

CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

By

ALEXANDER JAMES PAUL MORAN

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Abstract

This thesis traces the ways in which David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan, and Colson Whitehead react against the historical, institutional, and formal limits imposed upon contemporary fiction and culture. It argues that in order to counteract such constraints, they embrace and co-opt older forms and values as enabling for their fiction. In order to map these processes and relationships, I read these five writers as engaging with and reflective of the concept of *cultural reproduction*. Building largely from the definitions of cultural theorist Raymond Williams, the lens of cultural reproduction is a means to acknowledge what Williams terms the ‘limits and pressures’ of the contemporary – such as the inheritance of postmodernism, creative writing programs, technological changes, and commercial demands – and also to outline the ways these writers display agency in reaction to such limits. I discuss Wallace’s work as an exploration of the ways culture is reproduced habitually, and use the ideas of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in order to explicate this. I outline that Franzen’s attention to these processes is distinctly melodramatic, and discuss his nonfiction and later fiction as instances not of his stated realism, but of melodrama. I then discuss the ‘genreification’ of contemporary American fiction in the works of Chabon, Egan, Whitehead, and the differing reasons they all provide for their turn to genre. This focus on cultural reproduction acknowledges the differing relationships these writers have with numerous influences on contemporary fiction, and the autonomy they all display in reacting to this contemporary milieu.

Dedication

To Mum.

I'm sorry you couldn't quite make it to see this. I don't think you would have enjoyed reading it anyway, even if you almost certainly would have described it as either "super," or "very clever."

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Introduction

Charlotte Swenson, one of the protagonists of Jennifer Egan's novel *Look at Me* (2001), is a former model who has recently undergone facial reconstructive surgery after a horrific car crash. This event, and the transformative effect that going from a career as a famous model to being someone utterly unrecognisable has on her life, makes Charlotte of great interest to a new reality web platform called PersonalSpace. PersonalSpace aims to film people as they live normally, signing up what they term 'Ordinaries' and 'ExtraOrdinaries,' of which Charlotte is deemed to be the latter. In developing this new venture, the person in charge, Thomas Keene, wishes to base Charlotte's narrative upon certain literary models. Thomas implores Irene Maitlock – the person writing Charlotte's story – to “Show us the buried logic. What I don't want is, I was bringing cookies to Aunt Susie and I got run over by a tractor. This is not a Raymond Carver story, if you're familiar with his work” (2002, p.256).¹ Thomas does not want a minimalist narrative, in the manner of Carver, but a story with a clear plot and causality. Irene posits that what he desires is akin to classical literature, specifically Aeschylus, an idea which Thomas finesses somewhat: “Tragedy, okay. Yes ... But not Greek. Too cold. Has to be something warmer” (p.256). When Irene suggests drawing upon what she vaguely terms the “Nineteenth century,” Thomas immediately believes he has found what he is looking for: “Bingo. Hardy. The Brontës. Tolstoy. Sad things happen but they happen for a reason” (p.256). Thomas and Irene then go back and forth listing authors who embody the style they are aiming for; when Irene cites Émile Zola, Thomas responds, “Exactly. Stendhal. Or Dickens, for God's sake” (p.256). Thomas believes contemporary literary conventions, such as minimalist realism, do not depict reality in the way he wishes PersonalSpace to do so. As a result, he wants to recover the moral structure that he believes is evident in nineteenth-century fiction.

¹ All quotations are from this edition.

While Thomas essentially seeks a caricature of these realist works and their narrative logic, many contemporary authors share a similar belief that recent fiction is lacking the vitality it once offered. Egan, in this parody and in her genre-hopping writing, is one of several recent American writers who suggest that fiction need not be constrained by any particular institutional or interpretive frameworks. In particular, American authors have used their fiction to explore and address the limitations imposed by the legacy and influence of postmodernism, the role of university creative writing programs, technological advances, the constraints of market logics, and the marginalisation of genre fiction. In many cases, Egan and other writers included in this thesis point to the possibilities available for fiction writers in mining and revivifying past forms. The inheritance of postmodern fiction is something that two major American writers, David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen, are especially concerned with. Across novels, short stories and numerous essays, Wallace suggests that fiction, and wider culture, has developed a series of unthinking, detrimental habits due to this inheritance. Similarly, Franzen perceives his literary forebears as valorising difficulty above all else, and attempts to overcome this problem by returning to and recovering realist forms. For both writers, limits are seen as liberating for artistic possibilities. In his much cited essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993), Wallace speaks of his concern of what happens if 'rulelessness becomes the *rule*,' which he believes would mean 'protest and change become not just impossible but incoherent' (2009, p.68, italics in original). His fiction is in many ways an active embrace of the liberatory potential of limits, where play, experimentation, and engagement with those limits enables change. In a related but distinct move, Franzen chooses to work within the limits of the realist mode as a means to address his specific concerns over the inheritance of postmodern fiction, and the encroachment of technology, both of which he perceives as responsible for creating a disconnection between writers and readers. This process of recovering previous forms as a means to transcend contemporary

constraints is also evident in the work of Michael Chabon, who, like Egan, turns to genre. Chabon's reclamation of genre is partly a reaction to the narrowing of possibilities imposed upon fiction by creative writing programs and the models of writing that they advocate. Chabon reacts to such perceived constraints by embracing genre as generative, and co-opting their patterns and features, a move that is prevalent across contemporary American fiction. Colson Whitehead is also an author who has taken on genre forms as a means to revivify contemporary writing, particularly as a means to explore power relations, particularly in regards to race, throughout American history. This turn to genres is partly a refusal to accept the cultural limits that have been imposed on them as marginalised, critically underappreciated forms due to their close relationship with commerce. Across Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead, then, the appropriation and recovery of genre's recognisable patterns and formulas becomes a means for them to find freedom within its strictures and to address their specific concerns about the field of contemporary fiction.

Across these five writers, a shared set of themes and concerns emerge: first, that contemporary fiction is limited or constrained in some way, either institutionally, conceptually, or technologically. Second, that some limits are also enabling, liberating, and the recovery and repurposing of either older, or less 'literary' conventions and tropes can be a means to overcome such restrictions. This thesis contends that the work of these five writers can therefore be productively read as concerned with the processes of *cultural reproduction*.

Cultural reproduction is a concept that has a particular resonance in the Marxist critical tradition; my usage of it needs to be defined within this critical field, and the constellation of disciplines in which it appears. For Pierre Bourdieu, cultural reproduction is deeply enmeshed with *social reproduction*, where, as he explains in the essay 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,' educational institutions are the 'science' that relates these two concepts (1999, p.66). Bourdieu defines social reproduction as the reproduction of specific class formations: 'In

short, the effectiveness of the mechanisms by means of which the educational system ensures its own reproduction encloses within itself its own limitation ...' (1999, p.66). For Bourdieu, cultural reproduction refers to a process where 'culture' is a commodity of educational qualifications, mannerisms, and habits that maintains power within a specific class of people. While such concerns of the distinctions of class and the maintenance of cultural capital do intersect at points with the writers discussed in this thesis – particularly Franzen – my usage of the term is less concerned with a specifically Marxist critique and instead borrows this understanding of a dynamic in which a matrix of institutional, critical, and commercial conditions define and perpetuate the norms of literary culture to address the wide-ranging concerns that shape the work of contemporary authors.

I develop my concept of cultural reproduction from the writing of cultural theorist Raymond Williams, especially his descriptions in his later work *The Sociology of Culture* (1982). In this text, Williams includes an entire chapter on reproduction because 'in general ... it is inherent in the concept of a culture that it is capable of being reproduced; and, further, that in many of its features culture is indeed a mode of reproduction' (1982, p.184). Williams also states that 'some concept of reproduction is necessary if we are to have any critical sociology of, for example, either education or tradition' (1982, p.186). It is the way these writers interact with and react to specific institutions and traditions that is of particular concern here, and how these writers resist and react to the limits of educational institutions, technological advances, and market forces imposed upon contemporary fiction.

Williams historicises the way that since the 19th century, 'reproduction' has been understood as a synonym for copying, and he makes the useful distinction between *uniform* copying, and *genetic* reproduction, the latter of which he argues better encapsulates how cultural reproduction works (1982, p.185). This biological metaphor enables Williams to suggest the products of cultural reproduction, while clearly reflective of a longer accumulative history, are not wholly imitative. In

this thesis, reproduction is therefore understood as a productive process, whereby the reproduction of forms and values can also be an active re-appropriation of older concepts and limits, such as clichés, realism, or genres. Williams similarly historicises the concept of ‘culture’: he traces the development of the concept from its root as a ‘noun of *process*,’ coming out of its earlier meaning of the cultivation of crops, to its development in the late eighteenth century when it became a ‘noun of *configuration*,’ where culture came to refer to a whole way of life, a general informing spirit (1982, pp.9-11, italics in original). Williams states that definitions of ‘culture’ had by the early 1980s seen a ‘convergence’ of these two understandings, and it had come to be a ‘constitutive’ term, and representative of a ‘signifying system’ (1982, p.13). In *Keywords* (1976) Williams clarifies this further, and outlines how production and reproduction are tied to both ‘material’ culture – which relates to the institutions, both academic and commercial, that define the modes of production for these texts – and also ‘symbolic’ systems (Williams, 1983, p.91). Fiction is most commonly discussed as the latter, a ‘symbolic system’ which refers to the theories and approaches to fiction that have developed and evolved throughout literary history. In this thesis, each writer is primarily concerned with symbolic reproduction, especially periodising categories such as postmodernism, and concepts such as sincerity and authenticity. But the categories of material and symbolic are symbiotic, and so material processes – such as the importance of commerce, academic institutions, and radical changes in technology – are also discussed, as they play key roles in determining the limits these writers perceive and appropriate in the contemporary.

Williams’s definitions are not just distinct from Bourdieu’s roughly contemporaneous definitions, but are also a conscious rebuttal to more classical Marxist understandings of cultural reproduction. He summarises that in canonical Marxist writing, cultural reproduction is a concept that refers to the relationship of the base and the superstructure. Marx outlines this connection in the preface to *A Contribution To The Critique Of Political Economy* (1859), where he argues the base is

the underlying economic logic of an epoch. By epoch, he is referring to the means of production, which in the contemporary goes under many names: neoliberalism, late capitalism, and even late-late capitalism.² The superstructure is the legal and political structures that form as reflective of that base – the lived, historical reality (1976, pp.3-4). As Williams outlines in his essay ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ (1973), cultural reproduction came to refer in earlier Marxist criticism to ‘the imitation or the reproduction of the reality of the base in the superstructure in a more or less direct way’ (1973, p.4). What Williams questions in this essay is the way many critics at the time use the term ‘determines’: ‘We have to revalue “determination” towards *the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure*, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content’ (1973, p.6, italics mine). Williams’s definitions of cultural reproduction views it as a set of limits and pressures, but does not assert that its processes – whether institutional, like creative writing programs, or technological, like digital communications technology – absolutely determine cultural products. In this thesis, cultural reproduction refers to a series of material and symbolic limits and pressures that these writers are influenced by, and react to. The point is that in the more muted language of Williams, cultural reproduction does not say these writers are determined by any set aspect of culture – whether economic or otherwise – and instead are responsive to, and have agency in spite of, specific limits and pressures.

Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead, in their recovery of past forms and values, also revise how the past is understood, as well as the contemporary moment. With his emphasis on limits and pressures, Williams’s idea of cultural reproduction rejects the notion that the base is simply replicated in the superstructure, instead acknowledging, as Williams argues in *Problems and Materialism in Culture* (1980): ‘that no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts *the full range of human*

² For neoliberalism, read Harvey (2005), for late capitalism, Jameson (1991), and for late-late capitalism, read Fragopoulos and Naydan (2016).

practice, human energy, human intention ...' (1980, p.43, italics in original). This acknowledgement of the agency of fiction writers, working within such limits and pressures, is a central argument of this thesis. Discussing these texts in the context of this kind of cultural reproduction enables both an examination of the range of institutional and conceptual pressures and limits of contemporary literary culture, and how these authors try to counteract, disrupt, and influence the cultural norms they create. In his introduction to the 2010 reissue of John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), cultural theorist Henry Jenkins discusses how the rise of digital technology does not necessarily lead to unique forms of cultural production, but instead even more cultural reproduction. For Jenkins we should resist 'technological determinist arguments,' and rather 'insist ... that cultural and social factors shape technology far more than technology shapes culture' (2010, p.xv). Finally, Williams adds the caveat to his definition that 'The metaphor of "reproduction," if pushed too hard, can obscure these crucial processes of relative autonomy and of change, even while it usefully insists on a general and intrinsic character' (1982, p.186). It is the autonomy of these five writers in reaction to the limits and pressures of contemporary culture that is the focus of this thesis.

Defining cultural reproduction in such a way – as not simply a product of social reproduction, as Bourdieu claims, or as determinist – enables a more open and varied discussion of the ways that writers interpret such limits and pressures, and formulate their responses to them. These interrelated processes are the focus of this thesis. The following chapters will examine how each of the five writers discussed identify what they perceive as the limits and pressures of contemporary literary culture and will argue that their response is actually to appropriate different kinds of limits, often those of established or historical forms. The contention is that they seek out one set of formal or generic limits to work within in order to transcend the limits that define the

literary culture more broadly, thus exercising agency in choosing the parameters that define their work.

In Williams' definition of cultural reproduction he argues that a focus on the base as absolutely determining the superstructure leads to a critical focus on epochal shifts, rather than historical readings (1973, p.8). By epochal shifts he means the prioritization of analysis of moments where the means of production change. This thesis does not track such an epochal shift; instead I focus on what Williams terms a certain 'structure of feeling,' and the processes of cultural reproduction that they shape. Williams defines and revises this concept often throughout his writing, but perhaps the clearest version he gives is the one defined in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Here, he states a structure of feeling is a cultural hypothesis that attempts to understand 'elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence' (1977, p.132). By this Williams means there are many competing concepts at any point of history, and that any particular product of culture will contain the presence of these other voices within it. Via Williams, this thesis therefore suggests the contemporary structure of feeling is not a singular process, whether this is the reproduction of the base, or what Marx terms in *Capital* (1867) 'simple reproduction,' referring to the constant reproduction of the relationship between the capitalist and the worker (2008, p.320) Instead, as Paul Jones outlines, Williams offers 'A model of *multiple and potentially contradictory processes of reproduction ...*' (2005, p.139, italics in original). Williams' understanding of cultural reproduction as a plurality of contradictory and competing processes is particularly useful in my approach to these authors. For instance, while Wallace and Franzen both react to the pressures and limits imposed by the dominance of their postmodern forebears, they react in divergent ways. Similarly, while Chabon, Egan and Whitehead all engage with genre forms, they are responding to different perceptions of what the limits and pressures shaping literary culture are. While all responsive to the same structure

of feeling, and all turn to genre forms at this moment, they prioritise specific aspects of contemporary literary culture: the dominance of creative writing programs, artistic authenticity, and the racialised nature of power relations in defining the limits of popular art, respectively. Williams suggests that reproduction is ‘a process of deliberate continuity,’ and that ‘any tradition can be shown, by analysis, to be a selection and reselection of those significant received and recovered elements of the past which represent not a necessary but a *desired* continuity’ (1982, p.187, italics in original). Not only do Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead represent continuity with certain forms and values, but in their reactions to the pressures and limits of cultural reproduction, they all often demonstrate an autonomous desired *discontinuity* with many of the institutions and traditions that define contemporary culture.

Each writer is understood as asking a different question about reproduction: I begin with Wallace as he explores the reproduction of habits and customs at different levels: first of character, then form, and finally the reader. Williams argues that in regards to formal innovations, ‘It is especially necessary here to define levels in reproduction’ (1982, p.199). However, in this first chapter, I suggest seeing cultural reproduction as operating on different levels becomes a means to assess the work at levels beyond form, to delve into the text and also to the wider culture. I examine how Wallace’s texts show that even seemingly radical behaviours can become habitual, and always need to be reassessed and revised – that new limits must always be sought. Franzen is also discussed as a writer who queries the specific ways he believes contemporary literature is being habitually reproduced, but he differs in that he tries to recover the realist form as a reaction to these concerns. This chapter conveys how the pressures and limits of the contemporary structure of feeling are in tension with his valorisation of a particular literary period. In the final chapter, each writer is positioned as turning to genre forms, but in reaction to different pressures and limits. Chabon’s turn to genre forms brings into focus two points about cultural reproduction: first, the

marginalisation of genre forms by literary studies and wider culture, and second, the important relationship of how art is produced and reproduced in relation to commercial demands. Egan's fiction similarly queries the reproductive pressures of the contemporary, and she updates genre forms to address contemporary concerns, particularly in regards to technology. Whitehead's fiction queries the way the reproduction of forms relates to power, and the racialised nature of reproduction. These three writers see the histories of the genres they turn to as particularly evocative of the concerns they wish to address.

In many ways similar to Williams' cultural materialist approach, I build from close readings of texts to expand outwards to the cultural processes these writers address. For instance, Wallace's *oeuvre* consistently dramatises the practical consequences of the reproduction of certain social customs – such as how popular culture endorses concepts like irony, and denigrates others, like cliché – and I trace how Wallace historicises these customs within the postmodern era. The point is to explicate the ways in which each author represents cultural reproduction in their fiction and nonfiction, and the relationships and differences of such interpretations across the works of Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead. As distinct from Franco Moretti's call for 'distant reading,' or Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's 'surface reading,' this thesis reflects and enacts the value of close reading.³ This is not to say that these approaches are not useful in other contexts, but to claim that how these five authors interpret and enact cultural reproduction is best explored via close readings. Jane Gallop – writing in response to the critical dominance of New Historicism – persuasively argues: 'close reading is a method for resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bring things together in smug overarching conclusions. I would argue that close reading

³ See Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013) for a definition of his concept. For surface reading, read Best & Marcus (2009).

may in fact be the best antidote we have to the timeless and the universal' (2013, p.7).⁴ My close readings of each of these five writers seeks to do two things. First, to build a picture of the pressures and limits of the contemporary literary scene as identified by these writers, and second, to outline how each writer responds to their specific concerns. Williams points to the value of looking closely at a topic: 'It seems undeniable that the more we know of a particular form, practice, institution or period the less likely we are to be satisfied with any general analysis of it, however close' (1982, p.181). This thesis claims these five writers self-consciously disrupt our understanding of the contemporary, by questioning the reproductive processes of the present, and reclaiming and recovering older forms. A focus on cultural reproduction is not a claim to a new period or turn; in fact, it complicates such periodising, and close reading is the best method in which to explicate such complications and disruptions.

The Co-optation of Limits in Contemporary Fiction

To develop the notion of cultural reproduction within the texts of these five writers is not intended to challenge or displace the varying theoretical models that have been offered to define the contemporary, many of which identify processes of disruption and similarly posit a return to earlier forms. Rather, a focus on the limits and pressures of cultural reproduction works in conjunction with such models and theories, but enables an investigation into a broader survey of these signifying processes – the contradictory reproductive processes Williams outlines – rather than a single process or idea. The authors discussed in this study were born within ten years of each other, the oldest being Franzen, born in 1959, and the youngest being Whitehead, born in 1969. Each of these writers 'came to intellectual maturity,' to borrow Adam Kelly's phrase, during the historical

⁴ Rita Felski also critiques New Historicism in *Uses of Literature* (2008): 'One consequence of such historical embedding is that the critic is absolved of the need to think through her own relationship to the text she is reading. Why has this work been chosen for interpretation? How does it speak to me now?' (2008, p.10).

period that saw the supposed collapse of the high and low binary, rapid changes in digital technology, and the rise of critical theory (2016, p.197). This means that in relation to cultural reproduction, they share similar experiences of North American education and literary culture – the same structure of feeling.⁵ Yet, as this thesis will show, their priorities and influences regarding this structure of feeling vary from writer to writer. Williams’ concept of ‘relative distances’ is a useful way to navigate these differences. Williams develops this concept as a means to acknowledge that not all aspects of culture are economically determined. He suggests that some works are far removed from the demands of the market, and therefore to discuss them as purely defined by economics ‘is to misunderstand, reduce and even cancel them’ (1982, p.191). Consequently, ‘To offer a general theory based on one set of such instances is then as unwise as it is unnecessary. It is here that the hypothesis of relative distances can be particularly important’ (1982, p.191). Borrowing from this approach, the following chapters will attend to the variations in influence that certain aspects of a shared literary culture have exerted over these writers. While other critics have focused on specific symbolic and material aspects of culture – such as creative writing programs, irony, humanism, and sincerity – as a lens to explore how these shared concerns have shaped contemporary literature, this thesis examines the relative distances from different aspects of literary culture that have shaped these writers’ engagements with historical literary forms. This approach is attentive to the variations in priorities for these writers and enables distinct areas of contemporary literary culture to be brought into focus alongside each other.⁶

Each writer demonstrates a different relative distance from the prevailing pressures and limits of contemporary literary culture. It is worth briefly outlining these distances from one of the

⁵ This method of grouping authors into similar ‘ages’ is something Williams does in both *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). For more on Williams method of periodising, read Jones (2004, p.144).

⁶ See Mark McGurl (2009) for the creative writing programs, Lee Konstantinou (2016a) for irony, Mary K. Holland (2013b) for humanism, and Adam Kelly (2010 & 2016) for sincerity respectively.

most prominent pressures upon contemporary fiction, the inheritance of postmodern fiction. In *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016), Lee Konstantinou uses the relationships many postwar writers have with irony to explain ‘how postmodernism became historical’ (2016, p.4). The five writers discussed in this thesis treat postmodernism *as* historical, and display different distances from this inheritance. Stephen Burn and Robert McLaughlin adopt the useful but somewhat cumbersome term post-postmodernism (neither are happy with it) because it embodies the continuities between authors such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Robert Coover, and more recent authors such as Wallace, Franzen, and Richard Powers.⁷ McLaughlin conceives post-postmodern authors as ‘Inheriting the postmodern fascination with representation, the layers of text, discourse, narrative, and image that construct our experience of the world’ (2012, p.213). The extra ‘post’ denotes that while they are still heavily influenced by such writers, they also ‘penetrate through the layers, aiming, perhaps quixotically, to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real’ (2012, p.213). That McLaughlin describes post-postmodern writers as attempting to ‘reconnect’ to ideas that were questioned during the postmodern period when formal concerns were paramount is similar to the recovery of older forms I outline here. In *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013), Mary K. Holland similarly states that fiction after postmodernism is partly defined by a return, specifically of humanist values (2013b, p.3). Adam Kelly also outlines a return in contemporary American fiction, which he terms ‘The New Sincerity’ (2010, 2016). That Kelly uses the prefix ‘new’ denotes that while this recuperation of sincerity is a reproduction of an older, supposedly antiquated value, it is within a new context, and therefore has a renewed

⁷ The others McLaughlin believes are in this group are: ‘Rick Moody, William T. Vollmann, Mary Caponegro, Bradford Morrow, Michael Chabon, Denis Johnson, Colson Whitehead, A. M. Homes, Jonathan Lethem, Cris Mazza, and Susan Daitch’ (2012, p.213). Burn has recently started to use the phrase ‘second-generation postmoderns’ to refer to these writers and this period (2016, p.436). I address why I persist with the unwieldy term post-postmodernism in Chapter 2.

resonance and serves a different purpose than its previous uses. McLaughlin, Holland, and Kelly all suggest that many contemporary writers are trying to enact a distinct distance from the postmodern era. Furthermore, they all, as I suggest throughout this thesis, suggest that a reconnection with, or reclamation of, older values and ideas, such as humanism and sincerity, defines much of the fiction after the postmodern era.

This thesis will add to these debates by considering how each of the writers discussed initiate a return to past forms as a means to transcend the limits imposed by – among others – the legacy of postmodernism. My chapters on Wallace and Franzen explore at length the ways they perceive the influence of postmodernism working upon their fiction. Indeed, their texts are in many ways defined by their belief that this inheritance continues to be reproduced in often problematic ways throughout culture. Distinguishing them as post-postmodernists points to their engagement with a specific subset of postmodernism; as Wendy Steiner outlines, writers such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and William Gaddis represent only one aspect of this era, which she terms the ‘technically self-conscious line’ (2008, p.428). Steiner goes on to indicate that many readers treat these experimental texts as ‘a synecdoche for the whole period’ (2008, p.428). While Wallace and Franzen react to this specific strain of postmodern fiction – what Williams would term a ‘desired continuity’– they also enact a desired discontinuity from this version of postmodern fiction. While both were initially drawn to the ambition, invention, and political irony of postmodern writing – and as I discuss in these chapters and the term post-postmodern intends to capture, are evidently heavily influenced by such writing – both Wallace and Franzen feel many aspects of postmodern fiction have served their purpose, and an emptiness has come to pervade postmodern techniques and aims. To reproduce such values, then, results in a solipsistic irony for Wallace that is divorced from any critical or meaningful context, and for Franzen, a valorisation of obscure difficulty that isolates the reader from what he believes is the purpose of fiction. The

reclamations in both cases seeks to restore some of what it lost when it became excessively difficult for its own sake, or divorced from any critical or meaningful context. In paying attention to these aspects of cultural reproduction, each writer is identified as attempting to disrupt and re-shape these processes to varying degrees.

What these disruptions point to is an active engagement with the concept of limits as a central aspect of contemporary fiction. The concept of ‘limits’ is used here to capture two related but distinct meanings. First, it identifies the constraints set by the contemporary structure of feeling that limits the kind of literature that is produced and to which they seek to respond. Second, it refers to the boundaries and rules set by the older established forms and genres these writers draw upon in their fiction. Therefore, limits are not solely restrictive; as these five writers demonstrate, they can be enabling for their fiction. Attention to cultural reproduction shines a light on the way a self-conscious focus on limits – as both restrictive and also generative – is a key thematic of recent American fiction.

Raoul Eshelman declares that the postmodern era is evidently over, and he similarly describes the essential feature of contemporary literary culture to be a relationship with limits, which he terms ‘frames.’ He labels this ‘new aesthetic, for better or worse, performatism ... [a term which] refers to a strong performance, which is to say a successful, convincing, or moving attempt by an opaque subject to transcend what I call a double frame’ (2009, p.xii). By double frame, Eshelman – drawing on sociologist Erving Goffman – means that contemporary art and literature has an ‘inner frame,’ which is essentially a transaction or interaction between two people (or as Eshelman oddly states, ‘protohumans’) (2009, p.5). Encircling and containing this interaction is an ‘outer frame,’ which provides a limit to the possible reading, and demands the reader or viewer makes a choice: ‘The outer frame imposes some sort of unequivocal resolution to the problems raised in the work on the reader or viewer’ (2009, p.3). Eshelman’s concept of the frame relates to

the central theme of limits discussed in each of the chapters of this thesis, where authors actively impose and seek to limit their own fiction. Where my focus on cultural reproduction slightly deviates is that it also acknowledges the limits and pressures of contemporary literary culture, as well as the limits these writers seek to appropriate, impose, and play with, in the manner Eshelman's concept of the frame also suggests. Finally, as performatism is partly a return of what Eshelman terms 'monist values,' Eshelman also suggests, like McLaughlin, Kelly, Holland, and this thesis, that the present is an era of recovery and reclamation (2009, p.xi).

Akin to the phenomena of recovery I discuss in the work of Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead, there is also a strong focus among contemporary literary theorists regarding the ways in which writers are reclaiming, reimagining, or re-invoking previous literary periods, ideas, and forms. Most clearly, Joshua Toth's proposal of 'renewalism' evokes this return in its name, which he sees as a 'renewal of faith ... in the promise (of mimesis, of communication, etc.) and the impossible possibility that it will be fulfilled' in contemporary film and fiction (2010, p.119). Furthermore, alongside Neil Brooks, in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007), Toth discusses a trend towards a 'revival of (some type of) realism' (2007, p.4). This revival has been evident since Bill Buford's 1983 issue of *Granta*, where Buford proclaims the emergence of 'a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life,' and identifies Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, Elizabeth Tallent, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Tobias Wolff as representative of this trend (1983, p.4). There is also the neo-realism that Thomas Wolfe outlines in his polemic 'Stalking the Billion Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel' (1989). Here, Wolfe argues that authors should rediscover the value of Emile Zola's 'reportorial' approach to fiction (1989, p.55). In *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism* (2001), Robert Rebein suggests that 'contemporary realist writers have *absorbed* postmodernism's most lasting contributions and gone

on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character' (2001, p.20, italics in original). Similarly, Mary K. Holland argues not only for the aforementioned return to humanism, but also suggests that 'poststructural realism' is the defining mode that succeeds postmodernism, 'a new mode of realism ... that produces "reality effects" not by repressing the machinations of fiction, as does traditional realism, but by making them visible via metafiction' (2013, p.7). As well as being markedly similar to McLaughlin's definitions of post-postmodernism, Rebein's and Holland's work – as well as Buford's, Toth's, and Wolfe's – embodies the idea that contemporary writers should, or already do, reproduce realist forms. The focus here on the phenomenon of the recovery of past forms therefore fits within a wider critical consensus. As my close readings of cultural reproduction in their work demonstrates, their responses do not align in ways that would place them within a recognisable movement or constitute a cultural turn. Instead, they represent the varying and often contradictory reactions to the contemporary that attention to cultural reproduction draws out.

Chapter Structure

In the first chapter, to explore the ways David Foster Wallace depicts cultural reproduction, I turn to a school of philosophy that Wallace is often discussed alongside, or seen as representative of, that of American pragmatism. However, I focus on John Dewey, a proponent of this school who Wallace's work is rarely seen in connection with. Dewey's theories are useful as he argues that the self is a series of contradictory habitual urges; for Dewey, there is no ego or consciousness without, or beyond, habits. He also broadens this concept to define culture as similarly made of malleable customs. After outlining why Dewey's concept of habit is particularly pertinent in reading Wallace – as opposed to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, for instance, as well as the rich history of discussions of habit by other thinkers in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology – this chapter

suggests, via Dewey, that Wallace aims to defamiliarise habitual behaviours; his characters are bound by habits, and their worlds by societal customs. Rather than attempt a unification of Wallace and pragmatism, or attempt to situate Wallace's work as a new form of pragmatism, this chapter focuses on a strain of pragmatist thought that illuminates this aspect of Wallace's texts. This usage of Dewey follows the path set by contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein, which Inna Semetsky – in her discussion of the similarities between Dewey and Gilles Deleuze – summarises as 'based on the idea of freely juxtaposing ... two thought processes so as to be able to construct a commonly shared plane between the two' (2010, p.233). My use of Dewey juxtaposes Wallace's texts with Dewey's conception of habit, which elucidates what it might mean to formulate his characters and culture in such a way. That Wallace's texts suggest that cultural reproduction is habitual introduces what it means for these writers to pay attention to the processes of cultural reproduction of focus in this thesis: the way each writer questions that these processes should be reproduced, and the suggestion of an earlier form or value – represented in Wallace's texts by clichés – in response to such concerns.

How Wallace draws attention to cultural reproductive processes is a clear means to introduce the way this thesis uses the term cultural reproduction. In Chapter 2, Jonathan Franzen is treated as emblematic of the *tension* of the two processes of focus here: the pressures and limits of cultural reproduction, and the reclamation of an earlier form in reaction to these concerns. Franzen's famous 1996 essay, 'Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels' (edited and re-published as 'Why Bother?' in 2002) culminates in his advocacy of 'tragic realism' as a mode for fiction (1996, p.53). A few years after this essay, Franzen suggested that realism is the 'home' of fiction (2002a, p.110). Franzen's desire to be a realist not only intends to counteract the form, style, and difficulty of his forebears – he has particular ire for the work of William Gaddis – but also to reclaim the value of the nineteenth century conception of the realist literary tradition.

Through a close reading of Franzen's extensive epitextual pronouncements and his novels *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), my second chapter explicates the tensions evident in Franzen's work. In *Look at Me*, Thomas describes to Irene how she should write Charlotte's story: "Remember, authenticity is the beginning and the end of this product ... I'm not saying make anything up," which is reminiscent of Franzen's desire to be a realist (p.255). Indeed, Franzen states the job of the 'tragic realist' is to 'offer no opinion' of an event, but to 'simply represent it' (2002b, p.97). However, Thomas goes on to implore Irene to "*find* the drama, *find* the beauty, *find* the tension and give it to us. You may feel like you're making it more contrived, but it's the opposite" (p.255, italics in original). Franzen's fiction operates similarly, as his texts provide heightened moments of plot, tension, and drama, all of which are hallmarks of the melodramatic mode. Drawing upon the melodrama criticism of Peter Brooks, Christine Gledhill, and Linda Williams, this chapter argues that Franzen's works, while professing to reproduce a form of realism, actually reproduce what Raymond Williams would term – appropriating the language of Russian Marxist critic Valentin Volosinov – 'the internal signals' of melodrama (1982, p.194).⁸ This reading focuses on the didactic points he is trying to make about the processes of reproduction in the contemporary, rather than the oft-trodden ground of whether his texts stay within the formal limits of literary realism. In Franzen's melodramatic, Manichean construction of literary history, he reifies a particular period of realism, and, as Steiner suggests many do, a certain subset of postmodern fiction. Franzen's texts are useful to explicate the tension between the limits and pressures of the contemporary structure of feeling, and the narrow conception of the realist form and style he attempts to return to. It is due to this tension that his texts evidence many of the traits of melodrama.

The final chapter outlines a process I term the 'genrefication' of the contemporary American novel. After outlining what genrefication reflexively means for the selective tradition of literary

⁸ For more on Williams's turn to utilising Volosinov later in his career, read Jones (2003, p.194).

studies – especially for periodisation – this chapter concerns three authors emblematic of contrasting reasons for this recent development. It begins with close readings of Michael Chabon’s detective novel *The Final Solution: A Novel of Detection* (2004) and his serialised adventure novel, *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007). These two texts are genre-fication in its clearest iteration, and I contend that these texts are contemporary instances of pastiche. I then discuss Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) as emblematic of how popular, generic art is produced and then reproduced over time, and the relationship between such art and the market throughout these changes. This is the section that most clearly advances the connection between material and symbolic reproduction, as this relationship is central to the ways mass-produced, popular art is conceived and produced. In contrast to Chabon’s pastiches, in her gothic novel, *The Keep* (2006), Egan reproduces the gothic and makes it speak to the contemporary – she gothicises the present and contemporises the gothic. This section discusses *The Keep* as an instance of what structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov defines as ‘the fantastic.’ Egan’s text explores the manner in which genre forms provide what Adam Kelly describes – in an essay about the legacy of E. L. Doctorow – as ‘generative limits’ that enable these writers to represent and discuss specific aspects of the contemporary (2015). The chapter then considers Colson Whitehead’s zombie horror novel *Zone One* (2011) alongside the definitions of popular culture advanced by cultural theorist – and student of Raymond Williams – John Fiske. I turn to Fiske here as Williams had, as Paul Jones outlines, a ‘blindspot’ when it comes to interpreting popular culture (2004, xiii). In this final section, I argue that the post-apocalyptic, zombie horror genre is generative of the idea that popular forms develop in response to, and are reproduced by, power structures, particularly in regards to race.

Finally, attention to cultural reproduction works reflexively, and the analyses of Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead pose questions about literary studies: namely, the role of

institutions, the current cultural standing of literature, the relationship of art and commerce, the rigidity of periodisation, and the historical marginalisation of genre fiction. Pursuing these ideas the thesis looks at how each author negotiates their space within the institutional, technological, and conceptual influences upon their fiction, and analyses how each author reacts to these processes and concepts. By not only querying the current pressures and limits of reproduction but also actively reproducing older forms, the framework of cultural reproduction enables these related processes to be drawn out and assessed in tandem.

Chapter 1: The Need for Habitual Change in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace described his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996), as an exploration of what the future could hold if North America proceeds along the same ‘continuum,’ largely in regards to ecological policy and the reification of entertainment (Lipsky, 2010: p.81). Wallace’s posthumously released, unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011), is set in the early 1980s. If *Infinite Jest* speaks of a perilous future without change, *The Pale King* looks to the source of this prospective social and cultural crisis. In *Post-Postmodernism, Or, the Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (2012) Jeffrey Nealon suggests that the 80s does not refer to a particular decade, but rather – following Fredric Jameson’s example of defining ‘the 60s’ as a period that begins in the mid-50s and ends in the early 70s – to a specific type of cultural and economic production that is still being experienced.⁹ Nealon posits that the present is defined by an ‘intensification,’ rather than a break from, the precepts developed during this decade (pp.3-4). By setting *The Pale King* in the early 80s, Wallace positions the novel at the starting point of the period Nealon outlines. As Marshall Boswell (2012), Jeffrey Severs (2016), Mark McGurl (2014), and Richard Godden and Michael Szalay (2014) note in a variety of ways, the 1980s setting enables a critique of the economic and cultural ideas developed and adopted during this period – namely, what has come to be called neoliberalism. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015) Wendy Brown defines this nebulous concept as ‘a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’ (2015, p.17). Brown goes on to suggest that neoliberal reason modifies the ‘habits of citizenship’ of those who live under it (2015, p.30). Wallace’s characters in this novel are defined by individual and collective actions that are repeated unconsciously. *The Pale King* therefore suggests these actions are really *habits* that can always change. The 1980s setting, then, evokes a time when the habits of citizenship radically changed, in order to suggest that such a shift could happen again.

⁹ Nealon draws from Jameson’s essay ‘Periodizing the 60s’ (1984).

Before discussing which habits Wallace proposes need to change, it is worth first outlining which concepts have been identified as emblematic of postmodern fiction in particular. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson defines postmodernism as the new cultural dominant, one marked by depthlessness, a waning of affect, and a flattening of cultural value. In literary criticism specifically, Jameson contends that postmodern thought redefines the self as spatially understood, in contrast to the previous, modernist paradigm of conceiving the self as temporally positioned (1999, p.16). What Jameson means is that the self is no longer part of a narrative; no longer grounded within time, postmodern characters cannot situate themselves historically. The postmodern self is instead conceived spatially, outside of time, where, as Adam Kelly points out, Jameson defines the experience of postmodern literary characters as a series of ‘events’ rather than ‘decisions’ (2013, p.1). Jameson therefore argues that characters in postmodern fiction do not *affect* decisions, but are, instead, *affected*. Affect therefore becomes an external rather than an internal phenomena, and it is this inversion which is the basis for Jameson’s canonical formulations about postmodernity; that it is defined by ahistoricism as it is out of time, and a waning (because externalised) of affect. Similar to Jameson’s postulations, Brian McHale posits that postmodern fiction is defined by a turn to the ontological, as opposed to the epistemological dominant of the modernist era (1992, p.10). McHale casts the concerns of the postmodern period with being in the world, or indeed the existence of such a world: ‘What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?’ (1992, p.10). Therefore, like Jameson, McHale suggests that postmodern fiction defines the self as a spatial being, as it questions the place of a self within a world, and indeed what demarcates the limit of such a space.

Postmodern fiction is filled with examples of *affected* protagonists. For instance, Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) exemplifies this spatial – as in how she

interacts with her environment – understanding of self: she chases a series of red herrings, and is ultimately guided by an external other, not by her own decisions. A similar fate befalls Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), as Kelly summarises succinctly: 'Pursued by two obscurely located opposing powers, the Firm and the Counterforce, Slothrop becomes the prey of a system that seems at once all-powerful and strangely haphazard, and by the novel's end he has been stripped of any temporal coherence and intimations of agency that he might have possessed' (2013, p.1).¹⁰ Slothrop's lack of temporal coherence negates the possibility of his ability to *affect* decisions. In contrast to Pynchon and the definitions of postmodernity provided by Jameson and McHale, Wallace's fiction is consistently marked by his characters' decisions influencing events, and the characterological capacity for change.

In this chapter I use Wallace's unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, as a basis to explicate his career-long ideas. After the initial focus on this novel, my argument moves outwards to examine how these concerns operate throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*. By approaching *The Pale King* in this manner, I respond to the growing consensus that the novel operates as a locus for Wallace's enduring themes and ideas. For instance, in her review of the novel for *The New York Times* Michiko Kakutani states:

Although *The Pale King* was pieced together by Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch from pages and notes that the author left behind when he committed suicide in 2008, it feels less like an incomplete manuscript than a rough-edged digest of the themes, preoccupations and narrative techniques that have distinguished his work from the beginning. (2011)

Similarly, McGurl says of Wallace's career: 'It seems fair to call this the existentialization of Wittgensteinian pragmatism and to describe *The Pale King* as its culmination' (2014, p.38). It is evident then that both Kakutani and McGurl see coherent threads running through Wallace's

¹⁰ Kelly also points out the theoretical similarities between Pynchon and Jameson, asserting that, 'Pynchon and Jameson appear to be singing from the same hymn-sheet in this respect, at least, that in both writers what we have come to call postmodernism is defined by a concern with *events* rather than with *decisions*' (2013, p.1, italics in original).

corpus, and *The Pale King* as the culmination of his most often explored themes. This is not to say that Wallace's work is clearly a part of any set school of philosophical thought. As Clare Hayes-Brady points out, 'his persistent resistance to singularity makes it impossible to tie Wallace to a philosophical tradition' (2016, p.65). This chapter addresses Wallace's depictions of cultural reproduction particularly in regards to the limits and pressures of postmodernism, both as a fictional mode and a cultural logic. I address the effects of this cultural reproduction at three distinct levels: I initially focus on Wallace's attempts to re-temporalise his characters, and by doing so, empowering them to make decisions, rather than be at the mercy of the postmodern, Jamesonian/Pynchonian primacy of events. My reading then moves from the local level of character to the larger implications for culture. I conclude with a discussion of Wallace's defamiliarising use of form. Raymond Williams suggests that 'a tradition is the process of reproduction in action' (1982, p.184). Wallace's texts question whether fiction and culture should continue along the same continuum – he questions the traditions that are forming.

By situating Wallace as particularly concerned with traditions and customs, I propose it is productive to read his work through the lens of *habit*. Habit has been a topic in philosophy from Aristotle to the modern day, and, like the concept of cultural reproduction, it has a rich history within the fields of psychology and sociology. As Thorton Lockwood summarises, habit appears in Aristotle's work in two ways: as *hexis*, which refers to specific habits that a person has learned, and also to *ethos*, which refers to the process by which one learns something through habitual practice (2013, p.20). Often building upon or arguing with Aristotle's work, habit is a cornerstone of the philosophies of thinkers as varied as Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Remi Descartes, and Gilles Deleuze. More recently, philosopher Maurice Hadot defines his work as a series of 'practical

exercises intended to create habits' (1999, p.86).¹¹ Outside of philosophy, it is in the field of sociology where the concept of habit has been most keenly contested. As Charles Camic noted back in 1986, the concept fell out of vogue in sociological discourse from the 1940s to the 1970s (Crossley: 2013, p.136). The thinker who brought it back is Pierre Bourdieu.¹²

Bourdieu's Marxist-infused sociology would appear to be a natural fit with my discussion of Williams's cultural reproduction. Indeed, in *The Sociology of Culture* Williams cites Bourdieu as a like-minded thinker, and Williams scholar Paul Jones briefly notes the similarities in method between the two (2003, p.59). However, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), Bourdieu explains his development of habitus is partly driven by a wish to distinguish it from habit: 'One of the reasons for the use of the term habitus is the wish to set aside the common conception of habit as a mechanical assembly or preformed programme, as Hegel does when in the *Phenomenology of Mind* he speaks of "habit as dexterity"' (1977, p.218). In resisting this mechanistic conception of self, Bourdieu nonetheless does not quite wish to suggest 'that we should reduce the objective intentions and constituted significations of actions and works to the conscious and deliberate intentions of their authors' (1977, p.73). Habitus intends to suggest both a series of learned behaviours, and that, as Crossley notes, these behaviours, mannerisms, and understandings of self are 'a constraint upon freedom' (2013, p.153). As I will argue in this chapter Wallace does not regard habits as solely constraining freedom, but, as with each of the other writers in this thesis, limits, in this instance habits, can be enabling, and create possibilities for human action. It is Bourdieu's belief that habitus denies agency that places it at odds with Wallace's depictions of habits and customs here.

¹¹ Hadot's clear debt to Ludwig Wittgenstein – which Wallace critics such as Marshall Boswell (2003) have long noted - suggests there is possibly a relationship for future scholarship to explore between Wallace and Hadot.

¹² For an in-depth look at the role of habit in literary criticism, see Philip Fisher (1973). For a summary of the study of habit in philosophy, read Sparrow & Hutchinson (eds.) *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu* (2013).

Crossley goes on to contrast Bourdieu's idea of habitus with the definitions of habit proposed by American pragmatist John Dewey and French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Crossley outlines that for Dewey, habit is not a constraint upon freedom, but instead 'Habits are the structures that allow us to carry forward impulses to their consummation and which allow us, in deliberation, which is itself a habit, both to plan and to implement a plan' (2011, p.153). Crossley shows that Merleau-Ponty defines habit in a similar way, where habit 'lends our lives continuity. My self and life manifest continuity across time because and to the extent that they are rooted in habit, allowing me to pick up tomorrow what I began today. And habit lends this same continuity to collective history and culture' (2011, p.146). This continuity in day-to-day existence is what Merleau-Ponty defines in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) as the 'habit-body' (2002, p.95). Where Dewey differs is that habit is not a phenomenological means for the self to grasp each and every event within a timeline of past experiences. For Dewey, habits are what makes the self, and customs are what define society. As Terrance McMullan notes of pragmatist writers more broadly: 'most pragmatists argue that habits, at the individual level, are capable of constant revision and modification' (2013, p.241). What Dewey is particularly invested in is that revision is not just possible at an individual level, but also at a cultural level. In regards to my reading of Wallace, Dewey's discussions of the self and society as built of habits and customs better reflects the habitual processes of cultural reproduction that Wallace wishes to draw attention to, both at the personal and societal levels, and also enables a recognition of the possibility of personal and cultural change in such habits and customs.

I therefore employ the philosophy of Dewey (and to a lesser extent William James) to explore the concept of habit in Wallace's texts. This is not only because, as McGurl suggests in the aforementioned quote, Wallace's work is invested in a recovery and reproduction of older, pragmatic conceptions of selfhood. Dewey's writings on habit, particularly in *Human Nature and*

Conduct (1922), are useful to explore Wallace's texts as Dewey's philosophy is defined by a 'social psychology' (1922, p.63), and many Wallace critics have noted the need for sociality and connectivity posited in his work. Wilson Kaiser states that Wallace's texts evince a social understanding of being as 'ethological': 'a perspective in which self-constitution is not founded in an obligation toward an abstract, groundless Other, but instead is situated in a concrete engagement with a specific milieu that contains a multiplicity of human and non-human actors' (2014, p.54).¹³ Indeed, even when Wallace does depict his characters as having a 'Higher Power' in the AA sections of *Infinite Jest*, the characters find their belief in practical utility, rather than through recourse to a 'groundless Other.' Don Gately overcomes his initial concerns with the logic of AA precisely through a social, pragmatic understanding of truth: 'Pat [his sponsor] had said it didn't matter at this point what he thought and believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*. If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change' (2007, p.466).¹⁴ Don Gately's experience in AA is demonstrative of the sociality that defines so much of Wallace's work, and by transforming himself from a drug addict to a figure Herculean in his resolve, yet committed to a Sisyphean task, Don Gately also exemplifies the habitual change that permeates Wallace's texts, and which Dewey states define the self.¹⁵ Dewey's descriptions of habits also neatly complements the way Wallace is particularly concerned with the repetition of the cultural reproduction of postmodern cultural values, as both concepts suggest repetition is key to how culture and behaviour develop and form. Furthermore, both acknowledge the agency in changing such habits, and so reading Wallace alongside Dewey

¹³ Kaiser goes on later in the article to use a Spinozan concept of an 'ethics of affinity' to explain Wallace's focus on habit and pain in especial reference to the stretching boy in §36 of *The Pale King* (2014, p.56).

¹⁴ All quotations are from this edition.

¹⁵ Gately is Herculean through his twelve trials, and his overwhelming, heroic strength. He is also Sisyphean in his inability to ever be free from his addiction, the impossibility of ever completely ridding himself of that trial.

acknowledges that the processes of reproduction he is particularly concerned with – largely in regards to the reproduction of postmodern ideals and norms – are habits that can always change.

By adopting the social model of AA in order to overcome his drug habit – what Kelly describes as ‘the same generic story about his journey that everyone else also tells’ (2014) – Gately follows what Dewey calls ‘roads that are already there’: ‘Few persons have either the energy or the wealth to build private roads to travel upon. They find it convenient, "natural," to use the roads that are already there; while unless their private roads connect at some point with the high-way [sic] they cannot build them even if they would’ (1922, p.59). By ‘private roads,’ Dewey means forming isolating personal habits, rather than relying on what he terms ‘customs’ to guide habit formation. Dewey defines customs as ‘collective habits,’ but that is not to say they are ‘the consolidation of individual habits.’ Instead, he suggests customs form in two ways: first, they ‘exist because individuals face the same situation and react in like fashion,’ and second, ‘customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs’ (1922, p.58). Wendy Brown contends that neoliberalism is a form of reason that ‘governs as sophisticated common sense’; Wallace’s text demonstrates that this concept of reason is a custom, and therefore, like personal habits, can always be modified (2015, p.35). To return to Dewey’s road metaphor, the habits of citizenship form in line with these roads, and the challenge is to realise these routes are not the only paths to follow.

The sociality that Wallace advocates is, in Dewey’s metaphor, the need to travel down the paths left by others, rather than pick your own way. In order to foster this sociality, Wallace points to the utility of clichés. Clichés represent roads that previously acted as social highways, but which in postmodern thought and culture it has become habitual to ridicule and avoid. Wallace is responding to – and is a product of – the postmodern world described by Jameson and McHale. In his use of cliché he attempts to re-temporalise the postmodern understanding of self, which he

conceives as ontologically unmoored from a historical narrative. Wallace uses clichés as examples of historical habits – or in Williams’ terms, a tradition – that can be reproduced to leverage new, productive habits for his characters. To clarify, Wallace critiques the tradition that is forming in the present, and while he suggests the utility of older traditions, such as clichés, he does not valorise any single alternative. His texts demonstrate that any tradition is formed of habits, and that anything customary can always be modified. Wallace’s texts are attempts to do what Amy Hungerford terms – in a completely different context – ‘intervening in the formation of the future’ (2016, p.169). His characters demonstrate affected behaviours that are the product of their experiences. By casting behaviours as learned, by making them habitual, Wallace suggests the possibility of decisions affecting change. These efforts act to once again internalise affect, instead of leaving affect as the external force Jameson outlines for the characters of postmodern fiction. This means Wallace’s habitually defined characterisation merges the either/or of spatial or temporal existence; habits are both spatially defined – as in by the environment surrounding a road – and temporally, by previous, historical roads that can be followed.

Wallace’s fiction illuminates how habits are formed both knowingly and unwittingly, as well as the means by which social customs are formed, and why he feels a change is in order. The key distinction here is between habits and customs; to define this distinction, I will initially focus on Meredith Rand from *The Pale King*. Her long, confessional ‘tête-à-tête’ with Shane ‘Mr. X’ Drinion will form the first third of this chapter, which focuses on Wallace’s characterisation. Drinion is seemingly without habits, which is in stark contrast to Rand’s affected, habit-ridden demeanour. Indeed, she has to teach Drinion how to behave, how to operate within societal customs, thus indicating the co-dependence of habits and customs. This scene embodies why a habit-based reading is a productive way to interpret Wallace’s characters, and what aspects of cultural reproduction – such as the customary fear of being interpreted as banal or cliché – he depicts as

detrimental to his characters' habits. Additionally, I contend that the character David Wallace narrates this section. In the 'notes and asides' section containing the authorial Wallace's notes about the possible direction of this unfinished text, he states this narrator was supposed to disappear '100 pages in' (p.546).¹⁶ However, in editor Michael Pietsch's arrangement, this is clearly not the case, as David Wallace's presence is evident throughout the novel. This demonstrates the contingency at every level of habits; not only can habits always change, but an observer's habits influence how habits are interpreted. The second part of this chapter will turn to Chris Fogle's long confessional narrative from slightly earlier on in *The Pale King*. Fogle's story is suggestive of how habits can change, and also that if one does not realise a habit is a habit, it can be seen as simply the way things are. The final section zooms out to Wallace's wider concerns, and looks at the techniques he uses to defamiliarise his readers' unthinking reproduction of habits and customs.

