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This dissertation reexamines the narrative practice of self-reflexivity through the lens of aesthetic size to advance a new approach to reading long-form novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Whereas previous scholarship on the maximalist tradition relies on the totalizing rhetorics of endlessness, exhaustion, encyclopedism, and excess, I interpret the form's reflexive awareness of its own enlarged scale as a uniquely narrative "knowledge work" that mediates the reader's experience of information-rich texts. Thus, my narrative and network theory-informed approach effectively challenges the analytical modes of prominent genre theories such as the Mega-Novel, encyclopedic narrative, the systems novel, and modern epic to propose a critical reading method that recovers the extra-literary discourses through which scalarity is framed. Following this logic, each chapter historicizes prior theories of literary scale in postwar U.S. fiction toward redefining cross-national differences that vary across the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter two addresses the scholarly discourse of *encyclopedism* surrounding the Mega-Novels of Thomas Pynchon and Joseph McElroy. Posing an ethical challenge to popular critiques of metafictional aesthetics, both authors, I argue, contest one of the critical orthodoxies of realist form—the "exceptionality thesis"—which rests on an assumed separation between an audience's experience of fictional minds in a literary work and its understanding of actual minds in everyday life. In constructing a suitably massive networked platform on which to stage identity as a pluralistic work-in-progress,

Gravity's Rainbow and *Women and Men*, I contend, narrativize those operations of mind typically occluded from narrative discourse, and so make literal their authors' meta-ethical visions of a "multiplying real" as much a part of our world as the novel's own.

Chapter three focuses on the *mise en abyme* as a discursive practice in the labyrinthine narratives of Samuel R. Delany and Mark Z. Danielewski. My analysis posits *The Mad Man* and *House of Leaves* as immersive case studies on the academic reading experience by interrogating the satirical strategy of "mock scholarship," in which a textual object at plot's center is gradually displaced by the intra-textual reception history that surrounds it. Subtly complicating an increasingly imperceptible line between fact and its fictional counterpart, Delany and Danielewski, I assert, propose new forms of knowledge production through a multiplicity of potential "research spaces" that micromanage the interpretive process while exceeding the structural contours that frame it.

Chapter four considers the problem of *literary canon formation* in the polemical epics of Gayl Jones and Joshua Cohen. Across vast surveys of the stereotypes that mark their marginalization, Jones and Cohen transgress the metaphorical borders constructed between individual voice, collective identity, and the literary institutions that reify "ethnoracial diversity" as a belated form of cultural capital. Explicitly foregrounding the ideological gaps, errors, and omissions against which canonical classification is typically defined, *Mosquito* and *Witz*, I suggest, promote not so much a representative widening of the canon's historically restrictive archive as a complete dissolution of the exclusionary practices it honors and preserves.

EXCEPTIONAL SCALE: METAFICTION AND THE MAXIMALIST TRADITION IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

by

Daniel Warren Burns

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Committee Chair

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Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ON DIFFICULTY AND THE DISCOURSE OF AESTHETIC SIZE

In the cult screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's directorial debut *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), hapless regional theater director Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) receives an unlikely MacArthur Fellowship following a series of devastating personal crises. Using his "Genius Grant" to mount an ongoing, real-time art-installation, Caden selects a gigantic warehouse space in which to recreate the people, places, and events that compose his everyday life—ample room for a recovery project in the most personal sense. But as the depressive would-be artist's searching meditation on love and loss grows in richness and complexity, the line between reality and fantasy gradually begins to blur. That is, while the production's exteriors expand in all directions—fictional world crowding out the "real" one—its interior abruptly contracts. Little by little, the frustrated playwright finds his intimate human drama at proverbial "stage center" all but lost amid the cavernous recesses that surround it.

As sets scaffold unfinished sets and new performers edge out their more seasoned counterparts, these deferrals take a decisive turn when the director's own shadow-player, Sammy Barnathan (Tom Noonan), breaks character to critique the production in a grand gesture aimed at disrupting Caden's solipsistic focus. Pointedly culminating with his actual suicide in full view of cast and crew, Sammy's impassioned plea for a more egalitarian aesthetic inspires a critical shift along an otherwise independent trajectory

when Caden finally declares: “I know how to do it now. There are nearly thirteen million people in the world.¹ None of those people is an extra. They are all the leads of their own stories. They have to be given their due.”

The “burden of genius” at last shared with an acknowledged audience of collaborators, Caden’s creative block suddenly lifts as he recognizes how to complete his long-delayed magnum opus. He can *die*. Arriving via earpiece in a secondhand stage direction² that ironically prescribes the pathology to which his unusual surname alludes, this “solution” slyly nods to nineteenth-century French neurologist Jules Cotard. Indeed, the famed clinician’s most renowned diagnostic discovery puts a name to Caden’s elusive condition: the irrational belief in one’s own death despite all vital signs to the contrary, a.k.a., *le délire de négation* or “Cotard’s delusion.”³ Whether figured as acute performance anxiety or basic human loneliness, Caden’s unspecified “negation delirium” suggests the extent to which a meaningful existence depends on realizing oneself in relation to others. Put simply, the film’s axiomatic proposition on the dangers of an “overexamined” life could not be clearer: the more mediated the life, the less one actually lives it.

Arguably completing Kaufman’s extensive reputation⁴ as a scenarist obsessed with the often-arbitrary boundaries separating forms of fiction and forms of life, *Synecdoche, New York* ostensibly offers the final word in a career-long commitment to self-conscious narrative. But especially unique among works of narrative reflexivity is the film’s sidelong commentary on a neglected subject in postwar literary history. For it is only by reckoning with the sheer enormity of Caden’s post-contemporary

*Gesamtkunstwerk*⁵—an exhaustive blend of soaring ambition, open deadlines, limitless resources, and the authorial hubris such qualities both enable and inspire—that the overlooked significance of scale in twentieth and twenty-first century American fiction becomes apparent.

A foundational concern of narrative form, literary scale⁶ points to a unique set of reading problems identifiable as early as Western culture’s inaugural work of literary criticism, the *Poetics* (335 B.C.E.). Specifically, Aristotle proposes the tenet of “magnitude” as a problem of memory in relation to the basic concepts of plot structure. Measuring the volume of information a given listener or reader might reasonably expect to hold in his or her mind, magnitude’s heuristic value conflates manageable scope with “good form”⁷: a continuum within which a hypothetical “right size” is determined for the literary work in question. As much a function of reader comprehension as creative preference, this readerly imperative is founded on the dual demands of cognitive load and the apparent seamlessness or “simultaneous perspicuity” of part-whole relations (Aristotle 14). Consequently, artistic deliberations over a work’s aesthetic size emerges from the curious paradox of “appropriate” length—a synecdochical form conceived relative to a given audience’s capacities that simultaneously codifies those capacities in an official version of how reality should be represented.

The history of aesthetics reconfigures magnitude as the “sublime,” originally a synonym for boldness or excellence of thought and style in the rhetorical arts.⁸ Rediscovered and translated for a French audience in the sixteenth century, the first-century rhetorician Longinus’s short treatise *On the Sublime* would go on to influence the

theories of eighteenth-century English, Irish, and German philosophers and rhetoricians eager to build on its notion of aesthetic size. Most notable among these figures and works is Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), in which the concept's rhetorical origins are revised to consider the effects of magnitude on one's sense impressions. To this end, Burke offers the sublime as a negative counterpart to "the beautiful" grounded in a "passion belonging to self-preservation"—with particular wariness and respect paid to pain and danger (79-80). This apprehensive register for Burke is predicated on cognition, by which "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (95). Subdividing the sublime into passion, terror, obscurity, power, and vastness, Burke more precisely evokes how those negative sense impressions and anxieties common to sublimity impact the mind, highlighting in particular terror and obscurity as powerful influences on the imagination (in contrast with reason's tendency toward clarity and logic).⁹

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) provides the most influential and systematically complex definition of the sublime by dividing the concept's cognitive dimension into categories of "magnitude" and "quantity." The former category—an awareness of the stupefying effect the incomprehensibly large or vast has on human consciousness—is quickly clarified by the latter, through which our rational faculties perceive all expanses to be finite and measurable. This quantitative dimension illustrates a form Kant calls the "mathematical sublime," a variant that describes the imagination's persistent habit of "proceed[ing] unhindered to infinity" (138) while its watchdog

“Understanding” relies upon “numerical concepts” to tentatively chart or measure the incalculable stimuli in question (137). But as the late twentieth-century philosopher Jean-François Lyotard points out in his extended analysis of Kant’s third critique, this quantitative defense mechanism is for Kant typically overridden or outmatched by a “dynamical sublime” that reminds humanity of how thoroughly the concept exceeds human faculties despite perception’s natural inclination to see the infinite as a whole (115). That is to say, for Kant, certain forms of scale cannot be perceived as a totality, a dialectic between “immeasurability” and “comprehensibility” that human consciousness struggles to reconcile (102-108).

A key component of Lyotard’s postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, Kant’s recognition that certain experiences lie beyond rational thought also underwrites experimental forms of artistic representation in the modernist and postmodern periods by conveying the qualities of obscurity or incoherence in consciousness. Nodding back to its title’s rhetorical allusion, *Synecdoche, New York*’s sublimely tragicomic rendering of Caden’s “open work” drama can thus only ever “approximate” rather than achieve the artist’s total vision: a paradox common to any mode of aesthetic production, whether theatrical, cinematic, or—for the purposes of this dissertation—novelistic. In twentieth-century American novels published after the Second World War, the practice of narrative reflexivity works along similar lines, turning aesthetic size into both an open question and a deliberate provocation as conventional length restrictions are exceeded through the explicit enlargement of diegetic space.

Patricia Waugh characterizes this open-form practice as metafiction¹⁰ in her eponymously titled study (1984) where the idea is initially conceived as “not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency within [it] which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (14). In Brian McHale’s recent retrospective elaboration of Waugh’s parameters, the critic begets a long-form variant of metafiction that he calls “megafiction” (*Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* 74). Updating his classic theoretical dictum differentiating postmodern and modernist fiction, McHale specifies one common structural feature that complicates this distinction: self-reflexive megafictions in the postwar era by definition include an awareness of their own scale in-text (*Introduction* 74-75).

Previously, in his classic study *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), McHale characterized metafiction as the chief aesthetic element governing the shift in “cultural dominant” that constitutes postmodernism’s narrative preoccupation with ontology or “being” over epistemology or “knowledge” (10).¹¹ And yet, as the geographer Andrew Herod argues, “Because there is no clear agreement on whether scale ‘actually exists’...”¹² in the sense of its material, “ontological” status, the concept is generally figured as a representational figure or “epistemological” trope. Following this logic, metafiction’s ontological imperative would seem irreconcilable with scale’s epistemological status, an impasse that in effect replays the sublime’s controlling tension between the immeasurable and comprehensible. Rather than fall prey to the fallacy a conflation of size with intrinsic value suggests, I assiduously avoid evaluative questions

about the most “appropriate” way of narrating reality to conversely examine how such assumptions take shape within critical conversations about aesthetic size in American literature. Exploring varied logics of exaggeration within the augmented textual space that only big books can provide, my project accordingly highlights the role an emergent maximalist narrative tradition plays in the critical resistance to metafiction in American literary history after 1970.

Specifically, my dissertation examines the evolving debate between realist and self-conscious forms of narration to consider the ways in which the dense prose structures of maximalist metafiction facilitate a heightened, participatory relationship between audience and text. At once a critical reception history of and detailed survey on the formal category of literary maximalism, my project asks and answers such questions as: does a reconsideration of maximalism through metafictional aesthetics alter our understanding of realist representational strategies in the postwar period? In what ways do maximalist texts complicate metafiction’s challenge to realism’s aesthetic program? And how, by virtue of their scope, ambition, and length, do large-scale narratives elicit such distinctly American discourses of difficulty relative to new forms of knowledge work? To what extent have these forms contributed to the rise of an increasingly complex network society in American life after the Second World War?

What gets to count as “reality” has, of course, been highly contested throughout literary history and particularly as the issue enters the so-called postmodern era. Divided between “postmodernity as a political and cultural reality” and “postmodernism as an aesthetic style” (Docherty 3), this terminological distinction coalesces in the realism and

representation debate and gains in complexity with the various ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform interpretations of the real. The philosophy of language finds this debate best expressed through the work of philosopher Richard Rorty, who rejects “representation” as that which “implies...some correspondence between language and nonverbal reality” (Levine 4). For Rorty, all descriptions of this type are “arbitrary” as no “prelinguistic real” exists “but as part of a continuing and...liberating ‘conversation’ in which all reality claims are implicated in particular social, political, and historical moments and must be considered part of a fully human, not merely ‘rational’ or intellectual activity” (Levine 4). In other words, “‘realism’ and ‘representation’ are terms that imply social engagement” (Levine 17), a concern my study shares as it emphasizes various rhetorical approaches that reflexively reach out to engage the maximalist reader.

Bound up in this unexpectedly literal dimension of a field defined by figuration, questions regarding *how size matters* become increasingly inextricable from *what size means* for any number of postwar novelists. Whether that matter be a densely constructed prose passage or the distended physical mass of the “Mega-Novel” it builds, these “modern epics” are often dismissed as demonstrating little more than the rhetorical effect of erudition or amplitude. Paradoxically “reduced” to the status of inflated artifacts by their popular reception, maximalist fiction inspires a reactionary line of critique to which Franco Moretti’s humorous rejoinder speaks volumes: “Whenever anybody asks me to explain in a few words the characteristics of a world text, I found myself replying with growing irritation: ‘That’s easy – it’s very long, and very boring’” (*Modern Epic* 4). Indeed, while Moretti’s quip implies that the literary monoculture of the “Big Read”—to

borrow John Barth's playful phrase—flattens out as a concept by being “everything” to everyone (*Further Fridays* 87), I argue that maximalism's acknowledgment of its own enlarged scale is a key component of its relationship to audience.

Understood as a form of extra-literary discourse rather than a mere genre convention, the maximalist text's heightened reciprocity of awareness reveals a new way of understanding the self-reflexivity or “autopoiesis” long established as the dominant aesthetic practice in literary postmodernism. Maximalism, I argue, describes the reader's experience of both the linguistic density of a work's prose style and the book as an enlarged physical object, and thus constitutes a boundary negotiation between real and fictional worlds. Reading older maximalist works from the period as well as more recent variations on the form, my dissertation intervenes in classic discussions surrounding representations of the real when considered through the contemporary lens of aesthetic size.

Size Matters: Toward a Topological Approach to Maximalist Metafiction

My study draws upon network theorist Alexander Galloway's notion of “the interface effect” in order to conceptualize scale as both an aesthetic category and a uniquely postwar literary imaginary. A relational platform between interior and exterior textual boundaries, the “interface” describes, “those mysterious zones of interaction that mediate between different forms of reality” (Galloway vii). Suggesting that a text's excessive rhetorical and discursive effects gradually reveal how its mediated lines of demarcation (screens, windows, surfaces, openings, etc.) become themselves objects of inquiry, Galloway's premise narrates an explicit shift in the way “thinking the real”

evolves from a virtual to actual phenomenon. Consequently, my study addresses this phenomenon at a largely overlooked critical juncture between self-conscious narrative and the literary genre of the “big book.” This formal emphasis spans metafiction’s early reputation as parodic prose homage within the Black humorist and fabulist traditions¹³ to the multidimensional position it currently enjoys among current scholars of an ever-widening “period formerly known as contemporary.”¹⁴

As a categorical extension of various approaches to disciplinary span and space in American literature after 1945, this contemporary line of descent is aptly articulated in Mark McGurl’s acclaimed study *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) where the critic asks, “What links, if any, can be drawn between literary form and the work’s presumed scale of address?” (402). Arriving at the close of his richly historicized account of the creative writing workshop’s emergence in U.S. universities, McGurl’s question reflects the larger ambitions of a two-fold analytical approach: both sociology of the writer’s craft-as-institutional construct and neo-phenomenology of the critical reading experience. Put simply, McGurl’s method introduces a definitional framework crucial to the aims of my project by disclosing a fundamental tension between provocation and response, authorial action and audience reception when he writes:

Scale can first of all be considered as a spatio-temporal feature of aesthetic objects. The latter [...] may simply be a question of material form: what does it matter that short stories are relatively small while novels are relatively big? Or it may be a question of linguistic-representational mode: can we speak of the distribution of twentieth-century fiction along a scalar continuum from minimalism (understatement) to miniaturism (condensation) to maximalism (elaboration)? (McGurl 402)

Manifesting as discourses that comprise an assortment of formal features, these scales carry specific valences for the critics who invoke them. Scholarship on the maximalist tradition, for example, is typically framed by the would-be totalizing rhetorics of endlessness, exhaustion, encyclopedism, and excess. Such effects, deployed for genre coherence, in turn motivate the prominent genre theories on long-form twentieth-century American fiction, including *la novela totalizadora*, the Mega-Novel, encyclopedic narrative, the systems novel, and modern epic.¹⁵

Departing from this generic emphasis to propose the discursive value of scale as a full-fledged aesthetic category, my study effectively challenges the “taxonomy”-based analytical modes of earlier scholarly approaches¹⁶ to instead supply a critical reading method that recovers the discourses through which scalarity is framed. This strategy, by avoiding the pitfalls of genre criticism’s tendency to codify literary maximalism according to some intrinsic compositional logic or formal criteria, exposes the constellation of scalar tropes that “narrativize” a given work’s reflexive features to argue for a new way of conceptualizing American metafiction. In her revision of “narrativization” for contemporary narrative theory, Monica Fludernik traces the concept to “naturalization,” Jonathan Culler’s term for the series of operations by which the mind makes the incoherent sensible within a normative framework. This self-contained or “autopoietic” emphasis recuperates “inconsistencies as functions within its own setup” (Fludernik 24), a subjective set of internalized criteria usually determined by poetic convention, genre expectation, and the dominant aesthetic values of the period in which the work appears.¹⁷

Adopting Culler's premise for historiography, Hayden White coins the term "narrativization" to describe the temporal consonance behind a historian's decision to "impose [upon reality] the form of a story" (6). Narrativization, White explains, refers to the useful fictions that result when a basic chronicle of events is transformed into an overarching narrative. About this embedded textual critique of reality's capacity to "speak" [itself] into unmediated existence," he writes: "It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult" (White 5, 8). Hence, the historian's task comes down to the degrees of transparency with which he or she foregrounds representation as such. Deepening the cognitive implications of White's discussion by replacing his focus on "narrativity" (the extent to which a text is a narrative) with "experientiality" (the reader's tendency to accommodate textual material to her own set of "real-life cognitive parameters"), Fludernik uses the term to denote a fluid process of meaning-making within experientiality's range of potential (*Toward a 'Natural' Narratology* 387).

In turn, Fludernik's strategy has inspired narrative theorists such as David Herman to read experientiality as a virtual synonym for *qualia*: the embodied experience of what a particular event or phenomenon "is like" for the individual consciousness (or "mind") through which it is encountered.¹⁸ Mediating fiction's implicit boundary category between reality and representation as such, forms of narrator typically frame the way individual consciousness is experienced by the reader. For example, as Gérard Genette has demonstrated, a homodiegetic narrator functions as a featured character in the storyworld he or she narrates, while a heterodiegetic narrator stands apart from the

storyworld's action, commenting from a vantage point outside the diegetic space. At the nexus of these two types, I suggest an "allodiegetic narrator" who relays with full omniscience the entities and events within a particular storyworld¹⁹ but goes beyond the conventions of heterodiegetic narration to reflexively speculate on the mechanics of perception and knowledge production *within* the diegesis as it unfolds.

Allodiegetic narration, I contend, innovates on existing conceptions of the narrator's role within a maximalist text by deploying a form of narrative reflexivity distinct from the *autopoiesis* or "autopoetics" with which metafictional aesthetics is nominally organized. In contrast, I call this information-rich form *allopoiesis*²⁰ or, more accessibly, "allopoietics." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "poiesis" as the act of "creative production, especially of a work of art" ("poiesis"). With the prefix *auto-* preceding it, the term's context in systems theory conceptualizes *autopoiesis* as a self-generating or self-creating system that "produces its own components" (Livingston 79). Jerome McGann expands on this definition at the level of publishing platform in "Marking Texts of Many Dimensions," when he writes "...print technology...is a system that codes (or simulates) what one knows as autopoietic systems...such a system constitutes a closed topological space that 'continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components, in an endless turnover of components'" (McGann 200).²¹ Conversely, allopoietic systems—the prefix *allo-* meaning "other, [or] different(ly)"—describe a phenomenon that generates something *other than itself* based on the respective field of cultural production ("allo-") in which the object is embedded. Given the consistent line of critique directed at

maximalism's excessive brief, which often exceeds the "acceptable" parameters of fictional convention to address fields of knowledge that lie outside of literature's purview, I hypothesize "allopoietics" as a mode of narrative reflexivity that apprehends the text's impact beyond the scope of literary discourse.

As the organizing principle guiding my study of narrative reflexivity, this interface effect emerges from two relevant theoretical contexts: Galloway's own earlier contributions to network theory with Eugene Thacker, and the political philosophy of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (itself grounded in the positive ontology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). Hardt and Negri's definition of a new global form of sovereignty reframes society and its various identity categories as a fundamentally decentralized totality that composes the decentered political imaginary they call "Empire." Specifically, this innovative revision of postwar political life rests on a critical tenet of identity theory regarding what distinguishes one object from another: the concept of *haecceitas* (literally "thisness") or "individuation."²² Translated from its medieval origins in the scholastic philosophy of John Duns Scotus by the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, "haecceity" frames the subject of singularity in poetic imagery, with realist poetics in particular manifesting individual indelibility as the pattern of descriptive features that delimit individual personality traits and discrete character differences. As a result, realist authors naturalize individualism, inclining toward the illusion of substance or "closure" in their interpretations of haecceity without considering the relational context from which haecceity originally derives.

In my view, the proto-networked nature of maximalist storyworld construction develops in sharp contrast to realist haecceity, which aims to clarify individual identity by opting for the crucial detail that “draws abstraction toward itself” (Wood, *How Fiction Works* 67) and then swiftly “realizes” that abstraction in a concrete image. By contrast, the material conditions under which metafictional aesthetics denaturalizes the reality effects of realist narration, expresses the relational reality of the postmodern moment “and after”²³—a reality that runs parallel to postmodern aesthetics rather than as a successor to it. Indeed, this parallel or “lateral” emphasis demonstrates that the critical resistance to early metafictional aesthetics—which I maintain turns on an objection to size and its expression through various rhetorics of scale—is a resilient point of contention for critics and authors alike.

Notably, Andre Furlani locates this “lateral dominant” in the distinction between the Greek and English versions of the word “meta-” through a phrase used to describe authors who continue experimenting with modernist poetics in the postmodern era: *metamodernism*. In English, for example, the prefix *meta-* has a clearly linear association, “denoting derivation, resemblance, succession, and change” while the Greek preposition *μετά* expresses a more multidimensional phenomenon, referring to “‘after’ or ‘next’ [...] ‘among,’ ‘besides,’ or ‘over and above’; [and] ‘by means of’ or ‘in common with’” (Furlani 149). In this way, metamodernism’s status as a reflexive paradigm that operates under a lateral rather than linear logic offers a perfect framework for Furlani’s parallel cultural dominant “[w]here ‘post’-suggests severance or repudiation, ‘meta-’ denotes both change and the continuity apparent in the metamodernists’ efforts to succeed the

modernists” (149).²⁴ Standing apart from the formal characteristics of “superficiality” and “depthlessness” common to Fredric Jameson’s influential model of postmodernism,²⁵ allopoiesis, I argue, joins Furlani’s metamodernist thesis to expose a largely neglected “dimensional” dynamic of metafictional aesthetics.

Consequently, my *allopoietic* alternative to the governing “autopoetic” emphasis of postmodern criticism exposes the extent to which a sample of maximalist fictions imagine that they produce knowledge independent of the literary text through “literal” references to form. These explicit comments on size and scale serve the instrumental function of foregrounding extra-literary discourses as an indispensable part of their storyworlds. Toward the development of an allodiegetic narrator in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century maximalist novels, I deploy four critical strategies: *individuation*, *multiplicity*, *movement*, and, in a concluding analysis of contemporary “network narrative,” *connectivity*. These strategies emanate from the Deleuzo-Guattarian political ontology of networks developed by Galloway and Thacker in their manifesto *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007), a “set of concepts for describing, analyzing, and critiquing networked phenomena” they call “exceptional topologies” (58).

Applying these topologies in tandem with close-reading strategies from narratology, phenomenology, rhetorical criticism, and reception studies to challenge realist narrative aesthetics, I consider their utility for narrative discourse by interpreting maximalist metafiction’s various methods of reflexive provocation toward the would-be citizen-reader. Allopoiesis thus supplies an especially effective tool for interpreting aesthetic size with the rise of maximalist metafiction—an open, networked intertextual

matrix that is both *reflective of* and *reflective critically on* the rise of a network society and its assorted sociospatial and political arrangements in the postwar United States. Accordingly, my critique accounts for “a new realism,” as Bertrand Westphal has argued, in which “human space and narrative tend to obey a common logic...the derealization of space leads to its fictionalization” (163). Mapping national consciousness through textual representations that examine the intersection of knowledge production and fictional space, I explore maximalist metafiction along three relevant trajectories: the relationship between encyclopedic fiction and forms of collective identity; the intersection of the *mise en abyme* (“mirror in the text”) and fictions featuring “mock scholarly” practice; and the dramatization of debates over literary canon formation and ethnoracial diversity within archival or museal spaces.²⁶

At Large: Reading Long-Form Contemporary American Literary History

Given that literary realism classically splits into European and American (and nineteenth- and twentieth-century) variants, its specific aesthetic and historical meanings change over time. The continental model, famously refined in the oeuvres of Balzac and Flaubert, encodes a pattern of narrative strategies that depict nineteenth-century middle-class life with increasing rhetorical sophistication by “packaging and naturalizing an official version of the ordinary” (Kaplan 1). Realist modes of narration foreground an “objectified subjectivity” including the free-indirect style, a technique in which the narrator “becomes so defocalized that [readers] think there is no ‘voice’ but the character’s” (Nash 30). Consequently, the free indirect style and related realist narrative strategies historically signify collusion with dominant power structures via the “smooth

wall of prose” that occludes social and political realities (Wood, *How Fiction Works* 227). Underwriting metafiction’s challenge to these conventions is the well-established postmodern incredulity toward realist ideology, a response articulated by critics from Roland Barthes and Jean Ricardou to Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson, among numerous others throughout postwar literary criticism and theory.²⁷

The early reputation for nihilism on the part of maximalist metafictionists is thus far from surprising, with the sensibility palpable among the first-wave of Mega-Novels, including William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955), John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). As part of a resurgent postwar realism, the period critics mobilized against self-reflexive narrative invoke everything from glib gimmickry and deliberate obscurity to moral nihilism and bad citizenship amid their populist rejections of prose experimentation.²⁸ Moreover, the conflation of narrative reflexivity with values of a narcissistic, amoral, or outright malignant character underwrites an inference so old that it has become a near-critical commonplace. Such judgments imply that compulsive reflexivity at any scale is deleterious for its implied audience, and furthermore, that the form’s enhanced effects in an outsized context only magnify metafiction’s essential reputation for generating radical new forms of literacy, at once cognitive, moral, ethical, political, and national.

A frequently overlooked facet of this debate, though, is the way in which the conventions of realist narration continue to guide the aesthetic judgments of numerous authors and critics during both first (1949-1974) and second-wave postmodernism (1975-1990).²⁹ From Gore Vidal’s blithe dismissal of metafiction’s allegedly superficial

intellectual goals in his notorious *New York Review of Books* review essay “American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction” to John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*,³⁰ with its likening of reflexive form to an increasingly debased postwar humanity, fellow creative writers fire the warning shot across an increasingly reactionary bow adopted by academic critics. This latter trend begins with Robert Alter’s *Partial Magic* (1975), in which the rise of self-conscious fiction ostensibly signals “the death of the humanistic worldview” (230), a theme deepened by Gerald Graff’s *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (1979),³¹ with its pointed indictment of the American successors of the *nouveau roman* on the grounds of “bad faith” (81). These critics, among others, initiate a nascent resistance to metafiction that holds important implications for the form’s considerably warmer reception among critics of the early-to-middle 1980s, many of whom cut their critical teeth by addressing the moral implications of narrative reflexivity.³²

At its most tendentious, the early perspective on metafiction reduces the genre to little more than a cluster of offhand epithets, a defensive critical reading strategy that I call the “discourse of difficulty” as an outgrowth of the rhetoric deployed by influential critics during both eras. This discourse, I contend, breaks into the corollary critical features of unreadability, incoherence, opacity, overwrittenness, and obscenity: a constellation of negative tropes that, in recalling sublimity’s defining paradox, reveal an apparent realist bias in postwar American letters. No one academic critic or monograph better sums up this debate’s inception than a May 8, 1974 *New York Times* article entitled, “Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon,” in which veteran reporter Peter Kihss indicates that “All three members of the Pulitzer Prize jury on fiction expressed distress

and bewilderment yesterday that their unanimous recommendation for a prize for Thomas Pynchon's 'Gravity's Rainbow' had been turned down and that no fiction award was given this year" (38). Quoting a statement that would effectively cement the novel's popular reception history for the next half-century, the journalist explains how

Other members of the 14-member board, which makes recommendations on the 18 Pulitzer Prize categories...had described the Pynchon novel during their private debate as 'unreadable,' 'turgid,' 'overwritten,' and in parts 'obscene.' One member editor said he had tried hard but had only gotten a third of the way through the 760-page book. (Kihss)

Such notoriety suggests that, though observing the high degree of cognitive difficulty involved in reading *Gravity's Rainbow* has to some extent overshadowed the work itself, the novel's reputation as an impossibly challenging piece of fiction also remains, ironically enough, one of its few stable attributes over a forty-year reception history. Cautioned about the novel's dangers to the "readerly"³³ experience before a real engagement with its pages can even begin to take place, Pynchon's audience is naturally coimplicated with the book's terrified and increasingly paranoid Blitzkrieg-era population to receive a "judgment from which there is [seemingly] no appeal" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 4). This judgment Pynchon anticipates and builds into his novel's aesthetic program as a series of scalar effects that facilitate the novel's influential reputation as an "encyclopedic narrative"—a veritable Ground Zero for postmodernism's first and second-wave dividing line.

Among critics addressing other first-wave maximalist metafiction, for example, George Steiner weighs in with the quintessential anti-manifesto "On Difficulty" (1978),

which follows (to considerably more restrained effect) the author's notorious savaging of William Gaddis's National Book Award-winning *JR* (1975) in the pages of *The New Yorker* as a pretext for codifying "unreadability" as a critical precept. Following this counterintuitive approach, albeit in the heightened neurotic register of creative anxiety and false humility, is Jonathan Franzen's more recent repudiation of his own early postmodern anxiety of influence, "Mr. Difficult" (2002), in which the work of William Gaddis is once again held up as a test case on the dangers of the willfully abstruse. This time analyzing Gaddis' earlier epic *The Recognitions* (1955), Franzen's essay offers a window into the emergent second-wave postmodernism's gradual rejection of modernism's experimentalist poetics in favor of a so-called New Sincerity that absorbs as creative practice much of the critical dogma introduced by the antagonists of first-wave postmodernism. Both contexts consider the rhetorical complexities of the dual role that courts public taste within both popular press and academic spheres of influence: for the former, mandarin intellectual and populist critic, for the latter, self-promotional essayist and popular literary author.

But there is surely no critic who most consistently exemplifies this duality under the auspices of second-wave postmodernism than *New Yorker* critic James Wood, whose infamous review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001) "Human, All Too Inhuman: The Smallness of the Big Novel," bluntly invokes size as the key feature of metafiction's persistent problematic. In that review, Wood brands Smith's style with the memorable moniker "hysterical realism," proposing its descriptive utility regarding the key modus operandi of the "big contemporary novel" as a "perpetual motion-machine that appears to

have been embarrassed into velocity” (Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman”). In his estimation, this mode does not so much “abolish the conventions of realism” as “exhaust” and “overwork” them (Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman”). Moreover, Wood continues, “...objections are not made at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality: the style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality...but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself” (“Human, All Too Inhuman”). In other words, for Wood the hysterical realist’s violation of Flaubertian realism commits the sin of overwriting and smothers her characters with superfluous detail, all the while lacking the sort of moral seriousness befitting big, ambitious novels of ideas.

Wood’s philosophy, though readily available in his scores of reviews published in *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, and *The New Yorker*, reaches a kind of crescendo in his manifesto *How Fiction Works*, where the critic resuscitates the debate over “aesthetic authenticity” with an implicit emphasis on (to paraphrase Charles Taylor) the moral and ethical “horizons of significance” (*The Ethics of Authenticity* 39) that define it.

Employing both close readings and a broad survey of his own haphazard selection of “representative” literary works, Wood characterizes the ultimate purpose of literary prose fiction as one that rests on how aptly a given author models the critic’s favored mode of creative control—nineteenth-century lyrical realism—implicitly positioned as a veritable engine for humanist ethics. In Wood’s view, this particular form is again best exemplified by the oeuvre of its most widely heralded proponent, Flaubert, and most notably through that author’s use of *style indirect libre*. Advanced in works such as *Madame Bovary* and *Sentimental Education*, this narrative technique Wood defines as “inhabit[ing]

omniscience and partiality at once...[in which] a gap opens between author and character, and the bridge—which is free indirect style itself—between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance” (*How Fiction Works* 11).

Following this logic, Wood argues that the relative achievement of post-Flaubertian prose stylistics is largely contingent on an author’s ability to implement the various applications of free indirect style. Included among its recommended features, for instance, is the use of variant time signatures; the confusion of habitual and dynamic detail; and—as indicated earlier, haecceity or “thisness”—i.e., concretion of detail as an extension of narrative voice (Wood, *How Fiction Works* 67). Wood identifies these formal innovations in Flaubert’s work and traces their utility through authors from Henry James to Muriel Spark to Ian McEwan, advancing a narrative theory posited in stark contrast to the maximalist fictions associated with the so-called “postmodern” era (works ranging from Thomas Pynchon to Zadie Smith to David Foster Wallace).

Ironically, the critic’s most frequently referenced author turns against him by career’s end. A closer inspection of the later work from realism’s “founding father” reveals an important contradiction regarding the origins of postmodern prose aesthetics. Flaubert, upon whose legacy Wood bases his essentialized definition of “how fiction works,” is actually an important precursor to what today would be termed maximalist metafiction, particularly in his final unfinished novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881). Indeed, this “other Flaubert” cheerfully inhabits the derisive critical category that Wood famously posits in contrast with lyrical realism—*hysterical realism*—to illustrate a form

largely marked by, in true comic-ironic style, massively complex, “encyclopedic” narrative structures. Despite such nuances between these styles, for Wood “bad writing” equals “bad citizenship,” a moral failing that for the critic reveals a debased social ethic in its author’s willingness to “debase” language (*How Fiction Works* 32-33). Thus, Wood singles out David Foster Wallace (under the deleterious influence of Thomas Pynchon) as the most notorious American exemplar of this quality, pointedly addressing this connection by reading textual density as a reflection of American national space:

[Wallace’s] fiction prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America, and he is not afraid to decompose—and discompose—his own style in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him. ‘This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl,’ as Pynchon has it in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Whitman calls America “the greatest poem,’ but if this is the case ten Americas may represent a mimetic danger to the writer, the bloating of one’s own poem with that rival poem, America. (33)

Clearly, “decomposition” is here as much a placeholder term for Wood as “disintegration” was for poet-critic Yvor Winters, whose critique of Whitman and Joyce in *Primitivism and Decadence* seventy years earlier likewise compares experimental form to a decline in the moral seriousness that he argues should inform a literature of ideas:

To say that a poet is justified in employing a disintegrating form in order to express a feeling of disintegration, is merely a sophisticated justification for bad poetry, akin to the Whitmanian notion that one must write loose and sprawling poetry to ‘express’ the loose and sprawling American continent. In fact, all feeling, if one gives oneself (that is, one’s form) up to it, is a way of disintegration; poetic form is by definition a means to arrest the disintegration and order the feeling; and in so far as any poetry tends toward the formless, it fails to be expressive of anything. (136)

While Winters's negative correlation between prose stylistics and national identity anticipates McGurl's question about the correspondences between a literary work's form and its presumed scale of address by foregrounding the theories of exhaustion and excess hypothesized by postwar critics such as Tom LeClair, John Barth, Frederick Karl, Tony Tanner, and Joseph Tabbi,³⁴ it also speaks to a persistent false dichotomy at work in postwar American literary history. That is to say, a focus on aesthetic size outlines a trajectory in American postmodernism the contemporary critical contours of which begin with Wendy Steiner's influential field overview of the postwar period entitled "Postmodern Fictions, 1960-1990" (1999) in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*.

Steiner's chapter contends that postwar fiction classically breaks into two forms built on a naïve formalist assumption: "neomodernist" experimentation by typically white, male authors; and multicultural realism from social and ethnic minorities (441; 432). Dispensing with this fallacy through examples that reflect a spectrum of stylistic choices and values, Steiner encourages the latest iteration of postwar American literary historians to challenge this binary and reconsider its premises. In a conversation that has classically centered on a perceived aesthetic divide between realist and modernist modes of narration—modes through which both proponents and detractors of postmodern aesthetics structure their arguments—this divide typically splits between multiculturalism's predominantly realist narrative mode favored by writers of color, female, and queer writers, and the avant-garde experimentalist poetics practiced by an overwhelmingly white, male, upper-class cohort.

A touchstone among the loosely configured “Post-45” group of scholars who have recently taken stock of postwar American fiction's richly varied landscape, Steiner's intervention also focuses at length on the rhetorical effects of large-scale pioneers like Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the maximalist work's self-reflexive interplay subtly mediates its critical reception history. Following this intervention, Mark McGurl's periodizing triad of technomodernism, high cultural pluralism, and lower-middle class modernism extends Steiner's earlier critique of the technomodernist-multiculturalist binary even farther by reconfiguring the sociological premises upon which its false opposition is built. Moreover, McGurl's later *The Program Era* goes a long way toward recovering both the experimentality in multiethnic fiction, as well as the quotidian preoccupations of ostensibly anti-realist writers, by exploring how craft reflects class. My project subsequently builds on the work of both scholars to explain a critical pressure that yearns for the unity of realist representation,³⁵ demonstrating why size matters in popular and scholarly conversations about postmodern aesthetics while considering the variability of scales through which the object matter in question “self-reflects.” At the same time, in echoing McGurl's earlier incredulity about scale as an index of the reader's experience, I speculate on what role reception plays in exacerbating these critical effects to ask: does a story's length or density affect its mood and message? Is there a coherent relationship between a work's length and its presumed scale of address? Considering how long-form metafiction in the postwar period challenges the traditional realist model through a new modality of mapping, my study

submits these questions to a survey of novels that span older maximalist works from the “Long Seventies” to the present.

The emphasis on escalating types of self-referential narrative within the context of knowledge work likewise provides the reflexive platform through which I advance such text-specific questions as: how do twentieth- and twenty-first century maximalist fictions critically comment on the connection between national space and American identity? In what ways do these narratives, by virtue of their ambition and length, critique national consciousness through rhetorics of overload, accumulation, and expanse to suggest new forms of social and political agency from historically marginalized communities? Finally, how does reconsidering maximalism through the emergence of network theory alter our understanding of representations of the real in the postwar period? In response, I assert that maximalism constitutes a unique form of narrative “knowledge work” passed along to readers via an allopoietic method that mediates the information-rich experience of a long-form text’s enlarged external size and corresponding internal density.

The Scalar Turn: Critical Review

The value of studying size within the history of aesthetics has remained underexamined perhaps because references to scale and scalarity are so common. For this reason, my belated initiative posits this contemporary sub-field at the intersection of literary history, comparative area studies, and critical theory. To be sure, beyond the critics keyed to literary and narrative criticism above, the emergence of a definitive scalar turn in postwar criticism is visible through diverse scholars across a number of periods and disciplinary articulations—from Hsuan L. Hsu’s investigations into how space is

produced through representations of geographic scale in the nineteenth-century novel to Paul Giles's work on the transnational character of American literature and the assorted implications this trajectory holds for national identity.³⁶ These lines of inquiry are also in conversation with the pathbreaking scholarship of Wai Chee Dimock, from whose work scalarity as an instrument of precision and nuance might be said to first appear.

Approaching American literature against the geological time of the planet's 600 million-year span, Dimock's historicist approach in studies like her acclaimed *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2007) exposes America's transnational and global context on the wider world-literary stage.

By elevating discourse over genre, my study of maximalist metafiction is situated in an emergent subfield in literary criticism and theory that I tentatively call "the scalar turn" for its focus on the implications of aesthetic size for American literary history. This critical turn to scale follows Dimock's influential lead in "opening up questions of what counts as an entity, the platforms on which it emerges, the agency available to it, and the pressure it exerts on more conventional forms, such as the form of the nation" ("Scales of Aggregation" 219). In dialogue with diverse scholars from varied disciplinary backgrounds such as Mark McGurl, Barbara Johnson, Rita Felski, Lauren Berlant, Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru, and Sianne Ngai—each of whom have followed Dimock's influential lead in taking up "the diminished sovereignty of the nation-state" (219) from numerous historical, ideological, and institutional perspectives—I demonstrate how reading maximalism through metafictional aesthetics offers a new way of thinking about

national identity, particularly as constructions of cross-national difference vary across the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

Anticipating this approach, for example, McGurl offers an early glimpse of scale-based criticism prior to his aforementioned reflections on scale from *The Program Era* when, in *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James*, he argues that a given author's social ethic is interpreted through the relative prose density with which he or she depicts a work's "virtual interior of representation" (57). Accordingly, this "volumetric" imaginary takes up the virtual contours of the field of American literature in order to better understand the dimensional relation of represented to real space" (*The Novel Art* 58). McGurl's emphasis offers a "literalist" corollary³⁷ to Dimock's later remark about "the borders of knowledge [being] the replicas of national borders," when she asks:

[W]hat does it mean to set aside a body of writing as "American"? What assumptions enable us to take an adjective derived from a territorial jurisdiction and turn it into a mode of literary causality, making the latter reflexive of and indeed coincidental with the former? Nationhood, on this view, is endlessly reproduced in all spheres of life. This reproductive logic assumes that there is a seamless correspondence between the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of all other expressive domains. (*Through Other Continents* 3)

The "expressive domain" of literary discourse, as Dimock notes, take on a particularly national flavor in the postwar period as the matter of size becomes a motif so frequently invoked in discussions of large prose fictions from American literary history after 1945 as to be virtually meaningless. In hopes of clarifying this conventional wisdom, my dissertation consequently argues that scale is hardly a throwaway reference to big books;

rather, the current reemergence of magnitude as a vital issue in literary criticism provides an invaluable tool toward understanding how attitudes about American metafiction are shaped.

