation, that Plascencia meets the pessimistic politics of his text (and of the present it observes) with an optimism the power of which is secured by the same metafictional author/character struggle suggestive of hopelessness. As demonstrated in *The People of Paper*, Plascencia makes metafiction his technique for theorizing how literature can offer an affective framework essential to political thought-projects that will not accept the present order of life, labor, and art as inevitable.

To access this vision requires a reading of the novel's metafictional premise that may seem surface-level, naïve, or counterintuitive, a reading that, in taking seriously the metaphysics of a universe in which author and character clash, thinks at the same time allegorically and non-allegorically. More simply, a robust interpretation of *The People of Paper* capable of capturing the affective energization Plascencia sees postcolonial literature still capable of instigating mandates recognition of the sheer ridiculousness of de la Fe's fight against Saturn and sustained meditations on how and why the fight continues.

Like many a metafictional author-presence (such as the narrator of Robert Coover's "The Magic Poker" [1969] or Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* [1973]), Saturn demonstrates a capacity to manipulate the world his characters inhabit, a power he uses selectively but to destructive ends. The first battle with EMF is distinctly one-sided. Following de la Fe's

declaration of war, a fungus germinates on the carnations of El Monte and, mirroring the plague inflicted on El Derramadero, soon engulfs the houses of the city. As the EMF members scrape and burn the fungus from their homes, it poisons the lungs of twenty-three gang members who die in short order. Needless to say, in light of Saturn's supernatural surveillance and world-manipulating abilities, the campaign organized by de la Fe is one the EMF should hardly expect to win. It is Quixotesque in its delusion, even while its stakes are life-and-death. Decades later, when Froggy is the only EMF members old enough to remember the war against Saturn, the younger generation provides a contrastingly realistic understanding of what a war against Saturn would involve. A younger EMF member rebuffs Froggy's call to revive de la Fe's struggle with the following counterargument: "I say this with respect, we are not going to fight that war again. The veteranos couldn't win, we can't either."[37]

But the younger generation has no privileged knowledge. De la Fe knew Saturn's abilities just as well and against all reason he continued his campaign. After the fungal attack, EMF initiates new members, and a new coalition pursues the struggle. Eventually, a collective "EMF" voice emerges to narrate a column of text.[38] A continued war against Saturn seems, then, to represent a denial of what the EMF coalition is all too familiar with. De la Fe's war appears equal parts martyrdom and naiveté, a fight against an inevitability to which de la Fe will not resign himself. So the most immediate question we must ask of the novel: what could motivate de la Fe's struggle? What sort of affect could energize de la Fe and his compatriots in spite of a fate that, like neoliberal logic, seems all but preordained? And perhaps most importantly, is de la Fe's campaign a subordination of that knowledge to idealism?

In *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (2009), Michael D. Snediker rethinks the temporal dynamics of optimism in a way that helps us to unpack de la

Fe's apparent witlessness. Snediker's chief contestation involves the seemingly exclusive attachment of queer theory to negative affects (e.g. shame, melancholy, self-shattering), which he attributes to an assumption in queer theory that an optimistic perspective must be naïvely future-oriented. Queer theory, in Snediker's formulation, understands optimism as "an allergic reaction to knowledge" insofar as optimism risks discounting the discriminatory, violent, or inequitable realities experienced by queer persons in the present.[39] A utopic optimism in particular, because it attaches itself to a future starkly dissimilar from the present, can be seen as jettisoning its knowledge of the world as is, a world, in the context of queer subjectivity and self-formation, that is indeed structured by negative affects.

But must optimism be limited to an ignorant, future-oriented terrain? Must optimism turn a blind eye to the realities we know? Must hope resign itself to a "promissory" nature and limit itself to a "horizon"?[40] Snediker's project in *Queer Optimism* is to reject this conceptual/temporal paradigm, challenge the prevalence of binary affect-divisions in queer theory (e.g. "Mourning or melancholia? Gay pride or queer shame?"), and articulate an optimism—drawn from the "queer rhetorics" of Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, Jack Spicer, and Elizabeth Bishop—that is rooted in and valuable to the present in terms of theorizing queer subjectivity and its critical implications.[41] A "queer optimism" of this sort Snediker describes in distinctly non-utopic terms. Queer optimism, he writes, "doesn't aspire toward happiness, but instead finds happiness *interesting*. Queer optimism, in this sense, can be considered a form of meta-optimism: it wants to *think* about feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable."[42] The affect—relevant to possibilities of what can be conceived of with nothing besides the epistemic tools of the present—"depends on its emphatic responsiveness to and solicitation of rigorous thinking" and, in doing so, challenges "melancholy's proven capacity to

colonize all experiences similar to it."[43] Queer optimism thus allows us to articulate a subjective continuity that may persevere even in a present organized for queer experience around self-shattering, a subjectivity that is durable insofar as it can "make[s] disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable" even if they are not attainable in a given historical moment.[44]