Dewey's concepts do also have a wider relevance in regards to Wallace studies; indeed, the field has already developed many of its own habits and customs. There is a prevalent sentiment that Wallace's texts embody a shift in American literary culture. This has been dubbed post-postmodernism, The New Sincerity, and poststructural realism.¹⁷ Kelly defines this aspect of Wallace criticism succinctly: 'perhaps the most striking feature of Wallace studies ... [is] the implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both "diagnosis and cure," that it should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention' (2015, p.49). While I agree that Wallace's work can be seen as an ethical intervention, by focusing on habits my aim is somewhat more modest than saying his work offers a 'cure.' Many of Wallace's characters do show the effects of destructive habits, but

¹⁶ There are no set conventions in Wallace studies yet to make this distinction, so I distinguish between Wallace the author and Wallace the character through the terms 'authorial Wallace' and 'David Wallace.'

¹⁷ For post-postmodernism, see Robert McLaughlin (2005), for The New Sincerity, see Adam Kelly (2010), and for poststructural realism, see Mary K. Holland (2013b).

he does not attempt to offer a specific new mode – or new road, in Dewey’s terms – for fiction to follow. Instead, his texts depict certain behaviours as habitual and unquestioned, and ask how these came to be. Wallace’s *oeuvre* is not a definitive account of what fiction should be, and if one accepts that he argues for a pragmatic ideal of sociality in defining truth, it is contradictory to advocate a single author who could effect such substantial change. Lee Konstantinou puts Wallace in the context of Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* and Jameson’s canonical formulations about postmodernity to make a similar point: ‘in an era of the program or the system the solution to America’s “anti-worldly” literary field must be collective and institutional, not individual and private. Even the most talented single writer cannot, by definition, change the field alone’ (2013, p.86). As Konstantinou articulates, a single author cannot transform the entire literary landscape; such an event can only be achieved through the program or the system. Similarly, as Dewey would put it, such change can only be achieved socially, through new ‘highways’ of habits and customs.

William James argues in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) that plasticity is central to understanding how habits can be seen to define experience: ‘*Plasticity*, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits’ (1950, p.105). Wallace’s depiction of AA is a demonstration of how plasticity can be moulded – what Don Gately calls ‘deprogramming’ (p.369) – and that debilitating behaviours can be recognised as habits, and thus overcome. The focus on habit is vital, as James urges in *Principles*:

The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. *For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague. (1950, p.122, italics in original)

Wallace wants to make the habits of his readers ‘our ally’ rather than ‘our enemy.’ Developing characters who internalise the habits suggested by popular culture, Wallace creates fictional worlds in need of drastic change. For instance, there is the ironic stance Wallace believes is reproduced in every aspect of American life, most thoroughly explored in his essay ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (1993) and *Infinite Jest*. Wallace is part of a wider pushback against the reproduction of irony in contemporary culture, such as in the cultural criticism of Jedediah Purdy’s treatise *For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today* (1988), and in Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophy.¹⁸ In Williams’s terms, Wallace’s relationship with irony is part of a distinct structure of feeling, which he defines in *The Long Revolution* (1961) as a means to grasp the ways ‘the arts of a period ... include characteristic approaches and tones in argument,’ such as the 90s/early 2000s depictions of irony as detrimental to culture (1961, p.48). In exploring the effects of habits such as this in what Thomas Tracey calls ‘*novel* scenarios,’ Wallace shows the practical results of these negative habits and why they need to change (2014, p.174). In short, Wallace’s texts depict the cultural reproduction of specific acts and behaviours as habitual.

Wallace and Pragmatism

Wallace mentions pragmatist texts and ideas numerous times in his fiction and nonfiction. In *Infinite Jest*, Randy Lenz has hollowed out a huge, large-print combined version of William James’ *Principles of Psychology* and *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) in which to store his cocaine, and intermittently quotes these works to justify his behaviour. In *The Pale King*, the Jesuit Priest who so affects Chris Fogle quotes James’s maxim ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’ – from the

¹⁸ For a summary of MacIntyre’s rejection of irony as a vocabulary, see the introduction to Brad Frazier’s *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment: Philosophical and Theological Connections* (2006).

essay of the same name – during his accountancy lecture (2011, p.220).¹⁹ In a 1996 *Salon* interview with Laura Miller, Wallace also picked out James’s *Varieties* as a text that ‘sort of rung my cherries’ (1996, p.58). While the cadence of the phrase ‘rung my cherries’ is not exactly a ringing endorsement of James’ ideas, Casey Michael Henry’s genetic criticism – in perhaps the most convincing reading of Wallace’s relationship to James – explicates that explicit references to *Varieties* were gradually edited out of the Randy Lenz scenes in *Infinite Jest* (2015). In addition to the classical pragmatism of James, Richard Rorty’s defining work of neopragmatism, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), lends its name to a short story in *Oblivion* (2004).

Critics regularly follow these references, and read Wallace’s texts alongside pragmatist thinkers. In his important early study of Wallace, Marshall Boswell assesses the ideas of James vocalised by Hugh Steeply in *Infinite Jest* (2003, p.162). Clare Hayes-Brady situates Wallace’s work as a new form of neopragmatism, contending that ‘Wallace began, at least implicitly, to espouse a philosophy of his own,’ and by taking ‘account of deceit,’ his philosophy is more ‘realistic than [Richard] Rorty’s’ (2010, pp.31-33). David H. Evans explores the influence of William James on Wallace’s depictions of Free Will and the *possibility* of faith being a recourse to positive action. Evans argues: ‘One of the things that drew Wallace to James, I would argue, is the latter’s lifelong conviction that philosophy should be of some use in the life of the individual’ (2014, p.186). Evans’s analysis largely relates to James’s *Varieties*, and so, like Boswell and Hayes-Brady, it is criticism grounded in a pragmatist text that Wallace explicitly cites. Wallace’s fiction is regularly related to William James’ ideas in particular as critics posit a congruity between the interpretation that Wallace’s work explores the existential consequences of ideas – what Wallace terms in his review of David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988) ‘the *practice of theory*’ (2012, p.78, italics in original) – and the pragmatist method. As James outlines in *Pragmatism*

¹⁹ All quotations are from this edition.

(1907): ‘The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable,’ and his method focuses on the ‘practical consequences’ of such disputes (1991, p.23). The diagnosis and cure that Wallace’s work supposedly provides is therefore a distinctly pragmatic approach, and this is why he is regularly read alongside pragmatist writers, or indeed as a pragmatist.

Thomas Tracey’s biographical approach usefully sketches Wallace’s numerous encounters with pragmatism. He points out that Wallace’s father, James Wallace, is a proponent of Dewey’s ideas, and that Wallace is an acknowledged proof-reader for the elder Wallace’s Dewey-inflected monograph. In addition, both father and son studied philosophy at Amherst, a philosophy department with a strong pragmatist tradition (2014, p.158-159). When summarising pragmatism more broadly, Tracey also places habit as a concept foundational to Wallace’s work – ‘*Habit* is fundamentally related to the acquisition of human meaning, something Wallace thematically develops most thoroughly in *Infinite Jest*’ (2014, p.161, italics in original). There is a tendency in Wallace studies to assert the validity of a reading on the basis of the idea that he has read or cited a text – especially since the opening of the Wallace archives – and the direct influence of those he references is evident in his fiction. In her otherwise admirable *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016), Hayes-Brady stops short of discussing Wallace and the early pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘as he is not directly referenced in Wallace’s work’ (2016, p.85). While she does go on to suggest that other scholars should explore this connection, there is no need to establish such a clear, biographical ‘connection’ between Wallace and other writers. This embodies what Kelly contends is the return of the author prevalent in Wallace studies, as is evident in Evans’ contention about what drew Wallace to James, or Tracey’s attempts to establish Wallace’s knowledge of Dewey through his father (2015, p.51). Rather than attempt to unify Wallace and

pragmatism, or to situate Wallace's work as a new form of pragmatism, this chapter focuses on a strain of pragmatist thought that illuminates how Wallace's characters are defined by their habits.

To reiterate from the introduction, my argument follows the path set by Richard Bernstein, which fellow philosopher Inna Semetsky summarises thus: '[it] is based on the idea of freely juxtaposing ... two thought processes so as to be able to construct a commonly shared plane between the two' (2010, p.233). For instance, there is a moral, almost utopian liberal democratic political project that undergirds Dewey's pragmatism, as Dewey scholars Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander outline: 'Dewey understands democracy as a way of life, that is, as something that is realized in action. Institutions are necessary, but the heart of democracy is interaction, transaction, and communication' (1998, p.2). By seeing Wallace's characters as defined by their habits, and in constant interaction with their environment, his work suggests a similarly liberal democratic idea of interaction, transaction, and constant societal evolution. As Dewey argues: 'The fact that each act tends to *form*, through habit, a self which will perform a certain kind of act, is the foundation, theoretically and practically of responsibility. We cannot undo the past; we can affect the future' (1998, p.351). That Wallace's characters act habitually means their behaviours can always change, and this is why his texts can be productively read alongside Dewey. Wallace's work is not a diagnosis and cure, but instead – as the 80s setting of *The Pale King* evokes – suggests the *possibility* that the habits of citizenship can change.

By defining his characters by their habits, Wallace depicts them as affected, and affecting, their environment. As Dewey contends: 'Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not "in" that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil' (1922, p.296). Wallace's characters are like the plants of Dewey's metaphor; they engage with their outside stimuli, and have the ability to dramatically change depending on what they are interacting with. As my close reading of Meredith Rand demonstrates, her habits are a product of her social

environment, and how her beauty affects those around her. Dewey argues: ‘Attitude and, as ordinarily used, disposition suggest something latent, potential, something which requires a positive stimulus outside themselves to become active’ (1922, p.40). Similarly, in Wallace’s texts, habits are not latent; they are not unchangeable coins, with the world as an unchanging box, to use Dewey’s metaphor. The constant interaction of the character and their environment means both can change. Characterologically, Wallace’s fictional worlds are defined by contingency: Wallace’s characters have the agency to change, and as their cultural environment does not develop in a deterministic way, these can also always be reimagined.

To contend that Wallace’s conception of character is largely contingent is not to say that Wallace’s texts are devoid of characters who display inherent behaviours, which I, following the Dewey quote just cited, broadly categorise as *dispositions*. In *The Pale King* Chris Fogle counts words automatically rather than interpreting and understanding them – an example of a ‘private road’ that leads nowhere – and Claude Sylvanshine is a ‘fact psychic’ (p.118). Throughout this reading of *The Pale King*, I suggest that attention to habits and customs can give further credence to the idea that David Wallace narrates the entire novel, a position also held by David Hering.²⁰ For instance, early in the novel David Wallace describes Sylvanshine’s ability dismissively: ‘Most of what others esteemed or valued in him was unwilled, simply given, like a person’s height or facial symmetry’ (p.14). While valuable for his work, David Wallace dismisses Sylvanshine’s fantastical ability because unlike a habit, it is not learnt, but genetic. Similarly, slightly earlier in Wallace’s career, in the short story ‘Good Old Neon’ from *Oblivion* (2004), the protagonist, Neal, proposes: ‘Although we are seldom conscious of it, we are all basically just instruments or expressions of our evolutionary drives, which are themselves the expressions of forces that are infinitely larger and

²⁰ Hering argues more specifically that the narrator is in fact Wallace’s non-fiction persona: ‘I contend that this deliberate return to a false detail from a fifteen-year-old essay highlights the true identity of the “author” of *The Pale King*: it is “written” by Wallace’s non-fiction persona, *not* by the “fiction writer”’ (2016, p.144).

more important than we are' (2004, p.174). Neal has committed suicide; consequently, his belief that 'we are all basically just instruments or expressions of our evolutionary drives' is explicitly linked with a sense of helplessness and despair. The story concludes by zooming out to the 'real' Wallace coming to terms with the death of a classmate, suggesting that Neal's denial of free will is how Wallace tries to explain Neal's suicide. For Wallace, dispositions are unchangeable, and to see the self solely as the product of evolutionary drives is explicitly linked to a loss of agency.

To return to Dewey: 'We have just to do the best we can with habits, the forces most under our control; and we shall have our hands more than full in spelling out their general tendencies without attempting an exact judgment upon each deed' (1922, p.51). A focus on the habits of Wallace's characters illuminates the malleable nature of the forces most under his characters' control, and their interaction with 'the objective environment': 'For every habit incorporates within itself some part of the objective environment, and no habit and no amount of habits can incorporate the entire environment within itself or themselves' (1922, p.51). Unlike dispositions, habits are contingent, and it is these aspects that Wallace's characters seek to change. As Gertrude Stein – who studied under William James and whose writing investigates the 'repeating' nature of habits – points out in *The Making of Americans* (1925), to see behaviours as habits, and therefore changeable, is a distinctly positive way to depict humanity: 'Another form of having virtuous feeling is to think what any one is doing is only a habit in them' (2006, p.503). By casting behaviours as learned, by making them habitual, Wallace suggests the virtuous, utopian possibility of decisions affecting change. By having characters who internalise the habits suggested by popular culture – many of which Rand demonstrates – Wallace shows the detrimental habits that form, and the practical results of these repeated acts. It is only by being otherworldly, like the fantastical, levitating Shane Drinion in *The Pale King*, that habits are negated. Wallace's texts can therefore be seen as depicting the importance of habits in defining the self, and arguing that the focus should be

on why these habits and customs are being culturally reproduced – through the limits and pressures of popular culture, technology, and institutions – and why they have come to define this specific structure of feeling.

Meredith Rand: Smoking for Affect

Eve Sedgwick persuasively argues that throughout the twentieth century, habits became increasingly moralised, and habitual behaviour became synonymous with notions of addiction, compulsion, and a lack of self-control (1993, pp.138-39).²¹ Dewey would agree with Sedgwick's assertion that the concept of habit has no real moral import in itself, and argues that: 'We may borrow words from a context less technical than that of biology, and convey the same idea by saying that habits are arts. They involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials. They assimilate objective energies, and eventuate in command of environment' (1922, p.15). By arts, Dewey means that habits are learned, worked at, and perfected. Wallace depicts habits similarly in *The Pale King*. For instance, Toni Ware's manipulation of the impression she gives to others is described explicitly as an 'art': 'She played on this knife-edge most of the time – giving a false impression that was nevertheless concrete and tightly controlled. It felt like art' (p.511). The repetition of traumas she experiences throughout the novel – having to pretend to be dead as her mother is brutally murdered next to her, or being raped by a man who ostensibly was there to help her get in her locked car – has led to the formation of these protective habits; how others interpret her is therefore 'concrete and tightly controlled.' While having the quite uncomfortable implication that her sexual assault has empowered her in some way (which is a point Wallace also appears to also make in the final story of the horrific, oddly redemptive rape in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999)), her habits are learnt coping mechanisms, which stem from

²¹ I am indebted to Wilson Kaiser's discussion of Sedgwick and Wallace for suggesting this congruity between their concepts of habit (2014).

her repetitious experiences with her external environment. Her habits have become ‘like art,’ giving her, in Dewey’s terms, the command of her environment.

Toni Ware’s guardedness stems from the repetition of her traumas; repetition is foundational to the formation of habits in Wallace’s works. In Toni Ware’s case, it is an unwilling habit, born of circumstances outside of her control. Wallace also depicts characters who consciously attempt to make specific behaviours habitual. For instance, in *Infinite Jest* Hal’s tennis ability – described as like ‘ballet’ in the introductory section (p.14) – has been harnessed and worked at through repetition: ‘His serve, now, suddenly, after four summers of thousand-a-day serves to no one at dawn, is suddenly supposed to be one of the best left-handed kick serves the junior circuit has ever seen’ (p.260). Similarly, earlier in the novel Hal ‘Hit about a thousand serves to no one while Himself sits and advises with his flask’ (p.172). This image of a son practicing his serve to become a habitual ‘art’ as his father drinks from his flask shows both sides of repetition in habits. They can help – like Hal’s kick-serve – or hinder – like James’s alcoholism. Kendall Gerdes points out that in *Infinite Jest* repetition regularly falls into addiction: ‘forming a habit is not (contra Aristotle) simply the result of repeated practice. Habit, especially in *Infinite Jest*, verges into addiction’ (2015, p.338). Wallace portrays habitual behaviour as the product of repetition – both willingly and unwillingly – and formulated in interaction with a character’s environment.

Rand is the POTEX, ‘the prettiest of the examiners’ – an echo of PGOAT (prettiest girl of all time), used to describe Joelle Van Dyne in *Infinite Jest* – an acronym that intends to encapsulate Rand’s overwhelming beauty (p.480). She is constantly being watched, and constantly aware of being observed. The narrator notes the effect she has on her male colleagues specifically: ‘Suffice it that Meredith Rand makes the Pod’s males self-conscious’ (p.447). Consequently, Rand bears many reflexive habits she has adopted as so many men are evidently self-conscious around her. Her manner of smoking is her largest social crutch: ‘You can see that Meredith Rand would have a hard

time quitting cigarettes, since she uses the way she smokes and exhales and moves her head to convey a lot of affect' (p.484). Her habits in *how* she smokes – not just the habit of smoking itself – are, like Toni Ware's habits, learned, perfected, and 'like art.'

Rand and Drinion's conversation echoes the long debate between Hugh/Helen Steeply and Remi Marathe that punctuates much of *Infinite Jest*.²² The connections with this scene are numerous; the narrator also terms it a 'tête-à-tête,' and how Steeply – the feminine character in the conversation – smokes is documented throughout (p.489). Steeply's smoking is portrayed as a performance of femininity with varying success – 'M. Hugh Steeply of B.S.S. was standing then with his weight on one hip and looked his most female when he smoked' (p.430) – and, 'Steeply's use of the body to shelter the lighting match for his smoking was not feminine' (p.427). Steeply's smoking is a conscious performance of gendered behaviours; Marathe even sees echoes of femme fatale figures from 'black and white films' in Steeply's smoking (p.430). Rand is not trying to effect femininity, or smoking to fill 'silent pauses' as Steeply uses as 'integral parts of his techniques of interface' (p.108). Rand's smoking habits are a metonym for a wider conception of character evident across Wallace's work. His characters are structures of habits, which form and develop through their interaction with their ever-changing environment. Consequently, Wallace's characters are in a constant process of becoming.

The scene Wallace sets for Rand's and Drinion's conversation is characterised as a work custom; the narrating David Wallace even works out the attendance records of each member of 'Pod C' to this weekly event as if it is a baseball batting average (p.444). That someone can chronicle this pattern suggests another key aspect of habits and customs; that by being repeated, they become observable. This repetition of habits helps the narrator explain – which, as discussed in

²² This scene is also another instance of what Kelly outlines as Wallace's persistent construction of scenes almost entirely from dialogue. See Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas' (2014).

depth below, is in no way an objective account – and the reader to map and understand, Rand’s experience with Drinion. When Rand begins speaking with Drinion, Rand initially blows smoke rings, as if to impress him, even though ‘the vent overhead tears the smoke ring to shreds the moment she shapes and exhales it’ (p.455). Rand is used to having an effect on people – and men especially – indeed she is habituated to it, and Drinion does not provide this reaction. He is still blank by the time she has started her third cigarette: ‘Drinion still hasn’t spoken or fidgeted or changed his facial expression much at all. This now right here is cigarette number three since 5:10. There are no attempted rings’ (p.465).

She is portrayed as frustrated at not affecting Drinion, and her irritation reaches its peak when he understands one of her questions too literally about whether he usually stays at the bar that long: ‘She extinguishes the cigarette a bit more thoroughly and emphatically than she usually does, in order to reinforce a certain tonal impatience in what she says as she puts the cigarette out: “All right then”’ (p.459). Drinion’s face is still blank, and she begins to directly challenge Drinion whether he has had any sexual feelings, ever; questioning Drinion’s sex-drive in this manner gives the smoke rings a new sexualised context in which to interpret them. When Drinion affirms he has never had any such urges, Rand tries to read *his* habits, his affect, to see if this is true: ‘Rand is very good at reading affect on people’s faces, and as far as she can tell there’s nothing here on Drinion’s face to read’ (p.462). Her interaction with her external environment is usually marked by how others react to her appearance; therefore it is not her looks that define her habits, but how others interact with her. Earlier in the novel, David Wallace incorrectly suggests that beauty is a genetic disposition – a ‘given ... like facial symmetry’ (p.14). That beauty is a social concept – as any basic understanding of the different values of beauty across cultures demonstrates – is emphasised by how Rand affects those around her; this reaction is repeated, reinforced by the name POTEX, and this collective reaction in turn defines the formation of her habits. It is precisely this social custom

Joelle Van Dyne attempts to resist in *Infinite Jest* by veiling, and why she joins the U.H.I.D. (Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed). While there is a brief mention she may have had acid thrown on her face and so bears the scars of that, by veiling she resists the social construction of herself as the PGOAT; this concept ignores that no one could be the ‘prettiest of all time,’ as these values and customs can always change. As Dewey suggests: ‘A genuine appreciation of the beauty of flowers is not generated within a self-enclosed consciousness. It reflects a world in which beautiful flowers have already grown and been enjoyed’ (1922, p.22). Through Rand’s habitually defined being, Wallace offers a contingent, fluid conception of identity, which is markedly similar to Dewey’s contention that ‘Selfhood is not something which exists apart from associations and intercourse’ (1998, p.348). Consequently, Rand’s habits do not stem from her appearance, but from her interactions with others.

It is now that Rand starts to tell Drinion of how she met her dying husband, and she immediately tries to control how this news is interpreted:

“You’re thinking how sad, maybe, to fall in love and get married and then have your husband get a fatal disease – because it is, it’s fatal. Like the rich kid in that movie, what’s it called, except there it’s the wife, who’s kind of a lump if you want my opinion, but the rich kid gets disinherited and everything and marries her and then she gets fatally ill. It’s a tear-jerker.” (p.467)²³

Rand immediately refers to cultural stereotypes that she fears her narrative will be categorised as; she fears her personal story will be filed away by Drinion as banal. She thus uses sarcasm to try and maintain some control over the narrative, and dismisses it herself as just a ‘tear-jerker.’ She offers to tell Drinion the backstory: “I mean my sad story. Part of mine. Everybody’s got their sad story. You want to hear part of mine?” (p.467). The important part here is that Drinion does not respond, or the narrator does not include his response – it is recorded as an ellipsis – which implies she will tell her story regardless. Her desire to tell the story is integral to the story being told, as Drinion

²³ The film Rand is referring to here is Erich Segal’s *Love Story* (1970).

does not react at all to Rand's question-statement: 'There is no difference – Drinion's face remains composed and neutral without seeming in any way to be trying to stay neutral' (p.468). The narrator suggests she is generally habituated to eliciting a response, and so tells the dramatic, tragic tale of her dying husband when confronted with the affectless, habitless Shane Drinion.²⁴

As she launches into her story, Rand's smoking is continually catalogued: 'Every time she taps ash, it's three taps of the same speed and angle with a red-nailed finger' (p.471) and, 'Meredith Rand has a set of routines for putting the cigarette out, all of which, whether fast or stabbing or slow and more grinding from the side, are quite thorough' (p.474). As she uses her cigarette as a prop for affect, how she smokes is reflective of how she attempts to control the interpretation of the narrative. For instance, 'She has a definite style of averting her head to exhale and then bringing it back. Most people think she's very direct' (p.483). She employs the act of exhaling as a means to zoom in and out of the conversation, which creates a sense of intimacy, of directness in how she speaks. Rand also uses her cigarette as a means of emphasising and affecting irony: 'She makes a sardonic flourish with her cigarette hand as she says presto change-o' (p.486). The tone of the conversation is suggested by her habits, especially how she feels about Drinion: 'Again she uses the same number of stabs and partial rolls to extinguish it, although with less force than when she's appeared impatient or angry with Shane Drinion' (p.489). The intensity of these habits betrays her feelings about whom she is speaking with, about whom she is trying to affect. Rand's cigarettes act like a guide, an indication of what direction she wishes the narrative to go, and to elicit the responses she desires. However, other than Drinion, her viewers have their own affective drives,

²⁴ This section appears to suggest that Rand fails to affect Drinion physically, and so she attempts to do so emotionally – that she has to affect men in some way. While there is the cover of the narrating Wallace, this is still an incredibly problematic depiction of women. This a largely underexplored area of Wallace studies, but there are a few more recent works of note that take up Wallace's seeming misogyny, such as Amy Hungerford's reasons for refusing to read Wallace in *Making Literature Now* (2016), and Hayes-Brady's discussion of Wallace's work and gender (2016, pp.167-192).

and this means these interpretations cannot be absolutely controlled; that David Wallace uses the term ‘appeared,’ rather than a more definitive term like ‘been,’ emphasises this narrative is his interpretation of Rand and Drinion’s conversation.

Drinion does not react in the way men usually respond to her, which she describes as being seen as a “‘piece of meat’” (p.484). David Wallace confirms this assumption early in the chapter, as he uncomfortably and misogynistically states the ‘consensus’ at the IRS is that Rand is a ‘cut of pure choice prime’ (p.447). This once again points to his presence, as in his first interjection into the novel David Wallace discusses the ‘on-record’ interviews he undertook with his colleagues, which he breaks from the narrative of Drinion and Rand’s conversation to draw on here (p.72). Rand has an innate distrust of Drinion’s nonreaction to her, so every so often she tests Drinion’s lack of desire – ‘Rand looks briefly right at Drinion to see whether there is any visible reaction to the word *blowjob*, which he does not appear to provide’ (p.487, italics in original). When Rand first tells Drinion her husband is dying she outright asks “‘did you think that finding out he was dying might mean you’ve got some kind of sexual chance with me?’” When he replies negatively, she responds “‘Good. That’s good’” (p.466). The entire narrative is interspersed with her checking this is still the case. She states that the repetition of being viewed as the POTEX, as ‘a piece of meat,’ means she has internalised the idea that “‘the only thing you’ve got is your looks and the way you affect, boys, guys. *You start doing it without even knowing you’re doing it*’” (p.484, italics mine). Like Toni Ware, repetition in her interaction with others has led to the formation of particular habits. Drinion is the first person she has encountered who does not – indeed, cannot, as he has no sexual desire – have this reaction. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander contend that Dewey ‘rejects the idea of a substantive soul or ego,’ and that instead Dewey posits that ‘consciousness is a dynamic construction of habitual responses’ (1998, p.x). Similarly, Rand’s character is shown to be a product of her environment, and her habitual responses have formed in reaction to how many respond to

her. It is in this sense that defining a character through habits can re-temporalise their being; they have affected behaviours that are a product of their experiences, and that they become not just spatially, but temporally defined as well. Habits are a means to synthesise the temporal and the spatial, and to overcome it needing to be an either/or proposition for literary characters.

Drinion is not a typical person for Rand to be conversing with; he levitates, has no sexual desire, and seems to be almost completely without habits. As mentioned earlier, she is already on cigarette number three before he has even ‘fidgeted or moved.’ The contrast between their behaviour and interactions with each other is huge, and is a product of their starkly different histories. She was one of the popular, most attractive girls in high school, one of ‘the foxes’ (p.487); Drinion is an orphan, and nicknamed ‘Mr. X,’ an ironic moniker short for ‘Mr. Excitement’ as he is so dull (p.448). She is constantly the centre of attention; he is often forgotten, and regularly sits alone at these Friday night visits to the bar. Being constantly viewed and being aware of being viewed, Rand is littered with the habits documented above; in contrast, Drinion, the forgotten orphan, has seemingly none. In Wallace’s texts, self-awareness, the awareness of yourself as an object for others, leads to the formation of habits. This is shown by the distinct contrast of Rand and Drinion’s demeanours, and how their own knowledge of being viewed has defined their external behaviour, their habits.

Drinion’s lack of connection with the world results in a lack of *customs*, which means he does not operate within societal conventions. He does not have an understanding of what Raymond Williams terms ‘signal systems’: the internal rules that govern how culture is reproduced, and at this local level, how to follow social cues (1982, p.132). To reiterate, customs are those conventions and habits a particular community share; for example, Rand’s dismissal of cliché is an example of a custom. Drinion nods at seemingly random points throughout their conversation: ‘Drinion has a way of nodding where the nod has nothing to do with etiquette or affirmation’ (p.455). That the

narrator states that this nodding is not part of etiquette alludes to the idea that Drinion is devoid not just of habits, but also of customs as well. Rand learns she has to conversationally nudge Drinion to speak within conversational protocol. For instance, as she tells him she was sent to a psychiatric hospital she suggests his reaction: ““You might be asking how I got in there, since we definitely were not rich or from the Heights”” (p.469). While this partly betrays how she would like the story to be understood – she wishes to emphasise her modest background – Drinion’s lack of involvement begins to test her patience. Finally, in frustration Rand directly demands appropriate conversational custom, ‘You have to say little things occasionally, like it’s a real conversation, to show you’re at least interested. Otherwise the person just feels like they’re yammering and the other person could be thinking about God only knows what’ (p.472). His lack of customary conversational graces mean he has to learn them anew, and Rand tries to act as his guide. In Dewey’s terms, Rand has to show him how to connect to the public highway.

After her long exposition regarding her husband’s diagnosis of why she self-harms, Rand ‘looks sharply up at Shane Drinion’ (again showing her supposed directness), and asks him ““Does that seem banal?”” (p.498). Here, she fears appearing as a cliché, or banal, a concern that plagues Wallace’s characters across many of his texts. To take just two brief examples of many – I return to this topic below – during her attempted suicide Joelle Van Dyne in *Infinite Jest* dismisses her last thoughts about her friends and family as ‘banal’ (p.239). Similarly, in ‘Good Old Neon’ Neal relentlessly defines most of his life as banal. However, Drinion, without customs, cannot understand her concern. Earlier in the conversation Rand discovers that ‘he has no natural sense of whether something was sarcastic or not’; he cannot understand why her story would be considered banal (p.457). Consequently, Drinion answers, ““I don’t know”” when she expresses this customary fear (p.499). Drinion does not know customs such as the dismissal of clichés. It is notable that the

character without this fear has to be a fantastical, levitating, otherworldly figure; only a character beyond possibility is shown to be habitless and customless.

After Rand's cultural coaching, towards the conclusion of the conversation he responds in ways she deems correct when interpreting her husband's diagnosis. Drinion puts forth: "As I understand it, though, your actual experience is that someone else *was* being nice to you and treating you as worthwhile" (p.507, italics in original). The reader knows she is pleased with this response through her affect-laden ways of smoking: 'Rand smiles in a way that makes it seem as though she's smiling in spite of herself. She's also smoking her cigarette in a more thorough, sensuous way' (p.507). She is clearly pleased with Drinion's appropriate answer, which follows conversational customs and rules; it is no accident that she finishes the conversation two pages after this moment of success. She continues to smoke her cigarette in a way that conveys a lot of affect – 'She puts out her cigarette without any of the previous stabbing aspect, almost sort of tenderly, as if thinking tenderly of something else' (p.508) – and distractedly and inconclusively finishes her story. Through a mixture of Rand's habits and Drinion's almost complete lack of habits, this conversation is emblematic of the role habits play not just in conveying personal feelings and responses, but also the dependence on habits to be social, to be customary, and to connect to the public highway. Usefully for Dewey's road metaphor, Drinion literally cannot drive; in the novel, he does not drive down any physical road, and, culturally, he does not drive down private roads or the public roads, as he lacks both habits and customs (p.463).

Operating in the background of this discussion is the narrator, David Wallace. As mentioned, his presence is made apparent when he tangentially discusses his interviews of Rand's IRS colleagues. In addition, there are constant allusions to how his habits inform the story. This section highlights how habits must be observed by someone, and also can be interpreted – and in some cases misinterpreted – by that same viewer. Rand even comments on the possibility of an

observer as they begin their conversation: “Well, I don’t know how private it is” (p.450). This is partly a metafictional joke on David Wallace’s part – who is a metafictional device for the authorial Wallace – alluding to the lack of omniscience in the narrator, but it also suggests her constant awareness of being ogled, and seen as a ‘piece of meat.’ The theme of observation is further explored when Meredith suggests how her very presence affects those around her in terms of the observer effect in quantum mechanics:

“If you’re pretty,” Meredith Rand says, “it can be hard to respect guys ... Because you never even get to see what they might really be like. Because the minute you’re around, they change; if they’ve decided you’re beautiful, they change. It’s like the thing in physics – if you’re there to look at the experiment, it supposedly messes up the results.” (p.482)²⁵

This is the case with habit as well, as once observed by a person with their own habits and drives, the habit being viewed is modified and interpreted by the viewer. Dewey states that habits ‘distort’ our understanding of the external environment, and here the habits of the narrating David Wallace ‘distorts’ the reader’s understanding of this section (1922, p.32). The repetition of habits is necessary for the narrative voice to recognise their existence, but once seen, once noted, the narrator’s interpretation can lead to the trap of the more classically understood ‘unreliable narrator,’ betraying more about the narrator than the person being narrated. For instance, the aforementioned dismissal of Claude Sylvanshine’s ‘fact psychic’ ability, as ‘a given, like facial symmetry,’ and the narrator’s evident hostility to Rand’s attractiveness, has a wider meaning when the narrative voice is accounted for. Considering David Wallace has ‘pemphigoid cysts’ along the line of his jaw, it is no surprise he uses facial symmetry as an example of a dismissive given (p.300). The narrator’s habits have been formed by his interaction with his environment – his facial disfigurement partly

²⁵ Wallace lamented how he feels fiction always overlooks this fact to Larry McCaffery in 1993: ‘It’s interesting that most serious art, even *avant-garde* stuff that’s in collusion with literary theory, still refuses to acknowledge this, while serious *science* butters its bread with the fact that the separation of subject/observer and object/experiment is impossible. Observing a quantum phenomenon’s been proven to alter the phenomenon. Fiction likes to ignore this fact’s implications’ (2012, p.40, italics in original).

defines his experiences in the world – and so this brings distortion into how he describes others habits and abilities, and how he conceives of societal customs such as beauty.

Throughout their conversation, the narrator characterises Rand’s habits as trying to affect Drinion; he forms a narrative out of her habits, and the narratological ideas of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ are central to so much of this section of *The Pale King*. When introducing himself early in the novel, David Wallace describes his wish to be seen as an ‘artist,’ and this section demonstrates his conscious desire to prove his literary prowess – he ‘shows’ rather than ‘tells’ what Rand is thinking (p.73). But his distortions do clearly enter the narrative, and he does explicitly ‘tell’ the reader what to think. For instance, the narrator infantilises her habits: ‘Sometimes now Rand will every so often toss her head back and to the side a tiny bit, very rapidly, as if rearranging her hair’s feathering without touching it, which certain types of adolescent girls do a great deal without necessarily being aware of it’ (p.475). Though the habit itself is seemingly innocuous, David Wallace uses it to liken her to an ‘adolescent girl.’ When Meredith rests her chin upon her hand, he continues this theme: ‘Her eyes have changed; she puts her chin in her hand, which makes her seem even younger’ (p.477). Here, he reads into her habits based on his own preconceptions. Moreover, he interprets Rand through the prism of others: ‘Rand’s rep at the REC is that she’s sexy but crazy and a serious bore, just won’t shut up if you get her started; they argue about whether they ultimately envy her husband or pity him’ (p.489). He is not just observing, but interpreting, and his interpretations change as towards the end of the narrative as he reads the same chin resting habit from before in a different way: ‘She has had her chin in the same hand that holds the unlit Benson & Hedges, which looks like the opposite of comfortable’ (p.505). David Wallace previously mocked this as a tic befitting an adolescent, and yet here belittles it as a conscious habit, as something she is trying to affect Drinion with. The narration is both inconsistent, and accusatory of Meredith trying to affect Shane Drinion in particular ways. As detailed above, her habits do imply

many ideas about her – and Drinion’s lack of habits imply many things about him – but at no point does the authorial Wallace allow this narrative to be definitive; these habits are interpreted and catalogued by a distinct observer, whose own distortions and *habits* colour the entire section. Wallace’s conception of character suggests that an individual is not always constricted to the actions that have become habitual to them.

The conversation between Rand and Drinion is a microcosm of how habits function across Wallace’s texts. Rand’s smoking shows how affect is conveyed by habits, and also how habits can be performed consciously and unconsciously. These repetitious acts stem from her consistent experiences with the social world, namely, how men react to her appearance. Furthermore, in the isolated, affectless Drinion, the dependence of habits on sociality in Wallace’s texts is made clear; as Drinion lacks habits, he also lacks customs. Finally, the habits of the watching David Wallace distort the presentation of Rand’s habits to the reader. Dewey contends: ‘it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse. It is in the *quality* of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but *the* end is growth itself’ (1998, p.353, italics in original). *The Pale King* is suggestive of a contingent, habitual concept of the self and society, and therefore it questions and probes the way culture is currently being reproduced.

Clichéd Unto Death: The Supersedure of Meaning and Function in Modernity

The present section expands upon the cultural critique that Rand and Drinion’s conversation implies, as it looks at the formation and reproduction of cultural customs, and how these affect those who reproduce them. Wallace suggests these customs are limiting, and his fiction queries these limits, and suggests that there can be other, more productive limits that could be culturally

produced and reproduced. The cultural reproduction of postmodern cultural values is Wallace's concern, particularly in regards to what is propagated in popular culture. The idea of habit therefore spirals out to a wider cultural critique; his texts depict culture as malleable, and so the ways it is reproduced can always change. Rand constantly fears that Drinion will regard her as banal, and this type of self-consciousness is prevalent in characters across Wallace's texts. His characters being *subjected* to seeing something over and over, or repeating actions again and again, leads to the formation of specific habits and customs. Orin Incandenza discusses repetition in television before Interlace – referring to the time, given the novel's near futuristic setting, that Wallace was actually writing *Infinite Jest* – ““With television you were *subjected* to repetition. The familiarity was inflicted”” (p.600, italics in original). Similarly, in the short story ‘Good Old Neon’ the repetition of such imagery forms particular customs:

... the reason scenes like this will seem stale or manipulative to an audience is that we've already seen so many of them in dramas, and yet the reason we've seen so many of them in dramas is that the scenes really are dramatic and compelling and let people communicate very deep, complicated emotional realities that are almost possible to articulate in any other way. (2004, p.176)

The overabundance of these dramatic tropes for entertainment results in jadedness, of specific acts and behaviours being seen as trite because of their familiarity. This dismissal of these forms of emotion as cliché has become what Anton Van Zijderweld calls ‘the supersedure of meaning by function in modernity’ (1979, p.4). Van Zijderweld argues that the domination of modern interactions by cliché means that utility ‘supersedes’ any possible purpose of a statement or action; clichés are left unexamined, and exist solely for a functional purpose. However, Wallace – starting his career a decade after Van Zijderweld was writing, during a different structure of feeling – argues slightly differently: he suggests that by repeatedly dismissing emotions and actions as cliché, the meaning *and* function of such acts and terminology are superseded by a habitual distancing. The repetition of these images and phrases leads to their customary interpretation as banal and a

reactionary custom of dismissal. Repetition can therefore produce habitual reactions that become in themselves customs. These customs are the aspects of culture Wallace suggests are unthinkingly reproduced. His much-shared Kenyon College address from 2005, posthumously released as *This is Water*, is particularly concerned with the supersedure of meaning and function of clichés in the contemporary. As he states in the opening joke about two fish, ‘in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life-or-death importance’ (2009, p.9). One of the key strands of his writing is getting his readers to not see platitudes as banal. It is not specific clichés that he defends per se, but more the notion that historical ideas, regardless of their banality or triteness, can serve a particular purpose when applied in practice, and suggest different ideas of how habits and customs can be sculpted and formed.

In an oft-cited passage of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace dramatises how his characters’ fear of being perceived as cliché is a product of their interactions with what Dewey terms their ‘external environment,’ or more concisely, culture. A narrator explicates how the ‘U.S. arts’ help foment this supersedure of meaning and function: ‘[they are] our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears’ (p.694). The narrator then goes to suggest that this ‘mask’ becomes a habit: ‘And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté ...’ (p.694). Once ‘ennui and jaded irony’ become a habit, they habituate a reflex of ‘weary cynicism’ that disables the possibility of ‘gooey sentiment or unsophisticated naïveté.’ It is not just jaded masks of ennui, but the act of what Wallace terms ‘spectation’ that becomes a habit (McCaffery, 1993: p.33). For instance, in the tennis academy of *Infinite Jest*: ‘All the littler kids are consummate spectators and are sucked immediately into *Blood Sister*’s unfolding narrative, and the older females seem to take some kind of psychic cue from the little boys and subside, too, and watch ...’ (p.704). The slight difference in the generations shows

how this habit is only becoming more ingrained as time passes; the younger generation, only knowing a world of ‘spectation,’ are seemingly more conditioned to viewership than the older kids. Consequently, the habits of Wallace’s characters form and then perpetuate over time; if a behaviour is unquestioned by a previous generation, it becomes more engrained in the next. Again, it is what is being reproduced in culture that is Wallace’s concern; his fiction questions what tradition is currently in the process of becoming.

Wallace suggests that one of the consequences of these ‘masks’ of ‘jaded irony’ is that they insulate particular habits from criticism. As a narrative voice in *Infinite Jest* posits:

Saying this is bad is like saying traffic is bad, or health-care surtaxes, or the hazards of annular fusion: nobody but Ludditic granola-crunching freaks call bad what no one can imagine being without.

But so very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home. A floating no-space world of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era, under Gentle and Lace-Forche. Total freedom, privacy, choice.

Hence the new millennium’s passion for standing live witness to things.
(p.620)

Similar to David Wallace’s distorting narration of Rand and Drinion’s conversation, the narrator in this scene of *Infinite Jest* is implicated in this dismissal through the terms they use to describe any dissidence, which is ironic when the narrator is himself trying to expose a form of cultural myopia. Wallace depicts critique as almost impossible due to the masks of jaded ennui and irony people hide behind. For Wallace, in the cultural context of the U.S. circa 1996, clichés have lost their utility, and can no longer be used as public highways of meaning in order to form different, productive habits. As with each writer discussed in this thesis, Wallace’s embraces limits as a form of liberation; in his case, it is the limits of clichés that he believes can lead to more productive habits, and help both his fiction and the readers of his work. He dramatises how the loss of these older forms of communication has dramatic consequences for many of his characters. Wallace’s texts are concerned with what is currently being reproduced, and point to older, and often derided ideas, such

as cliché, in order to suggest that culture need not be reproduced in this set way: there is always the possibility of change.

These ironic, jaded masks are prevalent throughout Wallace's texts. As well as Rand's self-reflexivity as she speaks with Drinion, Chris Fogle dismisses his feelings about his parents' divorce as 'typical' on two occasions, as if the unoriginality of his experiences means they do not warrant exploration (p.156). Looking back on bickering with his father, he notes that 'in retrospect, it seems to me that we did this sort of thing to one another constantly, out of possibly nothing more than *unconscious habit*. It's a *typical* sort of dynamic between fathers and sons' (p.211, italics mine). As well as once again alluding to Wallace's investment in his characters' habits, by dismissing his teen anguish as 'typical,' and referring to his bickering with his father as an 'unconscious habit,' Chris Fogle discusses how he unthinkingly adopted a jaded mask, and the habits that resulted from this. Wallace demonstrates how masks of 'jaded irony' lead to the dismissal of seemingly 'typical,' 'trite,' 'banal,' or 'cliché' feelings, and has numerous characters refuse to countenance these emotions. As briefly mentioned above, in *Infinite Jest*, Joelle Van Dyne's attempted suicide is portrayed through a similar lens, and she dismisses her own final moments as sentimental and banal: 'The idea that she'll never see Molly Notkin or the cerebral Union or her U.H.I.D. support-brothers and -sisters or the YYY engineer or Uncle Bud on a roof or her stepmother in the Locked Ward or her poor personal daddy again is sentimental and banal' (p.239). Similarly, Neal in 'Good Old Neon' dismisses his depression as clichéd or banal thirteen times. Furthermore, a contributing factor to his suicide seems to be that his feelings are supposedly so cliché they appear as a throwaway line in an episode of *Frasier*: 'This line got a huge laugh from the show's studio audience, which indicated that they – and so by demographic extension the whole national audience at home as well – recognized what a cliché and melodramatic type of complaint the inability-to-love concept was' (2004, p.168). Not only has Neal internalised the idea that sentiment is banal, but he

recognises and dismisses his 'inability-to-love' as a joke in a popular sitcom; therefore, again, it is something he feels is clichéd and banal, and so he should not be feeling it. In reflecting this custom, Joelle and Neal indicate the primacy placed on newness, on originality in contemporary culture. Cultural critic Jedediah Purdy has a similar reading of how televisual culture affects habits and behaviour: 'the relationship is parasitic. As we become more sophisticated viewers of these portrayals, we also become more sophisticated observers of our own words and acts ... We know too much to think of ourselves, or anybody else, as original or unique' (2000, p.13). As both Wallace and Purdy suggest, this custom of desiring the new is actually a double bind; the relentless desire for the new or authentic is made almost impossible by a custom that is deeply sceptical about either being possible. Reproduction of these customs does not merely perpetuate said custom, but also closes off the possibility of changing it. The internalisation of the habits and fashions of the period into personal habits is detrimental to Neal and Joelle, so much so that they see their last moments through a cynical, distanced lens that denies them a true perspective on their predicament.

Neal's inability to break his habits, even repeating them from beyond the grave, is an extreme example of the habitual dismissal of cliché that Wallace suggests is endemic in the contemporary United States. A superseding of the meaning and function of clichés mean they become slogans without action, and clichés become meaningless if not followed by action. As Ludwig Wittgenstein argues 'naming is something like attaching a label to a thing. One can say that this is preparatory to the use of a word. But *what* is it a preparation *for*?' (1968, p.13, italics in original). This naming process is also why Neal, Joelle and some of the characters most resistant to AA in *Infinite Jest* dismiss clichés; clichés simply name a process, they are meaningless without the action that defines their meaning.²⁶ By focussing on the supposed triteness or banality of clichés, many characters in Wallace's works fail to see a cliché's meaning is only in the action it refers to;

²⁶ Geoffrey Day in particular struggles with the clichés of AA, and, much to Day's exasperation, Don Gately can only explain their utility through yet more clichés (p.278).

the superseding of meaning and function means even seeing *how* clichés *could* function is made impossible. In *The Pale King*, Chris Fogle ruminates on why he believes his father never espoused clichés: ‘If you begin to get the idea that other people can actually *live* by the clear, simple principles of good advice, it can make you feel even worse about your own inabilities. It can cause self-pity, which I think my father recognized as the great enemy of life and contributor to nihilism’ (p.208, italics in original). Here, this text once again summarises one of Wallace’s career-long concerns: as in *Infinite Jest* and entertainment, or Neal in ‘Good Old Neon’ and his fear of fraudulence, Fogle’s father dramatically suggests that the separation of meaning and function in clichés could ultimately lead to nihilism.

This residual habit of supposed self-awareness is indicative of another custom Wallace repeatedly alludes to in his work, as many of his characters convey that they are always aware of how they will be perceived. As confidently argued by K in one of the ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’:

This, of course, is because today’s postfeminist era is also today’s postmodern era, in which supposedly everybody now knows everything about what’s really going on underneath all the semiotic codes and cultural conventions, and everybody supposedly knows what paradigms everybody is operating out of, and so we’re all as individuals held to be far more responsible for our sexuality, since everything we do is now unprecedentedly conscious and informed. (1999, p.229)

In the above statement K illustrates the key delusion of the habit of self-awareness. K exemplifies how people are not truly self-aware, but self-aware in a set vocabulary, interpreting behaviours in a myopic way. In the terms used in this thesis, K does not see the ways his view is limited, and the challenge is to query such limits and develop new ones. In his extended interview with Larry McCaffery from 1993, Wallace contends that postmodern irony is unthinkingly reproduced: ‘It’s become our language; we’re so in it we don’t even see that it’s one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony’s become our environment’ (1993, pp.47-8). While there has been voluminous critical work focused on Wallace’s depictions of postmodern irony,

throughout his *oeuvre* he depicts numerous forms of tunnel vision, of characters only seeing in a set way due to the way culture is reproduced. Neal, Joelle, and K, despite their apparent self-awareness, are shown to be limited in this regard; they are performing a version of self-awareness *habitually*, without reflecting upon it. This delusion of self-awareness resembles Wallace's view of metafiction's self-consciousness, as he argues in 'E Unibus': 'Metafictionists may have had aesthetic theories out the bazoo ... [but] 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 seeing it' (2009, p.34). Meredith Rand also describes her psychologists in a similar light: 'Like they're a computer and you can't proceed until you give them the properly formatted answers' (p.469). She feels that they have just one way of seeing, and cannot see outside of what she calls the 'lens' of their training: 'whatever didn't fit in the lens they either didn't see or twisted it or squished it in so it fit' (p.475). That this form of self-awareness is only a habit has been lost sight of; as shown above, Wallace's fiction has a litany of characters who have lost sight that these attitudes and behaviours are just habits, and are contingent. The way culture is reproduced is a tradition in action; via clichés – or at least, the suggestion that his readers should not reject 'banal platitudes' simply because of the cultural custom of seeing such statements as trite – Wallace suggests there are other traditions that can be reproduced, and many could serve a distinct utility. In doing so, Wallace's texts attempt to overcome the supersedure of meaning and function of clichés, and suggest the ways such 'banal platitudes' could possibly lead to formation of productive habits.

Chris Fogle's Awareness Over Thinking

For Wallace, the challenge is to reveal that these behaviours are merely habitual, and not innate. William James argues in *Principles of Psychology* that 'Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of

society, its most precious conservative agent' (1950, p.121). Clare Carlisle, a philosopher of habit, notes (referring largely to the work of David Hume and Søren Kierkegaard) how 'Several thinkers have observed that the power of habit lies to a great extent in the degree to which it remains concealed' (2013, p.171). Similarly, Dewey remarks that 'One of the chief problems of our dealings with others is to induce them to reflect upon affairs which they usually perform from unreflective habit' (1922, p.279). Wallace draws attention to the idea that we are all 'unprecedentedly conscious and informed,' to use K's phrase, is a version of self-awareness. While the concept of habit, as stated by philosophers Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson, 'complicates our understanding of what it means to act,' it does not deny agency and the ability *to* act, to change behaviour (2013, p.3). However, one must be aware that a habit is merely a contingent set of learned behaviours – a self-defined set of limits – before new habits, and therefore new limits, can be sought.