Limiting its scope to U.S. authors, my study avoids a discussion of the rise in scale-based critical apparatuses as they are applied to the study of world literature, an interest recently taken up by Bruce Robbins, David Palumbo-Liu, and Nirvana Tanoukhi's collection entitled *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, and Culture* (2010). Although Robbins, Palumbo-Liu, and Tanoukhi's volume theorizes the new globalism through Wallerstein's older model by asking to what extent the top-down totality of world-systems analysis might productively engage with the variable geometry of an increasingly interconnected twenty-first century world—my narrative and network-theory driven approach is more closely aligned with Susan Stewart's analysis of scalarity through various discourses of aesthetic size at the intersection of "genre and significance" (94). Within the context of postwar cultural criticism, the conversation about literary scale can be seen to properly begin with Stewart's influential study, *On Longing*, in which the critic asks, "What does exaggeration, as a mode of signification, exaggerate?" (ix). Stewart's remarkable genealogy of nostalgia contends that iterations of scale manifest various forms of yearning desire as a metaphor for the relationship of narrative to origin and object (ix, 23).

This reflexive rendering figures "longing" as a projective mode that closes desire's distance through point of view, exactness, and spatial depth, the "body

determin[ing] the human sense of scale” (xii). As Stewart contends, “The body represents the paradox of container and contained at once” (104), a containment model that also suggests the lineage of big books to which these authors belong. While Stewart’s celebrated study is exhaustive at the level of example—through its constituent forms of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, and the collection—her treatment of the implications of aesthetic size at the concept’s origins is conspicuously brief. Tracing the discourse to a little-known essay by aesthetician Bertram E. Jessup entitled simply, “Aesthetic Size” (1950), Stewart challenges Jessup’s attempts to conflate size and value through the critic’s careful examination of Aristotle’s *magnitude* tenet. And yet, Jessup notes the rhetorical uses and misuses with which this concept is usually deployed as an empty superlative:

Simple correlation is, of course, not meant. It would be critically absurd and in contempt of the elementary facts of aesthetic judgment to hold that aesthetically “big” means “good” or that “larger” means “better.” Nonetheless, largeness or amplitude does not uncommonly enter into aesthetic pronouncement... Such terms as ‘great,’ ‘magnificent,’ and ‘grand’ have connotations of quality in quantity and may be used with critical justness and exactness as well as cheaply and loosely. They rest on the idea of aesthetic size. (31)

More noteworthy for Stewart is Jessup’s stronger claims on behalf of “coherence”—a critical category that modernist poetics relativizes through its groundbreaking explorations of interior states of consciousness. As if supplying an intermediate position between the earlier insights of Yvor Winters and the later critique established by James Wood, Jessup asserts that:

Blurred structure results in a weakening or decrease of interest. This is to say that a work of art is first of all a perceptual object and must, therefore, first of all conform to the laws of perception. With important exceptions to be noticed later, a small work of art into which a big structure is forced, suffers in its basic perceptual character by becoming blurred. (35)

Stewart's concern here of course centers on the fact that modernist poetics takes the radically variable nature of cognitive and perceptual categories for its object of investigation (e.g., Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Musil, and Kafka, to name a few of the authors responsible for this impression). Joining this nascent critical turn to scale as a defense of experimental fiction, my project expands on Jessup and Stewart's observations to note that the very possibility of exaggeration carries with it an imagined "appropriate" volume of detail or "right" size for length, width, and density that structures the rhetorical possibilities of a given mode of narration.

Although many of the texts I cover here reach for extra-literary contexts and non-narrative discourses, my critical apparatus has consistently been drawn beyond a strictly literary purview to aesthetic theory broadly conceived. For this reason, Sianne Ngai's concentration on "marginal to philosophical aesthetics" in her recent study *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), has furnished a useful heuristic for understanding the kind of role scale might play in literary criticism and theory. Ngai's proposed notion of "metacategory," a paradigm rooted in affective judgments rather than default principles or concepts is consistent with Stewart and Felski's approaches. Thus, I read the subject of scale in postwar fiction as a metacategory most often rooted in size and expressed in judgments about the length, scope, density, and difficulty of so-called maximalist works. Toward undertaking this approach, I examine the work of Pynchon,

Joseph McElroy, Samuel R. Delany, Mark Z. Danielewski, Gayl Jones, and Joshua Cohen in a tacit alignment with Wendy Steiner's contention that the concentration on size is hardly limited to the largely white male "neo-modernist" cohort of postwar American fiction. Rather, maximalist fiction arises in the work of a range of authors from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds. Given the latitude with which scale³⁸ is evoked in the humanities, my project combines both the neglected outliers of postmodern fiction and some highly representative examples to examine the complex receptions that have followed their publications.

The Scope of This Project: Chapter Outline

In her article "The Dialogical Avant-Garde: Relational Aesthetics and Time Ecologies in *Only Revolutions* and *TOC*," Amy J. Elias provides a useful organizational framework for the allopoietic approach delineated in the chapters that follow. Relational aesthetics, she explains, is defined by "ethics of collaboration between artist and audience, audiences and works, and audiences and other audiences" (740). Based on this three-fold pattern, my subsequent analyses take a layered and interanimating perspective with regard to how large-scale narrative maps an increasingly dense social web of networked connections in postwar America. In this way, my allopoietic emphasis draws from Christian Moraru's recent definition of identity in the late-postmodern or "cosmodern" era as a fundamentally trans-corporeal affair, the critic's notion of the *allotropic* evoking precisely the body's liminal "relationality-as-haptic reality" in late twentieth century US fiction. Inspiring my account of a distinctive shift in reflexive narrative discourses relative to scale, the novels examined herein realize Moraru's

“germane space where the body and its reincorporations as ‘other’...can stand side by side, distinct and subdivided instead of divided and isolated, not necessarily similar and yet woven into the same world syntax” (285).

This critical emphasis on syntax is especially significant for the authors in chapter two, whose tidal wave-like “life sentences” (a coinage that I borrow from William H. Gass) generate works both celebrated and condemned for their explorations of consciousness and multitudinal identity. The maximalist novels of Pynchon and McElroy use “the huge narrative to show forth [a] process of which human life is an instance” (“Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts”)—that “instance” being the birth of identity as a fundamentally fragmentary affair. At this intersection of identity theory and narrative poetics, my analysis demonstrates how Pynchon and McElroy challenge the conventions of traditional realist narration—a “multiplying real,” in McElroy’s term—by consistently exposing the various parts that build their would-be narrative wholes. In sentence-level *Lebenswelten* (life-worlds) that realize the increasingly interconnected postwar media ecology at scale, my chapter contends that Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and McElroy’s *Women and Men* (1987) sustain a powerful analogy between the saturated prose of an excessive text and the increasingly “saturated self”³⁹ of late-twentieth century American life. Posing an ethical challenge to the alleged narcissism and despair that characterizes popular critiques of postmodern fiction, these novels overwork traditional forms of realist narration via an intra-diegetic phenomenon that moves beyond representational boundaries to also invoke the external reception histories surrounding the “thick description”⁴⁰ of their totalizing texts. Thus, before taking up the groundbreaking

methods by which the works themselves convey self-consciousness, I consider the emergent discourses of difficulty that both anticipate and follow their alternately neglected and inflated reputations.

First addressed in his 1975 statement on craft entitled “Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts” and reiterated in the same terms as recently as a 2011 interview,⁴¹ Joseph McElroy’s focus on the “massed actualities of ordinary life” signals one of the most consistent, as well as consistently underexamined, aesthetic programs in twentieth-century American fiction (203). Improbably advancing his stated goal of “realism,” the author’s idiosyncratic oeuvre nevertheless shares the skeptical attitude toward nineteenth-century realist modes of narration held by other prominent American maximalists of the 1960s and beyond: a fifty-year career spanning the proto-postmodernism of Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, Coover, and DeLillo to include even second-wave “mega-novelists” such as David Foster Wallace and William T. Vollmann, among others. And yet, while the problem of how to assimilate “everything and more”⁴² would seem a largely comic preoccupation for the technomodernist literary monoculture common to both periods, in McElroy’s work the “impossibility of comprehensiveness” is no laughing matter (“Neural Neighborhoods,” 203). Rather, the author’s unexpectedly earnest brand of narrative reflexivity bears little resemblance to the ironic registers in which his oft-compared fellow travelers typically operate, suggesting less metafictional play than a full-blown meta-ethical program poised to break through representation’s self-conscious hall of mirrors once and for all. More akin to the reflexive inclinations of the period’s international avant-garde⁴³ than those American metafictionists with whom

he is usually grouped, McElroy's idiosyncratic fictions suggest a rather different form of encyclopedism, joining authors like Carl Emilio Gadda and Michel Butor to acknowledge audience participation as an explicit feature in the text's production of meaning. Across the author's body of work, I argue that this "literalism" takes the form of a synecdochical arrangement between the diverse subject positions his narration occupies intradiegetically and the disparate, often elliptical, storyworlds his characters inhabit.

Chapter three analyzes the ways in which a "mock encyclopedic" or "faux scholarly" diegetic framework often functions in a "micro-managerial" capacity for the reader's approach to interpreting maximalist metafiction. Occupying the middle ground between what McGurl calls the two signature genres of postwar fiction—the campus novel and the portrait of the artist—mock scholarly works such as Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* contemporize a subgenre Brian McHale traces to Rabelais and Swift. Best known in American letters through numerous postwar and contemporary examples of the form, from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) to Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2* (1995) to Marisha Pessl's surprise bestseller *Special Topics in Relativity Physics* (2006), the genre's dynamics are discussed through the notion of "possible-worlds theory," an approach from analytic philosophy that postclassical narratology adopts as "fictional worlds" theory.

In this context, fictional worlds as abstractions of possibility are measured through concretization of textual detail, the fictional world in question linked to the variable density of the fictional text that builds it. Thus, my first extended analysis demonstrates that so-called fictional "books about everything" serve as maps of

imaginative potentiality that provide an important conduit between the poetics of excess and the possible worlds this aesthetic pushes to the logical limit. Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man* (1993) is a mock scholarly academic mystery projected onto the labyrinthine setting of New York City in the early stage of the AIDS crisis. Infamous for its densely rendered excess of sexual detail, Delany's novel explicitly evokes possible-worlds theory through narrator John Marr's obsessive immersion into the rituals and social patterns of his research subject: the late modal realist philosopher-savant Timothy Hasler. Critically rewriting novelist Harold Brodkey's homophobic *mea culpa* about contracting HIV (*This Wild Darkness*), Delany's approach redresses period prejudices toward gay men and women that historically conflated behavior and identity. That is, *The Mad Man* overworks heteronormative projections of gay promiscuity through fantastic (perhaps impossible) sexual exploits, and foregrounds the act of scholarly research to polemically assault its audience in a powerful oscillation between academic and personal discourses. (Marr's journal entries and letters are culled from Delany's period autobiographical writings on the same milieu.) Following this logic, Delany's novel both imagines and in subsequent editions *provides* through scientific appendices on rates of HIV seroconversion an even more massively embodied corpus of actual scholarship surrounding its dense interlayering of fictive scholarly material. In this way, *The Mad Man* presents an important and unexplored variant of mock scholarship by combining the Borgesian textual labyrinth with social commentary on early AIDS awareness, the limits of social tolerance regarding same-sex desire, and the epidemic of homelessness and poverty in the postwar United States.

Similarly, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* offers a highly original poetics of excess in a constant interplay with the novel's various textural levels to create a possible scholarly world. The poetics of excess—an aesthetic common to the so-called "systems novel" in postmodern fiction—manifests "overload" as its key compositional strategy. Using Lubomír Doležel's pioneering narratological work on the fictional encyclopedia, my chapter demonstrates how Danielewski's excessive scaffolding of secondary critical material (both fictitious and actual) alters one's understanding of the way a literary text creates a fictional world. To argue this point, I focus on the narratological concept of "implicitness," in which a literary work's relative textural density from saturation to incompleteness alternately "fills" and "empties out" a fictional world. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, photographer Will Navidson maps the strange spatial violation at the center of his young family's home, a shape-shifting labyrinth that reflects his own incipient domestic and psychological instability. Danielewski's innovative narration of this embedded narrative is framed by mock scholarship surrounding the film Navidson makes of the labyrinth.

As audiences traverse the webbed density of Danielewski's mock scholarly Möbius strip, the realization dawns that the novel's story does not properly exist outside of the overloaded editorial apparatus (over 450 footnotes frame the novel) that scaffolds it for the reader. In this way, *House of Leaves*' "explicit texture" is only legible via the narrative's dense interlayering of editorially mediated (and, as Katherine Hayles has argued, "remediated") levels of diegesis. By revealing these fictional facts through excessive mediation, the author floods the fictional text's "zero texture" level, the

subtextual stratum in which information tends to be most implicit. This implicitness, I suggest, facilitates the text's infinite regress of possible scholarly worlds: a textual labyrinth that temporarily realizes the impossible object it recounts by filling its center with *actual* scholarly materials. This multiplicity in prose provides a critical site for arguments about representations of the real in late postmodern or metamodernist literature—a new mock scholarly “research space” generated by the novel's hypertextual dissolution between language and book, word and world.

My fourth chapter asks to what extent the study of maximalism might be applied to historically underrepresented groups through an analysis of the rise in representations of knowledge production among twenty-first century American writers of color. Targeting the legacy of literary canon formation as a widely contested site on the larger battlefield that composes the culture wars of the mid-to-late 1980s, I examine the subject's multicultural turn from the vantage point of self-conscious narrative practice. With a specific emphasis on the neglected subject of long-form or maximalist novels by writers of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, my analysis considers the larger ethnoaesthetic traditions to which my respective target texts—Gayl Jones's *Mosquito* (1999) and Joshua Cohen's *Witz* (2009)—belong in order to propose a new, countercanonical variant of literary maximalism. Featuring imaginary representations of archival and museal spaces, these multiethnic maximalist fictions serve as fundamentally aural repositories, critiquing a belated ethnic literary canon debate even as they bear witness to its increasingly pervasive influence on American literary history.

Across vast surveys of the stereotypes that mark their marginalization, *Mosquito* and *Witz*, I argue, record the conspicuous gaps, errors, and omissions against which rationales for canonical classification are typically transcribed, and so respond in literal terms to what Paul Lauter describes as “the implications of the material and institutional conditions of authorship and literary study, and with the functions of canons in establishing and maintaining boundaries” (Morrissey 182). These gaps, I further contend, ironically reveal an aesthetic subtext beneath the blur of language their verbose narrators use to unmask and critique the stability of the canon: an overloaded approach that collapses the metaphorical borders constructed between national space, ethnic identity, and literary representations of both components. This widespread rejection of the conflation of aesthetic category with ethnic identity leads my fourth chapter to also consider the recent revival in maximalist metafiction to representations of the book as a closed repository of knowledge in contrast with the proto-hypertext experiments of millennial fictions. This forced epistemological closure, I argue, restores the subject of scalar variability to a modernist register of nostalgic longing, typically figured through the curatorial role of the precocious polymath. In their frequently adolescent protagonists, these texts replace the conspiratorial valences associated with the Jamesonian social detective of first-wave literary postmodernism (picaresque knowledge workers such as Grass’s Oskar Matzerath, Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas, Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, to name a few) with a knowing return to sincerity that combines the self-reference of metafictional aesthetics with the pathos of traditional realism.

Archiving the aftermath of either personal or public apocalypse, characters such as Alma Singer (*The History of Love*), Oskar Schell (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) Benjamin Israelien (*Witz*) and Gurion Maccabee (*The Instructions*) steel themselves against Information Age overload. These texts, I suggest, enact “post-postmodern” *genizah*, “store-rooms or repositories for damaged, discarded, or heretical books and papers and sacred relics” (*OED*), broken American archives that evoke an explicitly post-nationalist (occasionally internationalist) approach to thinking about local and global contexts while remaining rooted in an explicit sociopolitical critique of the United States. Highlighting the important role citizenship plays in the critical distance enacted between self and space, container and contained, my analysis of *Witz* necessarily considers how the critique of totality offered by scale expresses the complex experiences of cultural minorities in the United States.

In the spirit of Zadie Smith,⁴⁴ chapter five concludes my project with a consideration of “two possible paths” for the maximalist tradition with a pair of notable developments in analytical approaches to aesthetic size and scale. The first offers a parallel to literary maximalism in the form of its opposite—the micronarrative or “miniaturist” tradition—while the second extends the implications of contemporary maximalist narrative as it collides with the advent of digital platforms. With the big book’s outsized rhetorical effects an increasingly “intangible” issue as print competes with e-readers, this networked narrative format, I assert, draws upon the episodic techniques of cinematic and televisual media in order to reach an audience increasingly susceptible to other representational forms. Following critical interventions into how

digital literacy has impacted literary interpretation, the chapter specifically applies the methodologies of critics such as David Bordwell and Mark C. Taylor to both recent miniaturist innovations by seasoned writers like Don DeLillo (*Point Omega*) as well as multi-part “megafictions” like Hanya Yanigihara’s curiously postethnic paean to friendship *A Little Life* (2014) or Garth Risk Hallberg’s unabashedly nostalgic *City on Fire* (2015). With networks the dominant organizational mode for contemporary society, the emergent network aesthetics, I argue, evoke a resilient new paradigm for interrogating literary scale to offer a bold, if not always necessarily *big*, vision for the “futures” of long-form American metafiction.

Notes

¹ Given that the 2007-2008-world population was around seven billion when Kaufman's film was written, this figure most likely refers to a Jewish audience via a Talmudic allusion to Rabbi Samuel Ben Nahman ("Barnathan") in Sammy's name (Child 138).

² Having exchanged roles with the otherwise marginal cleaning woman character, Ellen (Dianne Wiest), Caden's direction to "die" is given by her.

³ For the full account of this rare neurosis, see Cotard 314-344.

⁴ The "poet laureate" of twenty-first century cinematic self-reflexivity, Kaufman engages with human consciousness through a mediating author-function or meta-text in all of his prior screenplays. Before *Synecdoche, New York*, Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) was perhaps the film to push this assumption the farthest, with Kaufman's screenplay imagining a relationship between a cerebral screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman and his facile but far more successful twin brother, Donald (a useful fiction invented by the brother-less Kaufman). Serving a sly commentary on film aesthetics, Charlie's arty attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's so-called "unadaptable" creative nonfiction *The Orchid Thief* are continually upstaged by Donald's unanimously acclaimed hack-work inspired by workshop platitudes and tried-and-true genre convention.

⁵ I use the term for "total artwork" in the architectural sense of Walter Gropius's legacy rather than its proto-fascist context associated with the aesthetics of Richard Wagner. See Roberts 144-164.

⁶ As if echoing Aristotle's cited passage about an equally problematic small scale aesthetic, Caden's estranged wife Adele is a micro-miniaturist painter whose works can only be seen with a magnifying glass.

⁷ Aristotle calls magnitude one of the six basic components of plot, explaining that:

Any beautiful object, whether a living organism or any other entity composed of parts, must not only possess those parts in proper order, but its magnitude also should not be arbitrary; beauty consists in magnitude as well as order. For this reason no organism could be beautiful if it is excessively small (since observation becomes confused as it comes close to having no perceptible duration in time) or excessively large (since the observation is then not simultaneous, and the observers find that the sense of unity and wholeness is lost from their observation, e.g., if there were an animal a thousand miles long). (14)

⁸ Of the ability to speak well, for example, Longinus asserts that “an orator of the true genius must have no mean and ungenerous way of thinking... Grand and sublime expressions must flow from them, and them alone, whose conceptions are stored and big with greatness” (9). For an appropriately stirring and successful delivery, these “elevated” conceptions necessitate the tendency to “adorn and embellish” (Longinus 14, 37) their presentation stylistically—a program of tropes and exercises that suffuses one’s admirable “pursuits” with the dignity and grandeur Longinus calls “sublimity.”

⁹ Hugh Blair extends these classifications regarding the degrees of “astonishment” that accompany a confrontation with sublimity’s boundlessness; however, in complicating Burke’s original conception, Blair suggests that these degrees are beset by both positive (“internal elevation and expansion”) and negative (“a degree of awfulness and solemnity”) valences (Golden and Corbett 52). Furthermore, Blair casts a retrospectively critical eye on Longinus’s foundational definition, contending that

He sets out, indeed, with describing it in its just and proper meaning; as something that elevates the mind above itself; and fills it with high conceptions, and a noble pride. But from this view of it he frequently departs; and substitutes in the place of it, whatever, in any strain of composition, pleases highly. Thus, many of the passages which he produces as instances of the sublime, are merely elegant, without having the most distant relation to proper sublimity....” (Golden and Corbett 58)

Blair also distinguishes between the terrors of vastness and those of height and depth—the latter two qualities of which he argues the audience feels most profoundly.

¹⁰ Notably, it is a fiction writer who coins the term—William H. Gass in a chapter entitled “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” (1970), where he writes: “There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don’t mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the work of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction” (25-26).

¹¹ Although he does not include “megafiction” or even “maximalism” as categories in the earlier study, McHale’s unconscious consideration of metafiction’s scalar implications is arguably detectable in his choice of text when proposing the ontological versus epistemological antinomy (Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*). A regularly cited example of early maximalism, *Absalom, Absalom!* illustrates the author’s attempts to “embrace the

whole world in each sentence.” See Ross, *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991), 86. For discussion on Joseph McElroy’s debt to the Faulknerian world-sentence, see chapter two of this study.

¹² See Herod, *Scale* (London: Routledge, 2012, xi).

¹³ See Friedman, *Black Humor* (London: Corgi, 1965); Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979); and Barth, *Further Fridays: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984).

¹⁴ By interrogating the often-incoherent enterprise of “postwar” periodization as a blanket concept, Amy Hungerford’s essay “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary” offers a lucid synthesis of approaches to American literary history after 1960. In the years since its publication, Hungerford’s essay has also proved to be a touchstone for scholars within the loose “Post 45” collective of critics and historians. See Green 25-29 and Hoberek 234-236, for just two recent critics who address Hungerford’s claims.

¹⁵ See Karl, *American Fictions, 1980-2000: Who America Is It Anyway?*; Mendelson, “Gravity’s Encyclopedia” and “Encyclopedic Narrative from Dante to Pynchon”; LeClair, *The Art of Excess*; and Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-system from Goethe to García Márquez*.

¹⁶ John Kuehl is the earliest critic to point out the shortcomings of this approach, when he attempts to read other examples of so-called “encyclopedic narrative” through Edward Mendelson’s influential taxonomy. Kuehl’s critique calls attention to the way each text invariably generates its own theory, and furthermore, that these theories fail at some critical point of cross-applicability. In twentieth century criticism, the “anatomic” approach to large-scale texts begins with two studies of poetry, Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* with Fletcher’s *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, both of which offer a set of critical tenets or principles. More contemporary formalist approaches of this format also includes Robert Belknap’s *The List* and Stefano Ercolino’s *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666*.

¹⁷ See Culler 153-187 for a more detailed account of this concept.

¹⁸ See Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, 143-152 for a more fully elaborated discussion of *qualia*’s history in both philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

¹⁹ Allodiegetic narrators should also not be confused with autodiegetic narrators, a homodiegetic narrator, who, for example in autobiography, is also the central protagonist, and refers to him or herself in third-person.

²⁰ Systems theorists Humberto Maturana and Fernando Varela define an autopoietic machine as one organized in

a network of processes of production...of components that produce the components which (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as a network. (78-79).

Allopoietic machines, by distinction, are Cartesian and “have as the product of their functioning something different from themselves” (Maturana and Varela 80).

²¹ Dimensionality has been a preoccupying feature of McGann’s scholarship since his turn to “textual criticism” with *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1983). See chapter two of this study for his discussion of creative authorship and identity in *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 11-15.

²² See further elaboration of this definition on page 54 of chapter two in this study.

²³ For arguments about metamodernism as an aesthetic movement, see Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s “Notes on Metamodernism,” or the recent “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” by David James and Urmila Seshagiri. My project shares the slightly more reserved conclusions about this paradigm’s range of influence expressed by Andre Furlani (*Guy Davenport: Postmodernism and After*, 145-188), Mary K. Holland’s *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (199-201) and Christian Moraru in his *American Book Review* special issue on “Metamodernism” (3-4).

²⁴ Contra Furlani, a 2008 *PMLA* article surveying then-current developments in “The New Modernist Studies” by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz provides an alternative formulation. Characterizing the burgeoning field’s contemporary efflorescence along three potentialities—temporal, spatial, and vertical—by which the authors argue that “periods seem inevitably to get bigger” and acknowledge recent attempts to locate the traditional *fin-de-siècle* proto-modernist originary moment (c. 1890) as early as the mid-nineteenth century (737). Moreover, at the opposite end of the chronological spectrum, scholars seeking high modernist closure might exceed traditional demarcations set by the Second World War with excursions into the 1950s and beyond. Subject to an even more expansive critical treatment are spatial and vertical valences: the former typically “widen[ing] the modernist archive” by calling for work on previously neglected literary texts (and, through the application of *au courant* critical approaches,

older ones as well) while the latter blurs an increasingly permeable line between high and mass culture distinctions. See Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123 (2008): 737-748.

²⁵ Jameson’s argument for the supremacy of “a new kind of flatness... a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (9) is here revised to consider the recent turn to “lateral aesthetics,” of which the authors featured here are emblematic. Lateral aesthetics, as my analysis will show, runs the gamut from the “lateral agency” of Lauren Berlant’s work on intersections of affect theory and national identity, to the “lateral reflexivity” of David Herman’s work in postclassical narratology.

²⁶ More precisely related to my focus on literary history, Rita Felski’s recent neo-phenomenology of the reading experience *Uses of Literature* has provided both an inspired set of countervailing literary tropes and a new way of thinking about literature apart from “the quintessentially paranoid style of critical engagement” known as critique (3). Felski achieves this goal through four proposed “modes of textual engagement,” a heuristic the critic is at pains to differentiate with a set of conventional literary terms or principles (4). Her recommended set of descriptors—*recognition*, *enchantment*, *knowledge*, and *shock*—have supplied my own study with a positive shift in critical orientation that reconceptualizes literary criticism as a set of “multileveled interactions between texts and readers irreducible to their separate parts” to be eagerly charted rather than a rigid set of formal principles to be slavishly followed (14).

²⁷ See Barthes’s “The Reality Effect”; Ricardou’s *Problèmes du Nouveau Roman*; and Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

²⁸ See Vidal, Lasch, Graff, Newman, Will, and Wolfe.

²⁹ Foundational to the moral implications of this conversation is Charles Taylor’s discussion of authenticity and individualism in the postwar era. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor terms the two sides to this debate the “knockers” and the “boosters,” and so details the considerable difference of opinion over individualism’s consequences for human life and meaning. The “knockers,” with whom Taylor partially agrees, lament the increasingly solipsistic (and thus meaningless) forms the quest for self-fulfillment have taken, usually couched in the purely tendentious assumptions of “mutual respect” for another person’s opinion, regardless of what that opinion might entail. This elevation of “choice” from epistemological to moral principle, results in a worldview that often serves as “a screen for self-indulgence” (Taylor, *Ethics* 16). Despite his partial assent, Taylor falls short of the vehemence attributed to knockers Allan Bloom, Christopher Lasch, and others, pronouncing the ideal of self-fulfillment a worthy goal. This sentiment reflects a more carefully circumscribed version of the boosters’ position (“soft relativism” as a perfectly permissible state of human affairs), and though Taylor supports the ideal, he cautions against an uncritical stance toward its most superficial forms. In

critiques of the narrative methods of postmodern fiction, critics have often characterized the form as debased, travestied, and overly relativistic—aligning it aesthetically with the booster position mentioned by Taylor. From the knockers’ perspective, postmodern fiction would seem not to be a mere reflection of those trivialized forms of authenticity that early culture warriors such as Allan Bloom lament as symptomatic of culture’s decline following the 1960s; rather, postmodern fiction becomes itself identified as somehow intrinsically debased—an emblem of facile relativism and a cultural signifier for amorality and chaos. This argument is increasingly difficult to sustain against maximalist metafiction, which as noted previously, problematizes its own totalizing tendency. Again, this conflation/confusion of representation and reality implies that a new definition of realism is necessary that better fits the times in which these critics and novelists write, one that takes into account the widespread changes to human existence as a consequence of technological advances and “the primacy of instrumental reason” (Taylor 6).

³⁰ Gardner’s polemic advocates for “an old-fashioned view of what art is and does and what the fundamental business of critics ought therefore to be” (5) in a two-part argument about the way avant-garde fiction writers and poststructuralist critics in the postwar era bring about a decline in the quality of the literary arts. This decline, he first contends, whether by reflecting a new “debased” reality or by celebrating its effects (and so tacitly adding to it) has moral consequences for the state of the art and its readers. First, Gardner suggests that the quality of literary discourse is suffering due to a decline in moral courage. Second, he asserts that the quality of criticism has also diminished due to a preoccupation with the trivial. Against this charge, Gardner argues that art’s chief purpose should return to “rediscover[ing]... what is necessary to humanness” (6).

³¹ In this trenchant analysis of the early theory wars, Graff explores the rhetoric of both realist and anti-realist strains of fiction and the literary criticism that has surrounded these productions. Ultimately a polemic on recovering the pedagogical imperative for literary studies, Graff’s thesis is that “the loss of belief—or loss of interest—in literature as a means of understanding weakens the educational claims of literature and leaves the literature teacher without a rationale for what he professes” (7).

³² See Linda Hutcheon’s first monograph *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1980).

³³ I use “readerly” as Roland Barthes intended it, reflective of the reader’s expectation of “a classic text” that maintains the basic conventions of realism “representative” rather than “productive” (*S/Z* 4-5). *Gravity’s Rainbow* is widely considered, of course, to be the quintessential “writerly” text.

³⁴ See Tabbi's *Postmodern Sublime* for the continuing relevance of arguments charted from Longinus to the present regarding issues of magnitude, immeasurability, and comprehensibility in contemporary fiction (12, 29).

³⁵ One thinks especially of the twenty-first century surge in avant-garde manifestos that challenge the forms of literary realism espoused by critics like James Wood, Dale Peck, and B.R. Myers—a genre occupied equally by creative writers and literary critics. For example, Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley's mock-literary collective the "International Necronautical Society" with its interest in "mapping, entering, colonizing, and eventually inhabiting the space of death" as an aesthetic call to arms. Likewise, David Shields's *Reality Hunger* builds its argument out of a collage-like juxtaposition of effects, only half of which are the author's own.

³⁶ See Hsu, *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); and Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

³⁷ McGurl addresses Dimock's criticism directly in "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (2012): 533-553, where he charges "deep time" with being an unintended critique of overly narrow New Historicist approaches that avoid big picture generalizations, and, in so doing "expose the powerlessness of literary intellectuals to shape [their immediate histories] in any noticeable way" (534).

³⁸ Among the numerous entries offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, scale is alternately defined as an "apparatus for weighing," "relative or proportionate size or extent, degree [or] proportion" and "impartial judgment" ("scale").

³⁹ My notion of a "saturated self" borrows freely from the American psychologist Kenneth Gergen's theories of social saturation, which, in a turn that might well have been in reference to some of the novels in this dissertation, he argues

furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. . . . This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions by inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all" (5-6).

See *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic, 1991).

⁴⁰ In a discussion of McElroy's career, Tony Tanner invokes Clifford Geertz's influential concept from anthropology signaling the interpretive gloss that must accompany the significant contextual research that surrounds an object of study (See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic, 1973).

⁴¹ See Cohen and McElroy, "Real Realisms."

⁴² The expression gives second-wave maximalist David Foster Wallace's monograph on the history of infinity as a mathematical construct its title; see *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (New York: Norton, 2004).

⁴³ Even a cursory account of the postwar international avant-garde would have to include writers associated with the French *nouveau roman*, OULIPO (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*), the *neoavanguardia* (Gruppo '63), and Latin American practitioners of what Mario Vargas Llosa calls *la novella totalizadora* (the total novel). See Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1971).

⁴⁴ See Smith's revision of her *New York Review of Books* essay "Two Paths for the Novel," retitled "Two Directions for the Novel" and collected in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009) 71-98.

CHAPTER II

LIFE SENTENCES: MULTITUDINAL IDENTITY AND THE SATURATED SELF AT SCALE

The narrator of Danilo Kiš's story "The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)" relates an eventful work trip to Sweden during which, over the course of ten days, a pleasantly informative guide leads her on a whirlwind Stockholm tour. On the evening before she departs for home the trip concludes with an unexpected afterhours visit to the Royal Library, whereupon she is left in the care of a late-shift guard who escorts her to a large door. Entering the dungeon-like antechamber behind it, the woman notices a network of corridors extending from the room's center—each of them forking into larger rooms that correspond to the alphabet. Instantly, the visit's purpose is revealed to her as she rushes to find the letter that begins her own last name.

These rooms contain the infamous "Encyclopedia of the Dead": life stories of every person who has ever lived, recounted in exhaustive detail. The encyclopedia's entries overlook nothing, no matter how minor, in preparation for "the Return" promised by biblical prophecy. Compiled by a "religious order or sect whose democratic program stresses an egalitarian vision of the world of the dead," the seemingly innumerable volumes offer a comprehensive account of every facet of every life (Kiš 44). Taken as a unified collection, the massive tomes combine to form one definitive "book of the world," charting "everything that can be recorded concerning those who have completed their earthly journey and set off on the eternal one" (Kiš 43). And yet, the formal

arrangement of time in each passage operates by an impossible logic: the text's necessarily expansive approach—collapsing past, present, and future into one continuous stream—somehow achieves the most astonishing compression.

Although the encyclopedia privileges concrete facts, its entries unite both exterior and interior details, imparting the lived experience of consciousness as carefully as its surface representation. In the synopsis of her father's life, for example, the narrator notes that eighteen thousand days and nights are comprehensively covered in just five to six pages. Needless to say, making such a discovery is truly devastating for her on a trip planned in part to ease the grieving process following his recent death. However, bereavement quickly gives way to fascination, then responsibility, as she takes up the role of scribe herself, copying out "several of the most important passages and [making] a kind of summary of [his] life" before a new day begins and the guard returns to collect her (Kiš 42).

Among the most memorable of these anecdotes is a reflection on her father's late interest in painting flowers, which literally "blossomed" overnight on various surfaces throughout his home. This "floral contagion," she remembers, permeated his last few months, when, over hours, days, and weeks he would compulsively paint the design "which bore little resemblance to real flowers" (Kiš 61, 62). As the narrator finally reaches the entry's conclusion, she notices an unusual bit of flora sketched alongside its final paragraph—the same motif her father had drawn so obsessively over the course of his final months alive (Kiš 64). Reading the accompanying caption, she reports that its disturbing revelation causes her to wake up screaming; the entire trip, it seems, was a

dream. Weeks later, when she shares the remembered sketch's details with her father's doctor, the physician observes that its "basic floral pattern...resembl[ing] a gigantic peeled and cloven orange, crisscrossed with fine red lines like capillaries" describes precisely the tumor that killed him (Kiš 65).

By imagining a text that somehow encompasses everything that can be known of a human existence (including the disease that might terminate it), "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" provocatively asks its audience to meditate on the accumulation of events that compose their own daily lives. Purporting to transcend its material form via a textual boundary separating the living from the dead, Kiš's closing representational shift "realizes" its effects by abruptly tearing away that boundary through the "efflorescent" floral design revealed on the encyclopedic entry's last page.¹ In this way, the story's most indelible quality is arguably the impression of "totality" Kiš constructs within an otherwise artfully condensed microcosm. Whether holding between two covers the origins of life or the mysteries of its end, the title work's holistic conceit thus invites readers to consider the real-world examples that correspond to its deeply nostalgic assumption about a single text containing—apropos of its subtitle's boast—"a whole life." Of course such a volume would, as a function of its extraordinary length, naturally suspend its readers' own lives through the accumulated hours taken up by its innumerable pages: an imposition Kiš effectively avoids by defining scale's reflexive role as a textual trope. Instead, as his abbreviated approach demonstrates, the aspiring encyclopedist is better served by mediating these threshold effects between self and world without

pushing the reading experience to the absolute limits of endurance an infinite book imagines.

But what of writers who *do* translate the outsized ambitions of a long-form compositional process to their audience's experience of the text? Applying Kiš's logic on a considerably grander scale, this chapter examines the critical conversations surrounding two novelists whose extravagantly lengthy books belie conventional categorization by virtue of their corresponding internal density and capaciousness. Although similarly grounded in the metafictional inclinations of other maximalist writers among the international avant-garde of the period, the self-conscious narrative practices of Thomas Pynchon and Joseph McElroy are unique for the increasingly scalar manner in which they define American identity as a relational rather than *sui generis* construct. Not unlike the unusually penetrating forms of knowledge work that enable the narrator's extra-textual movement from life to death and back again in Kiš's haunting fable, this scalarity takes the form of a synecdochical arrangement between the diverse subject positions their novels explore diegetically and the disparate storyworlds those subjects inhabit. As Tom LeClair notes, while "many novels attempt to conceal their principles of synecdoche or imply that they are natural...Novels of excess call attention to their synecdoche, thus reminding readers of what has been left out of the excessive novels and, as importantly, what has been excluded from more conventionally scaled fiction" (19). Building on LeClair's synecdochical logic with two examples from his influential study *The Art of Excess*, this chapter accordingly examines the ways in which Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and McElroy's *Women and Men* (1987) sustain a powerful analogy

between the saturated prose of an excessive text and the increasingly information-saturated experience of late-twentieth century American life.

Both authors, I argue, pose an ethical challenge to the allegations of narcissism and despair that characterize popular critiques of metafictional aesthetics. Specifically, Pynchon and McElroy overwork traditional forms of realist narration via an intra-diegetic maneuver that moves beyond representational boundaries to reflexively invoke the external reception histories surrounding their would-be totalizing texts. Before taking up the groundbreaking methods by which the works themselves convey this self-conscious form of reading, I consider the emergent discourses of difficulty that alternately anticipate and follow their alternately neglected and inflated reputations. Of these discourses, the term “encyclopedic” offers perhaps the most consistently haphazard, if not altogether incoherent, set of structural tenets within the maximalist tradition; consequently, my critique accounts for this encyclopedic imaginary in critical references to the two novels under review.

To be clear, Pynchon and McElroy’s novels map a fractured American totality² that exceeds the merely metaphorical and descriptive registers associated with mimetic representations of encyclopedism, and so move well beyond the comparatively foreshortened encyclopedic discourse that Kiš’s haunting story suggests, with its microcosmic account of the encyclopedia as “the sum of human destinies, [and] the totality of ephemeral happenings...” (56). Against this “miniaturist” logic, my rhetorical and historicist expansion of LeClair’s systems theory-based approach explores the sort of “thick description”³ that superficially situates these authors in the company of other

maximalist fictions from the late 1980s and early 1990s, whether by relative novices sharing bold new visions (David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* and William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels* appearing alongside *Women and Men* in 1987), or via established veterans making good on long-awaited works-in-progress (Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul*, and Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* following shortly thereafter in 1991).

With nearly half of its 1192-page length previously issued in story form, McElroy's novel (ten years-in-the-making) is particularly prescient with regard to groundbreaking epic-length novels published between 1987 and 1992, in what can be seen as a watershed moment for the maximalist tradition in American literary history. From Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (an experiment written serially for *Rolling Stone* as a favor to the author—then in the throes of a crippling writer's block) to Richard Powers's contrapuntally dense synthesis of Flemish art, music theory, quantum mechanics, and the languages of computer programming in *The Gold-Bug Variations*, novelists in the period compose within exponentially larger, more complex, and thus more demanding platforms and formats than ever before, many of them free from conventional deadline pressures.

Unsurprisingly, with such freedom comes a correspondingly greater potential for creative paralysis. Whether one considers the case of Truman Capote's inevitably truncated *Answered Prayers*⁴ or perhaps most infamous of all, Ralph Ellison's unpublished follow-up to *Invisible Man*,⁵ a number of legendary postwar writers are equally notorious for work they fail to deliver.⁶

To be sure, the far-flung literary scene that Pynchon and McElroy's large-scale books anticipate provides a context for the highly idiosyncratic forms of narrative practice each author advances, despite the surprisingly conservative approach to prose poetics a close inspection of their auspicious cohort reveals. As often conforming to realist convention (Wolfe, Mailer, Ellison, and Capote) as offering a merely conceptual rather than formal critique of reflexive play's philosophical implications (Silko, Wallace, Powers, and Gibson), these contemporaneous and later works suggest that Pynchon and McElroy's contributions are paradoxically one of a kind despite the relational, meta-ethical programs their works intend. Across targeted examples, my discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Women and Men* accordingly examines how their authors' innovative approaches to narrative demonstrate a new way of understanding the self-reflexivity or "autopoiesis" long established as the dominant aesthetic practice in postmodern literature.

Departing from this classic paradigm, my allopoietic approach points out the unsustainability of a purely generic focus, which ignores the radical implications for identity generated by each author's highly original form of practice, and thus perpetuates the assorted discourses of difficulty that surround their work. By contrast, my critical reading method reveals the way these novels anticipate the elaborate interpretations that surround them by scaffolding character identity across the overloaded intellectual work environments of their diegeses. Specifically, I demonstrate the way this multitudinal emphasis in Pynchon and McElroy's constitutes a form of new narrative "knowledge work" by contesting one of the critical orthodoxies of narrative form: "the purported

unique capacity of fictional narratives to represent the ‘I-originary’ of another as a subject” (Herman, *The Emergence of Mind* 8). The “Exceptionality thesis,” as David Herman terms this key tenet of identity formation under realist narration, rests on an assumed separation between the conventions that govern an audience’s experience of fictional minds in a literary work and their experience of actual minds in everyday life.

Conversely, my chapter contends that *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Women and Men* challenge the neat distinction drawn by “exceptionality” in career-long culminations of their authors’ respective critiques of realist convention by invoking the boundaries between text and world as a fundamentally part-whole phenomenon. Such critiques, I maintain, challenge the Exceptionality thesis in distinct ways to affirm human identity as a pluralistic work-in-progress that scaffolds across multiple minds and increasingly decentralized spatiotemporal coordinates. In fact, as my explanation of the way allodiegetic narration foregrounds the mechanics of narrative discourse will show, distinctions between the narrator’s controlling consciousness and the operations of mind that construct that consciousness establish a uniquely exteriorized form of literary reflexivity in which scale is the crucial variable. Necessitating a suitably massive networked platform on which to explore a saturated self “at scale,” this challenge offers the mind’s experience of its world through the unmediated, potentially limitless access only excess can provide.