Plascencia's characters experience and literalize the affects of queer theory; they are not only melancholic but also, as constructions of and on paper, selves subject to shattering. De la Fe, whose depression originates in a plotline designed by another, burns himself as method of alleviation. Saturn/Plascencia's new lover, Cami, turns to beestings. Merced de Papel, an ancient woman constructed from paper, must continually repair her body with what scraps she can find. Oddly but powerfully, however, the EMF campaign's delusional ambition—an apparent dismissal of the characters' melancholic realities and their fixity—does not come at an epistemic deficit. Rather, it is the same metafictional awareness that intensifies characters' depressions—an awareness that their lives are subject to manipulation and commercialization—that the EMF deploys to turn the logic of literary depoliticization on its head. The EMF's metafictional realization that are *presently* confined to characterhood and literary production—that their struggle exists in a novel *still being written*—becomes their greatest hope and groundwork for resistance.

The EMF generals describe their campaign through a present shaded by Saturn's ongoing compositional activity; it is Saturn's explicitly *unfinished* act of writing that the EMF seeks to halt. As Froggy makes clear in his rallying cries, de la Fe's war is far from utopic, directed against the very notion of a future; de la Fe articulates "a war against the future of this story," "a war against a story, against the history *that is being written* by Saturn."[45] Accordingly, de la Fe instructs the EMF, should they encounter Saturn, to "steal the plot lines and the hundred and five

pages that have been written," a number reflective of the page on which it appears.[46] Saturn/Plascencia, too, is well aware of this conceptualization and corroborates it; when he summarizes his foe's surveillance-blocking tactics, Saturn/Plascencia recognizes that "[d]e la Fe's plan was to stump Saturn in the midst of the story, to hide their lives behind lead walls."[47] And indeed, of the few victories attained by the EMF, the most significant involves the prevention a more extensive composition/commodification. Though Saturn lives on after the war, still able to surveil his characters, it is crucial to recall the "unwritten afterword of this book" referenced early in the novel.[48] Although the mention of the afterword is brief, its ramifications are significant; the afterword's unwritten status clarifies that the EMF has successfully limited what should have been a more robust representation of their sorrows.

"All the anxiety that exists in metafiction revolves around the construction of a narrative, and what that narrative will contain," writes George Fragopoulos on *The People of Paper*.[49] In this vein, metafiction reroutes the EMF characters' conceptualization of their war efforts from a utopic future to an evolving present; the characters' aim might best be described as an injunction into the viability of that which is not now, the bare prospect of thinking an alternative order. (Such is the teaching of Rancière: that egalitarianism is epistemic before it is material, that equality is "a dynamic and not an end.")[50] Paradoxically, then, the queer and indeed critical optimism of Plascencia's characters, much like the populism of Laclau's account, both resists and depends on the godlike author figure. Characters' attention to the present—a temporal/political category which emerges from possibilities of thought ("interestingness," in Snediker's terminology)—depends on an antagonistic authoring force that, while devastating and destructive, is also instrumental in de la Fe's attempts to inaugurate a people.

So we return to a concept that has driven so much of this project: contingency. What

Plascencia's metafictional character vs. author dynamic secures in *The People of Paper* is the politically explosive proposal that the world we inhabit is hardly as intractable as it may seem. That the world is always under construction, as de la Fe recognizes, actively and in the present, is not only catalyst for an optimistic resistance—a "liberating truth," as Fragopoulos puts it—but more radically an optimism essential to joining demands that late capitalism, through its inconceivable scope and span, would otherwise posit separate or incompatible (the lesson of Fredric Jameson).[51] Thus, Plascencia brings a century-long engagement of metafictional thinking on political, ethical, and collective possibility into a critical discourse on the efficacy of postcolonial art amid coalition building and within social movements. The contribution of metafictional narrative to radical politics, Plascencia's contribution, is an affect that sustains a realization of the utmost importance: that the networks of global capitalism are, so to speak, still being authored, that the fate of the people is anything but written.

* * *

It is ill-timed, perhaps, to conclude this dissertation by interpreting a metafiction directed at global networks of literary production at a moment in which global ambitions, in the United States and Britain especially, are giving way to isolationist (and nativist) ideologies, when the US appears eager to cede its global authority, at what may be the conclusion of the American century. The arc of Western politics now bends opposite the arc of this dissertation, which began at the hyperlocal (although nationally inflected) with Sherwood Anderson, progressed to a globally-reaching neoliberalism with David Foster Wallace and Sheila Heti, shifted to the resonance of local and global violence with Leslie Marmon Silko, and settled finally at the critical prospects of postcolonial literatures in the context of depoliticizing, neoliberal patronage structures with Salvador Plascencia. And given the largely progressive tenor of the authors

surveyed in this dissertation, it is all the stranger to witness the American far-right, now energized with populist fervor, critique on grounds of economic inequality (although not without xenophobic attachments) the same neoliberalism that, for authors such as Wallace, Heti, and Plascencia, impinged on expressive capacity and artistic criticality.