Wallace consistently points out that identifying an issue's cause is not the means by which to remedy it. Rand believes her future husband's advice – which is simply to stop cutting, and to decide to do so – works because "'Unlike the doctors and small groups that were all about your feelings ... as though if you knew why you did it you'd magically be able to stop'" (p.486).²⁷ Rand alludes to an idea prevalent across Wallace's *oeuvre*, which is that working out what latent element of the self defines a repeated behaviour does not lead to resolution. In the AA of *Infinite Jest*, causation is discouraged as a reason for addiction, no matter how traumatic: 'causal attribution, like irony, is death, speaking-on-Commitments-wise. Crocodiles' temple-veins will actually stand out and pulse with irritation if you start trying to blame your Disease on some cause or other, and

²⁷ There is no space to discuss this here, but Rand's idea of self-responsibility here also echoes the philosophy of her namesake, Ayn Rand. As John Galt didactically espouses in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957): 'there is no greater, nobler, more heroic form of devotion than the act of a man who assumes the responsibility of thinking' (2005, p.920). It is possible that here Wallace is acknowledging the possible implications of his own responsibility thesis. For a brief discussion of Meredith Rand's similarities to Ayn Rand, read Emily Hogg (2014, p.62).

everybody with any kind of sober time will pale and writhe in their chair' (p.370). In 'Good Old Neon' Neal dismisses the idea that even if his supposed 'fraudulence' was genetic, that he had a 'fraud gene,' that that would make any difference to his existence: 'And even if I did, what difference would it make? I was still a fraud, it was still my own unhappiness that I had to deal with' (2004, p.150). Wallace's characters' do not simply discover a cause, and then reform their habits; their behaviour is more varied and complex than that. In 'E Unibus' Wallace extends this idea out to postmodern irony: 'The assumptions *behind* early post-modern irony, on the other hand, were still frankly idealistic: it was assumed that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom' (2009, p.67, italics in original). Throughout his career, Wallace questions whether discovering the etiology of a problem can in any way lead to a cure. Instead, his characters demonstrate that it is more productive to recognise that many behaviours and actions are habits, and can therefore change.

That Rand castigates her psychiatrists' approach as 'magic' is markedly similar to one of Dewey's assertions about forming new habits: 'We cannot change habit directly: that notion is magic. But we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfilment of desires' (1922, p.20). Fogle's narrative is a clear example of the modification of social conditions that Dewey calls for, where changing how culture is reproduced leads to different habits being possible; a focus on the environment, rather than the cause, of any set issue. Wilson Kaiser also focuses on the importance of Fogle's narrative, and convincingly situates the section as demonstrative of Wallace's opposition to postmodern characterisation and style: 'In contrast to the ironic distance of self-conscious "double-coding" in postmodern fiction, Wallace is describing the heightened awareness of "doubling," the coming into consciousness of the embedded quality of life' (2014, p.65). To extend Kaiser's argument further, Fogle's self-transformation shows that once he realises

how certain behaviours are just habits, he can change them. The broader point Fogle embodies is that culture does not need to be reproduced in only this manner, and to realise this means that social action is possible.

Fogle's interview is essentially a long explanation of how he came to work for the IRS. He makes a distinct contrast between his two selves – his younger, pre-IRS self, and the one that is being interviewed in this section of the novel. Indeed, his opening remark emphasises the difference he feels in himself, and how his new work, his new habits, have transformed him: 'I don't think my memory works in quite the way it used to. It may be that this kind of work changes you. Even just rote exams' (p.154). The idea that his work has changed him echoes Dewey's discussions of the role of work in forming habits, a theme of his philosophy evident from his early essay 'The Interpretations of Savage Mind' (1902): 'Occupations determine the fundamental modes of activity, and hence control the formation and use of habits' (1998, p.12). Fogle therefore frames his entire narrative through the lens of his transformation, and that his new 'rote' habits have changed how his brain works. This corresponds to how William James describes how habits form: 'Dr. Carpenter's phrase that *our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised* expresses the philosophy of habit in a nutshell' (1950, p.112, italics in original). As explored above in relation to tennis in *Infinite Jest*, Toni Ware's traumas, and Rand's experiences with men, repetition is key to the formation and perpetuation of habits, and Fogle's narrative is emblematic of how repetition can also effect personal change. Fogle embodies the ways repetition of an action can lead to the formation of new limits.

After giving an initial background to his specific role in 'the service' – the colloquial name given to the IRS by the characters of the novel – and his early years, Fogle describes his experiences with the drug obetrol while in college. The 'doubling' Fogle experiences on obetrol leads to the realisation that he was performing these acts automatically, without consideration for

their results: 'Like taking the train instead of actually driving yourself somewhere and having to know where you were and make a decision about where to turn. On the train, one can simply space out and ride along, which is what it felt as though I was doing most of the time' (p.185). Fogle characterises the distinction between automatic and conscious action as the difference between awareness and thinking: 'By the way, I do think that awareness is different from thinking' (p.190). Like with the delusion of awareness cited earlier, thinking stands here for acting automatically within a limited 'road' of behaviour, while awareness means being aware that that particular road, or train, is only one way of acting. On *Obetrol*, Fogle realises this distinction, becomes aware of these behaviours as habits, and this realisation enables him to question them, and seek new habits. It is seeing such institutional limits and reacting to them that is a constant across each writer in this thesis.

Fogle does not completely expunge the habits of what he terms his 'wastoid' former self, as he still recognises his narrative will be dismissed by many:

That may sound all drippy-hippie, getting in touch with inner feelings and all that business. But based on my experience during that time, most people are always feeling something or adopting some attitude or choosing to pay attention to one thing or one part of something without even knowing we're doing it. We do it automatically, like a heartbeat. (p.183)

He is aware his listener could construe his points as 'drippy-hippie', but as he points out, habits and customs are something everyone falls into 'automatically, like a heartbeat.' *Obetrol* makes him realise his own agency in changing these habits: 'What it felt like was a sort of emergence, however briefly, from the fuzziness and drift of my life in that period. As though I was a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over' (p.182). Dewey outlines that there is a fine line between automaticity, and also the requirement to have habits in order to function: 'Without habit there is only irritation and confused hesitation. With habit alone there is a machine-like repetition, a

duplicating recurrence of old acts. With conflict of habits and release of impulse there is conscious search' (1922, p.180). Fogle's realisation on obetrol relates to the automaticity of his habits and customs; his newfound awareness opens up the possibility of changing himself, of enacting a conscious search for new, more productive habits. This 'plunging into' beliefs is something Hal cannot get his head around in *Infinite Jest*, as he believes 'We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately – the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person' (p.900). Similarly, Neal in 'Good Old Neon' also struggles to find a new attitude to adopt, new habits to perform, from religion to more general hobbies. Neal relentlessly castigates himself as a 'fraud,' and even outlines what he terms the 'fraudulence paradox' (2004, p.147). In contrast, Fogle stops seeing himself as a machine, and realises he is a human being, with agency, and therefore with habits that can always change.

After becoming aware of his behaviour as habitual, Fogle decides to radically rethink his life. In doing so, he realises the utility and purpose of limits:

I knew, sitting there, that I might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't always just a hip pose. That I drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better. That I was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn't actually real – I was free to choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter. But that this, too, was because of something I chose – I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter. (p.223)

Fogle redefines himself in contrast to his nihilist, wastoid past; he makes a choice to work out and decide what matters. He recognises he has to form limits, and that he can choose what those limits are. When he was younger Fogle was limited by an idea of what freedom entails. His 'doubling' experiences on obetrol cannot fill this void alone; it is a temporary means to experience the awareness he seeks, and if overdone can lead to embarrassing results: 'I have to admit that I know that once or twice I got so lost in the halls or stacked layers of awareness that I went to the bathroom right there on the sofa' (p.188). David Wallace also hints that Fogle's 'obetrolling'

became a habit that lost him his job (p.271). Fogle completely transforms himself after his father's death. He becomes one of what David Wallace calls the 'true believers' that keep the service going, which is a striking contrast to how he sees his former self (p.271). Fogle's experiences on obetrol are all too brief; he relies on an amphetamine for this awareness, which becomes a negative habit that affects his health and professional life. But this notion of being actually aware, rather than the illusion of awareness, is what his story accentuates.

Fogle's decision to change his hair ('first thing' after term ends), his clothing ('a dark-gray ventless wool suit'), his demeanour (much to the bemusement of the Dean of Academic Affairs), and join the 'service,' is a dramatic instance of how habits can be changed (pp.233-5). To return to Dewey:

Habits are conditions of intellectual efficiency. They operate in two ways upon intellect. Obviously, they restrict its reach, they fix its boundaries. They are blinders that confine the eyes of mind to the road ahead. They prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice. Outside the scope of habits, thought works gropingly, fumbling in confused uncertainty; and yet habit made complete in routine shuts in thought so effectually that it is no longer needed or possible ... All habit-forming involves the beginning of an intellectual specialization which if unchecked ends in thoughtless action. (1922, pp.172-3)

Fogle realises that boundaries enable productive thoughts and actions; his new habits are the 'intellectual efficiency' he craves. As mentioned in the introduction, Wallace argues in 'E Unibus' that 'if anarchy actually *rules*, if rulelessness became the *rule*, then protest and change become not just impossible but incoherent' (2009, p.68, italics in original). Fogle's ruleless existence was in reality an antipathy to change. By making these life decisions, by having a road ahead to follow, Fogle makes future habitual change possible again. When within the IRS, Fogle re-temporalises himself; he is not out of time, understood spatially, but is embedded within a set institution, with rules to follow (which can always be broken). It could be argued that his work with the IRS has become similar to his previous nihilism, as in his devotion is so great that his work is another

instance of ‘the beginning of an intellectual specialization which if unchecked ends in thoughtless action.’ But what Fogle’s narrative demonstrates is that having habits is necessary for progress – there must be something to argue against, to contend within the self, in order to change – and the need to avoid ‘machine-like repetition’ in thought and action. The idea of limits – either externally imposed or appropriated - a key concern in many contemporary American fiction texts, and Wallace’s work suggests that limits are needed in order to be able to not just drift, and to possibly form new, habitual limits later. Limits enable the self and society to avoid ‘fumbling in confused uncertainty,’ to use Dewey’s phrase, and to be in a constant process of becoming.

Defamiliarisation: Wallace’s Beef with Readers

Extrapolating Fogle’s experiences to that of the reader, it can be seen how the authorial Wallace tries to challenge the ‘automatic thinking’ of his readers across his career. Dewey outlines how conflict is key to progress: ‘Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. Not that it always effects this result; but that conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity’ (1922, p.300). As Dewey acknowledges, it does not always work, but conflict is the means to break the passivity of unconscious habits. Defamiliarisation, writing in opposition to established habit, is the tool Wallace uses to make his readers see the distinction of awareness and thinking. Defamiliarisation is the means by which Wallace’s fiction exposes cultural limits and norms, and for the reader to question whether such limits should be in place.

Defamiliarisation was first outlined by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, and he did so in terms of habit: ‘If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic’ (2009, pp.4-5). Shklovsky sees art as a means to ‘estrangle’ the reader: ‘By “estranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and

“laborious” (2009, p.6). Wallace’s texts similarly attempt to make perception ‘laborious’; for instance, at a basic, physical level, the structure of many of Wallace’s texts defamiliarises particular habits for his readers. There is also his use of narrative frames highlighted throughout this chapter, the way his texts – particularly *Infinite Jest* – have sentences that run on for pages, and the way many of his stories seem to have elements missing, such as the gaps of *Infinite Jest*, or the silent interviewer of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. There are also the recurrent tropes of disjointed formatting and technical jargon, both of which he uses in the short story ‘Datum Centurio’ from *Brief Interviews*. In this story, set in 2096, Wallace blends the format of a dictionary entry with the technical language of computer coding, which results in a story that is wilfully, in Shklovsky’s terms, laborious. For instance, it includes sentences such as: ‘From Leckie & Webster’s Connotationally Gender-Specific Lexicon of Contemporary Usage, a 600gb DVD Product with 1.6gb of Hyperavailable Hot Text Keyed to 11.2gb’ (1999, p.125). While seemingly a technical entry on the etymology of the word ‘date,’ it also includes an explanation of the decline of interactive pornography in this future world. Raymond Williams suggests that ‘A form, as we have seen, is inherently reproducible,’ and that ‘formal dispositions ... are in effect given’ (1982, p.197). Through his formal choices, Wallace questions and defamiliarises the formal dispositions that many accept as given. Most obviously, there is the much-documented physical size of *Infinite Jest*, as pithily put by Jessica Hurley: ‘you don’t write a book that needs two bookmarks and special lumbar support to read unless you want to draw your reader’s attention to form ...’ (2013, pp.204-205). This is not as extreme as other contemporary authors’ experiments with form – Mark Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006) has two concurrent plots working from either side of the physical book, starting at two different points of history, and which never quite meet – but Wallace almost didactically defamiliarises his readers from their customary, automatic reading habits. Wallace put himself on a ‘footnote detox’ after writing his essay ‘David Lynch Loses his Head’ for *Premiere*

magazine, recognising his originally inventive use of footnotes had in itself become a habit (Gilbert, 1997: p.78). Wallace is self-aware of what structural habits and customs he adopts in his works, and self-consciously attempts to vary them. Stylistically and structurally, Wallace's fiction and nonfiction is confrontational towards his readers' expectations. In staging these confrontations and continually reminding the reader of their status within the process, he questions the limits of how culture is reproduced, and suggests there can be different limits for fiction and culture.

Wallace defined his defamiliarisation techniques in an interview from 1993 as based on the idea that: 'It seems that one of the things about living now is that *everything* presents itself as familiar, so one of the things the artist has to do now is take a lot of this familiarity and remind people that it's strange' (Kennedy and Polk, 1993: p.19, italics in original).²⁸ As historian Frank Trentmann suggests of the politics of everyday life, 'The quotidian, which is about the familiar, has become so familiar that it stands in the way of appreciating its historical genesis' (2012, p.522). Wallace expresses a similar sentiment to that of Richard Rorty, who describes the contemporary period as one marked by 'knowingness' (1998, p.126). A habit can prevent social change in its very automaticity; this 'knowingness' defines the behaviour of Joelle and Neal, all of whom dismiss any unoriginal experience they have as cliché or banal. Additionally, in 2004 Wallace claimed that it is the 'grand experiment' of the modern era to have a generation who has so much of their lives mediated through someone or something (Paulson, 2004: p.130). This relates to one of Egan's concerns discussed in the final chapter, as she aims to defamiliarise, and draw attention to, how digital communication has changed experience. Similarly, Wallace aims to make the reader question how and why information is conveyed to them – to question why these ideas are reproduced. In doing so, he highlights the institutional, technological, and historical reasons for

²⁸ Michael Chabon, Colson Whitehead, and Jennifer Egan echo this very point, but – as is discussed in the final chapter – they turn to generic, popular forms in order to defamiliarise contemporary experience for their readers.

such customs – in doing so, he historicises such customs, and allows the reader to question these limits.

In order to remind his readers of how nearly everything they see has been mediated by someone, somewhere, Wallace sets up a series of framing narratives in his stories. Again, like the process of defamiliarisation itself, this is not new; Kurt Vonnegut, for example, uses the same technique in many of his novels. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) the fictionalised Kurt Vonnegut drinks with his own creations in a bar: ‘Trout was aware of me, too, what little he could see of me. I made him even more uneasy than Dwayne did. The thing was: Trout was the only character I ever created who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being’ (1991, p.246). Framing narratives could even be called a postmodern convention (in the form of postmodernism Wallace outlines), as metafictional self-consciousness is a framing narrative in itself. John Barth is perhaps the keenest exponent of this technique, such as the constant intrusion of a John Barth-like figure into his novel *Chimera* (1972). First, he appears as a genie that tells Scheherazade and her sister, Dunyazad, the tales of *1001 Nights*, creating a circular, paradoxical image of authorship. Then, he reappears as the similarly initialed Jerome Bray, and communicates across time and space with the classical hero Bellerophon through notes in bottles placed in the sea. Wallace’s use of framing narratives serves a different end. As Holland concisely summarises, Wallace’s aim is to expose ‘mediation to his readers as a representation of reality’s multiple illusions, rather than using illusion to represent reality’ (2013b, p.66). Wallace’s purpose is not to simply draw attention to the mediated nature of the text – like metafiction – or the simulacra of all experience, such as the void at the centre of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, or *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This void is best encapsulated as Tyrone Slothrop ‘perceives that he is losing his mind’: ‘If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, here is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right

now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle' (2000, p.515). Instead, Wallace's framing narratives demonstrate the multiple illusions of the reality we construct, and in doing so re-instates the agency of a liberal human subject who can – indeed, has to – choose how they perceive the world. What Wallace wants to make clear is a certain structural ambiguity to every assertion that we attempt to make sincerely. As Adam Kelly asserts via Derrida's theorisation of gift giving as permanently unstable, 'Because all telling can be understood as a pose, there is no way to present sincerity positively in cognitive terms' (2010, p.141). This structural ambiguity is the means by which Kelly characterises Wallace and his contemporaries within what he terms New Sincerity writing. To relate this undecidability to habit, this impossibility of being definitive about anything does not foreclose possible interpretations; it helps instigate them, by allowing an individual to adopt different customs and habits. Wallace demonstrates how narratives have multiple possible frames and lenses, and these narratives are just one way of seeing a story. Framing narratives are not new in fiction, but originality is not the concern of Wallace, or indeed any writer in this thesis; culture is reproduced in restrictive ways, and Wallace's point is that this always can be changed. Furthermore, this denotes that previous techniques can be repurposed and reproduced for new ends, which relates to the acts of recovery and reclamation the other four writers in this thesis more overtly demonstrate.

The short story collection from 2004, *Oblivion*, has many such framing narratives, as the aforementioned zooming out to a 'David Wallace' at the end of 'Good Old Neon' demonstrates. *Oblivion* is possibly the least-studied work of fiction of Wallace's *oeuvre*; Marshall Boswell discusses the text as a 'unique' text in Wallace's career due to its 'unrelenting pessimism' (2013, p.168). This implies that the relative lack of criticism about this collection is possibly because critics struggle to fit in within their wider, more positive accounts of Wallace's impact on American fiction. Charles Nixon argues that *Oblivion* is a conscious revision of many aspects of Wallace's

earlier texts, and differentiates *Oblivion* as the product of the ‘mature’ Wallace, where he revises many of his earlier ideas and themes (2015, p.176). Thomas Tracey reads the collection as a discussion of trauma, and points out that ‘Many of the principle narrative techniques that recur throughout *Oblivion* are fully operational, and perhaps most explicitly foregrounded, in its second story, “The Soul is Not a Smithy”’ (2010, p.177). In this story, the narrator reminisces about a particularly memorable day at school. Paradoxically, the intrigue of this day is partly created by its tedium, and while bored the narrator daydreams in an incredibly complex manner. He stares at the grate that covers the window, and imagines a narrative in each of its individual squares. The ‘framing narrative’ therefore has an actual frame, of each individual metal square. Here is an example of Wallace’s framing narratives at their most basic; the framing of each daydream within these squares becomes part of the construction of the plot. The framing of these daydreams also distracts the narrator from the dramatic real world events as his teacher has a breakdown. Therefore there is a frame within a frame, a story within a story, and the real world events eventually jar the narrator away from his own framing narratives.

Also in *Oblivion*, in ‘Mister Squishy’ the narrator is part of, and possibly on some sort of secret mission within, an advertising focus group. The narrator is deeply critical of advertising (even possibly aiming to inject the ‘*Felonies!*’ chocolate snack they are discussing with ricin), and his encyclopaedic knowledge of the industry allows the reader to see behind the curtain of this business. The narrator describes how any product that becomes fashionable does not do so organically; everything is marketed toward becoming part of a ‘Metastatic Consumption Pattern or MCP’ (2004, p.23). That the narrative voice uses a term usually reserved for oncology – metastatic – to describe marketing demonstrates their feelings about the invasive nature of contemporary advertising. However, this portrayal of advertising as a malevolent, all controlling force comes from a narrator who is trying to undermine the entire process, and so he is in no way objective. Framing

the narrative within the perspective of a first person narrator – like with David Wallace in *The Pale King* – at once allows access into the workings of marketing, but also means the reader doubts the honesty of this account. The narrator’s perspective is just one way of seeing the situation, and does not foreclose the narrative’s possible meanings. Wallace repeats this framing trick in the short story that gives the collection its name. ‘Oblivion’ is a seemingly realist text where a marital dispute about who was asleep and when concludes with it all being a frighteningly believable dream. The entire narrative is thrown into question with the belated revelation that it was all a dream, and the entire story is reframed. As Nixon argues about the collection more broadly: ‘[the stories] do not end in obvious epiphanies for their central characters. Rather, they often end in ways that forces the reader into a kind of interpretive epiphany instead’ (2015, p.177). The ending of ‘Oblivion’ is clearly one such interpretive epiphany; not only does it require the reader to re-interpret the story as a dream, rather than actual events, but with the ending of ‘it was all a dream’ Wallace almost dares his readers to dismiss the short story as banal, trite, and clichéd.

The final example I will take from *Oblivion* is ‘Another Pioneer,’ where the narrator proclaims that his story is an ‘exemplum,’ but it is more like a cautionary tale about how all stories are created, and therefore mediated. At the outset of the story the narrator admits how he first heard the story: not only is it being told exclusively to a male audience – opening with ‘nevertheless gentlemen,’ and thereby possibly colouring how the story is told – but the narrator is himself far removed from the source of the story, it being something he heard from an acquaintance of a friend who overheard it on a plane (2004, p.117). This trick is repeated again in *The Pale King*, as the accountancy professor that so affects Chris Fogle relentlessly uses the pronoun ‘gentlemen.’ This undercuts his own assertion that, ‘But it is now today’s era, the modern era ... In today’s world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated. *Gentlemen*, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation’

(p.232, italics mine). He does not seem to realise that heroism, as he outlines it, should not be the exclusive domain of his entirely male class. In both these texts – as with Rand and Drinion’s conversation – Wallace foregrounds the audience, which suggests that these stories are distorted by their reception, and there is no ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ story to tell or receive.

In ‘Another Pioneer,’ the story itself has ‘three epitatic variants’ (2004, p.124) and ‘at certain points it became unclear what was part of the cycle’s narrative *Ding an sich* [thing in itself] and what were the passenger’s own editorial interpolations and commentary ...’ (2004, p.126). In this story, Wallace further emphasises his hope that his readers will try being actually self-conscious, *not only self-conscious about certain things*. Again, like Joelle or Neal, these first person narratives are just one way of seeing things; they are in no way conclusive. Wallace suggests that all of these narratives are not absolute; therefore, there is always the possibility of vocabularies beyond this habitual self-consciousness.²⁹ Wallace seems to suggest that there are unspoken assumptions, unthinking habits that are not questioned in culture. One of these assumptions is the failure to question that someone or something with a purpose and agenda is mediating anything anyone experiences in popular culture; his fiction attempts to defamiliarise this, make the reader uncomfortable, and begin to question how the information they consume is formed. Ultimately, Wallace suggests that there are multiple ways to view the world, and by acknowledging the contingency of all habits, he suggests that North Americans can adapt their habits to serve a different purpose.

Returning to *The Pale King*, it has already been noted how the narrative is framed and interpreted by the narrator, David Wallace, whose distortions are not just apparent in the Rand and Drinion section. For instance, he doubts the veracity of Fogle’s long story, and suggests that Fogle

²⁹ This idea has clear echoes with Rorty’s neopragmatic idea of the ‘liberal ironist,’ who should have no ‘final vocabulary.’ For Rorty’s discussion of this, see *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* (1989). For a reading of Wallace and Rorty, see Hayes-Brady (2016).

is extremely longwinded in order to be paid as much overtime as possible (p.257). David Wallace also dismisses Fogle as ‘logorrheic,’ and informs the reader of his own disdain for Fogle immediately after his long story (p.259). By undercutting the believability of a seemingly earnest confession, David Wallace attempts to debunk the entire 100-page narrative. However, the authorial Wallace places numerous doubts in the text about the credibility of David Wallace’s account. In his first interpolation, he continually undercuts his own trustworthiness. He first asserts, ‘All of this is true. This book is really true’ (p.67), and then only two pages later he concedes that it is only ‘substantially true’ (p.69). He later reveals that he wishes his readers to consider him an ‘artist,’ but – ironically foreshadowing his later accusation of Chris Fogle's motives – he also admits he may have written this memoir solely for financial gain (p.81). Further, his character is brought into question with a jarring, out of nowhere insinuation of anti-Semitism, when he notes a lawyer is ‘a female Jew’ absolutely needlessly (p.390).³⁰ This doubling of narration sets up another conundrum for the veracity of Fogle’s interview: Wallace mediates a narrative told by a reformed Fogle, looking back at his earlier self. This creates doubt at every level of the narrative. By making the reader choose between the seemingly earnest Fogle and the dislikeable narrator, the authorial Wallace creates multiple experiences of reading. Essentially, there is a story for those who believe the narrating Wallace, and one for those who believe Fogle. This ‘doubling’ in Wallace’s framing narratives of *The Pale King* creates a void of truth, and undercuts any sense of knowingness being possible.

The defamiliarisation process of *The Pale King* is, as Holland asserts about Wallace’s earlier work, a process by which he exposes reality’s numerous illusions. Wallace wants the reader to see that many behaviours are just habits, and for the reader to question *why* the story is being

³⁰ The final footnote of ‘Mister Squishy’ similarly has the phrase ‘Britton knew all about Laleman trying to Jew him out,’ which operates like David Wallace’s seeming anti-Semitism in *The Pale King* (2005, p.66). For a reading of the questionable descriptions of Fat Marcus’s Jewishness in *The Pale King*, see Godden and Szalay (2014, p.1291).

communicated. Wallace's novels and short stories are not passive acts of 'spectation,' but, as Marshall Boswell describes Wallace's work, it is 'a community where meaning is made' (2004, p.121). Wallace is asking the reader to question whether acts that seem sincere, like Fogle's story, could be, as Hal describes Orin's seduction technique in *Infinite Jest*, instances of "'sincerity with a motive'" (p.1048, italics in original). As Adam Kelly suggests, Wallace makes this impossibility of being definitive absolutely structural to any of his assertions. Finally, by making the metafictional author so eminently dislikeable – a possible anti-Semite who takes advantage of a case of mistaken identity for sex – Wallace sets up an interesting dichotomy: who to have faith in, whose framing narrative can you believe, in *The Pale King*? Postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan argues that trust is what realism is really about: 'the perpetually moot issue of realism is, at bottom, one of truth, but that truth is not transcendental or foundational: it is a matter of trust' (2003, p.1). By dramatising this trust, Wallace could be seen as a realist in Hassan's terms. Similarly, Kelly puts 'trust and faith' as central tenets of New Sincerity writing (2016, p.201). Regardless of this categorisation debate, Wallace forces his readers to make a conscious decision in interpreting his fiction – as Konstantinou outlines, there is a distinct kinship between this aspect of Wallace's fiction and the choice of frames that Raoul Eshelman argues defines performatist fiction (2016a, p.183). The reader is left in a liminal space, sure of nothing except that their understanding of the text can only ever be in a process of becoming – it can never be absolute. As Dewey outlines: 'In the strictest sense, it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse. It is in the *quality* of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but *the* end is growth itself. To make an end a final goal is but to arrest growth' (1998, p.353, italics in original). This absolute undecidability means a reading will, like the habitual self, never be static, but in a constant process of becoming. Wallace wishes cultural reproduction to therefore not be an unthinking, deterministic, fatalistic process – the continuum he states that *Infinite Jest* focuses on in

regards to environmental policy and entertainment – but the product of decisions and actions of deciding what elements of culture should be reproduced.

Conclusion

A habit-based reading of *The Pale King* evinces how this text summarises many of the concerns that dominate Wallace's career. More so than any other author in this thesis, he openly and clearly engages with his postmodern forebears, as evidenced most clearly in his nonfiction. I use the term engages as Franzen, as is explored in the next chapter, does not so much attempt to engage as reject his literary inheritance. Through a habit-based understanding of being, Wallace temporalises his characters' spatial ontology. Wallace's habit-based, temporally grounded understanding of being is a provocative suggestion of how literary characters can reacquire agency after the postmodern period. Wallace's characters affect events through decisions, and ground these decisions in a socially defined understanding of truth. Wallace depicts culture as reproduced by social habits, as in by customs. In doing so, his work argues, as Dewey suggests, that culture should be in a constant process of becoming.

Moving from the texts to the wider meaning of Wallace's work shows how he does not offer a programmatic understanding of how fiction should function after postmodernism. Wallace exemplifies Dewey's assertion that:

Escape from the clutch of custom gives an opportunity to do old things in new ways, and thus to construct new ends and means. Breach in the crust of the cake of custom releases impulses; but it is the work of intelligence to find the ways of using them. There is an alternative between anchoring a boat in the harbor till it becomes a rotting hulk and letting it loose to be the sport of every contrary gust. (1922, p.170)

Wallace's work, as discussed here in especial regards to *The Pale King*, represents an escape from the clutch of custom. He suggests that statements usually seen as 'banal platitudes' can be reclaimed, and the function and the meaning of these clichés can be generative for the formation of

new habits. Wallace's fiction is an attempt to do old things in new ways; to invoke the benefits of limits – what he calls in *This is Water* 'discipline' – in the formation of the self, in fiction, and more broadly in culture (2009, p.123). Furthermore, through depicting his characters as defined by habits, Wallace temporalises his characters by making their acts and behaviours contingent. To use Dewey's terminology, this enables his characters to construct 'new ends and means.' By suggesting the need to follow some customs, some habits, he does not let his characters to have no limits, as to be almost paradoxically too free – as Chris Fogle realises – is to disable any possibility of progress. Wallace's work is not a definitive statement of what habits to have, but intends to be a reminder that the reproduction of habits and customs is contingent, and therefore can always be changed. It is in this embrace of limits as choice, as deciding what elements of culture should be reproduced, that connects Wallace to the other writers of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Seeking a Home for Fiction: Melodrama in the Works of Jonathan Franzen

This chapter discusses the contrasting approach to fiction of Wallace's close friend, Jonathan Franzen. When looked at through the lens of cultural reproduction, he clearly shares many of the same concerns as Wallace – the inheritance of postmodern fiction, what behaviours popular culture inculcates and reproduces, and the effects of technological developments – but he differs from Wallace as he consciously reproduces a distinct literary form as an answer to the issues he diagnoses in contemporary U.S. culture. Franzen's oft-cited 1996 *Harper's* essay, 'Perchance to Dream' concludes with him defining his approach to fiction as that of a 'tragic realist' (1996, p.53).³¹ While Stephen Burn suggests that one should be careful not to read too much into Franzen's nonfictional pronouncements (2008, pp.46-51), the novels following this manifesto, *The Corrections* (2001), *Freedom* (2010), and *Purity* (2015), do demonstrate a clear shift in style, form, and content – and critical and commercial acclaim – from his first two novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992). This chapter argues that rather than works of 'tragic realism,' these later texts actually take on many of the qualities of *melodrama*. While melodrama may seem contrary to Franzen's realist intentions, I argue that the tensions of his recent novels between his realist aims and his postmodern inheritance result in and create a series of melodramatic effects. Furthermore, as he seeks to directly confront the issues he identifies in contemporary U.S. literary culture, his binary, Manichean engagements with such concerns are also distinctly melodramatic.

To understand how Franzen reaches melodrama it is necessary to first consider his approach to realism, and critics' responses to it. Like Wallace, Franzen situates his work in distinction to his postmodern forebears. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, his recovery of realism is part of a wider turn to realism in contemporary American fiction. Joshua Toth argues: 'In brief, and

³¹ Nearly all quotations are from the original article in 1996, but there are a couple of additions in the revision. When this is the case, the alternate publishing date of 2002 is put after the text.

somewhat crudely put, neo-realism, if not renewalism generally, is a direct reaction to the apparent hegemony of postmodernism' (2010, p.110). Nicholas Dames labels this reactive era of writers 'The Theory Generation' (2012). As Tom Wolfe also acknowledges in his manifesto, 'Stalking The Billion Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel' (1989), those who went to college after 1960 had a distinctly different experience than those before, and this was largely due to the advances of literary theory (1989, p.48). Focusing on Chip Lambert's experiences as a literature professor in *The Corrections* – which I discuss at length below – Dames argues that these scenes show that 'by 2001, Theory had become – at least for students, ex-students, and academics – part of the furniture of their lives' (2012). Dames posits that Franzen's novel explores this academic training in 'a form that Theory has done much to denaturalize and demystify (OK, "deconstruct")': the more or less realist novel' (2012). Dames situates Franzen's portrayal of theory as part of a wider generational turn, also seen in texts such as Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011): 'Eugenides combats Theory in a register even more effective than Franzen's satire: nostalgia. What do you do to Theory when you treat it *fondly*? You make it into one of the wonderful follies of youth: so good to have had them; so good to be beyond them' (2012, italics in original). The turn to realism in the contemporary, then, becomes a counter-revolution to the supposed excesses of literary theory.

However, while he does usefully situate Franzen amongst contemporaries – Jennifer Egan, Lorrie Moore, Eugenides, Sam Lipsyte, Ben Lerner, and Teju Cole – and helpfully outlines one of the ways Franzen's work engages with his postmodern literary inheritance, Dames does not define what he means by the term realism. In Dames' argument, realism becomes an elastic construct, expanding to engulf threats to its existence, and then contracting to explore a series of loosely defined concepts: '... Associationist psychology (*Tristram Shandy*); evolutionary biology (*Middlemarch*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*); finance capitalism (*The Way We Live Now*, *J R*);

psychoanalysis (*Confessions of Zeno*); post-Newtonian physics (*The Crying of Lot 49*) — realism has stretched to include these realms and countless others’ (2012). This is a particularly questionable list of realist texts; in particular, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *JR* do not seem to fit easily within this grouping. Here, Dames seems to conflate realism with the novel more broadly. Dames never demarcates what realism denotes; he cites vague concepts that could relate to most fiction, or even art, like ‘faith in signs,’ ‘a history of the present,’ and ‘a source of critical knowledge’ (2012). Furthermore, the realist novel never really went away; writers such as John Updike, Saul Bellow, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Richard Ford, and Anne Tyler continued to produce realist novels throughout the postmodern era. Further, in *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (2009) Gordon Hutner critiques the works that actually sold during the 1920s to 1960s, as opposed to what are critically lauded now. To state that the realist novel was in decline and is now making a return in the present, then, seems incorrect. It is more accurate to state that the academy has instead reproduced what Williams terms a ‘selective tradition’ of more experimental works, and in the contemporary period this selection is being questioned (1982, p.229). Franzen’s fiction is a response to the pressures and limits of this academic reproduction and valorisation of a selective tradition. As Toth, Wolfe, and Dames suggest, Franzen is part of a wider contemporary recovery of realism. But Dames’ reading of Franzen does elide the differences between Franzen and these other contemporary writers. Franzen is unique in the version of realism he seeks to revive: he recovers a specific idea of realism in order to critique cultural reproduction in both literature – particularly in regards to difficulty – and culture, which largely relates to technology and therapeutic culture.³² As with each writer in this thesis, he draws his own limits to his fiction as a reaction to the limits and pressures of the contemporary structure of feeling.

³² Holland reads A. M. Homes’ novel *Music for Torching* (1999) – possibly incorrectly – as a similar instance of a recovery of realist conventions (2013b, pp.91-127).

In the distinctly different context of realism in art history, Alex Potts suggests: ‘The conventional polarity between abstraction and realism is posited on a particularly narrow conception of realism’ (2013, p.2). It is this narrow conception of realism, in opposition to a similarly narrow definition of experimental postmodern fiction that Franzen wishes to recover. Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that realism is defined as such because ‘while the *form* developed further, its theories *froze* in time somewhere in the last century. What was a temporary stage in literature became a fixed definition in criticism’ (1980, p.38, italics in original). Franzen’s texts since ‘Perchance’ can be considered as attempts to reproduce a specific *version* of realism – the late nineteenth century idea of the form, advocated for by writers like William Dean Howells. In his revival of specific, reified form of realism and this clash with the limits and pressures of the contemporary structure of feeling, this chapter argues Franzen reproduces what Raymond Williams would term the ‘internal signals’ of the mode of melodrama (1982, p.194). Franzen defines his fiction in distinction from his postmodern forebears by cleaving to a fixed, narrow, and oppositional sense of literary realism. I argue that the melodramatic elements of his texts are partly a result of his binary conception of the differences between realism and postmodern fiction.

This chapter traces the ways in which the ‘internal signals’ of melodrama manifest in his fiction and nonfiction texts. By invoking melodrama here I refer both to the range of thematic concerns and emotional states associated with the theatrical tradition – such as a focus on the family – and also to the more generalised sense of melodramatic effects that are prevalent in Franzen’s fiction, such as dramatic heightening and didacticism. Critics have noted, without directly naming, the melodramatic quality of Franzen’s novels, as when Blake Morrison calls *The Corrections* a ‘serious soap opera’ (2001). The focus from this novel onwards on the dramas within families and the home is one obvious way in which Franzen’s work draws close to melodrama’s themes. But in more complex and formal ways to, his insistence on binary arguments and efforts to dramatise the

relationship between his postmodern inheritance and commitment to realism also result in a clash which results in melodramatic effects being prevalent across his fiction. Due to mixture of all of these traits being evident in his writing, Franzen's texts can be productively read as part of a longer melodramatic tradition.

Following in the tradition laid out by Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976), melodrama will be used in this chapter as 'a descriptive term.' However, as Brooks also acknowledges, 'It has, of course, most often been used pejoratively' (1995, p.xv).³³ My use of melodrama as a descriptive term for Franzen's texts is not a slight, or an insult. Effectively, analysis of Franzen as an author whose texts contain melodramatic elements clearly demonstrates a tension between how, as biographer Philip Weinstein describes, 'On the one hand, Franzen is attempting to seduce a global mainstream audience with irresistibly "good reads." On the other, he would have the critical cognoscenti recognize these "good reads" as Literature' (2015, p.xi). Stephen Burn cites a similar tension, which he terms a 'conflict between postmodern innovation and more conventional narrative forms ... in Franzen's novels and essays' (2011, p.ix). Rather than separating out at what points Franzen's work embodies each side of this dialectic, this chapter argues that it is the clash between his cultural context and the form he wishes to recover that results in his texts slipping into melodrama. As will be discussed below, Franzen's texts are constructions of tensions: of realism and postmodernism, of what he terms in his essay 'Mr Difficult' (2001) 'status' and 'contract' fiction, of male ideas of prestige and what Mark McGurl terms 'feminized mass market fiction' (2001, p.78). It is within and because of these tensions that Franzen's fiction and nonfiction can be productively read as reproducing the internal signals of melodrama.

³³ All quotations are from this edition.

Melodrama arose as a mode or effect on the French stage in the mid-nineteenth century. The *Melos* refers to the music used to add drama to the performance. It is from these origins that melodrama has come to mean overly dramatic, heightened drama. If, as Williams states, realism and naturalism plays were attempts to ‘accurately reproduce reality,’ then melodrama is an accentuation of the dramatic moments of such productions (1977, p.211). In a discussion of melodrama on the English stage, Williams delineates that: ‘Melodrama touched every nerve of nineteenth-century society, but usually only to play on the nerves and to resolve crisis in an external and providential dramatic world’ (1977, p.214). Williams goes on to state ‘Its methods became a byword for sensational exaggeration,’ a trait that is evident across Franzen’s fiction (1977, p.214). Interestingly, such exaggeration is a common element of the cartoonish plotlines and characterisations of postmodern novels, such as Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), where the execution of the Rosenberg’s is part of a Manichean battle between ‘Uncle Sam’ and ‘the Phantom.’ In this chapter I argue one of the reasons for the evident melodramatic nature of Franzen’s texts is precisely because of this inheritance, and the specific structure of feeling Franzen is writing within. Indeed, as mentioned above, I argue throughout that Franzen’s melodrama is the product of such tensions. Furthermore, the aspects of cultural reproduction he is concerned with – postmodern difficulty, the supposed collapse in the cultural standing of fiction, and technological advancements – he portrays in distinctly melodramatic ways. Interestingly, Franzen’s revival of realism as a response to his concerns regarding contemporary forms and technology once again highlights the appropriation of limits as an enabling force for contemporary writers. His fiction is particularly useful in relation to the focus on cultural reproduction for three reasons: first, he evidences many of the same concerns as Wallace, but shows a different reaction to these concerns. Second, his turn to older limits in response to the limits and pressures of the contemporary structure of feeling relates him to the work of Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead. And finally, as well as his embrace of realism, Franzen’s

resistance to the rapid advances in technology is another instance of writerly agency, rather than technological shifts – a rebuttal to what Williams terms ‘technological determinism’ (1977, p.208) – being the defining feature of his fiction.

As well as Brooks, I am heavily indebted to Linda Williams’ *On The Wire* (2014), for how I describe and understand melodrama. Williams contends that much of contemporary American life is understood in the binaries of the melodramatic: the war on terror, the war on drugs, and the Republican/Democrat dichotomy of American politics. In engaging with the limits and pressures of the contemporary culture, in his nonfiction especially, it is perhaps no surprise that Franzen’s worldview and fiction are dominated by a melodramatic standpoint (2014, p.155). His nonfiction is filled with binaries, which I discuss below as his melodramatic public persona. Often, such binaries seep into his fiction as well. My claim is not that Franzen is an overt melodramatist, but rather follows the line taken by Peter Brooks when he explains that, ‘I am not making an argument for the direct influence of melodrama proper on novelists like Balzac and James (though this influence is in fact discernible), I am rather suggesting that perception of the melodramatic in their work can usefully be grounded and extended through reference to melodrama’ (p.20). By referring to theories of melodrama the perception of the melodramatic in Franzen’s work can be explored. In this sense, this approach is similar to the juxtaposition of Dewey’s philosophies of habit with Wallace’s fiction in the last chapter.

While Franzen’s whole career does demonstrate instances of the melodramatic, the focus of this chapter will be the bestselling novels that have made Franzen a household name, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. As these texts are the result of his conscious attempt to reproduce the realist mode, this is where the melodramatic aspects of his fiction are most apparent. I focus on these texts in particular rather than his latest novel, *Purity*, as a key part of this argument is the way Franzen has been read by critics as a realist, or as failing to be a realist, and there is not enough

criticism of *Purity* at this time to establish a similar pattern.³⁴ I argue that Franzen's fiction and nonfiction can be seen as operating within what Stuart Cunningham calls 'the force-field of melodrama' (1981, p.191). Cunningham's useful metaphor of a force-field suggests a surrounding, protective shell of melodramatic understanding; Cunningham points out that there may be no aesthetic coherence to all melodramas, but 'Melodrama in this account can be best understood not as genre but as a *mode, function, or effect*' (1981, p.197, italics in original). Seeing Franzen's texts as reproducing the internal signals of the melodramatic mode enables a reading of his work as using his characters to serve specific functions; to make his points about the processes of reproduction – whether concerning the utility of fiction and the role of theory, or the role of contemporary technology and the ephemerality of products in consumer culture – as clear as possible. In this approach, Franzen's characters are seen as devices for the melodramatic staging of his concerns about contemporary culture.

Burn argues, with regard to the writers he identifies as post-postmodernists – David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, and Franzen – that 'the careful puncturing of the illusions of realism stresses their continued affinities to postmodernism' (2008, p.128). However, I do not think Franzen's work is carefully puncturing the tropes of literary realism; his desire to make his points as clear as possible to his readers – which manifests formally as the persistent use of italics – results in the constant appearance of the melodramatic trope of *heightening*. Linda Williams contests this idea of excess defining melodrama: 'Even among its rehabilitators melodrama is regarded as an embedded "mode of excess."' I believe this is the biggest flaw in its theorization' (2014, p.108). I

³⁴ This is not to say that *Purity* is not an instance of melodrama; in many ways, it is even more so than his previous texts. John Cawelti outlines what he terms the tradition of 'social melodrama,' and states that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe 'drew upon two of the strongest melodramatic traditions, the virtuous heroine persecuted by the brutal seducer and the suffering mother' (1976, p.272). *Purity* has all these traits: Purity is the virtuous heroine, Andreas Wolff is the seducer (and also the perpetrator of a melodramatic murder), and Purity's mother, Anabel, clearly fits the trope of the suffering mother.

intentionally refer to heightening to try and avoid this debate over the formal aspects that define melodrama. Melodrama relates to realism, then, as a deviation from the reproduction of reality, where drama is heightened to make a specific point, to right a particular wrong. When moments of drama are heightened, or made didactic, realistic texts often fall into melodrama. The tensions many critics note are evident in Franzen's texts, then, push his texts within the force field of melodrama.

Ever since Franzen declared in 'Perchance' that his later work is that of a 'tragic realist,' scholars have never really interrogated what the term 'tragic realism' means. This is especially odd because Franzen's own definition of the term is patchy at best; while he almost overdetermines his definition of tragic – he states that his fiction is built upon the Apollonian and Dionysian flux that undergirds Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) – he never makes clear what it means to be a writer who adheres to the principles of 'realism' (p.53). Susanne Rohr's unquestioning use of realism as a descriptive term for Franzen's work is typical of the critical response. She discusses Franzen's *The Corrections* as a novel that 'obviously obeys the narrative conventions of literary realism' (2004, p.92) and yet does not expand on what these 'narrative conventions' are, and defers her definitions to 'the classic descriptions of literary scholarship' (2004, p.101). Rohr's terminology stems from Melvin Bukiet's inclusion of Franzen's earlier novels within a group of contemporary American authors he defines as practicing 'crackpot realism' (a term he takes from Richard Powers' 1988 novel *The Prisoner's Dilemma*). Again, Bukiet does not explore what he means by realism, and instead defines Franzen's work in relation to the qualifier, 'crackpot' (1996, p.13). The ambiguity behind what Franzen, Rohr, and Bukiet mean by realism demonstrates that what Raymond Williams said over fifty years ago still applies today: 'it is easy to declare in favour of ... [realism], yet difficult to say what exactly is implied' (1959, p.22). Franzen, Rohr and Bukiet fall into this trap;

they ‘declare in favour’ of realism, and yet fail to define what it means to write in this mode within the contemporary structure of feeling.³⁵

It is interesting that since advocating for the mode of tragic realism, reviews of Franzen’s work regularly say that he is unsuccessful in this pursuit. James Wood is a critic who, in many ways similar to Franzen’s pronouncements, valorises a nineteenth-century idea of the novel, and believes the psychological depth of characters to be the central purpose of fiction (2000). He definitively ‘declares in favour’ of realism, to borrow Williams’s phrase. Wood suggests that *The Corrections* is a text of ‘softened DeLilloism,’ meaning Franzen offers ‘humans’ that Don DeLillo’s ‘Dickensian’ *Underworld* (1997) failed to do so (2001). However, Wood argues *The Corrections* ultimately fails in its attempts to accurately revive what he believes realism to be: ‘[Franzen’s] novel is a kind of glass-bottomed boat through which one can glimpse most of the various currents of contemporary American fiction: domestic realism; postmodern cultural riffing; campus farce; “smart young man’s irony” of the kind familiar in Rick Moody and David Foster Wallace ...’ (2001). What Wood alludes to here are the tensions that will be drawn out throughout this chapter: it is in the tensions between his desired realism with the limits and pressures of his literary moment – especially postmodern tropes as a tendency for farce – that ultimately results in his particular form of melodrama.

As mentioned, writing in *The Guardian* Blake Morrison calls *The Corrections* a ‘serious soap opera,’ and he goes on to argue that ‘by focusing on the emotional and domestic dramas of a single family, Franzen appeals to parts of the brain more usually satisfied by dynastic sagas and docudramas’ (2001). Indeed, critics often get close to describing his work as melodramatic, but use closely related descriptive terms instead. For instance, in a *New Statesman* article about Anne

³⁵ Although not discussed in this chapter, another critic who declares in favour of realism is James Wood, whose hugely influential reviews, and dismissal of what he terms the contemporary genre of ‘hysterical realism,’ are quite similar to Franzen’s pronouncements. He also For an entertaining critique of Wood’s criticism, see Rachel Greenwald Smith (2015, p.11).

Tyler's worth, Leo Robson argues that Franzen 'is essentially a specialist in sagas' (2005). In a highly critical review of *Freedom* for *The New Republic* Ruth Franklin claims Franzen's 2010 novel misses its target, and, 'Instead of an epic, Franzen has created a soap opera' (2010). Rather than instances of contemporary realism, these reviewers suggest that his fiction is more aptly described as part of popular, mass-market traditions. In his review of *Freedom*, Sam Anderson complains about 'Franzen the crank – mighty detester of Twitter, ATVs, and housing developments – who occasionally steps in to overpower Franzen the artist' (2010). Franzen the artist would be Franzen the realist, his seemingly overt didacticism breaking the conventions of this mode. To return to Ruth Franklin's review of *Freedom*, she has a similar complaint:

By the time *Freedom* is over, the reader feels less enlightened than manipulated. The manipulation has to do with the novel's reliance on Patty's 'autobiography' to tell major chunks of the story from her perspective. Like many of the contrivances on which *Freedom* relies for the twists in its plot, this one is far from believable, and realism simply cannot afford so much implausibility. (2010)

For Franklin, *Freedom* fails to live up to the precepts of literary realism; the contrivance of Patty's diary too obviously points to the text as an artifice, rather than 'believable' art. As with Anderson's review, this issue only arises if scholars insist on viewing his work as a form of realism. Instead, if we view these moments of excess as part of a melodrama, we can answer critical questions about what his work is trying to say, rather than make formalist complaints that he is not working within the bounds of literary realism. In the aforementioned critical work discussing Franzen's fiction, the prefixes of tragic and crackpot suggest a melodramatic element to Franzen's novels. In essence, tragic realism suggests a mode where drama is accentuated through moments of tragedy. Similarly, Morrison's description of *The Corrections* as a 'serious soap opera' also points to melodrama as a descriptive term, as serious soap opera is a derogatory means of saying melodrama.³⁶ Crackpot realism similarly suggests an excessive nature to Franzen's texts, which, again, is a key component

³⁶ The transition in televisual history from dismissing television serials as soaps, to being called 'prime-time novels' is detailed by Linda Williams in *On The Wire* (2014, pp.46-48).

of melodrama. To see Franzen's work as displaying elements of the melodramatic stops assessing his work in light of theories that froze sometime in the nineteenth century, as Hutcheon points out, and see his texts as failing to realist in some way. The lens of cultural reproduction enables a reading of his work within the limits and pressures of the contemporary structure of feeling, and how this blend with his realist aspirations results in texts that clearly display aspects of melodrama.

The Melodramas of Public Intellectual Life

A prominent feature of melodrama is the Manichean battle of good and evil. As Linda Williams summarises: 'What is essential ... is the dramatic *recognition* of good and/or evil and in that recognition the utopian hope that justice might be done' (2014, p.113, italics in original). A battle between good and evil requires an organisation of the world into recognisable binaries; the Nietzschean, Apollonian and Dionysian view of tragedy that Franzen suggests provides this sense of order. In 'Perchance' he even states that the tragic structure of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* 'confirms in us a sense of the universe's underlying orderliness' (1996, p.53). The orderliness he sees in the world manifests, as Franklin notes, as a series of binaries: 'Franzen [insists] ... on dividing the world of literature into binary categories (his polemics are filled with dichotomies: connection versus solitude, high art versus mass culture, and so on)' (2010). Franklin is correct in this description, but does not consider the melodramatic worldview these dichotomies point toward. Franzen discusses the limits and pressures of contemporary literature and culture in Manichean terms. Indeed, in the language he uses, the binaries he sets up and the ire he inspires, Franzen's public persona is distinctly melodramatic. It is perhaps for this reason that his polemics and

musings enrage so many people, such as the dispirited response of novelist Ben Marcus to Franzen's supposed dismissal of all experimental fiction (2005).³⁷

Franzen's public pronouncements are a self-conscious attempt to be a public intellectual, as he admits to Weinstein in a 2013 email: 'I could see, already in the late nineties that there was going to be a dearth of public writers as the previous generation (Mailer, Vidal, Updike, Sontag, Bellow, Roth, etc.) waned,' and this left a 'void' that he could fill (2015, pp.175-176). He acknowledges why he sought this level of notoriety: 'It's nice to know that if I want to bring something to public attention, whether it's the work of Paula Fox or the environmental havoc wreaked by free-roaming cats, I have some power to do it' (2015, p.176). He packages these concerns in binary, Manichean ways, and he acknowledges to Weinstein the separation of his supposedly 'autobiographical' writing and his actual self: 'And paradoxically, I really was trying to restore a sphere of privacy by writing autobiographically ... I'm going to put the official narrative, I'm going to order it, I'm going to put it out there, and it will become a bulwark within which I can continue to have a private life' (2015, pp.6-7). This performative element to Franzen's nonfiction contributes to the melodramatic tone, and Manichean binaries, of his arguments. We can analyse one such performance in his filmed interview with David Remnick for *The New Yorker*, where he effects a series of sighs and pauses in response to Remnick's questions; in this interview, he narrates a dramatic turn away from the world of what he terms 'paranoid theory' (2011). The binary arguments of his nonfiction, then, are partly a result of his desire to be a public intellectual who clearly, and persuasively, gets his points across.