Individuation and “the Multitude”: Encyclopedic Fiction in Pynchon and McElroy

From its origins in ancient Greece, through its varied incarnations in the medieval and Enlightenment periods, “encyclopedia” or “circle of learning” is rooted in the

expression *enkyklios paideia*, a phrase the *Corpus Aristotelicum* suggests is open to interpretation. This latitude has been supported by an array of etymological studies that interpret the term with a high degree of ambiguity; over time, for example, the somewhat elite applications of “‘circular,’ and ‘round’” evolve into the more egalitarian “‘in a chorus,’ [and] ‘in a circuit,’” hence the term’s connotation as a near analogy with “*culture générale*” or the “*artes liberales*” (Bos 194-195). Furthermore, linguistic historians argue that the “choric” valences of the term demand a more “inclusive” interpretation evoking the historical connotations of “regular,” “quodidian,” and “everyday.” Consequently, even at its inception encyclopedia was inscribed with a tension between democratic accessibility and the exclusionary roundedness of an enclosed form—a tension the history of linguistic representation closely parallels.

Encyclopedic order⁷ thus becomes a visual signifier for an epistemological rupture within the history of ideas. This rupture involves the transition from thinking about language in a direct correspondence with the object it represents to the recognition of its purely representational function. Michel Foucault identifies the site of this rupture in the sixteenth-century, arguing that the “single, unbroken surface in which observation and language intersect to infinity” is transformed into “an immediate dissociation of all language, duplicated, without any assignable term, by the constant reiteration of commentary” (*The Order of Things* 39). The transformation of language from a total transparency that mirrors nature to a representational image can be seen in alphabetic systems—and, as Foucault suggests by analogy, the circular encyclopedic form. Reflected in the spatialized representation of acquired knowledge that occurs with the rise

of Renaissance humanism, the arbitrary connection between referent and linguistic symbol is constellated in an array of visual metaphors, with circularity increasingly a figure for containment, enclosure, and the singularity of identity (Foucault, *Order* 84).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri challenge this conception of singularity through their influential concept of “multitude,” the human population reimagined as an “open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally” (*Multitude* xiii-xiv). An inclusive imaginary, multitude is distinct from the unitary and totalizing conception of “the people” commonly associated with a national citizenry. Rather, it embodies “different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations” (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* xiv) unevenly distributed across a network of pure potential (*potenza*). As my introduction previously indicates, Hardt and Negri ground this collective approach to identity in the notion of “haecceity” or “individuation” as the crucial concept of modernity. Arising out of a conceptual split between the planes of transcendence and immanence that engender traditional forms of sovereignty, individuation was originally proposed as a concept of “specific and creative difference” (Negri 111) in the thirteenth century by the medieval theologian John Duns Scotus. From Hardt and Negri’s materialist perspective, individuation elevates “the powers of *this* world” over a spiritual one, detaching human consciousness from a transcendental orientation to inaugurate the conditions whereby sovereignty is synonymous with *singularity* (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 71).

For Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, whose political theory of networks derives from this formulation, “the question of individuating a network” (38) comes

down to a radical revision of singularity imagined as a multitudinal rather than individualizing principle—“a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different” (qtd. in *The Exploit* 150). Following this logic, my analysis of the maximalist novels of Pynchon and McElroy charts the narrative implications of this multitudinal identity category, and so posits individuation as a productive force in metafictional aesthetics marked by an *excedence* or extreme excess in the “creative field of meaning” (Negri 111). Toward repositioning excedence as an aesthetic phenomenon that departs from the conventions of literary realism through expanded aesthetic size, my chapter revises LeClair’s pioneering work on the systems novel through author and textual analyses in an effort to explain the way late twentieth-century metafictional aesthetics interrogate fictions of “informational density” (*Art of Excess* 138). Specifically, I contend that the discourse of “encyclopedism,” as applied to *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Women and Men*, describes the way each author exhausts realism’s overcontrolled conventions to “displace the priority of the individual” (LeClair, *Art of Excess* 2). This strategy, I claim, offers strikingly original visions of contemporary subjectivity in which realist conceptions of individuation are replaced by new, radically “dividuated” forms of identity.⁸

Advancing a “view of the whole that does not reduce it to one homogeneous unit” (Galloway and Thacker 152), these narratives present a snapshot of identity distributed both *across* and *within* an aggregation of selves and scenes. The resulting “saturated self” conjoins the book to the body through open-ended imageries of birth, growth, generation, decline, and death—a uniquely scalar phenomenon predicated on those exaggeratory

“mode[s] of signification” (ix) that Susan Stewart calls “longing” in her influential theory of literary scale. Locating the concept’s first formulation as the “fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy” (ix), Stewart’s definition resonates in the liminal approaches to narration favored by *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Women and Men*. That is, both novels ultimately narrativize a sense of self via scales hitherto unattempted in twentieth century American fiction,⁹ by imagining the birth and rebirth of consciousness through the figural “deliveries” of their implied readers. In the analyses that follow, I therefore hold that the allopoietic interface generated by Pynchon and McElroy’s densely written pages constructs a strikingly literal conceptual imaginary in which the “real” world is seemingly transgressed through the allodiegetic narrator’s increasingly unchained focalization.

Pynchon’s epic interrogation of ontological security amid a long, slow postwar slide into madness and spiritual malaise presents in *Gravity’s Rainbow* “a book which hopes to be active in the world, not a detached observer of it” (Mendelson, *Pynchon* 10-11). Hence, the novel’s third person imperative voice actively promotes a meta-ethical turn that “warns and exhorts in matters ranging from the ways in which the book itself will be read, to the way in which its whole surrounding culture operates” (Mendelson, *Pynchon* 10-11). Though in juxtaposition with Pynchon’s macrocosmic approach, McElroy’s frequently referenced “small-scale units” motif shares his companion author’s interest in according equal weight to both human and non-human forms of agency, a tendency that literalizes the book as an enlarged textual object his printed matter “builds.” Guided by the sheer mass of its printed matter,¹⁰ *Women and Men*’s atomistic narrative

discourse arguably follows Pynchon's lead to suggest that generative experiences are always already under way: the text-world interface incubating, as McElroy himself explains, "the deeper thing where metaphor dissolves into identity" ("Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts" 216).

The birth that opens McElroy's truly epic novel, for instance, frames the roles that separate women and men in the creation and care for new life as a "division of labor unknown" (the first chapter's title). This singular "unknown" becomes a metonymy for all the unknowns or gaps lurking around the edges of human consciousness, and so serves as a point of departure for the novel's exhaustive exploration of the knowledge systems humanity constructs to fill these gaps. Always multiple in its perspective, the proudly feminist *Women and Men* expresses the novel's clearest narrative empathy with its opening chapter's anonymously laboring birth-mother, who experiences the passage of her child's body through her own as a complexly intersubjective phenomenon—a "multiplying real" comprising equal parts terror, torpor, anger, and elation. Uniquely, the birth functions in a homologous relation with the novel's unstable notion of "protagonist" (the character is never explicitly revisited after the opening chapter) by dividing into the dyadic figure of the title. This blending and coimplicating of the various "histories" that constitute the lived experience of all women and men sustains a distinctly American synecdoche through which equally liminal lead characters Jim Mayn and Grace Kimball pass "between."

As my introduction specifies, scale is here narrativized as a phenomenological object, with the narrator transmitting "experientiality" to the reader through the interface

effects that close the distance between character perception and novel setting. *Gravity's Rainbow* anticipates these liminal qualities with its radical use of the Quintilian figure of speech *transumptio*, or “sharing”—a technique known in narratology as *metalepsis*. On the one hand a “rhetorical figure consisting in the metonymical substitution of one word for another which is itself figurative (that is, a metonym)” (*New Shorter OED* 1755), *metalepsis* is more commonly utilized in contemporary literary discourse as a device expressive of spatiotemporally disordered, self-reflexive rifts in a story’s diegetic fabric. For Pynchon’s specific purposes, the method serves as a mode in which “the principal distinction between, or hierarchy of, levels has been broken down or violated: the narrator enters (‘shares’) the universe of the characters or, conversely, a character enters (‘shares’) the universe of the narrator” (de Jong 89). For example, Pirate Prentice’s dream that frames the novel’s bravura set piece during the London Evacuation opens up, some 500-plus pages later, into an unexpectedly pleasant tour of a “disquieting structure” that may or may not be Hell—“some very extensive museum” that most likely approximates *Gravity's Rainbow* itself (Pynchon 546). This “place of many levels, [with] new wings that generate like living tissue” expresses “the technical means of control” that supply my Pynchon analysis with its title: a “Critical Mass” through which “a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another” could spell an inevitable dwindling of the freedoms actively sought by the novel’s hundreds of characters (*Gravity's Rainbow* 548).

Readers are notably incorporated into this logic, knowing full well that—to quote the novel: “if it does grow toward some end shape, those who are here inside can’t see it” (*GR* 546). And yet, this implied audience, despite the novel’s many invitations to “go

inside,” can see its complex end taking shape (546) from the vantage point of critical receptions outside the text. In other words, while the “Critical Mass” to which the novel refers obviously foreshadows the then-still-gestating Atomic Bomb (a metonymy for the novel’s V-2 rocket technology),¹¹ it also furnishes an interpretive corollary to the general quest for immortality sustaining Pynchon’s overarching concerns. This analogous relation between narrative voice and the limits of the self in connection with a surrounding community is common to McElroy’s novel as well—albeit in an even more radically unstable context. Throughout a set of unconventionally structured sections rendered in full caps and entitled “BREATHERS,” McElroy focalizes his narrative with a first-person plural strategy identified at one point with the phrase the “various *we*” (*Women and Men* 36). This hyperomniscient perspective speaks across astonishing expanses of space and time to constellate the novel’s various characters and relationships in one cosmic interface, termed the “Colloidal Unconscious” (McElroy, *WM* 82).¹²

Such innovations suggest that Pynchon and McElroy’s scalar fictions can be seen as working parts that are more than their complex wholes, imagining their respective forms as, on the one hand, a fluid “multiple dwelling in time” (*WM* 19), and on the other—“a labyrinthine path” from which “there may be no appeal” (*GR* 546, 40). Confronted with narrators who constellate the genesis of and growth toward self-knowledge across deliberately colossal canvases, readers extrapolate strikingly different ethical programs from this mutually expansive emphasis. While McElroy’s somewhat utopian imagining, on the one hand embraces futurity to realize a collectivized, fluidly gendered, and even posthuman global future, Pynchon’s dystopian fever dream

exhaustively archives the past in a vast catalog of perversion, depravity, and the accumulated detritus of postwar humanity on the other. Toward reframing the “contingency,” “skepticism,” and “relativism” (Best and Kellner 19) that has constituted increasingly the postmodern experience of “everyday life” in an emergent network society, scale in Pynchon and McElroy also expresses a critique emblematic of the countercultural challenge of the 1960s—an era Lawrence Buell has called “the crucial phase in . . . postwar development” (144) and a key milieu in literary criticism surrounding their work. With this context in mind, my subsequent author analyses expose each writer’s unique meta-ethical program through scale’s figuration as a pattern of discursive practices that mediate interior and exterior textual spaces.

Thomas Pynchon’s Critical Mass

Gravity’s Rainbow’s willfully complex structural conceit offers a clear reflection of Pynchon’s famous demands on his audience by introducing the act of interpretation on its first page as “not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*—(1-2) and then proceeding to gradually ensnare the reader in that web as described. The novel’s attentiveness to readerly apprehensions, like the always-imminent payload delivered by its death-dealing object of fascination—the V-2 rocket—uncannily demonstrates a reversal of the novel’s central critique of causality:¹³ “screaming” critical reception preceding audience exposure to “explosive” textual event. Recent scholarship¹⁴ on *Gravity’s Rainbow* opens this underexamined facet of the novel’s meteoric impact on American literary history by considering approaches to reading the novel, its extraordinary influence on American culture, and the specter of difficulty this influence

embodies. A veritable *cause célèbre* for one critical faction, as my introduction shows, “difficulty” indexes the novel’s size and complexity through the resilient trope of “encyclopedism”—an analytical tendency that descends from what are arguably the two most influential essays on *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* maximalist poetics: Edward Mendelson’s “Gravity’s Encyclopedia” and “Encyclopedic Narrative From Dante to Pynchon.”

In both articles, which significantly overlap, Mendelson argues that encyclopedic narrative is in a synecdochical relation with the nation-state—a conceptual container “filled” by an emergent national identity “as it becomes aware of itself” (“Encyclopedic” 1268). The only American encyclopedic narrative other than *Moby-Dick* and so the only then-contemporary encyclopedic narrative featured in Mendelson’s study, Pynchon’s novel explodes the original encyclopedic model’s closed system, which, the critic indicates, claims to encompass entire cosmological and philosophical schemas (Dante, Rabelais, Goethe, etc.). Supplying a detailed taxonomy, Mendelson goes on to complicate encyclopedism as the most obscure of narrative modes at the same time that he elevates the genre as the “most important...in Western literature of the Renaissance and after,” typifying only seven “national narratives,” (“Gravity’s” 161). Each of these listed works (including *The Divine Comedy*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Faust*, *Don Quixote*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Ulysses*) fulfills an important role relative to the development of national culture within its respective country of origin “...as [that nation] becomes fully conscious of itself as a unity” (“Gravity’s” 161). This consciousness is traced in a center-margin movement contingent on the work’s reception history. In other words, though encyclopedic narratives begin in a marginal position relative to the culture they hope to

define, these narratives ultimately occupy a central role in the nation's emergent self-definition through the growing awareness of the literary work's cultural authority (sanctioned by the level of scholarly interest it generates).

Of course, what that role entails, and to what extent these works actually reach the implied national audience they apparently seek, is contingent on the national consciousness they represent. Whether textual forms are capable of manifesting the national culture's self-awareness, and the degrees to which these apparently reflexive forms change over time, is anyone's guess. Immediately controversial, the critic's peculiarly nationalist definition of encyclopedism thus introduces as many questions as his tenets propose to answer. Given its attempts to reach a wider audience, encyclopedic authorship, Mendelson maintains, deliberately incorporates assorted knowledge bases *outside* of literary history, including a science or technological advance, a non-literary art, and the history of one or more languages. This apparent mastery of multiple alternative discourses also extends to the field encyclopedic narrative itself occupies; as a result, the genre demonstrates competence in all styles of literature (romance, satire, pastoral, etc.). To this end, the critic suggests that a comprehensive capability allows the author to populate the novel's canvas with a vast assortment of characters "who try unsuccessfully to live according to the conventions of another genre"—an attempt to stabilize the work's highly variable nature in one form ("Encyclopedic" 1270).

Similarly, in one of Mendelson's most unusual tenets, encyclopedic narratives must carry "an image of their own scale by including giants or gigantism" ("Encyclopedic" 1271). Although the critic supplies examples of this puzzling feature

from each encyclopedic narrative, a more compelling rationale for scale arrives later in the essay when Mendelson defines it as a signifier for prophecy: “Like the giants whose histories they include, all encyclopedias are monstrous. (They are *monstra* in the oldest Latin sense as well: omens of dire change)” (1272). Encyclopedic narratives achieve this effect by being set near the immediate present though not in it—a temporal strategy that facilitates the illusion of prophecy, as Mendelson indicates:

From his position at the edge of a culture, an encyclopedist redefines that culture’s sense of what it means to be human. An encyclopedic narrative prophesies the modes of human action and perception that its culture will later discover to be its own central concerns. The disturbing “illegal” strangeness of most encyclopedic narratives at the time of their publication, the differences between the book and its culture’s self-conceptions, are the result of the encyclopedist’s understanding of modes of meaning that a culture has already begun to use but has not yet learned to acknowledge. (“Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 178)

By definition ahead of its time, Mendelson’s notion of encyclopedic narrative seems to anticipate much of the direction a nascent scalar turn has taken over the last twenty years—albeit in a discursive rather than generic context as critics frame their inquiries more than ever in discourses of aesthetic size rather than in terms of the top-down mechanics of big books.

For example, the notion of “encyclopedic discourse,” as Hilary Clark has noted, “is special in that it selects from the *entire domain* of human knowledge, arranging its selections according to specific orders—thematic and encyclopedic—that have developed historically, and representing its own discursive process in tropes such as the mirror, the tree, the labyrinth, the circle, and the network (98). Extending this chain of tropes, Clark

uses the example of the computer and specifically, Marvin Minsky's *model of memory* "as a network of orderly search operations" (102) to articulate the basic tensions of knowledge system design (an orderless heap of facts) enacted in the desire for order that informs any encyclopedic enterprise. In my view, this discursive function underscores Mendelson's national emphasis, and speaks more deeply to the implications encyclopedism's proto-networked form holds for political rhetoric. Notably, the critic's close reading reinforces this reflexive quality by arguing that *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of the first novels to really engage the reader directly, as Pynchon's obsession with non-literary discourses and what Mendelson calls a "*political* history of language" opens the novel's aims up to a larger audience ("Encyclopedic Narrative" 1273). Moreover, the critic contends that, "It is...an exposition of the ways in which language is altered by political decisions, and of the modes in which language affects the world of life and death that lies ultimately outside language" (Mendelson, "Gravity's" 167).

To this end, Pynchon's novel illustrates a reflexive logic that narrates the political content it critiques through a language filled with that content; as Mendelson writes, "the book itself must use a language that is, unavoidably, a system shaped by the very powers and orders that it hopes to reveal" ("Gravity's" 169). Therefore, the book's form enacts the excessive content staged in-text, with the reader treated to "the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge" ("Gravity's" 162). Given that encyclopedic narrative before *Gravity's Rainbow* is imagined as a repository for national identity, ("Encyclopedic" 1271), the emergence of reflexivity as a controlling

technology (and scale as an organizing principle for thinking about large fiction) positions the novel's critical importance as a signal by which the reader-citizen is alerted to their experience of and potential allegiance to a specific national narrative.

But in a provocative turn to the historical conditions in which Mendelson's ambitious theory was generated, Petrus van Ewijk and Luc Herman complicate its authority by suggesting that "encyclopedic narrative" may be rooted in little more than a fit of critical pique following the Pulitzer Board's infamous decision not to award *Gravity's Rainbow* the 1973 prize due to the novel's alleged incomprehensibility. Was Mendelson's theory merely a response to his frustration with the book's negative reception?¹⁵ Although Mendelson has yet to acknowledge any such extratextual motivation for his theory, foregrounding this hidden dimension of the novel's reception history opens an important line of inquiry into encyclopedism as a rhetorical feature.¹⁶ For, as its definition suggests, the term "encyclopedia" calls attention to the inside and outside of the textual object by purporting to "contain" or "enclose" a body of knowledge or circle of learning. This impossible task ultimately highlights the series of representational strategies that coordinate "containment" (realism's isometric dream of direct correspondence) as well as the critical prejudices and allegiances produced by maximalism's so-called "totalizing fallacy." Given that in a skeptical age offering an image of totality would seem to do nothing more than advertise the motives and ambitions of those who would dare "totalize," in my own estimation "encyclopedism" is more plausibly read as an epistemological signifier of limited coherence; that is, the trope

is useful only as a conduit to metacategorical arguments about the cognitive difficulties of excessive aesthetic size of which maximalism is only one “small” part.

To take an earlier case in point, consider the remarks of postmodern author John Hawkes: “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained” (Bradbury 7). Hawkes’s mission statement, like many of those authored by his cohort (Barth, Barthelme, Gass, et al.) implies that realism’s push for accessibility in this period is underwritten by formal choices predicated on differences in scale relative to poetics. Unsurprisingly, critical reactions to willfully diffuse or difficult narrative discourses are framed in a realist metrics of size, which underwrites all existing controversies and debates surrounding postwar aesthetics. These controversies, familiar to scholars of postwar American literary history, seem to elude Herman and van Ewijk’s discussion of the double bind a so-called totalizing text presents—“an all-encompassing, perpetually valid system” that necessarily “ignores the fact that reality’s complexity prohibits it from being captured completely” (167). Defining the irony of a purportedly totalizing form, the critics go on to note that it will be inevitably limited, situated, and narrow in its scope despite the encyclopedic tendency’s ability to outdistance human cognition with respect to memory. In this respect, Herman and van Ewijk imply that encyclopedic narrative replaces the Great American Novel, a shift that anticipates the recent conversation in American Studies initiated by Lawrence Buell about Mendelson’s text-specific illustration of the genre’s critical importance.

Although they touch on key shortcomings of Mendelson's argument—for instance, the international scope of Pynchon's "national" narrative and the limited number of texts that might actually approximate the form's tenets—Herman and van Ewijk misrepresent several key points in Mendelson's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. For example, when they single out the critic's "much vaunted 'totality'" as the "core characteristic" (169) of his analysis, they ignore the fact that Mendelson cites Pynchon's novel as an exception to the totalizing rule. Relying on examples of Pynchon's textual references to the impossibility of total coverage, Herman and van Ewijk also fail to mention Mendelson's key point toward illustrating Pynchon's open form encyclopedia: its reflexive use of "modes in which language affects the world of life and death that lies ultimately outside language" (Mendelson 167). Actually, Mendelson's article not only initiates the discussion of an open encyclopedia, but it also considers the ways Pynchon's novel moves beyond the epistemological purview typically associated with the encyclopedia, to an ontological and political one. For instance, the critic indicates *Gravity's Rainbow's* attempts to reach beyond the limits of a fictional world, breaking the proverbial fourth wall in order to propose sociopolitical solutions "for use outside the book" (172). Aside from the way they sidestep these important points, Herman and van Ewijk nevertheless streamline the research of critics like Hilary A. Clark on the history of encyclopedias and encyclopedic narratives, with some compelling new material on the novel's use of Bakhtin's polyphonic discourse and expanded insights on encyclopedic narrative as a proto-networked phenomenon. Intriguingly, the authors read Pynchon's novel through Martin Buber's discussion of the human will to control various aspects of

the world and particularly the prescient way in which the philosopher's work anticipates Pynchon's critique of an emergent society of control (apropos of Foucault and Deleuze) as delivered through narrative voice ("I," "You," etc.).

Notably, it is in his solo follow-up essay to the article co-authored with Luc Herman that van Ewijk undertakes a genealogy of encyclopedism (here called encyclopedic *narrative* and *novel* interchangeably) while deepening some of the technological implications of Hilary Clark's analysis derived from Deleuze and Guattari. Despite the fluid organization of much of his research and the article's inspired attempt to chart literary innovations alongside new technologies (apropos of its title "Encyclopedia, Network, Hypertext, Database: The Continuing Relevance of Encyclopedic Narrative and Encyclopedic Novel as Generic Designations") van Ewijk's entire thesis seems to rest on a misreading of Mendelson's essay. As stated previously, "Gravity's Encyclopedia" asserts that *Gravity's Rainbow* executes a decisive shift in the history of encyclopedic narrative—a decentered, anti-totalizing variation on the form that implicitly aligns with the theories of postmodernism van Ewijk claims are not disclosed in Mendelson's elaborate discussion of Pynchon's novel. Given his clear awareness of Mendelson's first article ("Gravity's Rainbow"), demonstrated in the earlier piece co-authored with Luc Herman, van Ewijk's concentration on the abbreviated "Encyclopedic Narrative from Dante to Pynchon" suggests a deliberate elision of Mendelson's full analysis and implies that the earlier critic was unaware of postmodernism as an emergent form. This peculiar evasion of the more fully developed piece, in which Mendelson details the specific function of Pynchon's open-form revision (again, to reflexively expose the political

history of language), allows van Ewijk to omit certain details about Mendelson's work that do not stand up to scrutiny when one rereads "Gravity's Encyclopedia." When he writes, for example, that Pynchon's novel "opposes the desire for totalization and containment to one of radical openness" (van Ewijk 211), one recognizes that this is precisely what Mendelson contends in his longer piece.

While I disagree with van Ewijk's argument that the moniker "encyclopedic" might still usefully apply to large-scale American novels "that directly or indirectly explore [their] own totality" (206), I do find his interest in an emergent network aesthetics to be an important step in understanding the nature of totality and multiplicity engendered by maximalist discourse. The critic's essay gestures toward this topic by following Clark's lead to offer a definition of the network form in opposition to earlier encyclopedic tropes, echoing newer network theory by Galloway and Thacker with a glancing mention of "individuation" (van Ewijk 215). Yet the generic focus of the article inhibits van Ewijk from exploring the rhetorical implications of maximalism as a discursive mode. Rather, a more cogent explanation of this approach can be found in the third chapter of John Kuehl's much earlier *Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealistic American Fiction* (1991). In a chapter entitled "Maximalism versus Minimalism," Kuehl contends that the way these two scales of narrative discourse use language accounts for their differences. Whether called "big books, mega-novels, [or] total novels" (108), maximalist fictions are comparable to Menippean satires or "encyclopedic farragoes," Kuehl asserts, because they privilege a form that allows the exploration of wide-ranging ideas over the smaller spatiotemporal closures of realist

narration. Repositioning encyclopedism as less emblematic of a particular content emphasis to instead consider its formal size, Kuehl illustrates the way maximalism projects images of accumulation and expanse as well as copiousness of plot, character, and setting to demonstrate an amplified style of discourse that fills the text with esoteric information. This plenitude of information, Kuehl contends, usually pulls from multiple fields, and in his definition maximalism can be seen as a near-synonym for encyclopedism. The critic discusses a variety of texts to support his point, including *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Recognitions*, and in his analysis of the former text engages Mendelson's thesis directly. Departing from conventional critical thought, Kuehl advocates for the latter novel's centrality over Pynchon's epic and submits *The Recognitions* to a lengthy comparative discussion with Donald Barthelme's minimalist masterpiece *The Dead Father* (1975). As part of his larger thesis on anti-realist fiction, maximalism and minimalism share the common themes of "defamiliarization" and "the juxtaposition of various literary forms: epic list, duologue, monologue, tall tale... manual, and speech" (117). Though Kuehl's survey is a solidly comprehensive survey with careful definitions, Herman and van Ewijk criticize it for attempting a too-literal application of Gaddis to Mendelson's taxonomy.

By dismissing a closer look at encyclopedism in Gaddis' work vis-à-vis Kuehl, Herman and van Ewijk foreclose the rich potential opened up by Stephen Burn's recent contention that the critical neglect of William Gaddis's oeuvre is best understood by observing the fortunes of the similarly understudied genre to which it belongs: encyclopedic narrative.¹⁷ Engaging the cultural emphasis of Mendelson's influential

definition, Burn suggests that despite encyclopedic narrative's association with the modernist masterpiece, its habit of undermining the totalizing rhetoric of grand narratives is quintessentially postmodern. While Mendelson proposes that encyclopedic narrative charts an emergent national culture as a unified entity, Burn asserts that its roots in the history of the encyclopedia invoke "fragility rather than national coherence" arising from "a pervasive anxiety about the security of ordinary books as safe containers of knowledge" ("The Collapse of Everything" 51). *The Recognitions*, he contends, balances Enlightenment-era apocalyptic fears about the impermanence of information storage and retrieval with the earlier medieval belief that encyclopedic technology could perfectly reflect or encompass reality.

Restoring this debate to its poetic origins in the criticism of Northrup Frye, David Cowart's recent study *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (2012), features a section entitled "The Encyclopedic Vision" that characterizes Mendelson's definition as a point of departure for Pynchon's encyclopedism. But Cowart's line of inquiry revolves around the now-familiar observation that Pynchon's approach introduces readers to their own desire for "meaning making." The critic points out that in the midst of acknowledging this desire, readers often recognize their need for accessible modes of learning—a necessity at odds with Pynchon's reflexively staged project: "the actual working of systems logic" (Cowart 198). After charting the many critical lenses with which literary theory has approached Pynchon's work, Cowart returns to Frye's definition of Menippean satire as a foundational precursor to encyclopedic narrative, "work characterized, from antiquity into modern times, by its ungainliness, its

voluminous, encyclopedic ambitions, its scatology, its digressiveness, and its descents into the fantastic” (200). Furthermore, the critic also observes Frye’s description of the work as “sacred scripture” and echoes Mendelson’s tightly circumscribed list when he comments that though Melville only wrote one encyclopedic novel, Pynchon has made it a habit. This habitual observation that establishes the author as maximalist-metafictionist¹⁸ *par excellence* draws notable parallels between the post-structuralist revolution in social thought by philosophers like Derrida and Pynchon’s postmodern aesthetics. Finally, Cowart goes on to illustrate the extraordinary synchronicities between the publication of Pynchon’s novels and significant historical and cultural events. With a flair for the zeitgeist that reworks the paranoia theme in Pynchon’s work, Cowart suggests that (much like Pynchon’s characters) one tends to find what one goes looking for—an insight always teasingly expressed as the eternal problem of hermeneutics.

Reception history-based criticism on *Gravity’s Rainbow* in particular and encyclopedic narrative in general reaches its apogee with Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger’s recent *Gravity’s Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (2013), in which the varied social, historical, political, and, most significantly, *countercultural* contexts are put into productive dialogue with the recently available Pynchon Archive at the University of Texas-Austin’s Harry Ransom Center. Ironically, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers numerous glimpses of its own archival features as my earlier reference to Part III, Episode 24 indicates. But despite the fervor with which fantasist-surrogate Pirate Prentice’s opening dream conspicuously figures its pleasant vision of the afterlife as a textual allegory through iterations of size, no character more aptly typifies the part-whole

nature of identity as an embodied excess of information than Tyrone Slothrop, the novel's putative protagonist-hero. Indeed, Slothrop's untimely "scattering" (presumably, *death*) that closes the novel is symmetrical with the lasagna-like layering of the character's introduction via the messy aggregation that defines his workspace in Part I, Episode III.

"An Attrition of Self": *Gravity's Rainbow*

—it wants a machine of many parts, not oneness, but a complexity... Yet who can presume to say *what* the War wants, so vast and aloof it is... so *absentee*. Perhaps the War isn't even an awareness—not a life at all, really. There may be only some cruel accidental resemblance to life.

- Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (133)

Opening with arguably the most arresting epigraph in postwar fiction, *Gravity's Rainbow* suspends for some five hundred and forty pages an explicit discussion of the subject that frames its audacious assertion: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 1). Both a comforting wink at the vital role technology would play in sustaining human life following the Second World War and a rueful nod to the irrevocability of death despite such advances, Pynchon's strategic elision of Werner von Braun's¹⁹ remark thus foregrounds immortality as the happy accident of technological progress. That is, the quotation's mediating function between science and spirituality, continuity and extinction operates under a metonymic logic that deliberately troubles distinctions between reality and representation, context and text, across a complex chain

of liminal associations. Coordinating these associations through metaleptic play, the novel's default subject position is one of ontological insecurity—the state of profound, death-like paralysis and anxiety under which the novel's multitudinous characters attempt to survive. Surveying examples of metalepsis in *Gravity's Rainbow* toward supporting my allopoietic method, I contend that Pynchon's narration pushes even further beyond the normative boundaries between characters and narrator—"looking outside," as it were, to address the implied reader at strategic moments in the narration. This rhetorical effect, I assert, metaleptically "shares" the experience of ontological insecurity and its attendant anxieties with the novel's audience.

In this regard, Pynchon's epic masterwork most clearly matches Mendelson's theory through the critic's temporality argument—that encyclopedic narratives are "set *near* the immediate present but not in it," ("Gravity's" 163). Anticipating Manuel Castells's conception of timeless time in both the form and content of his work, this tenet posits a world in which information becomes the dominant currency, and where "we accumulate time through information collection so that the past, present, and future appear in the same hypertext, thereby eliminating the 'succession of things' (Hopper 79). Indeed, Castells's "space of flows" is the liminal space of *Gravity's Rainbow* given the novel's "possibility of practicing simultaneity without territorial proximity" (Hopper 79) and doing so through over four hundred characters spread across vast distances and periods. Given this international focus, Mendelson's claim that Pynchon challenges rather than delimits national boundaries supports the critic's overarching thesis that a national narrative must always serve a national critique—a reflexive and relational position rather

than an insular and isolationist one. In fact, Steven Shaviro links the essential structure and content of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the various “transversal connections” and “subterranean collaborations” of transnational capital during World War II, i.e., the handful of wealthy proto-“managerial elites” (in Manuel Castells’s current term) who ran the war. Detailing the dizzyingly complex shape this early network society takes, Shaviro writes:

Large corporations, for instance, burst the bounds of the nation-states, as they sold weapons to both sides and found opportunities, thanks to all the destruction and chaos, to pursue their own agendas of product development and eventual market saturation. It was in the crucible of the war that these corporations first learned how to become transnational, in the sense that has become ubiquitous today. More generally, the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* are filled with paranoid apprehensions, crazed behaviorist schemes, strange correlations at a distance, phase shifts, feedback resonances and other nonlinear transformations that defy prediction. Pynchon’s point is that all these “network effects” were indeed produced by and through World War II, even if they were invisible to observers at the time. (147)

Cate Watson suggests that these “network effects” are better posited “reality effects,” exploring the author’s “construction of [said] effects within a context of ontological doubt” (11); thus, *Gravity's Rainbow's* attempts to apprehend a reality made illusory through a host of narrative metalepses, discontinuities, and fragmentations constitutes an ethical move on Pynchon’s part to account for the cataclysmic changes ushered in by World War II.

Accordingly, my discussion of ontological insecurity joins the recent skeptical turn²⁰ in scholarship regarding the novel’s tacit interest in “discursive practices” as “effective political tool[s]” (Witzling 145). Rather than entering into a complex discussion about *Gravity's Rainbow's* propensity for social or political change, however,

I focus solely on making legible the phenomenological aspects of “reading” as narrated in, and applied to, Pynchon’s signature work. Brian McHale’s groundbreaking early article on the modernist reader in the postmodern text is here instructive, as the treatment of reality and unreality within *Gravity’s Rainbow* is alternately expressed as the “reconstructed real of hallucination” and a coinage the novel itself provides (and McHale adopts): “radical-though-plausible-violations-of-reality” (“Modernist Reading” 93). McHale goes on to cite Pynchon’s novel as a foundational example in the postmodern period as literature that “emerged from the ‘dominant’ of modernism” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 5), a period and movement in which an epistemological emphasis was the key philosophical assumption. As my introduction notes, McHale’s definition of postmodernism conversely takes an ontological emphasis as its point of departure—the perspective that involves a turn from the “world we think we know” to “which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10). To this hypothesis one might avoid essentializing general definitions of ontology by taking McHale’s qualifying approach—“a theoretical description of a universe” (27, emphasis mine)—rather than an expression of the universe “writ large.” In other words, to clarify one’s sense of the way ontology works in *Gravity’s Rainbow* would be to base one’s methodological assumptions on interactions between the novel’s invented story-world or diegesis and its comprehensive construction of actual patterns of human consciousness within this fictive realm.

Katherine Hayles identifies these patterns as “tend[ing] toward self-obliteration because the focus for the text’s anxiety is precisely the cognitive thought that seeks to

organize diverse data into coherent patterns” (169). “The source of the tension,” she continues, “lies in the nature of human consciousness itself” (Hayles 169), a “nature” the text attempts to catalog in every conceivable variant, regardless of how debased or arcane. It is my contention that the “textual anxiety” to which Hayles refers, contaminates the reading experience deeply, or as Leo Bersani has convincingly written: “...*the major anxiety provoked by Gravity’s Rainbow is ontological rather than epistemological*” (107, author’s emphasis). Although a wealth of critical voices (Hayles and Bersani notable among them) have offered suggestions as to how anxiety works in the text, expressing it as, alternately, characterological trait, narrative trope, rhetorical space, and scientific field model, none have ventured into academic disciplines that reflect the novel’s textual concerns in psychological and social theories contemporaneous with its composition.

As one notable case in point, counterculture-minded readers might consider the controversial British psychotherapist R.D. Laing, who defines the ontologically secure individual as one “whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties” (40). For Laing, ontological security is characterized by a stable sense of self-identity and a high degree of comfort with individual autonomy. Illustrating the birth of the self, Laing encourages readers to consider the experience of the infant, and most specifically, the newborn’s point of view²¹ as it comes into contact with the world. “Under usual circumstances...” Laing writes,

[T]he physical birth of a new living organism into the world inaugurates rapidly ongoing processes whereby within an amazingly short time the infant *feels* real and alive and has a *sense* of being an entity, with continuity in time and a location in space. In short, physical birth and biological aliveness are followed by the baby becoming existentially born as real and alive. Usually this development is taken

for granted and affords the certainty upon which all other certainties depend. That is to say, not only do adults see children to be real biologically visible entities but they experience themselves as whole persons who are real and alive, and conjunctively experience other human beings as real and alive. These are self-validating data of experience. (42-43)

In this way, the phenomenological experience of a secure self, confident in certain corporeal assumptions about where it ends and the world begins, is possessive of “an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth,” (Laing 43) are the human coordinates for ontological security. This construct, in privileging logic, consistency, and coherence, mirrors analogically the realistic text—with its deft compartmentalization of mimetic effects to facilitate verisimilitude.

Opposite the reassuring state of affairs typified by ontological security lies its negation, or “ontological insecurity.” As Laing indicates, the ontologically insecure person suffers from a chronic instability of identity, featuring a “low threshold of security” with a great degree of difficulty expressing intimacy or sociality. Hence, the theorist demonstrates ontological insecurity through three stages of anxiety: “engulfment,” “implosion,” and “petrification.” With engulfment, “the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity” (45-46). Laing goes on to identify “isolation” as “the main maneuver used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment” (46). Implosion or “the impingement of reality” is for schizophrenics, “the experience of the world [is] liable at any moment to crash in and obliterate all identity” (47-48). This sense that a penned off reconstruction of reality

taking shape around the individual's isolation is being repeatedly breached by the unintentional antagonisms of everyday life Laing characterizes as taking the form of a heightened sensitivity: alternately empty and "longing for the emptiness to be filled" (47). Finally, there is the tenet of petrification, which Graham Prince²² has taken to be a synthetic "response" to the prior two reaction formations. Petrification involves "depersonalizing others before they can threaten" (Laing 48)—a condition that Prince holds is "the self still longing for relatedness, [the depersonalizing strategy being] as much a turning of the self to stone through isolation" (286). This highly fraught state of being initiates what Laing terms the "schizoid position" (89), the first step toward a diagnosis of acute schizophrenia that parallels the novel's critique of the relationship between self, society, and modern institutions.

More significantly for the history of social theory, Pynchon's critique facilitates ontological insecurity's sociological context in Anthony Giddens' notion of "practical consciousness" (*The Constitution of Society* 44). Giddens characterizes practical consciousness as a type of conscious awareness or range of attentiveness to various levels of everyday life, explaining that:

'Conscious' is sometimes used to refer to circumstances in which people pay attention to events going on around them in such a way as to relate their activity to those events. In other words, it refers to the reflexive monitoring of conduct by human agents, largely in the sense of what I have called practical consciousness. Thus, for example, a school teacher may be 'conscious' of what the children in the front rows of the classroom are doing but 'unconscious' of others near the back who have started gossiping with one another. The teacher may be being inattentive, but is not unconscious in the same sense as an individual who has 'lost consciousness.' (*Constitution* 44)

Giddens' definition is strongly reminiscent of the way narrative focalization works: the "position or quality of consciousness through which we 'see' events in the narrative" (Abbott 233). Beyond practical consciousness, Giddens goes on to formulate the slightly more elaborate concept of "discursive consciousness"—in which one's ability "to give a coherent account of one's activities" (*Constitution* 45) becomes central. Expressed in narrative terms, discursive consciousness reflects the degrees of certainty with which one might judge that aforementioned "quality of consciousness" against the expectations of daily life (whether real or imagined). Pynchon's narrative voice occupies the middle distance between these two perspectives, gleefully mediating the prose's syntactical gaps, fissures, excesses, or erasures. To the extent that ontology is defined through interactions between the novel's invented story-world (for Giddens' "discursive consciousness"), its mimetic construction of the "practical consciousness" experienced by implied readers when initially encountering a literary text. Within this space, erupting out of the tension created between practical and discursive levels of consciousness, sits the "reflexive awareness" that Giddens maintains is fundamental to modern institutions; hence, his contention that

All human beings continuously monitor the circumstances of their activities as a feature of doing what they do, and such monitoring always has discursive features. In other words, agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behavior in which they engage (*Modernity* 35).

As a critique of institutions—including its own simultaneously exemplary and problematic position as literary fiction—*Gravity's Rainbow* polices its readership by

building the self-monitoring conceit of rampant paranoia and dizzyingly overdetermined plotting into its structure, a framework posited on the “premise” of ontological insecurity that then “becomes it” through the institutional reflexivity Giddens argues is a critical part of late or postmodernity.

David Leverenz has written of Pynchon’s ability to “cunningly construct, then destroy, the basic trust” that typically informs the unspoken contract between reader and text (Levine and Leverenz 231), a remark that could just as easily describe the way Pynchon’s novel realizes a transition between conceptions of ontological insecurity in Laing and Giddens. Critical commentary about the way reflexive alter egos among the novel’s cast of characters have acted as narrative conduits between the text’s controlling intelligence and its implied readership list numerous candidates toward illustrating this important intra- and extra-textual strategy. For example, Pirate Prentice’s role as “fantasist-surrogate” (13), in which the intuitive gift for imaginative leaps into the fantasies of others, becomes a flexible metaphor for the role of the artist. Similarly, as Brian McHale has noted, “Franz Pökler’s cinema-oriented dreaminess, Mr. Pointsman’s burgeoning megalomania, Tchiterine’s and Enzian’s predilections for powerful drugs—all these belong to the same general tendency” (“Modernist Reading” 91). Concisely summarizing what this feels like at the level of reading, McHale argues that, “the minds of *Gravity’s Rainbow* give us access only to provisional realities which are always liable to be contradicted and cancelled out (“Modernist Reading” 91). This determinedly unstable approach infects nearly every convention of what readers have come to expect from literary fiction, alternately mocking the will to make meaning by punning on subtext

and symbolic logic (the “palimpsestic” motif in which interpretation and interpretive strategies are inscribed on or by various bodies and body parts).²³ Likewise, Pynchon’s narration evokes the more complexly ordered and networked information flows that organize the novel’s sweeping critique of History’s “official version[s]”²⁴—as if the “million bureaucrats...diligently plotting death [with] some of them even know[ing] it” (17) each deserved his own story, backstory, and complex mythology.