This asynchrony will be short-lived, I suspect. The premise of this dissertation—that to write fiction in some way about fiction is also to reflect on the social, economic, and political conditions that dictate thought, expression, and identity more broadly—suggests that if metafiction continues to be written in a US sphere of influence (a safe assumption, given its century-long deployment), then it is only a matter of time before metafiction will interrogate the status of art and consequently thought, speech, identity, and sociality amid the nationalist turn. This is not to suggest that metafictionists will give up the global altogether—as, indeed, in the US context it is functionally stateless corporations that have reaped largest benefit from supposedly nationalist politics—but rather that we can expect American metafiction, as it has for the last century, to contest the epistemic and ontological confines of the new nationalism with the same deftness and ferocity with which it contested neoliberalism. If we are to ascertain the politics of literature in the age of Trump, then it would be entirely appropriate to look first to the age's emerging metafictions.

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[1] Steven Poole, "The War Against Saturn," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview29.
[2] Ibid. Eric Bennett argues with greater nuance that there are in fact four voices available in institutional creative writing—minimal and impersonal modernism, loquacious and personal realism, magical realism, and postmodernism—of which the developing writer must pledge allegiance to one. See Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).
[3] Max Benavidez, "Salvador Plascencia," *Bomb Magazine*, January 1, 2007, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/salvador-plascencia/.
[4] George Ducker, "An Interview with Salvador Plascencia," *Hobart*, March 1, 2006, http://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/an-interview-with-salvador-plascencia. Plascencia has

also remarked, "I grew up with this aesthetic of cholo culture. There's an iconic resonance in the tattoos, gang tags, and the other homeboy rituals. I wanted to combine that with the bizarre and tender sense of humor of writers like Barthelme and Vonnegut." He adds, "I play on the stereotypical conception of gangsters, of Chicano youth—or Latinos in general— being in gangs, but in this book it's sort of a parody. I'm using the common media representations, but I take them to an absurd level, maybe confirming the stereotype, but also making it mythic. I was consciously reenacting what a Chicano is thought to be. I also wanted to challenge our conception of the Chicano-Latino novel. I made *The People of Paper* mythic so people wouldn't look at these characters as they're usually perceived, as gangbangers." Benavidez, "Salvador Plascencia."

[5] Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 46.

[6] Ibid., 28, 20.

[7] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 86.

[8] Ibid., 74.

[9] Ibid., 111.

[10] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 199), 38.

[11] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 71.

[12] Ibid., 96.

[13] Ibid., 162.

[14] Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 53.

[15] Ibid., 43.

[16] Ibid., 218.

[17] Ibid., 124.

[18] See "World Lite: What is Global Literature?," *n+1*, 17 (fall 2013), https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/.

[19] Kevin Cooney, "Metafictional Geographies: Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*," in *On and Off the Page: Mapping Place in Text and Culture*, ed. M.B. Hackler (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 193.

[20] Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary Fiction," *American Literary History* 23, no.3 (2011): 594.

[21] See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[22] In describing his influences, Plascencia tends to downplay the literary with only a few exceptions, Márquez being one of them. He has said, "*The People of Paper* is much more indebted to *The Queen is Dead*, Goya, and Carlos Marcovich's *Who the Hell is Juliette?* than it is to any novel. My sense is that you alleviate some of the anxiety of influence by crossing mediums. If the Miltonic weight is too much on you, maybe what you need is some Bach in your Walkman." Sarah Crossland, "An Interview with Salvador Plascencia," *Devil's Lake*, April 18, 2013, https://dept.english.wisc.edu/devilslake/features/2013_plascencia.html.

[23] Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 42.

[24] Ibid., 45.

[25] Cooney, "Metafictional Geographies," 208.

[26] Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy," 576.

[27] Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 109.

[28] Ibid., 109.
[29] Ibid., 114.
[30] Jeffrey T. Nealon, "University. The Associate Vice Provost in the Gray Flannel Suit: Administrative Labor and the Corporate University" in *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 68.
[31] Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 219.
[32] Ibid., 239.
[33] Ibid., 164.
[34] Ibid., 187, 189, 191.
[35] Ibid., 245.
[36] Ibid., 241.
[37] Ibid., 49.
[38] Ibid., 189.
[39] Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.
[40] Ibid., 16.
[41] Ibid., 25, 32.
[42] Ibid., 3.
[43] Ibid., 3, 14.
[44] Ibid., 3.
[45] Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 46, 209. Emphasis added.
[46] Ibid., 105.
[47] Ibid., 90.
[48] Ibid., 41.
[49] George Fragopoulos, "Ten Theses on the Nature of Metafiction (and a Parenthetical Review of Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*), *The Quarterly Conversation*, http://quarterlyconversation.com/salvador-plascencia-the-people-of-paper-metafictio.
[50] Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Polity Press, 2016), 117.
[51] Fragopoulos, "Ten Theses."