These binaries proliferate across his essays.³⁸ For instance, in 'Perchance' he states that 'I resist, finally, the notion of literature as a noble higher calling, because elitism doesn't sit well with

³⁷ To take the most current example, the almost immediate rebuke of Franzen's recent article in *The New Yorker*, 'Carbon Capture,' by the very conservation group he is promoting, is a pretty clear example of the ire Franzen's nonfiction inspires (2015b).

my American nature' (1996, p.45). By using the language of heroic struggle, such as 'to resist,' Franzen writes in very stark, melodramatic terms. Furthermore, he describes the binary between elitism and his American nature, by which he means anti-elitist populism. This tension, between his need to write serious fiction and yet to also have broad appeal, is one of a series of tensions that creates melodrama in Franzen's work. He discusses the work of William Burroughs within a similar binary: 'Transgressive literature is always, secretly or not so secretly, addressing itself to the bourgeois world that it depends on' (2012, p.267). Here, Franzen situates his own work in opposition to what he terms transgressive fiction, in order to once again distinguish himself from the supposedly bourgeois form of fiction his forebears and contemporaries either venerate or follow. He creates a black and white argument by reifying an image of what Burroughs means to students of literature. This process of solidifying and reifying is also particularly important in his reproduction of the realist mode, as it enables the particular story he tells of his turn from the limits of postmodern fiction, and the affirmation of the productive limits he perceives to be evident in his version of the realist mode.³⁹

A decade before his discussion of Burroughs, in his essay 'The Reader in Exile' Franzen suggested that:

The electronic apotheosis of mass culture has merely reconfirmed the elitism of literary reading, which was briefly obscured in the novel's heyday. I mourn the

³⁸ In his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, there are a series of binaries; of city and county, of Republican and Democrat, and the more uncomfortable racial binary the novel enacts, with the dark, evil, Indian police chief brought in from Bombay, Susan Jammu, who destroys the white, suburban Probst family. As Michiko Kakutani queries in her review of the novel: 'is he – inadvertently, perhaps – feeding this country's worst suspicions about foreigners and populist politics?' (1988). The racial binary is a dominant one in the history of melodrama, and for a definitive account read Linda Williams' *Playing The Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (2001).

³⁹ As Lee Konstantinou outlines in *Cool Characters*, Franzen is not wrong in this assertion, especially about the punk ethos of Burroughs and his followers, such as Kathy Acker: 'Acker essentially describes punk as a solution to a problem arising from a broken relationship between artists and their imagined or actual audiences. Middle-class artists were getting the wrong kind of reception' (2016a, p.138).

eclipse of the cultural authority that literature once possessed, and I rue the onset of an age so anxious that the pleasure of a text becomes difficult to sustain. (1995, p.178)

Again, this passage is marked by the use of melodramatic language – he ‘mourns’ that the novel no longer has the cultural authority he believes it once did. The lost ‘cultural authority’ of the novel that Franzen cites here is integral to melodrama, and will be returned to later in the chapter. In this passage, Franzen also bemoans an elitism that has emerged between those who read and those who turn to electronic mass culture. He argues that the remaining readers, who have not been swept away by technology, are now in a form of cultural exile (exile again being extreme, melodramatic language to use). Here, Franzen sets up another binary, of technology against the novel, and uses melodramatic language to discuss this struggle. Throughout all Franzen’s binaries – of elitism versus populism, of technology versus fiction, of the previous influence of the novel versus its supposed irrelevance now – there is a constant recognition of a good and an evil side. To cast the limits and pressures of cultural reproduction in Manichean terms in this way enables him to situate his work in opposition to such traits and concerns. The next section outlines how this tendency to distinguish himself from what he is not does mirror some aspects of realist writers throughout literary history.

The Tensions of Realism

To reiterate, Williams suggests that ‘a tradition is the process of reproduction in action,’ and, like Wallace, Franzen rejects the current tradition that is forming. What is distinct about Franzen is that – similar to writers working with genre discussed in the next chapter – he offers a specific mode, certain limits, in reaction to these concerns. Realism is a notoriously vague term when used in literary scholarship. Looking to the roots of the American realist tradition in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, William Dean Howells became, as Phillip Barrish persuasively argues, the

person who ‘first elaborated what might be called *realist taste*’ (2001, p.17, italics in original). Howells only defined realism in very broad terms: ‘Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material’ (1959, p.38). While Franzen, Rohr, and Bukiet add a qualifier to define realism, Howells’s definition defers its meaning to another debated term, truth. That Howells defines realism discursively is partly why Michael Davitt Bell asserts that realism in the nineteenth century was ‘devoid of any consistent meaning’ (1993, p.4). After Howells’ heyday and as modernism began to flourish, structuralist critic Roman Jakobson contended that realism was still a slippery term in 1922: ‘The history of art has been equally slipshod with respect to scholarly terminology. It has employed the current vocabulary without screening the words critically, without defining them precisely, and without considering the multiplicity of their meaning’ (1987, p.19). Jakobson goes on to argue that to pretend that any artistic mode has a claim to verisimilitude – as realism does – is to overlook that the ‘guiding motto’ of each artistic movement has been ‘faithfulness to reality, maximum verisimilitude,’ from the romantics to the movement most contemporaneous to Jakobson, the expressionists (1987, p.20). Jakobson sees the term ‘realism’ as utterly meaningless beyond referring to a specific period of art in the nineteenth century. Bell points out that Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988) also ‘mainly uses “realism” more as a period marker than as a generic label’ (1993, p.4). Realism can therefore denote a period of art, rather than a persistent mode for fiction. Indeed, Franzen reifies and reproduces this historical understanding of realism – what Waugh suggests is the ‘frozen’ nature of the realist theories – as opposed to arguing for a new, contemporary form of it in the manner Jakobson states happens in each era. It is because Franzen sees realism within this particularly narrow lens that I will refer back to the nineteenth century concept of realism throughout this chapter.

Eric Auerbach’s classic *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) offers another approach to defining realism. Ihab Hassan (2003, p.10) and Michael Löwy

(2007, p.194) note how Auerbach avoids any set definition of what he means by mimesis in the entire text. However, Auerbach's afterword suggests that this was quite intentional; the aim is to offer descriptive analysis, not prescriptive pronouncements (2013, pp.572-573). Auerbach's study is self-consciously vague, as he seeks examples of 'the representation of reality' – the subtitle of the work – throughout a huge swathe of literary history. He offers definitions of periods of realism; it would not be inaccurate to say he offers a picture of *realisms*, rather than a definitive statement of what realism denotes. Auerbach's historically contingent descriptions of realisms are distinctly different to Franzen's attempts to revive the conception of realism specific to the late nineteenth century novel. Indeed, his stated reasons for reviving realism, as opposed to what he terms theory, or postmodernism, or technological advancements, are distinctly melodramatic acts.

Moving into the sixties, Donald Pizer attempted to define a specific form of American realism. Pizer grounds his definition in George J. Becker's threefold classification of European realism: first, verisimilitude of detail derived from observation and documentation; second, an effort to approach the norm of experience; and third, an author's adherence to an objective view (1961, p.263). However, by creating a new subgenre of 'American realism' – which he argues is more idealistic than 'European realism' – Pizer further diffracts and confuses what realism connotes (1961, p.263). Consequently, even in an attempt to define realism explicitly – Pizer's text is subtitled 'An Essay in Definition' – the term still requires qualifiers in order for critics to explicate their usage of it. It is therefore perhaps understandable that Franzen, Rohr, and Bukiet divide realism into 'crackpot' and 'tragic' subgenres; such qualifiers provide a means for these writers to signal what they mean by realism, which has always been loosely defined.

Throughout his career, philosopher Nelson Goodman regularly discussed realism. In *Languages of Art* (1968), Goodman suggests that 'Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. Newer or older or alien

systems are accounted artificial or unskilled' (1968, p.37). In essence, Goodman states that understandings of realism are contextual, and differ in each era. In 1983 he went on to posit that realism is defined by what is 'told rather than in the telling' (1983, p.270). His distinctly constructionist account details that a realist text 'must be [discussed] in terms not of what the pictures and stories denote but in terms of what denotes them, not in terms of how they sort things but in terms of how they are themselves sorted' (1983, p.271). To Goodman, realism is therefore a construct of how a text is defined and discussed, and defines itself – in many ways, it is defined by what is left out of a story. As is discussed later in this chapter, Franzen's texts regularly include elements that in historically realist texts would be left off the page, which I suggest are scenes of melodramatic heightening. Much more recently, Simon Denith asserts a similar point to Goodman, that realism is best understood as a 'set of conventions' (2007, p.34), and author Tom McCarthy uses the exact same term: 'Realism is a literary convention – no more, no less – and is therefore as laden with artifice as any other literary convention' (2014, p.21). Jennifer Egan also defines what she terms the 'verisimilitude' of her upcoming novel, *Manhattan Beach* (2017): 'I see verisimilitude exactly the way you suggest: as one of many possible approaches, rather than as some basic truth I've deviated from and am now finally returning to' (Dinnen, 2016). By positioning his work in the mode of tragic realism, Franzen suggests a literary mode is something that can simply be co-opted. It would therefore seem that Franzen sees realism like Goodman, Denith, McCarthy, and Egan do – he is able to reproduce it as there are conventions he can follow. However, what is interesting is that he sees these conventions – in contrast to Egan – as somehow the way one *should* write, as the definitive mode for fiction.

In 'Perchance' Franzen states that his work is 'serious fiction,' and so by extension he situates himself in opposition to what he believes to be non-serious fiction (1996, p.53). In the same essay he claims that 'literature's aura of oppositionality is especially intense in America, where the

low status of art has a way of turning resistant child readers into supremely alienated grownup writers' (1996, p.52). Franzen hereby sets up a series of binaries: of low and high art, of America and the world, of children and adults, and locates these specifically in the American experience. In 2009, Franzen went further, defining his writing as always reacting to something:

... my work represents an active campaign against the values I dislike: sentimentality, weak narrative, overly lyrical prose, solipsism, self-indulgence, misogyny and other parochialisms, sterile game playing, overt didacticism, moral simplicity, unnecessary difficulty, informational fetishes, and so on. *Indeed, much of what might be called actual "influence" is negative: I don't want to be like this writer or that writer.* (2012, p.124, emphasis added)

Franzen defines his fiction as an 'active campaign' against values he dislikes. By invoking sentimentality, Franzen places his fiction in opposition to the generation after his own – as discussed in-depth later on – which he defines (at least later in his career) as overly sincere. His dismissal of overly lyrical prose is a clear reference to his documented loathing of John Updike, as are solipsism, self-indulgence, and misogyny, which Franzen groups together with 'other parochialisms.'⁴⁰ Furthermore, through the use of the adverb 'overly,' Franzen, like each writer in this thesis, suggests the key thematic of limits. Some lyricism would seem to be okay, but not too much. His opposition to sterile game playing, unnecessary difficulty, and informational fetishes refers to how he characterises – and to an extent, caricatures – his postmodern forebears, and also his loathing of what he terms in 'Perchance' the 'upbeat techno-corporatism under which we now live' (1996, p.53). Franzen's approach to fiction, then, can be seen as distinctly negative; he defines tragic realism by what he wants it not to be.

As Fredric Jameson explains in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), one convention of realism is how it defines itself in opposition to other modes:

⁴⁰ David Foster Wallace spoke about Updike to David Lipsky: 'I think he's mentally ill ... Yeah ... I think he's a *nasty* person,' and he went on to say that if Lipsky thought Wallace disliked Updike, he should hear how much Franzen despised him (2010, p.93, italics in original). Franzen's own work has also been repeatedly attacked in the popular press and by other authors as misogynistic, with novelist Jennifer Weiner taking centre stage in this debate.

Realism, for or against: but as opposed to what? At this point the list becomes at least relatively interminable: realism vs. romance, realism vs. epic, realism vs. melodrama ... and of course, most frequently rehearsed of all, realism vs. modernism ... Most of these binary pairs will therefore arouse a passionate taking of sides, in which realism is either denounced or elevated to the status of an ideal (aesthetic or otherwise). (2013, p.2)

Like Goodman, Jameson indicates here that realism is largely understood by what it is not rather than any singular, positive assertion of what it is. Harry Levine points out that this oppositional nature of realism is a trait dating back to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1607): 'The satirical denial of early, often quixotic, literary modes becomes a kind of signature of realism, which then in its very mockery invests the old literary forms with new importance and marks its own anti-literary procedures as self-consciously literary' (2007, p.15). The modern novel from its inception is therefore grounded in opposition to 'old literary forms,' mocking the very literariness of other forms as, paradoxically, too literary, and therefore unrealistic. Franzen would therefore appear to reproduce this particular convention of realist texts.

This oppositionality to other literary forms is evident throughout the history of realism, from its earliest moments in French literature to its more contemporary iterations. Indeed, rarely has a writer written in the realist mode without weighing in on what Mark McGurl calls 'the great, awful Realism-Romance Debate' (2001, p.43). This opposition is encapsulated in many texts historically regarded as examples of realist fiction.⁴¹ For instance, in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), Fabrizio Del Dongo is compelled by his romantic ideals to join Napoleon's army. However, Fabrizio's delusional, romantic ideals are shown to be incongruous with reality. He fails to realise the absurdity of his aim to speak with Napoleon: 'he had left with the firm intention of speaking to the Emperor; it had never occurred to him that this might be a difficult enterprise' (2000, p.29). Stendhal specifically situates Fabrizio's delusions as fomented by romantic art: 'one by one he was

⁴¹ The starting point of realism is always up for debate and is largely moot; however, for a discussion of the beginnings of European realism read F. W. J. Hemmings' introduction in *The Age of Realism* (1978).

dispelling all his fine dreams of sublime and knightly comradeship like that of the heroes of *Gerusalemme Liberata* (2000, p.48). Essentially, Fabrizio's 'fine dreams' are dispelled due to an incompatibility with the realities he faces. Stendhal's opposition to the mode of romanticism is therefore one of the defining features of his use of the realist mode.

Returning to the American tradition of realism, just over fifty years after Stendhal's novel William Dean Howells situates his texts in opposition to 'effete romanticism' (1891, p.74).⁴² In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), the reading habits of Nanny Corey demonstrate how even a child is put off by the overindulgences of romantic literature: 'Nanny, the younger, had read a great many novels with a keen sense of their inaccuracy as representations of life, and had seen a great deal of life with a sad regret for its difference from fiction' (2003, p.137). According to Howells, romantic fiction has lost its connection with an audience due to its disconnection from lived experience. Similarly, in the same novel the well-read Penelope Lapham almost foregoes marrying Tom Corey out of a romantic ideal of tragedy; she believes she cannot be with Tom as her sister is infatuated with him. Later, Penelope looks back at the absurdity of her actions: "'It was my one chance, in this whole business, to do anything heroic, and I jumped at it'" (2003, p.267). As the narrator laments in *Lapham*: 'Our theory of disaster, of sorrow, of affliction, borrowed from the poets and novelists, is that it is incessant; but every passage in our own lives and in the lives of others, so far as we have witnessed them, teaches us that this is false' (2003, p.269). Penelope's view of reality is distorted by her consumption of the 'false' lessons she reads in romantic fiction – similar to how Wallace suggests 'masks' are learnt and adopted by his characters – and these lessons culminate in a threat to the wellbeing of herself and those around her.

In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the protagonist, Henry Fleming, mirrors Stendhal's Fabrizio; his romantic notions of war are starkly contrasted with the realities he

⁴² For a broader discussion of masculinity in realism, read Barrish (2001).

experiences. In his reading of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), Fredric Jameson describes the concept of 'Jim's *bovarysme*, the relationship between his work and the "course of light holiday literature" that first suggests it to him' (1983, p.200). The idea of Bovarysme, as Jameson implies, is a prevalent concern in late nineteenth century fiction, and Henry Fleming is one such example. He loathes his fellow soldiers for not living up to his ideals, 'His companions seemed ever to play intolerable parts' (2008, p.49). For Fleming, there is a disjunction between how the other union soldiers behave, and the romanticised heroes of war portrayed in romantic art and literature. He imagines himself as a classical hero, 'And, furthermore, how could they kill him who was the chosen of gods and doomed to greatness?' (2008, p.69). The reader is left in no doubt that Henry's delusional expectations of Homeric grandeur are absurd. Across these three texts – *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *The Red Badge of Courage* – romanticism is portrayed as detrimental to characters' wellbeing, and out of step with their reality. These novels all demonstrate a reactionary quality, what I term the 'not that' characteristic of realism, where all three texts situate themselves in opposition to romanticism.⁴³ To relate back to Goodman's arguments, realism in these texts is defined by what it is not, by what is not on the page, rather than what it definitively is.

One could conclude that Franzen's idea of realism fits within this paradigm of rejecting a diverse range of his forebears, and defining himself by what he is not. However, there is another opposition running through the texts of Stendhal, Howells, and Crane, and it is one of the binaries Jameson highlights: the relationship of realism and melodrama. As Peter Brooks details, Stendhal wrote at a time when melodramas dominated French theatre.⁴⁴ Howells and Crane were asserting

⁴³ As Andreas Huyssen argues, this continues in the modernist age: 'the repudiation of *Trivalliteratur* has always been one of the constitutive features of a modernist aesthetic intent on distancing itself and its products from the trivialities and banalities of everyday life' (1986, p.47).

⁴⁴ Brooks has been criticised by Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah, and Ruth Mayer as focusing too much on the French influences of melodrama, but his history of melodrama on the French stage in

their positions at a point in American history when, as Frank Rahill indicates, the ‘truly American melodrama’ was taking hold, and in the 1880s there was a cycle of melodramatic Civil War and frontier sagas (1967, p.25). In Stephen Crane’s novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), there is an explicit dramatisation of the supposedly negative effects of melodrama on the populace. Crane clearly demarcates the difference between his work and the melodrama that dominated the popular stage at the end of the nineteenth century:

Maggie always departed with raised spirits from these melodramas. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually overcame the wealthy and wicked. The theatre made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory. (2006, pp.33-34)

Crane suggests that melodramas encourage delusion and impossible aspirations. Even Maggie, the susceptible victim to such delusions, realises the obviousness of the imagery used, and recognises the ‘culture and refinement’ she had seen represented was done ‘perhaps grotesquely.’ The narrator claims that: ‘To Maggie and the rest of the audience this was transcendental realism’ (2006, p.32). This paradoxical coupling of ‘transcendental’ with ‘realism’ is different to crackpot or tragic in that it is consciously qualifying melodramas as distinctly unrealistic. Crane points to what he believes to be the danger of melodramas, in that they suggest transcendence of the quotidian is possible for all who see them. Melodramas define how Maggie sees Pete, her suitor, with Pete described in the terms Henry Fleming sees himself in *Red Badge*: a ‘supreme warrior’ (2006, p.22). The melodramatic plays Maggie enjoys are shown in the same light as romanticism in the works of Stendhal, Howells, and in Crane’s own *Red Badge*; a seductive depiction of the world which is far removed from reality, which can have detrimental effects on those who consume them.

In Maggie’s case, the effects of melodrama result in a tragic ending, where she becomes a prostitute and is almost certainly murdered. In this text, Crane clearly delineates the difference and

the first half of the nineteenth century is informative in the context of French realist authors (2007, p.9).

prestige of his fiction from the melodrama of the stage. Crane also explicitly genders his position of prestige, which is perhaps influenced by his reading of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). Andreas Huyssen defines the gender binary in *Madame Bovary* as: '[the] woman (Madame Bovary) is positioned as reader of inferior literature – subjective, emotional and passive – while man (Flaubert) emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature – objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means' (1986, p.46). Similarly, Crane situates himself, the author, in the position of control, and Maggie as a gullible consumer of inferior art.

As argued by Christine Gledhill in her foundational survey of melodrama scholarship, the end of the nineteenth century saw a separation develop between realism and melodrama on the stage:

With the return of the 'literary' dramatist to the theatre, greater value was placed on dialogue, character analysis and naturalist performance. Realism became a singular goal on its own account, and the hallmark of metropolitan 'high culture,' while melodrama was relegated to entertainments for popular and/or poorly equipped provincial theatres. The separation out of a middle-class audience, the impact of 'new drama' and the reformed categories of tragedy and realism led to melodrama's derision. (1987, p.27)

The shift that Gledhill maps here can be seen outside of the theatre as well. As Frank Kelleter and Ruth Mayer suggest in their brief outline of the history of melodrama, 'the leading literary voices of the period (including Henry James) were anxious to distance themselves from the melodramatic tradition of the preceding period' (2007, p.11). Tragedy and realism became the prestigious modes, worthy of high culture, while melodrama was relegated to the lower classes and derided. It is this shift in separating out high and low that culminates in what McGurl calls 'a general masculinization of novelistic prestige' which carries on into the modernist movement (2001, p.78). McGurl usefully historicises this 'masculinization' as 'over and against a feminised mass market fiction, that extends at least from Howells's realism through Crane's impressionism and Wharton's antisentimentalism, on to the exaggerated masculinities of Ernest Hemingway and Dashiell Hammett' (2001, p.78).

Therefore, to advocate for tragic realism, as Franzen does, and to claim his work is serious fiction, is to participate in this tradition of the masculinization of prestige. However, there is an interesting tension in Franzen's work between the prestige he seeks in what McGurl calls 'the art novel,' and his need to also be a part of the 'mass market fiction' that many of those he venerates abhor (2001, p.2). It is this tension that Franzen's infamous debate with Oprah over her selection of *The Corrections* for her book club most clearly represents.⁴⁵ Burn persuasively argues that 'Franzen's books are built on an opposition between postmodernism and more traditional fiction that is stubbornly unresolved in each novel' (2008, p.49). It is this tension, the pursuit of both masculinised prestige and the popularity found in what is traditionally – and chauvinistically – seen as feminine mass-market fiction that results in his work reproducing many aspects of the melodramatic mode. In the next section, it is this tension I explore across his writing.

From Postmodernism to Melodrama: Rejecting Mr Difficult and Coming Home

Like Wallace, Franzen constructs a place for himself in literary history in opposition to postmodern fiction. His views on postmodern literature are largely concerned with his aforementioned dislike of fiction that is intentionally difficult. He most clearly describes his ideas about the issues he believes challenging fiction causes in his essay on William Gaddis, 'Mr Difficult' (2002). Though Franzen concedes the huge influence of Gaddis's first novel, *The Recognitions* (1955), upon his fiction, he castigates the ever-increasing complexity of the author's later work. Franzen reveals that he 'remains stuck on page 469' of Gaddis's *J R* (1975), and is frustrated with Gaddis for being 'Mr.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses this episode of Franzen's career as a result of the clash of new and old media forms: 'It is no accident, I believe, that this conflict's "literary" figure is a white man, while the "televisual" position is occupied by a woman of color; the conflicts between media forms have always been about conflicts between dominant and emergent subjectivities' (2007, p.8).

Difficult' (2002b, p.104). For Franzen, *J R* is representative of the difficulty that makes the supposed classics of literary postmodernism so inaccessible that they are no longer read:

The spine of *J R* was often suspiciously uncracked, however, or a strangely low used price was pencilled inside the cover, or the bookmark, which might be a sheet of rolling paper or a *Talking Heads* ticket stub, could be found on page 118, or 19, or 53, because Gaddis's fiction was, if anything, more difficult than ever. (2002b, p.106)

He believes that, due to the difficulty of Gaddis's later works, his books became a symbol of intellectual prowess, and are left untouched as prestigious ornaments on bookshelves. Franzen is particularly concerned by the cultural reproduction of difficulty, as it marginalises the influence of fiction in culture. Such 'readers' of Gaddis's work were – to use the popular stereotype – 'hipsters': they listen to the popular bands of the time, such as *Talking Heads*, and pretend to read academically 'cool' literary works such as *J R*. Franzen is particularly irked by the idea of works being lauded without being read. Franzen sees literary postmodernism as marked by a pervasive, intentional level of difficulty that disengages readers from reading – or even enjoying – literary fiction, and thereby restricts its audience to a small band of academics. McGurl argues that this was the whole point of the modernist novel: 'In the nineteenth century ... it had been common to understand the novel *as* a kind of school. By contrast the difficult modernist novel, left to its own devices, teaches almost nothing. Rather, it humiliates. It can be understood only *in* school' (2001, p.112, italics in original). Franzen seems to believe this humiliation of readers has continued in postmodern fiction, and this difficulty results in what he calls elsewhere the 'self-selecting elitism' of reading literary fiction: 'The paradox of literature's elitism is that it's purely self-selecting. Anyone who can read is free to be a part of it' (2002a, p.177).⁴⁶ Franzen's later work is therefore a reaction to the 'unnecessary difficulty' and obscurantism he perceives to be a domineering trait in

⁴⁶ David Foster Wallace has similar arguments with John Barth's fiction in 'E Unibus Pluram.' Wallace's relationship to Barth is extensively explored by Harris (2014).

the classics of postmodern fiction, as it reproduces a form of self-selecting elitism, an elitism that relies on a specific educational background in order to be able to enter such a domain.

But as well as outlining Franzen's binary opposition to difficulty, 'Mr Difficult' suggests why he melodramatises this supposed predicament. Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) that 'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (1984, p.4). For Franzen, Gaddis's later work has too difficult a code, and is thus an exclusionary means of writing that turns off too many readers. These texts maintain social capital within a particular group of society. Consequently, 'Mr Difficult' is an attempt to make a complex literary history understandable to those without the code – it is specifically addressed to 'a Mrs M. in Maryland,' who complained about his verbosity in *The Corrections* (2002b, p.100). To return again to Bourdieu: 'Like the so-called naive painter who, operating outside the field and its specific traditions, remains external to the history of the art, the "naïve" spectator cannot attain a specific grasp of works of art which only have meaning— or value—in relation to the specific history of an artistic tradition' (1984, p.4). Franzen's position of opposing elitism – and wishing to be a public intellectual – means he uses a language that even the 'naïve spectator,' such as Mrs. M., has the code to, and incorporates straightforward binaries to construct his arguments – he embraces these limits as enabling a larger audience to enjoy his work. In *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), Fredric Jameson states that avoiding the 'ethical binary' of good and evil – in essence, the language of the melodramatic mode – is imperative when writing as it is 'the root of all ideology' (2009, p.408). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu operates on a similar principle to Jameson: 'the style of the book, whose long, complex sentences may offend ... is to prevent the reading from slipping back into the simplicities of the smart essay or the political polemic' (1984, p.xiii). Franzen suggests in 'Perchance' that his first two novels attempted such a Jamesonian subversion of binaries and ideologies: 'instead of

sending my bombs in a Jiffy-Pak mailer of irony and understatement, as I had with *the Twenty-Seventh City*, I'd come out throwing rhetorical Molotov cocktails [in *Strong Motion*]' (1996, p.40). In his later work, Franzen engages and embraces this ethical binary, and attempts to make contemporary predicaments digestible (although only to a degree, as Mrs. M.'s complaints demonstrate). Franzen's desire to be seen as a 'contract' author, as opposed to what he calls Gaddis's 'status' model means his fiction operates on a similarly stark, ethical plane as his nonfiction (2002b, p.100). While he takes these terms from the character of Jack Gibbs in *J R*, perhaps betraying a broader appreciation of the novel than this essay implies, what is pertinent here is that in his desire to write texts that appeal to a wide audience, and to make complex arguments and concepts understandable to his readers, Franzen's nonfiction is written within certain limits.⁴⁷ These limits – of righting wrongs, of making his texts understandable to the broadest possible audience – mirror those of the melodramatic mode.

In 'Mr Difficult' Franzen rejects the reproduction of a very specific, male-centric, American form of postmodern fiction. In describing the work of postmodern authors such as Gaddis, Franzen depicts these texts as a disruption of the domestic sphere: 'to build the reader an uncomfortable house you wouldn't want to live in; this violates what seems to me the categorical imperative for any fiction writer' (2002b, p.110). As well as again using excessive language to proclaim that a comfortable home for the reader is the 'categorical imperative for any fiction writer,' the metaphor of a 'home' for fiction is prevalent throughout his nonfiction. In an interview with Donald Antrim, Franzen speaks of author Jane Smiley's theory of literary history as something he subscribes to, and specifically frames his place in literary history not just in relation to the home, but also to ideas around masculinity: 'I feel like I'm essentially participating in one of those swings, *a swing away from the boys-will-be-boys Huck Finn thing*, which is how you can view Pynchon, as adventures for

⁴⁷ Lee Konstantinou discusses Franzen's inversion of Gaddis's status and contract distinction from *J R* in an essay for the *LA Review of Books* (2012).

boys out in the world. At a certain point, you get tired of all that. You come home' (2001, italics mine). In opposition to the experimental maximalism of a 'boys will be boys' author like Pynchon, Franzen's idea of a 'home' for fiction is one that is less *avant-garde*, more conventional – essentially, more 'realist' – in which he turns away from his own former writing style. For instance, he discusses with Burn the 'Pynchonian letters' he used to write his fiancée from Germany, who hated them: 'You could either play with the boys like that, and relegate women to minor and substantially objectified characters on the margin, or you could try to have a full-fledged relationship with a woman, in which case that kind of boy writing, however brilliant and masterful, was necessarily subordinate' (2007). By casting experimentation as specifically masculine, 'boys will be boys,' and defining this home as where fiction should be, Franzen genders what it means to be experimental, and what he is writing against. However, it is precisely mass market, supposedly romantic, frivolous fiction that realists such as Howells criticised as transparently fantastical, even to a child such as Nanny Corey. This populist aspiration is contrary to the masculinised form of prestige of the realism he seeks to reproduce, and this tension within his own aims is why his fiction inhabits the same melodramatic world as his nonfictional persona.

Franzen not only cites the home as a metaphor for where fiction should operate, but his novels often pivot around the central image of the family home. In Thomas Elsaesser's psychoanalytically infused, foundational study of melodrama in film from 1972, he proffers that 'Melodramas often use middle-class American society, its iconography and the family experience in just this way as their manifest "material," but "displace" it into quite different patterns, juxtaposing stereotyped situations in strange configurations' (1972, pp.59-60). Elsaesser points out that melodramas operate in tension within the family home, and utilise the iconography of middle-class American life in order to do so. Similarly, Peter Brooks argues: 'the familial structure that melodrama (like Greek tragedy) so often exploits contributes to the experience of excruciation: the

most basic loyalties and relationships become a source of torture' (p.35). Franzen's fiction explores domestic worlds in crisis, and tensions within the family home are a key trope of his fiction. The family home is also central to texts such as Howells' *Lapham*. The sinking Boston home in this text works as an allegory for Lapham's financial folly, of excess, which is in stark comparison to the home in the countryside, which is a symbol of simplicity and responsibility, of limits. The home is therefore not a scene of conflict, or drama, but allegorises that one should avoid excess. The family home operates in Franzen's texts, then, in a distinctly melodramatic fashion; as a site of tension, strife, and crisis, and it also represents the symbolic 'home' for fiction he believes the realist mode to be. It encloses his text within specific limits he desires for his fiction, a space where he heightens the drama, and manufactures strife in order to make his points as clear as possible to the reader.

Linda Williams puts forth that the home is central to the beginning of any melodramatic text: 'One of the key ways of constructing moral power is the icon of the good home' (2001, p.7). As well as the later texts that most clearly demonstrate elements of melodrama, this trope is evident in Franzen's first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*. The Probst family home is emblematic of how the family's fortunes progress in the novel. The novel opens with a depiction of an incorruptible family unit, a home where they are all devoted to one another. However, over the course of the novel the family fractures. First, the Probsts' only daughter, Luisa, leaves home before the end of high school to live with her boyfriend. Much more dramatically, the matriarch of the family, Barbara, is kidnapped, and is eventually murdered. The destruction of the family unit is represented starkly by the home burning down near the end of the novel. The house in *The Twenty Seventh City* is a metonym for the Probst family's happiness in the course of the novel; at the moment the family falls apart, the house is also destroyed.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In *Music for Torching* (1999), A.M. Homes has the family burn the house down on purpose in the first scenes of the novel. The fallout of this failed attempt then drives the narrative.

In *The Corrections*, Alfred and Enid raised their children – Gary, Denise, and Chip – in the Midwest, but all have since moved to Philadelphia and New York, with contrasting aims and fortunes. There is a gap between generational expectations, as Enid laments about her daughter’s failed marriage: ‘Denise should never have been attracted to Emile in the first place! It was the same problem Enid had with Chip and even Gary: her children didn’t match. They didn’t want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends’ children wanted. Her children wanted radically, shamefully other things’ (p.139). The overarching plot of the novel is Enid’s attempt to have all of her children home for one last Christmas, to be together one final time. The narrator describes the family and their home as symbiotic, as dependent on each other for their existence: ‘The family was the house’s soul’ (2007, p.310). The house in St. Jude crumbles as Enid’s husband, Alfred, struggles with Parkinson’s disease. Franzen represents this early in the novel through the ironic dishevelment of the Lambert home due to Enid’s hoard of *Good Housekeeping* magazines: ‘his great blue chair ... was now fully engulfed by *Good Housekeepings*’ (p.8). Alfred’s decline is therefore mirrored in the condition of their home, and the whole novel builds towards having one last family Christmas together at this house.

The oldest son, Gary, has a family that most clearly mirrors his parents. Indeed, Gary describes his life as what his parents ‘*taught ... [him] to want!*’ (p.252, italics in original). However, ‘of the rich family-filled future that he’d imagined, almost *nothing* had come to pass’ (p.250). First of all, this section demonstrates Franzen’s persistent use of italics, drawing his readers’ attention to certain ideas and statements, in order to not only heighten the emotion of the moments for the characters, but to also make his point as clear as possible. Franzen does use formal techniques to direct the reader, but it is in a narrow, limited way. To return to Potts’ discussion of realist art, he states that ‘Realism does not involve a categorical rejection of formal concerns ... Realism is not anti-formalist but anti-formalistic ...’ (2013, p.3). Franzen does use form and style to

accentuate his points, but his work – at least, from *The Corrections* onwards – does not draw attention to form in the same way as Wallace, or in the genre forms of Chabon, Egan, or Whitehead. His reproduction of the realist mode, then, is anti-formalistic, but his later novels do not reject formal concerns, they just do not foreground them.

In Gary's sections of the novel, as in the texts of Stendhal, Howells, and Crane, an idealised, romanticised image is depicted as out of step with reality. Where Franzen is distinct from these former realists is in making Gary aware of this discrepancy. Gary spends much of the novel trying to convince his wife and children to go with him to St. Jude for one last Christmas, and only succeeds in convincing one son to come. Linda Williams argues that in melodramas, 'The narrative then ends happily if the protagonists can, in some way, return to this home, unhappily if they do not. It is not necessary that the space of innocence be an actually realized, pre-lapsarian garden' (2001, p.28). Gary, Denise, and Chip do all return to this family home at the end of the novel. Denise is a chef, and her workplace is described as like a family: 'A good crew was like an elective family in which everyone in the little hot world of the kitchen stood on equal footing, and every cook had weirdnesses concealed in her past or in his character, and even in the midst of the most sweaty togetherness each family enjoyed *privacy* and *autonomy*: she loved this' (p.436, italics in original). But there are key distinctions Franzen makes between this elective family, and Denise's actual family in the Midwest. When Denise does return to her family home in St. Jude she has just destroyed another family, and lost the restaurant she created. However, she can always opt out of this family; upon returning to St. Jude she learns from her Alzheimer's ridden father that he has always known of her teenage love affair, and passed up his pension in order to protect her. The final child, Chip, experiences professional failure and has an extravagant journey to Lithuania – a journey I discuss in detail below – but upon his return to St. Jude he forms his own family with Alfred's doctor, and the novel ends with them expecting their first child. These homes and families

are not portrayed as perfect. Indeed, Gary is portrayed as at war with his wife and children, and Denise's professional family is corrupted by her affair with her boss's wife. The St. Jude home is definitively not a pre-Lapsarian site of innocence, but the house, and the family that becomes its soul, is a central, melodramatic image that grounds the entire plot of *The Corrections*.

Similarly, at the beginning of *Freedom*, the moral power of a good home is established; the newly married Berglunds are central to the re-gentrification of their neighbourhood, Ramsey Hill, in St. Paul, Minnesota. While this section, as Kathy Knapp points out, is written as a 'withering satire ... of middle-class aspirations,' the structural starting point of a good home is still established (2014, p.53). As Linda Williams outlines, the intrusion of the outside world on the home is a melodramatic trope: 'The narrative proper usually begins when the villain intrudes upon this idyllic space' (2001, p.28). The villain in *Freedom* is the Berglunds' neighbour, Blake, a loud, truck-driving Republican. Much to the chagrin of liberal Walter and Patty, Joey, their son, begins to admire Blake. As well as representing the binary reality of American political discourse, Joey – echoing Luisa's absconsion in *The Twenty Seventh City* – leaves the home to live with his girlfriend, Connie, whose step-father is Blake. In doing so, the family home, the idyllic space Patty and Walter have carved out for themselves, is destroyed. Patty's prying neighbour, Merrie Paulsen, characterises Patty as living in a dream world: "She thought she could live in her own little bubble, make her own little world. Her own little dollhouse" (2010, p.19).⁴⁹ Like Gary in *The Corrections*, Patty's idealised dreams for family life destine her for disappointment (recalling Stendhal's, Howells', and Crane's depiction of the clash of romanticism with the real world). In *Freedom*, this dream world is broken by an outsider, and the plot is only resolved when Patty and Walter are back together, seemingly off to form another home, not at Ramsay Hill or Nameless Lake. The image of the family home functions as a metaphor for Franzen's turn away from the 'boys will be boys'

⁴⁹ All quotations are from this edition.

narratives of authors such as Pynchon, whose novels not only often operate in liminal spaces, but also have transient – or in Tyrone Slothrop’s case in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, disappearing – characters. From his first novel, *V* (1963), Pynchon’s texts are usually concerned with those on the edge of society, whether literally on the coast or figuratively outside of the mainstream. What Carolyn Williams says about melodrama applies to Franzen’s consistent image of the home, that ‘melodrama metonymically highlights the suffering attendant upon a new emerging social order’ (2012, p.202). Franzen’s use of the home and family operates as a metonym for wider concerns; in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, the home works as a dramatisation of an abandoned natural home that fiction needs to return to, and the limits Franzen wishes to utilise to counteract the concerns he evidences in regards the processes of cultural reproduction, particularly here in regards to the reproduction of experimental, difficult ideas of how fiction should be written.

Melodramatic Heightening

Though he positions himself in opposition to the tropes and techniques of postmodern fiction, Franzen’s texts still display the influence of his postmodern forebears. Burn’s book-length study of Franzen aims to accentuate these continuities: ‘It is the burden of much of the rest of this study to demonstrate how Franzen’s intertextual dialogues make plain his postmodern origins’ (2011, p.19). Indeed Burn suggests that Franzen – along with Wallace and Richard Powers – can be productively read as post-postmodernists: ‘post-postmodernist novels betray ... a family resemblance to the previous generation’s work’ (2011, p.19). While most recently Burn discusses authors such as Franzen and Wallace as ‘second-generation postmoderns’ (2016, p.436), what the clunky term post-postmodern does encapsulate is the desire of these writers to break from, and yet still evidence continuities with, the ideas and concepts of postmodern fiction. These family resemblances come out in different ways, and are in constant tension with Franzen’s realist ambitions.

Before exploring the way his postmodern-inflected moments are distinctly melodramatic, it is first worth establishing some of the continuities Franzen's work does demonstrate with the previous era. In 2009 Franzen confessed that in his early twenties he used to 'put a lot of effort into copying the sentence rhythms and comic dialogue of Don DeLillo; I was also very taken with the strenuously vivid and all-knowing prose of Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon' (2012, p.122). Some of these habits continue in his later two novels, even after he has supposedly expunged such techniques. These novels contain Pynchonian puns and wordplay: in *The Corrections* Gitanas's Lithuanian political party are called 'VIPPAKJRIINPB17; the One True Party Unswervingly Dedicated to the Revanchist Ideals of Kazimieras Jaramaitis and the "Independent" Plebiscite of April Seventeen' (p.102), and the neoconservative group that Joey works for in *Freedom* are called RISEN (p.401). Franzen claims he now avoids such wordplay, as he details in his translation and notation of the work of early twentieth-century Austrian polemicist, Karl Kraus: 'Kraus loved linguistic accidents like this and was wont to ascribe deep significance to them. When I was twenty-two, I did, too. Nowadays they seem to me a little cheap' (2014, p.23). This once again demonstrates Franzen's belief that there is a dramatic shift in his later novels. Furthermore, while the names are absurd, the events they are a part of – Chip's Lithuanian adventure, Joey's worldwide business trip – are moments of heightened drama that serve particular purposes. In regards to Chip, his journey serves to highlight the countries forgotten in the economic boom of the 1990s, and in Joey's case, it is the callous profiteering of many private companies following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The point is not that these events are impossible; for instance, the role of private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan is well documented.⁵⁰ Rather, the didactic purposes of these scenes, and also the heightened drama, define these episodes as particularly melodramatic.

⁵⁰ While bizarre contract procurements is so well documented it has already been given the Hollywood treatment in *War Dogs* (2016), that Franzen opts for Joey to sell truck parts specifically could be a reference to Hikmatullah Shadman, a young Afghan who made tens of millions from

In the early American realism of Howells there are foreign adventures. In *Lapham*, Tom Corey is appointed head of foreign paint sales for Lapham's company, and travels to Central and South America, but his journey is off the page, and the action of the novel is kept in Boston. Following Goodman, realism is largely defined by what is left out, by what is not said. In contrast, Franzen attempts to depict the global economy of the contemporary moment in the tradition of many of the systems novels of his postmodern forebears. Robert McLaughlin suggests that post-postmodern authors such as Franzen offer 'not a move away from this attitude but rather, again, a change of focus' (2012, p.221). Burn suggests that a key element of postmodern authors such as Gaddis, Barth, and Coover is the desire to write 'encyclopaedic postmodern masterpieces,' and the scope and breadth of Franzen's novels does show a clear continuity with this aim (2011, p.9). It is perhaps for this reason that Stefano Ercolino situates Franzen among Pynchon, Wallace, Zadie Smith, and Roberto Bolano as an author of 'maximalist fiction,' even though he acknowledges how uneasily Franzen sits within this company (2014, p.41). Franzen's characters' outlandish adventures show the tension between the influence on Franzen of postmodernism and a desire to be a realist. This heightening also shows the influence of authors like Pynchon, Coover, DeLillo, and Gaddis, with their penchant for farce, satire, irony and hyperbole – what Burn terms 'silliness' (2011, p.22). While Franzen rejects this inheritance, the stylistic influence of these authors are, at times, readily apparent. The melodramatic moments in his texts are partly a result of these literary influences being in tension with his realist aims. This shows the difficulties Franzen faces in his attempts to reproduce the realist mode in the contemporary period; he cannot exactly forget his contemporary context, and the influence of his forebears distorts, as Dewey would say, the realist mode he tries to reproduce.

selling trucking equipment. For an in-depth account of Shadman, and the way logistics contracts were sold in the Afghan and Iraq wars, see Matthieu Aikins article on the subject (2016).

To reiterate, Burn argues that ‘the careful puncturing of the illusions of realism stresses their continued affinities to postmodernism’ (2008, p.128). However, I do not think Franzen’s work is carefully puncturing the tropes of literary realism; his desire to make his points as clear as possible to his readers – such as his relentless use of italics – results in a constant appearance of the melodramatic trope of heightening. Franzen constantly tells his readers exactly what he means: for instance, in *Strong Motion* the linkage of the American economy and the villains of the narrative, Sweeting-Aldren, is stated explicitly: ‘The pump at F2 ran so smoothly that the old generation of executives forgot about it and the new generation never learned. It was like the national economy, which began to roar again in the mid-eighties’ (2001, p.408). Franzen explicitly tells the reader of the analogy of Reaganomics and the forgotten waste pump, in order to make sure they do not miss his essential point. There are many more examples of Franzen spelling out his analogies and metaphors as similes in *The Corrections*, *Freedom*, and *Purity*. As Crane’s Maggie recognises that melodrama perhaps offers images of virtue ‘grotesquely,’ the obviousness of Franzen’s heightening and analogies means there is little potential for misinterpretation. His aim is to reproduce the realist mode, but his texts internal signals mirror the crudity of melodramas. This melodramatic heightening serves to address the reader who does not have the specific literary code, and is again demonstrative of Franzen’s attempts to appeal to the mass market, rather than a literary elite. Franzen’s novels follow a similar formula to how Gordon Hutner defines the many forgotten texts of middle-class realism from throughout the twentieth century: ‘Unlike postmodern fiction, they are not so complex that theories of language, time, and space are needed to be developed to understand them. Rather, this fiction *wants* to be available; the ironies and ambiguities of the contemporary history these novels play out seem patent, their contradictions readily reconciled’ (2009, p.13, italics in original). Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to describe many of the texts Hutner discusses as written within the force field of melodrama. Through his use of heightening and analogy,

Franzen's fiction – like the binary, Manichean logic of his nonfiction – is an attempt to not be a part of what he sees as elitist literary traditions, and instead to be approachable and understandable by all. Franzen often uses heightening to make his point clear, which is another reason why his fiction often reproduces the tropes and techniques of the melodramatic mode.

Franzen's breakout novel, *The Corrections*, is the text that Rohr cites as 'obviously obeying the conventions of literary realism'; however, many moments in the novel do not easily fit this description (2004, p.92). As Franzen's biographer Philip Weinstein suggests, Chip's journey to Lithuania is tonally and stylistically out of step with the rest of the novel: 'The matter of "Lithuania" is one such "crazy scenario" in *The Corrections*, a plot-move that fails to correct a previous dilemma. (Joey will get inexplicably involved with faulty truck parts in a wacky exotic setting in *Freedom*, and the same question will arise. What is *that* doing here?)' (2015, p.138, italics in original). Weinstein objects to this scene of *The Corrections* as it is evidently a 'Deus Ex Machina,' and feels it is incongruent with what he vaguely terms the ideas of identity that he suggests are Franzen's major thematic preoccupation (2015, p.142).⁵¹ Weinstein correctly identifies the way this is a clear plot device, but he only highlights how it is not realistic, and so he falls short of analysing the purpose this journey has for Chip's story. The journey is ludicrous not only in how it comes to take place – a Lithuanian politician is looking for someone who simply has "'good, American English'" to take part in a complex marketing scheme – but also in the events it details (p.130). Chip discovers that irony literally sells in the United States: 'The lesson that Gitanas had learned and that Chip was now learning was that the more patently satirical the promises, the lustier the influx of American capital' (p.505). Franzen heightens the drama to present an absurdist image of the excesses of irony he sees as endemic to postmodern culture. He shows how irony makes a joke out of serious situations, which in this case is the failure of the World Bank to support

⁵¹ Weinstein also points out the odd way Lalitha operates in the narrative of *Freedom*, and that she is another deus ex machina of Franzen's (2015, p.160).

stagnating economies.⁵² Here, he suggests (as do Wallace, Purdy, and MacIntyre) that the reproduction of irony dominates postmodern culture, disallows any critique, and essentially helps capital flow by soaking products in a superficial and ironic appeal.

This heightening is also a constant refrain of Franzen's nonfiction. For instance, in 'Perchance' he outlines his ideas about postmodern culture thus:

The American writer today faces a cultural totalitarianism analogous to the political totalitarianism with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine... (1996, p.43)

Franzen heightens the terms of the debate to liken the current situation for writers to the environment that Eastern Bloc writers faced. Franzen's absurd and mildly offensive exaggerations are, as is the case in his fiction, a raising of the stakes to make his point as clear as possible, which here is his view that 'technological consumerism' dominates contemporary culture. For Franzen, tragic realism is an escape route from the 'infernal machine,' and the futility of reproducing eternal critiques. His means to break this cycle is a melodramatic, Manichean binary whereby he becomes a tragic realist to break this cycle, in reaction to the limits and pressures of the cultural reproduction of technological consumerism. However, Chip's and Joey's journeys are not instances of any form of realism, whether tragic or not; they are in fact emblematic of Franzen's use of melodramatic heightening. Brooks contends that heightening is a technique by which an author achieves 'the art of the summary and the essential; it extrapolates from the surface of life into a dramaturgy of purer signs. The measure of crudity involved in such representations is the necessary price of delivering the essential' (p.144). The presence of heightening, in order to point outside the text in a seemingly crude and obvious manner, suggests that looking at Franzen's texts as melodramas rather than works of realism can make apparent the essential points he is trying to make. Again, this

⁵² For a more sustained analysis of the role of the market and capital in *The Corrections*, read Annesley (2006).

heightening is also partly the result of his postmodern inheritance, and the difficulty of entirely expunging the cartoonish, heightened, hyperreal tropes of his earlier fiction.

As well as Franklin's review, many critics have taken issue with Franzen's use of heightening in *Freedom*. Margaret Gram takes issue with how Franzen incorporates the topic of population control into his text: 'Unsustainable population growth ... arrives in *Freedom* not as part of the story but via passages of monologue or dialogue or thought, each characterized by a kind of *discursive excess or overflow*' (2014, p.296, italics mine). When she pinpoints the 'excess' of Franzen's sections on population control, Gram unwittingly uses the language of melodramatic criticism; Brooks calls melodrama a 'literary aesthetic of excess' (2014, p.202). Gram usefully situates these discursive excesses as 'didactic discourse': 'it seems clear enough that the content of speeches and dialogue does have a different ontological status than do the main events of a story, and accordingly ... I'll refer to such speeches and dialogue as *discourse* or *didactic discourse* rather than *story* or *plot*' (2014, p.296, italics in original).⁵³ Brooks points out that 'One of the most immediately striking features of melodrama is the extent to which characters tend to say, directly and explicitly, their moral judgments of the world' (p.36). This didactic discourse is a by-product of the heightening of the melodramatic mode; Walter's rants, and his regular explanations of his latest political ideas, are clear examples of heightening. Gram goes on to argue that *Freedom* 'does seem at several points to be struggling to wrench the population problem out of the realm of didactic discourse and into the lives of its characters,' (2014, p.299) and also posits that there is a tension between Franzen's supposed antigrowth politics and 'the formal mechanisms available to literary realism' (2014, p.296). Indeed, there is a disconnect between Franzen's use of didactic discourse to

⁵³ Kathy Knapp's illuminating article about population control in *Freedom*, while having no reference to Gram's essay, offers a completely different take on this rhetoric. Knapp contends that the outdated references of Walter's ideas about population control indicate this is not didactic discourse, but instead demonstrate Walter's myopia: 'The novel's engagement with the topic of overpopulation is thus both anachronistic and provocative' (2014, p.60).

communicate his political message and his realist aspirations. However, when viewed through the lens of melodrama, didacticism is a common tool to communicate moral judgment, and thus rather than being out of place, is in fact fully appropriate to the mode at work.