Despite these characters’ compelling roles in Pynchon’s reflexive scheme, none comes close to dramatizing ontological insecurity’s effects like default protagonist Tyrone Slothrop. In a typically depersonalizing fashion, Slothrop is introduced to the reader through an accretion of objects on his desk, a survey of this reluctant knowledge worker’s interaction with larger institutional themes. This passage illustrates the importance of Laingian “object relations” as it informs ontological insecurity in Pynchon’s novel. Slothrop’s space is described as a sort of bureaucratic hovel: dirty, poorly lit, cordoned off, and overflowing with a blend of institutional and personal waste. Indeed, the narrator’s lingering attention to detail leaves seemingly no stone unturned:

Their desks are at right angles, so there’s no eye contact but by squeaking around some 90°. Tantivy’s desk is neat, Slothrop’s is a godawful mess. It hasn’t been cleaned down to the original wood surface since 1942. Things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma that sifts steadily to the bottom, made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of rubber eraser, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains, traces of sugar and Household Milk, much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to powder. Then comes a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarette butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors including the hard-to-get heliotrope and raw umber, wooden coffee spoons, Thayer’s Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges sent by Slothrop’s mother, Nalline, all the way from Massachusetts, bits of tape, string, chalk...above that a layer of forgotten

memoranda, empty buff ration books, phone numbers, unanswered letters... (*GR* 18)

The sheer excess of this sedimentary formation begets an excess of narration that realizes the novel's performance of ontological insecurity, translating the reader's experience of *Gravity's Rainbow* in a characteristically untidy three-part example. One might begin by identifying what this type of narration is doing: a lengthy system of cataloging interrupted only by descriptive pauses, each of which seems intended to needle the reader's expectations of resolution (e.g., the ellipsis that restarts with "...above that"). Apropos of Laing's initial stage of anxiety, Pynchon's narrator literally "engulfs" the reader in a blizzard of material elements from the story-world, as Laing's original diagnostic criteria for this affect are translated. Typified originally as the "dread of relatedness as such" (Laing 48), the rhetorical effect of ontological insecurity is realized syntactically for the implied reader as a corresponding flood of information engulfs the novel's diegetic reader-surrogate. Likened to a sense of "drowning...in the most strenuous, desperate activity" (Laing 46), the implied reader's first response takes this sentence to be a purely formal phenomena, that is, to be literally flooded with syntax and descriptive detail with little regard for its content. In other words, engulfment in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the sheer, dizzying accumulation of facts that threaten readerly autonomy—the secure vantage point from which one generally perceives the "chosenness" of a particular literary detail. Expressing a propensity for guided rather than promiscuous selection, the excesses of Pynchon's world threaten our own as the readerly contract earlier referenced by David Leverenz is repeatedly violated.

The inevitable turn to interpretation on the part of a fully engulfed implied reader suggests Laing's second principle, *implosion*. Enacting the proverbial grasping at straws, the implied reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* sifts the accumulation of alternately meaningful and meaningless details, hoping for some sense of the narrator's hyper-attentiveness to the composite whole. For example, in a novel about war, the reader's analytical alertness to the rhetorical power of certain choices of diction might lead her to concentrate on the desk's "incendiary" theme: nouns like *ash, debris, paste, powder, scatter, flints, matches, pins*, are modified by *black, broken, crumpled, ground* and *decomposing*. Pynchon climaxes this theme in an image that perversely "blooms" up out of the trash pile when he puts in apposition with the jigsaw puzzle piece²⁵ of a Weimaraner's eye, "the orange nimbus of an explosion (perhaps a sunset)" (*GR* 19). A realistic novel might seize on this observation (which looks out at the audience, mimicking or mocking its observational powers) as an acknowledgment of fiction's epistemological emphasis. In Pynchon, however, the section ends with Teddy Bloat, the scene's resident detective. Bloat's consciousness is periodically ventriloquized by the narrator via free indirect style, who decides there is really not much to notice (of course, already having "over-noticed" and commented on *everything*). Mentioning the air of gossip that accompanies Slothrop's every move (a sort of free-floating rhetorical sediment to the desk's material one), the narrator writes:

"He does lead rather a complicated social life," thereupon going into the story of Lorraine and Judy, Charles the homosexual constable and the piano in the pantehnicon, or the bizarre masquerade involving Gloria and her nubile mother, a quid wager on the Blackpool-Preston North End game, a naughty version of

“Silent Night,” and a providential fog. *But none of these yarns, for the purposes of those Bloat reports to, are really very illuminating* (GR 20, emphasis mine).

In the same instance that Pynchon’s narrator negates the possibility for “illumination” from the accretion of matter earlier presented on Slothrop’s desk and built upon through the decadent social life mentioned, he nevertheless continues narrating it as a realizable goal. In effect, this poetics of excess implodes the reader’s ability to model the discriminating selection process realistic fiction typically provides—a negotiating, as James Wood contends, of habitual and dynamic detail—or perhaps the differentiating between supplementary and constituent events that helps order the reader’s involvement in the diegesis. Moreover, the story-world literally threatens to crash in and obliterate any sense of what the reading hopes to accomplish by the standards of realist narration. As Laing elsewhere indicates, “any contact [with the reality of the story-world] is then in itself experienced as a dreadful threat because reality is experienced from this position...in itself a threat to what identity the individual is able to suppose himself to have...” (47).

The depersonalizing strategy of petrification follows closely on the heels of Pynchon’s focalization of Slothrop’s desk when the narrator introduces perhaps the core image of the novel, if not its most objectifying one. Readers have just been introduced to a character through the accumulation of objects on the surface of his workspace, a passage that ends with a reference to Slothrop’s unusual assortment of reading materials. Pynchon here acknowledges the reader’s interpretive quest, when, following mention of Slothrop’s dictionary of technical German, a British Foreign Office *Special Handbook*,

and the ubiquitous *News of the World* tabloid, he refers to the protagonist as a “faithful readers (19).²⁶ Readers are then presented with a map of London (being studied and photographed by Teddy Bloat) investigating the high incidence of correspondence between V-2 rocket explosions and Slothrop’s apparent erotic assignations. The image serves as a veritable cartography of depersonalization, in which women are reduced to colored stars,

...pasted up on Slothrop’s map, [and covering] the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled ‘Darlene’) sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys...in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Annes, Susans, Elizabeths (*GR* 19).

Indeed, in a veiled allusion to Jorge Luis Borges,²⁷ the stars and their new significations threaten to displace the actual geographies about which Bloat was originally concerned. As the scene ends, the narrator notices that Bloat’s real mission (and notably the reason for which the implied reader has been prepared) has been replaced by the “amiable anthropology” of Slothropian girl-chasing (20).

The constitutional instabilities of Pynchon’s focalization, spatiotemporal shifts from past to present and back again, and the negotiation of both components through the novel’s myriad formal and informal discourses, lead a thoroughly engulfed and imploded audience toward a state of petrification. To the extent that fiction sends specific, coherent messages, Pynchon’s narrator closes the episode with a pun on disconnection and thwarted reception, a model for the implied reader’s experience:

Well. He's done now. Bag zipped, lamp off and moved back in place. Perhaps there's time to catch Tantivy over at the Snipe and Shaft, time for a comradely pint. He moves back down the beaver-board maze, in the weak yellow light, against a tide of incoming girls in galoshes, aloof Bloat unsmiling, no time for slap-and-tickle here you see, he still has his day's delivery to make... (GR 20)

This final telltale ellipsis reinforces Pynchon's repeated motif of "incoming" (GR 7), but never "delivered" (GR 17) mail,²⁸ of broken connections (GR 11), thwarted consummations (GR 122-123), and the larger threat of complete extinction (from opening von Braun epigraph to the mythology of the Hereros to the surrealistically burlesque *Story of Byron the Bulb*" (GR 660-668). With the narrative shifting from Slothrop's comprehensively depersonalized desktop to Teddy Bloat's ebullient march away from ACHTUNG offices, the implied reader recognizes that the narrative's reflexive alter ego (through whom the narrator has guided his free indirect style) closes with an unequivocal embrace of the second-hand, rejected, or devalued "minor" products that signify the disposability of personal identity in Pynchon's narrative.

This attrition of self through an accretion of waste materials is not, however, meant to equate with a loss of identity—as one noteworthy analogue, Amy Clampitt's widely anthologized poem "Salvage" (1983) can attest. Clarifying Pynchon's waste-based ontology by guiding readers through a junkyard (not unlike Slothrop's desk) from which the poem's speaker takes unqualified "esthetic satisfaction," Clampitt lovingly guides the reader along a detritus-laden landfill scene, from "cortege of [lasagna-layered] crumpled/defunct cars" to a "trash-basket dig" in order to drop us casually alongside a "bag-laden, hermit woman" whose propensity for discovery and delight is apparently inexhaustible (24). Here, the speaker champions the "ceremonial removals" from "the

category of received ideas,” a sublimity that transforms her low culture landfill into a high culture wonder to behold, offering both solace from the “greater incubus” of daily life, as well as genuine “pleasures of the ruined” amidst an aesthetic that embraces the fragmentary and diffuse (Clampitt 25). Like its challenging predecessor *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the poem suggests that conceptions of identity are merely limitations of one’s own creative vision rather than actual categories to be studiously upheld, presenting the abstraction of ontology for what it is: an epistemology of salvage as near-salvific mode of engagement, if not an authentically relational reason for being.

Joseph McElroy’s Multiplying Real

Among the limited scholarship that surrounds Joseph McElroy’s fiction over the past half-century, the subject of reflexivity is treated in fairly gestural terms. That is to say, while observant of scale as a generic marker—McElroy’s persistent identification as a writer of long, difficult fictions—critics rarely consider the concept’s flexibility as a controlling metaphor for a new embodied form of narrative reflexivity that inaugurates the author’s utopian social imaginary. For example, Waugh’s *Metafiction* includes a brief section on McElroy’s debut novel, *A Smuggler’s Bible*, through which the critic contends that the narrative’s reflexive coordination of the human mind’s cognitive capacities occur in a productive tension with the mimetic expectations of the traditional novel. Despite examining *A Smuggler’s Bible* with energy and rigor, Waugh’s analysis simultaneously initiates the discourse of difficulty that I assert characterizes the reception history of McElroy’s fiction generally, when she writes,

Neither [the protagonist] nor the novel can absorb and organize the numerous and contradictory codes and registers of language with which they are both confronted and constructed. Mythical, biblical, numerical, geographical, physical and metaphysical explanations break down into a total overdetermination of meaning, which therefore becomes meaningless. (39)

This early commentary acknowledges the often-alienating experience of McElroy's fiction, a perception his works pass along to the reader as his characters diegetically enact attempts to comprehend the world. Yet, in evoking the reflexive operations that surround the author's text, Waugh's argument also establishes the author's clear investment in conjoining the narrator's experience with that of his readers. This meta-ethical turn, as my analysis will show, evolves across the author's next five novels to culminate in the grand statement of *Women and Men*.

As previously indicated, McElroy criticism emphasizes the writer's overloaded style within a series of loosely information-driven subgenres such as the "total novel," "encyclopedic narrative," "the Mega-Novel," "systems novel," or "modern epic." Following the ambitions of these models but with greater contextual elaboration is Stefano Ercolino's recent discussion of the "maximalist novel," which illustrates the manifest impossibility of devising a master theory for the genre. As with the structural approach of most anatomies, Ercolino's admittedly less essentializing model sifts the gaps in prior formulations to devise its own unified approach²⁹ while operating under the critical assumption that generic criticism is often too beholden to a teleological imperative that "frequently ends up obfuscating an important characteristic of every literary form and, in particular, of the novel" (242). Conversely, Ercolino's approach champions "an intrinsic structural instability, to varying degrees, determined by a

characteristic osmotic openness towards the literary system as a whole” (242). This continuum-based model is better suited to McElroy’s oeuvre in that the author’s aggressively reflexive approach turns those earlier models against themselves by evading full incorporation into the systems his narrators gesture toward.

To take Mendelson’s classification strategy as a case in point, the term “encyclopedic” appropriately evokes what McElroy’s fictions “do,” but not merely in the “information-rich” sense usually meant by the term. Rather, the etymological implications of *encyclopedia* reveal a richer valence at work in this author’s unusual project. Translating to “body of knowledge” or “circle of learning,” the Greek phrase *enkyklios paideia* again explicitly invokes the inside and outside of the textual object as a “container” or “enclosure” of meaning in antiquity. Under the fractured conditions of McElroy’s aesthetic program however, an enclosure of total knowledge becomes an epistemological signifier of limited coherence, as nearly every critic of McElroy’s work has indicated. Consequently, the author’s so-called encyclopedism is less resonant for signifying a bounded textual display than for signaling the cognitive dissonance that results from a confrontation with excessive aesthetic size.

Literally tracing the expansive shape of his storyworld in the midst of narrating it, McElroy charts the structural contours of his “Wide Load” (*Women and Men* 41) narratives via a pattern of scalar tropes that enable him to question epistemological closure with unusual rhythms, repetitions, and counterintuitive stresses worthy of such great modernist poets as Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound. One of Pound’s structural devices in particular offers striking parallels with McElroy’s textual strategy. As Guy

Davenport's celebrated analysis of *The Cantos* indicates, *periplum* "refers to a voyage or circumnavigation" in which "a sailing around the subject as though it were an archipelago or long coastline" occurs. A metonymy for the totalizing impulse that informs all cartography, Davenport suggests that *periplus* (its plural form) analogizes research by simulating

either a voyage or a record of a voyage made on a sea for which no maps exist. [...] In this mode, memory and contemplation replace history in action. But the metaphor of the voyage is as active as always, and becomes even more obvious by its new configuration: the voyage of the contemplative mind back through an accumulation of experience (*Cities on Hills* 90-91).

Expressing this aesthetic impulse via a lateral movement through the text that repetitively encircles its narrative elements, McElroy figures his books as open containers of meaning that repeatedly exceed the limitations of the book's bounded form. This "Obstacle Geometry," as McElroy describes the approach in *Women and Men*, manages the reader's experience of both the linguistic density of the work's prose style and the "object matter"³⁰ of the book as a conceptual container (365).

To this end, I assert that McElroy's narrative poetics demonstrate a new way of understanding the self-reflexivity or "autopoiesis" long established as the dominant aesthetic practice in postmodern literature. Although metafiction elevates its discursive implications as a "tendency" rather than a genre, the maximalist or "megafictional" variant is frequently framed in generic terms. Beginning with Jerome McGann's "textual criticism," critics began to theorize the radical implications self-referential fictions have for performativity beyond linguistic utterances, McGann himself remarking that

[The] literary work by its very nature sets in motion many kinds of creative intentionalities. These orbit in the universe of the creative work but not around some imaginary and absolute center. Rather, they turn through many different kinds of motion, at many structural scales, and in various formal relationships. The universe of poiesis no more has an absolute center than does the stellar relationship we have revealed through our astronomy. What it has are many relative centers which are brought to our attention by our own acts of observation. The universe of literature is socially generated and does not exist in a steady state. Authors themselves do not have, *as authors*, singular identities; an author is a plural identity and more resembles what William James liked to call the human universe at large, a multiverse. (75)

Revising this autopoietic paradigm, my analysis of McElroy's work further illuminates the unsustainability of a generic approach, which ignores the truly radical implications of the author's innovative allopoietic strategies. Thus, my discussion examines the author's poetics through a brief survey of the narrative strategies deployed across his early novels to support two interanimating claims: one textual and internal, the other contextual and external. My first claim diagnoses the sporadic history of McElroy criticism as largely constituting a response to the author's synecdochical style—a testament to the way in which McElroy's often-abstruse critical lexicon expresses human interactions with the world in scalar terms. As Jerome McGann, Ira Livingston, Levi Bryant, Mark McGurl and other scholars who approach literary discourse from an object-oriented perspective observe, reflexivity is itself a scalar phenomenon that reveals authorial agency in varying degrees of visibility and occlusion. Grounded in the intrinsic self-awareness of narrative perspectivism, McGurl, for example, elaborates on this purview to suggest that scale as a relational aesthetic category charts the proximity and distance invoked between perceiving subject, perceived object, and the surrounding visual field in which both are situated (400-404). In previous McElroy criticism, this perceptual emphasis takes two

forms, the “topographical” and the “topological”—models best understood through the geoaesthetic lens later applied by critics like Stephen Burn, whose recent coinage “topological fiction” echoes the very first analysis of McElroy’s poetics in Tony Tanner’s notion of “ultimate topography” in 1975. Topography as it is used in the field of geography describes a boundary line that “encloses a particular absolute space” (Herod 24) while topology expresses networked structures in which lines and nodes construct space through a weave of intersecting and disconnecting patterns of various lengths and size.³¹ To the extent that the scalar imagery in McElroy’s novels evokes a “literal” aspect to the text’s being-in-the-world, the author takes up the apparatus’s actual shape while invoking the uneasy part-whole relations that fill its frame.

This emphasis brings me to my second claim, rooted in the external or contextual dimension that surrounds McElroy criticism. Indeed, the curiously literal series of correspondences between McElroy’s narration and the exterior “object matter” of the book was observed as early as Tony Tanner’s lengthy analysis of the writer’s work in a 1975 *TriQuarterly* essay entitled, “Toward an Ultimate Topography: The Work of Joseph McElroy.” Not surprisingly given its author’s neologicistic tendencies, the phrase “ultimate topography” itself comes from *Hind’s Kidnap*, McElroy’s second novel, and describes the prose’s reflexive mediation of surface and depth in what Tanner calls a “scrupulous delineation of the surfaces and lines and intersections which make up the perceptual field, or simply the particular ‘place,’ for some person at some point in time” (219). For Tanner, this imperative appears as early McElroy’s debut, *A Smuggler’s Bible* (1966), which repeatedly invokes the notion of authorial projection or “smuggling” as protagonist

David Brooke attempts to reconstruct his identity out of eight different impressions given to him by other people in his life. In other words, the hollowed-out smuggler's bible of the title serves the dual referential purpose of invoking textual collection while also identifying the text readers hold in their hands. Both a material manifestation of David's psyche and a McElroy alter ego, the narrative voice implores its protagonist to "project [himself] into the lives of others" (*A Smuggler's Bible* 6) as Brooke sifts, collates, synthesizes, and reconfigures his life through memory as an open field of potential. Mediating Brooke's growing madness while goading readers to consider their own reflective processes in dialogue with the text, the voice asserts: "He doesn't know what I am, but he knows I'm in him and behind him. [H]e senses that I—I—am his propulsion....I inhabit him" (McElroy, *A Smuggler's Bible* 3). This curiously intimate and yet disembodied allodiegetic narrator would offer the first example of McElroy's unusual form of reflexivity.

The author's second novel *Hind's Kidnap: A Pastoral on Familiar Airs* (1969) continues the theme of habitation and tenancy through a lost child mystery-as-neo-phenomenological allegory on human perception. Broadly meditating on the mechanics of investigation as narrative occlusion or perceptual blind spots, *Hind's Kidnap* defines perspective through its absence, the paranoiac notion that sliding around the edges of one's vision is a unified representation of reality just out of reach. Moreover, McElroy devises narrative discourse not in the service of story but rather as a reflexive platform through which the reader's perceptual processes are interrogated by the textual interface itself. Through an array of pseudoscientific puns, tropes, metaphors, and homologies,³²

McElroy's inventive lexicon frequently foregrounds period technologies in both actual and virtual forms by staging elliptical confrontations with knowledge systems in futurist settings of an apparently totalizing, even totalitarian, character. In this way, *Hind's Kidnap* initiates the first of numerous descriptive passages that comment on contemporary communication devices in specialized jargon as a mode of social control.

For instance, when the novel's protagonist, occasional sleuth and human giant Jack Hind, thinks he has picked up the trail of missing seven-year-old Hershey Laurel, Hind tracks the suspected kidnapers to the Center for Total Research: a Chemosphere-like structure with nearly omniscient powers of surveillance that hovers at the edge of New York City's borders. Familiar with the Center given his friend Maddy Beecher's dictatorial control over its wide-ranging brief (humorously, Beecher is the sole employee in the huge complex), Hind observes its technocratic milieu in a scene that echoes his own corporeal hugeness:

At Maddy's elbow, by his Holographone—which took dictation and returned it to him printed in his own hand—there was magnetized to the desk top the single tiny button that of all the (as Maddy put it to Hind) doodads here most quaintly suggested what tricks contemporary techne know. For, at a touch, followed by the relevant number whispered, Control would send up, projected (and of course blown up) on his then suddenly uncabineted screen against the east wall behind him, any microfilm on file. (56)

In a passage that reexamines the same dynamics of *A Smuggler's Bible's* cursory suspense narrative but transfers the book-as-container metaphor to the semi-permeable membrane of a microfiche interface, “projection” here refers to both magnification of text and promotion of self. Circumventing the subsequent cognitive obscurity of such a scene

while simultaneously encouraging the reader to inhabit its semantic confusions, McElroy's narrator perversely signifies across a metonymic chain of surfaces that blur the storyworld with our own—as if inviting readers to ponder the printed matter their eyes are scanning as well as the meanings encoded therein.

Again, McElroy's earliest academic critic, Tony Tanner, notes the proliferation of this interface effect in examples ranging from a defaced subway map to an angled Dürer woodcut to the mysteries of the human body (218). This last, "embodied" component Tanner relates in one notably "subatomic" passage from *Hind's Kidnap* that does for depth what the "Holographone" passage does for surface: "And you thought of the soft mass of Cassia's insides, unknown to her, and bubbling away, different from the outside skeleton of membranes, hair, crust and polish, each with untamed intersection of message while behind and below were dark bubbling insides loved but almost never seen" (McElroy, *Hind's Kidnap* 525). Such progressively diffuse effects of McElroy's narrative poetics, in which the deliberate flattening of the affective balance between readerly suspension and closure, has often led to charges of incoherence:³³ an ironic judgment given how extensively the author works to convey the actual experience of a consciousness in flux. Indeed, as Stephen Burn recently suggests in a *New York Times* book review of McElroy's short fiction, if anything the author's work strives for hyper-coherence, mapping the infinitesimal series of interactions that occur between the human sensorium and the material world through which it moves.

"Topological fiction," as Burn has recently termed McElroy's work, refers to the moves of narrative process visible via the "cognitive mapping that underlies and dictates

[all of McElroy's] fiction" ("Topological Fictions"). Burn's coinage alludes to an instructive parallel with Fredric Jameson's revision of cognitive mapping for conspiracy theory, the similarly topological turn that marks the critic's sequence from *Fables of Aggression* (1979) to *The Political Unconscious* (1981), in which the "the most influential formal impulses of modernism" that Jameson calls "strategies of inwardness" (*Fables of Aggression* 2) harden into the similarly totalizing "strategies of containment" (*The Political Unconscious* 10) that postmodern fiction and theory inevitably disrupt. Where the former, perhaps for the first time in narrative theory, merely recognizes obfuscation as a legitimate discursive mode with the justification that it "reappropriate[s] the alienated universe by transforming it into personal styles and private languages," (Jameson, *Fables of Aggression* 2) the latter celebrates it by "allow[ing] what can be thought to seem internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable which lies beyond its boundaries" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 38). This "unthinkable" realm is analogous to the lateral logic of McElroy's allopoietic mode, a parallel emphasis that considers the dimensional or, in David Herman's words "extroverted reflexivity" ("Lateral Reflexivity" 295) for which McElroy's theoretically informed fictions are known.

This lateral emphasis is a point of departure worthy of interrogation through the plots in which McElroy's characters find themselves embedded. By the publication of *Ancient History: A Paraphase* (1971), for example, the "phenomenological accuracy" (Tanner 220) of McElroy's approach had moved from mere inventive textual play amidst the conventions of genre fiction to a full-blown theory of practice. "Para-phase,"

anticipating Furlani's definition of metamodernism, refers to a state of between-ness: a mode of permanent oscillation between inside, outside or beside time (*phase* meaning 'a section of time,' *para* meaning 'beside,' 'parallel to,' 'substituted for')" (McElroy, "Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts"). In the novel, a narrator, Cy, stalks the pompous ideologue Dom, a thinly veiled "grand man of contemporary letters and polemic" à la Norman Mailer. Stumbling into Dom's apartment shortly after the man commits suicide, Cy literally inserts himself into the deceased artist's life by incorporating his own story within the pages of Dom's last writing project. This personal history-as-hidden transcript, buried between the lines of a renowned public intellectual's failed career, further complicates the modes of between-ness earlier informing David Brooke's multiple manuscripts and Jack Hind's real and invented clues. Generically, this sideways movement also refers to innovations within already established poetic forms while clarifying Brian McHale's early diagnosis of McElroy's "lateral" position to modernism on the grounds that the author's poetics do not foreground "ontological preoccupations, but rather [are] strategies for exploring consciousness in fiction—consciousness in and of fictional characters, consciousness in and of the text itself, the consciousness of the reader" (244). McHale goes on to argue that McElroy's texts, despite their considerable innovations, fall short of being postmodern texts by remaining "devoted to radical explorations of modernist issues of consciousness; call it 'late-modernist,' if you will, or 'aggravated modernism'a lateral move into still-unexplored spaces of modernist poetics" (244).

Following the critic's hypothesis, I suggest that the lateral, dimensional quality in McElroy's work expresses the "literal" nature of reflexive narration—that is to say, *the lateral is the literal*. Although each of McElroy's novels innovates on existing conventions of narrative reflexivity, the author's scalar turn arguably occurs between his fourth and fifth novels *Lookout Cartridge* (1974) and *Plus* (1976), in which the lateral tendency reaches a kind of crescendo of literalism in the former novel's opening pages. Again conceived in a narrative voice positioned from the outside-in, *Lookout Cartridge* open with one of the author's most explicitly metaleptic breaks: "A hand enters a lab's glass wall through large elastic lips sleeving a glove port. You have seen this, don't think you haven't. Once the hand is into the sleeve it feels its way into a thick lightweight glove in order to get at pieces of who knows what on the other side of the glass—cans of bacteria, say" (6). Here, McElroy's notion that the objects within a particular storyworld, entities and events, arrive via a liminal, "dimensionless space Between" (292) refers to the scenarios into which protagonist Cartwright feels he has inserted himself—a human cartridge injected into the massed movement of temporal flux amidst the montage-driven arrangement of textual episodes.³⁴ Similar to the focalizing strategy of *A Smuggler's Bible*, *Lookout Cartridge's* narrative consciousness seems to occupy a space outside the consciousness of the protagonist with the option of inhabiting that consciousness, albeit from a position curiously aligned with the reader's—for, as the "sleeved port" passage indicates, "you" the reader are complicit in the narrator's manipulations of characters. Indeed, for McElroy's next two novels, an even greater degree of active involvement

would be required of the reader: framed as a veritable co-conspirator of McElroy's emergent allodiegetic narrator.

Lookout Cartridge's follow-up, *Plus* (1976), goes even further, as McElroy's narration of a brain that orbits the earth to conduct solar energy tests prefigures *Women and Men's* disembodied humanity. As the brain becomes more conscious of its surroundings, it attempts to fill the space capsule by sprouting, through McElroy's customary linguistic inventiveness, several "shearows" and "faldoreams" (the author's neologisms for arm-like appendages). For being his most expansively cosmic fiction, *Plus's* embodied metonymy for the interior and exterior of the book is ironically also one of the author's shortest at 215 pages. And yet, the narrative's presentation of a mind willing its corporeality back into being anticipates *Women and Men's* metastasizing overgrowth. In the context of generic criticism, the author's unusual mediations between Inside and Outside, clarity and confusion, suggest Timothy Melley's recent notion of "strategic irrationalism" (31), the habit of pointing to a coherent genre category through a suspenseful premise (in McElroy's case—an abducted child; a motiveless suicide; a missing or destroyed film; a "space opera") only to expand and flatten the expectations of that genre through a series of perceptual *longeurs*. References to scale streamline these interactions in McElroy's work, where they are as much a topical preoccupation for his characters as a compositional one for his narrators.

In the analysis that follows, I suggest that McElroy's explicit, allopoietic references to scale moves the subject from a seemingly epiphenomenal register to a literal one. The author's culminating text from the period, the 1192-page *Women and Men*,

aggregates the strategies of his earlier five novels by putting previously published short fictions into conversation with longer, thematically-related “Breathers” chapters composed of Faulknerian world-sentences that expand across hundreds of pages within the text.³⁵ Specifically, McElroy’s “multiplying real” manifests as a purely epistemological phenomenon through the paradoxically artificial frame of allo- rather than autopoiesis, and so imagines his storyworlds beyond the material limits of the text. This “lateral” reflexivity, I contend, offers an image of totality that—in interrogating the motives and ambitions of those who would dare totalize—realizes the “Relation at large” to which his “various we” belong (*Women and Men* 1146).

“This Community of Us”: *Women and Men*

All of this speaks. In many bodies or, as our leaders have said, on an individual basis. Speaks also, we understand, in this “we” that we have heard. What is it? some community? Ours. Operating less than capacity then suddenly beyond itself. So that in the zone between we have this voice of relations—is that it?—of possible relations too?

- Joseph McElroy, *Women and Men* (11)

The quintessential “New York novel” in a postwar milieu teeming with representations of city life great and small, *Women and Men* is unique among other urban American fictions for its open suggestion that audiences “take occupancy” (McElroy 783) within the diegetic space. Positioning readers as veritable *renters* alongside the assortment of textual tenants who populate its frequently articulated “structure that can accommodate a multiplicity of small-scale units” (McElroy, *WM* 40), the book’s expansive contours underwrite a dimensional logic that realizes definitively the author’s

key questions across his five previous novels. What does it mean to “occupy” a fictional world? Can “inhabiting” a text be as *real* as inhabiting a world? To what extent is narrative form capable of closing the distance between these two, apparently distinct, spaces? Toward answering these questions, I propose that the author’s exhaustively comprehensive representational mode is less about demolishing the conventions of realist narration than scaffolding them across multiple platforms.³⁶ In the discussion that follows, I take up the novel’s core argument, conveyed in a central relational image of a man and woman gazing just past one another, perpetually misaligned and deferring connection (LeClair, *Anything Can Happen*, 250). This fictional rendering of the modernist impulse of “longing” McElroy explores through a variety of monumental contexts in American history and geography—both natural (the Ship Rock monadnock located within the Navajo Nation in New Mexico) and cultural (the Statue of Liberty’s assembly on Bedloe Island in the nineteenth century). Between these two poles, the novel’s longing for connectivity amidst the author’s relentless interrogation of reality as alternating patterns of division and between-ness describes the existential problem of how courtship, cohabitation, marriage, children, and careers can occur, shoulder to shoulder so to speak, without the participants ever fully knowing the other person.

Frequently mentioned in his author interviews about the novel, this incongruous image illustrates McElroy’s vision of distance alongside relative proximity, disconnection amidst intended intimacy, throughout *Women and Men*’s extraordinary length: the capacity, as Mega-Novel theorist Frederick Karl once remarked, of “infinite extension” or “[the] ability to come at the reader from all sides simultaneously” (“More Than A

Novel” 183; 185). This scalar relation, I contend, closely approximates Christian Moraru’s notion of *body allotropes*: textual tropes of corporeality and embodiment that dissolve the normative boundary formations associated with identity as a closed ontological category. Moreover, a tropology of this type envisions “the body and its incorporations as other...stand[ing] side by side, distinct and juxtaposed instead of divided and isolated” (Moraru 285). Considering the utility of this critic’s heuristic for examining the way positionality works in the novels of Joseph McElroy, my topological method likewise aims to describe a new narrative logic in which readers might also be implicated.

Noted earlier in the context of David Herman’s critique of the theory of mind expressed by the Exceptionality thesis, my allopoietic emphasis shares Herman’s assumption according to which fiction’s access to interior states of consciousness is an exceptional status. Suggesting a closed system that reduces the understanding of minds to a mere literary effect, this status is superficially analogous to the experience of consciousness but—in its classic formulation—inapplicable in an extra-literary, real-life, context. Toward challenging this conventional wisdom, I propose an allodiegetic narrator whose focalizing strategies realize the lateral reflexivity implied by Brian McHale in his discussion of McElroy’s “aggravated modernism” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 206). Indeed, David Herman has codified this tendency elsewhere, defining the approach as follows:

[R]eflexivity in narrative can operate laterally as well as vertically, cuing the reader to engage in ongoing acts of version-making, a generalized habitus of paraphrase. In turn, this logic of paraphrase connects the story-versions contained

in the text with the broader enterprise of exchanging and modifying versions of stories in the world(s) in which the narrative is read. Such reflexivity might be baptized ‘extroverted reflexivity,’ in contrast to the ‘introverted reflexivity’ Hutcheon sees as endemic to the complex fictions she studies (295).

Herman’s emphasis on this different form of reflexivity anticipates “the new geometry of ‘we’” (*Cosmodernism* 6) established by Moraru’s embodied imaginary, in which scale’s status as a system of measurement emerges from the body as an experiential locus. Thus, it stands to reason that McElroy’s lived-in, lateral, “Wide Load” aesthetics, with their “massed actualities” and “multiplicities of small-scale units” would use the most acute experience of relationality—birth—to establish their point. Following the author’s lead, I contend that McElroy’s approach constitutes a uniquely maximalist discourse of aesthetic size in *Women and Men*, imagining the literal scale of life via an allopoietics that shape the world through scalar tropes of curve, mass, volume, density and width that reveal their reflexive scaffolding in order to produce a reality outside their diegetic boundaries.

Again, scale is here imagined as an interface effect in which the conceptual imaginaries of “Outside” and “Inside” dissolve into “one non-individuated mass” (*WM* 760). From its fantastic inversion of atomic age anxiety in the “People-Oriented Bomb of Late America” (retitled in the novel’s only stand alone chapter vignette, “The Dream as Later Reported”) to its cosmic engagement with those dead and dying women and men undergoing “Simultaneous Reincarnation” (*WM* 30) following their torture murders at the hands of the Pinochet regime after the 1973 Chilean coup, the novel’s harrowing account of what it is like to live under the shadow of various geopolitical nightmares in the postwar period is contrasted with the laissez-faire political agency afforded those who

occupy Greater Manhattan's bohemian subcultures from 1976-1977. Beyond establishing a communitarian interface through which his characters might collectivize, McElroy encourages readers to participate in his project, at numerous points invoking his audience through the novel's idiosyncratic "we" narration. Enmeshed in "webs of interlocution" that classical narrative conceptions of identity typically streamline for coherent self-identification (Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 39), an implied readership is made a salient part of the novel's narrative approach when, for example, the narrator insinuates "us" into the narrative in the novel's second chapter. Ostensibly a descriptive phrase for the way prisoners unify under often isolating conditions, this mass is later termed the "Colloidal Unconscious" by the novel's convicted freelance economist Foley, providing a synecdoche for the carceral environment perpetuated by the novel's late-Cold War milieu. In this way, *Women and Men's* increasingly mereological thematic moves beyond the aridly theoretical to reconceive human life from the perspective of absolute collectivity, a necessity it imagines in the face of almost certain annihilation by asking how humanity will go on after the all-but-inevitable outcome of nuclear proliferation.

For example, a passage excised from *Women and Men* entitled "The Last Disarmament But One," blends the creative and interpretive act in textual space with its plot involving a crater the size of an entire nation adjacent to the U.S. border (whether the country is Canada or Mexico is unclear) following an atomic explosion. In place of this investigation of how best to memorialize those formerly occupying the land upon which a hole 1,760 miles in circumference now exists, McElroy has filled the textual gap with a reflexive gesture that subtly revises the original story's nuclear terror: an inter-chapter

entitled “The Dream as Later Reported” relating the advent of “people-oriented bombs,” which atomize property but leave the human figures inhabiting it untouched. Arguably, *Women and Men*’s synecdochical emphasis reaches outside the text and extends to its literal composition, with eleven of the novel’s thirty-three chapters previously published as stand alone stories. As the novelist Rick Moody has suggested, these stories retrospectively serve a paratextual function when read comparatively with the larger novel—as “unities and ideas of completion that have nothing to do with *length*” (Moody 145)—and which continue to grow and complicate the original epic.³⁷

An interanimation of form and content, the novel’s narrative consciousness proceeds from a parallel universe in which voices emerge as “Perhaps...spirits or angels waiting to be reincarnated, waiting to be changed into human form. Perhaps they are the voices of the Gaia-encircling wind. Or the unheard ‘tenant angels’ within our bodies, our untaken possibilities” (LeClair, *The Art of Excess* 169). It follows then that LeClair’s chain of speculation finally settles on “the cognitive revolution,” or as the critic specifies, “consciousness that recent researchers, like chaos theorists, have shown to be plural and sophisticatedly organized (or disorganized) than earlier models of consciousness claimed” (*The Art of Excess* 169). Most significantly for an analysis centering on the interface effects generated by a radically exteriorized form of narrative reflexivity, *Women and Men* provides the clearest image of McElroy’s relational ethic, as when he writes:

It’s what’s between us, or we share. A relation which we are all. And what a time for a breath or break. Before we’ve half begun. Which we are always doing, aren’t we? It’s the best time. A breather now. For hear us falling. Toward the

horizon albeit oblique, for we imagine it isn't our natural state. We are some power to be here and to have changed toward life even to think distinct from these angels lately to be heard speculating in us as if they were learning to hope. We deserve to know what is in us. (McElroy, *Women and Men* 9)

Even in the midst of resistance (“we imagine it isn't our natural state”), McElroy's “we narration” reinforces the notion that identity is always-already plural, a shape-shifting composite or aggregation of the multiplicity of selves with whom we are engaged in daily life. This engagement is not merely the *rapport de face à face* of Levinasian ontology or the co-presence of self and world common to Heideggerian onto-theology; rather, McElroy suggests that the sheer volume of language might produce a space in which the text itself serves as a relational conduit, or, as Moraru contends, an allotropic “identity notion” in which, “[a] body, along with that somebody inside it, becomes like or simply becomes, some other body and thus somebody else so as to hint not only that it can relate to others and thus enter new configurations of humanness, but that relating, interacting, and joining in such aggregates is what the body does *qua* body (*Cosmodernism* 285).

Curiously, *Women and Men* even features literal references to the “lateral,” as “lateral transfer” is made on two separate occasions with reference to news organizations (the novel itself functioning as a kind of phenomenological report). Speaking about his daughter, part-time protagonist Jim Mayn thinks,

If you are moving (you take on faith) but apparently not forward (as into the sea) and not backward (like the hairy man on the rubberized, banked running track at the gym who jogs backward half a mile for every mile forward, maybe you are moving sideways, for if life is an education it must be to find out what you are already doing because it can't avoid in some way Doing. Lateral transfer? he echoed his daughter in the nation's capital last month: why 'lateral transfer' used to be what the other wire service did a lot of, and now (for how did she, his

daughter, know the term?) seems ancient and empty (but why is ancient empty?) like going back into an apartment once lived in and trying it and moving out again for many months and then trying it as a pied à terre and then at last moving in. (McElroy, *WM* 978)

Of course in practical terms, lateral transfer means the movement into a position with a status or salary that is identical to the one presently assigned. In economic terms, with no forward movement, the feeling that might accompany such a condition is akin to running in place. Emplotted in a novel constructed on principles of infinite extension, this passage's somewhat arrested movement is reminiscent of Lauren Berlant's notion of lateral agency, which the critic describes as "subjectivity" and "self-interruption"—the scene of "slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; embodying, alongside embodiment" (777). Lateral agency is described later as being "appetitive," when Berlant writes: "the subjects of appetites [are not] always fully present to their motives, desires, feelings, and experiences, or as even desiring to be" (777). A related passage supports this appetitive thesis when Jim thinks back over his failed marriage to Joy, the mother of his daughter, as a field of unspoken, embodied relationality,

Relationship was the word. Relation. Each was the other's closest relative. Closer than blood, and clearer to boot—clear friction. [...] Well, you can't exactly tell it, speak of it, except some other way, say indirectly, with the door closed—but where are *you*? For example, let them watch TV in a room or hunt for change in a dark taxi, or one lie on a bed in a hotel room while the other moves into the bathroom or out. Soft points marking motion. Life's in parts, and some go together and some don't, and some incongruously don't, and the whole scheme is better left to itself (1004).

As demonstrated by the example of both *Hind's Kidnap* and *Plus*, McElroy's work has been moving toward this kind of molecular meditation for quite some time—a movement that Susan Stewart, citing Lacan, calls the body's erotogenic zones: the limits of the body where inside and outside dissolve into edge. “We narration” thus serves to both acknowledge the irreconcilability of the sexes and reach for this reconciliation as a new aesthetic imperative.

Patrick Colm Hogan has divided group narration into three components: “1) collective (where the group speaks together as “we”); 2) distributed (where individuals present distinct, but interrelated voices from the group); and 3) instantiated (where one speaker is presented as typifying the group)” (233). Specifically, Hogan's theory frames group narration as a complication of focalization among multiple voices within the narrative, specifically invoking “hierarchy” to explain the modes of dominance and subordination that typically inform how a controlling intelligence guides readers through a narrative. By contrast, McElroy's “various we” resists hierarchy in an effort to reveal a dialectical relationship with the tightly focalized, even minimalist slices-of-life composing the previously published short fictions that populate his novel. Diffusely rendered across ten of the novel's thirty-four sections, McElroy's “Breathers” chapters—though the longest and densest of the novel—supply the most explicit account of the author's innovative project. Notable primarily for their first-person plural narration, these chapters are delivered via collective voicing, a polyphonic strategy that simultaneously spell the novel's labyrinthine storyline out in the most literal terms while also generating considerable confusion due to McElroy's unusually aggregated syntax. Following this

dialectical approach, I confine my analysis to two representative chapters from his massive book, organized by the subject of birth: the opening chapter, entitled “division of labor unknown,” and the final chapter entitled “BETWEEN US: A BREATHER TOWARD THE END.”

Opening the novel with paired epigraphs by Martha Martin and Abraham Lincoln respectively, McElroy organizes the novel’s key relational tropes, childbirth and marriage, in an arrangement that follows the dialectical emphasis the rest of the novel will enact. Culled from the obscure collection *Revelations: Diaries of Women*, Martin’s passage reads: “I always think of the child as a girl. What if it’s a boy? Oh, it couldn’t be...” This curious quote is followed by one of Lincoln’s letters to “a fellow lawyer” dated “November 9, 1842”: “Nothing new here, except my marrying, which to me, is a matter of profound wonder.” Lincoln’s meditation on the subject of marriage, in contrast with the image of a woman laboring alone in the Alaskan wilderness (Martha Martin), sets up a controlling dialectic within the text that its subsequent chapters confirm and extend. Offering two images of community building, one figurative and one literal (the creation of those citizens that will populate the community and so perpetuate the marriage and family structure upon which its foundations rest), these quotes are immediately explored in the novel’s tense opening chapter, which opens mid-delivery as a nameless woman speculates about her husband’s commitment to their marriage through a complex discussion of relative scale and positionality. The woman recognizes that her husband cannot fully comprehend her pain: a fact about which she remains acutely aware as she delivers this relation “Between us, it was what marriage was all about” (7), at

precisely the moment the relationship that generated the child is lost: “in the process of losing one another, maybe a woman and a man looking right at each other to see each other” (7). As with previous McElroy fictions, ocularcentric communication with an environment through varying degrees of distance and proximity, and the importance of eye contact within that framework as a form of solidarity and shared labor, reveals levels of intimacy and estrangement between the women and men who populate the world of the text.