Franzen's moralising leads Sam Anderson to complain that in *Freedom*: 'One of the book's climactic moments, in which Walter makes a memorable speech at a press conference, strikes me as implausible—a victory of plot and message over character' (2010). The heightening and staged situation of Walter's rant – and ensuing viral success – is another instance of Franzen's melodramatic methods. If one considers these moments as instances of melodramatic heightening rather than implausible moments that step outside the boundaries of literary realism, then the reader is free to focus on Franzen's moralising point. It seems unproductive to criticise Franzen's work for failing to uphold realist elements; instead, one can view the relationship of melodrama and realism in his texts as emblematic of the tension between an urge to write a domestic, more palatable form of fiction and yet to also acquire a masculinised form of literary prestige. As Christine Gledhill describes: 'As a mode melodrama both overlaps and competes with realism and tragedy, maintaining complex historical relations with them. It refers not only to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world' (1987. p.1). Franzen's work can be usefully read via Raymond Williams' concept of 'relative distances.' Franzen's texts demonstrate varying degrees of the melodramatic, the tragic, or the realist, throughout his career. His way of viewing the world – as shown by his binary-defined nonfiction, his Manichean understanding of fiction, and his use of heightening – is distinctly melodramatic. This worldview does not negate readings of tragedy or realism in his texts, but instead competes with them, effectively forming Franzen's particular style of melodrama. The categorical error of viewing Franzen as a realist prevents an analysis of how melodramatic heightening is central to the – sometimes quite questionable – messages Franzen's texts try to communicate. His metaphor of the home can be seen at once as a rejection of his

postmodern inheritance and a melodramatic metonym of his wider concerns. Lastly, Franzen's use of heightening points to the world outside the text, dramatises his political ideas, and frames his Manichean categorisation of the contemporary world. He therefore can be seen to respond to the limits and pressures of cultural reproduction through fictionalised moments of heightened drama, in which he resolves such concerns.

The Melodramatic Pursuit of Sincerity

Franzen is not the only writer to split literary history into the camps of experimental and those who write in the home of fiction; as mentioned, Ben Marcus wrote an article in direct opposition to Franzen. As is explored more completely in the next chapter, in *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015) Rachel Greenwald Smith splits contemporary fiction into texts that evidence 'personal feelings' – in which category she situates Franzen – and 'impersonal feelings' – which are usually more experimental texts, such as Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String* (1995). In her essay 'Two Paths for the Novel,' British novelist Zadie Smith similarly bifurcates literary history; she outlines two traditions of cultural reproduction in literary history. Smith compares the history of 'lyrical realism' through Joseph O'Neill's 2008 novel *Netherland*, to the more experimental lineage of Tom McCarthy's 2005 novel *Remainder*:

The literary economy sets up its stall on the road that leads to *Netherland*, along which one might wave to Jane Austen, George Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Yates, Saul Bellow. Rarely has it been less aware (or less interested) in seeing what's new on the route to *Remainder*, that skewed side road where we greet Georges Perec, Clarice Lispector, Maurice Blanchot, William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard. (2008)

If one were to place Franzen within these two paths, he definitively falls into the 'lyrical realism' camp (even if this does go against Franzen's own desire to situate his fiction in opposition to 'overly lyrical' prose). Furthermore, this choice demonstrates the agency these writers have in choosing which path to be a part of, and the different pressures and limits they are reacting to in

their particular structure of feeling. In his annoyance about Gaddis's later career and Burroughs, Franzen embodies Smith's contention that those of the lyrical realist path lack interest in looking at what more experimental works like McCarthy's explore (in the next chapter, I question how separate these literary histories truly are). Even when Franzen reviews Donald Antrim's novel *The Hundred Brothers* (1997), whose title points to its experimental premise, his praise centres around Antrim's novel's 'Apollonian' form: 'The novel is a Dionysian dream in which nothing, not even sanity, can escape the corrosive chaos of this circumstance; but its form is bravely Apollonian' (2010, p.117). One might argue that the bulk of well-recognised postmodern authors would fall into the experimental school of fiction, and this is the tradition Franzen no longer wants to continue to reproduce. As mentioned, McCarthy proposes that realism is a form of conventions, and is therefore a mode that can be reproduced like any other. Franzen, like Dames and Wood, sees realism as a stable mode, and one that best exemplifies what fiction can achieve. However, as Hassan's, Jakobson's, and Potts' definitions of realism suggest, it could be argued that experimental texts are attempts to represent reality and experience more accurately. This once again accentuates how Franzen attempts to reproduce a specific tradition and type of realism in his fiction.

As mentioned, Burn outlines that the way Franzen reacts to postmodernity is similar to the way Wallace and Powers attempt to stake out their places in literary history. In a regularly cited passage from his 1993 essay 'E Unibus Pluram,' Wallace suggests that, paradoxically, the most revolutionary thing an author could do after postmodernism is to return to previous ideas of sincerity: 'Today's risks are different, new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh, how *banal*"' (2009, p.81).⁵⁴ At this early point of Wallace's career, he suggests that sincerity could therefore be the

⁵⁴ In *Not Your Mother's Morals: How the New Sincerity is Changing Pop Culture for the Better* (2013) cultural critic Jonathan Fitzgerald celebrates a turn to sincerity across contemporary culture.

dominant paradigm after postmodernism, as a reaction to the dominance of irony in postmodern culture.⁵⁵

In *Orfeo* (2014), Powers focuses on the experimentation that dominated music over the 1960s and 1970s. The protagonist, Peter Els, looks back and rejects the experimentation of his earlier work:

The manifestos of Peter's twenties – the movements and lawless experiments, the crazy climbs up onto the barricades – feel like a tantrum now, like his daughter refusing to take her nap. Who can say what the academy champions these days? Els has been away too long to know. But he knows that cool will give way to warm, form to feeling, as surely as a leading tone tilts forever toward the tonic. Music cut from new whole cloth? No such material. (2014, p.182)

The whole of Powers' novel is the story of a life lost to abstraction, and a slow cultural turn back from 'form to feeling.' Like Wallace and Powers, one of the major binaries of Franzen's fiction and nonfiction is the rejection of the formalism of postmodern fiction. Again, this points to the anti-formalistic nature of Franzen's turn to tragic realism. Burn points out the 'tendency of early critics of postmodernism to identify the movement as a deliberate attempt to subvert the emphasis that the modernist movement placed on artistic form' (2011, p.4). He goes on to state that the post-postmodernism of these three authors 'explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within, postmodernism' (2011, p.19). While Burn is correct to indicate that Franzen, Wallace and Powers do definitively 'all emerge from the same origin, having been immersed in the fiction of American postmodernism,' the same structure of feeling, their post-postmodernism – as the contrast between this reading and the previous chapter on Wallace demonstrate – if we can call it that, is markedly different (2011, p.16). Like Wallace, it is what is being culturally reproduced in the contemporary

⁵⁵ Like with Franzen's and Smith's nonfiction, the starkness of Wallace's position here is in many ways a melodramatic binary. David Rando illuminatingly discusses the melodramatic binaries of Wallace's nonfiction – of irony and sentiment, for example – as undercutting Wallace's own logic (2013).

U.S. that concerns Franzen. However, in contrast to Wallace, he offers specific limits for fiction as a means to discuss the issues he diagnoses in culture.

Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion*, is emblematic of his earlier ideas about the place of sincerity in fiction. *Strong Motion* is largely defined by the bildungsroman-like transformation of the protagonist, Louis, into a sincere, irony-free adult. Early in the novel, Louis's aversion to being earnest is so strong he even confuses an earthquake with the physical feeling he associates with being genuine, 'His stomach plummeted; he attributed this to the sick-making effort of sincerity. However, the real problem was the floor, which was moving' (2001, p.165). Louis's disgust with sincerity is in stark contrast to his girlfriend, Reneé, who when walking around Boston with Louis early in the novel, gives 'a small green offering to the Jimmy Fund with its fight against cancer in children and showed no embarrassment when her more cynical companion reacted with a double take' (2001, p.187-188). For Louis, his cynicism disengages him from the simple act of charity, as if there is always some subterfuge underlying all sincere acts. However, after Reneé is shot and the Sweeting-Aldren conspiracy is exposed, Louis undergoes a secular conversion; he finds out it is okay to have 'belief in something':

Now that Eileen was being a peach and Peter no longer patronized him, he had no choice but to be sincere with them. But sincerity implied some kind of belief in something – the kind of belief that Eileen and Peter had in living in America and making a good life for themselves, or that Reneé had in the power of women. Louis still thought the country sucked and he had his doubts about the okayness of being male. If he'd ever known how to believe in anything else, he'd long ago forgotten. (2001, p.488)

Louis's sister Eileen's 'belief in America' is embodied through her desire to have a home, and to operate within the system she finds herself in. Louis is trying to work out what to believe in, an action for which he has forgotten the motions. In short, the novel concludes with Louis attempting to live sincerely. Furthermore, as it ends with a character doubting 'the okayness of being male,' Franzen identifies Louis's previous cynicism as explicitly masculine, which echoes Franzen's

reasons for dismissing experimentation in his nonfiction. As Stephen Burn illuminatingly documents, *Strong Motion* advocates a political stance of ecofeminism; similarly, it also shows a bildungsroman-like development away from masculine cynicism to a more domestic, Eileen-like 'home' for Louis's sincerity and use of emotion.⁵⁶

This theme of sincerity continues in *The Corrections*. In Chip's brief academic career, he teaches a class in critical theory. The novel depicts an increasingly sincere student body transforming how this class is received: 'Each year, it seemed, the incoming freshmen were a little more resistant to hardcore theory than they'd been the year before. Each year the moment of enlightenment, of critical mass, came a little later' (p.46). Franzen dramatises a world where many of the great theoretical texts of the postmodern period are slowly losing their relevance to a new generation of Americans. Further, Chip demonstrates that 'hardcore theory' is not enjoyable, as reading philosophy is directly equated with the language of self-improvement – 'he read the damned Heidegger and did his crunches every morning' (p.53).⁵⁷ 'Hardcore theory' and postmodern literature remain half read (like the students trying to read *J R*), or are, at best, treated as an unpleasant means of self-improvement. As put by Ankhi Mukherjee, 'Chip's demise as a theorist, Franzen suggests, has everything to do with the condition of theory, which fails, however, to provide answers' (2007, p.102). For Franzen, the critical theory that permeated so many humanities departments during the postmodern period resulted in further disengagement from all audiences, and lost relevance due to a younger generation that longs for sincerity.

⁵⁶ As Burn persuasively argues: '*Strong Motion* concerns the connection between the irresponsibility of male sexuality and industrial waste practices. The foundations of this examination initially betray significant affinities with ecofeminist criticism' (2009, p.73).

⁵⁷ This scene is partly autobiographical. When Franzen went to Berlin to study in the 1980s, he took many books of literary theory with him. However, 'What people used to say about Chinese takeout – that you were hungry again an hour after eating it – soon came to be true, for me, of literary theory. Of the dozen books I schlepped over to Berlin, *Gravity's Rainbow* was the only one I finished' (2013, p.22).

Chip's relationship with Melissa is the clearest example of this new attitude. Melissa states that she 'likes herself,' (p.68) and has no problem saying her parents are her 'best friends' (p.70). Like Louis with his sick-making feelings about sincerity, Chip is confused by Melissa's openly professed love for her parents and herself, 'He couldn't work out if she was immensely well adjusted or seriously messed up' (p.70). Chip's struggle to understand this demonstrates the impracticalities of a hermeneutic of suspicion in daily life. Melissa remonstrates with Chip that: "This whole class ... it's just bullshit every week" (p.50). In a scene marked by obvious, heightened irony, Melissa explains a distinct separation between the theory and practice of Chip's heroes. Melissa argues that Chip's favourite theorists are disengaged from reality, and do not offer any solutions: "But they all know it's evil. They all know 'corporate' is a dirty word. And if somebody is having fun and getting rich – disgusting! Evil! And it's always the death of this or that. And people who think they're free aren't 'really' free. And people who think they're happy aren't 'really' happy" (p.50).⁵⁸ Chip's Marxism is satirised as a simplistic, melodramatic worldview in itself, with the Manichean struggle of class-consciousness versus the infernal machine. Provocatively, Brooks suggests that 'systems of thought,' such as Marxism, are defined by a melodramatic conflict (p.201). Melissa goes further, and argues that the ideas of critical theory are constructed on sand: "Nobody can ever quite say what's wrong exactly"; it is a disengagement from the culture that Melissa attacks, one where criticism merely talks "about the state of criticism" (p.50).

This autopoetic, self-referential impulse frustrates her so much she literally shouts and swears at Chip. Melissa's critiques deeply affect Chip:

[They] ... cut him to the quick ... if the great Materialist Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really *was* improving the lives of the formerly oppressed; if it was only straight white males like Chip who had a problem

⁵⁸ Bob Holland in *Strong Motion* is a self-described 'Old Marxist drone,' showing the continuation of Franzen exploring issues around the theories and practice of Marxism (1992, p.363).

with this order – then there was no longer even the most abstract utility to his criticism. It was all, in Melissa’s words, bullshit. (p.51)

In this cartoonish description of the role of theory, Franzen is once again using melodramatic heightening to make his wider point.⁵⁹ While Franzen’s turn against theory can be seen as part of a wider ‘post-theory’ moment, Patrick Ffrench notes in his review essay of what have come to be called ‘post-theory’ works that it is never quite clear what these writers who turn against theory are referring to: ‘what is attacked by the detractors of theory is a version of theory which itself derives from their translation of it’ (2006, p.108). As with his understanding of realism, Franzen reifies a particular idea of what theory means – in his interview with David Remnick, he refers to it as ‘paranoid theory’ (2011) – and says he turned away from it because it provides no answers for practical, lived experience. This scene in *The Corrections* is also similar to Franzen’s depiction of literary postmodernism in the work of Gaddis, where the academy has disengaged from any wider audience via the difficulty and lack of ‘utility’ in hardcore theory. Furthermore, as with his characterisation of difficulty and prestige as masculine, Franzen again locates delusions and abstractions in terms of gender, and also here in terms of race; the ‘Order’ Chip realises he is a part of has a specific vocabulary, a prestigious code many others do not have access to. As with Wallace, it is the form of reproduction that Franzen wishes to question, and to make it seem absurd. The ‘lack of utility’ is what hurts Chip so much, and he is thrown into a personal crisis by this realisation. His first reaction is to escape, and he initially seeks to run from his realisations about reality with a regrettable, drug and sex-filled weekend with Melissa. Romantic illusions are shown to clash with his reality, and his fling with Melissa – and the essay he helps her write – loses Chip his job. Through melodramatic heightening, Franzen explicitly links these idealised, romantic views with hardcore theory, and Chip’s story echoes the lessons of Stendhal’s, Howells’, and Crane’s

⁵⁹ Read François Cusset’s *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (2008) for an exploration of the U.S. academy and theory.

texts. His fiction enacts a dramatic rejection of the utility of theory as a limit and pressure upon contemporary literature.

After his romantic delusions lose Chip his job, and utilises his cynical irony to sell fatuous stocks in Lithuania. However, Chip, like Louis in *Strong Motion*, experiences personal growth. He recognises the error of his ways, and when he returns from Lithuania he feels like he needs to rewrite his character: ‘He didn’t understand what had happened to him. He felt like a piece of paper that had once had coherent writing on it but had been through the wash’ (p.619). At the end of the novel Chip cares for his father, and settles down and starts a family. By turning away from theory – and thereby finally removing the opening ‘six-page lecture about anxieties of the phallus in Tudor drama’ (p.28) from his film script – his film even becomes marketable; Chip’s part in the novel ends with him on his ‘fourth or fifth’ rewrite for a New York producer (p.650). Chip’s move to sincerity not only marks an improved relationship with his family, but also provides a traditional happy ending present in so many works of melodrama. As Brooks explicates: ‘The *reward* of virtue ... is only a secondary manifestation of the *recognition* of virtue’ (p.27, italics in original). Chip’s rejection of ‘hardcore theory,’ of irony, of cynicism towards his family, is the recognition of virtue in Franzen’s novel. Franzen’s melodrama – embodied here by Chip and Louis – is a mode of writing within a universe of heightened drama. Franzen depicts the cultural reproduction of postmodern ideals, represented here by cynicism and hardcore theory, as dysfunctional and isolating in practice, and conquerable only by recognising the virtue of sincerity. Franzen’s texts melodramatise a version of literary history, one which allows him to overcome the limits and pressures he perceives to being culturally reproduced, and to suggest his form of tragic realism in its place.

Freedom from Sincerity

That Franzen, Wallace, and Powers all advocate a similar ideal of sincerity is no surprise, as Jameson asserts about realism:

Unfortunately, however, as the history of nominalism testifies, new universals always begin to form around the wreckage of the old ones, and what had deservedly been revealed to be unnameable inevitably gets named and generalized in its turn. Such are then the new plot-types that begin to emerge within realism itself and to be codified and marked in their turn for narrative deconstruction. (2013, p.145)

These authors' move towards sincerity therefore becomes 'a new universal,' to be 'codified and marked.' Moreover, it is a universal that in *Freedom*, Franzen aims to 'deconstruct.' In 2008 Franzen mocked the sincere tone he had previously argued for: 'And everybody agreed that irony was dead. The bad, empty irony of the nineties was simply "no longer possible" post-9/11; we'd stepped forward into *a new age of sincerity*' (2012, p.153, italics in original). While again using melodramatic language – sardonically pronouncing the death of irony – in *Freedom* Franzen attempts to deconstruct what he believes has become a paradigm of sincerity, as it prevents fiction from being 'true to reality' (Connery: 2009, p.34). Like the theory he depicts as divorced from reality in *The Corrections*, Franzen feels the cultural reproduction of sincerity distorts both fiction and the reality it aims to represent.

Reviewers and critics often note a shift in Franzen's focus in *Freedom*. In his review of the novel, Sam Anderson uses the language of melodrama – heroes and villains – to indicate that the pursuit of virtue has been internalised within the characters in *Freedom*: 'As the novel progresses, we see this agony from many different perspectives — Walter's, Patty's, their son Joey's, their friend Richard's — and each shift subtly tweaks the story, swinging blame, exposing motives, recasting villains as heroes and heroes as villains' (2010). Kathy Knapp notes how this aspect of the novel is distinct from Franzen's previous work: 'unlike Franzen's earlier novels, which depict characters swept up in the vortex of a heedless and impersonal capitalism, the dark force at work in

Freedom is explicitly associated with human actors motivated by personal interests' (2014, p.55). Without a set form of virtue to aspire towards – Louis and Chip's newfound sincerity, for instance – the characters of *Freedom* have differing paths to melodramatic virtue.

Whereas sincerity was emergent in *Strong Motion* and *The Corrections*, in *Freedom* a new societal thirst for sincerity is most clearly represented through the music career of Richard Katz.⁶⁰ As Mark Bresnan notes, in *Freedom* Franzen 'gets all the references right' in regards to locations and other period markers of the music scene of this era (2014, p.32). Gerard Moorey argues that 'such popular music references are part of the novel's meticulous evocation of social history' (2014, p.70). The references to the music scene of the early 1980s is perhaps a moment where he does demand of his reader a particular code, in order to grasp exactly what he is referring to. While Wallace sets *The Pale King* in the early 1980s to explore the period where certain societal habits were developed and formed, Franzen sets much of *Freedom* in the same period to look at the development of the indie rock scene throughout this decade, and how it compares with the music of the present.⁶¹ Throughout *Freedom* music operates for Franzen as a sociological marker, as Moorey suggests, and also as a form of ekphrasis to discuss his other concerns around contemporary literature and culture.

Richard Katz's first band, The Traumaties, are a punk band who sing absurdist songs such as 'I hate sunshine'; they are warmly reviewed, but never that popular, and thus partly reminiscent of Franzen's description of Gaddis's work, as although they are not intentionally difficult, they are purposively hard to listen to (p.72). Richard and Walter are confused by the contrast between their meagre audiences and the band's critical reception, and always feel that Richard must be close to

⁶⁰ Popular music is regularly a topic in contemporary American fiction, and to take two examples of many, popular music is central in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010) and Teddy Wayne's *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* (2013).

⁶¹ See Michael Azerrad's *Our Band Could be Your Life* (2002) for an exploration of this aspect of 1980s culture.

commercial success. Richard is specifically portrayed as a consumer of postmodern literature, sighted at one point reading Pynchon's *V* (1963). Further, the novel has two allusions to Richard attempting to read experimental Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard, an author Richard describes as 'his new favorite writer' (p.204). Bernhard's challenging texts – such as *Correction* (1975) – are representative of the valorisation of difficulty that Franzen laments, as each of Bernhard's texts consist of just one long sentence. In Smith's 'Two Paths for the Novel,' Bernhard would distinctly be on the opposite path to Franzen. When on the train, Richard uses a Bernhard book to hide from the world: 'holding a Bernhard novel close to his face, he was able to achieve complete privacy until the train stopped in Philly' (p.349). This literalises the disengagement Franzen believes such difficult novels engender. Richard's career is therefore demonstrative of the elitism, the resistance to popular acceptance, that Franzen believes defines so much postmodern art.

It is only when Richard writes the album *Nameless Lake*, a more palatable country album about his confusing relationship with Patty, that he gains any recognition beyond a small circle of 'scruffy, well-educated, white male fans' (p.185). *The Traumatiks*' music simply doesn't sell in a contemporary environment dominated by sincerity, and moreover it never did (which is exactly what Peter Els discovers about his experimental compositions in Powers' *Orfeo*). *The Traumatiks*, like Chip's critical theory, appeal only to 'white male fans,' once again situating supposed artistic radicalism in terms of whiteness and masculinity. However, rather than appreciate his success, Richard goes back to building decks; he rejects *how* he has to be successful in a culture seeking sincerity. Sincerity becomes a marketing tool, a cultural dominant, and therefore a means to succeed; Richard rejects this, and returns to a small label. His contempt for sincerity is most keenly demonstrated when he surveys the crowd at the *Bright Eyes* concert Walter takes him to:

The nation was fighting ugly ground wars in two countries, the planet was heating up like a toaster oven, and here at the 9:30, all around him, were hundreds of kids in the mold of the banana-bread-baking Sarah, with their sweet yearnings, their innocent entitlement – to what? To emotion. To unadulterated worship of a superspecial band.

To being left to themselves to ritually repudiate, for an hour or two on a Saturday night, the cynicism and anger of their elders. (p.369)

Richard directly entwines the desire for sincerity with a disengagement from the political realm; that global warming and the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan are *allowed* to happen without protest, due to this detachment from politics caused by sincerity. The language used equates this disengagement with immaturity, not only dismissing them as ‘kids,’ but also utilising the term ‘superspecial’ to further infantilise this ‘yearning’ for sincerity. He describes the ‘new universal’ of sincerity here as a juvenile desire to feel emotion, and a screen that allows individuals to ignore the more heinous realities of the world.⁶²

However, once again gender complicates this assertion. As mentioned, Richard is specifically portrayed as a consumer of postmodern literature, and his original band, *The Traumatiks*, are a little known but much revered punk band. Richard is therefore emblematic of a generation dedicated to the experimentation and difficulty Franzen expressly writes in opposition to. Richard’s dismissal of these ‘kids’ is not just infantilising and patronising, but it is also worded in distinctly domestic terms, such as his contempt for ‘banana-bread-baking Sarah.’ Franzen paints Richard’s derision as a patronising rejection of the domestic, the home. Franzen once again locates misogyny within the postmodern generation, highlighting the previous era’s rejection of the domestic sphere. It is no accident Richard is the character that has an affair with Patty, so the character that explicitly appreciates postmodern literature breaks apart the Berglund’s marriage (however dysfunctional it has become). In *Freedom*, Franzen moves beyond the binary of sincerity and cynicism; Richard is a means to critique the sincerity Franzen sees overtaking contemporary art, but he also embodies the dichotomy between the postmodern generation and the home he seeks to situate his fiction within. In short, Franzen wishes to avoid reproducing what he sees as a

⁶² That ‘emo’ is now a distinct music genre – with bands such as *Jimmy Eat World*, *Thursday*, *My Chemical Romance*, *Bullet for my Valentine*, and many more – is emblematic of this desire for sincerity in youth culture.

distinctly masculine approach to fiction, and he reacts the limits and pressures of how he perceives postmodern fiction to be. Consequently, he offers a form he believes does not exclude via difficulty, or an oblique form of misogyny. His version of realism, then, is an attempt to overcome these concerns. To see Franzen's depictions of theory and sincerity as melodramatic emphasises his didactic points about the way U.S. culture is being reproduced. He suggests that to live in the world of 'paranoid theory' or to live sincerely does not equal living a moral life. As the next section outlines, he wishes his own texts to inform and inspire action within his readers.

Seeking Permanence in a Plastic World in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*

Lamenting the apparently transitory nature of so much of late 20th/early 21st century life for those living in the United States, Franzen's nonfiction repeatedly addresses the difficulty of writing fiction that can remain relevant. As he states in 'Why Bother?' 'What's topically relevant while ... planning the novel will almost certainly be passé by the time it's written, rewritten, published, distributed, and read' (2002a, p.67). Franzen fears his work will be swept up into the world of consumer capitalism, used and then forgotten; essentially, he wants his work to be remembered. In 2009 Franzen spoke of this desire for permanent literary relevance: 'The stories that recognize people as they really are – the books whose characters are at once sympathetic subjects and dubious objects – are the ones capable of reaching across cultures and generations. This is why we still read Kafka' (2002a, p.122-3). Franzen's advocacy of the mode of tragic realism is an attempt to acquire some semblance of enduring cultural relevance, in opposition to a period he sees as constantly in consumerist flux. Once again, Franzen sets up a binary, of permanence versus transience. To claim Franzen is a melodramatist is to question whether his texts will endure, as John Cawelti outlines: 'There is a special point of cultural interest about the social melodrama. Time and again, books and authors of this type have achieved an extraordinary popularity within their own era, only to lapse

into almost total obscurity in succeeding generations' (1976, p.263). Only time will tell if Franzen's means of limiting his fiction means this is to be Franzen's fate.

In discussion with Christopher Connery a few years later, Franzen frames this debate not just in terms of his own legacy, but also contends that the transient nature of consumer capitalism disables the possibility of realising you are an individual: 'The moment you become an individual is the moment when all that consumer stuff falls away and you're left with the narrativity of your own life' (2009, p.36). He believes the novel is directly in opposition to consumer culture: 'All the things that would become impossible — politically, emotionally, culturally, psychologically — if people ever were to become simply the sum of their consumer choices: this is, indirectly, what the novel is trying to preserve and fight in favor of' (Connery: 2009, p.36). Here, he indicates that the aim of his fiction is to reengage the reader with values he sees as existentially enduring. Franzen places his fiction – and novels in general – as fighting for affective possibilities of what is possible 'politically, emotionally, culturally, psychologically.' The limits he tries to reproduce are intended to enable him to explore enduring, stable issues. As terms like 'fight' suggest, the manner in which he approaches this conundrum is once again infused with melodrama.

In his Kenyon College address of 2011, Franzen offers a narrative about the transformative influence of fiction in how he approaches the world: 'what really killed theory for me – and began to cure me, more generally, of my obsession with how I appeared to other people – was my love of fiction' (2012, p.10). In this address – which one can see as a performance of his melodramatic, public persona – an abstraction is once again melodramatically dying. As his work is largely concerned with what has been lost and must be regained, it is, again, distinctly melodramatic, as Gledhill explains: 'if realism's relentless search for renewed truth and authentication pushes it towards stylistic innovation and the future, melodrama's search for something lost, inadmissible, repressed, ties it to an atavistic past' (1987, pp.31-32). Again, it is Franzen's narrow conception of

what realism means that leads to his reproduction of the internal signals of melodrama. To reiterate, realism is an attempt at the accurate reproduction of reality. When moments of drama are heightened, and the world sorted into Manichean binaries, purportedly realistic texts fall into melodrama. Howells and his realist contemporaries believed they were moving literature forward in some way; Howells wrote in 'Criticism and Fiction' (1891) that he saw realism as breaking the bonds of tradition: '[it] seeks ... to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition' (1959, p.15). Jakobson outlines that whether realist, impressionist or surrealist, all these movements thought they were offering unprecedented and innovative access to how things really are; again, Wallace and McCarthy are in some regards realists.⁶³ In contrast, Franzen wistfully looks into the past on numerous occasions, citing a literary arcadia when the novel had a degree of influence and reach. For instance, in 'Perchance': 'A century ago, the novel was the preeminent medium of social instruction. A new book by William Dean Howells was anticipated with the kind of fever that today a new Pearl Jam release inspires' (1996, p.41). Ken Gelder explicates how these literary worlds are not really comparable: 'In the early 1800s – during Sir Walter Scott's time – sales of over 10,000 copies would have suggested real popularity ... By the 1970s, records were broken with sales of around 300,000. By the 1990s, a top-selling novel meant sales of over one million' (2004, p.7).⁶⁴ While his historiography is hazy at best, what is important is that Franzen longs for a revitalisation of some lost literary past, and this is a hallmark of the melodramatic mode.

⁶³ Wallace discusses with Larry McCaffery that he believes the distinction of experimentalism and realism is a false distinction, but does acknowledge there are many proponents of what he terms 'big-R' realism – which Franzen's work would be a part of – and 'little-R realistic,' which he believes experimental works are also aiming for (1993, p.36).

⁶⁴ As Kathleen Fitzpatrick points out, this idea that there was a golden age of literary influence is a myth: 'The image many elegizers of the novel create – a movement in the past in which a people, a culture, a nation was affected as one body by the movements of literary thought – is largely mythical, a revisionist creation of a nonexistent utopia' (2007, p.15).

Alfred's struggles in *The Corrections* embody a wonderful metaphor for Franzen's fears about the diminishing relevance of the novel. Alfred is concerned with how material objects are becoming increasingly perishable: 'the problem was urgent. A cultural war was being waged, and the forces of plastic were winning. Alfred had seen jam and jelly jars with plastic lids. Cars with plastic roofs' (p.312). To Alfred, everything is slowly becoming synthetic; nothing is sturdy or well made any more, as shown by the fact that jam jars and car roofs are now plastic rather than a more robust material. Franzen wishes to melodramatically wage a 'cultural war' against the plasticity of contemporary culture. Franzen fears that, like plastic, so much of the contemporary United States is dominated by cheap, throwaway thrills; cultural reproduction – specifically the mass production of material goods – is a process that clearly concerns Franzen here. Plasticity also suggests how synthetic Franzen perceives contemporary life to be; the re-establishment of an older, sturdier order – counter to the plasticity he sees as dominating contemporary life – is what Franzen wishes to revive and reproduce. Franzen's valorisation of what we have culturally lost is also exemplified in *The Corrections* when Denise is conversing with Gary at the Coreckall investment seminar: "'I liked the past,'" Denise said, uptilting her complimentary half-liter of imported water' (p.236). Denise's lament embodies Franzen's fears about the commodification of culture, and his belief that something has been lost in this process. He longs to write books that reach 'across generations and cultures,' but he is unsure if this is even possible in the contemporary climate.

To make his fiction reach across generations, Franzen's work advocates values that are not transient consumer choices, and are instead distinct from the world of plastic, throwaway materialism. Peter Brooks observes that 'The ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them' (p.17). While his characters are regularly expelling clearly identified antagonists – the cynicism of Louis and Chip, for instance – the ephemerality of contemporary consumer culture is the antagonist Franzen wishes to expel,

especially in the two novels that follow his advocacy for tragic realism. Brooks suggests that in this ritual 'there is ... a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear' (p.17). Franzen asserts a mode of fiction that operates as a counterpoint, or a correction, to what he sees as the fugacious fashions and concerns reproduced in the contemporary period. By seeking to locate his work as antithetical to the plastic world of the consumer economy, Franzen believes the role of fiction is to discuss ethical imperatives, not the habits and choices consumerism fosters. In this sense, while Wallace's work addresses precisely how these habits define the self, Franzen sees these choices as plastic, ephemeral, and materialistic, and he has a series of characters realise the 'narrativity' of their own lives. In doing so, he enacts what Brooks calls the ritual of melodrama – identifying an antagonist, in this case plasticity, and dramatically expelling it – and Franzen therefore makes a set of ethical imperatives clear.

In *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, he turns his ire on two specific targets that define this cultural transience for him: an overly medicated culture, and his fears about technological advances. Fredric Jameson talks about a 'reduction to the body' in postmodernism, wherein the mysteries of Being are no more and all ills can be explained scientifically with biomechanical solutions (2013, p.28). Franzen's fears are very similar; he believes the postmodern assumption that all psychological or emotional affects can be alleviated by simple physical fixes has produced a culture overly reliant on medication. His fiction enacts a Manichean struggle between the evils of an overly medicated culture, and the inherent good of fiction (much like his binary of consumer culture and the stability of fiction). Enid's use of Aslan, a drug which removes any semblance of psychological struggle, dramatises Franzen's fear: 'No exertion more strenuous than raising hand to mouth, no act more violent than swallowing, no religious feeling, no faith in anything more mystical than cause and effect was required to experience a pill's transformative blessings' (p.273). As well as the overt reference to Aslan, the Christ-like figure of C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, the pill swallowing process

is described like taking communion; Franzen suggests this pill enables Enid to narcotise, rather than deal with, her problems. It is the availability of this easy solution, this plasticity, which Franzen wishes to represent as a debilitating force on contemporary culture.

When Alfred falls overboard on a cruise, Enid is initially unaffected by her husband's plight as she has just taken Aslan. But the drug – a wonder drug that is another instance of melodramatic heightening – does not remove her trauma, it merely delays it.⁶⁵ For Franzen, this ‘reduction to the body’ tramples over issues that are more existentially complex than simply being a chemical imbalance. Enid’s eventually rejects Aslan, and this is expressed in terms of experiencing something real: “‘I want the real thing or I don’t want anything’” (p.609). Enid’s desire to experience ‘the real thing,’ unmedicated, is exactly what Franzen wishes his readers to experience through his work. Enid’s melodramatically redemptive ending demonstrates a turn away from the easy solution of medication; the desire to ‘make some changes in her life’ would not be possible if she had succumbed to Aslan (p.653). Enid’s struggle and eventual purging of the medication – she dramatically throws her Aslan pills away – (melo)dramatises the possibility to feel something real if the plasticity of an over-medicating culture is rejected. To use Brooks’ terminology, Franzen has Enid ‘purge’ herself of Aslan in order to make a set of ethical imperatives clear.

The other aspect of plasticity that Franzen wishes to overcome relates to how rapid technological advancement creates a false sense of ontological ease.⁶⁶ Franzen represents this advancement in several discussions his characters have about the ethics of the Internet. In his latest novel, *Purity*, he overtly compares the Internet to the monitoring of the East German Stasi: ‘The answer to every question large or small was socialism. If you substituted *networks* for *socialism*, you got the Internet. Its competing platforms were united in their ambition to define every term of

⁶⁵ Psychopharmacology is central to many texts of contemporary American fiction; it plays a central role in *Infinite Jest*, and also in Benjamin Kunkel’s *Indecision* (2005).

⁶⁶ For a more positive spin on the cultural shifts brought about by automation, read Robert Samuels’ celebration of the contemporary as the age of ‘auto-modernity’ (2008).

your existence' (2015a, p.448, italics in original). Here, he again makes his point as clear as possible to the reader. In *The Corrections*, during his Lithuanian adventure, Chip discovers that 'The beauty of the Internet was that Chip could post wholecloth fabrications without troubling to check even his spelling. Reliability on the Web was ninety-eight percent a function of how slick and cool your site looked' (p.504). Again, Chip's 'fabrications' do not even require correct spelling; technological advances make the production of a sleek presentation too easy, which operates to conceal the realities of the content. Chip's website absurdly grounds his pleas for financial support in real historical events, comparing 'the impending European sand-and-gravel crisis to the oil crisis of 1973' (p.503). There is no foundation for Chip's outlandish claims, but none is needed in this melodramatically heightened world, where presentation is valued over content.

On the receiving end of the kind of falsities Chip creates, in *Freedom* Joey struggles to procure truck parts to ship to the Americans in Iraq. His attempts to offload the parts are hindered by the free information available on the Internet (incidentally, this echo of *The Corrections* – as in Joey's struggles on the Internet are a result of the falsities people like Chip put on there – is an obvious metafictional gesture).⁶⁷ As Jenna says to Joey – quoting her boyfriend, Nick – “‘free information’s by definition worthless’” (p.423). Franzen portrays the Internet, and technological advancement more generally, as another elite code that excludes so much of the populace. This is further suggested when Joey is sent on a wild goose chase across the globe; using free information, and not knowing what he is doing, Joey struggles to find information on the web that is true in reality. Franzen uses the falsities available on the Internet to show the plasticity of much of contemporary culture. Across these two texts, Franzen enacts a Manichean struggle between the

⁶⁷ In *The Corrections*, Chip's movie script being dominated by references to breasts is Franzen mocking his previous novel, *Strong Motion*, which has a ludicrous amount of references to breasts. From MaryAnn's 'jutting breasts' (p.66), or perhaps most clumsily: 'Lauren handed her breasts over casually, like surplus charms she was glad to donate to the needy' (p.222). Franzen's self-mockery is partly demonstrative of the split he sees in his own career between his first two novels and his two later novels, but also that he has not entirely expunged his metafictional tendencies.

evils of technology and the good of fiction. For Franzen, literature that makes a lasting impact should make deeper explorations than addressing consumer choices and technological developments that are always liable to change. He situates his fiction as opposed to the idea of technological determinism, then, and the cultural reproduction of such an idea of inevitability.

Franzen writes fiction in opposition to what he believes is an ahistorical contemporary literary culture that is seemingly unaware of the utility of previous modes and forms – in short, in opposition to how he defines postmodern fiction. In ‘Perchance’ he – very questionably – blames this ahistoricism on identity politics and contemporary theory. He dramatically (and quite bizarrely) claims that fiction pre-1950 is no longer read and studied because: ‘the therapeutic optimism now raging in English literature departments insists that novels be sorted into two boxes: Symptoms of Disease (canonical work from the Dark Ages before 1950), and Medicine for a Happier and Healthier World (the work of women and of people from non-white or non-hetero cultures)’ (1996, p.47). He proposes that his ‘tragic realism’ will recapture this historical scope:

I spent the early nineties trapped in a double singularity. Not only did I feel that I was different from everyone around me, but I felt that the age I lived in was utterly different from any age that had come before. For me the work of regaining a tragic perspective has therefore involved a dual kind of reaching out: both the reconnection with a community of readers and writers, and the reclamation of a sense of history. (1996, p.53)

Once again, Franzen’s remarks are markedly melodramatic – he feels ‘trapped’ in ‘an age ... utterly different from any age that had come before’ – and he heightens the stakes to make his predicament clear. This idea of ‘reconnecting’ with readers is a common theme across the writers in this thesis. It places Franzen alongside not only Wallace, but, as is shown in the next chapter, Chabon, in asserting that sort of connection with readers has been lost in the postmodern period. For Franzen, historicity is present in enduring values and ontological issues that reach across generations. His choice of formal limits for his texts, then, is an attempt to limit his fiction to grasp such a sense of history, and to explore such permanent issues.

Franzen's characters identify the texts that embody these enduring values. At the end of *Strong Motion*, Louis recognises the continuing applicability that Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* (1886) has in the present:

James's Boston of the 1870s turned out to be inhabited by the same eternal feminists with whom Louis had marched in the big pro-choice rally in July, the same crackpots and dreamers who had funded Rita Kernaghan and come to her memorial, the same slippery journalists who were still trying to insinuate themselves into René's apartment by telephone. (1992, p.499)

Louis sees echoes of James's novel in his contemporary moment, and it is this continuing relevance that Franzen seeks for his own work. Similarly, in *Freedom*, Patty's reading of *War and Peace* (1869) is also shown to have enduring value; she sees her brother as reminiscent of Pierre in Tolstoy's classic (p.522), and she turns to Tolstoy's text, 'At first in desperate escapism, later in search of help' (p.175). In his nonfiction he makes this connection explicit, that he 'found new allies in Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Alice Munro' when composing *Freedom* (2012, p.124). This theme continues in *Purity*, as the protagonist's name, Pip, and the plotline of her unknown wealth obviously connects this text with Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861). His characters find comfort and value in the texts he admires, an enduring relevance he wishes to emulate. Furthermore, by explicitly citing the prestigious works he aspires towards, he suggests the tradition he hopes to recover and reproduce.

In both *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, this notion that ancestors and descendants have the same basic struggle in different contexts is emphasised within the characters' families. Carolyn Williams argues that this is a convention of melodrama: 'Strife within and across the generations is represented through familial pairs, which also enable the representation of emergent historical change' (2012, p.205). In *The Corrections*, Chip is flabbergasted to hear that he is 'more like his father than he seemed to realize' (p.26). This idea of common experience across generations is echoed by Alfred during the flashback to Chip's childhood: 'The scene was so wrong, so sick with

revenge, that for a moment Alfred honestly thought the boy at the table was a ghost from his own childhood' (p.314). As Alfred makes the same mistakes as his parents, Chip seems similarly doomed to repeat the errors of his father. In *Freedom* this theme appears again in relation to Patty and her daughter, Jessica, when Jessica begins to date a musician:

Patty had to forget everything she knew about musicians and endorse, at least tacitly, Jessica's belief that human nature had lately undergone a fundamental change: that people her own age, even male musicians, were *very different* from people Patty's age. And when Jessica's heart was then broken, slowly but thoroughly, Patty had to manufacture shock at the singular unforeseeable outrage of it. (p.533, italics in original)

By showing the same mistakes being made across generations, Franzen suggests that the mistakes of Alfred, Chip, Patty, and Jessica are doomed to continue. However, this argument is once again gendered, as specifically '*male* musicians' have predictable actions and behaviour.⁶⁸ Franzen's portrayal of the predictability of masculinity as something to be resisted or overcome is constantly alluded to in his fiction; from Louis's doubts 'about the okayness of being male,' Chip worrying his critical theory was only the concerns of 'straight, white males' and now Patty's and Jessica's experiences with promiscuous male musicians. Implicitly and explicitly, Franzen's fiction is marked by a negative reaction to the masculinisation of prestige that his nonfiction suggests he aspires towards.

In the Howellsian realism explored earlier in this chapter, the idea of fatedness is mocked in *Silas Lapham* through the unexpected marriage of Penelope and Tom; heroic, romantic, or tragic aspirations are depicted as out of step with realism. Similarly, Stendhal, with Fabrizio's delusional expectation of meeting Napoleon, mocks any concept of destiny, of things meaning to happen. Discussing the early American melodrama of Charles Brockden Brown, MaryAnn Snyder-Körber

⁶⁸ Kathy Knapp has also spotted his use of familial pairing and interestingly situates uses it to argue a slightly different point: '*Freedom* follows the line from one generation to the next in order to challenge the legacy of entitlement that has provided the basis for white middle-class male identity' (2014, p.72).

uses slightly different terminology, but also indicates that the role of fatedness, or what she terms mirroring, is pervasive in melodramas: ‘Mirroring is, of course, a strategy that suggests endless reflections and doublings rather than closure’ (2007, p.71). Snyder-Körber also indicates that this mirroring is indicative of enduring issues, and so melodrama will also continue, returning to the home of fiction again and again: ‘The ambiguity created in the attempt to render legible sets the stage for yet another attempt to clarify the unclear and so on *ad infinitum*’ (2007, p.71). This notion of an ever-repeating exploration of values and ideas is echoed by a narrative voice in *The Corrections*: ‘what made correction possible also doomed it’ (p.323). A correction may be possible, but because the need to adjust the correction may emerge, no correction can ever be final, and (melodramatic) mistakes will be always be repeated. Exploring these repeated traits is what Franzen believes should be the enduring home for fiction. While Wallace’s texts aim to explore contingent habits, and the possibility of change, in Dewey’s terms Franzen’s texts depict dispositions that endure across generations. In having consistent traits, his characters are fated to act in similar ways to their predecessors.

Franzen uses the notion of character traits perpetuating through generations – Chip and Alfred, Jessica and Patty, and Joey and Walter – to suggest that there are permanent existential issues that reach across cultures, which cannot simply be explained biomechanically. Franzen feels contemporary culture reductively explains so much as a matter of genetics. Burn points out the way that ‘genetic inheritance’ is a central topic of the post-postmodern writers – Wallace, Powers, and Franzen – he discusses (2011, p.25). Powers most clearly embodies this in his novel *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), which dramatises the aftermath of the discovery of DNA. Expanding the pool of authors slightly from Burn’s grouping does suggest that this is a prevalent contemporary concern. In his essay ‘Literature, Science, and Human Nature,’ British author Ian McEwan uses the idea of genetics to reach for the same universals Franzen longs for: ‘If there are human universals that

transcend culture, then it follows that they do not change, or they do not change easily' (2005, p.12). Conversely, Marilynne Robinson argues in her essay 'Darwinism' that if a genetic, Darwinian understanding of culture became the norm, there would be no need for anyone to discuss ethics: 'This is the great peculiarity of this school of thought, that it wishes to make an ethic of what it presents as an inevitability, when, if inevitability were a factor, no ethic would be needed' (2005, p.58). Franzen essentially oscillates between these two points: that, as MeEwan outlines, genetics do define character traits, but a focus solely on genetics, as Robinson suggests, is a reductive way to interpret human behaviour. To quote the Coreck tall salesperson in *The Corrections*, "And here, as everywhere in medicine today, *the secret is in the genes*" (p.228, italics in original). Franzen characterises genetics as the easy answer, a quick fix, and Dr. Hibbard's sales pitch accentuates this point. When Hibbard explains Aslan to Enid he claims: "Fear of humiliation and the craving for humiliation are closely linked: psychologists know it, Russian novelists know it. And this turns out to be not only 'true' but really *true*. True at the molecular level" (p.366). Dr. Hibbard is referring here, most explicitly, to the seemingly sado-masochistic protagonist in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864). Franzen wishes to situate his fiction within an infinitely reusable home, a site of limits that explores existential issues, and this focus will ensure his literary legacy – like the James and Tolstoy novels he references in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom* – as these texts reach across 'cultures and generations.' He attempts to resist what he believes is the contemporary reproduction of historical amnesia through situating his texts within such a historical legacy.

Conclusion: Ontological Ambiguity

In his nonfiction Franzen explains that he believes everybody experiences what he terms 'points of crisis.' He outlines that these universally experienced moments offer existential insights:

As a percentage of the total world population, we're ever smaller specks, and what we are is ever more mediated by the structures we've created for ourselves to live in.

And yet, as you go through life, you still hit these *points of crisis* where something genuine is happening. A choice is being made, or a life is being destroyed, or hope is being regained, or control is being relinquished, or control is being achieved. These moments may be utterly insignificant historically, but they're still hugely meaningful to the person experiencing them. (2009, pp.35-36, italics mine)

Franzen's turn away from medicalisation, from technological advancement, is a rejection of these mediating structures, and only at points of crisis can one realise the artificial nature of these structures. Rather than bringing into focus the mediation of such structures, as does Wallace, Franzen wishes to depict a reality distinct from them. Rather than pointing outwards to some larger significance – like the classic systems novels of postmodern fiction – Franzen turns inwards, to what Smith terms the myth of the bottomless soul, in order to show that these personal 'points of crisis' are universal. These moments are not just examples of heightening, but also mirror almost precisely a process that Brooks details as central to melodramas: 'a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive them from any transcendental system of belief' (p.viii). Without recourse to a transcendental system of belief, Franzen explores his characters' points of crisis to expose values beyond the mediating structures that dominate contemporary life.

Sylvia Roth's grieving process in *The Corrections* illustrates what Franzen means by a point of crisis. Sylvia has been grieving for her brutally murdered daughter, and therapy has become a chore, something expected of her, but not necessarily helpful. Sylvia only begins to heal when she begins to draw handguns, missing therapy sessions to sketch incredibly detailed pictures. Her story shows how grieving is an intensely personal process, which – contrary to the opinion of many around her – cannot follow a convenient, medically defined path. She realises, "the survivor and the artist was me, not her" (p.350). Sylvia's 'point of crisis' is not her daughter's death, but the moment she comprehends she has to go on living: "And when the event, the big change in your life,

is simply an *insight* – isn't that a strange thing? That absolutely nothing changes except that you see things differently and you're less fearful and less anxious and generally stronger as a result" (pp.350-351, italics mine). Sylvia describes an internal shift, which allows her to 'love life' again (p.351). She is able to *function*, and share her story with Enid (something her husband – who is living in denial – cannot do).⁶⁹ Furthermore, Sylvia makes her insight congruent with a religious epiphany – to what Crane dismisses as moments of transcendental realism – a means of dealing with her trauma. In what is clearly a rebuke of what he calls, in 'Perchance,' 'therapeutic society' (1996, p.44), Sylvia's grief demonstrates the intensely personal nature of these insights.⁷⁰

In *Freedom*, Joey undergoes a similarly transformative process to Sylvia, which, again, is only an insight, not some grand event. Joey exemplifies another bildungsroman-like development of a young, male character away from cynicism, a trope of Franzen's fiction. This repurposed protagonist type – Louis in *Strong Motion*, Chip in *The Corrections*, Joey in *Freedom* – continues with Jason in *Purity*. Jason evolves from someone who texts friends about Pip's appearance and his desire to have sex with her when she is out the room to an apologetic, reliable boyfriend by the end of the novel (2015a, p.28). All four embody a move away from cynicism, and their narratives resolve with a melodramatic recognition of virtue. Joey is a rogue son who leaves his family to live with his parents' despised neighbours, and, in a clear reaction to his father's politics, becomes an active participant in the neoconservative elite of Washington. However, Joey's 'shell of coolness' that so infuriates his father is gradually worn down and, in another scene of melodramatic heightening, Joey's cynicism finds its limits (p.476). That Joey is an undergraduate who is trusted to procure trucks for a huge multinational corporation may be implausible, but the point of this

⁶⁹ That there is a therapeutic side to storytelling is a constant presence in Franzen's work. Whether it be Sylvia Roth here, or Patty's diaries in *Freedom*, the idea that sharing your story is beneficial is made clear. Patty – as explored earlier – also says she starts reading *War and Peace* 'At first in desperate escapism, later in search of help' (p.175).

⁷⁰ For an account of the role of psychotherapy in postwar American culture, see Halliwell (2013).

heightening – as Weinstein notes, this *deus ex machina* – is to make Joey realise the possibility of virtue. Joey has an attack of conscience, and acquires a debilitating fear that he is causing the deaths of United States soldiers through his morally repugnant business dealings. While Joey finds himself in this position because of his initial calculating cynicism, when faced with the reality of his situation he is overcome with guilt and uses his money for the education of his pathologically devoted wife, Connie, and gives the rest to a veterans' charity.⁷¹

It is during Joey's journey to South America that he has his point of crisis.⁷² He considers cheating on his wife, Connie, with the beautiful – but vacuous – Jenna. The reader is left in no doubt about what to think of Jenna, as Joey's thoughts use the melodramatic language of villainy to compare her to a war profiteer: 'Now he felt as if Jenna, with her shifting standard of fidelity, had suckered him in much the same way his bosses at the think tank had. She'd done for sport, as a meanness to Connie, what the warmongers had done for profit' (p.401). As well as being another instance of Franzen making his point as clear as possible by just stating what his analogy is, Joey's point of crisis, his insight, happens after he swallows his wedding ring:

And it was a strange thing to feel, but he definitely felt it: when he emerged from the bathroom with the ring on his ring finger, and Jenna rushed past him and then reeled out again, squealing and cursing at the stench, he was a different person ... He was the person who'd handled his own shit to get his wedding ring back. This wasn't the person he'd thought he was, or would have chosen to be if he'd been free to choose, but there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of contradictory potential someones. (p.432)

In this comic moment, Joey rediscovers not only his wedding ring, but his devotion to Connie. Like Sylvia Roth, his realisation at his point of crisis is not expected, it is not what he would have 'chosen' for himself, but it is a moment of personal clarity about what defines himself. He discovers

⁷¹ As Catharine Walker Bergstrom points out, the depiction of Connie is one of the most troubling of the novel: 'Although we read Connie's words in dialogue, we never get her point of view on this relationship, and feminist critics have expressed shock at the depiction of her selfless submission and silences' (2014, p.127).

⁷² That Joey needs to visit Paraguay for business, is another echo of *The Corrections*, as it is the country Gitanas complains receives more help from the IMF than Lithuania (2007, p.130).

a definite sense of self; that this grand moment is juxtaposed with Jenna ‘squealing and cursing at the stench’ is a perfect example of just how solipsistic Franzen believes these moments are. To Joey, this is a moment of self-discovery, but for Jenna it is simply a moment where the boy she is on holiday with stunk out the bathroom. It enacts a dramatic embrace of limits as a liberating means for Joey to realise a sense of self, which embodies the liberatory potential of limits noted throughout this thesis.

Seeing Franzen’s work within the force field of melodrama illuminates why he depicts his characters as working towards moments of what Enid calls in *The Corrections* ‘something real.’ These real moments are ontologically vague, but Franzen sets out a clear path in order to reach them; they are accessed through melodramatic points of crisis, where a character realises something about themselves. His work does in many ways follow the conventions of realism – its oppositionality to other literary modes, for instance – and it is tragic in its fatedness and dramatic events. His fiction is also crackpot in its dramatic heightening. However, it is none of these things alone. Through the tensions of all his desires – his nostalgia, his opposition to many influences upon contemporary fiction, and his desire for enduring relevance – Franzen produces a melodramatic home for his fiction, a mode constantly at odds with the prestige he longs for. The processes of cultural reproduction Franzen’s work addresses – postmodern fiction, the disconnection of fiction from its audience, the rise of digital technology, pharmacological advancements – are melodramatically depicted as destroying literature and culture; he therefore reproduces his distinct idea of the realist mode, as a means to productively limit his fiction to what he believes is its enduring home.

Chapter 3: The Cultural Reproduction of Genre in the Fiction of Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan,
and Colson Whitehead

Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) immediately evokes the language of the hard-boiled detective genre when introducing its protagonist, Meyer Landsman: 'Landsman is a tough guy, in his given way, given to the taking of wild chances. He has been called hard-boiled and foolhardy, a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch. He has faced down shtarkers and psychopaths, has been shot at, beaten, frozen, burned' (2007, p.10). At this early point of the novel Chabon fosters a relationship with genre forms, and makes a connection to the detective genre obvious to the reader. However, it soon becomes apparent that this is not a standard genre novel; the counter-factual, alternate history setting of a temporary Jewish homeland in Alaska clearly differentiates this novel from other texts in the detective genre. Indeed, this is hinted at by the naturalistic use of the Yiddish words 'momzer' and 'shtarkers' in describing Landsman. As J. Madison Davis points out, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union's* blend of genres is reflected in the literary prizes it received as well; the novel won two crime genre awards, The Edgar Allan Poe Award and the Dashiell Hammett Award, as well as the science-fiction prize, the Nebula Award (2008, p.9).⁷³ Chabon's fusion of these genres – the detective and the alternate history subgenre of science fiction, all shot through with an element of magical realism – becomes generative for a wide-ranging exploration of contesting themes: Jewish identity, Israel, 9/11, and terrorism. Furthermore, the relationships with genre Chabon exhibits reflect a wider process: the genrefication of contemporary American fiction.

In the last twenty or so years there have been numerous texts written by otherwise 'literary' novelists which contain genre elements. This chapter focuses on Chabon, Jennifer Egan, and Colson

⁷³ Davis elaborates on just how rare this is: 'The Edgar nominating committees generally choose more popular novels closer to the traditional genres of mystery and suspense, while the Hammett nominations, based on the criterion of "literary excellence," tend to be edgier and more overtly literary' (2008, p.9). Many books are nominated for both awards, but rarely do they win the two at the same time.

Whitehead, but there is wider turn to genre in American fiction, as evidenced by writers like Jonathan Lethem, Gary Shteyngart, and Cormac McCarthy, to name only a few. Genrefication is also demonstrably international: in Canadian fiction, Fredric Jameson notes that Margaret Atwood, ‘can now be considered to be a science-fiction writer’ (2009, p.7). Emily St. John Mandel’s post-apocalyptic *Station Eleven* (2014) is also distinctly generic. Genrefication is also evident in British fiction, as Kazuo Ishiguro has penned both the science fiction *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and the fantasy *The Buried Giant* (2015). There is also David Mitchell’s genre-bending *Cloud Atlas* (2004), and younger British novelists like Ned Beaman similarly display clear relationships with genre, such as in the mystery elements of *Boxer Beetle* (2010). Andrew Hoberek suggests that the phenomenon I label genrefication is ‘a transition in parentheses: not finished but increasingly visible as an emergent phenomenon in which genre fiction resumes its status as a respectable terrain for serious writers’ (2011, p.486). Raymond Williams argues that once there is ‘a certain persistence of typical factors,’ a new movement can be defined in culture (1982, p.199). The persistence of typical factors evident in contemporary American fiction is also conversely the persistence of the typical. Rather than a movement, this chapter suggests that genrefication is the culmination of a gradual encroachment of genre, on both fiction and criticism, throughout recent American literary history. I explore why this process of genrefication is happening in contemporary American letters, and identify what many authors see as generative about fostering these relationships with genre forms.

In order to unpack what is meant by the term genrefication, I first survey a broad swathe of contemporary American writers, and the relative distances recent authors have with this phenomenon. I then explore the ways in which Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) depicts the relationships between genre and art, and generic art and commerce. The chapter then turns to the ways Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead self-consciously

operate as reproducers of genre forms; while there are some interesting areas of overlap, they also display starkly different reasons for the genrefication of their fiction.

I am not the first to use the term ‘genrefication.’ In a polemic for *Mayday* magazine, Claire Harlan Orsi suggests the genrefication of contemporary American fiction works as an ‘elucidation of hidden structures’ (2010). By this she means that it challenges the prestige of literary fiction, and that ‘Genre fiction is frightening to literary writers because it openly references the conditions of its production’ (2010). Orsi argues that ‘literary fiction *is* generic, *does* contain codes, and that these codes *are* for the most part unexpressed’ (2010, italics in original). My use of genrefication is less concerned to show the generic aspects of literary fiction, although there is an interesting interplay between the generic and the literary that I explore later in the chapter. Rather, my usage of genrefication explores what it means to reproduce genre forms in the contemporary, and how this affects our understanding of literary history. Joshua Rothman also uses the term genrefication, and situates this process as part of a wider shift – ‘over the past few years, the rise of the young-adult genre has highlighted a big change in book culture’ (2014). He suggests that the result of this change is that ‘it’s no longer taken for granted that important novels must be, in some sense, above, beyond, or “meta” about their genre. A process of genrefication is occurring’ (2014). Here, Rothman usefully distinguishes how genrefication is different from previous usages of genre, a distinction I return to below. Rothman contends that Northrop Frye’s theories of genre in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) have renewed relevance due to genrefication. Frye offers a fourfold account of genre, where the novel is merely one genre of what he terms ‘prose fiction’; there is also the romance, the anatomy, and the confession (2001, pp.303-315). What Rothman believes makes Frye’s model so useful is that he suggests that all prose fiction contains intermixtures of these four categories: ‘Frye’s way of thinking is especially valuable today because it recognizes that the clash of genre values is fundamental to the novelistic experience’ (2014). Rothman posits that Frye’s

categories can enable a different conversation: ‘maybe, instead of asking why so many grownups read young-adult novels, we ought to be asking why novels are losing, and romances gaining, in appeal’ (2014). However, as Orsi also suggests, genres reference the means of their production, and Frye’s approach does not quite allow for this sociological angle – in a word, his approach is taxonomic.⁷⁴ I use genrefication to denote a slightly different process, and to outline this I must first explain how the term ‘genre’ should be understood here.

Adapting and narrowing some of the theories and terminology critics have offered for the wider understanding of genre is a productive way to theorise specifically about genre fiction. R. B. Gill suggests some useful frameworks for how genre is understood in contemporary academic parlance. He outlines the idea of ‘family resemblances,’ a term taken from the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which in regards to genre is ‘a fuzzy model ... that uses both multiple operators and degrees of similarity’ (2013, p.76). Wittgenstein defines family resemblances as a concept for language that accounts for the ways a word has no singular definition, but connotes a series of interrelated meanings.⁷⁵ He focuses on the word ‘game,’ and all the possible games this term can refer to: ‘we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail’ (1963, p.32). The metaphor of family resemblances is therefore a means to comprehend this ‘complicated network.’ To see genre through this metaphor also relates to the way Williams the processes of cultural reproduction, as Wittgenstein’s analogy similarly suggests that there are resemblances, but not copies, when a genre is reproduced.

Family resemblances continues to be a useful concept as it can be developed to incorporate more radical and unstable understandings of genre, theories which better account for the way

⁷⁴ Structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov takes particular issue with Frye’s categories in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975, pp.11-19).

⁷⁵ This is largely a conversation with, and rejection of, the logical positivism he espouses in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).

cultural reproduction at the level of genre is shown to operate in this chapter. Building off the ideas of Wai Chee Dimock, Ed Folsom describes genre as a rhizomatic concept, in the way Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define the concept in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Folsom outlines the rhizome as: ‘the subterranean stem that grows every which way and represents the nomadic multiplicity of identity – no central root but an intertwined web of roots’ (2007, p.1573). The rhizome is a pertinent concept for genrefication as these writers not only blend genres – as in the hybridity of *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* – but they also move rhizomatically between genres across their careers. I use the phrase ‘relationships with genre forms’ throughout this chapter as it suggests a sense of give and take, of reciprocity, between the author and the genres they work with. For instance, in the case of Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, the detective genre provides his novel with a structure, a style, and character types, while Chabon reciprocally brings his own fascination with what constitutes Jewish identity. Genrefication, then, intends to capture two rhizomatic processes. First, the rhizomatic way that genres form and develop, and second, the way these authors move from genre to genre across each of their texts.

A focus on the genrefication of the contemporary novel allows a different aspect of the postmodern era to be explored, in distinction to how Wallace and Franzen interpret it. As Hoberek suggests, ‘there is a difference between the transitional but still self-consciously “literary” appropriation of popular genres in the work of authors like Barth and Pynchon ... and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves’ (2007, p.238). Jeffrey Williams elaborates further on this generational shift: ‘The use of popular genres differs from that of the postmodernists, who might have stitched in a vignette featuring Mickey Mouse, for instance, as part of the action, but as parody or farce, for shock or humor’ (2016, p.112). Williams defines a key distinction from the previous appropriations of genre forms, by authors such as Thomas Pynchon,

John Barth, Ishmael Reed, and Robert Coover. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, as a mystery, is distinctly more generic, in both style, content, and especially its resolution, than Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for instance. Pynchon's novel is part of what McGurl labels 'meta-genre fiction': 'where a popular genre – romance, western, science fiction, fantasy and detective fiction – is both instantiated and ironized to the point of becoming dysfunctional in the production of its conventional pleasures' (2009, p.217). However, genrefication is not simply a linear development out of the postmodern era. Indeed, one of the central arguments of this chapter is that genrefication reflects a longer, rhizomatic process of reproduction.

Shades of Genrefication and Michael Chabon's Pastiches

Genrefication can be seen in varying degrees across contemporary American fiction. Heather Dubrow proposes approaching works of genre, and genres themselves, through the metaphor of '[the] color spectrum: no one genre, no one hue appears in isolation, and none appears in its purest state' (1982, p.28). Here, Dubrow emphasises – echoing Folsom's image of the 'interconnected web' – that there is no pure example of a single genre. As *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* demonstrates, many different shades of genre can be exhibited in a single text. The metaphor of shades can also be extended to outline the contemporary literary field in regards to genrefication, from the richest to those on a different colour-wheel altogether. In mapping these relationships to genre, the term contemporary denotes authors who started writing anywhere from the late eighties to the present. This period marker stems from the first texts of the writers of focus in this thesis: Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1987), Franzen's *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), and Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988). I do not believe it is helpful to have an exact date or moment that signals when the contemporary begins. Amy Elias convincingly argues that 'our notions of the contemporary might change' if we change what historical event we use to define the

beginning of the contemporary (2016, p.39). However, even this is not exactly right, as Amy Hungerford points out: ‘Political watersheds are one thing, but cultural or aesthetic ones quite another’ (2008, p.411). Hungerford goes on to suggest post-1945 as a periodising marker, but in relation to genrefication, this includes too broad an array of writers, and too many different relationships and approaches to genre. I contend that it is more productive to periodise on the basis of what relationship is being explored, what relative distances are being defined, and which writers are under consideration. With Chabon and Jonathan Lethem being possibly the earliest examples, the late eighties is the moment that defines the scope of this survey.

First to consider are the richest shade, and the focus of this chapter. Hoberek outlines how Chabon is the ‘most visible’ of those who have turned to genre (2011, p.484). He sees Chabon’s career as a gradual rejection of the precepts taught in creative writing workshops, and leans heavily on McGurl’s arguments – and language – to discuss Chabon’s career. He suggests that Chabon’s first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988), is ‘heavily indebted to the approved workshop style,’ and claims that his sophomore work, *Wonder Boys* (1995), demonstrates ‘thematic dissatisfaction with this style, and appreciations of genre fiction’ (2011, p.484).⁷⁶ Hoberek goes on to suggest that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) – which he defines as ‘a meta-generic work of comic-book magic realism’ – evinces an ‘attitude toward genre [that] is more sentimental than ironic.’ He defines Chabon’s later, ‘ironic’ work as the ‘full-on genre fictions *The Final Solution* (2004), *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007), and *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007)’ (2011, p.484).⁷⁷ His description of *Gentlemen of the Road* and *The Final Solution* as ‘full-on genre fictions’ does not address the distinct way Chabon reproduces genre forms in these texts, although it does allude to the ways these texts represent the strongest shade of genrefication.

⁷⁶ Chabon’s first and second novels, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and *Wonder Boys* are campus novels, which McGurl contends is one of ‘the signature genres of the Program Era’ (2009, p.49).

⁷⁷ Unmentioned by Hoberek, Chabon has also written a fantasy, *Summerland* (2002), a novel rich in allusions to myths that is aimed at the Young Adult market.

Gentlemen of the Road is an adventure novel, and in a further declaration of its relationship to popular/past traditions, was released in serialised form in the *New York Review of Books*.⁷⁸ *The Final Solution: A Novel of Detection* – whose subtitle points to its generic aspects – is a clear homage to Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. *Gentlemen of the Road* has a pair of protagonists, Zelikman and Amram, who follow a typical adventure plot, along the lines of Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* (1844). The novel comes to a swashbuckling ending, wherein Zelikman and Amram help the exiled ‘bek,’ Filaq, assume the throne in a dramatic last battle, and the evil deposer is vanquished in a righteous elephant crushing. *The Final Solution* is a mystery novel with a retired Sherlock Holmes as its protagonist. As in Conan Doyle’s texts, previous elaborate cases are hinted at throughout the narrative: ‘The old man had visited Gabriel Park once before ... Then as now it was a question of murder, and there had also been an animal concerned, then – a Siamese cat, painstakingly trained to administer a rare Malay poison with a brush of its whisker against the lips’ (2004, p.55). *The Final Solution* also follows a traditional detective novel plot, which Anna Richardson summarises succinctly as ‘the fundamental triptych of murder-investigation-solution’ (2010, p.122). In this instance, a murder is brought to a reluctant detective, who uses his brilliance to work out who the culprit is, and also to find a boy’s parrot.

These works are not simply instances of what Raymond Williams terms replication. For Williams, with replication ‘it is not that such works are identical, but there is an important sense in which the variations are so trivial that the formal similarities quite outweigh them. There are other cases in which the element of formal reproduction as it were outweighs the specific content’ (1982, p.197). While definitely ‘full-on genre fictions,’ *Gentlemen* and *The Final Solution* can be productively read as pastiches. These contemporary pastiches are distinct from Jameson’s definitions from *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), where he

⁷⁸ Serialisation is making a distinct return to contemporary culture, across TV, film, and many other media. Read Allen & van den Berg (2014) for a discussion of this development.

discusses the ‘well-nigh universal practice’ of pastiche in the postmodern period (1991, p.16). He situates pastiche in dialectical opposition to parody; he claims parody has ‘laughter,’ ‘conviction,’ and a ‘satiric impulse,’ in contrast to the ‘neutral practice of ... mimicry’ of pastiche (1991, p.17). To see all pastiche as neutral undercuts the ways in which this practice can be generative, for both writer and reader. Film theorist Richard Dyer reads pastiche as more than mimicry: ‘pastiche does something beyond replication, but not taken to the point that it becomes parody, ridicule or burlesque ... [pastiche is an] uncertain, but suggestive and productive, place’ (2007, p.54). To Dyer, this ‘place’ of ‘signalled imitation’ is distinctly historical: ‘pastiche’s signalled imitation at once mobilises the qualities of and indicates a relationship with prior works (albeit sometimes immediately prior and even ongoing). In other words, pastiche is always and inescapably historical’ (2007, p.131). In the serialised way it was published, *Gentlemen of the Road* further emphasises the historical roots of its adopted generic frame.⁷⁹ Similarly, *The Final Solution* uses a canonical literary character, and the reader expects this character to resolve this case as he does in all his previous adventures. To pastiche in such a manner brings to the forefront Williams’ assertion that ‘a tradition is the process of reproduction in action’ (1982, p.184). These pastiches clearly signal to readers that they are reproducing – and therefore are modifying – these literary traditions.

In these two texts, Chabon blends generic tropes with real historical events. As Dyer states, this practice serves a particular purpose: ‘[pastiche] reminds us that a framework is a framework, and also that this is enabling as well as limiting – enabling and setting limits to the exercise of transhistorical sympathy’ (2007, p.177). Pastiche defined in this way therefore resonates with Adam Kelly’s contention that genres provide ‘generative limits’ (2015), as these limits provide frameworks that enable particular readerly experiences. *Gentlemen* dramatises a relatively under-

⁷⁹ James Mussell discusses how seriality functioned in nineteenth century periodicals: ‘... seriality imposed a connection with the moment that was lost (or mitigated) when republished in volume form’ (2012, p.54). As Chabon’s novel followed a similar publishing cycle, it can be said that *Gentlemen* is an attempt to evoke this specific publishing practice.

acknowledged moment in history, a 10th century Pogrom in which Zelikman's family were slaughtered. *The Final Solution* brings the backdrop of the Holocaust, both through its provocative title and the boy's parrot, who appears to be reciting the numbers of the trains leaving for the camps. As Anna Richardson argues, *The Final Solution* also questions the conventions of Holocaust narratives: 'Like the popular crime narrative ... the structure of a Holocaust testimony is indeed highly conventionalized, grounded in the "before-during-after" of the narrator's Holocaust experience' (2010, p.160). Pastiche, in the manner Chabon uses it, not only evokes certain historical moments, but brings to the fore the generic conventions of what is being pastiched.⁸⁰ Dyer puts forth that 'Pastiche ... imitates formal means that are themselves ways of evoking, moulding and eliciting feeling, and thus in the process is able to mobilise feelings even while signalling that it is doing so' (2007, p.180). *Gentlemen* aims to elicit sympathy for Zelikman and the trauma of his murdered family, and to delight in his ability to overcome this tragedy and lead a successful coup. The overt artifice of genre forms, then, moulds the reader's affective response – it suggests all will be well for these characters – as the formal limits of the detective and adventure genres demand these expected structures and resolutions. Similarly, in *The Final Solution* the detective form, and the presence of the always successful Holmes, is suggestive that the boy's parrot will be found, and thereby provide some solace to him, even with the context of his horrific experiences of the Holocaust. Pastiche is therefore a self-conscious, metafictional practice, one where the expected forms and resolutions mould the reader's perceptions. These two novels emphasise that these knowingly artificial limits can be generative, for both the writer and the reader. Chabon's pastiches are examples of the richest shade of genrefication.

While Chabon's pastiches imitate the style and form of the genres he works with, Egan self-consciously updates the gothic genre in *The Keep*. This is not a work of pastiche, but an attempt to

⁸⁰ Dennis Johnson's *Nobody Move* (2009) could also be read as a pastiche of the American crime novel.

write a gothic novel set in the present, and one that is representative of contemporary concerns. Egan's text, like Chabon's, begins with a clear demonstration of its relationship to genre, and in the very first paragraph establishes the novel's gothic setting: 'the castle was falling apart, but at 2 a.m. under a useless moon, Danny couldn't see this. What he saw looked solid as hell: two round towers with an arch between them and across that arch was an iron gate that looked like it hadn't been moved in three hundred years or maybe ever' (2006, p.3).⁸¹ The reason Danny is at this castle also echoes Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), as a long-lost relative has invited him; this further proclaims to the reader that Egan's text is part of the gothic tradition. However, as John Freeman points out, *The Keep* is 'a neo-gothic story in which all the things that typically happen to women in that genre – meltdowns, imprisonment – happen instead to a man' (2013, p.368). Egan's way of working with genre throughout her career places her within a similar shade of genrefication to Chabon, but her inversions of these forms means the relationships she forms with genre are slightly different. Like *Gentlemen of the Road*, Egan's science fiction short story 'Black Box' (2012) was released serially. However, while Chabon's serialised novel can be seen as a pastiche of the periodicals of the nineteenth century, Egan's serialised work is distinctly contemporised, as 'Black Box' was released as a series of tweets for *The New Yorker's* twitter account. To reiterate from the introduction, cultural theorist Henry Jenkins discusses how the rise of digital technology does not necessarily lead to unique forms of cultural production, but instead even more cultural reproduction: that we should resist 'technological determinist arguments,' and rather 'insist ... that cultural and social factors shape technology far more than technology shapes culture' (2010, p.xv). In this sense, Egan's work is reflective of how technological usage is shaped by cultural practices. This is particularly important to how Egan uses the gothic genre in *The Keep*; in contrast to Chabon's pastiches, she both gothicises the contemporary, and contemporises the gothic.

⁸¹ All quotations are from this edition.

As well as his zombie horror novel, *Zone One* (2011), Colson Whitehead's texts consistently foster relationships with genre forms. In *Understanding Colson Whitehead* (2014), Derek Maus suggests that Whitehead's 'relationship to literary categories (that is, genres and subgenres) is quite strong and explicit throughout his work' (2014, p.1). His first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), is a fantastical detective novel about elevator inspectors, and *Sag Harbor* (2009) is reminiscent of a coming-of-age narrative, or a 'covert work of Young Adult fiction' as Hoberek suggests (2011, p.485). Whitehead demonstrates varying shades of genre-fication throughout his career, but in *John Henry Days* (2001), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2007), and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Whitehead does depart from popular genre forms.⁸² The final section of this chapter discusses the ways his non-genre texts are thematically consistent with his works of genre.

Although not a focus of this chapter, Jonathan Lethem's texts evidence a similar shade of genre-fication to Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead. He began his career with *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994), a work that, like Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union*, blends detective tropes with science fiction. Lethem's detective novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in both its style and plot, appears to replicate the tropes of the detective genre almost exactly.⁸³ However, Lethem creates an unusually fallible private eye in Lionel Essrog, one with Tourette's syndrome, who lacks the cold, purposeful detection skills of Conan Doyle's Holmes, or Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. While starting off in the cluster of authors who most obviously demonstrate genre-fication, more recent texts such as *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), and the multi-layered saga *Dissident Gardens* (2013) – a novel Lee Konstantinou labels a 'postironic bildungsroman' (2016a, p.44) – Lethem's

⁸² For a discussion of popular fiction, read Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004). His discussion is limited to science fiction, crime, and romance, and he does point that romance is 'the most prolific and bestselling popular genre of all' (2004, p.5). It is curious that romance seems to not be a part of genre-fication, or at least not yet. Interestingly, Jesús Blanco Hidalgo has recently read Franzen's fiction as iterations of the romance genre (2017).

⁸³ This switch to writing genre works has also had interesting knock on effects for the Dewey-decimal system; when getting *Motherless Brooklyn* book from my local library, it was stored in the mystery section, away from Lethem's other work.

trajectory has been away from genrefication. Konstantinou's description also points to the useful distinction between literary genres such as bildungsroman – which as discussed in last chapter, Franzen often employs – and the relationship with popular forms that the authors grouped under genrefication develop. While deeply conventionalised, the bildungsroman does not have the same pulp, popular resonance of the genres Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead work with. Lethem, then, is part of the same cluster as Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead, as he also exhibits varying shades of genrefication in his fiction.⁸⁴

Another case to consider is Mark Danielewski. In the haunted house narrative of *House of Leaves* (2000), he interestingly both subverts the familiarity of genre fiction through his experimental typography, but also meets these expectations through his terrifying content. Danielewski's lineage is more a modernist and postmodernist play with genre, as in the tradition of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), or the aforementioned meta-genre fiction, rather than working within generic, popular, formal limits. With the twenty-seven-volume project *The Familiar* (2015-), he, like Chabon and Egan, is part of a wider contemporary recovery of serialisation. In her review of *The Familiar: Vol. 1 – One Rainy Day in May* (2015), Lindsay Thomas suggests that this series incorporates 'seemingly endless allusions to genres such as fantasy, manga, cyberpunk, science fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction, Victorian realist fiction, and literary theory, as well as to Danielewski's other works' (2015, p.387). Thomas's reading usefully highlights that Danielewski does not so much work with genre, as allude to genre, which is also a useful way to describe the fiction of Junot Díaz, specifically *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Díaz's novel shifts between languages, genres, and styles seemingly at will, and with little explication of what each phrase or term is referring to. However, again, even though heavily indebted to comic books,

⁸⁴ Hoberek suggests that Cormac McCarthy's career works in the opposite direction to Lethem. He suggests: 'the shift from *Blood Meridian* to *The Road* also models the transition from the program era's suspicion of genre to recent writers' embrace of it' (2011, p.496).

Díaz's text is not defined by a specific genre form, and so, like Danielewski he can be seen to allude to genre, rather than working within genre. Danielewski and Díaz therefore embody a lighter shade of genrefication than Chabon, Egan, Whitehead, and Lethem.

Moving away from overt genre fiction, there is another cluster of authors dedicated to what Jeffrey Williams defines as: '[a] return to realist conventions, focusing largely on middle-class family experience, while naturalizing some modernist conventions too (like deftly alternating narrative perspectives) and employing a literary idiom with a certain virtuosity' (2016, p.103). Many of these writers are claimed by Nicholas Dames as part of the 'Theory Generation,' and each of these writers also a relative distance these from genre, as well as theory. Franzen is distinct from this cluster as his work, as explored in the last chapter, is a recovery of a specific type of realism. These authors are as comfortable as those discussed so far in representing popular culture and its influences, but do not so readily utilise generic, popular *forms*. Texts of this shade of genrefication includes Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (2010). Like Spiotta, Ferris, Foer, and Wayne, Ben Lerner has demonstrated his usage and acceptance of pop culture – the title of his second novel, *10:04* (2014), refers to the film *Back to the Future* (1985) – but does not work within the limits of generic forms. This cluster is therefore tenuously connected to genrefication; they represent the influence of popular culture on their characters and language, but they do not 'inhabit' popular forms in the same way as the authors of the richest shade of genrefication do so.

In the final cluster are authors who are simply divorced from genrefication entirely. This can only include those who not only do not work with genre forms, but also are unaffiliated to any institution. As McGurl illustrates, creative writing programs reproduce their own distinct genres: the campus novel, the portrait of the artist, the workshop story collection, the ethnic family saga, meta-

genre fiction, various forms of prison narrative, and the short short story (2009, p.49). To be entirely distant from genrefication a writer would also need to be completely separate from the demands that publishing houses place on writers (as is explored in the Chabon section of this chapter). One writer who fits this description is Evan Dara, whose experimental texts – *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995), *The Easy Chain* (2008), and *Flee* (2013) – are marked by a distinct, Gertrude Stein-like style of unending prose. While popular culture is naturalistically referenced throughout these texts, his work is almost an active resistance to genrefication, or even being conventional in any way. Dara’s work can be seen as a reproduction of *avant-garde* norms; not only in his anti-conventional style, but in that he publishes his work on his own press, he does not do interviews – there is even a theory that Evan Dara is a pseudonym of Richard Powers – and his texts are keenly political, and consistently experimental.⁸⁵ No text is free from the reproduction of some sort of literary conventions, as Dara’s *avant-gardism* demonstrates, but Dara is a contemporary American writer who consciously distances his work from genrefication.

In regards to genrefication and the authors studied in the other chapters of this thesis, Wallace and Franzen have quite contrasting relationships. Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* could be productively read as part of a science fiction, dystopian lineage, and, considering the prevalence of ghosts and grotesqueries, possibly as part of the gothic tradition.⁸⁶ However, like Danielewski, his work alludes to, rather than works within, genre. The melodramatic mode that Franzen’s work evinces is a clear attempt to follow conventions, in a similar manner to the way these authors work

⁸⁵ One of the few contemporary authors to highlight Dara’s evident brilliance is Franzen, whose work would seem to be so contrary to Dara’s texts (Franzen, ‘FC2,’ 1996). For what I believe is the only criticism written on Dara’s *The Lost Scrapbook*, read Green (2005). In regards to the Richard Powers theory, if that is the case, then I surely cannot be the first to question why Powers does not just write ‘Evan Dara’ books exclusively (although it is also true he would therefore struggle to make a living from his writing).

⁸⁶ I am indebted to Melissa Holton’s paper ‘The Darkly Delicious Thing: Explorations of the Gothic in *Infinite Jest*’ at The David Foster Wallace Conference 2016 for pointing out the gothic elements of Wallace’s texts.

with genre. However, he does not create new formal relationships in each text; he changes themes and motifs, but not his form. As Irish author Colm Tóibín suggests in his review of *Purity*: ‘The structure follows the same system as Franzen’s earlier books *The Corrections* and *Freedom*’ (2015). In contrast, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead explore many of the same themes, but dramatically change their form in each of their novels. In their different iterations of genrefication, their texts respond to three different limits and pressures of cultural reproduction: Chabon’s work explores institutional and market forces, Egan looks at technological pressures, and Whitehead’s work explores the role of power in defining how popular culture is reproduced. It is the realization of the potential of limits as a means for a writer to assert agency, against the limits and pressures of the processes of reproduction, that links the authors who display the strongest shade of genrefication to Wallace and Franzen.

The Genrefication of Literary History

Author Lev Grossman is one of the most avid proponents for the contemporary turn to genre fiction. As the writer of the fantasy novel *The Magicians* (2009), he is also part of this development. He contends that genrefication represents a shift from the precepts of modernism: ‘We were trained—by the Modernists, who else – to expect a literary revolution to be a revolution of the *avant-garde*: typographically altered, grammatically shattered, rhetorically obscure. Difficult, in a word’ (2009). Grossman diagnoses the same issue with difficulty as Franzen, but rather than realist conventions, he turns to popular genres, which he terms ‘a revolution from below’ (2012). Grossman argues that ‘the true postmodern novel is here, hiding in plain sight’ (2009). He sees literary history in an almost fatalistic manner: a linear progression from modernist difficulty, to postmodern meta-genre fiction, which culminates in contemporary genrefication.

Arthur Krystal has queried Grossman's contentions. Krystal makes the distinction between writers of genre fiction and the contemporary turn to genre: 'It seems to me that Chabon, Egan, and [the British novelist Kazuo] Ishiguro don't so much work in genre as with genre' (2012b). None of the authors mentioned work in a specific genre, like Chandler or Hammett, but, in an auteur-like fashion, hop from genre to genre. Indeed, Whitehead accentuates this auteur analogy in a recent interview with *The Guardian*: 'Growing up watching Kubrick, it seems like a normal thing. You do your dark comedy, you do your war movie, you do your science fiction movie, and it's all accessing different parts of your personality' (Dean, 2016). Following Krystal, genrefication concerns authors working *with* numerous genres, rather than in specific genres continuously in their careers. Krystal also points out how Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, David Goodis, H. P. Lovecraft, and Philip K. Dick – all historically seen as 'pulp' writers – have been recently ordained by the Library of America (2012a). This alludes to the two processes the term genrefication incorporates: first, the genrefication of literary history, and second, the *gentrification* of genre fiction. Leif Sorensen points out how detective fiction, such as Chandler's and Hammett's, has been seen to bridge 'the "great divide"' [as labelled by Andreas Huyssen] between modernism and mass culture' (2010, p.501).⁸⁷ Sorensen recovers the importance of the fantasy/science fiction/horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft to suggest that other genre texts also bridge this gap.⁸⁸ Rather than developing out of postmodern fiction, then, as Grossman suggests, genrefication suggests one should look back, question periodisation, and revise and expand the literary canon.

Sorensen argues that detective fiction has long-held an air of literary and critical prestige. For other popular genres, this has been a slower process. John Cawelti, possibly the foundational

⁸⁷ Jameson's *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (2016) argues essentially the same point as Sorensen makes here.

⁸⁸ There is also 'The New Weird' movement in fiction, whose most famous proponent is the British fantasy author, China Miéville, which recovers this Lovecraftian inheritance. Read Marshall (2016) for a summary of this movement: she intriguingly connects this 'weirdness' to the realist and naturalist texts of the late nineteenth-century.

theorist of what he terms 'formula fiction' suggests: 'Because of their association with the times of relaxation, entertainment, and escape, this type of story has been largely ignored by literary scholars and historians or left to the mercy of sociologists, psychologists, and analysts of mass culture' (1976, p.1). Since Cawelti, there have been numerous critical works that focus specifically on genre fiction. Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982) goes as far as to complain that too much criticism was focused on popular culture, even in the early 1980s: 'Our age has a great appetite for studies of writing that is hardly worth studying. Thrillers, detective stories, science fiction, advertisements, pop poetry, pornography ...' (1982, p.10). He distinguishes between the literary and the subliterary, and argues that we must maintain a concept of literary distinction, in order to guarantee that the educational institutions culturally reproduce, maintain, and reinforce this concept of value: 'Shall we in the name of anti-elitism deprive the people of their legitimate inheritance?' (1982, p.10). While he largely disparages genre fiction, Fowler singles out science fiction as a legitimate area of study (1982, p.226).⁸⁹ In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Sedgwick states that her study aims to 'make it easier for the reader of "respectable" nineteenth-century novels to write "Gothic" in the margin next to certain especially interesting passages ...' (1980, p.4). This gradual encroachment of genre into academic study is part of the process of genrefication; there has been a slow acceptance that any author can work with genre, and genre fiction need not be a distinct area of study for literary scholars. Furthermore, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead all attended college as popular forms were beginning to be discussed in this way. Whitehead even acknowledges this, but claims that 'theory' confirmed what he felt about popular forms, rather than the other way round (I return to this in the Whitehead section) (Selzer: 2008, p.398). Genrefication intends to suggest not just the gradual

⁸⁹ See Elana Gomel's discussion of *avant-garde* genre fiction for a summary of how science fiction became central to many critics, specifically Brian McHale, Darko Suvin, and Fredric Jameson (2012, p.395).

encroachment of generic forms upon American fiction, but also upon literary studies. A focus on genre enables the critic to turn back and question periodisation – to query the reproduction of a tradition in action.

In distinction to Wallace and Franzen, the authors I group under genrefication are not part of the post-postmodernist group Burn describes, or simply a development out of meta-genre fiction as Grossman postulates. Hoberek suggests that the contemporary turn to genre complicates ‘both a modernist/postmodernist understanding of twentieth-century literary history as a linear progression,’ and also ‘the counter-model of literary history, articulated most forcefully by Gordon Hutner, in which the critical attention given to difficult or experimental fiction in fact belies the ongoing dominance of realism’ (2011, p.486). As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, in *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920 – 1960* (2009) Hutner excavates the forgotten history of ‘thousands’ of middlebrow texts that academia usually ignores. Echoing Cawelti’s language for why scholars used to ignore genre fiction, Hutner believes critics have overlooked these hugely popular works because they are ‘the widely read, easily comprehensible fiction that Americans chose for their edification and literary entertainment’ (2008, p.1). As Hoberek points out: ‘The return to genre fiction—which is, among other things, a return to the pre-modernist canon of literary respectability—might encourage us to pause over the question of how separate these two literary histories [of experimental and middlebrow] in fact are’ (2011, p.486). As Hutner shows, literary history has been reproduced in a desired way; genrefication further complicates this history, and brings into focus many forgotten genre works.

One of the main reasons literary history has been reproduced in such a way is due to the way universities teach the canon. In an essay entitled ‘Imaginary Homelands,’ Chabon discusses his experiences as ‘an English major, and a regular participant in undergraduate fiction-writing workshops’ (2008, p.188). Chabon suggests that these workshops valorise some approaches as more

worthy than others: ‘I was taught – or perhaps in fairness it would be more accurate to say I learned – that science fiction was not serious fiction, that a writer of mystery novels might be loved but not revered, that if I meant to get serious about the art of fiction I might set a novel in Pittsburgh but never on Pluto’ (2008, p.188). Here, Chabon proposes that creative writing programs reproduce a desired continuity, and in doing so marginalise other writing styles and modes. As mentioned in the introduction, in *The Program Era* McGurl discusses how such programs lack ‘genre consciousness,’ and do marginalise popular genre forms (2009, p.306).⁹⁰ He goes on to state that this lack is part of the inheritance of modernism: ‘it did not take its cultural bearings from the consumption habits of the lower middle class, but rather from the modernist tradition as it had been institutionalised in and as the New Criticism’ (2009, p.306). McGurl’s account therefore offers an institutional, sociological grounding for the influence of modernism Grossman cites; modernism has been reified, canonised, and reproduced in a specific way by these programs, similar to the ways Franzen reifies and recovers a period of realism. Chabon situates his turn to genre as partly a reaction to the ways these programs, and the academy more generally, reproduce literary history.

When he discusses his turn to genre, Chabon proclaims that his hope was to find a ‘home’ for his fiction (2008, p.170). He therefore uses the same language as Franzen to tell the story of his turn to genre. Chabon equates his search for a literary home with his personal exploration of his Jewish identity: ‘For a long time now I’ve been busy, in my life and in my work, with a pair of ongoing, overarching investigations: into my heritage – rights and privileges, duties and burdens – as a Jew and as a teller of Jewish stories; and into my heritage as a lover of genre fiction’ (2008, p.170). Ultimately, he merges these investigations: ‘I failed to notice what now seems clear, namely that there was really only one investigation all along. One search, with a sole objective: a home, a

⁹⁰ McGurl does discuss the few programs that are specifically focused on genre fiction, namely web-only classes – which can contain 6000 students at a time – and the Clarion workshop, championed by its most famous graduate, science fiction author Octavia Butler (2009, p.306, p.395).

world to call my own' (2008, p.170). *The Final Solution* neatly embodies Chabon's merging of his two personal quests, with the obvious connotations of the first half of the title, and then the generic aspects pointed to in the novel's subtitle, *A Story of Detection*.

But to cite a reaction to the Program Era as the defining reason for the process of genrefication does not fit every author discussed in this chapter. As well as the relative distances they all display from universities, Jeffrey Williams suggests that 'McGurl's now canonical work is in many ways too monolithic an explanation of the shift in fiction as a result of creative writing. It was not just creative writing—and these programs varied more than McGurl acknowledges—but shifts in US culture outside the "system"' (2016, p.120). He notes that the influence of publishing houses is understudied; however, as Raymond Williams argues, one should be careful not to overstate the importance of institutions to reproduction: 'But if we deduce significant cultural relations from the study of institutions alone, we shall be in danger of missing some important cases in which cultural organization has not been, in any ordinary sense, institutional' (1982, p.35). Indeed, to see Chabon's work as a simple rejection of The Program Era does a disservice to many of the reasons he gives for why he works with genre, as well as the implications of those reasons. Jeffrey Williams analyses contemporary fiction under the concept of generations, and specifically, what he terms Generation Jones. Developed by author Jonathan Pontell, Jones is the generation that lies between the boomers and Generation X. Williams suggests that 'Theirs is the fiction of those who grew up with mass culture so they see it as a normal part of their world, rather than a questionable, degraded, or oppositional one' (2016, p.112). Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead demonstrate how a defining feature of genrefication is a lack of alarm over popular culture. They demonstrate the radical possibilities of popular genres, and, as Adam Kelly succinctly describes it, that genre forms provide 'generative limits' for their fiction (2015).

Since his turn to genre, Chabon's nonfiction regularly addresses what he believes are undervalued parts of literary history: M. R. James, Philip Pullman, the comics of Howard Chaykin, and many more.⁹¹ Like Franzen, he uses his status as a public intellectual to draw attention to art he feels strongly about. In one such essay, he decries the lack of contemporary ghost stories, arguing that Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) was 'only the best of a good two dozen that ... [James] produced during the heyday of the form, in the latter half of the nineteenth century' (2008, p.122). This demonstrates how authors such as Franzen can look at the same era as Chabon, and even the same authors – in this case Henry James – and yet cite a completely different form of influence. Following McGurl, Hoberek sees the Program Era as reproducing a specific understanding of Henry James' work. This results in 'the twentieth century, and eventually the creative writing program,' which inherits 'a commitment to both realist representation and continual stylistic innovation' (2011, p.486). Chabon laments that the version of literary history taught in many writing programs distorts James's *oeuvre*, ignoring his genre fiction like *The Turn of the Screw*, or his gothic novella *The Jolly Corner* (1908). In acknowledging the presence of genre fiction by these respected authors, we complicate and contradict many linear literary histories, such as the Program Era's version of James, and late nineteenth century fiction more broadly.

Like the concept of cultural reproduction more broadly, genrefication works alongside critical theories that destabilise and question periodisation. There has been a shift in modernist studies to recognise the influence of genre on many modernist authors, which Sorensen's work on Lovecraft is reflective of. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz characterise this shift as the 'vertical' expansion of modernist studies, where 'once quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been reconsidered' (2008, pp.737-738). This not only expands the focus onto writers of genre fiction during the modernist period, but also the genre fiction of

⁹¹ Chabon's essay collection, *Maps and Legends* (2008), is essentially a collection where he discusses writers and artists he believes should be better known.

canonical writers, such as Gertrude Stein's detective novella, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* (1948).⁹² The lens of genre suggests a richer and more nuanced literary history than is often described and reproduced in literary studies; it points to a persisting, encroaching genrefication of literary history, and the rhizomatic nature of literary development. McGurl complicates the program era narrative through the figure of Joyce Carol Oates, who he notes has 'few literary progeny of note' (2011, p.312). He argues that 'Oates's fiction presents no neat separation between genre fiction, middlebrow fiction, and high literary fiction,' and it is her hyper-productivity and lack of 'disciplinary shaming' that has led to her marginalisation (2009, p.308). Similarly, in an in memoriam essay for *The LA Review of Books*, Kelly discusses the lack of scholarly attention paid to E. L. Doctorow. He cites the manner in which 'many of his books read initially like particularly finely written versions of standard genre tales,' but these generic forms obscure that 'Doctorow is using genre conventions to achieve structural effects and insights into broader non-generic subject matter that wouldn't be possible in the same way by ignoring those conventions' (2015). In using genre in this way, Kelly suggests that 'Doctorow points ahead to later developments in American fiction' (2015). Genrefication therefore draws out a different historical timeline of authors to the one Wallace and Franzen cite – as in the difficult, experimental, and ironic works of Pynchon, Gaddis, and Barth – as neither seem to acknowledge Doctorow as part of postmodern fiction.⁹³ More broadly, genrefication enables scholars to question and reach outside of the typical texts of the literary periods of modernity. By self-consciously reproducing generic, popular forms in the contemporary, the authors discussed in this chapter point to the ways scholars should question reproduction in literary studies – how they tell the story of literature – and reassess the role of genre throughout literary history.

⁹² For a reading of Stein's genre work, see Levay (2008).

⁹³ The academic silence regarding Doctorow is quite curious, because – as Kelly also notes – two canonical works of postmodern theory – Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991) and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) – both describe postmodernism via Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975).

The Value of Escape in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* tells the story of the development of a comic book, *The Escapist*, by Josef Kavalier and Sam Clay. In doing so it explores the relationships of history to genre, and generic art to commerce. The popular form of the superhero comic is depicted as escapism – hence the title of the comic – from the horrific realities of World War Two, especially for the Jewish creators and writers of these comics. While *Kavalier and Clay* underscores his belief in the underappreciated value of comics and genre fiction, this is not to say that Chabon celebrates every iteration of genre in popular culture. In his nonfiction, he speaks disparagingly of genre in films in particular: 'Thanks to the heavy reliance of the new mass media (film, then radio and TV) on adapting and exploiting the more plot-centred literary genres ... every blockbuster summer film of the past twenty years, almost without exception, fits safely into one or another of the old standby categories – "genre" absorbed the fatal stain of entertainment' (2008, p.19). Chabon sees entertainment as something writers need to claim back: 'Yet entertainment – as I define it, pleasure and all – remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates each of us from everybody else' (2008, p.19). Like Franzen and Wallace, Chabon diagnoses a disconnect between writer and reader, and his turn to genre in order to entertain in many ways echoes Franzen's invocation of contract fiction. To bridge this gap he believes artists must 'reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection' (2008, p.17). Chabon aims to re-appropriate 'the fatal stain of entertainment' for literature, which points to a central aspect of genrefication: that these writers attempt to exist in a liminal space between the literary and the generic.

Kavalier and Clay fictionalises the birth and development of the comic book, and Chabon outlines how it began as what he terms a 'mongrel' art form: 'the comic book of 1939 was,

artistically and morphologically, in a far more primitive state. As with all mongrel art forms and pidgin languages, there was, in the beginning, a necessary, highly fertile period of genetic and grammatical confusion' (2000, p.75).⁹⁴ This neatly embodies the rhizomatic development of new artistic media. The narrator describes how the earliest comics suffered from 'a bad case of the carbon copies. Everything was a version, sometimes hardly altered at all, of a newspaper strip or a pulp-radio hero' (p.77). This is, in Williams' terms, reproduction as replication. Chabon depicts the comic as initially dismissed as a derivative object: 'From the beginning, there was a tendency among educators, psychologists, and the general public to view the comic book as merely a debased offspring of the newspaper comic strip' (p.75). This disdainful reception of the comic book is immediately contrasted with a wistful description of the form during its Golden Age: 'in the full flower of its since-faded glory, read by presidents and Pullman porters, a proud American cousin, in indigenous vitality and grace, of baseball and jazz' (p.75). At this early point of the text, Chabon indicates the narrative arc of the novel; that the comic book will develop from this mongrel state to become – at least in Chabon's view – as important as jazz and baseball to American cultural history.

The novel is loosely based on the real development of the comic book: Chabon references real events, and Sam and Josef also resemble the actual creators of *Superman*, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel.⁹⁵ At the beginning of the novel, Chabon cites Sam's influences as distinct mixture of high and low culture: as a child Sam was 'an omnivorous reader with a self-improving streak, coy with Stevenson, London, and Wells, dutiful about Wolfe, Dreiser, and Dos Passos, idolatrous of S. J. Perelman' (p.4). Sam's reasons for reading these texts echoes Chip's reading of critical theory in *The Corrections*; Sam reads these as 'self-improvement,' which masks his 'guilty appetite [for]

⁹⁴ All quotations are from this edition.

⁹⁵ For a definitive history of the comic book, see Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz's *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (2014).

those two-bit argosies of blood and wonder, the pulps. He had tracked down and read every biweekly issue of *The Shadow* going back to 1933, and he was well on his way to amassing complete runs of *The Avenger* and *Doc Savage*' (p.4). Chabon's description of Sam as an 'omnivorous reader' slightly complicates Jeffrey Williams' contention – which he draws from the sociologists Richard Peterson and Roger Kern – that the contemporary generation show a more 'omnivorous range' in their reading and cultural tastes (2016, p.115). Chabon suggests through Sam that it is not that people in Sam's era were not reading popular fiction, but that they felt compelled to conceal this love of popular texts – it was seen as immoral, and a distraction. Sam's desire to hide his love of genre serials contrasts markedly with how open authors such as Chabon and Whitehead are with their love of generic and popular works. Contemporary authors are not fearful or ashamed of their personal omnivorous range, as Junot Díaz's multivocality perhaps most clearly demonstrates. The manner in which these authors play with popular forms reflects the encroachment of popular forms into the academy, and also a broader cultural appreciation for the products of popular culture.

Halfway through the novel, when they have achieved huge success with *The Escapist* and numerous other publications, Sam and Josef discuss going to Hollywood to write films. This conversation reveals Sam's concerns regarding the cultural legitimacy of his work: "We could move to *Hollywood*, Joe. That could *lead* to something. It could be the start of something really *legit*" (p.356, italics in original). Josef responds to Sam with: "Something legit ... I know that's important to you" (p.356). Sam's desire to be seen as 'legit' – which resonates uncomfortably with his concealed homosexuality – defines much of his career. Chabon depicts this drive as a hangover from his 'self improvement regime,' and how Sam has learnt that some art forms are more 'legit' than others. It is also important that Josef is not American; he has not been raised with the same concept of legitimacy as Sam, he has a relative distance from these values, and sees all he is doing

as art. Chabon's novel conveys that the comic book is 'legit' by weaving a dense tapestry of all the artistic and cultural influences from the period that the comic book developed.⁹⁶ For instance, in a footnote that breaks the fourth wall, Chabon suggests: 'The still-fresh memory of Harry Houdini in the American mind thirteen years after his death – of his myth, his mysterious abilities, his physique, his feats, his dedicated hunting down and exposure of frauds and cheats – is a neglected source of the superhero idea in general; an argument in its favour, as it were' (p.120). Here, Chabon demonstrates that genres are not mere escapism, or rather, not only entertaining escapism. Instead, genres develop in response to notable historical figures, and reflect specific cultural moments. Genres are therefore particularly responsive to – and reflective of – the context in which they arise.

Later in the novel, at a party surrounded by artists, Sam and Josef are told by the art dealer Harkoo that their work is "quite surreal." Unsure what this means, Sam checks with Josef – "That's good, right?" – and Chabon's wider point is that superhero comic books came out of a cultural moment that also produced the surrealist movement (p.235). Chabon creates other points of historical context; Josef's artwork is greatly affected by seeing Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), and suggests that *Citizen Kane* is conceptually a comic book: 'In this one crucial regard – its inextricable braiding of image and narrative – *Citizen Kane* was like a comic book' (p.362). Writing under the name Rose Saxon, Josef's love interest – and later Sam's wife – Rosa Saks, has her work compared to the starkly colourful 1950s melodramas of the director Douglas Sirk (p.545). Chabon references a real book of comic book criticism, Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (1995), but adds an account of his own character's work as reflective of Sirk's aesthetic. In this moment, Chabon is pointing ahead to the later cultural acceptance of the comic book, which could be said to culminate in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1992) winning the

⁹⁶ As Daniel Levine points out, *Kavalier and Clay* has numerous echoes of Homer's *Odyssey*, so he also ties his own text to a 'high' literary tradition (2010). For a discussion of Chabon in the wider context of the comic-book novel, read Singer (2008).

Pulitzer Prize. It is also worth noting that Sirk's melodramas also only began to receive critical recognition long after their first release. Chabon therefore relates the comics of Rose Saxon to Sirk's work to suggest the delayed appreciation of comics is similar to the gradual appreciation of Sirk's films.⁹⁷ American superhero comics did not appear out of a vacuum; indeed, they borrowed lore from famous cultural figures, techniques from artistic movements, and imagery from aesthetically lauded filmmakers.