This material is treated over 1100 pages later in a consolatory meditation expressed from some transcendental space in first person plural. Alternately referred to as “the void,” the “curve” that traces the contours along that void, and the “Obstacle,” this scalar framework also describes the implicit potential in language, as the “We” narrator notes:

We had learned we were a language; or was it we’d been asked to be? [...] We had been told or had learned we were perhaps words; or we were of all things the collision course along which larger matters tracked; or we were the ‘all’ that proved Part to be oft greater than Whole; or if not ‘all,’ then we were the ‘us’ (*in* we) so buried that we could but bear with it, for then at least if *it* came to light, so would we, though if not broken now and again toward parcels of life seen by bent parts of life that from another system seemed straight we when we are most turning seem, multiple by multiple, most dark as if seen by an anti-light (1113).

McElroy’s dimensional approach, in Frederick Karl’s view, sets the conditions whereby “entire sentences and paragraphs do not function for informational or narrative purposes; language forms a kind of envelope or umbrella for events, in which time past, present, and future become indistinguishable...with lateral or horizontal as well as vertical movement; it has almost infinite extension (183). Famously conceiving of his long books

at the level of the sentence, McElroy's fiction can be read as a rendering of what William H. Gass has recently called the "life sentence." As McElroy explains in a set of remarks worth citing at length:

It's dense prose and always rewarding, but I'm *in* it, and it reminds me, among many other things of the importance of the sentence. Literature is not made out of words, but out of sentences. I think that makes more sense to me. And if so, then the sentences that are made out of the words—that are made out of the language—are pointing to certain things. [...] The sentence is a narrative in itself.

The lateral narrative discourse to which McElroy refers takes to the time to comprehend its surrounding environs, rather than move in a linear way through conflict. Though commentary on the author's "difficulty" arguably constitutes the chief reason for his obscurity, guided by the unstated assumption that non-realist modes of narrative constitute not "doing literature" at all, this misinterpretation stems from a lack of attention to the role of scale in framing McElroy's poetics.

Put another way, the "lateral" emphasis common to both McElroy and Pynchon demonstrates that the critical resistance to early postmodern aesthetics turns on an objection to size through various rhetorics of scale. As a resilient point of contention for critics and authors alike, these "encyclopedic" fictions absorb the editorial role of the former in order to communicate the latter's lived experience of contemporary knowledge work as a radical reconceptualizing of the self. To the extent that we are always already individuated from a plural rather than singular substrate, this multitudinal conception suggests that human identity is shaped to an even greater degree by the knowledge systems that surround it rather than some intrinsic set of "personal" characteristics.

Between these lines, McElroy's recent recommendation thus serves as a rallying cry for the potentially immersive movements that guide each novel's allopoietic method:

"Novels are narratives to *be in*. *To live in*. *To exist in*. Not primarily forms to jump into and get to the end of. It's a substance that the great big novel becomes...which invites you to *be in it*, not necessarily to *leave it*. To move *around in it*. To move *laterally*.

("Real Realisms," author's emphasis).

Notes

¹ The dreadful power of Kiš's final line hinges on the author's elegant use of the single word "efflorescence," which has an unsettlingly ironic effect on the narrator's reflection about her father's late-blooming artistry. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "efflorescence" has three definitions; the first two would seem to fit the implied reader's initial encounter with the father's painting: "1. the process of producing flowers, or bursting into flower; the period of flowering"; and "2. a development like that of blossom; an abundant or ostentatious growth; the flower of age" ("Efflorescence"). From the vantage point of the story's startling conclusion, the reader can reflect back over the curious fact that the father's "budding artistry" is not narrated forebodingly—perhaps the most straightforward way to signal a dire development like terminal cancer. Rather, the narrator reflects about the family's delight with his work—a pleasant rather than haunting memory. Only after one notes the third definition of "efflorescence," which clarifies the "floral pattern" as a symbol of death, can the word's connection to the cancer metastasizing throughout the father's body be understood. Though the *OED* also notes the somewhat anachronistic usage of these variants, they are nonetheless accurate: "3a. Color developed on the skin, either in the ordinary course of nature, or as the result of disease"; "b. a morbid redness or rash of the skin" ("Efflorescence"). In contrast with the reader's first encounter with the paintings, one swift, shocking moment discloses the fact that the actual object winding across the surface of the house is a malignancy, the appearance of which the father cheerfully, if uncannily, "translates" through the compulsive painting projects that illustrate his home. By hopeful consensus, its appearance is misinterpreted by the family as flowers, the narrator again even noting, "He painted flowers that bore little resemblance to flowers...." (Kiš 62). The shock of the object not meaning what its original interpretation seemed to mean causes readers to reassess the whole story—not unlike the encyclopedia's goal of reconstructing whole lives in textual form.

² Daniel T. Rodgers cultural history of the postwar U.S., *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011) speaks to this seismic shift at all levels of the Republic, including "postmodern aesthetics," as he explains:

Fact pressed unsettlingly into fiction in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties*. Genres blurred and ruptured. Totalities were accounted the new aesthetic enemy. The play of time—time wrenched from history's strata, sliced and recombined, twisted and tumbled all over itself—was only a part of the larger avant-garde movement. Fredric Jameson and David Harvey's efforts to see in the postmodern sensibility the logic of late-capitalist transformations of space and time, with its instant information portals and its power to bring even the most widely flung goods into juxtaposition, downplayed the sheer contagion of styles, metaphors, and innovations in the postmodern arts.

But at the cutting edge of the arts there was no missing the experiments in folded time: the exuberance of a kind of transgressive time travel. (231)

³ In an early analysis of McElroy's career, Tony Tanner invokes Clifford Geertz's influential concept from anthropology signaling the interpretive gloss that must accompany the significant contextual research that surrounds an object of study. See Tanner, 206-237.

⁴ For a strong overview of Capote's compositional problems, see Fox's "Editor's Note" to the 1987 edition, subtitled *The Unfinished Novel* (New York: Vintage, 2012), xiii-xxii; or, for the most comprehensive account to date, Kashner, "Capote's Swan Dive" (*Vanity Fair*, December 2012, Web).

⁵ The unfinished sections of Ellison's *Three Days Before the Shooting...* were published posthumously in two versions: most recently under his intended title in 2010 at a staggering 1136 pages; and in the aftermath of Ellison's death under the title *Juneteenth* (1999) with a heavy editorial hand by literary executor John F. Callahan. For the definitive account of the curatorial work on both versions, see *Ralph Ellison in Transition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010) by Callahan's co-editor Adam Bradley. Examples abound outside the form of the novel as well, the most reflexive of which includes the case of *New Yorker* columnist Joseph Mitchell. See Mitchell's belated collection *Up in the Old Hotel* (New York: Vintage, 1993), which includes both "Professor Seagull" (1942) and "Joe Gould's Secret" (196). These stories reflect on the writer's association with bohemian vagrant Joe Gould, who claimed to have written a volume of several thousand pages entitled *An Oral History of Our Time*. Some critics have argued that Mitchell's discovery that Gould was lying about the book led to a decades-long writer's block, as the once-prolific Mitchell failed to complete any writing after 1964.

⁶ Conversely, this defeatist sensibility goes both ways, as authors are also rejected for undeliverable work; for example, the misogynistic violence of Bret Easton Ellis's maximalist satire *American Psycho* (1991) which, in the wake of a record \$500,000 advance by Simon and Schuster, led to the firm's withdrawal of the novel's hardcover publication on moral grounds. More radically, this negative charge also informs strong convictions about the fleeting fortunes of literary production writ large, reaching a crescendo of reflexive nihilism via 1992's *Agrippa (a book of the dead)*: novelist William Gibson's 300-line electronic poem delivered on one 3.5-inch floppy disk and designed to self-destruct through software encryption after one "reading."

⁷ In *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture*, Stephen R. Yarbrough outlines one of the governing debates behind this epistemological impasse in his analysis of the philosophical assumptions that divided fourteenth century humanists Desiderius Erasmus and Petrus Ramus. Arguably relevant to the tensions between the

immeasurable and the comprehensible in Kant's later discussion of the sublime, Erasmus and Ramus disagree on whether discourse is a negotiable or *a priori* phenomenon—a difference visible in their respective rhetorics. Yarbrough specifies that Erasmus's exhaustive *copia*, a method that “exerted itself in argumentation through a balanced presentation of possibilities,” conceptualizes the realization of truth via “persuasion to a possible conceptual whole from elements that others will consider relevant” (111, 113). In contrast, Ramus's “ready-made world” operates on a “sublimely logical” principle his followers called “encyclopedia”: “a closed system of logic to create an image of total intelligibility” (112). In this way, Ramus's conception of truth manifests as “persuasion from a conceptual whole toward conclusions that others will...consider *necessary*” (113). With respect to contemporary narration, one might argue that this absolutism of “necessity” versus the contingency of “relevance” underwrites many of the assumptions at work in the realism versus metafiction debate.

⁸ Deleuze's late essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control” distinguishes between the individualism of a disciplinary society and the new “dividuals” that characterize the logic of a control society. Distinct from the individuating process by which “individuals” are made (a process individualism then conveniently forgets), *dividuation* foregrounds the parametric process of measurement that accompanies the separating out of dividual entities from a larger multitude. This process of dividuation thus accounts for the ways in which identity is inscribed within a multiplicity of environmental and situational contexts—the self a “continuous network” (6) rather than a stable construct. See Deleuze, (*October* 59, 1992) 3-7.

⁹ While both authors refer to European novelists in interview and essay accounts of their work, Brodkey referencing Proust and McElroy practitioners of the *nouveau roman* such as Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, the influence of James, Stein, and Faulkner is also acknowledged.

¹⁰ In his discussion of the work of Jean Ricardou, Brian McHale cites the critic's concept of “variable reality” in which “a supposedly ‘real’ representation is revealed to have been merely ‘virtual’—an illusion of secondary representation, a representation within the representation—or vice versa, a supposedly virtual representation is shown to have been ‘really real’ after all” (McHale 116). Proceeding from the latter perspective, my theory of allopoietics demonstrates that this “extroverted reflexivity” in David Herman's terms, proceeds at one additional remove beyond Ricardo's notion of inter- and intra-dimensional reflexivity. That is, extra-dimensional narration moves beyond the coterminous diegetic boundaries to incorporate an implied readership that reacts to the difficult effects of an enlarged text.

¹¹ See Richard Rhodes's definitive *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), where the author defines critical mass as “the volume of chain-reacting substance necessary to make the chain-reaction self-sustaining” (241). For a

more fully elaborated discussion of Pynchon's use of the "critical mass" metaphor in episode 24 of part 3, see chapter 11 ("Narrating Liberation") of Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (Athens: U of Georgia, 2013), 176-198.

¹² McElroy's concept owes more than a little of its mechanics to young Wyatt Gwyon's febrile condition in Part I of William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, about which the narrator muses:

Prolonged hours of wakefulness, when all he sought was sleep, might turn out to have been sleep when he waked: but most insupportable was the sensational affair which went something like this: consciousness, it seemed, was a succession of separate particles, being carried along on the surface of the deep and steady unconscious flow of life, of time itself, and in fainting, the particles of consciousness simply stopped, and the rest flowed on, until they were restored: but this was the stoppage, the entire disappearance of that deeper flow which left the particles of consciousness suspended, piling up, ready at any instant to shatter with nothing to support them. Still, at such times everything was in order, of shape and color to mass and distance, of minutes accomplishing hours by accumulation just as the clock itself stayed on the table where it was if only because it had been accumulating there for so long: that was the reassurance of weight (51).

¹³ The V-2 rocket's great innovation, and one of the novel's myriad technological fascinations, is to be faster than the speed of sound, hitting targets *before* its warning approach can be heard (the "screaming" of the book's opening lines). See *Gravity's Rainbow* (henceforth *GR*), for elaborations on this detail: 3; 24.

¹⁴ See Freer, McClintock & Miller, Herman & Weisenberger, Cowart, Witzling, and Mattessich.

¹⁵ One is reminded of Jack Green's *Fire the Bastards!* (1962). This self-published screed is directed at early reviewers of *The Recognitions* whom Green attacks for misunderstanding (and in some cases, not reading) Gaddis' 956-page novel. See O'Connell's "Fire the Bastards! The Great Defender of William Gaddis" (*The New Yorker*, Feb. 17, 2012).

¹⁶ See the conclusion ("Perpetual Interwar") to Paul K. Saint-Amour's *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 303-317, for a more fully elaborated discussion of the critic's calls Mendelson's "project of

aggrandizing” Pynchon’s novel at the expense of closely examining “the form and history of the encyclopedia” (204).

¹⁷ Burn’s argument draws on a range of primary and secondary sources including additional interpretations of encyclopedic narrative by Italo Calvino and Franco Moretti, general formulations of large-scale novels by Frederick Karl and Tom LeClair, and critical attacks on the deliberate difficulty of postmodern aesthetics by novelist-critics such as Jonathan Franzen with respect to fiction that conveys information overload. The core theme of Gaddis’s novels, Burn concludes, is the “collapse” rather than preservation of information—a theme that he argues is consistently focused on the limitations of encyclopedism. Though a well-supported historiography of the formal-epistemological links between encyclopedias and encyclopedic narratives, the cultural centrality of encyclopedic narrative in a national context is somewhat undersold in Burn’s account.

¹⁸ The analogous relationship between maximalism and encyclopedic narrative is also visible in the work of Gerhard Hoffmann, who explores the meaning of maximalism, particularly in the “late stage of postmodernism” (637). Focusing his analysis on William H. Gass’s *The Tunnel*, Robert Coover’s *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors’ Cut*, Harold Brodkey’s *The Runaway Soul*, and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, Hoffman’s critique begins in a negative trajectory: the contemporary works by two former titans of postmodern fiction have “depleted” the original strengths of this approach. In the case of Coover, excess is figured through its protagonist porn star’s exploits—a “multicoded” parody of heroic convention. Hoffman suggests that the overloaded ironizing of this convention through double and triple layering of satire itself becomes itself a tired convention. With respect to Gass, Hoffman implies that the author’s once-innovative contributions to fictional form might have outworn their welcome due to the novel’s thirty-year gestation period. Conversely, he praises Brodkey and Wallace for their massive achievements, a success that stems from the authors’ common use of multimodality and that parallels (albeit in a comparatively successful way) the excessive and belated qualities common to Coover and Gass. For Brodkey, “excess is the means of researching the mysteries of the human mind and soul in the ramifications of a person’s consciousness”(641)—a focus that is refracted through the author’s movement between mind, soul, and the events to which both are subject via the outside world. The mind in Brodkey is depicted as a “contained” and “bound,” but ceaselessly “pushing against the limits of consciousness” (641). This expansive investigation of interiority is at sharp odds with the external emphasis of Wallace’s novel, which attends to people, things and space equally in the pursuit of a fantastically complex and comic critique of late-twentieth century American life. Despite its extraordinarily dense and intricate structure, *Infinite Jest* is ultimately about human frailty and the assorted addictions that compose desire. Wallace’s definition of maximalism, Hoffman argues, is “pushing to further limits in order to try out and ‘complete’ aesthetic possibilities of complexities” (644).

¹⁹ Von Braun's status as a Nazi rocket scientist-turned-NASA aerospace engineer generates the epigraph for the novel, but as Steven Weisenberger points out in his magisterial *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, Pynchon omits several details of note.

²⁰ For an opposing perspective that delineates the novel's potential for political agency and activism in a notably idealistic vein, see Thomas Moore's monograph *The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987).

²¹ As we will see below in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this concentration on point of view in narrative terms is the ability to focalize.

²² I am indebted to Prince's emboldening piece, "Is R.D. Laing's Concept of Ontological Insecurity Applicable Beyond Schizophrenic Experience?" as both a useful gloss on *The Divided Self* and a solid defense for the extrapolation of Laing's theories in other contexts.

²³ References to "lips as palimpsests" (16), "poor human palimpsests" (51), and the visceral, occasionally "seminal" translation of meaning through bodily fluids "written" onto the surface of human bodies ("to write on them words of himself" 51) is a dominant chain of signification for Pynchon's interest in "relatedness" between narrator, characters, and reader. This tendency reaches a kind of crescendo in the *Kryptosam* vignette (72-73), a sequence in which, however improbably, seminal fluid acts as a kind of chemical bath/developing agent for the invisible ink that delivers one of the novel's many internecine coded messages.

²⁴ In a supremely ethical move, Pynchon implicates himself in this cottage industry of received ideas about capital H histories, going to great lengths to call attention to the historiographic implications of every historical scenario he undertakes to narrate. For example, in the celebrated Episode 19 (formidably explicated at chapter-length by Stefan Mattesich, in his monograph *Lines of Fight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon*), Pynchon plays with his own purposes in response to a slogan one of the chapter's characters sees on a wall: "AN ARMY OF LOVERS CAN BE BEATEN. These things appear on the walls of the Red districts in the course of the night. Nobody can track down author or painter for any of them, leading you to suspect they're one and the same. Enough to make you believe in a folk-consciousness. They are not slogans so much as texts, revealed in order to be thought about, expanded on, translated into action by the people..." (*GR* 157).

²⁵ Yet another teasing bit of self-reflexivity on the author's part—are we putting together a puzzle, or is this just another meaningless piece of a protagonist who will himself later become reduced to pieces and scattered?

²⁶ Of course, each of these volumes would be an invaluable aid to faithful readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* as well.

²⁷ See Borges' "On Rigor in Science" for a meditation on one-to-one relationships between cartography and actual space (*Dreamtigers*. Trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Austin: U of Texas P, 1964. 90)

²⁸ A preoccupying system of communication for Pynchon most prominently featured in his prior *The Crying of Lot 49*, "mail" is established in the novel's opening pages as a euphemism for the V-2 rocket's delivery of a death-dealing payload. See *GR* 3-4.

²⁹ Ercolino's tenets include length, the encyclopedic mode, dissonant chirality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrative omniscience, paranoid imagination, internal dialectic, internal semiocity, ethical commitment, and hybrid realism.

³⁰ Bill Brown's "Thing theory" supplies several useful helpful articles to support this approach. See the "Introduction" to *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, and his introduction to a *PMLA* special issue on print culture and the history of the book, "Textual Materialism."

³¹ For the implications topography holds for issues of racialization and liberatory cosmopolitan education (more of which will be figure in the Chapter four discussion), see the "Epilogue" to David Harvey's *Cosmopolitanism and Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 249-284.

³² Just a brief listing of these neologisms suggests a writer inventing new vocabularies to account for the unusual phenomena that occur within his created worlds: *smuggling*, *de-kidnapping*, *pan-vasectomy*, *Personatic Flow*, *placental city*, *neutraline equatics*, *vectoral muscle*, *Americanolysis*, *rankless field*, *Strictural Anthroponoia*, *Utmosis*, *Camouflage Contingency plan*, *gradient inclination*, and *radius self*. Each of these terms occupies a liminal space between the storyworld of which they are a part and the controlling intelligence that unfolds that world. This space, I go on to argue in *Women and Men*, represents McElroy's innovative contribution to narrative reflexivity.

³³ Though almost no McElroy book review avoids characterizing his work as difficult, an exemplary survey might include reviews by Garth Risk Hallberg, James Gibbon, Jonathon Walter, Andrew Essex, and Sven Birkerts among those that make "difficulty" the review's central thematic. Notably Essex is the only critic to make this quality an unambiguous virtue, writing (of McElroy's *Actress in the House*): "It is a novel of such astonishing complexity that it is almost unreadable—and I mean that as a compliment; see Essex, "The Complications" (*Village Voice*, June 3, 2003).

³⁴ See chapter 4 in John Johnston's *Information Multiplicity* for an expanded version of his article with the same title, again—a coinage from McElroy's own compositional method.

³⁵ See LeClair, *The Art of Excess*, 156, for the specific influences that inform McElroy's syntactic expansions.

³⁶ In what is now seen as the most sustained statement of purpose among his early writing, "Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts," McElroy explicitly acknowledges the influence of Martin Heidegger's classic essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" on his work, citing its conceptual imaginary of the "four-fold" as a critical feature in his debt.

³⁷ The 2010 eBook publication of *Women and Men's* excised novella *Preparations for Search* supplies a case in point for the way a maximalist novel's digital presence might allow for almost infinite expansion—in this case, nearly thirty years after its source text's publication. See McElroy, *Preparations for Search* (Westland, MI: Dzanc, 2012).

CHAPTER III

WORKS SITED: MOCK SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RESEARCH SPACE OF POSSIBLE WORLDS

Jorge Luis Borges's *Ficciones* (1944) opens with a critical prologue on the hubris of big books. Calling the tendency a "laborious and impoverishing extravagance," Borges challenges the wisdom of elaborating interminably "an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes" (15). The more efficient alternative, he proposes, would be a précis or summary that "pretends...these books already exist" but analyzes rather than approximates their expansive contours (Borges 15). True to form, Borges puts this theory into practice a few pages later when he introduces the fabricated forty-volume *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the collection's first story. Recounting an epistemological conspiracy by a "benevolent secret society" of philosophers whose speculative world gradually imposes itself on the real one, the author achieves Tlön's impossible logic via one key feature: the dissolution of generic boundaries separating criticism from fiction (Borges 31).

Specifically, Borges reimagines these boundaries as interactive spaces through which radically inclusive forms of narrative reflexivity become possible—a scalar sleight-of-hand encompassing even the reader's role when Bioy Casares (reader-surrogate and real-life friend of the author himself) cites the illusory text in question for perspective about this unusual discovery (*Ficciones* 22). Subtly complicating an increasingly imperceptible line between fact and its fictional counterpart, Casares's

misremembered aphorism eerily glosses the narrator's opening remark on the curious "conjunction"¹ that generated their mutual inquiry:

On the following day, Bioy telephoned me from Buenos Aires. He told me that he had in front of him the article on Uqbar, in Volume XLVI of the encyclopedia. It did not specify the name of the heresiarch, but it did note his doctrine, in words almost identical to the ones he had repeated to me, though, I would say, inferior from a literary point of view. He had remembered: 'Copulation and mirrors are abominable.' The text of the encyclopedia read: 'For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and extend it.' (Borges 18).

As a figure of invention embedded within (and so positioned against) an authoritative text, the suppressed novelty of Casares's "superior" variant here moves his would-be emphasis beyond epistemology to engage with the subject of identity itself. For while the passage's mimetic glimpse into infinity's "mirrored depths" suggests the ease with which an encyclopedia's closed circle of facts might be distorted, it equally valorizes fiction's imaginative challenge to any conceptually "contained" enterprise. Thus, the story's central tension—between scholarship's custodial mastery over an archive and authorship's subversive unmaking of it—emerges via assorted iterations of aesthetic size.

Ranging from a bogus entry's ability to sneak almost unnoticed into a voluminous but otherwise unremarkable *Britannica* reprint, to the growing awareness of a collective intellectual effort so "vast" its scope abolishes any trace of the individual part within a larger whole (*Ficciones* 17, 22), Borges's exemplary tale ostensibly constitutes a modest proposal for inexhaustibility amid an exhaustion² with available resources. And yet, what often goes overlooked in his cautious corrective to lengthy exegesis is the way its example conversely initiates a maximalist problematic as such. After all, in denigrating

big books, Borges simultaneously advertises their outsized impact—perhaps for the first time in a self-conscious context. This unintended consequence of protesting what would prove to be a salient preoccupation in the Argentine fabulist’s work of course echoes Tlön’s somewhat ominous ability to rhetorically redouble the reality that contains it. But even more provocatively, the paradox invites “us” (his readers off the page) to occupy its imaginary research spaces alongside the narrator, his research co-conspirator Casares, or any of the scores of Borgesian knowledge workers³ whose interpretive methods we might compare against our own. Whether branded a miniaturist poetics of “world-mastering” detail in short-form narrative contexts (McGurl, *The Program Era* 376, 379), or the “unfinished endless discourse” of genre-bending “critifictions” (Federman 48-49), Borges’s method thus anticipates the proto-scholarly impulses of all potential readers.

In response to the scalar implications of this influential technique in Borges, and, more directly, in the fiction of his American successors, my third chapter extends the practical utility of allopoiesis across the work of two authors whose novels consistently foreground the act of interpretation within their respective storyworlds. Demonstrating yet another variant of the allopoietic mode’s unusually extroverted form of narrative reflexivity, the literary labyrinths of Samuel R. Delany’s *The Mad Man* and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* project their fictional worlds at one additional diegetic remove through a complex oscillation between framing and embedded narratives. I argue that this dialectical movement between and among narrative levels emerges most acutely through the discourse of “mock scholarship,” a compositional conceit in which the intra-diegetic reception history of an art-object at story’s center replaces that object as the

work's primary emphasis. Generally but not exclusively confined to representational forms—paintings, poetry, novels, films, and scholarly writing about the subjects—these analytical artifacts are often subordinated to the interpretive lenses that seek to define them. Accordingly, these works complicate the traditional separation of primary textual product from secondary critical process by inverting real-world academic protocols—a strategic scaffolding of varied intra-analytical approaches within the reflexive parameters of a classic technique: the *mise en abyme* or “mirror in the text.”

Defined as “any aspect enclosed within a work that shares a similarity with the work that contains it,” this “optical illusion,” in Lucien Dällenbach’s patient assessment, includes two parts: “approximation” and “twinning” (8-10). Approximation refers to the “reciprocity of contemplation” that occurs, however explicit or oblique, when formal duplication appears within the work—whether in the form of *ekphrasis* (a painting or artwork described at length), a play within a play, film within a film, or some other creative process that comments on the work framing it (Dällenbach 11). Similarly, “twinning” intensifies this arrangement by coordinating and sustaining “an analogy between the situation of the character and that of the narrator [or] between the thematic content of the main story and that of the story contained within it” (Dällenbach 18). Read together, the two concepts anticipate the reader’s own meaning-making activity in and around the text: “approximating” the object while “twinning” the intellectual work that takes its measure.

Raymond Federman’s “critifictional” method is here instructive, for, in positioning Borges’s cross-generic hybrid from the other side of the disciplinary

interface, Federman illustrates the facility with which a scholar-author (rather than an author-as-fabricator of faux-scholarship) might also freely dismantle and reassemble the tools of his trade via the playful rejection of arbitrary categories. Such a vantage point also considers the extent to which criticism is equally susceptible to fictional discourses, not to mention the varieties of productive dialogue such an overlap elicits when confronted by “a narrative that contains its own theory and even its own criticism” (Federman 31). With this dynamic in mind, the critic asserts that because literary language is “always in excess of itself,” it must “invent new rules...of restrain[t] and constrain[t]...” to preserve its generic legibility (Federman 63). Celebrating this sense of play, albeit within the formal parameters of academic criticism, Brian McHale situates mock scholarship in the tradition of academic satire. This tradition, far older than the Borgesian variant seen above, draws upon a lineage that includes François Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1571), Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1735), James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), to name a few titles marked by faux-academic frameworks. Renowned for its seamless synthesis of both easily verifiable and blatantly fabricated critical material from numerous fields, forms, and genres, the form also persists across contemporary examples, including works that range from “Stanislaw Lem’s ‘mock book reviews’ to the ‘mock scientific reports’ of Prynne, Perec, and Mathews to the mock encyclopedias of Milorad Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars*” (McHale, *The Obligation of the Difficult Whole* 122). This playfully deceptive conceit unsurprisingly proliferates amidst the late twentieth

century's frequently skeptical turn, with McHale's catalog conspicuously eliding postwar American literature's most noteworthy mock scholarly fiction—Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*—having already given it pride of place in the critic's earlier study, *Postmodernist Fiction*, due to its unusual balance of “narratorial unreliability” and “epistemological uncertainty” (18).

As an originary model for postwar American mock scholarly practice, Nabokov's “limit-text between modernism and postmodernism” (McHale, *Postmodernist* 18) shares with Delany and Danielewski's novels the temporary ability to supplant the textual artifact with the critical culture and apparatus that encloses it. Indebted to this influential example, both authors incorporate fictive scholarship throughout their respective diegeses by using a deliberate excess of information—a discursive feature that overwhelms in order to both direct and misdirect reader interpretation. The resulting “poetics of excess” again underwrites an aesthetic common to the so-called *systems novel*, the genre Tom LeClair associates with the “dominant strategy of overload” as a crucial tenet in postmodern fiction (*The Art of Excess* 14). Overload, LeClair explains, “...results when the rate of information becomes too high for the receiver to process, to sort and integrate within his operative categories” (14). In place of merely flooding its own structure with a surfeit of fictional references, however, mock scholarship in a maximalist context encourages rather than estranges the reader's participation by making its bibliographic details the very fabric of the novel in question.

Following this logic, my chapter expands upon its predecessor's radical reconceptualizing of the self as a dividuated or “saturated” phenomenon in earlier

maximalist metafiction by examining the surrounding discursive spaces that shape this plurality. That is, while I previously argued for the notion that identities analyzed at a large enough scale are revealed to be multiple rather than singular phenomena, the third chapter pushes this claim even farther in its exploration of the knowledge systems by which those collective identities self-identify given an enlarged textual scale. With this premise at stake, the study closely examines how both Delany and Danielewski pursue their respective poetics of excess through the narrative knowledge work that often accompanies self-knowledge and self-definition. To this end, my critical reading method herein relies on scholarship related to the literary appropriation of “possible-worlds theory.” A cross-disciplinary subset of modal realism⁴ within analytic philosophy, “possible worlds” or “fictional worlds” theory translates abstractions of possibility into a concretization of textual detail (the relative material density of the list of sentences representing the world in question).

Narrative fictional worlds are composed of facts and gaps, a continuum shaped by the relative completeness and incompleteness of a world’s total construction. Lubomír Doležel characterizes these degrees of completeness as “texture,” or “the exact form of expression” or “original wording in which [a] motif appears in the literary text” (*Heterocosmica* 35-36). A text’s “density” or excessive volume of detail is generated by the narrative’s “intensional function,” or the “global regularity of texture that affects the macrostructuring of the fictional world” (Doležel, “Fictional Worlds” 9). The critic clarifies the purpose this intensional function serves with the following elaboration:

If we observe in a text a global regularity that controls the arrangement of zero texture, implicit texture, and explicit texture, then we will say that a “density function” operates in that text. It affects the structuring of the corresponding fictional world due to the fact that explicit texture constructs determinate fictional facts, implicit texture constructs indeterminate facts, and zero texture creates gaps. This macrostructuring—the distribution of gaps and of indeterminate and determinate facts—will be called the “world’s saturation” (“Fictional Worlds” 9).

The explicit texture’s solid core of fictional facts generally supplies the narrative’s overarching material density; as Doležel explains, “The core forms the world’s macrostructure in association with domains of fuzzy indeterminacy and diffused emptiness (“Fictional Worlds” 9). Furthermore, in conceptualizing implicit texture as a constructed storehouse of fictional facts that all readers might use to construct a fictional world, Doležel calls its open field of potentials the “fictional encyclopedia”: a concept that connotes the reader’s ongoing amassment and networking of details, patterns, themes, and motifs within the story world (*Heterocosmica* 176). This internalized archival process, the critic asserts, is so crucial that “all our interpretive decisions and the entire reconstruction of the fictional world are guided by this cognitive resource” (“Fictional Worlds” 8).

Typically, the creation of fictional worlds or “worldedness” is predicated on what need not be said—the “proliferation of intentionlessness” that Eric Hayot has recently likened to “what [the work] knows most deeply, and thus says least” (50). In contrast, a given possible world generated by mock scholarship yearns for instantiation—an explicitly literalizing “mechanism for the generation and exhibition of knowledge about itself as a totality” but with the background or offstage compositional operations restored via the text’s volumetric heightening of “metadiegetic amplitude” (Hayot 50, 59). A

metonymy for scale,⁵ this tension between the figurative and literal raises a series of questions: namely, how do *The Mad Man* and *House of Leaves* contribute to a fictional tradition of possible scholarly worlds by calling into reflexive awareness the ways in which their authors' respective poetics of excess construct the novel's various textural levels? Does each author's excessive scaffolding of secondary critical material alter one's understanding of the way a fictional text gives rise to a fictional world? More precisely, do the features of implicitness—the literary work's relative textural density from saturation to incompleteness that alternately “fills” and “empties out” a fictional world—function differently in both texts? Is it self-canceling for a text with an excessive, perhaps “encyclopedic” narrative strategy⁶ to second-guess the “fictional encyclopedia” hardwired into narrative convention? Indeed, can a text ever truly lose its sense of implicitness?

By calling attention to more austere executed representations of reality, mock scholarly fictions can be seen as maps of imaginative potentiality that provide an important conduit between a poetics of excess and the possible worlds this aesthetic pushes to their logical limit. Following chapter two's claim that the fictional worlds of maximalist novels literalize the fictional texts that build them—the authors examined in my third chapter construct their mock scholarly frameworks for a purpose beyond the mere realization of mass through a set of purely accretive or aggregative principles. Rather, these literary labyrinths deploy the allopoietic mode for an intensely immersive acknowledgment of the reader's experience—at once micromanaging the interpretive process while subtly fueling its expectations.

Multiplicity and “the Mock Scholarly”: The Literary Labyrinths of Delany and Danielewski

Manuel DeLanda suggests in his elegant history of complex systems that the controlling tension between the implicit and explicit is underwritten by a key distinction separating the two prominent forms of social ontology. On the one hand, a totality depends upon the “organismic metaphor” that compares the social structure with the human body. This orientation connects each constituent part of a living institution through a relation of interiority: “...just as bodily organs work together for the organism as a whole,” he explains, “so the function of [these] institutions is to work in harmony for the benefit of society” (8-9). Referring to its original Hegelian sense, DeLanda explains, the organic model for social totalities always operates as a closed conceptual system driven by an interdependence between part and whole that he calls “relations of interiority” (9). Free from the “emergent properties” that might compromise the metaphor’s vision of a coherent unity, these relations of interiority depend upon the baseline assumption that any whole can be reduced to the sum of its parts. In turn, the relations between those parts can only ever compose the totality that governs them.

But what this assumption invariably ignores, DeLanda explains, are the complex mechanisms of emergence that govern these relations—mechanisms irreducible to the parts they guide. By contrast, these mechanisms are motivated by their “capacities to interact” with other entities, and thus challenge the organic form of totality through a contrasting form, the “assemblage” model proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (DeLanda 10). A dramatic departure from the organismic metaphor, DeLanda indicates that the concept operates under “relations of exteriority,” in which their component parts

are not defined by the ability to conform to a preconceived whole but instead by the exercise of their capacities—a dialectic predicated on the “interaction between parts” rather than the realization of a totality (11).

This philosophical distinction again follows my second chapter’s reliance on positive ontology in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, with a particular emphasis on the way it has influenced Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s revision of the principle of individuation. Likewise, this third chapter’s critical assumption relies on a fundamental premise in the former critics’ work. “Multiplicity,” Jonathan Roffe contends, “is arguably Deleuze’s most important concept,” a governing assumption in stark opposition to the organic totality that imagines the world in an ultimately reconcilable part-whole arrangement. That is, by the logic of Deleuze’s counter-model the very possibility of the organismic metaphor’s coordinating premises are purely illusory, for—as Roffe goes on to clarify—“Multiplicities are not parts of a greater whole that have been fragmented, and they cannot be considered manifold expressions of a single concept or transcendent unity” (Parr 176). Moreover, DeLanda identifies multiplicity as an important index of scalarity, specifically defining it as “a solution to the micro-macro problem in terms of a multiplicity of social entities operating at intermediate levels of scale” (6). This valence prefigures Timothy Clark’s recent discussion of scale in a non-cartographic context, in which scalarity is predicated on the “jumps and discontinuities of...scale effects” beyond the usual geographic connotations that govern representations of scale (149).

Analogous to DeLanda’s positing of them as “extensive properties” (6), these relations of exteriority posit the assemblage for the purposes of literary fiction as a form

of multiplicity that also extends to the book-as-assemblage via a premise Deleuze and Guattari once differentiated by two parallel types:

A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world-tree. This is the classical book as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 5).

Reflecting their critique of an “arborescent” schema in the history of western philosophy by which knowledge becomes expressed as a hierarchical, tree-like structure, Deleuze and Guattari offer the “rhizome,” in which thought is more aptly represented by a networked concatenation of root structures, radically open, chaotic, and free. It is this “second figure of the book,” they assert, “to which...modernity pays willing allegiance” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 5).

The rhizomatic format to which this multiplicity gives rise describes precisely the textural saturation in chapter two’s examination of the allodiegetic narrative strategy commonly referred to as “encyclopedism,” with its rich legacy in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction and particularly among writers associated with postmodern tradition. Less prevalent, however, are literary works that surpass mere simulation regarding the reality of academic knowledge work to actually invoke (as they enlist) the audience’s time and intellectual energy in this labor. Thus, Delany and Danielewski’s deft use of mock scholarly inquiry in a maximalist context provides an audacious reboot of their earlier “miniaturist” precursors (whether Borges, Manganelli, Calvino, or Barthelme),⁷ albeit scaled to epic proportions. Pushed just a bit farther in the direction of practicality, a

perpetually “unfinished,” seemingly “endless” discourse arguably invites the cross-disciplinary emphasis of a theorist outside literary studies. Part-retort to Borges’s miniaturist *cri de coeur* in *Ficciones* “Prologue,” part-homage to Federman’s categorical latitude, my analysis herein undertakes an allopoietical reversal on the governing logic of mock scholarly practice by drawing on two approaches from “actual” academic research models. Fitting for two maximalist narratives that invent sizable archives of both factual and fictitious secondary critical material, these two models acknowledge the invisible moves by which scholarly knowledge production is created.

The first, through which I examine Samuel R. Delany’s academic murder mystery and queer polemic *The Mad Man*, is John Swales’s influential “CARS Model” of research introductions. Swales’s system, which stands for “Create a Research Space,” provides a useful heuristic for demonstrating Delany’s artful mapping of assorted polemical goals within a recognizably institutional format. CARS is structured via three moves: “Establishing a Territory,” “Establishing a Niche,” and “Occupying a Niche.” These moves are then subdivided into smaller steps, each characteristic of a critical part of the novel’s erotically charged but oddly prosaic plot. This disciplinary standard proves to be the most subversive element in an anti-transgressive work whose surreally graphic sexual content is narrated without the slightest hint of shock or revulsion. In fact, I contend that Delany’s allodiegetic appropriation of academic discourse conventions—in juxtaposition with *The Mad Man*’s pornographic “field research” passages—creates the conditions for a heteronormative audience to confront its ideological limitations with respect to, initially, tolerance, and finally, acceptance and advocacy.

The second model expands on Swales's work to consider the multiplicity of research *spaces* that open for new forms of knowledge production in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Compositionist Kathleen Yancey reconfigures Swales's model as a practice that takes place in "multiple sites—a metaphorical space, a large disciplinary space, a smaller subdisciplinary space, a material space, and increasingly, especially in the twenty-first century—an electronic space" (160). Furthermore, Yancey divides these sites into four interrelated practices, updating the CARS model with the handier referent *fill-in-the-blank spatiality*, which reconsiders the model from other disciplines. Next, she proposes *research-by-way-of-iconic-space*, a familiar academic research strategy that situates an influential precursor's work "relative to [one's own] as a means of claiming space" (160). Following the iconic model, Yancey "divides the 'research space' among camps," (160), the notion of *research-as-placement-within-dichotomous space* that, in effect, separates the influential ideas of a prior scholar or scholars into oppositional factions. Finally, *research within contextual space*, encourages "the researcher to look ahead to identify the possible contexts within which the research might appear and use that multiplicity as a means of exigence and interpretation both" (Yancey 160).

Though not previously recognized as "mock scholarly" works in earlier critical accounts, *The Mad Man* and *House of Leaves* nevertheless embody the form's excessive contours through their maze-like appropriation of the *mise en abyme* model—a controlling technology for mock scholarly practice. On the one hand, *The Mad Man*'s formal operations might be seen as an outgrowth of the "mock scholarly prefaces and appendixes of Delany's own *Neverjon* series," one of the noteworthy examples Brian

McHale discusses in his survey of the postmodern long poem, *The Obligation of the Difficult Whole* (122). On the other hand, however, its complex status as both a brainy thriller and thinly veiled memoir of the unfolding AIDS crisis from the early 1980s to mid-90s, complicate its comparison with Delany's fantasy series. Rather, the novel's management of academic discourses is more conventionally guided by a realist sensibility in its narration through the perspective of one obsessively committed narrator whose erotic single-mindedness of purpose drives his scholarly project forward.

From this latter perspective, *The Mad Man* refers to two works—the novel we are reading, and an identically titled diegetic textual object at story's center (à la Borges). As the unfinished novel manuscript of murdered philosopher Timothy Hasler, this duplicated text's meaning and origins supply the primal core of graduate student John Marr's murky investigation, and so realizes that “reciprocity of contemplation” between the storyworld's text and the novel we are reading in which it is framed. Since *The Mad Man*'s structure signals the *mise en abyme*'s two corollary features of approximation and twinning, these components—as with most mock scholarly “mirrors in the text”—are offered as the story's dominant hermeneutic. After Borges's considerable contribution, this hermeneutic teaches readers how to understand Hasler's work and life through an interpretive key that only he, and/or a sympathetic fellow traveler, can provide. Obviously, *The Mad Man*'s most conspicuous feature, and certainly its dominant controversy, is the manner in which Marr's graphic and often fantastic *longueurs* into sexual obsession arguably complement rather than compromise its elaborate mock scholarly framework. And yet, this ostensibly shocking material gives *The Mad Man* its

ethical and emotional center despite the digressive quality its excessive sexual passages might suggest. Narrated in the relaxed, uninhibited tone of one expressing a healthy sexual curiosity, the novel's excess means to subvert sexual mores *without* necessarily courting transgression—the prevailing wisdom of earlier scholarship on Delany's pornographic fiction notwithstanding.

In her analysis of Delany's earlier *Hogg* (written 1969, published 1995) for example, Kathryn Hume terms the author's pornographic works "aggressive fictions," in which the liberatory zeal of radical individualism overrides all other community considerations outside the self-interested, pleasure-seeking protagonists featured in-text (133). This blind self-interest also includes the implicit victimization such an unfettered pursuit of personal freedom might entail for more vulnerable segments of society, hence the work's debased reputation along these lines. In contrast with the blatantly predatory, dystopian world of Delany's first foray into pornography however, *The Mad Man's* "pornotopic" agenda operates under a decidedly different operating logic. To support this unusual technique, Delany both imagines and ultimately provides (in a detailed study on rates of HIV seroconversion appended to the novel's conclusion) an even larger body of actual scholarship surrounding Marr's dense interlayering of fictive scholarly material. In this way, *The Mad Man* presents an important and unexplored variant of allopoiesis, amplifying the smaller-scale labyrinths of the Borgesian encyclopedic imaginary through a more finely tuned critical awareness regarding the way an individual reader's threshold for sexual difference affects the boundaries he or she constructs between a personal and professional life.

The *mise en abyme* ably mimics these interface effects, suggesting a close correspondence between the book-as-assemblage and the labyrinth-form—a spatial representation of the concept’s interanimating complexities that takes two divergent paths: the “unicursal” and the “multicursal.” As Penelope Reed Doob indicates in her foundational work *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, the *unicursal* labyrinth propounds a single, interminable route that bends and twists in on itself toward one central goal. This “endurance model” of labyrinthicity stands in stark contrast with its “ventilated” counterpart; indeed, the *multicursal* labyrinth forces those entrapped to select from a number of possible choices via its “chaotic model” of labyrinthicity. Exhibiting the former variant, Hasler’s *The Mad Man* offers another, perhaps heightened, version of the novel the reader holds in his or her hands; however, its placement prior to and thus, technically, “outside of” its host story’s diegetic boundaries puts the texts in a seemingly dialectical arrangement. At odds with each other in much the same way Hasler’s biography and scholarship might be interpreted in diverse ways by different orientations within the academic community, these disparate elements constitute the means by which readers alternately negotiate and navigate *The Mad Man*’s unicursal structure.

House of Leaves complicates Delany’s intersection of countervailing critical assumptions through the “multicursal” labyrinth form, a formal emphasis that ups the stakes considerably relative to the assorted levels presented by Delany’s epic. With a textual object at book’s center that likely does not exist, the novel’s copious range of real and imaginary references are mobilized to quickly exhaust all interpretive options before

awareness about the ruse is even allowed to set in. Thus, as my discussion contends, the reader is best served by surveying, rather than closely reading, its manifold levels. My allopoietical approach follows Yancey's method in its reluctance to treat the entire text to comprehensive interpretation—choosing to instead emphasize how the novel's narrative density function configures its various scholarly "research spaces," a paradigm that reads mock scholarly practice through real-world composition theory. Before contextualizing Danielewski's various possible scholarly worlds, however, one must first canvass the various ways in which these worlds are conceptualized: the novel's richly conceived, often hilariously irreverent tour through the life of a scholar *malgré lui*.

Featuring a terrifying discovery by Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Will Navidson and his family following a short vacation, the novel's primary level details the sudden appearance of a mysterious door in the family living room through which Navidson locates an endless labyrinth⁸ within the structure of the house. Purportedly captured on film, the discovery engenders a second level (and a second discovery) by one Johnny Truant, who stumbles across a lengthy excursus on the Navidson film by blind independent scholar Zampanò, entitled *The Navidson Record*. Zampanò's work is concerned (at the categorical level) with fictitious material only pertinent to the story-world: mock scholarly monographs, journal articles, popular press human interest stories, etc., that comment directly on *The Navidson Record*. Consequently, Truant's research intensifies the novel's density function via his glosses on actual texts, not limited purely to titles, but also editions, translations, and assorted errata utilized by the blind scholar in his variorum account of *The Navidson Record*. These secondary and tertiary levels are

better apprehended through the text's use of footnotes, differentiated via font by the multiple editors who enlist them: Zampanò using Times New Roman; Johnny Truant, who discovers Zampanò's work—*Courier*; and a group of nameless editors who curate the missing Johnny's work—*Bookman*. Finally, the works of the impersonal "Editors" who gloss Johnny's text is blandly "directional" (e.g., "see Index"), pointing the reader to other parts of the book we are reading—*House of Leaves*—which may or may not be the same *House of Leaves* captured in-text (513).

Although indebted to previous criticism of the novel (most prominently the work of Katherine Hayles, of which more will be mentioned below) and certainly in regular conversation with its concerns, my analysis departs from existing studies of *House of Leaves* to examine the novel's structural parameters beyond the popular multi- and intermedial purview. The disciplinary lenses of new media and hypertext studies has produced some admittedly fascinating scholarship; however, its definition of materiality is notably distinct from the way I use it here in an attempt to move "beyond the manuscript and the book...to expand the ways of locating physical detail in a sign system"—a practice Bill Brown refers to as "textual materialism" (25). Because a great deal of this scholarship focuses solely on the typo- or topographical element of the literary text—the surface or "surficial"⁹ play at work in *House of Leaves* for instance—Brown has also previously directed extensive critical attention to the "objectual" content *within* a given narrative, as well as how this content's presence (and absence) affects and is affected by narrative form.¹⁰ Thus, where a critic like Mark B.N. Hansen would assert that "...the referential impossibility [in *House of Leaves*] is not narrative based and

epistemologically focused so much as it is *material*: at bottom [stemming] from an incompatibility between the ‘topo-logic’ of digital processing and the phenomenal dimension of human experience” (607, emphasis added), I respectfully dissent with this terminologically short-sighted formulation to adopt Hayles’s more dialectical conception: “Materiality...emerges from the interplay between physical attributes and semiotic components” (790).

In the general sense, then, these allopoietical analyses explore the subject of materiality in a narrative context, asking in what ways possible worlds theory might supply the necessary critical vocabulary toward better understanding the scope and depth of both Delany and Danielewski’s ambitious projects. While numerous critics have made passing mention of the authors’ haphazard admixture of both actual and fictive secondary critical materials,¹¹ no study has yet accorded it central importance, nor has anyone explored its innovations on existing traditions of possible scholarly worlds¹² in fiction through a narratological lens. To these overlooked subjects, my study now turns.

Samuel R. Delany’s Paraliterary Passages

Paraliterature describes popular or genre fictions that lie outside accepted canonical judgments about what constitutes literary discourse but that nevertheless seek to explore the kinds of socially and intellectually demanding themes associated with high culture forms. Of course, this center-margin arrangement in postmodern theory provides the ground upon which the high-low cultural distinction has been widely debated, with genre a critical catalyst for many of its clashes. Given his willingness to ignore this distinction (as well as the generic markers that define it), Delany’s work in two deeply

contested sites of this conversation can hardly be considered overly “categorical.” Rather, as chosen vehicles for creative expression, Delany’s use of science fiction and pornography manages to serve the devotedly marginal or underground readerships each form attracts while exemplifying the author’s deep commitment to transforming the conventions upon which those audiences depend.

This transformative impulse arguably begets what Fredric Jameson has called “a new discourse,” which “works hard to assimilate the ‘primary text’ (formerly called Literature) into its own substance, transcoding its elements, foregrounding all the echoes and analogies, sometimes even borrowing the stylistic features of the illustration in order to forge the neologisms” (*Postmodernism* 103). Against the more commonly used term “intertextuality,” these inspired borrowings Jameson likens to the conceptual “wrapping” that informs arguments about the false dichotomy between text and context, thus challenging an epistemological imaginary whereby the text is always a hermetically sealed interior and context provides a potentially unending external totality to its contained counterpart. “Wrapping” conversely inverts this hierarchical juxtaposition and so sets the theoretical conditions for mock scholarship’s emergence as a form of paraliterary play in its own right. Indeed, Jameson singles out Delany’s oeuvre in particular as emblematic of the tendency to “[draw] the terminological fragments of theoretical discourse back into their own official ‘literary production’ and leave them embedded there, like fossils in stratified remains or the outlines of some atomized body in a future Pompeii” (*Postmodernism* 103).

It follows then that the paraliterary's subversive appeal, as Delany has indicated elsewhere, lies in the ability to sneak a challenging subtext in under the radar of respectability—accessible art providing a low-stakes context where serious engagement is rarely expected.¹³ The former being the paraliterary genre by which the writer would make his name, science fiction has often been thought to provide a kind of subterfuge for Delany's early experiments in the use of sexually explicit material, with his epic masterpiece *Dhalgren* (1975) offering the first of these engagements. And yet the historical record reveals pornography to be far from a marginal concern in Delany's work, its outlaw allure providing a resilient home throughout his career for many of the author's prominent themes constellating around race, class, gender, sexuality, and the way these components both control and are controlled by social space. Significantly, the paraliterary can also be seen to frame another enduring critical construct in Delany's work: the author's notion of "paraspace." Hypothesized in her analysis of *Dhalgren*, for example, Emily Apter defines paraspace as "a life-world of effaced nationalism, blunted characters, and psychic extremes," a description that might also apply to *The Mad Man's* harrowing account of homelessness (232). This lateral emphasis, in which the marginal coordinates of national space are repositioned as central, realigns the author's sociospatial preoccupations with his metatextual ones.

Both generic and spatial, Delany's pornography continues to attract a fair amount of attention to the septuagenarian writer's oeuvre in its own right, especially as it comprises the lion's share of this final phase of his career in recent works such as *Phallos* (2004), *Dark Reflections* (2007), and the nearly 900-page *Through the Valley of the Nest*

of Spiders (2012). As Robert Reid-Pharr relates in a recent afterword to *Phallos*, Delany's much-revised pornotopic work in development since the 1970s, *The Mad Man* is part of a significant subset within the author's oeuvre, "demonstrat[ing] Delany's interest in what one might call the beastliness of human sexuality, the ways that our sexual desires and practices represent not only our need for affection and companionship but also an unquenchable fascination with violence and degradation" (129). And beyond Delany's own oeuvre, *The Mad Man* notably joins the restless search for community that informs other postwar American gay novels published between the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the first appearance of AIDS in 1981. Superficially echoing other fact-fiction hybrids such as John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw*, Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, and Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (all published in 1977-78, the year Delany's novel begins), *The Mad Man* avoids both the tendency to alternately satirize or rhapsodize a subculture in flux (Kramer and Holleran for the former, Rechy and White for the latter). Instead, Delany recasts the often ambivalent catalog of liberatory sexuality common to his peer novels through an ebullient, Whitmanian register of spirited "fellow-feeling" that refuses to apologize for its behavior while at the same time rejecting literary pornography's coldly taxonomic origins in the work of Sade, Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski. Despite the daring level of explicit detail offered by their authors, in each of *The Mad Man's* peer works largely anonymous sexual encounters between men is featured along a dramatic arc characterized by fear, desperation, self-loathing, and abandonment. With no shared intimacy supported by an American society that recognizes this behavior as perversion (or worse, criminal),

the relationships depicted in these novels are made up of equal parts desire and despair, as the fleeting and ephemeral flattens into an obsession with the figural and the quantifiable.

Rechy's second novel, *Numbers* is exemplary in this regard, with Texas native Johnny Rio hoping (in a competitive wager with himself) to exceed his previous personal best amidst the sexual hunting grounds of Greater Los Angeles. As its title indicates, the political promise of Rechy's debut *City of Night*, with its itinerant hustlers constellating an ever-shifting but boldly uncompromising vision of emergent queer America, has, in a mere four years, devolved into little more than a game of bean-counting—the novel's faceless sequence of conquests a series of notches carved into the protagonist's belt. To be sure, *Numbers* illustrates how easily the mindless juvenilia of "counting" one's sexual partners can displace the dream of "being counted" by a society indifferent to the exigencies of early gay liberation. Rechy's numerical motif receives a chillingly Malthusian turn in Kramer's *Faggots* via an opening passage that foreshadows the extraordinary loss of life during the AIDS epidemic. Specifically, the future founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis and author of *The Normal Heart* begins his moving stand against promiscuity with a comic census that reflects the novel's tough love even as it inadvertently prefigures the demographic that would suffer the largest losses in the early battle against the disease:

There are 2,556,596 faggots in the New York City area. The largest number, 983,919, live in Manhattan. 186,991 live in Queens, or just across the river. 181,236 live in Brooklyn and 180,009 live in the Bronx. 2,469 live on Staten Island, substantiating that old theory that faggots don't like to travel or don't like to live on small islands, depending on which old theory you've heard and/ or want

substantiated. Westchester and Dutchess Counties, together with that part of New Jersey which is really suburban New York, hold approximately 297,852, though this figure may be a bit low. Long Island, or that which is beyond Queens, at last count numbered 211,910. (This goes all the way to Montauk, remember.) Suburban Connecticut (not primarily of concern here, nor for that matter are suburban New Jersey or suburban New York— but you might as well have the advantage of all the statistics, since they were exhaustively collected). (3-4)

Here, Kramer's cynically reflexive logic extends the theme of exhaustive collection begun in Rechy's restless oeuvre through the many sexual vignettes narrated within period novels. But where Rechy, Kramer, and other authors of this milieu invest their narrator's desires with palpable dread, Delany casually drops a protagonist into roughly the same period (and beyond) without any of the same hang-ups or issues. Rejecting the premonition that gay life will never flourish free from guilt and recrimination due to the alleged self-loathing it might inspire (Rechy) or the ethical limitations it might present for true community (Kramer), what separates Delany from these authors is the refreshing lack of dread with which he narrates the erotic lives of his characters. By contrast, this narrative component is sublimated through the novel's mock scholarly interface where the search for lasting instead of fleeting contact shapes the novel's sources of the self.¹⁴

The plot is deceptively simple. *The Mad Man* unfolds nearly two decades in the life of John Marr, a philosophy graduate student whose investigation into the sordid events surrounding epistemologist Timothy Hasler's untimely death inspires his own emergent queer identity. Cut tragically short in a mysterious West Village gay bar stabbing, Hasler's brilliant career as a rising star in the analytic tradition leaves behind a considerable corpus of unpublished material, including correspondence, partial manuscripts, and miscellaneous private writings. Drawing upon this archive, Marr's

research initially aims to be the tipping point in a recovery project his faculty advisor and fellow Hasler enthusiast Irving Mossman hopes will establish “Hasler Studies” as a tenable area of specialization. But when the young scholar’s attentions turn to aspects of Hasler’s sexual history, his mentor’s planned division of labor is dramatically altered by a confluence of personal and professional factors (Delany, *The Mad Man* 7, 22).

Unsurprisingly, Mossman’s original goal of writing the definitive Hasler biography abruptly ceases when he discovers diaries that explicitly detail the late philosopher’s idiosyncratic sex practices. These paraphilias range from deliberately unclean fetish-play¹⁵ with homeless men in public parks to bizarre, bestial fantasies involving a griffin-like creature with bull’s head and insect wings. Related in a letter to his advisee, Mossman’s sudden discomfort also betrays his own latent homophobia—a reaction that only intensifies when Marr is himself casually outed by fellow students at their fairly conservative institution. His promotion clock ticking, Mossman’s paranoia about the project’s negative impact on his academic reputation leads him to abandon work on Hasler indefinitely.

But at the very moment this collaboration is jeopardized, Marr feels unexpectedly liberated by its likely collapse. Deepening his commitment to the study via a subsequent move to New York City, Marr calls this new independence “a kind of beginning for me” and even rents an apartment in the building that housed Hasler’s last known address (Delany, *The Mad Man* 18). Now, literally occupying his subject’s social space, Marr redoubles his efforts with a strategic difference; that is, in order to understand the entirety of Hasler’s achievement, this perpetual student seeks to inhabit the man’s milieu entirely.

Therefore, Marr's *modus operandi* includes the enthusiastic exploration and adoption of Hasler's decidedly outré erotic preferences as a kind of informal field research. Leaving seemingly no stone unturned in the late philosopher's carnal repertoire (and then some), what follows is John Marr's fifteen-year record of sexual decadence as personal discovery.

“Publish-or-Perish”: *The Mad Man*

You read his work; you study it; you even teach it—and *you* decide if, within the systems of the world, that work is of major importance or not. If you decide it is, you write your book, and your essays, and your articles, and your lectures—in which you *say* that. You write them because *you* believe in the work. You don't spend all your time looking around you, counting how many other people are saying this stuff is great—or not saying it. You don't keep counting the footnotes in which the name appears, wondering if you should abandon the project because there aren't as many this year as last.

- Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (64)

As I proposed earlier in this chapter, the author's evocation of Marr's thesis project neatly approximates John Swales's CARS research model, in effect “Creating a Research Space” through his elaborate mock scholarly ruse. Indeed, Delany unconsciously mimics Swales's model by “claiming centrality” (Swales 140) through both novelty and exigency: two key rhetorical conventions Delany and Marr invokes in order to inform readers of Hasler's important contributions. That impressive list, he explains, comprises multiple innovations in modal logic, with contributions that include “sixteen refereed articles,” seven reviews, groundbreaking monograph *Pascal, Nietzsche, Peirce*, and a collection entitled *Formal Conjunctions/Informal Disjunctions (The Mad*

Man 10). With nearly all of this material written in Hasler's late teens and early twenties, Marr contends that the philosopher's works were years ahead of their time; this claim he substantiates with a reference to the advent of so-called "Hasler grammars"¹⁶ in the discipline of natural language philosophy.

Accordingly, Marr's rhetoric creates the conditions for both the philosopher's critical importance (in Swales's terms, "establishing a territory" within a nascent subfield) and Marr's own indispensability as Hasler's definitive interpreter: "establishing a niche" (Swales 148). This perverse twist on the academic adage that one becomes what one studies receives a literal turn with Marr's subsequent relocation to Manhattan and earnest reenactment of Hasler's lifestyle, completing Swales's triad of "moves" as the student literally "occupies a niche" (159) via the slow subsumption of his own identity to that of the deceased. Delany frames this movement structurally with three key paratexts: a "Disclaimer" and a "Proem" that open the novel, and an "Appendix" that, in closing the novel, provides the starkest context for its sociopolitical agenda. Originally the preamble or preface to an epic poem, a "proem" establishes a given work's theme, structure, setting, conflict, and/or imagery in a condensed format. Similarly, this formal feature might announce the poem's central argument—for example, the romantic rationale for the *Decameron*'s proposed one hundred tales, or the detailed account of Satan's fall from grace that opens *Paradise Lost*. A creative departure from this tradition, *The Mad Man* effectively divides the convention's dual objective between its two introductory sections: the larger novel's sexually animalistic imagery is previewed in the "Proem's" bestial tableau while Delany confines his polemical goals to the "Disclaimer."

Echoing the prefatory matter of earlier mock scholarly works, the latter section in particular identifies Delany's chosen genre in paraliterary terms. With characteristic precision, Delany brands *The Mad Man* a "pornotopic fantasy" and warns readers about the explicit content that follows (*The Mad Man* ix). Notably, the neologism "pornotopic" is unique to his work in that it combines (as the phrase suggests) *pornography* and *place*. Steven Shaviro, in a blog response to feedback received from Delany on one of the critic's posts about *The Mad Man*, clarifies that "pornotopic" should not be read as a hybrid term denoting *pornē* and *eu-topia*—a sexual free space, or, more literally, *good place*—for the expression of sexual freedoms. Rather, Delany applies it with pornography's original root in mind, a transliteration that more properly embeds the novel's libidinal economy in a topology of exchange: *the place of prostitutes* ("The Mad Man Redux"). In the same breath, however, Shaviro points out how Delany's novel seeks to undercut any monetary motivation behind its copiously narrated sex in two ways. First, the novel imagines either impossible or extreme sexual acts that are likely illegible within the sexual market that organizes erotic exchange-values between client and prostitute. Secondly, the sex occurs between Marr and mostly homeless men—actors for whom agency lies outside the conventional circulation of capital—occupying a demographic in which (by group fiat) individuals receive at most only one penny for their participation. This risible financial incentive surely offers a sly critique of early queer novels like John Rechy's *City of Night* and *Numbers*, in which hyper-masculinized gay men retain their sense of self-respect by being paid for their labor, but its penuriousness also speaks to the value of human lives across a number of marginalized contexts.

For it goes without saying that *The Mad Man* is more than just an academic satire filled with bitterly sardonic subtext on everything from the “publish-or-perish” mentality of tenure and promotion to the large percentage of graduate students living below the poverty line. Rather, the novel invariably comes close to realizing one of the projects it claims to avoid due to the difficulty of the endeavor—“a history of homelessness on the Upper West Side for the last decade”—when it asks quite earnestly: “How would you go about researching that?” (280). Marr anticipates this question with a question, and the novel’s intra-diegetic double, Hasler’s *The Mad Man*, supplies at least one answer. As Marr queries aloud, to no one in particular, after discovering the lost novel’s manuscript: “...suppose I were researching not the life of some genius philosopher with his books and articles and a wake of articulate friends and acquaintances, but rather a homeless kid in and out of mental hospitals for chronic masturbation and indecent exposure?” (Delany, *The Mad Man* 247). Given that *The Mad Man* text itself constitutes the academic mystery guiding John Marr’s impassioned, but glacial progress, its discovery opens other avenues of exploration in his ever-widening research space.

Addressing this emergent purpose, Delany narrates the way Marr establishes a niche by adopting two of Swales’s four sub-principles—both of which speak to the biographical leanings of his project. First, because little is known about Hasler’s death, his investigation “identifies a gap” in the historical record (Swales 154). Similarly, in an effort to tell the full story of Hasler’s final days, Marr must “continue the tradition” by expanding on primary source accounts (limited to newspaper articles) of the murder. But Delany’s ambitions, like his alter ego John Marr, far exceed the mere fleshing out of

gossip mill conjecture. Instead, he shows the way Marr's explicit encounters apply Hasler's radical philosophy, and in so doing—raise a number of important questions regarding Hasler's research. Marr's repeated references to his own philosophical project—tentatively entitled “The Systems of the World”—would seem to literalize *The Mad Man's* awareness of itself as a systems novel. But the novel's title, with its dual valences of righteous anger and madness, ultimately outweighs this oft-repeated, under-explicated philosophical red herring. In contrast, Hasler's *Mad Man* celebrates not the organismic totality of a unified system, but instead valorizes the open, emergent and ultimately “all-consuming, all-cleansing Heraclitean fire” of its author's apparent last words: “EKPYROSIS” scrawled hastily in feces across his bedroom walls immediately prior meeting his doom (Delany, *The Mad Man* 426).

Teasingly introduced in a letter from Hasler's Pulitzer Prize-winning friend, poetess Almira Adler, the unfinished, fragmentary status of Hasler's novel is a clear allusion to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: from its “489 notecards” double-bound with yellowed and breaking rubber bands to its shape-shifting role as a floating signifier for the outrages of social injustice. In this way, *The Mad Man's* mystery is keyed implicitly to identity, with Hasler's increasingly itinerant and risky behavior inviting readers to ask: to whom does the title figure refer? John Marr? Perhaps one of the many men either he and/or Hasler (in an earlier era) encounter in the park? Or could it be Timothy Hasler himself? Who, or what, is the “mad man,” and how is madness tied to the novel's relentless pursuit of highly eccentric, arguably repellent sexual activity? As the only extended excerpt from Hasler's novel, the Proem's central image works to answer this question by introducing

the larger novel's critical attention to landscape as a life-world populated by an underclass increasingly susceptible to that landscape's harsh textures. Organizing the unlikely intersection between the early 1980s Upper West Side queer demimonde and a homeless population devastated by poverty, mental illness, and the onset of HIV, the Minotaur-like beast at labyrinth's center signifies the unfettered sexual possibility explored in Hasler's journals through a homologous composite of the typically enormous, bearish men with whom he partners. Presented in scalar terms, this "hulking" creature's feral features Hasler describes in lavishly priapic language—with testicles the size of "rocks," and the "texture and color of overripe avocados," its "muscle-ridged" gut "heavy as some gone beer-hound's," and "the columnar sex, brushing the thickened under-conduit twice, thrice, and twice again" (1). But despite its "wings," "feathered legs," "brass claws," and overall "taurine" countenance, this phantasmagorical giant stands upon a recognizably human "callused and engrimed foot" just a few steps from "the Hudson's glass-green rush" (1-2). Suggesting the increasingly conflated motifs of unclean appearance and illicit desire amidst the verdant flora of Riverside Park and other city landmarks, the creature's casual engagement with the sensory details of its own excremental and eliminative functions¹⁷ foreshadows the "madness" of Marr's itinerant lovers—many of whom he shares (at a distance of a decade or more) with Hasler.

Yet this madness is hardly limited to mere psychopathology. Rather, in a Foucauldian reversal, Delany turns the discourse against itself to invoke "outrage" as a form of madness constructed via "a combination of its milieu and its anger" (*Shorter Views* 382). This strategy follows the lead of Delany's fellow porno-polemicist and friend

Michael Perkins,¹⁸ with whom Delany and, in the world of the novel, Hasler, share a publisher: Rhinoceros Books (*The Mad Man* 484). Expressed throughout the novel in the context of rage and indignation at the larger society's hostility to their plight, anger is a destructive force that shapes the outsized dimensions of both character physiognomy and affect as much as it does Marr's ambitious examination of Hasler's totalizing philosophy. In perhaps the novel's most literal acknowledgment of queer activism on the part of a homeless character, Mad Man Mike opens up about the murder of a homeless friend whose curiosity about Marr's investigations leads to his death in a stabbing similar to Hasler's:

The answering voice, torn by gasps and cracking with its own intensity (somewhere the rasp splintered, the stone shattered), filled the room, the apartment, my head: 'It's not your fault—I know that! The breath tearing into him sounded as though it would split his chest. 'It's not your fault—it's not mine! But I'm mad! I'm mad the kid is dead!' It sounded as if the air he breathed would rip muscle from bone. In the dark he reeled. 'The little bastard don't *have* to be dead! He could be alive. I'm alive! I could have taught him how to stay alive—if he would have done what I told him! I could have taught him how to stay warm in the winter—where to get blankets and stuff. Him and me—' and here it became only a man crying—'we were...were a lot...alike. I could taught him—' then, again, a man was raging—'taught him how to stay dry, how to stay free, how not to get caught—when I met him, he didn't even know enough to come in out of the goddamn rain! He shouldn't have to be dead. (427)

Described throughout the novel as a "monster," this biracial giant supplies the likely identity for *The Mad Man* of Hasler's title—having accompanied Hasler on his last night alive and whose wildly liberated behavior arguably attracted the philosopher's murderer in a gay bar strictly known for hustling. In other words, Mad Man Mike is the novel's

embodiment of absolutely unrestrained excess: from his Sadean sexual stamina (limited to a five minute-minimum recovery time) to his unusually amplified vocal force.¹⁹

Clearly, the novel's characterological excess along these lines is not merely predicated on degree of explicit detail but volume, overworking straight projections of gay promiscuity through arguably impossible sexual exploits in order to normalize those conventionally "taboo" behaviors to which heteronormative readers might otherwise object. Anticipating these objections, Delany casually emplots activities likely to incite resistance and disgust squarely within the context of romantic fulfillment and harmony—activities that depend on his narrator's calm acceptance and free expression amidst the nested frames of mock scholarly practice as a way of authorizing this material's delivery. Steven Shaviro concurs with this interpretation, arguing that *The Mad Man* is not transgressive because "its intent is not to arouse [since]...it presents such arousal in a continuum with all the other aspects of life (the narrator's, the writer's, and the reader's) rather than as some sort of rupture with them" ("The Mad Man").

Toward illustrating this quotidian milieu, perhaps the novel's most exemplary passage carries the reader from an absolutely shocking story recounted by one of Marr's indigent lovers to a meditation on the spiritual significance of realizing one's deepest sexual desires, however "debased." The story begins with the childhood reminiscences of Marr's lover, a man named Leaky Sowps whose nickname springs from his own, somewhat bemused, incontinence. Leaky describes a rollicking scene from childhood in which his adolescent companion and roommate, a toothless, hunchbacked African-American male named Blacky, attempts with some difficulty to fellate the family dog.

The boy, whose sole rhetorical purpose within Leaky's recollections is to provide a comic foil for the speaker's own degrading experiences, is characterized as a figure of mirth and camaraderie—replete with slapstick flourishes worthy of Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Suddenly shifting into the continuous present of Marr's narration, Leaky interrupts his youthful reverie to urinate into Marr's mouth as the two enjoy a post-coital cuddle. The action, described as casually as one would comparatively innocent circumstances, culminates in the following interior reflection by the narrator (worth citing at length):

A kind of physical relaxation comes after orgasm which is wonderful and satisfying and makes you fall into the heaviest of sleeps; but that's not what I'm talking about here—although, because I'd just dropped a second load twenty minutes ago, that feeling might have been mixed in with it. But there's another, psychological peace, which, were I religious, I'd describe by saying, it feels like you're doing what God intended you to do—like you're filling the space God intended you to fill. Perhaps it's the feeling of desire—not want, or need, or yearning, but desire itself—satisfied. Finally satisfied. Not a God believer, I'm willing to accept the God in that feeling as a metaphor. Yet, it seemed to me, here I'd found the point where the metaphor and the thing it's a metaphor for might be one. Lying there, I thought: People feel guilty about wanting to do stuff like this. But this is the reward for actually doing it, for finding someone who wants to do it with you: The fantasies of it may be drenched in shame, but the act culminates in the knowledge no one has been harmed, no one has been wounded, no one has been wronged. (Delany, *The Mad Man* 344-345)

Given his narrator's carefree preoccupation with practices likely to inspire outcries of abuse, infection, and degradation, the author knows these activities will be shocking to all but the most jaded readers—whose reactions will likely mirror the literalism of Marr's merging of the metaphorical into the material. Consequently, *The Mad Man's* propensity for shock arises via the reader's own invariably modest experiences, a productive tension that supports the novel's overarching aim: to reach a predominately straight audience

resistant to Marr's lifestyle and transform its assumptions about what constitutes normative and deviant sexual behavior.

Staged for maximum unease, Delany's elaborate set pieces involving urolagnia, coprophagia, and the sexualization of other excretory functions constitute both a provocation and a bold experiment in tolerance. Such passages, Reed Woodhouse argues, "force...reader[s] to reexamine the whole question of sexual desire: how it should be expressed, whether it should be restrained, and if so, by what means" (213). Moreover, it is precisely the lack of restraint in Marr's immersive strategy that ultimately proves to be a far more productive line of inquiry than his mentor's more detached approach. Operating far beyond Mossman's limited purview, it is, after all, Marr, not his influential mentor, who successfully publishes the definitive account of Timothy Hasler's murder. In order to ferret out this information, the young scholar must allow his own identity to become gradually subsumed by Hasler's—a feat of empathy the novel demands in equal measure from its audience as readers descend the depths of New York's sexual underground alongside Marr through the novel's astonishingly intimate vantage point.

To achieve this polemical goal, Delany synthesizes these two seemingly disparate discursive styles into one seamless approach. Drawing on his own highly candid correspondence (available in *1984: Selected Letters*) from a period roughly contemporaneous with first Hasler and then Marr's experiences, the author also overwrites one of the more notorious *mea culpas* in contemporary American letters. *The Mad Man's* opening sentence famously rewrites Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness* in a near-verbatim passage with one noteworthy exception: where the original offers a

surprised confession of the author's HIV-positive status, Delany's version offers a negative reversal. The original begins with a stark declaration:

I have AIDS. I am surprised that I do. I have not been exposed since the '70s, which is to say that my experiences, my adventures in homosexuality took place largely in the '60s, and back then I relied on time and abstinence to indicate my degree of freedom from infection and to protect others and myself. (Brodkey, "To My Readers")

In what follows, Brodkey's fairly defensive letter (featured in *The New Yorker's* "Personal History" column) frames the author's behavior as an anomaly that makes little chronological sense given the discontinuity between the AIDS virus's first appearance and Brodkey's claimed cessation of bisexual activity.

By contrast, Delany's negation rejects the implicit shame in Brodkey's original words, generating a queer affirmation of sex-positive behavior in an era that forbids it:

I do not have AIDS. I am surprised that I don't. I have had sex with men weekly, sometimes daily—without condoms—since my teens, though true, it's been overwhelmingly...no, more accurately it's been—since 1980—all oral, not anal. My adventures with homosexuality started in the early-middle seventies, in the men's room of the terminal on the island side of Staten Island Ferry... (5)

Clinical but thoroughly comfortable in its candor, Delany's narrative immediately begins to weave together Marr's sexual identity with his scholarly one, and does so from an intertextual base that regards queer sexuality as a marginal, deviant activity. By inverting Brodkey's defense with an affirmational rhetoric that celebrates rather than condemns, Delany generates increasingly radical threshold effects between text and reader—effects

that in the age of AIDS issue forth in a proud and courageous tone rather than one underwritten by guilt, despair, or dread.

This persona supports Marr's implicit counter-thesis leveled against his advisor's complacency and bigotry regarding Hasler's sexuality. A sustained assault on the institutional separation of literary fiction and its critical response, *The Mad Man* queers the critique begun in the work of Borges and Federman through Marr's decision to collapse his personal and scholarly identities into one composite self.²⁰ To this end, the novel first undermines the notion that queer sexual desire in the AIDS era is an automatic death sentence. Secondly, and more clearly connected to the vision of scholarly life the novel depicts, it argues that one cannot entirely dissociate the "intellectual side" of a project from the life that motivated it (Delany, *The Mad Man* 22). These assumptions are conspicuously held and perpetuated by straight characters within the novel's storyworld, and so suggest the author's target audience. Most conspicuously, *The Mad Man's* central set piece takes the form of a sixty four-page letter to Mossman's wife Sam, in which Marr delivers an unsolicited inventory of gay sexuality across an assortment of bars, movie theaters, city parks, and other public venues.

Sam's letter achieves a kind of crescendo as Marr transitions into a discussion of the palpable sense of relief that slowly replaced the almost ubiquitous terror involved with cruising for sex in the period. In a passage worthy of closer inspection, Delany's narrative turns inward, away from a largely material account of sexuality, to one that addresses period risks despite a reluctance to disavow many of the continued advances in LGBT life:

Concern? Yes. Of course I retain that. But I spent the whole time, as I roamed the theater, orchestra, balcony, and lounge, doing all the things I've recounted to you, thinking with a violence and a life-and-death committedness it will be hard to convey. Certainly, telling you the result of that thought (that the fear—the dull, so reasonable, yet so crippling terror a part of my life and the lives of so many gay men for two-and-a-half, if not three years now—has vanished) does not give you the process's mechanics or effect. When sex is so available and plays such a large part in life, sexual activity ends up fulfilling many, many psychological functions—as chosen recreations often do: It helps you deal with any number of tensions and becomes a stabilizing and balancing force—and it provides an object for as much or as little intellectual analysis as anyone by temperament might require. (152)

Underwriting these themes of life and death is a pornotopic²¹ purpose that inspires, in Delany's words, "a book about various sexual acts whose status as vectors of HIV contagion we have no hard-edged knowledge of because the statistical portraits of the relation between such acts and seroconversion (from HIV- to HIV+) have not been done" (*The Mad Man* ix). In this way, *The Mad Man* presents an important and unexplored variant of the *mise en abyme* by combining the Borgesian textual labyrinth with social commentary on early AIDS awareness, the limits of social tolerance regarding same-sex desire, and the epidemic of homelessness and poverty in the postwar United States.²²

Implying that a partial understanding of the artist's life, or any critical attempt to sanitize, cordon off, or separate out the supposedly unsavory details of that life, is to deliberately misread the artist in question, *The Mad Man* positions its heteronormative audience in a static space beyond comprehending the gay artist's experiences. Thus, with Marr as the reader's most welcoming guide, Delany works to break down any residual resistance to an empowered and fully participatory queer social context through a poetics

of excess that, to cite the author on his lifetime discursive project, interrogates “the whole economy of discourse” to consider how its open range of potentials “generate the values and suggestions around a concept, even if [that] concept has no name” (Ghansah).

Mark Z. Danielewski’s Invisible Library

Of the four hundred fifty footnotes that fill Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) less than half of the cited references are traceable to actual published sources. This densely disseminated “invisible library”²³ through which the novel’s seven hundred-plus pages are organized, constitutes an inspired revision of the longstanding satirical practice of “mock scholarship” common to the academic novel subgenre. By contrast with Delany’s overtly polemical use of the approach in *The Mad Man*, in which John Marr’s obsessively researched inquiry into the life of Tim Hasler limns his own impassioned experiences of sexual desire unbound, Danielewski’s use of mock scholarship works to convey a strikingly different impression. That is, where Delany’s protagonist ultimately uses Hasler’s unfinished manuscript as a means to his own existential and romantic ends—in effect, “completing” the project by living it—Danielewski conveys the belief that his book’s central object of study (the documentary film *The Navidson Record*) only exists in the allodiegetic spaces between factual and fictitious secondary critical material surrounding it.

Consequently, Danielewski’s deft interweaving of real and imagined criticism amplifies the Borgesian example that opens this chapter by relying on the deliberate confusions this method undoubtedly elicits in readers. Echoing the synecdochical effect an actual reference volume’s embedded fabrications on the fictional world of Tlön have

on the real world that frames it, Danielewski's novel again relies on the logic of the *mise en abyme* or mirror in the text to make a powerful comment on the nature of fiction-making and its impact on "everyday life." Simply put, this *fausse-archive*'s rhetorical effect in both contexts lies in its ability to insinuate itself into one's intellectual field of vision with such casual skill that the ruse is passed along to the reader, making it nearly impossible to tease out fact from fiction.

Complicating Delany's approach to the *mise en abyme*, *House of Leaves* innovates on the fictional trope of "possible scholarly worlds" by inverting the levels of textural density associated with conventional accounts of a text's normative narrative core. Because the "determinate fictional facts" that construct the novel's "explicit texture" are only made legible via the narrative's dense interlayering of editorially mediated (and, as Hayles has argued, "remediated"²⁴) levels of diegesis, the events on Ash Tree Lane—including the principals involved with the film's recording, the "strange spatial violation" that inspires the film, the existence of the house, and right down to *The Navidson Record* itself—only "exist" via the editorial apparatus that narrates them for the reader. In revealing the so-called determinate fictional facts through such excessive mediation, the author floods the fictional text's "zero texture" level, the subtextual stratum in which information tends to be most implicit. That is to say, through the persuasive redistribution of textural density layers, *House of Leaves*' saturation of detail compromises the narrative's "implicitness," a layer historically pushed to the margins of the reading experience.

Put another way, the novel's infinite regress of possible scholarly worlds temporarily actualizes the black hole that fills its putative center, in turn forcing the reader on a mission to recover that lost implicitness—a recovery process the audience is asked to participate in as they traverse the textural density of false facts embroidered by Danielewski's mock scholarly Möbius strip. Specifically, *House of Leaves*' poetics of excess relies on both implicit and explicit texture to build the novel's density function, for despite its own considerable length, the novel imagines an even more massively embodied corpus of scholarship surrounding its core narrative event. This implicit texture echoes Tom LeClair's statement on synecdoche—the rhetorical figure that generates the effect of enormity or magnitude in the reader:

To be precise, no writer masters the world or even information. What he masters is synecdoche, the illusion that the part he has selected, structured, proportioned, and scaled are appropriate substitutes in context for what could be a much larger set of parts, which in turn would only suggest, not exhaust, the whole of discourse (*The Art of Excess* 18).

Indeed, the synecdochical tendency invites readers to consider, for example, the lengths of some of the longer faux-scholarly works that make up the budding cottage industry of “Navidson Studies”: Esther Harlan James's Trinity College doctoral dissertation of over six hundred pages entitled “Crave the Cave: The Color of Obsession” (Danielewski 387); or Bernard Porch's “four thousand page treatise” (75) *All In All*, a text that mysterious exegete Zampanò cheekily reminds readers (via MLA format no less) was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts by Harvard University Press in 1995 (76).

With these maximalist models in mind, the most helpful question perplexed readers can ask when confronted by such exhaustive references is perhaps the most obvious for radical metafiction's real-life skeptics: why would anyone want to interrogate such disparate, often absurdly pedantic topics, and at such length? Running the gamut from an archly philosophical exegesis on the epistemological implications of "echoes" within the structural spaces of psychogenic fugue (most of Chapter V), to speculations about the meaning of a cursory facial reaction caught on a single frame of film,²⁵ to an article that purports to exhaustively analyze a character's barely mentioned vacation hobby²⁶—the outrageous conceptual emphases of these sources frequently provide readers with an answer. That is to say, no one would conceive of topics of such ludicrous specificity and scope,²⁷ but even more importantly, no one could write about such topics because they surround an object that does not exist. Mark B.N. Hansen has worked toward theorizing this textual aporia, writing, "...the novel is about an *impossible* object, a referent that is absent not simply in the sense of being lost or unlocatable, or even in the sense—common to all fiction—of lacking any existence whatsoever prior to and outside of the fiction that conjures it up (607). Grounding this judgment in textual detail, William G. Little admits that "[the] footnotes contain passages so lengthy and labyrinthine that it becomes difficult to tell what constitutes the novel's core text, the interior of *House of Leaves*" (178). Both critics' perspectives take into account the representation of a tactile, textural sense of a world roiling beneath the surface of the printed page that contains it, and most vitally—the perceived interrelationship between the two levels of meaning. If surficial materiality in the novel is in constant juxtaposition with the object matter it

signifies, then this dialogue is most certainly coordinated by the narrative strategies that arrange Danielewski's book.

Unique for the fact that it micromanages the reader's intuitive process, *House of Leaves* proceeds—as Hayles has argued—from a two-fold poetics of excess: first, by oversaturating the text at the level of “inscription surfaces”: the novel's exhaustive process of conceptually overreaching and chronically overwriting through a secondary critical framework. This illusion of determinative fictional fact at the story's center has been aptly deemed by Hayles the novel's default position of “everything and anything but empty” (781). Similarly, Hayles frames the novel's focalization as a multi-perspectival phenomenon that refracts coverage of a given event via multiple layers of “remediation”—layers that arguably establish the novel's only viable (though finally unreliable) narrative world (782). In this way, Hayles differentiates between the inscription technologies present in the narrative's mediation, including “film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers” (780), and “inscription surfaces,” the horizontal *plattes* upon which literal textual (and by implication textural) saturation occurs. Cataloguing the variety of saturated surfaces described by Johnny Truant in his introduction to *The Navidson Record*, the critic also indicates the wealth of writerly roles each palimpsestic passage occasions discursively:

Johnny adds to these ‘snarls’ by more obsessive writing on diverse surfaces, annotating, correcting, recovering, blotting out and amending Zampanò's words, filling out a journal, penning letters and poems, even scribbling on the walls of his studio apartment until all available inscription surfaces are written and overwritten with words and images. (Hayles 781)

This overdetermination of formal elements within the story world is matched by the novel's equally convoluted distribution of the three editorial levels that deploy them to make sense of the spatiotemporal rift in the House on Ash Tree Lane's center.