Chabon's novel echoes what Heather Dubrow asserts about genre more generally: 'However detailed the conventions associated with a literary form may be, they represent not merely an injunction to adopt certain topoi but also an invitation to adapt those topoi to the aesthetic and social conditions of one's age and to the predispositions of one's own temperament' (1982, p.14). Similarly, *Kavalier and Clay* suggests that the comic book is part of a specific 'structure of feeling', which, to reiterate, refers to the idea that there are many competing concepts at any point of history, and that any particular product of culture – such as a comic – will contain the footprint of these other voices within it. Chabon's novel depicts the ways in which *The Escapist* changes dramatically under the stewardship of George Deasey, and Josef and Sam allow this to happen because they move on from writing the superhero comic in response to being so overwhelmed by *Citizen Kane*. Genres provide both generative limits for their author and readers, and also reflect a structure of feeling.

The Escapist originally gives Josef a forum to fight, and imagine a victory against, the ever-growing threat of the Nazis to his family, who are stuck in Europe. The dichotomy of the hero/villain narrative that develops is depicted as a result of the demarcation of clear sides in the war against fascism. Subtlety is not their intention, and Sam and Josef argue with Anapol until he agrees for the cover of the first edition of *The Escapist* to depict Adolf Hitler being punched in the

⁹⁷ Sirk's stock began to rise in the early 1970s. His films are an excellent example of an earlier era of scholarly recovery. For a discussion of the importance of Sirk's films, see Klinger (1994).

face.⁹⁸ In *Film and Culture: Hollywood and Hitler 1933 – 1939* (2015) Thomas Doherty outlines the comparative silence of the film industry in regards to the rise of Nazi Germany – which, as I discuss below, *Kavalier and Clay* dramatises – and Chabon implies here that comics, being outside of the established culture, were able to say things that films could not. Early in the novel, Josef questions whether such portrayals are a waste of time: ‘Walking around talking and making up a lot of nonsense about someone who could liberate no one and nothing but smudgy black marks on a piece of cheap paper. What was the point of it? Of what use was walking and talking and smoking cigarettes?’ (p.135). After the war, Josef realises there is an ameliorative purpose to comics:

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history – his home – the usual charge levelled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. (p.575, italics in original)

Josef’s appreciation for the utility of popular art embraces Jameson’s assertion in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) that popular, generic art are instances of ‘wish-fulfillment’ (1981, p.183). Chabon’s novel suggests wish-fulfillment, if we can call it that, can serve a distinct purpose; there is a value in the escapism these popular forms provide. John Fiske, a theorist of popular culture, persuasively argues that ‘There is no mass culture, there are only alarmist and pessimistic theories of mass culture’ (2010, p.140). He asserts that such theories ignore ‘the cultural processes by which the people cope with’ what he terms ‘the industrial and ideological imperatives of the power-bloc.’ What happens in this interaction is that people ‘either reject them or turn them into popular culture’ (2010, p.140).⁹⁹ Popular, generic texts provide Josef

⁹⁸ This is a homage to the cover of the first *Captain America*, released in 1940, which depicts Hitler being punched in the face. Captain Marvel also fought on this front – his archenemy was actually named ‘Captain Nazi.’ Canada also had ‘Johnny Canuck’ do the exact same thing.

⁹⁹ Daniel Horowitz provides a history of why contemporary scholars utilise the term ‘consumer culture,’ rather than ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture: ‘[it] includes not only the intangibles of creative production but also the material objects and the institutions such as department stores and amusement parks that proffered commercial goods and experiences’ (2012, p.2). I utilise the

with a welcome escape; they enable him to momentarily exist in a world where the horrific events that happened to his family and home city did not occur. This is in stark contrast to the manner that popular texts are seen as fostering delusional conceptions of reality in the works of Howells and Crane, as discussed in the previous chapter. The entertaining, generic nature of comic books is therefore shown to develop as a reaction to a specific historical event, and serve as escapism for its readers. Chabon demonstrates that entertainment need not be a stain, and can be a means for fiction to connect with its readers.¹⁰⁰

Josh Lukin has coined the term ‘genre-poaching’ in order to explain the contemporary turn to genre (2010, p.1). He sees this poaching process as a grab bag of possibilities, where authors enact the collapse of the high and low binary many have seen in postmodern fiction. However, there is an issue with Lukin’s term; poaching suggests a grabbing of forms, without a mention of how they merge with contemporary concerns and developments in fiction. ‘Poaching’ therefore depoliticises and dehistoricises the use of genre in contemporary fiction. The term genrefication is more nuanced in this respect as it suggests a slow encroachment of genre. Moreover, poaching also resonates with an idea of taking something illegally, and raises the question of who owns these forms. Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead do not see the ways they inhabit genres as transgression in any way. ‘Inhabiting’ a genre is not a neutral act, as Dubrow outlines: ‘When an author chooses to write in a given genre, he is not merely responding to the achievements and the pronouncements of others; he himself is issuing certain statements about his art and often about art in general’ (1982, p.10). Like with Sam and Josef’s decisions to write these comics in a certain way, genrefication must be discussed as a conscious choice, one that proclaims the value of the chosen genre, the self-

Fiskean terminology of ‘popular’ throughout as it incorporates the idea that these cultural products do not need to always be consumed; they are ubiquitous, and are regularly experienced without an act of consumption.

¹⁰⁰ In this way this work is similar to Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), a text which, like Chabon’s novel, uses the good and evil dichotomy that is so overt in the comic book to discuss Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic in stark terms.

consciously chosen limits, to the contemporary moment. Poaching also obscures the way in which each engagement with a genre builds upon that genre's history – to be a part of a tradition in action.

Compromise Aesthetics in *Kavalier and Clay*

Kavalier and Clay also portrays the complex relationship of generic art and commerce. In his Foucauldian update of Dubrow's work, John Frow terms this the 'material support' of genres (2015, p.148). As Raymond Williams discusses, when art is 'pre-selected for massive reproduction,' it displays an evident, and difficult to parse, relationship with the market (1982, p.104). Chabon neatly describes this volatility in regards to the superhero genre: 'In later years, in other hands, *The Escapist* was played for laughs. Tastes changed, and writers grew bored, and all the straight plots had been pretty well exhausted. Later writers and artists, with the connivance of George Deasey, turned the strip into a peculiar kind of inverted parody of the whole genre of the costumed hero' (pp.358-359). This passage suggests how the reproduction of genres can be affected through numerous means, such as the emergence of new publishing technologies or, in this case, Deasey's editorship. It also details that genres change in response to shifts in audience tastes, or writers' predilections. By dramatising the effects of these developments, Chabon's novel represents the complex relationship between popular art and commercial demands. In his critique of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983), Lee Konstantinou argues that Hyde's text is in many ways an attempt to wash over this complex relationship: 'Calculate, Hyde seems to say, but not too much. Get paid if you can, but don't labor (or *don't only labor*) for the money' (2016b, p.134, italics in original). In contrast to Hyde's work, Chabon does not obfuscate this relationship. In 'Imaginary Homelands' Chabon even states that 'No regime or censor stands between me and the publication of my work – nothing but my own shortcomings and the invisible hand of the marketplace' (2008, p.169). His own shortcomings can be read here as referring to the

reasons he gives for his turn to genre: his relative distance from creative writing programs, his desire to entertain and connect with his audience, and his love of popular forms. The second half of this statement points to the relationship between art and the demands of the market, a relationship he elucidates in *Kavalier and Clay*.

In an essay where he explores a forgotten history of the short story, Chabon briefly mentions ‘the overwhelming role ... that business decisions play in the evolution of literary form’ (2008, p.25). He extends this point to explore why the ‘arrant and effective hackwork’ of Arthur Conan Doyle has ‘endured so long.’ He asserts that ‘[this] testifies ... not only to Conan Doyle’s art and storytelling gift, and to the magic of the central heroic duo, but to the quickening force, neglected, derided, and denied, of money and the getting of it on a ready imagination’ (2008, p.37). For Chabon, hackwork – work explicitly written for profit – is not necessarily meritless or bad, as Conan Doyle’s enduring reputation demonstrates.¹⁰¹ The pulp writing of George Deasey in *Kavalier and Clay* further indicates this: ‘He professed to despise the pulps and never lost an opportunity to ridicule himself for earning his living by them, but all the same he took the work seriously, and his novels, each of them composed in two or three weeks, were written with verve and an erudite touch’ (p.156). Chabon is not concerned with the issues Franzen expresses about the transience of popular forms, or the negative habits Wallace sees popular art as inculcating. Instead, Chabon embraces the affective potential of artistic forms that are inherently commoditised and mass-produced. One of the key elements of the turn to genrefication – as will become apparent in the subsequent discussion of Jennifer Egan – is the mythic nature of what Jameson terms ‘authentic artistic expression,’ whatever authentic refers to (something Jameson does not define) (1981,

¹⁰¹ Serialisation also brings this relationship to the fore. Tom Wolfe discusses that when writing *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in its original serial form, the pressure of producing fiction in such a way. He states that ‘producing a chapter every two weeks’ felt like he had ‘a gun at ... [his] temple’ (1989, p.54).

p.93).¹⁰² John Fiske's indirect rebuke of Jameson is a better way to grasp how the authors assessed in this chapter understand the role of popular and generic forms: 'Popular culture is not consumption, it is culture – the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities' (2010, p.19). *Kavalier and Clay* explicates the ways in which commodification relates to, but does not absolutely define, popular cultural products like the comic book.

After Josef and Sam convince Anapol to fund their first comic, they constantly have to convince him of the financial worth of any changes they wish to make. Daniel Punday situates this tension in the wider context of novels about comics, and suggests that works such as *Kavalier and Clay* 'seem fascinated by the ultimately metaphysical problem of personal identity in the marketplace: How do you understand yourself if your identity or the creative products through which you define it can be owned by someone else?' (2008, p.298). Similar to Punday, I suggest that Chabon's novel addresses how producers of popular art have to constantly negotiate their form and content within publishing and market constraints. In doing so, his work echoes Rachel Greenwald Smith's idea that publishers and critics regularly celebrate an aesthetic of compromise: 'the belief that contemporary art is at its most socially relevant when it forges compromises between strategies traditionally associated with the mainstream on the one hand and those associated with experimental departures from the mainstream on the other' (2014). In the essay 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story,' Chabon laments the compromises publishers make in marketing genre fiction: 'This emphasis on the conventionality, the formulaic

¹⁰² In his definitions of New Sincerity fiction, Adam Kelly similarly notes a turn against valuing authenticity: 'If authenticity can be defined as that which cannot be commodified, then it appears that nothing even remotely public can by now remain authentic. And language is inescapably public, as the contemporary writer knows well, a fact that presents nagging problems for a literature that wants to be original, affective, humanly and politically vital' (2016, p.202).

nature of genre fiction, is at least partly the fault of publishers and booksellers, for whom genre is largely a marketing tool, a package of typefaces and standardized imagery wrapped around a text whose idea of itself as literature, should it harbour one, is more or less irrelevant' (2008, p.20). *Kavalier and Clay* shows the seemingly endless rounds of negotiation, as well as compromise, which mark any popular form. Konstantinou points out that Smith does not see this compromise aesthetic as exclusive to critics, and that in her monograph, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), she argues that fiction writers 'have self-consciously embraced something like compromise aesthetics as their practice' (2016b, p.146). As mentioned, Smith valorises texts that evoke 'impersonal feelings.' These are texts that question 'our economic, political, and social convictions,' rather than those that evoke what she terms 'personal feelings,' which only reflect how 'emotions are increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage' (2015, p.4).¹⁰³ However, this binary does not quite account for the negotiation and compromises that genrefication as a process suggests. Genrefication texts evoke both impersonal and personal feelings, rather than being an either/or proposition. By working within the limits of genre, these writers thematise the processes of compromise and negotiation that are central to the creation of art in the contemporary era.

Inspired by *Citizen Kane*, Josef and Sam turn to Anapol, as they did at the inception of their careers, to ask him to fund and publish a new approach to comics. Anapol is suspicious of them, and when they say they have devised "“basically a whole new approach to this game. We saw-”" Anapol tellingly cuts them off, and checks their artistic ambition by questioning the financial implications of their new idea: "“What do we need with a whole new approach? The old approach has been working great”" (p.364). To convince Anapol, Josef and Sam appeal to an abstract idea of artistic value – "“This is better”" – but Anapol again reminds them what 'better' means in this

¹⁰³ She uses Chabon's review of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) as one example of a reading that valorises and promotes personal feelings (2015, p.45).

popular, mass produced form: “Better in this context can mean only one thing ... And that is more money. Is this new approach of yours going to make more money for me and my partner?” (p.364). Chabon shows that at each moment Sam and Josef wish to change how comics are made, or indeed to initially start *The Escapist*, there is a need to demonstrate the commercial value of these changes. Chabon’s novel thus demonstrates that a relationship with popular, generic forms is part of an aesthetic not only of compromise, but an oscillating negotiation between an artist’s aims and the limits of what can and will be published at that time. Personal and impersonal feelings can therefore be operative within a single genre text, rather than an entire text being emblematic of either of side of Smith’s dialectic.

Sam’s, Josef’s, and Anapol’s exchange also re-enforces the historical nature of genre, specifically the commercial context. Ultimately, Anapol will only fund their new venture if *The Escapist* stops his one-man war against Nazi Germany, as Anapol wishes to sign the movie rights of the comic over to a studio whose second biggest market is in Germany. Thomas Doherty outlines how Germany was the second biggest film market for Hollywood films, and provides a history of the relationship of the Hollywood studios with Nazi Germany: ‘Up until the outbreak of war in Europe, MGM, Paramount, RKO, and Twentieth Century-Fox figured business was business. Only Warner Bros. dissented, putting its money where its politics were’ (2015, p.312). Despite this, Josef, much to Sam’s surprise, agrees to the deal, as the genre no longer provides the escape he seeks:

“I appreciate what you think you are doing. But I want to do *this* now.” He tapped the portfolio. “I’m tired of fighting, maybe, for a little while. I fight, and I am fighting some more, and it just makes me have *less* hope, not more. I need to do something ... something that will be *great*, you know, instead of always trying to be Good.” (p.367, italics in original)

In Franzen's *Freedom*, Walter similarly realises he does not always have to be 'good.' Both texts suggest there is a distinct separation of art being 'good' and 'great.'¹⁰⁴ What Josef needs from his art has changed with the context; he is therefore willing to compromise some aspects in order to push forward with others. This negotiation also unleashes Josef's most experimental stage: 'All these forays into chopping up the elements of narrative, in mixing and isolating odd points of view ... all these exercises were, without question, raised far beyond the level of mere exercise by the unleashed inventiveness of Joe Kavalier's pencil' (p.369). However, the constraints of publishing a mass-produced form of art are mentioned again and again. Josef is described as 'stretching, as far as was possible in those days, under the constraints of a jaded editor and of publishers who cared chiefly for safe profit, the limits of comic book storytelling' (p.369). Though compromise is evident, this does not define his work; as Smith contends, supposed compromises can be evidence of dissent: 'the hybrid gestures many critics read as signalling compromise might better be read as pointing to the continued presence of tension and dissent in literary and political culture alike' (2014). Chabon's descriptions of the adaptations and changes of Josef's art, all under the watchful eye of publishers and editors, signals not only Josef's attempts to maintain a radical aesthetic, but also a continued tension with the very publishers who are focused on profits. Smith points out that 'the very notion of compromise obscures historical contingencies,' and Chabon's novel, and his wider use of genre, is particularly invested in the historical contingencies that affect the use and development of generic forms (2014). To conclude, Raymond Williams can help parse out some of the concerns Chabon and Smith help illuminate.

¹⁰⁴ Lee Siegel derides Dave Eggers and the *McSweeney's* enterprise more broadly for what he sees as a conflation of these two concepts: 'The conviction that good-intentioned people necessarily make good art is what lies behind the hectic innovative blurring of fact and fiction in Eggers's work, and in the work of the writers he publishes' (2007).

To recap from the introduction, Williams suggests that to claim that a work of art is either economically determined or not is ‘as unwise as it is unnecessary’ (1982, p.191). Williams originally developed his metaphor of relative distances (which I have used throughout) to recognise that such distances ‘can be particularly important’ in regards to the relationship of art and economics (p.191). In regards to Chabon and his depictions of the compromises necessary for popular art to develop, he shows how popular/generic art can be seen as close to the market, but is not necessarily absolutely defined by it. In the case of Sam and Josef’s comics, there is always a sense of dissent, of relative distance from the commercial demands of their work. In *Kavalier and Clay*, that popular forms serve a distinct utility is a central part of the novel, as is the way popular forms can be seen to reflect a certain structure of feeling. Finally, this text dramatises the oscillating aesthetic of negotiation, dissent, and compromise that defines how many popular forms evolve, develop and are reproduced. Genrefication is thus particularly reflective of the role of the market in the processes of cultural reproduction.

Jennifer Egan: Contemporising the Gothic and Gothicising the Present

As mentioned, having not attended creative writing classes, Egan describes herself as ‘an outsider, really’ (Dinnen, 2016). However, she is still part of a contemporary literary and publishing era that is imbued with the terms of creative writing. Egan is therefore not separate from this world, but demonstrates a certain distance from it. Nonetheless, she has expressed concerns with what kinds of texts are produced in the contemporary period. She discusses being a judge for the National Book Award in 2009, and is careful to preface that while she ‘read some great stuff,’ she also noticed a certain conservatism: ‘But I also found myself thinking that a lot of novels feel really constrained and unaware of the possibilities at hand’ (Julavits, 2010). Egan questions what has become the modus operandi of contemporary fiction: ‘I find that curious, because the novel began as this

explosion of craziness. I mean, look at Cervantes and Sterne. Two of the first novelists. There's nothing holding them back. They haven't learned to be afraid to do anything' (Julavits, 2010, italics in original). That she suggests authors are afraid to move outside of seemingly unspoken precepts is reminiscent of Chabon's suggestion that he 'learned' specific ideas from creative writing workshops of what literature is, and also the way Wallace's texts suggest that the reproduction of norms and ideas happens unthinkingly. Egan may be implicitly indicting the institutional reasons for this constrained approach to fiction, but what she emphasises instead are the limitless possibilities of fiction: 'You do need to be in control, and, in a way, the more chances you're taking the more you need to control them. But now I feel like the control is coming before the chances. For example, this idea that you can't change the point of view. *What?* Why? If you can make it work, you can do anything' (Julavits, 2010). Here, she is consciously inverting the famous Jamesian principle in regards to point of view; this suggests Egan's turn to genre fiction is therefore appears to be quite similar to Chabon's, in that she shows the myriad forms available for fiction writers. Also like Chabon, she looks back to a specific historical period – the early development of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – when she believes these limits had not yet been imposed upon what fiction could be.

Egan also – like Franzen and Chabon – looks back wistfully to the nineteenth century: 'And again, I can't help looking back to the 19th century to someone like Dickens or George Eliot or Zola. These were writers who were revered, widely consumed, and yet they were writing great work by any standards' (Alford, 2012). This demonstrates once again that the reproduction of genre forms is a rhizomatic practice – that even when drawing upon the same historical period as Chabon and Franzen, Egan reaches markedly different conclusions. In the same interview, Egan outlines that the contemporary turn to genre cannot be simply seen as a collapse of the high and low binary: 'I don't like this so called high brow versus commercial dichotomy because I feel it isolates both camps in

an area that I'm guessing no one particularly wants to be in. Who wants to be "high brow," and I put that term in quotes, and unappreciated, and who wants to be "commercial" and "unserious?" (2012). The gothic is, as Jerrold Hogle defines it more broadly, a particularly apt genre for an author who wishes to collapse this binary: 'Still classified for many as [borrowing Virginia Woolf's phrase] betwixt and between "serious" and "popular" literature and drama, the Gothic is thus continuously about confrontations between the low and the high, even as the ideologies and ingredients of these change' (2014, p.9). While Franzen's work is built on a series of tensions between what he terms contract and status, Egan's selective tradition is one where she wishes for an understanding of fiction where there is no such tension: 'I don't see any reason why there has to be an opposition there. I don't like it and I don't think it serves any of us very well, either as producers of creative work or as consumers of it' (Alford, 2012). Egan proposes that when drawing on these selective traditions, the difficulty is one of 'renovation': 'Renovating a space is a way of asserting our ownership, but it raises a question: How do we honor the past without letting it rule us?' (Egan, 2007). Egan's recovery of genre forms, then, self-consciously tries to renovate and assert ownership of genres; again, genrefication is not transgressive in any way, as Lukin's concept of 'genre-poaching' seems to imply. In *The Keep*, Egan contemporises the gothic, and gothicises the contemporary.

As David Punter outlines in his canonical work of gothic criticism, *The Literature of Terror* (1980), the gothic is simultaneously defined as 'a literary term, as a historical term, as an artistic term, [and] as an architectural term,' and within its specific literary usage, 'it has a range of different applications' (1996, p.1). For instance, the gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century is starkly different to the psychoanalytically infused, contemporary gothic of Joyce Carol Oates' gothic saga novels –such as *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) – or the neo-gothic of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), yet they are all still gothic texts. Punter states that in the

broadest sense, the ‘most universal features’ of gothic texts are the possibility of ghosts, an aristocracy, a castle setting, and a love plot (1996, p.2). *The Keep* does fulfil these generic requirements: ghosts are suggested at numerous points, there is a Baroness, it is set in a castle, and there is the love triangle between Howard – who owns the castle – his wife, Ann, and Mick (who is actually Ray, the narrator of much of the novel). While there are many ways to approach a gothic text – indeed, a defining characteristic of the genre is the plethora of interpretations available for each event – Egan’s novel can be productively read as a contemporary instance of the fantastic, as defined by structuralist critic, Tzvetan Todorov.¹⁰⁵ Todorov suggests that: ‘the fantastic is based essentially on a hesitation of the reader – a reader who identifies with the chief character – as to the nature of an uncanny event’ (1975, p.157). By using the trope of hesitation – predominantly in regards to telecommunications technology – *The Keep* distinctly fits Todorov’s definition of the fantastic.

The Keep is a noticeable departure from Egan’s previous novels, which while having generic elements – like the near-future dystopian elements of *Look at Me* – did not inhabit a genre in the same way. As with Chabon, it becomes tempting to see her previous work – the short story collection *Emerald City* (1993), and the novels *The Invisible Circus* (1995) and *Look at Me* (2001) – in light of the genrefication evident in *The Keep*. For example, Josh Lukin suggests that ‘*Goon Squad* (2010) is not Egan’s first self-reinvention: like Michael Chabon or Karen Joy Fowler, she brings her subtle and vivid prose to a new genre with every book, producing novels and stories that function beautifully both as literary fiction and as urban fairytale or Gothic or picaresque or international thriller’ (2010). This demonstrates the difficulty in assessing the authors who produce texts that display varying degrees of genrefication; as Phillip Abbott points out in his discussion of utopian fiction and genre, ‘there is a definite submergence of the author in genre texts’ (2008,

¹⁰⁵ For a summary of the way theorising of the gothic has evolved over time, see Hogle & Smith (2009).

p.336). Conversely, as Will Norman suggests in regards to Martin Amis's genre work, *Night Train* (1997): 'We are now invited to judge authors of literary fiction holistically in terms of their *oeuvre* rather [than] to judge individual genre choices' (2011, p.53).¹⁰⁶ Egan, Chabon, and Whitehead move between these categories, of the literary author and the genre writer. The challenge for the critic is to situate these texts as part of a rich genre tradition, and also within the context of the writers' *oeuvre*. Egan professes to Alford: 'I started with the earliest ones [gothic novels] and read all the way up through Joyce Carol Oates, Stephen King. Wilkie Collins is a real page-turner. I was interested in all of it' (2012). She displays this knowledge throughout the novel, alluding to and borrowing heavily from other gothic texts. Most obviously, Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) has a similar set-up to *The Keep*, where an old friend, Roderick Usher, invites the protagonist, the unnamed narrator, to stay. When they are trapped within the keep late in the novel, this is an instance of what Eve Sedgwick terms the convention of 'live burial ... a favourite conventual [sic] punishment in Gothic novels,' and one that is also evident in Poe's short story with the dramatic appearance of Madeline, Roderick's sister who was entombed alive (1980, p.20). Egan refers to previous texts and tropes of the gothic, and yet also updates these tropes to create a particularly contemporary iteration of the genre.

Egan reveals different reasons for the genrefication of her texts to Chabon's. To Steel, Egan stated that 'I know there's a way in which the tools that I'm really using as I write are emphases and extrapolation,' which usefully points to how genrefication can function (2006). Terms such as 'tools' and 'fascinated' also betray that Egan's turn to genre is distinct from Chabon's and Whitehead's; this gothic novel is not a product of a love of genre fiction or popular forms. Instead, it is a rather academic approach, something Egan further insinuates to Zara Dinnen: 'when I write

¹⁰⁶ Amis's *Night Train* is an apt example of what Kelly terms 'genre slumming' (2015). It also embodies Hoberek's idea that contemporary authors 'with recognized high-cultural cachet [are] now increasingly mak[ing] forays into popular genres' (2007, p.238).

fiction, it is often with a cerebral query in mind that may almost seem more suited to academic exploration than fiction writing' (2016). For Egan, the generative limits of genres are means to certain ends.

The Keep begins with Danny trying to find his way into a castle that his cousin, Howard, has invited him to. He has not seen Howard since his teens. Once Danny has found his way into the castle, Danny experiences a sense of the uncanny in trying to connect this adult 'Howard' with the child 'Howie' he knew: 'The new Howie was fit. Built, even. Love handles, girly pear shape – gone. Liposuction? Exercise? Time passing? Who knew. On top of which he was tan. This part really threw Danny, because the old Howie had been white in a way that seemed deeper than not getting sun' (p.20). As well as echoing the doubles and doppelgangers of gothic texts such as Poe's 'William Wilson' (1839), the text begins with Danny hesitating and questioning whether this is the same Howie as before. It is not until Danny notices an uneasiness reminiscent of the awkward *Dungeons and Dragons* playing teenager he knew, that he begins to see Howie in the man called Howard that stands before him (p.30). Danny's struggle to recognise Howard is the first in a series of hesitations that occur throughout the novel.

Egan constantly builds up odd facts and images for the reader in *The Keep*. For instance, Danny believes he has 'invisible skills': 'He felt a prickling on the skin of his arms that gave him hope. Another invisible skill ... Danny could feel on the surface of his skin when wireless Internet access was available' (p.24). The reader experiences a fantastical experience of hesitation in this moment – whether this is possible, or just hubris on Danny's part. To Charlie Reilly, Egan describes what aspect of the gothic she wishes the text to invoke: 'one of the things that most interested me is that so often in gothic novels the reader is left wondering what is really happening and what isn't,' and that the 'reams of scholarly material' on Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is because it leaves this question open (2009, p.443). As she suggests that no explanation should be given for

these events, Egan's work fits the way Todorov defines the fantastic in relation to its two neighbouring genres, the marvellous and the uncanny: 'If ... the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary ... new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous' (1975, p.41). An example of an uncanny novel would be Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), where, as Egan complains to Josh Lukin, everything is eventually explained: 'I think the mistake that she makes is that she provides a scientific explanation, which is really disappointing' (2010). A marvellous novel would be Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where a giant 'armoured hand' is given no rational explanation, but numerous witnesses attest that it actually exists; consequently, the reader must accept it as a supernatural occurrence (1998, p.104). By reading the novel as an instance of the fantastic, it becomes apparent that Egan builds hesitation into every aspect.

To see this as a fantastic novel suggests a key aspect of the way genrefication functions; there is the need to not provide easy plot resolutions, in the way Franzen's melodramas do. To David Remnick Franzen calls himself 'a closure guy' (2011), which he situates as a clear (binary) difference from Wallace's intentional open-endedness. In Ned Beuman's review of Christopher Priest's science-fiction novel, *The Adjacent*, he suggests that 'The laws of genre mean that on the whole we can tell whether we're reading a science fiction novel that will be rationalised at the end or an *avant-garde* novel that won't' (2013, p.34). A fantastic novel maintains this relationship with what Beuman quite loosely refers to as the *avant-garde*, as an explanation for these supposedly supernatural phenomena is never provided (which is the trait of James' *Turn of the Screw* that Egan celebrates). As is also discussed below in relation to Whitehead's zombie horror text, a central element of genrefication is to not provide clear reasons for the fantastical elements of the plot, and to blur distinctions between the literary and the generic in doing so.

The numerous narrative levels of *The Keep* work alongside the supernatural elements to create yet more hesitations for the reader, and so the metafictional elements work with, rather than against, the gothic conventions of the text.¹⁰⁷ Ray tells the reader: ‘I did make it up, I say, because I want Holly to think that. Otherwise it’s all just stuff a guy told me, so why not be impressed with that guy instead of me?’ (p.53). This then raises the question of who is telling Ray the story, and near the end it is revealed that Ray believes it is the ghost of Danny telling it to him from his cell window. After being shot, Danny follows the light, in a typical rendering of death, and at the end of the tunnel, he ends up at Ray’s prison window: ‘It was a long walk, but when he finally got close to the door he realized it wasn’t a door, it was a window. Danny couldn’t see through it – the glass was foggy or dusty or maybe just warped. But when he got to the window and put his hand against it, the glass suddenly cleared ... I saw him standing there. And he saw me’ (p.210). The clichéd nature of the description does suggest that this is Ray’s fictionalisation, but the gothic setting means the reader hesitates to dismiss Ray’s version of events. Ray himself also hesitates, when his cellmate, Davis, unveils his contraption to speak with the dead. It may be ‘a shoebox full of dust with knobs pushed through the cardboard,’ but Ray still hesitates: ‘what if it works? What if it actually does what Davis is saying?’ (p.100). Hesitation is therefore built into Ray’s layer of the narrative, as ‘in that split second I go from pretending straight into believing – it’s like pretending *made* me believe, except that doesn’t make sense, because pretending and believing are opposites’ (p.100, italics in original). As he is seeing a ghost, Ray hesitates to dismiss Davis as simply delusional. By struggling to conflate pretending and believing, Ray is having a distinctly fantastic experience, which Todorov defines as a moment when ‘*the transition from mind to matter has become possible*’ (1975, p.114, italics in original). Ray starts to believe this transition is possible, and again hesitates as he does so.

¹⁰⁷ Read Sherry R. Truffin (2013) for a reading of what she terms ‘gothic metafiction,’ a tradition in which she mentions *The Keep* in passing (2013, p.66).

Through these transitions and hesitations, Egan's aim is to defamiliarise and gothicise contemporary digital communications. As she explains to Jennie Yabroff: 'The questions had to do with telecommunications, and how it parallels supernatural experience. What does it mean that we are engaged in disembodied communication all day long?' (2006). In the same interview, she goes on to suggest the fine line between a person speaking to themselves and speaking into their mobile phone: 'And they may actually be in la-la land, in which case they actually are hearing voices and responding to them. Gee, that's an awful lot like being on the phone. At a certain point, what's the difference?' (2006). Danny is Egan's tool for exploring this; he has lugged a satellite dish across to wherever they are in Eastern Europe, desperate to stay connected while he is away from New York.¹⁰⁸ When still trying to work out how to enter the castle, 'Danny took out his cell phone and flipped it open. He didn't have international service, but the phone lit up, searching, and just seeing it do that calmed Danny down, like the phone had power' (p.11). This power operates 'like it was a Forcefield Stabilizer left over from Terminal Zeus' (p.11). That this connectedness is compared with a childhood game of Danny's immediately alludes to its illusory nature; the fantastical, hesitation-inducing nature of the gothic setting enables Egan to equate contemporary technology with the imaginary, and the supernatural.

Danny's satellite falling into a pool dramatically undercuts Danny's faith: 'Nope. It was dead, and not that tunnelly deadness of an open line – that would've been the sound of angels singing in heaven compared to this, which was the sound of no sound – an object that was just *what it was* didn't lead to anything or anyplace or anyone' (p.70, italics in original). That the sound of an open line is compared to angels once again points to the almost religious faith Danny has in these devices. At the start of the novel, his belief in his need for these connections is emphasised to the

¹⁰⁸ When Danny asks Howard whether they are in Germany, Austria, or the Czech Republic, Howard confesses he does not know as "'Those borders are constantly sliding around'" (p.4). The questionable location of the castle is therefore another instance of making the reader hesitate, even in regards to where the novel is set.

point of absurdity: ‘His brain refused to stay locked up inside the echo chamber of his head – it spilled out, it overflowed and poured across the world until it was touching a thousand people who had nothing to do with him ... if Danny kept it locked up inside his skull, a pressure began to build’ (p.11). Danny’s need to stay connected has become a psychological crutch, and losing that connection leads him to act strangely, and distrust what he sees and hears. However, Danny’s desire for information means he tragically leans too far out of the window of the keep when listening to Mick and Ann speak of their affair. The severe brain trauma Danny suffers due to this fall means his seemingly supernatural experiences could always just be a result of this injury, and so once again hesitation – what is called by David Punter the ‘ambiguity’ of gothic texts (1996, p.96) – is built into how to interpret the events of the novel.

In a long discussion, Howard explains to Danny that he sees contemporary communications as illusory, and as detrimental to a – very loosely defined – ‘real’ experience. Howard states: “‘The machines are so small now, and using them is so easy – we’re a half step away from telepathy,’” and Danny immediately undercuts him: “‘Except we’re talking to people who are *there*. You can hear them”” (p.128). Howard is insistent on the fact that, “‘They’re not *there*, Danny. Where’s there? You have no idea where they are ... No one’s ever there, Danny. You’re alone. That’s the reality”” (pp.128-129). Howard insists that it is impossible to absolutely clarify that who is speaking is real, and that Danny has an unspoken *faith* that this digital reality is as it seems.¹⁰⁹

Howard therefore aims to gothicise communication systems, and in doing so points to an underlying assumption in every usage of modern technology: “‘What’s real, Danny? Is reality TV real? Are confessions you read on the Internet real? The words are real, *someone* wrote them, but

¹⁰⁹ Danny also fails to question his own fallibility when using technology, such as when he is looking for the castle online: ‘Danny couldn’t even find it online, although he hadn’t been sure about the spelling’ (p.4). Egan is pointing to another important aspect of utilising technology, and one that echoes Joey’s struggles in *Freedom*; technology only functions as well as the user knows how to use it.

beyond that the question doesn't even make sense. Who are you talking to on your cell phone? In the end you have no fucking idea” (p.130, italics in original). Howard argues that there are limits to these connections; they are reliant on an assumption that what is being communicated is sincere – without this belief, the entire system falls apart. It is on these grounds that he insists ““We're living in a supernatural world, Danny. We're surrounded by ghosts”” (p.130). By creating gothic hesitations in this ubiquitous aspect of contemporary experience, Egan's novel resembles Alan Kirby's arguments in *Digimodernism* (2009). For Kirby, 'Web 2.0 depends so critically on the apparently real that it gives a name (“trolls”) to those who reject it' (2009, p.142). Danny has to be absolutely invested in the idea that all his connections are 'apparently real,' which, as Kirby argues, means 'Wikipedia, message boards, and social networking sites clearly require, in order to function at all, a level of sincerity in their users (impossible to measure objectively)' (2009, p.142). Sincerity, or trust, become values not because of any moral imperative. Instead, they are necessary in order for these interactions to function.

This discussion of sincerity relates to the debates around Adam Kelly's concept of The New Sincerity, which builds largely from his reading of Wallace's texts (and specifically *Infinite Jest*). However, in *Cool Characters*, Lee Konstantinou persuasively points out there is essentially an a priori belief in the possibility of sincerity inbuilt into Kelly's formulations: 'Postironic belief must precede the ethics of New Sincerity' (2016a, p.175). Similarly, Danny realises that an unspoken faith undergirds his usage of technology. Kirby goes on to put this idea of sincerity in a wider contemporary context: 'While sincerity is a value, a conscious moral choice reassuringly (in troubled times) under the control and will of a speaker, digimodernist earnestness, like postmodern irony, has deep roots in contemporary culture. It can therefore seem a compulsive mode, involuntarily swamping its speaker' (2009, p.151). Danny perfectly embodies this 'swamping' of 'digimodernist earnestness' in how he interacts; he even sees death in light of communication

possibilities: ‘That’s what death is, Danny thought: wanting to talk to someone and not being able to’ (p.77). Like with Wallace’s attempts to defamiliarise habitual behaviour, Egan’s text points at underlying, fantastical beliefs that are reproduced unthinkingly, and which the generative limits of the gothic genre allow her to explore.

When he gets through to his girlfriend Martha in New York, Danny is sceptical it is her, so he asks for “some identifying information” (p.168). The bad connection and his strange line of questioning means Martha is also suspicious about who she is speaking to. For both parties, the veracity of this call collapses: Martha states, “I don’t believe you’re Danny,” to which Danny replies: “I don’t believe you’re Martha” (p.168). This theme of miscommunication through technology also contemporises the gothic; there has been a constant theme of miscommunication and misreadings in works that can be seen as within the gothic genre, which usually suggest, or lead to, violence and tragedy. In Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred mistakenly stabs his own daughter, Matilda, believing her for Isabella; in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily misreads the blood on the steps of the castle as that of her Aunt, Madame Cheron, and therefore mistakenly believes she is dead. This theme continues in neo-gothic novels like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where Sethe misinterprets the intentions of the helpful white man, and tries to attack him with an ice pick. Similarly, after they escape from the keep Danny tries to stab Ray. Danny’s whole world is communication and information; when he begins to hesitate to trust this, he turns on Ray. Similarly, Ray is suspicious of Danny, questions his motives, and responds to Danny’s attack by shooting him. This misunderstanding results in a particularly gothic death for Danny, the result of a fantastical experience of misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Egan’s defamiliarisation of contemporary technology is similar to Wallace’s techniques, where trust becomes central to how these works are understood. Chabon also alludes to the ways a reader may be made uncomfortable by a genre novel; in his afterword to *Gentlemen of the Road*, he

says the reader may find his choice of form ‘incongruous’ with his earlier works (2007, p.198). Texts representative of genrefication consistently form relationships with genre forms in order to discomfort the reader – which is contrary to the purpose and effect of genre fiction as it is traditionally conceived and popularly consumed. In *S/Z* (1974) Roland Barthes outlines the distinction of ‘readerly’ texts, those with accepted structures and events, in contrast to ‘writerly’ ones, which do not work within such conventions, and in fact resist them (1974, pp.4-5). Genrefication once again collapses this binary, or at least produces texts which oscillate between the readerly and the writerly, the generic and the literary, or personal and impersonal feelings.¹¹⁰ *The Keep* evidences how genre forms can be used to defamiliarise, and create hesitations, in readerly expectations.

Managing the Gothic: Reclaiming Authentic Experience

Howard wishes to reclaim the gothic as a key component of contemporary experience, as well as monetise it through the East European castle he has purchased to run as a hotel. In her interview with Josh Lukin, Egan lays out the reasons she has characters like Howard in *The Keep*, or Moose in *Look at Me*:

In *The Keep*, there’s no one in academe, but there is someone with a Big Theory—Howard. The hotel creator. And at a certain point, he lays out his theory; and his theory is kind of important to the book. It’s not that it exactly is my theory, but it’s important to have it out there. So I’m interested in the people who are actively trying to analyze and theorize about the world around them. They’re very useful as characters. (2010)

¹¹⁰ They operate similarly to Fiske’s concept of the producerly text: ‘The producerly text has the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology ... but it also has the openness of the writerly’ (2010, pp.83-84). However, in distinction to the producerly, many of these genre works are not as accessible as others in the genre, as a quick look at the amazon reviews of Whitehead’s zombie novel demonstrates in particular.

Here, Egan points to the way she wishes to have characters actively thinking about the world around them. Again, this idea demonstrates the differing genre-fication of Egan in comparison to Chabon or Whitehead; for Egan, genre is approached in a quasi-academic manner, where characters are ‘useful,’ and genres are a generative tool for emphasis and extrapolation.¹¹¹

In his survey of the gothic, Jerrold Hogle outlines that the concept was originally developed from representations and images that were ‘so pointedly fake and counterfeit from the beginning’ (2014, p.15). Egan indicates this is precisely what drew her to the gothic: ‘the kind of fake medievalism of the gothic ... the sort of cheesiness, if you will, of that gothic atmosphere’ (Alford, 2012). Egan goes on to discuss the purpose of this ‘cheesiness’: ‘[it] is really about the perception that the supernatural might be possible, that there’s this state of awaiting the arrival of a disembodied presence and a communication’ (Alford, 2012). The artificiality of the setting enables the possibility of the supernatural, which creates generative limits for her fiction. As mentioned, Egan discusses realism as similarly artificial: ‘I see verisimilitude ... as one of many possible approaches, rather than as some basic truth I’ve deviated from and am now finally returning to. I mean let’s face it, this is *all* artificial’ (Dinnen, 2016). Chabon uses the afterword to *Gentlemen of the Road* to essentially justify what he has just offered the reader for 200 or so pages. While Chabon is keen to emphasise that he does not ‘repudiate’ his earlier work, he interestingly suggests that his first two novels exemplify ‘the genre of late-century naturalism’ (2007, p.200). Similarly, in a mocking article about a ‘Genforms’ machine for authors to use to produce fiction within generic parameters, Whitehead suggests that even the anti-formalistic ideas of Dada are as generic as a

¹¹¹ Martin Paul Eve discusses the ways academics appear throughout Egan’s *oeuvre*, and that Egan herself is wrong here; the hotel is staffed by graduate students in *The Keep*, so it is not as separate from the academy as she claims (2016).

thriller (2014).¹¹² The three authors I discuss in this chapter therefore all see fiction as following conventions, and viewing fiction in such a way is a key part of genrefication.

Howard's purchase of the castle is a means for him to theorise about contemporary entertainment, and to suggest his sincere belief in the need to reinvigorate everyone's imaginations. Howard proclaims to Danny: "Think about medieval times, Danny, like when this castle was built. People were constantly seeing ghosts, having visions" (p.44). Howard believes we have lost touch with some deeper, inner experience: "Was all that stuff happening before and then it stopped? Unlikely. Was everyone nuts in medieval times? Doubtful. But their *imaginations* were more active. Their inner lives were rich and weird" (p.44). Howard squarely blames contemporary entertainment for this lack of creativity: "We've lost the ability to make things up. We've farmed out that job to the entertainment industry, and we sit around and drool on ourselves while they do it for us" (p.45). As well as sounding slightly like Franzen, Howard here states that his aim is for the hotel to gothicise contemporary experience. To use the language of the fantastic, he wants to embrace the possibilities of a transition between mind and matter, and to suggest the gothic nature of contemporary communications technology.

Howard seeks to recreate a lost sense of authenticity, an imaginary realm that is distinct from the entertainment industry. Howard's nostalgia for some sort of lost past connects him with Robert McLaughlin's suggestion that the post-postmodern era is one where writers attempt to 'reconnect' with 'something real' (2012, p.213) and also with Enid's desire to experience 'the real thing' in *The Corrections* (2007, p.609). This is why he purchased the castle, and this is what he is trying to recreate for those who visit. What Egan demonstrates is that such notions of reality also follow distinct conventions, and require certain limits in order to function. When they discover the

¹¹² Whitehead regularly ironises generic forms in his nonfiction; here, it is the sales pitch, and the political press conference gets similar treatment in his article for *The New York Times* following Barack Obama's 2008 election victory (2009).

tunnels to the keep, Howard makes a speech that outlines the confines of his 'mission': "The whole mission of this hotel we're putting together is to help people shed the real/unreal binary that's become so meaningless now, with telecommunications" (p.188). In an otherwise illuminating article, Daniel Olson accepts Howard's assertions absolutely as Egan's own ideas: 'The modern mind, which has outsourced its entertainment generating to Hollywood, now needs to invent, to see what is not there, and to not see what is: we need to be whole. Like Howie, Egan intimates that we need a hallucination now and again' (2011, p.329). Olson follows Howard's insistence that "My *mission* is to bring some of that back. Let people be tourists of their own imaginations. And please don't say *like Disneyland*, because that's the exact opposite of what I'm talking about" (p.45, italics in original). Really, in the context of making a functioning business of a hotel, managing experience in the way Disneyland does is precisely what he is doing. Even in describing his project, Howard's language seeps into the language of branding, such as when he describes to Danny his concept of 'The Imagination Pool.' He describes this as a place where "You dive in and – *bang* - your imagination is released: it's yours again, not Hollywood's, not the networks or Lifetime TV or *Vanity Fair* or whatever crap video game you're addicted to. You make it up, *you* tell the story, and then you're free. You can do anything you want" (p.47). Danny is suspicious of Howard's motives; for instance, he feels Howard is giving him a 'Motivational Speech,' which again links Howard's supposedly pure motives with commerce, and the very industry he is setting up this hotel in opposition to (p.129). Howard's intense management of every aspect of this experience is in fact much more akin to the games of *Dungeons and Dragons* he led as a child; Howard is once again the dungeon master, and enabling everyone who comes to the hotel to have a gothic experience that he tightly controls. The alternative, to have an actually gothic experience, such as when they are locked in the keep at the end of the novel, is terrifying; working within the limits Howard sets is central to making a gothic experience reproducible.

In the final section of the novel, after Danny has died and Ray has escaped from prison, Holly, Ray's creative writing teacher, decides to visit the castle herself. Every aspect of Holly's experience is tightly controlled; here, the generative nature of limits comes to the fore. Before she sets off for the castle, Holly receives an envelope that states that other than 'live medieval music at dinnertime' – which once again points to the cheesiness of the genre that Egan intends to evoke – the rest of her stay is supposedly up to her (p.234). In fact, this is not the case at all; first, a man named Jasper meets her at the local train station, and leads her to the castle (p.235). She is then provided with clothes to wear, the very comfortable sounding 'cashmere sweatsuits' (p.236). Centrally, when she gets to her room, there is a note which states '*Our premises are secure. You may go wherever you wish, day or night ... Our staff is plentiful and, we hope, unobtrusive*' (pp.236-237, italics mine). This is reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), where the need for plentiful staff to run and maintain an abbey surprises Catherine Morland. Upon arrival at the Tilney family Abbey, Catherine is amazed that her beloved gothic novels could get it so wrong: 'How inexpressibly different in these domestic arrangements from such as she had read about ... [where] all the dirty work of the house was to be done by two pair of female hands at the utmost' (1991, p.174). Austen emphasises the plethora of people needed to maintain these gothic settings, and that this management is intensely noticeable. Similarly, in this last section of *The Keep*, Egan peels back the layers to show the cheesiness and artifice required to provide a gothic experience. Howard's dream is to have his visitors explore their imaginations, but only in a certain way.

However, these limits do not undercut any experience Holly has in the castle; in fact, they are generative of her redemptive ending. At the very end of the novel, she stands at the edge of Howard's Imagination Pool, and experiences a sense of 'childish excitement' (p.242). She then dives in, re-emerges (with obvious religious echoes), and cries by the pool. Howard's intense

management of her experience does not devalue it in any way, and in this sense Howard's design of the hotel is markedly similar to how Egan wishes the reader to see her use of genre. Todorov proclaims that 'the fantastic represents an experience of limits,' and *The Keep* is distinctly fantastic in the way management, what Egan terms control, is generative of a specific readerly experience (1975, p.93). Konstantinou sees a similar process at work in *A Visit from The Goon Squad*: 'Egan means to show, in the final chapters of her popular novel, that reified forms (such as PowerPoint) allow for genuine artistic expression and emotional involvement for her characters, and, by allegorical extension, for the contemporary novelist' (2016a, p.43). Again, in this PowerPoint chapter a generic form is used to suggest the generative nature of limits. Egan does not reify genre in the same manner as Franzen reifies realism; instead, as Konstantinou suggests, she writes novels in forms that are already reified. The genrefication that is evident in *The Keep*, then, is a means to suggest the gothic nature of modern communications technology, and the underlying earnestness that enables it to function. Furthermore, the manner in which Howard tries to reproduce a truly gothic experience clashes with the cheesy nature inherent to the gothic, and the demands of commerce to make the experience reproducible. *The Keep* demonstrates that the limits of genres, regardless of their evident artificiality, can be generative, redemptive, and revelatory, for both the characters and the reader.

Colson Whitehead, The Post-Apocalyptic, and the Micropolitics of Popular Culture

Like Chabon, Whitehead regularly cites the influence of genre fiction as foundational to his career: 'Until I got to college, I only read horror and science fiction; tales of the fantastic made me love books and want to be a writer' (Keehn, 2011). Whitehead is also perhaps one of the most forthright writers in regards to the obsolescence of ideas of a high and low culture: 'It's 2011 — I don't think it's that novel to recognize the equivalency of cultural forms. The world is a junkyard — take the

parts you need to make the machine work the way you want it to' (Keehn, 2011). He does not valorise a specific era, like Egan and Chabon; instead, he suggests that fiction can draw upon any aspect of cultural history. Furthermore, by suggesting 'the world' is a junkyard from which to build a machine, Whitehead also echoes the way Egan approaches genre as a tool. As briefly discussed above, Whitehead is the only author who acknowledges the changes in academic approaches to popular culture. However, he posits that theory confirmed his own predilections: 'The idea that it was "okay" to talk about pop culture in a serious way jibed with my own feelings about it, so it was nice to see people think seriously about music or TV, even if I didn't know what a lot of their words meant, especially the ones in italics' (Selzer: 2008, p.398). This again alludes to the importance of relative distances in interpreting genrefication; in this case Whitehead states a *desired* relative distance from the limits and pressures of the academy, and that his love of genre fiction predates the recognition of popular culture in academia.

In the same interview in which he speaks of the 'junkyard,' Whitehead goes on to argue that 'A song, a poem, an essay lives beyond the time of its creation if it can speak to different generations, cultures, contexts. If the recognition is ignited' (Keehn, 2011). Here, Whitehead appears to not see genrefication as a historical process – such as Chabon's pastiches, or Egan's update of the gothic. Whitehead states that his debut novel, *The Intuitionist*, was his 'first stab at trying to repurpose a known genre — the detective novel — for my own purposes' (Keehn, 2011). While sharing a kinship with Egan's means/ends approach to genre, Whitehead argues that at least in his first novel, his aim was not to update, but to repurpose and blend genres. Whitehead's conscious reproduction of genre forms reflects Raymond Williams' assertion that while cultural reproduction is 'a temporal concept, involving movement from one dateable manifestation of culture to another ... this does not mean that it is always historical' (1982, p.183). Whitehead therefore suggests the genrefication evident across his texts is therefore an *unhistorical* approach,

which is reminiscent of Jameson's canonical formulations about a 'new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' in postmodern culture (1999, p.9). Wallace and Franzen interpret this flattening of cultural value as hugely detrimental, and therefore their fiction suggests ways in which art can reacquire some sort of depth – Wallace defamiliarises unthinking, habitual behaviour, while Franzen explores ideas of melodramatic virtue. In contrast, Whitehead appears unalarmed by this flattening. By seeing cultural history as a junkyard, Whitehead flattens everything to the same level, whereas Chabon thickens the parts of cultural history he holds dear. However, what I argue in this section is that while Whitehead is unconcerned with the binary of high and low, he is actually deeply invested in historicising the cultural processes whereby genres are reproduced. Specifically, his fiction elucidates how genres develop in regards to, and can help explore, the power structures that form and reproduce popular cultural forms, such as genres.

In *John Henry Days*, Whitehead explores addresses the flattening of the John Henry folk myth into a piece of reusable pop culture, which suggests that when the reproductive processes of culture are controlled by those in power, it leads to a distortion of history (I return to this text later in this section). While *Kavalier and Clay* shows the relationship of art and the market, *Zone One* emphasises the importance of power relations in the formation and reproduction of popular forms; it definitively does interact with the historical development of such forms, and limits and pressures in the development of them. To explore concepts of power in this novel, the arguments of cultural theorist – and Raymond Williams' student – John Fiske are particularly pertinent. Fiske's work (before he became an antiques dealer in the late nineties) largely concerns the way popular culture forms and circulates. For Fiske, popular culture is always produced by the oppressed. Read in this way, *Zone One* is a text that illustrates Fiskean concepts such as the micropolitics of resistance, and the art of making do. In the final section of this chapter, I outline the racial politics evident in in the

history of contemporary zombie texts – namely, the Civil Rights context evident in George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) – and how Whitehead repurposes the zombie genre to address contemporary racial concerns.

Heather Dubrow proposes the idea of the ‘generic contract’ to understand how genres function: ‘whether literary or cinematic, our knowledge of the generic contract allows us to maintain the appropriate mood and to concentrate on what is most significant about the work’ (1982, p.32). While Franzen’s idea of contract fiction is with the explicit aim of meeting his readers’ expectations, Whitehead’s zombie horror novel *Zone One* – as with the defamiliarising uses of genre evident in Chabon’s and Egan’s texts – deliberately does not meet the requirements of such a contract. It lacks the traditional action of many other horror texts, whether that be George A. Romero’s classic zombie films, or the popular AMC television show – based on the comic of the same name – *The Walking Dead* (2010-). John Cawelti outlines that there are ‘two special artistic skills that all good formulaic writers seem to possess,’ the first of which is ‘the ability to give new vitality to stereotypes’ (1976, p.10). In his creation of a new type of zombie, the ‘straggler,’ a zombie who does not bite, but is frozen while performing a rote act seemingly forever, Whitehead develops the zombie ‘stereotype’ in the manner Cawelti argues all genre writers need to do. The second skill Cawelti says is needed is ‘the capacity to invent new touches of plot or setting that are still within formulaic limits’ (1976, pp.10-11). Zombie texts display variance in two areas – first, the setting, and second, the reasons given for the cause of the plague. As horror novelist Toby Venables indicates, Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* ‘effectively did for zombies what Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* did for vampires’ (2015, p.212). The setting of this film is a country house; this creates a tense, play-like structure for the majority of the film, and a means to explore the tense relations between the people who enter the house – in regards to race, class, and gender. In Romero’s next film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the setting of the shopping mall famously provides a

critique of American consumerism. In the final film of his first trilogy, *Day of the Dead* (1985), a military bunker operates to criticise American militarism in the 1980s.¹¹³ Recent works in the genre reach for ever more novel settings, from the global scope of Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006), to the narrow confines of a Star Trek convention in Kevin David Anderson and Sam Stall's *Night of the Living Trekkies* (2010). Zombies have even been placed in canonical works of fiction, as in Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009).¹¹⁴ In contrast, Whitehead's setting is a military base on Manhattan, both a nod to Romero, and also the post-apocalyptic New York of *The Omega Man* (1971). In his choice of setting – and exactly as Egan does with the East European castle of *The Keep* – he does not push the boundaries in any way. A setting that is typical of the genre – like Egan's gothic castle, or Whitehead's post-apocalyptic New York – is a defining feature of genrefication. Rather than offer radically new premises or explanations for such events, the way these texts work within these conventional settings is a synecdoche for how these writers work with genre; as generative limits that enable them to discuss contemporary culture.

In regards to the cause of the zombies, in *Night of the Living Dead* it is left unclear, but there is a theory briefly mentioned that it is a radioactive space probe that has returned from Venus. In more recent zombie texts, as with the setting, authors and filmmakers are reaching for ever more innovative causes; to take one example, it is sexually transmitted in Amelia Beamer's *The Loving Dead* (2010). What Whitehead does is leave this cause unanswered. As with Egan's take on the gothic, the tendency in the ways these authors inhabit genres is to not provide an explanation for the supernatural elements of their plots. Ned Beaman complains that Christopher Priest's science fiction novel, *Inverted World* (1974), fails because 'at the last minute, Priest ruins it: a physicist

¹¹³ This brief survey does not do justice to the scope of Romero's films. See Tony Williams' *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (2003) for a reading of his entire career, and the broader cultural history Romero draws upon.

¹¹⁴ Brian McHale refers to Grahame-Smith's text as a 'genre mashup,' which is another contemporary aesthetic which suggests reproduction (2012, p.144).

appears from nowhere with a technobabble explanation for everything you've just read' (2013, p.34). Like Egan's use of the fantastic, how Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead work with genre is defined as not providing explanations, and to opt for ambiguity where a genre writer would provide explanation.

Kazuo Ishiguro's fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* (2015) is comparable to *Zone One* in that it is overtly generic – it has Sir Gawain, King Arthur, dragons, and a quest – and yet it also meanders, and has a distinct lack of action. Even the dragon is a fat, wheezing myth, so this text denies the possibility of a dramatic final battle between the hero and monster. In his review of Ishiguro's text for *The London Review of Books*, Adam Mars-Jones suggests that a lack of pace is seemingly a means to maintain a sheen of literary respectability when writing a genre novel: 'How is it possible to override the natural movement of such material towards the rollicking and the rip-roaring? One obvious first step is to kill pace, and this is close to standard practice among writers who want to enter genre territory without losing sight of literary priorities' (2015, p.17). Whitehead's pacing – of long, meditative moments, and peppering the reader with flashbacks – means *Zone One* does appear to upset the generic contract in a similar way. Counter to this, Carl Joseph Swanson succinctly summarises why Whitehead's novel does meet the generic contract of the zombie horror genre, and what drew Whitehead to this genre: 'The zombie narratives he so admires are characterized by social commentary and protest, narrative instability, philosophical and symbolic complexity, and above all an intertextual citing and revision of their own tropes' (2014, p.381). However – as with Chabon's deviations from the traditional detective narrative in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* – *Zone One* fosters relationships with other genres and traditions. It is productive to look at Whitehead's novel through the lens of the post-apocalyptic, in the manner Douglas Robinson outlines in *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (1985). This distinction is worthwhile to make, as while many zombie texts are

post-apocalyptic, not all are, such as *Night of the Living Dead*, which dramatises a localised outbreak. Similarly, not all post-apocalyptic scenarios are as a result of zombies. This enables a reading that does not simply see the text as succeeding or failing to meet an implied contract – to be reproduction as replication, as it were.

In his provocative work of philosophy, *In The Dust of This Planet* (2011), Eugene Thacker argues that the value of horror fiction is to help the reader imagine a future without humanity, to see not just the ‘world-in-itself,’ but also ‘the world-without-us’ (2011, p.5). He contends that the horror genre allows a writer to explore an area which ‘lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific’ (2011, p.6). Building partly from Thacker, Leif Sorensen reads *Zone One* via the protagonist’s pessimistic interpretation of the apocalypse: ‘Mark Spitz’s account of the zombie plague opposes the American Phoenix’s [the name given to the survivors by the interim government] narrative of rebirth. In his narrative, the disruption brought on by the apocalypse is permanent, not reversible’ (2014, p.565). Sorensen also suggests that: ‘Against the late-capitalist fantasy of a future that consists of an endless reproduction of the present, Whitehead offers the shocking possibility of an absolute ending’ (2014, p.561). Interestingly, Tim Lanzendörfer argues the absolute opposite, and that Whitehead’s text is utopian (2014, p.40). While Sorensen’s reading is particularly illuminating – and shows this novel can be read, like *Infinite Jest*, as a warning that unthinking, habitual cultural reproduction could be apocalyptic – my reading sits between these poles of the apocalyptic and the utopian. I suggest it is also productive to focus on the society that is created, rather than just the possibility that Whitehead depicts of there being no future.

Robinson claims that a post-apocalyptic framework encourages the reader to focus on what he terms the ‘relational’ aspects of a text: ‘the importance of the image of the end of the world in American literature is not at all formal, as many critics have argued, but ideological; not structural

but *relational ...*' (1985, p.7, italics in original). This relation is between 'the author's interpretive stance on the future of the world and on the past of the text, its relation both to history as con-text and to previous apocalypses as pre-text' (1985, p.7). As numerous critics have noted, there are constant echoes in *Zone One* between the pre- and post- zombie worlds. For instance, in his glowing review of the novel, Andrew Hoberek states that 'the way in which Mark Spitz and Kyle continually misrecognize signs of the coming collapse echoes one of the novel's running themes, the resemblance between the world before and the world after Last Night' (2012, p.407). Indeed, Whitehead – partly joking – often suggests: 'For me as a New Yorker, I grew up in the terrible New York of the '70s and '80s, so I'm familiar with a certain kind of ruined New York, and I carry that around with me all the time. So it was not much of a leap to imagine a devastated New York' (Sundermann, 2012). There is also the reminiscences of characters, such as Mark Spitz's squadron leader, Kaitlyn: 'Working the island with Kaitlyn, Mark Spitz received steady dispatches from the extinguished world, weathered but still legible' (2011, p.47).¹¹⁵ As the narrator further notes, 'Where was The System now, after the calamity? It had been an invisible fist floating above them for so long and now the fingers were open, disjointed, and everything slipped through, everything escaped' (p.17). This post-apocalyptic setting is generative of what was previously invisible, as the survivors try to reproduce their culture and society from before. Seeing this text as part of the post-apocalyptic tradition, then, enables us to look at what Whitehead situates as the context – the pre-collapse world – and the pretexts – the post-apocalyptic texts Whitehead refers to – of this apocalypse.

This post-apocalyptic world is a means for Whitehead to form a fictional break, where time has stopped for a moment – or, more precisely, measuring time has briefly ceased – and the survivors try to reproduce their lives from before. As Mark Spitz notes, 'It was impossible to find a

¹¹⁵ All quotations are from this edition.

gossip magazine or newsweekly that had been published beyond a certain date. There was no more gossip and no more news' (p.11). In *The Omega Man* – the movie which lends its name to Mark Spitz's squadron – the filmmakers suggest the freezing of time by the numerous calendars that display the date as March 1975. In *Zone One*, time has seemingly stopped, as there is no more gossip, no more popular culture to circulate. The narrator suggests how the apocalypse has ruined any sense of temporality: 'Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment' (p.50). Robinson argues that the challenge for the characters in post-apocalyptic texts is to acquire control over 'the inscrutable forces of fate or time ... How is man to gain a measure of control over forces that by definition *are* beyond his control? To what extent can the human imagination shape its own destiny in *opposition* to the powers of the universe?' (1985, p.58, italics in original). Whitehead's novel dramatises the ways reproduction happens in this new community. As Mark Spitz muses: 'Why else were they in Manhattan but to transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side?' (p.48). However, before they can import these old ways, there are numerous structures that need to be in place.

The new government attempts to provide such a system, and Mark Spitz appreciates the way they prevent his life becoming one eternal moment; he 'had to admit that he preferred things now that Buffalo was in charge, replicating the old governmental structures. He liked the regular meals, for one thing' (p.88). Mark Spitz begrudgingly accepts that 'it seemed to work, the return of the old laws. In reconstruction, you knew where you stood' (p.89). It is once these structures are in place that Mark Spitz can begin to grasp temporality as he once understood it: 'This was the fourth day of rain, Friday afternoon, and a conditioned part of him submitted to end-of-the-week lassitude, even if Fridays had lost their meaning' (p.8). He realises that this is actually a sign of progress. Once the new society reaches this level where boredom is possible once again, what is interesting is what is

reproduced in the new world; what culture the survivors develop in order to cope with, and give meaning to, their lives.

The interim government introduces ‘anti-looting regs,’ in order to stop the foraging that became central to survival immediately after the disaster (p.38). These laws, while seemingly incongruous with the imminent possibility of all life being wiped out on earth, are a performative act that helps inculcate a belief in the future, and a connection to the order of the past: ‘There had been laws once; to abide by their faint murmuring, despite the interregnum, was to believe in their return. To believe in reconstruction’ (p.38). The government create many such symbols that suggest recovery is possible: ‘Buffalo created an entire division dedicated to pursuing official sponsors whenever a representative turned up, in exchange for tax breaks once the reaper laid down his scythe and things were up and running again’ (p.39). The purpose of these acts and symbols is in order for the survivors to believe in a future. Mark Spitz even describes the survivors as ‘*acolytes* of what’s to come,’ a phrasing suggestive of the faith the government are trying to engender (p.12, italics mine). Buffalo also attempts to restart a type of branding, as they send down t-shirts and buttons, and also attempt to brand the recovery – ‘The American Phoenix,’ and ‘We Make Tomorrow!’ (p.26). Consequently, the Buffalo government attempt to inspire a belief in the recovery by circulating a forward-looking commercial culture.

Popular culture does form in this new world, but the buttons and t-shirts sent from Buffalo do not define it. In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) James C. Scott, based on his anthropological studies of the village of Sedaka, Malaysia, develops the idea of ‘everyday resistance’: ‘Those with power in the village are not, however, in total control of the stage. They may write the basic script for the play but, within its confines, truculent or disaffected actors find sufficient room for manoeuvre to suggest subtly their disdain for the proceedings’ (1985, p.26). Similarly, the desire for control in *Zone One* becomes a question of how these survivors

define their own existence, away from the official culture shipped to them. For Fiske 'Routine lives require routine pleasures,' which is exactly what happens in *Zone One* (2010, p.88). Mark Spitz celebrates the return of regular meals, and the ordering of his existence that the governmental structures provide. The Omega Squad's routine work leads to the Sunday tradition of drinking with the Lieutenant; they develop their own routine pleasures and rituals (p.53). One of the key aspects of Fiske's assertions is that popular culture is formed by the disempowered, and in response to the dominant culture and ideologies of the age. Indeed, as *Kavalier and Clay* suggests, popular culture emerges out of a negotiated space, and it is within this space that fashions develop: 'Kill techniques cycled in their fads, in this week and out the next, as the soldiers refined and traded tips and accidental discoveries' (p.75). These 'fads' resemble how Fiske describes the formation of popular culture: '[it] is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore to our social experience' (2010, p.4). The culture that is produced shows traces of power relations – these sweeps are requested and dictated by the Buffalo government – and yet also reflects the social experience of these soldiers, and the agency they possess in forming their own culture.

The name 'Pheemies' that the survivors have given themselves is another example of the negotiations that define popular culture. Pheemies is a name divested of its original 'Phoenix from the ashes' meaning, and as Fiske asserts: 'Representation is control. The power to represent the world is the power to re-present us in it or it in us, for the final stage of representing merges the representor and the represented into one' (2016, p.158). With this nickname, the survivors wrest back control to represent themselves, which emphasises the role of popular culture to provide agency. As the world has been frozen at a specific moment, Gary – one of Mark Spitz's fellow members of Omega Squadron – echoes that exact moment that popular culture stopped in the world

before the collapse: ‘In a few weeks Gary had started employing the vocab of the polyglot city, as it has been transmitted through popular culture: the eponymous sitcoms of Jewish comedians; the pay-cable Dominican gangster show; the rat-a-tat verses of totemic hip-hop singles ... he had the delivery down, the correct intonations reinforced by countless exposures’ (p.22).¹¹⁶ While Wallace depicts these countless exposures as forming detrimental habits, Gary here embodies what Fiske – via Russian linguist Valentin Volsinov – terms the ‘multiaccentual’ nature of localising language, which is a ‘bottom-up tactic,’ as opposed to the ‘uniaccentual’ nature of imperialising power (2016, p.31). Gary imitates the variety of popular forms, as opposed to the monolingual accent of the Buffalo government’s decrees.

The survivors also re-appropriate other aspects of the ubiquitous popular culture before the plague, such as when the Squadron are tasked with clearing out the tunnels of the subway: ‘To draw the skels out, Josh started playing an old heavy metal song on a kazoo’ (p.208). Even as ‘The title eluded Mark Spitz,’ he can still remember the music video: ‘In the video the band played a bar mitzvah dressed in thick biker leather,’ and then: ‘Soon they were all humming the song, then giddily crooning it at the top of their voices’ (p.208). This scene, and Gary’s adoption of the ‘polyglot’ variety of popular speech, demonstrates that popular culture provides a common language, as Fiske argues: ‘For television provides a common symbolic experience and a common discourse, a set of shared formal conventions that are so important to a folk culture’ (2011, p.80). I define the distinction between folk and popular below, but it is first worth noting that Whitehead’s text suggests that popular culture provides an important series of shared referents. Consequently, as do Chabon or Egan, Whitehead’s genrefication suggests the utility and resonance of popular forms.

¹¹⁶ Similarly, in the prison of *The Keep* the development and circulation of slang is stopped at a particular moment: ‘And once I noticed the old words Davis uses I started hearing them everywhere, because this place is a word pit – words get stuck in here, caught from when the clock stopped on our old lives’ (2006, p.57).

Where he differs is that he shows the power relations that limit such popular cultural products, and how the disempowered negotiate and dissents from such limits.

The surviving populace has developed their own dialect that reflects their ‘countless exposures’ to violence. As their lives consist of clearing zombies, their language reflects their militarised existence: ‘The sweepers gobbled and assimilated the military lingo into their systems with gusto. Mingled with the fresh slang, the new vocabulary of the disaster was their last-ditch armor plate. They tucked it under their fatigues, over their hearts, the holy verses that might catch the bullet’ (pp.78-79). As well as echoing the experiences and slang of American soldiers in Vietnam – as Michael Herr details in *Dispatches* (1977) – the suggestion that this lexicon works as protection is telling.¹¹⁷ It points to what Fiske calls – via the work of French sociologist Michel de Certeau – the role of popular culture to be ‘the art of making do’: ‘There is no “authentic” folk culture to provide an alternative, and so popular culture is necessarily the art of making do with what is available’ (2010, p.13). Here, Fiske indicates that there can be no authentic experience in the manner Jameson desires; as Chabon and Egan’s texts also demonstrate, there is a process of negotiation in the reproduction of all popular forms. This vocabulary both shows the power relations of their militarised state, and is also an embodiment of the art of making do, of using language and culture to try and protect oneself from a harsh reality. The survivors develop not just popular forms out of what is available to them, but also their own *folk* culture. But as Fiske argues: ‘Our thinking about such a rural or folk culture should not be nostalgically romantic: it was itself a culture of deprivation, oppression or slavery, which is why its popular creativities of making do with limited resources transfer so readily to contemporary urban conditions’ (2016, p.219). The folk and popular forms in *Zone One* are distorted by power. In Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative *The Underground Railroad* (2016), the protagonist, Cora, moves from State to State, in a manner that

¹¹⁷ Herr details the ‘war names’ the soldiers give themselves (1991, p.74), and the ‘bitter refracted faith’ many soldiers adopt to try and get through the war (1991, p.56).

echoes Mark Spitz before he moves into the Zone.¹¹⁸ In South Carolina, she works in a museum, as part of a display that depicts a sanitised version of slave life. She notes the inaccuracies of the display, and the way the exhibit that commemorates the Boston Tea Party oddly appropriates Native American Headdress (2016, pp.110-115). As is discussed below in regards to *Apex Hides the Hurt* and *John Henry Days*, Whitehead consistently depicts how those in power dictate how culture is reproduced. This complicates and politicises Egan's discussion of popular forms as inherently inauthentic, as it suggests that the inauthenticity can be the result of the distortions of power relations in both the development and the reproduction of popular forms.

However, as Scott outlines in regards to ideas of the 'everyday resistance' of the peasants of Sedaka, language is not all the survivors control in *Zone One*; they do have some agency. The Pheenies demonstrate numerous instances of what Fiske calls a micropolitics: 'The politics of popular culture is micropolitics, for that is where it can play the greater part in the tactics of everyday life' (2010, p.46).¹¹⁹ There are numerous micropolitical acts that are dramatised in the novel, as the characters try to form a new sense of self, in Robinson's terms. These micropolitical acts are part of the art of making do, of utilising what is around them to enrich their everyday life. Before he is a sweeper, Mark Spitz clears abandoned cars from highways. The roads cleared reflect the experiences and wishes of who is in charge: 'One of the generals visiting Golden Gate on a fact-finding tour of New England reconstruction efforts had sworn by this highway when visiting family over the holidays, back in the good old dead world, and thus his pet shortcut became an official leg of the corridor' (p.144). A whim of a general means the way culture is reproduced and reformed

¹¹⁸ *The Underground Railroad* has many echoes of his other texts, as if to accentuate the relationship between America's violent past and the present. For instance, the races that Lovey presides over at the plantation in *The Underground Railroad* are an echo of the races that conclude *Sag Harbor*.

¹¹⁹ Fiske's militarised terminology – taken from Michel de Certeau – such as 'tactics' here, or elsewhere he describes those who consume popular culture as 'guerillas,' is particularly resonant with the post-apocalyptic, militarised world of *Zone One* (2010, p.29).

reflects these power structures, and the disempowered find ways to form their own culture within the limits of these tasks.

Mark Spitz works alongside a character called Quiet Storm when clearing these highways of abandoned cars. Quiet Storm is very particular about how the cars are placed, and sometimes makes Spitz and his co-workers drive miles to place a certain car somewhere. Only towards the end of the novel does he find out she had been writing messages with the cars: ‘What readership did she address? Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective. To Anyone Who Can Read This: Stay Away. Please Help. Remember Me’ (p.233). The messages that Quiet Storm writes, all while achieving her set task, are a micropolitical act that points to how she negotiates her everyday existence. To return to Rachel Greenwald Smith – although her contentions are distinctly not about popular forms – she asserts that ‘humans are still capable of producing works of art that gesture to modes of thinking and feeling that go beyond the confines of how we are now inclined to think and feel’ (2015, p.129). Quiet Storm’s messages are suggestive of this capability, to imagine a reality beyond the world in which they inhabit. Quiet Storm’s micropolitical act is a means to think and feel beyond the confines of her work, and to suggest a connection to some other, possible, future existence. Again, the turn to genre fiction is not simply wish-fulfilment, as Jameson claims; a text that works with popular forms can also be a micropolitical act, in a similar manner to how Chabon depicts the negotiations of Sam and Josef in *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, or the way Quiet Storm achieves the road clearing in *Zone One*.

The survivors develop numerous narrative rituals to give shape to their experiences after the apocalypse, such as the ‘Last Night’ narratives they all share. The stories serve as a means to believe in a possibility that the speaker may live on, as part of a wider narrative in the future: ‘This might be the final human being they’d see before they died. Both speaker and listener, sharer and receiver, wanted to be remembered. The Obit got it all down for some calm, distant day when you

were long disappeared and a stranger took the time to say your name' (p.113). This new ritual has developed its own rules, such as when Mimm – who Mark Spitz lives with in a toy store for a brief time – tells her Last Night story: 'Mark Spitz didn't ask about Harry. You never asked about the characters that disappeared from a Last Night story. You knew the answer. The plague had a knack for narrative closure' (p.130). These stories become a means to suggest a sense of trust, of community; in many ways, it is an image of how genre conventions develop and perpetuate. Whitehead's post-apocalyptic lens, then, demonstrates the value of popular culture, as Fiske describes it: 'The routine pleasures of popular culture may derive ultimately from the sense of chronological control it offers, but within this lie the associated pleasures of making relevant meanings' (2010, p.53). Following Fiske, the rituals, routines, and narratives of popular forms gives shape – they provide limits – to existence.

These narratives also function as a means of redemption, which is best exemplified by Kaitlyn's Last Night story: 'Kaitlyn told them her Last Night story not to enter into ritualized mourning but to say: This is a story of how it used to be. When we didn't know what was happening and were defenceless' (p.239). Kaitlyn uses the ritual to suggest that these experiences are in the past, and they no longer have to live like that: 'Kaitlyn made a toast to Zone One and the new world they chipped from the stone, building by building, room by room, skel by skel. The intent of the caricature, Mark Spitz thought as he listened to her story, is to capture the monstrous' (p.238). The cultural ritual of telling your experience of Last Night is, for Kaitlyn, a means to bracket the past, and contrast it with the present. It is wish-fulfilment, in Jameson's terms, but like Chabon's depiction of comics, this is not necessarily something to be derided or suspicious about; this is a caricature with a purpose. As Wallace suggests via cliché and Egan also depicts through the knowing cheesiness of the gothic, a caricature can still be generative, revelatory, or redemptive.

Another example of the role of popular culture in rebuilding the world is the elevation of Gina Speers, a former porn star, who is now a hero for her exploits. In a world where books are not read but burnt for warmth, where winners of the Nobel Prize for literature are seen as useless, and where communications majors are now required to be soldiers, this society needs a new kind of hero.¹²⁰ The narrator states that ‘a society manufactures the heroes it requires. Gina was that new species of celebrity emerging from the calamity, elevated by the altered definitions of valor and ingenuity.’ Gina’s feats are both reliant on the circulation of popular culture – ‘Her feats trickled out with the reestablishment of communications with the European powers’ – and also contextual: ‘The more unlikely the tale of survival, the absurd extremity of one’s circumstances in a world of extreme circumstance, the greater one’s fame’ (pp.42-43). The circumstances of the zombie apocalypse has redefined concepts of heroism and celebrity, and popular culture is reflective of the historical context it arises from, its specific structure of feeling.

As well as the Last Night narratives and Gina, there is also the ‘folklore’ of anticipant, the antibiotic that will somehow miraculously cure those who are bitten. When Gary is bitten towards the end of the novel, the narrator points to the falsity of this myth: ‘It was folklore, the megadose of drugs that snuffed out the plague if you swallowed it quickly enough. Anticipant had been a second-tier antibiotic in the previous world; no telling how it had been cast as the cavalry repelling the invading spirochetes of the plague’ (p.229). It exists only as a rumour, and no one has seen it work: ‘Poll a random mess table at a resettlement camp and you’d find one or two phoenies who claimed to know someone who knew someone who had been saved by this prophylaxis’ (p.229). Suggesting the ‘acolyte’ nature of the survivors once again, anticipant’s reliance on belief to make

¹²⁰ Mimm and Mark Spitz burn books for heat: ‘slowly rubbing their hands over the books they burned for heat, the novels devoted to the codes of the dead world, the histories, the poetry that went up so easily’ (p.195). There is a rumour that Buffalo has two Nobel Prize winners, and they are ‘useful ones, none of that Peace Prize or Literature stuff ...’ (p.35) The Lieutenant refuses to go back into the tunnels as “‘One of my unit leaders majored in communications, for God’s sake”” (p.215).

it function operates similarly to a religious faith: 'But it didn't hurt to carry some pills in your pocket. People carried crucifixes and holy books. Why not an easy-to-swallow caplet of faith, in a new fast-acting formula' (p.229). In *Zone One*, popular belief is depicted as part of the art of making do that enables the survivors to continue with their everyday existence.¹²¹ As Fiske suggests: 'Scientific rationalism may be able to paint the big picture, but down among the details of everyday life it often fails to provide explanations that are of any help in guiding behavior or that offer any hope of improving one's lot' (2016, p.189). Rationally, these characters know anticipant will not help them; however, they could not do their work if they exclusively operated on scientific rationalist principles. To act rationally in this setting, as Whitehead himself suggests, is probably to follow the lieutenant: 'if you're really high-functioning and really cognizant of what's going on, you'd jump off a building' (Rosenberg, 2012). This anti-rationalism connects genrefication with Wallace's and Franzen's concerns over the reductive nature of psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology, as McGurl explains: 'If science could ever complete the task of explaining the world, the low allegories of genre fiction would no longer be necessary' (2010). The allegorical, escapist nature of genre fiction suggests that not all is known, that scientific rationalism does not completely explain everything, and genre fiction can strive for what is not known, and question what is habitually accepted.

To return to Fiske: 'Popular knowledges are localizing ones: they are used in the attempt to gain control over some of the immediate conditions of life' (2016, p.205). The Buffalo government try to control and inculcate a belief in the future. However, the way popular cultural products may exceed the original intention of the producer means they can become micropolitical acts. Whitehead's novel is like *Kavalier and Clay* in its suggestion of the value and historicity of popular

¹²¹ In Max Brooks' *World War Z*, the millions made by Breckenridge 'Breck' Scott through the development of phalanx, the vaccine for the wrong illness, shows the exploitative side to the ameliorating nature of narrative (2006, pp.54-59).

forms, and also like *The Keep* in how it demonstrates how structure and limits are generative of revelatory and redemptive experiences. Where Whitehead is distinct is that he shows how power relations define the processes of production and reproduction, and that popular forms, such as genres, develop in response to, and because of, their consumers' desire to acquire control over their experiences.

Zombie Pretexts, Racial Context

The way *Zone One* depicts the relationship of power relations to the reproduction of popular culture is analogous to John Frow's Foucauldian conception of genre. Frow contends that genres 'actively generate and shape knowledge of the world,' and that – in a similar phrasing to Fiske – 'generically shaped knowledges are bound up with the exercise of power' (2015, p.2). That power relations distort and control the cultural reproduction of history is also a key theme in two earlier Whitehead novels, *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006). In *John Henry Days*, the myth of John Henry develops from a folk tale – which demonstrates Fiske's point that folk culture is 'a culture of deprivation, oppression or slavery' (2016, p.219) – and into a piece of popular culture, one that is consumed and reproduced in a myriad of different ways throughout the twentieth century. In *Apex*, an advertising executive is hired to rename a town, and the central idea is that those who pay to reproduce history control the manner of reproduction. How the zombie horror genre enables Whitehead to extend this argument about the power relations that dictate cultural reproduction, particularly in relation to race, is the focus of this concluding section.

In *John Henry Days*, the United States Postal Service decide to commemorate the African American railroad worker and folk hero, John Henry, on a stamp. At the event that announces this commemoration, J. Sutter, the protagonist of the novel, notes how John Henry has been appropriated: 'J. looks around the room and confirms that they [himself and Pamela, whose father

collected John Henry memorabilia] are the only black people in the joint. Honoring a black hero and them the only folks in the room. John Henry the American' (2001, p.59). The refrain of John Henry as 'an American' is repeated in the celebratory speech by Parker Smith, who was sent by the postmaster general to commemorate this event: "John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln's famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American" (2001, p.66). Smith overwrites history, and suggests that more important than John Henry's experiences of racial prejudice through the reconstruction period – a period echoed through the language used to describe the city being rebuilt in *Zone One* – or the back-breaking work he did, is the fact he is American. Who controls the manner in which this myth is reproduced becomes the central motif of the novel.

The racialised nature of cultural reproduction comes to the fore in flashbacks to previous investigations and depictions of the John Henry myth. Whitehead fictionalises the real attempts of Dr. Guy Johnson, a University of North Carolina professor, to visit Hinton, Virginia, and research John Henry. However, he is not allowed to stay in the McCreery Hotel in Hinton due to his race: 'His earnestness to get to Hinton, coupled with the numerous dispatches he had posted under the whiteface of scholarly research, had caused him to forget the grip of Jim Crow, ever clenched around his people' (2001, p.157). In Egan's *Look at Me*, Moose experiences 'a corollary, clammy intimation of just what it might be like to face the world without access to letterhead – a person with no affiliations' (2002, p.110). This clearly elides that for many, the whiteface of letterhead has historically not been enough. As Johnson cannot research the John Henry myth, he worries how the story will be reproduced, 'Who else is there to preserve the body of Negro folklore against the march of time? White folks?' (2001, p.160). The white reproduction of this myth through time culminates in the ceremony with the USPS representative, where John Henry is described simply as 'an American.' Josie, the local hotel owner, laments towards the end of the novel: 'the land is full of

ghosts of dead men who sacrificed themselves to give this region life. They tremble every tree, inhabit the wind and dwell in the soil. Surely they have opinions on this weekend's events' (2001, p.363). The ceremony never discusses or acknowledges this history, it is not reproduced; instead, John Henry becomes an American, and he is memorialised as such on a stamp.

John Henry Days resonates with W. T. Lhamon's theories of 'optic blackness.' Lhamon develops 'optic blackness' from the paint factory metaphor Ralph Ellison uses in *Invisible Man* (1952), where whiteness covers the black labour that produces and reproduces many cultural and material products. The point of reading texts through the lens of optic blackness, then, is to draw out and explore this history that has been painted over with whiteness. Lhamon defines optic blackness as a cultural mode that 'persists across historical epochs, artistic periods, and political ideologies' (2005, p.112). Lhamon goes on to suggest the co-dependence of optic whiteness and optic blackness: 'Optic white may prefer to escape or efface, to repress or deny this past; optic black calls attention to that history' (2005, p.113). Whitehead's novel depicts both the optic whiteness of cultural reproduction – like the constant refrain that John Henry is an American – and also that the novel itself is a work of optic blackness, operating to call attention to this whitening process. Whitehead's work consistently alludes to the way power relations dictate cultural reproduction, and optic blackness is a productive way to approach aspects of his fiction. His fiction therefore draws new limits, such as his embrace of genre, to explore such concerns about the racial limits and pressures to the processes of cultural reproduction. In a 2011 interview, Whitehead proposes that the zombie film is the perfect embodiment of the history repressed by a mode like optic whiteness: '*Night of the Living Dead* is the story of a black man on the run from the mob of white people who want to destroy him, literally devour him — in other words, it's a crucial subplot of the America narrative' (Keehn, 2011). That Whitehead suggests this is a 'subplot' points to how he sees this history as unspoken, and he wishes to bring this subplot to the fore.

The optic whiteness that defines cultural reproduction is also evident in *Apex Hides the Hurt*. When looking at the street names of the midwestern town, Winthrop, in which the novel is based, the ‘nomenclature consultant’ notices an interesting dichotomy. He notes that the streets named by white settlers share a certain ethos: ‘Winthrop’s Virginias and Oaks were well within character for someone hungering after the connotations of the eastern establishment, he decided. Want to import the coast to the prairie? You have to learn how to be just as dull, name by name’ (2007, p.128). In contrast, he highlights that ‘the black settlers had different marketing priorities,’ due to their historical circumstances:

Hope crossed Liberty, past the intersection of Salvation. Better than naming the streets after what they knew before they came here. Take Kidnap to the end, make a left on Torture, and keep on ’til you get to Lynch. Follow the lights ’til you get to Genocide and stop at the dead end. Not exactly the stuff that inspired positive word of mouth among prospective neighbors, unless he was so out of the loop that the phrase “We saw the prettiest little bungalow on Rape Street” was now much more upbeat than it used to be. (2007, p.128)

Whitehead here points to the buried history of these names, and that these seemingly inspiring street titles are counter-intuitively reflective of a horrific past. Lhamon argues that ‘Optic blackness is not authentically or experientially black – as various as that must be – but authentically corrupt, like Atlantic life and history’ (2005, p.133).¹²² The scars of the Atlantic slave trade and Jim Crow remain in these names, and an optic black lens can help draw it out. These names, then, obscure that power relations define how culture has been reproduced, and – like with the labelling of John Henry as an American – naming is central to this process. While Wallace uses naming to suggest the possibility of forming new habits, Whitehead’s novel suggests how naming is a political act, and how power relations are central to how the town has come to be known in this way: ‘If the history of the town Winthrop became the chronicle of the family Winthrop, well, they were the ones forking over the dough. With historians and grocery clerks, the customer is always right’ (pp.140-

¹²² Lhamon is building here on Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993).

141). Here, he suggests that history is the product of the customer; essentially, who pays to reproduce it, like with the highways cleared in *Zone One*. This once again indicates that how culture is reproduced is the product of desired continuities, of a selective tradition of those in power.

Jeffrey Williams suggests that generation Jones – to recap, the generation in between the boomers and X – approach race differently: ‘For Boomers, perhaps the foremost cultural division rested on the axis of black and white; for [generation] Jones, it is not that race has disappeared, but their fiction does not dwell on it as centrally’ (2016, p.110). Whitehead rejects such a claim; in an article for *The New York Times* following Barack Obama’s 2008 election, he mercilessly mocks the usage of language such as ‘post-racial’ (2009a). Leif Sorensen outlines how the apocalypse has seemingly rendered prejudice over: ‘Mark Spitz’s blackness is a nonissue for most of the novel, seemingly showing that the American Phoenix’s efforts to make the zombie apocalypse into an occasion for solidarity have succeeded’ (2014, p.571). This reading overlooks how race impacts the narrative of *Zone One*.¹²³ Sorensen’s reading also neglects to explore the relationship of *Zone One* to Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which clearly reflects the Civil Rights struggles of its 1968 release date. Similar to the way Egan contemporises the gothic, *Zone One* is therefore not unhistorical in the manner Whitehead outlines his aesthetic; it is in part an update of the zombie horror genre’s depictions of race.

Zone One reveals that Mark Spitz is black near the end of the novel, and this raises the question of which parts of the narrative reflect this fact. As Jeffrey Williams notes, this same ploy is utilised in Percival Everett’s novel, *Glyph* (1999), when the race of the main character, Ralph, is revealed partway through the novel (2016, p.110). There is also Toni Morrison’s classic short story, ‘Recitatif’ (1983), where two girls are placed together in an orphanage, and the narrator, Twyla,

¹²³ Max Brooks’ *World War Z* is a zombie text that does depict the post-racial future Sorensen defines. Here, the character Mary Jo Miller looks back at her previous racism as anachronistic: “‘She wasn’t one of the ignorant ones, she was a ‘clean’ Mexican. I’m sorry to use that term, but that was how I thought back then, that was who I was’” (2006, p.65).

complains she is ‘stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race’ (1983, p.243). Morrison plays with the reader’s preconceptions, and never allows the reader to settle what race Twyla or Roberta are. In *Zone One*, while there are no moments of open prejudice, that Mark Spitz may be a person of colour is hinted at throughout the novel. The Civil Rights era backdrop of Romero’s original *Night of the Living Dead* is evoked most clearly in the final scenes, when the patrolling policemen/vigilantes murder the main character, Ben, who is black, even though he is not a zombie. As Mark Spitz asserts when thinking about disaster films: ‘By his sights, the real movie started after the first one ended, in the impossible return to things before’ (p.135). By simply having this chance of trying to rebuild, of acting in the follow up movie, in the context of Romero’s films Mark Spitz’s continued existence definitively suggests progress has been made in relation to racial politics in America.

As mentioned, there are a few instances where his race is made apparent in the novel. In these moments, *Zone One* represents a turn that Maryemma Graham notes in her discussion of contemporary black writers: ‘black literary production has moved from a constrictive spatial reality to a spatial imaginary’ (2013, p.78). Rather than the constant threats in the spatial reality – as Ben experiences in Romero’s film – Whitehead hints at Spitz’s race through the way he has internalised stereotypes in his spatial imaginary. First of all, there is his nickname – taken from the record breaking Olympic swimmer – which, as he says to Gary, derives from the stereotype of “‘the black-people-can’t-swim thing”” (p.231). This is not a threat to his physical reality, but it is a constant reminder that his race defines him spatially, to those he interacts with. Furthermore, he doubts that Gary really has never heard this stereotype: ‘He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines, but he did not press his friend. Chalk it up to morphine’ (p.231). Even if Gary is being earnest, Spitz has inculcated the idea that people like

Gary will know, and possibly believe, these stereotypes. Once again, trust is central to a character's experience, and this doubt is a product of the racial spatial imaginary that is subtly alluded to throughout the novel.

This constrictive spatial imaginary is also suggested at other points. For instance, Spitz worries that Gary will interpret him as lazy: 'Mark Spitz got in gear. Gary was close and he wanted to look busy in order to head off any wisecracks about his work ethic' (p.13). He has internalised that others may believe this racist stereotype, and he is conscious his actions can be interpreted in this way. Outside of *Zone One*, in *John Henry Days* J. Sutter also experiences an uncomfortable moment when an agent approaches him to write a book on hip-hop, without asking him of his interests, solely because of his race (2001, p.136). This is not exactly the prejudice Whitehead's literary forebears depict, but it is nonetheless maintains a constant presence in the spatial imaginary of J.. Whitehead does not depict the contemporary black experience as without violence, as Mark Spitz was physically attacked in college 'when a gang of townies had invaded the Spring Concert looking for trouble' (p.36). This attack is not definitively because of his race – it can only be inferred – but it evidences the manner in which his race constricts the reader's spatial imaginary as well, and these events are seen in light of his race, even if they are unrelated. Whitehead's point is that these experiences continue for African American people, and while the threat is not always physical, race still operates as a constant constriction on Mark Spitz's spatial imaginary, and on the reader's.

That Gary seemingly forgets any racial stereotype leads Mark Spitz to wonder whether these clichés will forever be gone, now that 'There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them' (p.231). In this summation, the zombie is the eternal Other, and so othering within humans is briefly thought of as no longer necessary. However, Mark Spitz realises that part of the rebuilding process, part of getting boredom back, is that other less palatable parts of the previous world will return as well: 'If

they could bring back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns ... There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked' (p.231). Reminiscent of the way *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* depict the reproduction of history, in *Zone One* Whitehead uses the zombie horror genre to suggest that if the structures of society can be reproduced, then so can the racial optics that existed before the catastrophe. That Mark Spitz lists prejudice alongside parking tickets and reruns points to how trite he finds it; to Whitehead, prejudice is simply part of the junkyard of reproduction. In distinction to writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison, Whitehead's text suggests that the context is now one of the spatial imaginary, rather than the pervasive encroachments on physical reality those before him depict.

Consequently, when Jeffrey Williams suggests that what he terms 'generation Jones authors' have 'pioneered the development of multicultural fiction and genre fiction,' it seems like a false dichotomy (2016, p.104). Essentially, it is questionable to separate multicultural writers from those who write genre fiction. McGurl outlines that the program era is partly responsible for this idea, as he points out when discussing the development of Native American fiction: 'blood is thicker than language, it is no doubt thicker than genre, too' (2009, p.243). In establishing the value of a particular point of view, the claim that there is an 'authentically Native American novel' to be written by Native Americans closed off the possibilities of what fiction writers of colour could write (2009, p.243). It seems more productive to suggest that what Williams calls multicultural authors – which includes an absurdly divergent array of authors, regularly with little in common – provide different perspectives on, and relationships with, genre fiction. Williams does usefully go on to suggest why he mentions multicultural and genre writers alongside each other: 'These latter two groups are less invested in representing the generation per se than the cultural circumstances that the generation has experienced' (2015, p.104). Whitehead reflects the ubiquity of popular forms in

contemporary experience simply by the relationships with genres he invokes in this novel. However, he also suggests the experience of blackness within this genre, and that zombie horror is particularly generative for this discussion.

The novelist Martha Southgate contends that younger, contemporary black authors can be described as ‘post-oppression’ writers, a term she defines as distinct from ‘that much and justifiably maligned term “post-racial,” and also distinct from “post-black”’ (2013, p.257). Southgate proposes that ‘younger contemporary writers are utterly aware of their race and the history around it. They are not past it, ashamed of it or denying it’ (2013, p.257). Whitehead embodies this in *Zone One*, and also earlier in his career, through the racialised nature of cultural reproduction in *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (Southgate uses Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor* (2009) as the perfect embodiment of a post-oppression novel (2013, p.264)). Southgate interestingly suggests that ‘the definitions of Blackness, for these writers, are somewhat different and perhaps more *capacious* than that of writers of an earlier generation’ (2013, p.257, italics mine). The idea that definitions of blackness are now ‘more capacious’ is particularly telling in relation to Whitehead’s work; the genre-fication his work evidences therefore reflects a capaciousness evident in contemporary African American fiction, such as Southgate’s own novels. In *Third Girl from the Left* (2006), Southgate uses the context of film history to show the differing experiences of three generations of women over the twentieth century; first, the grandmother of the family was raised with segregated cinemas, and her mother is shot in front of her during the Tulsa race riot of 1921. Her daughter is an extra in Blaxploitation movies, and then her granddaughter is a documentary filmmaker. The novel concludes with the youngest realising that she has the ability to tell any story she likes. Whitehead also suggests this capaciousness in his interview with Michelle Dean: ‘I was allowed to write about race using an elevator metaphor because of Toni Morrison and David Bradley and Ralph Ellison. Hopefully me being weird allows someone who’s 16 ... [to] see the different kinds of African

American voices being published' (2016). Alongside the gains of these writers, a gradual encroachment of genre has led to this capaciousness. Similar to Chabon, Whitehead explores the power dynamics that influence the production and reproduction of popular forms. Like Egan, Whitehead's work suggests that genre offers generative limits to depict and discuss contemporary issues. For Egan this was a discussion of technology; in Whitehead's genre work, the post-apocalyptic suggests the way popular culture forms in relation to power structures, and the zombie horror genre provides generative limits for Whitehead's depiction of the contemporary experience of the limits and pressures of blackness.

Conclusion: The Reclamation of Genre

To Chabon, genrefication is a process of recovery, of recuperation, not only of popular forms, but also of a literary culture where any writer can work with these forms. Egan also turns back, and cites the freedom experienced by Cervantes and Sterne early in the life of the novel as something she wants to recover. Similarly, the genrefication evident in Whitehead's work is partly a widening of possibilities, and the complicated history of each form he repurposes are the active embrace of new limits for his fiction. Seeking capaciousness, utilising new limits, is a major driver for the genrefication of contemporary American fiction. Chabon suggests that genre fiction may be escapism, it may be entertaining, but this does not devalue it as art in any way; he suggests that more experimental approaches are similarly governed by conventions and rules. Egan demonstrates that these forms such as the gothic continue to be generative to discuss contemporary culture. Whitehead complicates both Chabon's valorisation of popular forms and Egan's more academic use of them, and that these limits have developed in line with power structures. The limits of genre forms, then, are a particularly pertinent way to enact and explore how popular cultures form and develop over time – Whitehead emphasises that this process is racialised, and thus the exclusionary,

selective nature of many processes of cultural reproduction. Finally, genrefication shines a light on some forgotten histories; not just Chabon's lament that genre works have been side-lined by academia, but that reproduction is dictated by power, by who pays, in Whitehead's terms. Popular forms may initially develop as acts of resistance, and then be exploited by those in power for profit, but they can also be reclaimed, updated, or repurposed – as Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead demonstrate.

Conclusion

In *Look at Me*, some people Thomas approaches to participate in PersonalSpace question the ethics of the enterprise. Thomas finds a physician who accuses him of ‘turning people into shopping malls’ particularly affecting (p.263). He overcomes his troubled conscience by rationalising that “‘I’m part of a Zeitgeist. If I don’t do it, someone else will’” (p.263). Raymond Williams outlines that cultural reproduction is a concept that ‘usefully insists on a general and intrinsic character’ to culture (1982, p.186). Thomas appears to reflect this, as he believes the technological capabilities that enable PersonalSpace, mixed with the economic potential of the venture, means that this, or something similar, is inevitable. But Williams goes on to point out that ‘The metaphor of “reproduction,” if pushed too hard, can obscure ... crucial processes of relative autonomy and of change’ (1982, p.186). The five writers in this thesis demonstrate that cultural reproduction is not a linear process in the manner Thomas outlines. Indeed, Thomas’s own attempts to reproduce a version of nineteenth century realism undermines such a conception of cultural development. Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead all display autonomy in their responses to the institutional, economic, technological, and conceptual influences upon their work. Wallace and Franzen share similar concerns about the inheritance of postmodernism, but act upon these conclusions in contrasting ways. Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead all work with popular forms, and yet provide varying reasons for their turn to genre. A focus on cultural reproduction, then, acknowledges the institutional, historical, and conceptual influences on contemporary American fiction, and yet also explores what sociologist Chris Jenks calls the ‘social action’ of these writers (1993, p.1). Whether it is Wallace’s defamiliarisation of established habits, Franzen’s recovery of his idea of realism, or Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead’s reclamation of the utility of popular forms, each of these authors attempts to effect change in literary culture.

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Rachel Greenwald Smith develops sociologist Bruno Latour's concept of 'tracing' to argue that contemporary criticism should 'not expos[e] forms of connection that are understood to pre-exist the act of discovering them, but rather construct ... one of many possible pictures of how elements in a system interrelate' (2015, p.129). Similarly, Mary K. Holland suggests that there are numerous possible paths that could be traced to succeed postmodernism, and her focus on concerns with language and humanism is a snapshot of 'one among many' (2013b, p.200). The close readings offered here are another mapping of a distinct theme, and a distinct phenomenon, in contemporary American fiction; they explore another path for what fiction is to come after postmodernism, and indeed whether the term 'postmodernism' is always a useful category to map the work of every contemporary author. Further, the map this thesis traces is generative of a few contingent conclusions about contemporary American literary culture.

First of all, let us return to the thematic of limits I discuss in each chapter. Whether it is in relation to educational institutions, the market, technology, or concepts of power, the way each writer interacts with limits emphasises a consistent focus on the manner in which information is mediated, controlled, or influenced by the producer's original intentions. Attention to cultural reproduction demonstrates that these texts focus on how these structures operate in everyday experience. Related to this, in both Wallace's exploration of habits and Franzen's melodramatic focus on the home, attention to their depictions of cultural reproduction suggests a turn to the practical, to the everyday. Similarly, in Chabon's celebration of generic, popular entertainment, Egan's focus on ubiquitous technology, and the way Whitehead depicts the power structures that inform most of lived experience, these texts, despite their fantastical plots and settings, also foreground the quotidian. That these writers focus on the everyday is partly driven by the belief that the reproduction of values such as difficulty, artistic virtuosity, and craft has divorced fiction from

lived experience. They each argue, in differing degrees, that creative writing programs, the academy, and popular culture reproduce these values. Connected by the theme and phenomenon of cultural reproduction, then, Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead collectively suggest a contemporary focus on the everyday, practical lives of their readers.

One of the challenges in writing this thesis was developing a method of close reading that could analyse Chabon's pastiches, and to a lesser extent, the conventional, didactic nature of Franzen's texts. The recent critical tendency when faced with the formulaic is to read a huge volume of such works and then compare trends across huge swathes of texts, such as Gordon Hutner's approach to the middlebrow texts of the twentieth century, or Franco Moretti's distance reading of late nineteenth century detective fiction (2007, p.27). These approaches wash over the distinct differences of many of these texts; a vocabulary to closely read the affective possibilities of forms critics usually see as reified needs to be further developed. As Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* (2008): 'Faced with the disconcerting realization that people often turn to books for knowledge or entertainment ... [critics] can only lament the naïveté of those unable or unwilling to read literature "as literature"' (2008, p.5). To develop such a critical vocabulary scholars may need to mirror the writers they critique, and recuperate and develop earlier concepts. Such undertakings appear to be underway, examples of which are Adam Kelly's evolving concept of New Sincerity fiction, or Ihab Hassan's turn to ideas of trust. Similarly, this thesis often recuperates or repurposes older modes of thought in order to offer more tools to navigate the changes in contemporary fiction. In the first chapter I repurpose Dewey's concept of habits to explore Wallace's depictions of self and society. In the second, I situate Franzen's texts as part of the long melodramatic tradition. In the final chapter, I rehabilitate the concept of pastiche, develop the concept of managed authenticity in relation to Egan's texts, and explore the complex relationships of popular forms and power in concert with Whitehead's works. Still, there is so much more to do, and the need for new and

renewed terminology will come ever more to the fore if trends such as genrefication continue in contemporary American fiction. This vocabulary will be further required if criticism continues to re-evaluate earlier periods, such as the ‘vertical’ shift in modernist studies that Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz note (2008, pp.737-738), and the understudied history of genre fiction I explore in my third chapter. Close analysis will be needed of texts recovered during these endeavours, and many of our current critical approaches struggle when texts are overtly generic, entertaining, or didactic.

Finally, as so much of what was once written or stored physically becomes digitised, the material processes of cultural reproduction – as in deciding what to digitally retain for the future – will increasingly intersect with and affect the symbolic side of reproduction. The way Wallace, Franzen, Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead dramatise and comment upon the processes of cultural reproduction, as well as recover and reproduce older forms, therefore reflects a historical moment when reproduction is a central element of the culture. Wallace’s texts challenge unthinking, habitual reproduction, and outline why he believes many habits and customs need to change. Franzen argues that processes of reproduction should not be exclusionary. His work also highlights the issues that arise with trying to reproduce earlier forms in new contexts, as this can lead to unintended consequences and results. The genrefication evident in the texts of Chabon, Egan, and Whitehead exemplifies that radical potential can be found in the reproduction of even the most compromised and unlikely of artistic forms. A focus on cultural reproduction reveals the constant creative process that defines not only fiction in the present, but also how writers and critics recover or neglect elements of the past.

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