To better understand the ways in which the allopoietics of excess and narrative textural saturation interact on a practical level in Danielewski's novel, I now turn to Kathleen Blake Yancey's "research space" model as a critical lens through which the metaphorical sites of imaginative "constraint" and "potentiality," world "incompleteness" and "saturation" can be understood, constructing and in turn constructed by possible scholarly worlds. In a survey of the ways in which *House of Leaves*' possible worlds are shaped by various forms of research space, I will demonstrate that Yancey's four-part paradigm uncannily translates Danielewski's use of secondary critical material, and so literalizes the critical scaffolding that accompanies any interpretive process.

The research space paradigm is present in multiple permutations throughout the novel's overlapping diegetic levels, most obviously in the book's organization of different scholarly emphases. As a veritable formula for parsing out its excessive purpose, Danielewski's method implies that readers can fit practically any of the myriad forms of actual and fictive scholarship into one of the four practices (a virtue of the book's close approximation of real world scholarly methodology). Additionally, one can detect its behavioral influence over a given editor's respective relationship to the text. Zampanò, with his fairly pompous tendency to invoke iconic writers and thinkers, soaks his commentary in the allure and mystery of intellectual elitism. Johnny Truant's dialogic attitude toward his precursor's work puts him solidly into the dichotomous space of

scholarly camps (arguably the only realization of “actual factions” in-text, despite Zampanò’s copious details to the contrary). Finally, the “Editors” occupy a way out of the original spatial context, manifesting a sort of “photo positive” to the negative space of the labyrinth (the material epicenter that constitutes the “territory” claimed by *fill-in-the-blank spatiality*). Notably, the Editors avoid acknowledging the House’s existence at all—confining their remarks to Zampanò and Truant’s scholarly work.

Within its first two pages, Danielewski’s novel cycles immediately through the patterns of research space suggested by Yancey’s paradigm, setting a clear tone for the novel’s use of possible scholarly worlds. Zampanò first gestures toward *fill-in-the-blank spatiality*, locating the “more promising” direction of research about *The Navidson Record* in “the interpretation of events *within* the film” (Danielewski 3, emphasis added). These remarks (and the general reverence of tone in this section) instantly position the spatial rupture at the heart of the House on Ash Tree Lane as the novel’s presumptive research subject, recognizing its terrain as the important event necessitating further investigation relative to prior scholarly work. *Research-by-way-of-iconic-space* is also immediately invoked with the first of many references to relevant pronouncements by hallowed figures in world culture. In this latter instance, readers could not be treated to a more applicable pair of examples, and particularly the way in which they are introduced: Milton is called “England’s greatest topographer of worlds satanic and divine” while Dante is identified, rather unceremoniously, as “hell’s greatest tourist” (Danielewski 3-4). Following this lofty double reference, Zampanò fears the documentary’s deleterious

effects on Academe with an eye to its uneasy curricular position amidst normative programs of study:

In fact a few eager intellectuals have already begun to treat the film as a warning in and of itself, perfectly suited for hanging whole above the gates of such schools as Architectonics, Popomo, Consequentialism, Neo-Plasticism, Phenomenology, Information Theory, Marxism, Biosemiotics, to say nothing of psychology, medicine, New Age spirituality, art, and even Neo-Minimalism. (Danielewski 4)

By contrast, *Research within contextual space* should be conceived in far less rigidly institutional terms, as Yancey likens it to “an exercise of multicontextual space [that] assumes an interlayering, an overlaying whose remix, whose intertextuality is the incubator for ideas, for knowledge” (166). Assuming familiarity with the landscapes proffered by the first three models of research space, I here locate the fourth variety outside the labyrinth-like anomaly at the house’s center, and beyond even this shaky “foundation”—through the often maze-like organization of the text’s more “visible” editors, Zampanò and Johnny Truant.

At the novel’s opening, Danielewski gives readers two glimpses of this external level. First, he provides the example of Will Navidson, who is quoted as recommending the documentary be taken “literally,” and warns off would-be thrill-seekers interested in the House’s secrets that there is “nothing”²⁸ there to discover (4). Secondly, he sets up the innocuous, but increasingly harrowing description of “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway” photographed by Navidson, in which the photographer does not enter the space, but rather moves around and through it via the outside of the house where its length should extend. These vignettes offer the reader a glimpse of the “outside world,”

breaking free from the text's inversion of zero and explicit texture, and so recovering some of the implicitness lost by the torrent of real and imaginary scholarship that surrounds the House on Ash Tree Lane.

Yancey's notion of *Fill-in-the-blank spatiality* in *House of Leaves* refers to the figure of the labyrinth as both architectural and metaphorical subject, of course, also highlighting its importance as a literal component of the diegesis (*The Navidson Record* and the structural anomalies it captures within the house on Ash Tree Lane). Equally crucial is the text's "labyrinthine" profusion of actual and fictive commentary surrounding Navidson's film, the involuted nature of which can send readers down numerous blind alleys in pursuit of various false leads. A third layer of labyrinthicity is most visible through the text's typographical or *perigraphic* (as critic Natalie Hamilton refers to the shape-shifting text) approximation of "labyrinthicity," the maze-like difficulty expressed through ergodic²⁹ play. Of course, following the etymological roots of the word *labyrinth* (from "labor" and "intus") which stress, alternately, difficulties of "exit" and "entrance" (Doob 124), Danielewski's labyrinth-like structure certainly depends on the metaphorical difficulties of access and escape at the most basic linguistic level to construct its larger narrative of epistemological impasse.

"Into the Maze": *House of Leaves*

Aside from recurrence, revision, and commensurate symbolic reference, echoes also reveal emptiness. Since objects always muffle or impede acoustic reflection, only empty places can create echoes of lasting clarity.

- Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (46)

If the blend of actual and fictive scholarship that surrounds the impossible object at center constitutes a threshold for the reader to cross—gaining access to its paradoxically empty “depths”—then *fill-in-the-blank spatiality* should be seen as symmetrical with *research within contextual space*. In other words, the only way one “enters” the non-Euclidean space of the House’s vertiginous interiors—space structured and defined by an explicit texture comprised of falsehoods—is through the editorial content of Zampanò and Johnny Truant. The implicit texture generally associated with realism’s narratorial reticence, a reticence allopoietical strategies rudely violate, is repeatedly covered over in an avalanche of concretion via these editorial layers: featuring discursive patterns of analysis, speculation, cross-reference, conjecture, and farflung theoretical posturing. As in hallmarks like its older cousins *Pale Fire* or *The Crying of Lot 49*, readers are put in the awkward position of actually knowing less the more information they are given. Escape, then, becomes the dominant goal, predicated on mastering the labyrinth, of which there are two varieties. The mock scholarship that surrounds the “strange spatial violation” erupting from within the House on Ash Tree Lane takes on the labyrinth-like structure of its subject, and mimics the metaphorical valences each type of labyrinth possesses. Doob identifies three dimensions: “the labyrinth as sign of complex artistry”; “the labyrinth as a sign of inextricability or impenetrability”; and “the labyrinth as a sign of difficult process” (65-91). As previously explained, *House of Leaves* combines these elements through the two layers of cursality, which the allodiegetic editors then weave through the rhetorical strategies informing their possible scholarly worlds. The unicursal element—which signifies “a difficult, winding,

but potentially rewarding linear process”—coexists alongside “a spatial, artistically complex, and confusing artifact” as Espen J. Aarseth has written about Doob’s models in a blended format (7). *House of Leaves* not only realizes this through multiple types of textual play, but it also actually cites Doob in-text (107). Moreover, Danielewski seems to have made this real scholarly source a constitutive part of his book’s schema, and thus collapses the actual and fictive criticism into one possible scholarly world. Accordingly, the author promotes the various instances of rhetoricity readers can expect from the highly unreliable editor-narrators while creating another important category distinct from the hard and fast rules of fact and fiction.

In a fascinating aside on the implications that surficial play and narrative textural density hold for the future study of possible scholarly worlds, Gerhard F. Probst points to a research space that privileges a poetics of excess guided by textural density:

What are the effects of incorporating...parts of a text dealing with factual information into a fictional text? Are they mutual or one-directional? In other words, does the fictional text alter the quality of the fact-based text or vice versa? Obviously, facts remain facts whether they relate to history, geology, or biology. But the context in which they appear in a fictional text gives them a function other than the statement of facts: they point beyond their factuality (175).

This deliberate interweaving of fact within fiction constructs the “blank space” of the labyrinth, creating impressions of difficulty, complexity, and confusion. Cycling through the three subsequent research spaces, Danielewski shapes an allopoietic model that points beyond the factuality of facts to usher in a hybrid possible scholarly world generated purely through space.

A method that proliferates throughout *House of Leaves* in an offhandedly scholarly manner as well as an obnoxiously showy one, the “name-dropping” characteristic of *research-by-way-of-iconic-space* is one of the novel’s most saturated motifs, figuring as a prominent aspect of Zampanò’s often pompously “magisterial” tone. Typically issued through the scholarly practice of epigraphs that begin each chapter, or peppered throughout the narrative in high culture references (often in multiple native languages which offer the illusion of a polyglot editor),³⁰ the intellectual figure as icon is introduced most archly in the transcript of Karen Green’s partial film *What Some Have Thought* (Chapter XV), a montage of actual and fictive, creative and critical icons in conversation about the *Navidson Record*. In a sort of scattershot question-and-answer session that reads like a transcript, Danielewski mimics the voice and tone of such high culture luminaries as Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Douglas R. Hofstadter, and Stanley Kubrick alongside the more accessible punditry of Stephen King, Anne Rice, Steve Wozniak, and Hunter S. Thompson. More pretentiously, and undoubtedly a “reflection” of the intellectual vanity evident in Zampanò’s totalizing project and pompous tone, is Chapter V’s mini-treatise on the many valences of “echo.” The first truly concentrated example of iconic space, Zampanò’s analysis is also the most sustained up to that point in the novel, pivoting around the work of the formidable Yale critic-poet John Hollander. Hollander’s status is evoked through scale at numerous turns as Zampanò puts large and small critical studies in an oppositional relationship via footnote position; namely, on the same page Hollander’s monograph is introduced, directly below its footnoted entry, the editor has included a massive collection entitled *Glorious Garrulous Graphomania*

(edited by T.N. Truslow). Of course, garrulity and graphomania are varieties of excess—the former meaning “prolixity,” the latter—an addiction to “overwriting” (see Hayles’s analysis of Part II). The following page calls Hollander’s work a “slim volume” that while “abound[ing] with examples of textual transfiguration” (Danielewski 44), also commits the cardinal sin of “only devot[ing] five pages to the actual physics of sound” (Danielewski 47). As a matter of course, it is Zampanò’s tone that gives away his superficial scholarly approach; whether he knows better than the critic in question—“Hollander is wrong when he writes on page 55...” (Danielewski 46)—or, as with the Dante comment earlier, reduces a major author to a patronizing series of rhetorical “head-pats,” e.g., Cervantes is called a “literary marvel” (Danielewski 42).

Ironic considering the shallow critical intelligence that informs his project, Zampanò’s analysis reaches a kind of crescendo with a passage on the notion of “hollowness.” Treated as a kind of ultimate Otherness that the void within the House instantiates, “hollowness” as a subject worthy of the blind scholar’s interest suggests an inherent emptiness at the heart of his larger project: this quality is suggested by the space itself and *The Navidson Record* itself as an artifact worthy of critical inquiry. Needless to say, hollowness could be a simple dig at the type of scholarly model that seeks after a pedantic, surface level projection of erudition, and clearly by following on the heels of “blank” space, aligns with the themes of emptiness and negation initiated by the first level of research space.

This scaffolded effect is most visible in the text’s seventeenth chapter, which features three schools of thought that have sprung up around *The Navidson Record*: the

“Kellog-Antwerk Claim”; the “Bister-Frieden-Josephson Criteria”; and the “Haven-Slocum Theory” (Danielewski (385-407)). Each of these schools is devoted to answering what the fictive framework of critical inquiry has determined is *the* fundamental question of the whole affair: “Why Did Navidson Go Back to the House?” (Danielewski 385). In response, Danielewski structures the three positions in a strategy of dual recursion, i.e., Zampanò puts their positions in conversation with one other, each repudiating the other by performing the prior two models of research space (in this case, claiming “invisible” territory and using “false” icons within the possible world of Navidson scholarship). Nodding first to *fill-in-the-blank spatiality*, Zampanò relates that “Kellog and Antwerk argue that the act of returning was an attempt to territorialize and thus preside over that virtually unfathomable space” (386). The Kellog-Antwerk claim’s central emphasis on Navidson’s desire for ownership and possession is here invoked, followed closely by research-by-way-of-iconic space as Navidson’s own renowned status is implicated in the claim’s specious reasoning: “He refused to lure television programs and other corporate sponsors to his doorstep which would have further enforced his titular position, at least in the eye of the media. Nor did he invest himself in any kind of paper writing, lectures, or other acts of publicity” (Danielewski 386). Providing an index on the alternately self-promotional and narcissistic condition of academic envy, iconic space is always invested in the reception over the actual idea, since to first recognize celebrity is to no longer “see” the scholar’s conceptual power in isolation from his or her ethos. Indeed, Zampanò’s movement into dichotomous space is no different.

Consistent with most of the mock scholarly framework, rhetorical appeals narrate a deceptively thick knowledge base, generally issued through a kind of self-important appeal to authority and credibility that is then undone by the thinness of the engagement. A transition canvassing the Kellogg-Antwerp Claims's various interlocutors and antagonists generates suspense for the challenge wrought by the Bister-Freiden-Josephson Criteria (shortened in-text to the handier "BFJ Criteria"): "Refutation One: We do not accept that filmmaking constitutes an act of naming, Image never has and never will possess proprietary powers. Though others may deny it, we believe that to this day the Adamic strengths of the word, and hence language, have never been or ever will be successfully challenged" (Danielewski 386). This "opening salvo" (386) is an additional powerful layer in support of *The Navidson Record* as fiction; in fact, it seems to vindicate the overall editorial project of creating an artifact out of the object critical matter that encompasses it: for without the film there's no proof of the House, and without the House—there's no text. Zampanò's rhetoric here builds in intensity as he relates the "most controversial claim made by the [BFJ] Criteria": "...that Navidson began believing darkness could offer something other than itself" (Danieleski 387). This comment anticipates the critical industry that studies *The Navidson Record* and adds an additional allodiegetic layer to the proceedings, an "ouroboric"³¹ narrative strategy that aptly describes the impossible logic at work in the relationship between House, documentary, and commentaries around it by the fictitious character at the center of that fictitious world.

Discussing the short deconstruction of classificatory systems in Jorge Luis Borges' "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," Michel Foucault argues that, "...he does away with the 'site,' the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed" (xvii). From the excessive employment of actual and fictive secondary criticism to citation schemes that blend false sources with true ones, including "misattributed citations"—"false footnotes which [reverse] the intent of the original [source]" (Salus 14), and various other purposefully sloppy editorial gaffes, Danielewski's sense of critical play realizes the Borgesian imperative suggested by Foucault's remarks. After all, what is contextual space if the context is nonexistent?³² This question follows the impossible logic of the novel's central object of study to its illogical conclusion, the final model in Yancey's four-part schema challenging the previous three by destabilizing the ground upon which the reader's discursive expectations have been founded. Connections, networking, and the "impossibility of knowing everything" are stressed in this model (Yancey 166), and uncannily, Danielewski's novel models this approach in the period immediately after Navidson's escape from the labyrinth. The result is that something like immanence descends on the novel, particularly in its closing chapters, with remaining sources reflecting a more pathos-laden quality.

Emphasizing the connectedness and harmony of a networked spatial model rather than the claustrophobic enclosures that construct prior chapters, the novel's form "behaves" as if the epigraph opening its final chapter in the labyrinth—as world-weary

and resigned an expression as we have read in the novel—has become its organizing principle:

We felt the lonely beauty of the evening, the immense roaring silence of the wind, the tenuousness of our tie to all below. There was a hint of fear, not for our lives, but of a vast unknown which pressed in upon us. A fleeting feeling of disappointment—that after all those dreams and questions this was only a mountain top—gave way to the suspicion that there something more, something beyond the three-dimensional form of the moment. If only it could be perceived. (Danielewski 491)

As Hayles has suggested, “The labyrinth is... a trope for incomplete knowledge ... a site where paradoxical inversions become highly energized as absence flips into presence, the contained stretches far beyond its container, and outside becomes inside becomes outside” (792). Following this logic, *House of Leaves* enters contextual space by actualizing the possible worlds most fictions only narrate through multiple levels of diegetic control, an arsenal of faux scholarly methods, and the four levels of research space mapped by its bibliographical Tower of Babel. Simulating the “texture” of reality by saturating an audience with a copious assemblage of analytical detail, this maximalist work complicates the discursive implications of mock scholarly practices by arguably opening up a research space that powerfully mirrors the contours and constraints of our own.

Notes

¹ While the arresting first line of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (“I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia.”) is translated identically in both *Ficciones* (trans. Alistair Reid) and its alternative, *Labyrinths* (the second English-language edition of Borges’s stories)—subsequent lines are altered significantly in the latter to read, “The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejía...” (3). This version departs from *Ficciones*’s static rendering, “The *unnerving mirror* hung at the end of a corridor in a villa on Calle Gaona, in Ramos Mejía...” (emphasis added 17). Thus, in a decision consonant with the copulative analogy Casares goes to the trouble of verifying, James Irby’s translation in *Labyrinths* neatly capitalizes on the mirror’s agentic capacity to “disturb” space. Indeed, Andrew Hurley’s magisterial translation of Borges’s *Collected Fictions* (1998) concurs with Irby’s judgment about the passage, with a rendering that clarifies and deepens the dimensional valences of Tlön’s abominable revelations: “The mirror *troubled the far end of a hallway in a large country house* on Calle Gaona, in Ramos Mejía...” (68; emphasis added).

² John Barth’s proto-postmodern policy statement “The Literature of Exhaustion” builds its claims for a regenerative or replenishing literary aesthetic amid dwindling possibilities for novelty on Borges’s legacy. With specific reference to “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Barth asserts that Tlön’s world-dissolving conceit is

a paradigm of or metaphor for itself; not just the form of the story but the fact of the story is symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message [...]. Like all of Borges’s work, it illustrates in other of its aspects my subject: how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—paradoxically, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world (*The Friday Book* 71).

The *regressus ad infinitum* or exhaustion of possibilities in which fiction finds itself is thus met by its double in Borges’s work: a “*dual regressus*” of facing mirrors that “give resonance and relation” to this state of creative torpor by making its process part of the product.

³ My reference to “knowledge workers” descends from Alan Liu’s use of the term in *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), in which the author poses a question that speaks to this study’s interest in literary maximalism as a reflexive vehicle for emergent research spaces: “What is the relation between the now-predominantly academic and other knowledge workers (even ‘creative writers’) who manage literary value in ‘cultural context’ and the broader realm

of professional, managerial, and technical knowledge workers who manage information value in ‘systems’?” (3). For non-literary discussions of the concept, see both scholarly and popular press accounts: for the former, Howell, 155-161 (*Systems Theory and Practice in the Knowledge Age*) and Christensen, 243-254 (*Global Knowledge Work: Diversity and Relational Perspectives*)] for the latter, notably Friedman, 263-277 (*The World is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*).

⁴ Following on from the legacy of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work in analytic philosophy in the early twentieth century, the crucial texts in the analytic tradition’s take on “possible worlds theory” (contemporaneous with narrative theory’s appropriation of the concept) include Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980); and David K. Lewis’ *On the Plurality of Worlds* (London: Blackwell, 1986). See note 32 in this chapter for a direct discussion of the connection between Danielewski’s mock scholarly technique and Wittgenstein’s thought.

⁵ Thomas Pavel invokes maximalism when he compares textual expanse, in which “perceptual proximity does not vary” to “perceptual immobility of a static camera”; that is, “the scale of the text appears rather to relate to the *perception* of dimension; long novels develop a feeling of breadth, short stories one of fleeting immediacy” (98).

⁶ In his entry on the “encyclopedic novel” in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Luc Herman notes that “encyclopedism” in the generic sense can simply refer to a text that narrates “an enormous amount of information from a variety of fields” (Herman, et al., 138). More strictly, the author also suggests that most encyclopedic narratives operate under the highly ironic, illusory notion that a totality of knowledge can be contained in a large, but admittedly, limited space.

⁷ For a solid survey of this impulse in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, see “The Total Library” (1939, trans. 1999), “ (1940, trans. 1961), “The Library of Babel” (1941, trans. 1962), “Funes the Memorious” (1942, trans. 1954), “The Aleph” (1949, trans. 1962), *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1967, trans. 2005), and *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1954, trans. 2001). Giorgio Manganelli’s *Centuria: One Hundred Ouroboric Novels*, clearly in the tradition of Borges, also strives to convey the impression of vastness through its one page stories, or “novels. . .from which all the air has been removed” (qtd. in “Translator’s Preface,” 6, New York: McPherson & Company, 2005). Like Manganelli, Italo Calvino began his career as a member of the *Gruppo ’63* or “neoavanguardia,” an Italian collective of poets, fiction writers, and essayists, committed to a futurist aesthetic. Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, among many other works, is composed of 55 prose poems describing fictitious cities, a faux travelogue into the fantastic that uses the journeys of Marco Polo as its template. Finally, Donald Barthelme’s pocket epics, many of which got their start within the tightly constrained column inches of *The New Yorker*, are archival in their cool and uncompromisingly difficult range of esoteric reference, incorporating pictographic and textual effects to suggest the whole of knowledge; *City Life* (New York: Farrar, 1970) is viewed as the representative “encyclopedic” collection.

⁸ Volume I of G.R. Hocke's *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst* (Hamburg, 1957) offers one of the first full-length studies of the concept's origins. For a more concise examination of the labyrinth's mythological and architectural implications, see Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth*.

⁹ See "surficial": "Geol. Of or pertaining to the surface of the earth"; in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol. 2 (N-Z). Ed. Lesley Brown. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3157. This definition aligns with the general precept of self-reflexivity that informs metafictional practice, i.e., the synecdochical relationality between text and world; as Christian Moraru has related, "The book (the novel) reflects the world-as-book (text) and thus self-reflects. It is in this sense that the intratextual 'mirrors' the extratextual, is 'like' it, i.e., 'is.' In its makeup and structure, the book *is* the world" (Moraru). From "Postmodern Fiction after the 'Material' Turn: An Overview." *ENG740*, Blackboard. 30 Nov. 2010. Lecture.

¹⁰ See especially Brown's, "The Dark Wood of Postmodernity: (Space, Faith, Allegory)," *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 734-750; and the special "Things"-themed issue of *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001).

¹¹ Cursory references abound, particularly to the way in which footnotes serve to construct an alternative narrative (argued here as less *alternative* than *only*). See Jessica Pressman's "House of Leaves: Reading the Networked Novel," *Studies in American Fiction* 34.1 (2006): 108; Natalie Hamilton's "The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *Critique* 50.1 (2008): 4-5; Sudha Shastri's "Return to the Beginning: *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski." *Atenea* 26 (2006): 84-85; and William G. Little's "Nothing to Write Home About: Impossible Reception in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*." *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 178.

¹² In his groundbreaking study *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), narrative theorist Thomas Pavel anticipates the use of "possible worlds" in a maximalist context when he defines them as, "abstract collections of states of affairs, distinct from the statements describing those states, distinct thereby from the complete list of sentences kept in the *book about the world*" (50, emphasis author's).

¹³ A precursor to paraliterature that—with its erasure of high and low culture divisions—performs similar work in a context highly critical of maximalism, is film critic Manny Farber's distinction between "white elephant" and "termite art." The former, anticipating the chief criticisms of aesthetic excess, refers to works that saturate every available space of the screen with dramatic content. The subsequent "frieze of continuities" results in an overelaborated, self-important piece of art. Conversely, termite art supplies a minimalist corrective to "white elephant" pretensions, "where the spotlight of culture is nowhere in evidence, so that the craftsman can be ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it" (136). Following the introduction's

discussion of Bertram Jessup and Susan Stewart's respective commentaries on the false assumption that would conflate quantity with quality, Farber's theory is similarly suspicious of the conflation of greater aesthetic size with greater value. See *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Da Capo, 1998).

¹⁴ Kramer arguably adopts Delany's mock scholarly technique in his long-awaited magnum opus *The American People* trilogy (*Volume 1: Search for My Heart*) by making Fred Lemish—the author's sex-negative alter ego from *Faggots*—the novel's hero. Lemish, like his real-world counterpart, is writing a revisionist history of American life entitled *The American People*.

¹⁵ The paraphilia denoting erotic excitement derived from soiled or unwashed persons is classified as *salirophilia*, with the specific material forms of filth organized under the subsidiary term *mysophilia*. Largely the province of scholarly work on sexual pathology and deviance, these paraphilias are classically defined in the context of criminal mental illness (see Aggrawal, Campbell, Holmes and Holmes, Laws and O'Donohue, and Butcher for the definition's negative valences). Alternatively, studies ranging from Wilson's collection *Variant Sexuality*—with its rejection of “deviance” as an operant term—to Money's *Gay, Straight, and In-Between: The Sexology of Erotic Orientation* work less to moralize sexual behavior than consider it relationally, on a continuum of practices between consenting adults (see Bering and Peakman for less essentializing clinical discussions). Also, note Radden's *The Philosophy of Psychiatry: A Companion*, which points out the conspicuous removal of “mysophilia” from the DSM's fourth edition. Radden speculates that the term might be implicitly “subsumed, with some stretching, under fetishism or partialism” (61).

¹⁶ Sacha Arnold draws an interesting parallel between Hasler's legacy and the work of real-life logician Richard Montague, whose unsolved murder occurred under similarly mysterious circumstances. See “That's Just Semantics! (or the Proper Treatment of Richard Montague in Literary Fiction). *The Quarterly Conversation*. N.p. Web. 2008.

¹⁷ See Foltz and Davidson.

¹⁸ Readers are afforded a glimpse into just how long pornography has been an important avenue of exploration for Delany's work in his moving appreciation of close friend Michael Perkins' novel *Evil Companions* (1969), the “fundamental conceit” of which offers a clear antecedent to *The Mad Man's* polemical purpose (382). “Suppose,” Delany conjectures, “the new breed of pot-puffing, longhaired young people—beatniks or hippies—really were as perverted and sexually dangerous as a hypostasized American middle class and working class then claimed to fear...” (382). Indeed, Perkins' novel draws these excesses out to their appropriately shocking ends, giving the novel a force generated “from a combination of its milieu and its anger” (382). See *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and The Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover: University P of New England, 1999), pp. 377-383.

¹⁹ Though the abandoned Chelsea Piers are not directly referenced in-text, Delany's descriptions in the Proem and subsequent homologous correspondences he draws between the Minotaur and homeless characters like Mad Man Mike approximate the highly stylized gay iconography that burnished the locale's reputation as a well-known spot for public sex among men. Specifically the work of gay muralist Tava (Gustav Von Will), these large-scale caricatures featured gargantuan male figures in typically ecstatic poses of tumescence. See the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art's page on their exhibit "The Piers: Art and Sex along the New York Waterfront," April 4-July 7, 2012.

²⁰ The novel's class-consciousness manifests most pointedly in the near-constant mock-deference by homeless characters toward Marr (and, before him, in journal entries by Hasler). Marveling at why a professor would deign to spend his time with them, these character asides also inform Hasler's *Mad Man* text in the form of individual knowledge bases: "'Look at all the stuff you know that I don't,' I said. 'What stuff?' 'Everything from how to get along inside a mental hospital to how to get out of one. All you know about how to live out on the street—how to live rough in Riverside Park. We're very different, Mike. And the things you know that I don't could fill books.' To emphasize it, I picked up a book (*The Critique of Judgment*, wouldn't you know) and held it up before him. That seemed to impress him. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Maybe.'... [card 237:] (*The Mad Man* 404).

²¹ Delany has continued to clarify precisely what he means by this term as recently as a June 2012 interview with Delany scholar Kenneth James. Conducted as part of the media junket surrounding the author's most recent pornographic work *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), the interview focuses at length on Delany's sexually explicit works—about which the author provides the following definition:

Pornotopia...is the place where any relationship can become immediately sexualized. You walk into the business office, and you smile at the secretary and she smiles at you, and the next thing you know you're having riotous sex on the desk—this is the world of Pornotopia. Every once in a while something actually occurs in Pornotopia, but not all that frequently. And so...yes, when you write about explicit sex, often in the same way, you have to do a little juggling to make it sort of fit in with the story, and those little generic jugglings that you have to do create the texture of Pornotopia. And so, Pornotopia is the place where pornography happens. ("Samuel Delany interviewed by Kenneth James, June 18, 2012")

²² Delany's theoretical treatise *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU P, 1999) can be read as a companion piece to *The Mad Man*, covering similar ground as

both participant-observer and detached social scientist. Part-cultural history, part-ethnography, the study's examination of the Giuliani Administration's efforts to clean up Times Square and the subsequent displacement of the area's gay population posits a distinction between networking and contact in its passionate advocacy for queer urban spaces. Networking, Delany proposes, serves only the superficial purpose of spreading knowledge: an epistemological benefit that lacks any profound social consequences beyond one's career goals. Contact, in contrast, promotes an ontological and spatio-proximal value—with its non-competitive and interclass possibilities free from the work environment. See especially "Part 2: ...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red," 109-200.

²³ See Ed Park and Levi Stahl's blog *The Invisible Library* an alphabetized list-in-progress of fictitious authors and their books as featured in film, television, fiction, and graphic literature. Park has also written an essay for the *New York Times* about his obsession with documenting "books that exist only between the covers of other books" ("Titles Within a Tale," *New York Times.com*, June 19, 2009).

²⁴ Crediting new media theorists Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter for the concept, Hayles defines remediation as "the re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium" (781). See "Saving the Subject: Remediation in House of Leaves," *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 779-806.

²⁵ Though numerous instances of this hyper-attentive microanalysis abound, it reaches a kind of crescendo when the team of explorers arrives at Ash Tree Lane. Narrating their first encounter with the hallway, Zampanò writes, "Newt Kuellster suspects the first view of that place irreparably altered something in Holloway: 'His face loses color, something even close to panic suffuses his system. Suddenly he sees what fortune has plopped on his plate and how famous and rich it could make him, and he wants it. He wants all of it, immediately, no matter the cost'" (82). This quotation is superscripted by the novel's eighty-eighth footnote, which reads: "See Newt Kuellster's 'The Five and a Half Minute Holloway'" in *The Holloway Question* (San Francisco: Metalambino Inc., 1996), p. 532; as well as Tiffany Balter's "Gone Away" in *People*, v. 43, May 15, 1995. p. 89." (82). In addition to suggesting further study in "our world," the novel's amusing but believable simulation of scholarly conventions, and particularly its cheerful conflation of high (academic), low (mass media), and independent (small, underground presses and self-publishing) discourse communities, provides a good deal of its fun as viewers navigate the dizzying index of both sublimely and absurdly titled articles.

²⁶ The footnote, directing us to "See Lewis Marsano's 'Tom's 1865 Shelter' in *This Old House*, September/October 1995, p. 87" falls from a passage about domestic tensions in the Navidson household—tensions that send Tom "to the garage where he works for a while on a doll house he has started to build for Daisy..." (Danielewski 62).

²⁷ As in all academic satire, the joke here of course is that no one *but* an academic would conceptualize such topics. Again, see Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) for the playbook on this type of literary gamesmanship.

²⁸ For an energetic discussion of the various ways negation is treated as an ontological category, see Will Slocombe's "'This is Not For You': Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.1 (2005): 88-109.

²⁹ Espen J. Aarseth defines "ergodic literature" as being "derived from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning 'work' and 'path,' ...denot[ing] instances in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1-2). This concept is posited against the notion of "nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (Aarseth 1-2). See his *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).

³⁰ Truant calls attention to Zampanò's various strategies to elevate his own sage-like stature, of which the polyglot aspect is one quality. The character even comments about "how Zampanò likes to obscure the secondary sources he's using in order to appear more versed in primary documents" (Danielewski 107).

³¹ "Ouroboric" narrative, coined by Giorgio Manganelli with his *Centuria: One Hundred Ouroboric Novels* (New York: McPherson & Company, 2005), refers to "Ouroboros," the mythical image of the snake eating its own tail. Signifying a metafictional narrative's ability to loop back in on itself, usually through a rift in the space-time continuum, the method typically implicates the apparently "stable" diegetic level that purports to ground one's understanding of that object within a normative continuum.

³² Ludwig Wittgenstein anticipates this effect in the closing lines of the *Tractatus*, where he remarks that any reader who understands him eventually recognizes his logical propositions as nonsensical, "when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them" (85). With this reference, readers are encouraged to transcend the propositions laid out about a logically perfect language, in the same way that Danielewski's multiple frames of literary allusion construct figures out of other fictions—in effect, "throwing away the ladder" to "at last set [our] lands in order" (85). The referent—humanity's attempt to know the unknowable—at the heart of this textual overlay serves an ironically transcendent function by retrospectively mourning the impossibility of a stable relationship between language and reality, as Danielewski's objects of knowledge (language) become increasingly fragmentary before dissolving into a kind of tacit resignation by his characters at novel's end.

CHAPTER IV

AMBIENT ARCHIVES: ETHNORACIAL DIVERSITY AND THE UNBOUND BORDERS OF CANON FORMATION

An uncharacteristically visual response to “the most serious question” of its narrator’s life (117), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* concludes with a tacit admission of guilt. Having disclosed his ability to pass in white society, the now-exposed title figure’s appearance suddenly signifies a meaning altogether different for the young woman whose love inspires his candor. “When I looked up,” he observes, “she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired. She appeared not to have comprehended what I had said” (Johnson 121). Confirming his worst fears regarding the “ruse” upon which their budding courtship has seemingly depended, this reaction vindicates earlier apprehensions about a romance recounted in unusually self-conscious terms. Indeed, having previously “watched her to see if she was scrutinizing me, to see if she was looking for anything...which made me differ from the other men she knew” (Johnson 118), this would-be anthropologist’s alertness to his “dazzlingly white” companion’s judgmental gaze is outmatched only by a musician’s synesthetic zeal for sound. For “it was not her delicate beauty which attracted me most; it was her voice, a voice,” he continues, “which made one wonder how tones of such passionate color could come from so fragile a body” (Johnson 117).

This vignette is notable neither for its confessional quality (from a man who assiduously avoids its public expression), nor for the hint of romantic betrayal with which it accents his lifelong identity confusion—tidily resolved a few scenes later via reconciliation, marriage and children. Rather, the exchange points to a larger problematic at work in Johnson’s groundbreaking novel: the way “vision” speaks for “voice” through a subject position curiously resistant to both. Although the Ex-Colored Man’s decision to pass in plain sight clearly emerges from his reluctance to self-identify with the features of black community membership under Jim Crow, this social imperative is often outweighed by the compulsive desire to understand how such features “compose” his fellow citizens. Thus, despite his earnest desire “to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classical music form” (Johnson 88), the narrator’s much sought-after but frequently deferred “birthright” (Johnson 125) signals a clear tension at the intersection of sight and sound. Through the key binary of visibility and occlusion, Johnson’s novel accordingly presents a decisive challenge to the belief that race narratives rest upon “visibly” minoritarian voices for their expression, initiating a critical transition in African American literary history even while maintaining continuity across its traditions.

Bookended on the one hand by Du Bois’s veil,¹ and, on the other, by the “peculiar disposition of the eyes”² that focuses Ellison’s hermeneutic of suspicion, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*’s ubiquitous “race question”³ evolves from a consideration of how vision authorizes voice to an interrogation of the very principles upon which perceptual authority is founded. Whether metaphorically reflecting

institutional condescension toward those black pupils “looked down upon” (Johnson 9) regardless of their scholarly promise, or romantically generated in the embodied angles of dominance and subordination between the narrator and his beloved, Johnson’s exploration of race as a socially constructed phenomenon is predicated on hierarchies of scale. Following Andrew Herod’s important observation noted at various points in this study, scale has been historically interpreted as an ontological reality rather than an epistemological tool contingent on subject position (25). Johnson intuitively critiques this categorical confusion grounded in Enlightenment assumptions about race through the novel’s treatment of positionality relative to perspective.⁴ Framing character conversations about race through a series of scalar tropes that visually constellate this perspectival emphasis as a clear point of departure, *The Autobiography* consequently functions as a rhetorical interface between the knowledge systems that give shape to racializing discourses and the cultural practices that enact them.

The novel’s penultimate (and longest) tenth chapter is exemplary on this point, opening and closing with the black body figured as an outsized analytical object worthy of scrutiny, surveillance, and study. Observing “a tall, broad-shouldered, almost gigantic, colored man” (89), the Ex-Colored Man narrates his fellow traveler’s specimen-like status as a symbol of racial uplift⁵ in an appreciative, if covert, regime of spectatorial activity that covets the “Negro gentleman’s” ability to “attract general attention as he strode the deck in a sort of majestic loneliness” (89). Even more provocatively, the “fine physical proportions” of this co-passenger inspire a kind of phenotypical reverie in the novel’s narrator, rendering his “admiration” for the man’s facial features, skin tone, and

overall comportment⁶ in an inversely proportionate relation with his own occluded identity. When a racist passenger unsuccessfully attempts to have the black passenger ejected from the compartment, the narrator engages him with this uncomfortable information—the access of which is only possible given the Ex-Colored Man’s own covert status. After revealing the slight, the Ex-Colored Man describes his interlocutor’s response as issuing forth from “a voice which comported perfectly with his size and appearance,” leavened by the mild admission ““I think my curiosity overcomes any objections I might have”” (Johnson 89).

With the word “objections,” Johnson introduces the chapter’s overt rhetorical agenda, in which language itself is implicated in his visual critique through assorted cognates of the signifier “object.” The narrator’s analytical alertness to the word’s assorted connotations culminates with its speaker pushing back:

‘Do you know, I don’t *object* to anyone having prejudices so long as those prejudices don’t interfere with my personal liberty. Now the man you are speaking of had a perfect right to change his seat if I in any way interfered with his appetite or his digestion. I would have no reason to complain if he removed to the farthest corner of the saloon, or even if he got off the ship; but when his prejudice attempts to move me one foot, one inch, out of the place where I am comfortably located, then I *object*.’ On the word ‘object’ he brought his great fist down on the table in front of us with such a crash that everyone in the room turned to look. (emphasis mine, Johnson 89-90)

Following the narrator’s wholly visual, “objectifying” introduction of his counterpart, he generalizes these revelations about the continued status of African American males as unsightly “objects” in American society: first, in conversation with his giant companion;

and then through an explicit debate he overhears erupting among four white train passengers on the so-called “Negro Question.”

The discussion surrounding this question, for which the narrator remains silent, reaches a crescendo when—in a reversal that rests on the assumption of white rather than black inferiority—the Northern interlocutor asks his Southern antagonist, “Can you name a single one of the great fundamental and original intellectual achievements which have raised man in the scale of civilization that may be credited to the Anglo-Saxon?” (96). Tongue-tied in response, the bigoted Texan listens quietly to the Northerner’s enumeration of African supremacy in every area of cultural achievement, from the fine arts to the sciences to assorted innovations throughout human history: a barrage of commentary the narrator notes as “pass[ing] a little beyond [the Texan’s] limits” (Johnson 97). But despite the triumphant mood elicited by this rejoinder, the competitive nature of the exchange nevertheless perpetuates one of the fundamental assumptions behind black modernist discourses on race—the transference of literature as a mere “index of racial progress, integrity, or ability” (Warren 10). In so doing, Johnson arguably implicates the very field—literature—in which his characters’ conversation is framed by dramatizing its particulars within the pages of his genre-bending autobiographical “novel.”

Using Johnson’s groundbreaking work to frame its title query, Kenneth Warren’s controversial study *What Was African American Literature?* addresses this dynamic at the proverbial scene of that discipline’s inception. With respect to the novel’s unusual subject position, Warren contends that the Ex-Colored Man’s decision to evade the heroic

role associated with in-group solidarity during the period discloses the ideological double-bind at work in African American literature as a whole—namely, “the paradox that the condition one was fighting to overcome was the very condition that gave one’s life meaning” (18). In this way, the narrator’s calculated silences ironically “speak” to what Warren asserts is Johnson’s most salient observation: that the Ex-Colored Man’s core existential dilemma reflects anxieties over the entire “destiny of black character” following Jim Crow’s inevitable dissolution (Warren 21).

Such silences speak louder than words when considered within the equally institutional context of an emergent American literary canon to which Johnson’s achievement clearly belongs. Indeed, this context, much like *The Autobiography’s* muted message, often realizes its clearest expression in the unspoken part of the conversation: canon formation with an expanded focus on ethnoracial diversity. A critically important subject in contemporary literary history, canonical critique opens to scrutiny the problematic set of assumptions governing what should (and should not) constitute “great” literature within a national literary tradition. Targeting the legacy of literary canon formation as a widely contested site on the larger battlefield that composes the culture wars of the mid-to-late-1980s, this chapter examines the subject’s multicultural turn from the vantage point of self-conscious narrative practice. With a specific emphasis on the neglected subject of long-form or maximalist novels by writers of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, my analysis considers the larger ethnoaesthetic traditions to which my respective target texts—Gayl Jones’s *Mosquito* (1999) and Joshua Cohen’s *Witz* (2009)—belong in order to propose a new, countercanonical variant of literary maximalism.

Where chapter two of this study examined the critical conversation surrounding the discourse of encyclopedism in an effort to more clearly account for multitudinal forms of reflexive identity expressed in large-scale novels, and chapter three explored the way mock scholarship maps the intellectual space surrounding its research-driven narrators (both of whom “become” their projects through full immersion in the literary labyrinths their scholarship constructs), then this fourth chapter assumes an even more institutionally reflexive perspective with respect to its allopoietic method. Featuring imaginary representations of archival and museal spaces, these multiethnic maximalist fictions serve as fundamentally aural repositories, critiquing a belated ethnic literary canon debate even as they bear witness to its increasingly pervasive influence on American literary history. In my view, these selections and the issues they address share the sensibilities of newer scholarly work on the meaning and purpose of the archive; for example, in a recent theory of the “ethnic archive” Dana Williams and Marissa Lopez posit the claim that

If the archive has historically provided an opportunity to establish tradition, the ethnic archive affords an opportunity to do the opposite: to challenge assumptions cultivated as truths; to contest the hegemony of the nation-state’s imagined pasts and gestures; and to invoke a multiethnic cacophony of voices that require reconsiderations of established knowledge and knowledge production alike (358).

Across vast surveys of the stereotypes that mark their marginalization, *Mosquito* and *Witz*, I argue, record the conspicuous gaps, errors, and omissions against which rationales for canonical classification are typically transcribed, and so respond in literal terms to what Paul Lauter describes as “the implications of the material and institutional

conditions of authorship and literary study, and with the functions of canons in establishing and maintaining boundaries” (Morrissey 182). These gaps, I further contend, ironically reveal an aesthetic subtext beneath the blur of language their verbose narrators use to unmask and critique the stability of the canon—an overloaded approach that collapses the metaphorical borders constructed between national space, ethnic identity, and literary representations of both components.

In this way, *Mosquito* and *Witz* ultimately promote not so much a representative widening of the canon’s multiethnic archive, as the total dissolution and destruction of the exclusionary ideological boundaries it has historically honored and preserved. Accordingly, Jones and Cohen flood their novels with information that complicates the reification of difference and diversity accompanying discussions of the canon by alternately enacting and critiquing two key tenets of critical race theory—differential racialization and the voice-of-color thesis. In fiction as in life, differential racialization argues that individual fictional characters are irreducible to any one race or ethnicity given the essentialist fallacy challenged by social constructionism. Conflating physical appearance with judgments about intrinsic character and ability, this fallacy has fomented the historical development and inculcation of negative personal attitudes toward and prejudicial public policy against racial and ethnic minorities due to differences in phenotypical make-up—a phenomenon Paul Gilroy aptly terms the “body-coded order of identification and differentiation” (120). Similarly, the voice-of-color thesis presumes that minority status accords the writer or speaker “presumed competence to speak about race and racism” given the inability of their “white counterparts” to understand these

subjects from the vantage point of lived experience (Delgado and Stefancic 9).

Deconstructing these embodied biases while maintaining the importance of their visibility within an overwhelmingly white heteronormative male literary tradition, *Mosquito* and *Witz* metonymize debates over canonicity through border narratives that challenge fundamental assumptions about the ontology of ethnoracial difference.⁷

Centering on that well-worn and largely self-critical phrase for describing large-scale, all-encompassing national fictions, the “Great American Novel” (or “GAN” to borrow an acronym from Henry James), my discussion specifically considers the creative ways in which *Mosquito* and *Witz* undermine a tradition that aspires to totalize national identity through a panoramic approach to its social, political, and cultural life. One step beyond the more generalized narrative preoccupations with scholarly knowledge work in chapter three, my focus here shifts from questioning the nature of literary criticism itself to the larger legacy of which it is a part. Lawrence Buell’s recent *The Dream of the Great American Novel* rightly calls the outmoded canonical paradigm into question in an effort to recover the concealed alterities at work in classic maximalist fictions such as *Moby-Dick*⁸ and *Gravity’s Rainbow* while also elevating the profile of more diverse canonical interventions such as *Invisible Man*, *Blood Meridian*, *Beloved*, and *Tropic of Orange*, among others. Building on classic and contemporary scholarship in American Studies and multiethnic literary criticism, my chapter analyses join Buell’s reinvestigation of the canon’s “increasingly deterritorialized conception of ‘the American’ itself in recognition of its broader transatlantic, transpacific, and hemispheric origins and cross-border affiliations” (48) to explore how *Mosquito* and *Witz* subvert traditional conceptions of

canon formation as they exhaustively interrogate the critical contexts that surround their subjects: African-American and Jewish-American fiction. To this end, my discussion demonstrates the way Jones and Cohen mobilize a series of critical arguments about the spurious integrity of assumptions regarding the ethnic literatures to which their novels belong—whether defined by the literary legacies of the cultural groups with whom their authors self-identify or the wider stream of world literary production in which such legacies participate.

Movement and “the Liberated Voice”: Canonical Critique in Jones and Cohen

Shortly after prompting his title with the question “What then [is] the dream of the Great American Novel...?” Lawrence Buell ventures a tentative response with the admission that “GAN-talk can’t be exonerated from the charge of bad exceptionalism...[given] the fact that the novels held up as the likeliest candidates have been anything but patriotic” (17). In other words, the “greatness” of the Great American Novel subversively depends on the work’s explicit resistance and repudiation of precisely those nationalist verities that would exploit the legacy of literary “achievement” as an ideological tool. Specifically, Buell’s inversion posits the GAN’s long shadow as a “Trojan Horse” of sorts, with the scalar implications of “greatness” an outsized but ultimately hollow conceptual shell filled with the comparatively modest motives of critique. Understood within the larger rhetorical framework of American exceptionalism, Buell’s pointed evaluation of the Great American Novel’s dubious “greatness” follows Donald Pease’s two-fold definition of exceptionalism as both “political doctrine” and “regulatory fantasy” that “define[s], support[s], and defend[s] U.S. national identity”

(11). Acknowledging the twenty-first century's increasingly decentered, topological sovereignty, Buell's remark notably joins Pease's emphasis on "the sovereign power of the imagination" (3) in critical contrast with the sovereign power of the state. This topological emphasis transforms my baseline question from previous chapters regarding to what extent "exceptionally" large texts interrogate various aspects of American exceptionalism in the postwar era to a consideration of the permanent state of exception through which America has conducted its affairs as the central global superpower since the Second World War. Predicated on an ironically charged exceptionalism that operates "less through the exception of individuals, groups, or institutions and more through the exceptional quality of networks or of their topologies" (Galloway and Thacker 40), topological sovereignty revises the maximalist novel's earlier encyclopedic formulation as "a national text" coterminous with territorial borders to account for its contemporary status as a decentralized network that traces the topology of an increasingly unbounded and deracinated national space.

Following this logic, my chapter's controlling definition of scale emerges from Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker's proposed third "exceptional topology" in their ongoing political ontology of networks: "movement." However, where individuation and multiplicity—the key theoretical principles guiding chapters two and three of this study—only "serve to portray a static snapshot view of a network," the concept of movement calls attention to "the inherently dynamic, process-based qualities of networks" (61). Mapping these metacognitive movements onto the myriad arguments that compose the canon formation debate, Jones and Cohen's novels present their

narrators as authorial amanuenses who extend the possibilities for literary inclusion by making the subject of race, ethnicity, and citizenship literal plot points within their stories. However, given the canon's slow integration as a source of anger and rage (a gesture too little, too late), these fictions simultaneously work to destroy the categorical integrity of those canonical systems that would deign to "accept" them—a stance worthy of "scorched-earth" maximalisms in the tradition of Menippean satires such as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) or László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989).

The canon's status as a lightning rod for partisan political debate can perhaps be most evocatively recounted in U.S. Education Secretary William J. Bennett's controversial 1985 report, "To Reclaim a Legacy." Bennett's argument notably diminishes the role of racial and ethnic difference in this context by elevating "the best that [Western] tradition has to offer" over its negligible nod to "our pluralistic nation" (30), this exceptionalist rhetoric pays modest lip service to the "long overlooked cultural achievements of many groups," at the same time he is quick to caution "our eagerness...to sacrifice the principle that formerly lent substance and continuity to the curriculum, namely that each college and university should recognize and accept its vital role as conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization" (29-30). Bennett's opening salvo was amplified in an exchange less than a year later during a panel at Yale University later recalled by Roger Kimball, whose notorious polemic *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* identifies in no uncertain terms the debate's two sides. On the one hand, Kimball positively identifies those who agree with

Bennett's notion of "the best that has been thought and said" as practiced and disseminated by "a common culture founded upon a recognized canon of great works" (101). On the other, he deplores the rise of an "adversary culture" (xv) in which the "value of Western culture and civilization...was undermined" (101). A binary referenced in too many studies to recount for the purposes of this analysis,⁹ the tension between a traditional curriculum and the counterculture experiments of the 1960s and 70s later manifests in a second wave of criticism that unproblematically builds on the legacy of the latter.

For example, by the time Paul Lauter writes *Canons and Contents* (1991) just a few years after Bennett and Kimball's essays, he is empowered to "underline the fact that canon criticism was initially an effort to carry the politics of the 1960s social movements into the work socially-engaged academics actually did, especially into our classrooms" (Morrissey 177). Amid the reactionary voices of its predominately white detractors, the debate thus complicates to an even greater degree among those proponents for whom a more integrated canon carries with it a set of corresponding internal assumptions about the inculcation of ethnic difference in a non-literary context. As Madolyn Jablon has shown in her analysis of voice, metanarrative, and the oral tradition, *Black Metafiction: Self Consciousness in African American Literature*, the movement toward a "self-authenticating voice" (112)—in opposition to the racial ventriloquism performed by white culture's historical attempts to speak for communities of color—is a key feature in the development of an African American literary tradition. Toni Morrison's deliberately elegiac *Beloved*, for example, offers a chorus of open voices in an attempt to give speech

to the unspeakable, an oral antidote to the tightly circumscribed racial taxonomies scribbled into the notebooks of slave overseer “Schoolteacher.” Calling attention to its own futile project of representing the destroyed archive of the Middle Passage, *Beloved* stages the complicated tension at work in classic slave narratives between “orality and slavery and literacy and freedom” (Heffernan 84). Morrison’s recovery or “re-memory” project recognizes the impossibility of locating the origins of this historical injustice, and so resists those representational and categorical modes of discourse so inextricably embedded within the hegemonic practices of antebellum slave economies. As much an antidote to Schoolteacher’s columned ledger filled with the pseudoscience of raciology as the literary canon’s historical omission of voices of color, *Beloved*’s “congealing and consolidation of voices in writing” as Alessandro Portelli has argued, “...completes the dizzying exchange between the concrete and the immaterial, between spirits and history, which pivots on the oxymoron of the ghost incarnate” (Moretti, *The Novel* 889-890). Haunted by history, Morrison’s pedagogy-inflected texts confront the limitations in American self-knowledge even as they demand their readers participate in the legacies those practices have wrought.

Among other archive-driven historiographic metafiction such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), this self-knowledge often transcends the various forms of exclusion and inclusion upon which American national consciousness defines itself, both within and across borders. With a name inspired by American literature’s most excessive national poet, Walt Whitman, Kingston’s protagonist Wittman Ah Sing is an extravagantly expressive playwright given to stream-

of-consciousness exhortations about his favorite American literature—shot through with spirited defenses of his native Chinese culture. Imagining himself an Aquarius Age Sun Wukong (the Monkey King), Wittman’s journey dramatizes Kingston’s own experience as a cross-cultural *encyclopédiste* by incorporating texts from Homer to the sixteenth-century Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West* to *Ulysses* (1922) to assorted Beat writers within his repertoire. Notably, the protagonist’s would-be Whitmanian ebullience often unmask the dominant prejudices of the day and gives rise to his own as he negotiates his role as a reluctant prophet in an era of increasingly liberatory politics and cultural pluralism. Highlighting the pivotal role authenticity plays in the critical distance between self and space constituted by citizenship, Kingston’s novel explores the problematic experiences of cultural minorities in the United States in relation to literary canon formation.

Underscoring these counter-canonical tensions between aesthetics and activism is an argument about style that divides postwar prose fiction into, on the one hand, the avant-garde experimentality of white, male “neo-modernist” authors, and, on the other, the apparent realism of an increasingly visible multiethnic contingent. This so-called “purist argument,” that defines postmodern literature as a chiefly formalist enterprise, has been widely debunked for producing a “strikingly race- and gender-restricted canon” (Steiner 431). Introduced in Wendy Steiner’s influential chapter “Postmodern Fictions, 1960-1990” from *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. 7* (1999), the purist argument assumes that “art progresses along only one line and that [...] anything not conforming to the central aim of the series is outside it” (431). A critical

commonplace of this type, Steiner cautions, typically “reduc[es] art to a single... peculiarly mechanistic... function and aim, and thus to an extremely narrow range of possibilities” (431) amid the aesthetic diversity of postwar American literary history.

Alternatively, she suggests a “sociological” or “thematic” turn emerging in the early 1970s that highlights those marginalized voices who insist on “the validity of personal experience” over the “angst and hyperrationality” of their upper-middle class, technocratic counterparts (Steiner 441). Recognizing its reductive impact on the critical conversation, Steiner calls this overly neat distinction a false dichotomy in which “the absolute boundary between two visions – between “high” postmodernism and women’s, ethnic, or minority art – is a fiction maintained by a mind-set lodged in modernism” (442). Indeed, it was due to postmodernism’s irreverent departure from the presumptive elitism of this modernist readership—in which the progressive experimentation with form guiding the sophisticated audience’s allegiances was replaced by a turn toward “thematiz[ing] the act of reading” (Steiner 445)—that a more heterogeneous reception of diverse class and educational backgrounds was able to emerge.

Evincing varying degrees of self-awareness about the size and scope of their works, authors of diverse ethnic backgrounds such as Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Leon Forrest, Colson Whitehead, Percival Everett, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Octavia Butler, Helena Maria Viramontes, and Victor LaValle challenge this binary. And yet, while all of these authors utilize metafictional approaches to their craft, very few of them have done so in the context of maximalist works that one would associate with the popular reach and sustained influence of canonical status. Even the two

most notable long-form exceptions to this rule—Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (768 pages) and Forrest’s *Divine Days* (1144 pages)—in addressing the literary traditions to which their authors belong, conversely avoid acknowledging in an explicit manner the discussions that construct those traditions. Consequently, my discussion moves beyond the purely demographic—questioning the historical absence of a greater number of maximalist novels by writers of color and diverse ethnic backgrounds—to engage instead with the very pressures that inform the question.

My intervention begins by interrogating the assumption introduced in Tom LeClair’s *The Art of Excess*, where the critic maintains that writers from marginalized ethnic backgrounds, having been denied full participation in American culture, are by extension denied the enlarged vision that accompanies this privileged purview (29). Challenging the totalizing definition of perspective this assumption rests on, I claim that writers speaking out of a marginalized community’s experience are uniquely positioned to push the boundaries of a white, Eurocentric form—and furthermore, that it is maximalist metafiction’s unusually pluralistic treatment of voice that makes such a position possible. Despite the political imperative of contesting the canonical legacy of a tradition at the same time that they assimilate its aesthetic purview, multiethnic maximalism seeks out the gaps that open between the “polyphony” and “dissonant chorality” that Stefano Ercolino cites as the key features of narrative voice in the maximalist novel. The former, which Ercolino traces to Franco Moretti’s study on the “modern epic,” “aspires to totality through a strong dialogic opening” while the latter takes the fragment’s logic as its point of departure (48). In other words, the collision of

these two forms, one predicated on totality and the other multiplicity, figures voice as “a semantic entity in which the conflicting perspectives of author, narrator, characters, and readers are played out, the place in which geographic space and time are disassembled and recombined by the voracious storytelling frenzy of the maximalist narrator” (Ercolino 50).

Acceding to Tom LeClair’s notable omission of ethnic voices from the systems novel genre,¹⁰ Ercolino’s theoretical principles nonetheless resonate with the rise of a more diverse authorship in the production of long-form novels—a revision my allopoietical emphasis adds to the critical conversation in a close examination of the respective narrators of Jones and Cohen’s novels. Specifically, these ambient archives—as my chapter’s title indicates—both expand and explode the literary canon through the ultra-inquisitive voices of two key knowledge worker archetypes, “the social detective” and “the curator.” Originally hypothesized by critic Frederic Jameson, these allodiegetic figures problematize the intellectual milieus of which they are a part by revising historically epistemological roles associated with the solution of individual crimes or recovery of lost artifacts. Notably, Jameson’s study on images of globality in postmodern and Third World cinema entitled *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992) proposes a generic shift in the literary form of the detective story that occurs in the transition from a post-industrial to information-based economy. A form that becomes more commonly associated with a rise in urban populations, the classical detective story, Jameson claims, originally revolved around three figures: a lone detective, a victim, and a criminal. Asserting that this individual paradigm transfers to a collective one due to the larger

institutional schemes that affect mass society with the proliferation of information and communications technologies following the Second World War, Jameson identifies paranoia as the controlling theme of a new genre termed the “conspiratorial allegory of late capitalist totality,” or the “conspiracy thriller” (*The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 22). In this new genre, the lone sleuth becomes a “social detective” intent on uncovering the large-scale intrigues associated with corporate and governmental entities.¹¹ Consumed by mysteries often too complicated to solve given the cognitive limitations of individual deduction and overwhelmed by their employment within gigantic social spaces, the social detective embodies the pursuit of truth in a world system that often occludes his or her presence by the force of distance between subject position and object pursued.

Complicating the notion of alienation that Jameson argues opens up between “local positioning of individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated” (“Cognitive Mapping” 353), my allopoietical analysis of *Mosquito* examines how the dialectic of inclusivity and exclusivity upon which the literary canon depends is deliberately foregrounded through moments of public exposure in which the rhetorical “occasion” or *kairos* demands speech. In specific passages, I look at how the narrator’s oscillations between extreme volubility and strategic silences, both vocally and through inscriptions or signs on the body, complicates and is complicated by race, gender, and/or cultural identities of the individual conducting the “investigation.” Touching on the descriptive tensions between identity and anonymity through the onomastic excess of names and naming, *Mosquito*’s outrageously loquacious, truck-driving autodidact-narrator Sojourner Jane Nadine Johnson, a.k.a. “Mosquito” (her

childhood nickname, though she prefers “Nadine”) self-identifies with three exclusive groups in the text, each of which she casts a skeptical eye toward in the midst of expressing in-group solidarity: the Sanctuary Movement, the Cosmic Detective Agency, and the Daughters of Nzingha. Vehicles for her seemingly relentless drive to discourse on varied forms of knowledge and the mechanics of knowledge production, these three underground organizations supply stops on the literal information superhighway (she sporadically references the Web as a mode of research inquiry along the way) that traces the narrator’s navigation of the U.S.-Mexico border in the emergent Internet Age.

And yet, Nadine’s discourses are just as readily informed by earnest and often enthusiastic expressions of ignorance—the stigma of “not knowing” both a catalyst to the protagonist’s further plan for study and a trigger for her acute awareness about the circuitous ways in which knowledge work accords self-respect, community esteem, and material advancement relative to race and ethnicity in American society. The novel, I maintain, rightly reads these expressions as a consequence of being left out of the intellectual conversation, and repeatedly targets canonicity as the focal point of that discussion. However, Jones’s interest in representational parity is not merely a platform for inclusion and advance. By contrast, Nadine’s often maddeningly diffuse national and transnational investigation¹² on a dizzying array of subjects—from landscape and physiognomy to personal tastes both culinary and literary—is closer to Ishmael Reed’s similarly archaeological operative PaPa LaBas in the author’s seminal *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972).

An archive that restores the forgotten legacy of occult folklore and legend to African American history via the “Jes Grew” fever permeating the novel’s 1930s setting, *Mumbo Jumbo* radically elbows its way into the canon via its wholesale deconstruction of the largely white, Judeo-Christian “Wallflower Order” cabal that supplies the novel’s reigning conspiracy. Moreover, *Mumbo Jumbo*’s great skill at opening a productive dialogue between Anglophone and African cultures has had telling results, given its wide influence and acclaim that even extends to Harold Bloom’s notable inclusion in his Eurocentric polemic *The Western Canon*. But Reed’s novel, like its successor *Mosquito*, subversively reveals this lost history as a secret text that lies beneath the foundations of American life¹³—always already superseding rather than merely supplementing the grand narrative of Western culture. As a “Cosmic Detective”-turned “hidden agenda conspiracy specialist” (Jones 550), Nadine’s journey follows a parallel trajectory, albeit with the added dimension of gender difference to complicate Reed’s problematically misogynist tone as one of its key areas of critique.

A sequel of sorts to the social detective role, Jameson’s recent notion of the curator emerges from the critic’s anti-canonical belief that “we cannot exactly write new literary histories today” due to what he calls “the problem posed by memory of the text” (“New Literary History after the End of the New” 384). Citing the increasingly virtual, intangible features of postmodern artistic production, in which analytically legible textual processes and the critical apparatuses mobilized to understand them are all-but-obsolete, Jameson’s concern over the “dizzying multiplication of presences on the page” (“New” 383) speaks volumes about the emergent maximalist tradition to which *Mosquito* and

Witz belong. Akin to Federman's critifictional conceit outlined in chapter three and this study's allopoietical emphasis as a whole, Jameson's claim stems from the fact that "...we [critics] cannot execute them in the way the older framers of projects (artistic or not) then patiently brought these first glimmering ideas to full realization step-by-step and in concrete detail. For such new ideas are not to be realized, they are and remain purely theoretical ("New" 386). In contrast, Jameson suggests a different kind of critical program—a "new narrative paradigm of history" more akin to an artistic installation than a work of literary history or theory:

Let's rather imagine that these newer works, or 'texts' as it is more appropriate to call them, are mixtures of theory and singularity, which is to say that in some fashion they transcend the old opposition between a work and its criticism or interpretation that held for an aesthetic committed to the concept of the work in general, and to the security of closure and of reified form. Now that opposition—between the critic and the creator, the artist and the review—an opposition over which so much bad blood has been spilled at least since the eighteenth century—is no longer binding; and the critic has been transformed, has mutated, into something like the curator, or has indeed become indistinguishable from the writer himself. ("New" 385-386)

Unseen until the novel's final pages, the narrator of Joshua Cohen's *Witz* occupies this quasi-oracular, curatorial role, through which the painstaking recovery of a nearly extinct Jewish culture manifests as a series of mock-elegiac set pieces. Focalized through this figure, Cohen's cultural recycling project shifts from a nostalgic to critical mode that first mourns, then interrogates, notions of cultural authenticity or originality through an apocalyptic narrative that freely borrows from the legacy of Jewish American literature while demolishing his contemporary cohort's pretensions to that legacy.

After a millennial plague kills 18 million of his fellow “Affiliated,” the Gargantua-like Benjamin Israelien survives in the shadow of another giant: the “great green monster” of American assimilation herself, Lady Liberty. Mocking the wise-child narration of precocious polymaths from other Jewish American literary fictions (Foer, Krauss, Auslander, Shteyngart, et al.), Cohen advances his polemical goals via Ben’s formal digressions—a strategy that subverts the late-modernist registers of nostalgic longing and dread through which the contemporary Jewish American novel often conflates the Shoah with post-9/11 trauma narrative. Given the widespread rejection of aesthetic category’s conflation with ethnic identity, my analysis also finds in Joshua Cohen’s *Witz* a parodic nod to the canon as a closed repository of knowledge in contrast with the proto-hypertext experiments of millennial fictions. This forced epistemological closure, I contend, restores the subject of scalar variability to a modernist register of nostalgic longing, typically figured through the mock-curatorial role of the precocious polymath. Impossibly wise beyond their years, the typically adolescent protagonists that populate these texts displace the conspiratorial valences associated with the Jamesonian social detective of first-wave literary postmodernism (picaresque knowledge workers such as Grass’s Oskar Matzerath, Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas, Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, et al.) with a knowing return to sincerity that combines the self-reference of metafictional aesthetics with the pathos of traditional realism.

Gayl Jones’s Aural Literacies

Long a staple of white representations of indigenous peoples, the maximalist form and its critical figure are perhaps most famously illustrated in a metafictional context by

Cormac McCarthy's blood-soaked account of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands during the mid-nineteenth century, *Blood Meridian* (1985). Personified by the hairless, possibly demiurgic giant Judge Holden, whose obsession with total knowledge underwrites the expansionist rhetoric of the period, McCarthy's encyclopedic curator is a sentinel patrolling the earth in search of specimens to annotate in his ever-present ledger. The Mephistophelean Judge, who alternately calls to mind the Satan of Job and a coldly rational Quixote, acknowledges the fact that "books lie" (116) while ceaselessly seeking to draw the natural world and its representation into correspondence. The "suzerain," or "keeper-overlord" the Judge explains, rules "even when there are other rulers," thus, epistemological closure is here imagined as imperialist control over land and knowledge of landscape (198). As anti-polemical as it is obsessed with the political economy of nineteenth-century westward expansion, *Blood Meridian's* monolithic narrative voice shrouds its critique of manifest destiny in a cosmic-nihilistic fog of bloodletting that speaks for no one in particular: neither the white barbarians bent on spreading the good news of settler colonialism, nor the subaltern populations subject to their genocidal practices.

Akin to McCarthy's brute force renderings of human nature, Gayl Jones' *Mosquito* nevertheless departs significantly from the violent imagery of its author's much-heralded 1970s work. With its title image of a blood-bloated insect, the author's latest (and possibly last)¹⁴ novel seems to owe more to the craft that served her in the long interval between *Eva's Man* (1976) and her National Book Award-nominated *The*

Healing (1998): poetry. In fact, as early as 1981 Jones nodded to the title creature in her long poem “Wild Figs and Secret Places,” which begins: “Memory is a mosquito/
Pregnant again/And out for blood” (20). Suggesting the turgid, overflowing style common to the novel’s narration, Jones’s image relays the self-taught (and more often than not, *overheard*) nature of its narrator’s reflections. As much a love letter to the canon’s monumental reach as an attempt to puncture its pomp and circumstance, *Mosquito*’s encyclopedically recursive structure at times feels much like the etymological encircling that word connotes. Filled to bursting with serious literary criticism and theory, casual newsletters, advertisements and newsletters for literary societies, dramatic interludes, and—most significantly—a want ad for a cosmic detective agency, Jones’s novel works to break down formal and generic divisions which for the author are clearly extensions of the racializing categories historically responsible for exclusion in literary circles.

Writing of *Mosquito* in a claim that could also apply to *Witz*—Carrie Tirado Bramen asserts that Jones’s novel “challenges the traditional hierarchical assumptions that inform narration by reimagining the spatial and temporal dimensions of the novel. *Mosquito* is centered around the problematic of racial characterization, which foregrounds the spatial process of characterization over the temporal dimension of plot development” (130). The “descriptive novel,” in Bramen’s terms, works against the form’s dominant narrative mode—which favors the organization of time over space—and so risks stasis or torpor in a “reversal...where stillness or description is privileged over action” (131). Stretching the form’s contours plays on both the varied “movements” or

cult-like collectives to which Mosquito belongs and the novel's storyline about her actual "movements" as a truck-driver along the Dairy Mart Road that runs parallel to the U.S.-Mexico line from San Ysidro to the Tijuana River Valley. That is to say, the novel's ironic mobility is generated largely through its logic of repetition; for, as ceaseless as Mosquito's journeys as a truck-driver and Sanctuary Movement worker seem to be, her mobility, in Bramen's estimation, "becomes monotonous" for reasons that outweigh the exigencies of narrative arc and pace (131). Rather, Bramen concludes, Jones's ambitious purpose of dismantling the closed loop of stereotyping is outdistanced by an even more subversive goal "that the repetition and circularity of stereotyping produces its own self-referential world beyond which there are no authentic identitarian categories" (127). This "metadiscourse on stereotyping" occurs in slow degrees through Nadine's relentless torrents of speech, which run the gamut of discursive registers, including cliché, homily, speculation, conjecture, gossip, and innuendo that "refuses to transcend stereotypes just as it refuses to authenticate them" (127).

Where my own analysis of *Mosquito* departs from Bramen's arises at the level of her claim that "There are no fixed standards by which literary characters can be measured and evaluated" (127)—an implicit challenge to the mission of literary canon formation. In other words, while Bramen's argument concentrates on the "real" implications of Nadine's personal relationships for interethnic agency and alliance, her resistance to more closely examining the way literature destabilizes the hegemony of racializing categories omits the most significant aspect of Jones's novel. Thus, my canon-centered discussion more closely aligns with Casey Clabough's analysis of Jones's 1990s fiction, in which

the critic senses a shift in Jones's formerly Afrocentric fictions to a "Latinocentric or even 'noncentric' [paradigm]," in which "many of the various ethnic individuals [have] transcended or successfully signifying upon the stereotypical characteristics often associated with their respective cultures" (247). With this deliberate overworking of identity categories, Jones alerts her audience to the various techniques she will deploy to undermine readerly expectations regarding African American literature writ large. Central to this reflexive gesture, Clabough contends, is the narrator's constant evocations of literary representation and publication—a tendency typically delivered by Nadine's best friend and self-styled public intellectual, Delgadina. In a related passage, the critic cites Jones's likening of literal borders to literary ones:

Delgadina is writing what she calls a border novel for her border art project. She has a long and involved first chapter because she wants it to be like the people who reads the novel has to cross a border to get into the novel. I tells her that they's a lot of the people that ain't going to want to cross that border to get into her novel (qtd. in Clabough 264).

This acknowledgment of the border-as-metaphor recalls the way Claudia Sadowski-Smith distinguishes between narratives that literally unfold on the U.S.-Mexico border and those that use the concept in an allegorical capacity to signify Chicana/o culture. Uniting culturally marginalized groups under a larger liminal category that broadens the actual territorial boundary's implications by "liberat[ing] it from the notion of space to encompass notions of sex, class, gender, ethnicity, identity, and community" (34), this metaphorical border has also garnered criticism for precisely this dislocated context. For, as Sadowski-Smith continues, "One of the more troubling aspects of 'liberating' the

border from its spatial referent to denote Chicana/o concerns with homeland, migration, identity, and aesthetics is that the voices of other border communities become muted” (34).

By contrast, *Mosquito* can be seen as the career-long culmination of one critical goal: giving voice to these hybridized communities, which complicate straightforward representations of what Gustavo Perez Firmat once called “life on the hyphen.”¹⁵ Repositioning this liberatory liability as a comparative strength, Jones’s wide-ranging use of the border metaphor conversely marks her Southwest as an “anthropological place,” Marc Augé’s term for the shared space negotiated by indigenous (autochthonous) and migrant (allochthonous) communities—as when Nadine playfully exclaims, “When you’s in Arizona you know they calls it the Redlands—I ain’t signifying on the native peoples I’m talking about the land itself?...” (3). Although on the surface expressing an absurd one-to-one relationship between the landscape’s appearance and those communities that inhabit it, such remarks blur the linguistic line between the literal and figurative. Given that the novel’s skillful interweaving of cultural differences begins at the taxonomic level, Nadine’s narration opens *in medias res* with a discussion that moves from the anthropomorphic similarities between the Southwestern landscape’s flora and fauna and the physiognomy of various peoples of color to the complication names present for the uneven relationship between signifier to referent.

“La Raza Pura”¹⁶: *Mosquito*

Some members of the Perfectability Baptist Church are Negroes, others is colored people, others is blacks (with a small *b*), others is Blacks (with a big *b*), others is

Afro-Americans, others is African-Americans (hyphenated), others is African Americans (unhyphenated), others is Just Plain Americans, others is New World Africans, others is Descendants of the Victims of the African Diaspora Holocaust, others is Descendants of the Victims of the African Diaspora Holocaust, others is Multiracialists, others is Multiethnics, others is Sweeter the Juice Multiracial Multiethnics (these are people like myself who have other races and ethnic groups, like Mexicans, Irish, Greeks, and Italians in they ancestry but who resemble pure African gods and goddesses), others is Cosmopolitan Neo-Africans, other is African-Internationalists, others is African Memphians from the Republic of New Africa Memphis and drapes theyselves in the Africa Memphis Flags, ‘cause when I give them some of my Republic of Texas literature that talked about gringos freeing theyselves from imperial Mexico they decided to form they own Independent African Republic in Memphis, not the whole state but just the they own city, though like the Texans they still considers theyselves to be Americans but not citizens of the “corporate United States.”

- Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* (613)

Mosquito’s Southwest setting affords Nadine the occasion for racialized descriptions as she acknowledges her “listening audience” (as opposed to a reading one) with the question,

Who among y’all knows the name of every tree? I might now know the names of them trees, but if you shows me a tree, I can tell you what part of the natural country it is from. I can tell you whether it from the East, the West, the Southwest, the South Central, the Midwest, the Southeast, the Pacific Southwest, the Northeast, or wherever you asks me. I might not know the names of them trees, but I knows them by better than they names (3).

Here, Jones relates the notion that to know something “better than its name” is to immediately devalue the act of identification¹⁷ while suggesting a level of familiarity or intimacy beyond language. And yet, what are readers to think of this maneuver in a novel the lion’s share of which is composed of lengthy inventories on any number of disparate subjects? Accordingly, the reader-listener’s goal then becomes recognizing the method in

Jones's seeming madness and having the patience to parse her associative interpretive style.

A white epistemological strategy to consolidate power over peoples of color going back to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*,¹⁸ the logic of the inventory manifests in Nadine's metadiscursive habit of talking extensively around a subject, citing those opinions against whom she balances her insights, and expressions of ignorance or false humility about the scope of her knowledge regarding the subject matter. Delivered in a colloquial style, it is this last affectation that marks Nadine's self-consciously autodidactic approach to intellectual advancement. In the first chapter alone, for example, references to "I don't know," "I guess it called," "I ain't even know," and—in a turn to the reader that also includes herself, "you know you" followed by any number of referents that express a kind of blithe astonishment at all there is to know and the channels and byways one might navigate in order to learn. Curiously, the most prominent trigger to these verbal tics is the subject of writers of color and multiethnic literature—about which Nadine's fascination leans toward "non-canonical literature" (411). Speaking on the feminist society/consciousness-raising group the Daughters of Nzingha, of which she has recently been made a member, Nadine qualifies her interest in such literature as being "by persons of color which is often not written about by academics nor even reviewed in the mass media" (411).

Of course, Nadine's interests are not solely due to her ethnic background (self-described African-American), but rather stem from an assortment of textual and contextual variables. In fact, she is troubled by the assumption that her audience might

judge her tastes relative to cultural background and so qualifies this interest with a defense:

I know there's those of you that believes that my bookshelf is confabulatory, cause I don't seem like no literate woman, but my little bookshelf ain't near so confabulous as that of Delgadina's and even Delgadina she were still surprised to see the books on my bookshelf. (329)

Following this admission, Nadine catalogs the contents of her shelf, which comprise a potent admixture of British literature, mass-market romances, self-help, home improvement, and Eastern religion. As in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the text "we" as readers are reading is suggested in the *mise en abyme*-like effect generated by the Daughters' collection of sacred "Truth Books," one of which might very well be the novel in our hands:

One were a large black book, seem like it were about eight and a half by eleven inches, a couple inches thick. The strange thing about that book were it didn't have no title written on it nor the name of its author. When you opened the book, you couldn't just read it, you had to keep reading. [Note to reader: the Daughters of Nzingha bookstore assures you that it is not the book you are currently reading.] (409)

As inspirational texts, the Truth Books are described as not always telling the whole truth, but rather advancing the belief that "everyone had many selves and that one of their selves was an exemplary self."¹⁹ A self that contained one's exemplary nature. Monkey Bread said that her philosophy of selves rather than a self was from African philosophy, though I didn't understand shit about it myself" (411). On the textual level, she also prefers a more contemporary style of narration, comparing her own project to Sterne's

Tristram Shandy while eschewing realist novels “where the writer takes a whole page or maybe several pages to describe that woman, who she is, who she think she is, what she look like, what other people think she look like, as if the listener can’t figure out none of that for they ownself. And you don’t need to know all that about that woman in that story” (423). Aside from the realist style of narration she repudiates, this passage might very well describe Nadine’s own copious descriptions about her life and the reactions of others to her. Using the language of narrative to characterize her relationships, Nadine calls herself an “unreliable narrator” (474) and incurable gossip.

In the novel’s chapter two, however, the narrator’s self-consciousness about these labels is refracted through the lofty perspective of her best friend, the Hispanic bartender and organic intellectual, Delgadina. Delgadina’s viewpoint proves to be an influential mechanism in shaping Nadine’s emerging social consciousness—and particularly about academic discourse and the contemporary university as a social institution. For instance, she cites Delgadina’s opinions on the canon, with a reference to the way curriculum is shaped by the experiences of the people teaching it: “Delgadina she be reading this book about the working class in academia, ‘cause she say they’s a lot more of the working class in academia now, and that’s why you’s got this renewed Great Books movement, ‘cause they don’t like the working class deciding what’s great literature, not to mention women and minorities” (Jones, *Mosquito* 46). Such remarks, although seemingly reflective of Jones’s ideas about social construction as both inferential and learned through exposure to the ideas of others actually reveal a superficial propensity for chatter about academic politics and professionalization. In fact, when Nadine says, “I consult

with individuals on a wide range of areas where society, psychology, race, and politics converge,” her consultations are often immediately absorbed rather than submitted to anything approaching extensive critique—this despite the narrator’s presentation of herself as a self-styled “cosmic detective.” Of course, this detection is hardly given over to a set of clues tied to a single crime. Rather, Nadine’s target mystery is America—her specific investigation the policing of borders as an information-gathering strategy. For example, in response to Delgadina’s liminal intellectual pursuits, Nadine calls attention to the distinction between “the real border and the border as a metaphor”—a distinction she willfully rejects in her deliberate confusion of literal and figurative levels of signification.

Echoing Delgadina’s “border novel”/“border art project,” Nadine welcomes her mentor’s impact on her intellectual life as a form of border crossing that transforms this woman of color’s relationship to the nation:

So I has to protect my own borders. That’s why I am ambivalent about the border, but I knows about the war. They is people who thinks I don’t know about the war ‘cause I don’t all the time talk racism and I likes watermelon. But I knows about the war. I knows America like I knows myself. I knows if the colored peoples of the world writes they view of history it is a different history. Even when I reads the Native Peoples’ view of history in them books that you has yourself, Delgadina, the whites is all liars and rogues, and the ones that ain’t is the exceptions and not the rule. Of course they claim that they’s is the objective history and us history is us subjective view. But I knows them Native Peoples in them books of yours is speaking the truth and more than the truth. (137)

Through her preferred method of listening, or the gift of “auditory memory” (the ability to remember everything she hears) as she reveals later in a lengthy tirade to Delgadina on stereotyping, Nadine’s aural emphasis conjoins voice to vision in a manner that highlights the narrative’s deliberate omissions. Following a discussion on the cultural

histories that have been forgotten or purposely buried, Nadine's ability to listen for subtext—for the deeper meaning stereotyping conceals—helps her locate her “natural self” (as opposed to “simple”):

‘Cause I know you hear everything I'm saying. I hear everything people say and sometimes I hears what they don't say. Sometimes I am even like them peoples that calls theyselves remote hearers. I ain't got the gift for remote viewing without a telescope, but I has got remote hearing. And sometimes I can hear what peoples mean. Sometimes I knows what peoples is meaning even when they is speaking foreign. Or speaking what is foreign to me but familiar to them. I knows the language of love in anybody's language. And I knows when people is using language for sacred possibilities and for healing purposes. (Jones, *Mosquito* 138-139)

This acknowledgment leads Nadine into an allusive reverie about first Langston Hughes's “Simple” stories (featuring black Everyman Jessie B. Semple), and then Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which Nadine declares is her favorite book. Given Jones's propensity for substantive as well as formal connections (Nadine alluding to texts with similarities of content as well as formal technique), the Ellison link provides an important throughline for Nadine's later immersion in the Brotherhood-like “Sanctuary Movement,” described as a modern-day Underground Railroad for Central and South American refugees seeking safe passage across the border.

Similarly positioned as an investigation of the psychic underworld of race consciousness through the early part of the twentieth century, *Invisible Man* (1952) introduces its anonymous protagonist in the mode of a nameless Dostoevskyan “Underground Man.” This narrator begins relating his experience of African-American identity through a retrospective mediation illuminated by 1,369 bulbs leaked off the

power grid owned and controlled by Monopolated Light and Power. One of the novel's many metonymies for white hegemony, this image introduces a central metaphor that extends from W.E.B. DuBois' influential account of double-consciousness (1901), through to its complex actualization as corporeality in Johnson's allegory on racial passing. In *Invisible Man*, invisibility is described by the narrator as "a peculiar disposition of the eyes" endemic to those with whom he comes into contact. A description of white culture's inability to "recognize" African American humanity except on its own prejudicial terms, the narrator's explanation is couched in conspiratorial terms: the "victimless crime" of Jameson's social detective paradigm that touches a collective so expansively its mysteries extend beyond individual agency to strain the limits of comprehension.

Couched as an internal disposition that has great external consequences, Ellison's theme is expressed through a variety of tropes that amplify Du Bois's double-consciousness as the defining characteristic of twentieth-century African American experience. The narrator's anonymous existence in New York City both exacerbates and clarifies our understanding of this peculiar disposition in numerous encounters that touch psychological, political, and cultural categories. Far from a purely formal exercise in philosophical inquiry, this aspect is represented through emotion as well, one particular example anticipating the narrator's entrance into political life through the Brotherhood. Traversing the urban wasteland following his surreal recovery from a head injury, Ellison narrates the narrator's witnessing of a humiliating spectacle: an elderly woman's eviction from her home. Ellison here deploys motifs of vision and sight as affective lenses that

propel the narrator out of apathy into the leadership position his fellow citizens so desperately need. In the vignette, the expression “look” and “looking,” both descriptively and imperatively (ostensibly the reader is being asked to “look”) is combined with a rising emotion the narrator detects in the crowd and in himself. His eyes burn as he “looks” and “looks,” exchanging glances across the “whirlpool of emotion” generated by the urban mass (Ellison 270).

The reason behind the woman’s removal from her property is identified by the blanket remark, “These white folks, Lord. These white folks,” and the narrator recognizes a “self-consciousness” about the crowd, as if they are ashamed of bearing witness to the spectacle but curious about the woman’s fate (Ellison 270). Inspired by a “vision” of his mother, the narrator feels his voice rise in an attempt to quell the crowd, as he cries out for sanity and order amidst the incipient violence of their reaction. The evicted woman’s “mind-plunging crying” (270) juxtaposes with the narrator’s later discussion of “plunging outside history” (434, 439)—his characterization of what happens to those who no longer count, those “dead” and “defunct” African Americans whose right to full participation has been ignored due to their resignation from a racist social structure that only recognizes them as second-class citizens. Although the narrator has retreated from public life at novel’s end, he indicates—confirming our sense of this imperative—that he will surface again, perhaps on “lower frequencies” that can be more easily heard.

Like Ellison’s invisible narrator, Nadine chooses her battles with respect to what she shares with the reader in a novel whose narration ostensibly proffers total transparency but ultimately keeps its confidences to itself. At the beginning of the novel’s

twelfth chapter in a passage worth quoting at length, she announces to the reader that because those who transported people of color through the Underground Railroad didn't share every detail of their activities, she will henceforth have to be careful:

Like every story, I gots to decide how much to tell y'all and how much not to tell...I's got to tell y'all as much as I should tell, but less of the story than I know. I know that there is a lot of y'all that thinks that this is a fabricated truth, and that even the names that I says is my own might not be my true names. I got to talk to y'all more about that, 'cause y'all keeps asking me this and that about my story. It ain't that I don't trust y'all—I mean the ones of y'all that is worthy listeners—but you can't trust everybody with every story. You can't trust people with every story. You don't tell everybody every story. Even them stories that is satires ain't to be told to just everybody. You don't even tell everybody everything in the same story. Even during freedom them people knew not to tell every story and knew who were worthy to hear them stories and who weren't. There is people who says I's free. I can tell them any story I want to tell. But even us government knows that they is confidential stories and secret stories and top secret stories. They has the freedom of information, but that is only a ruse. (Jones, *Mosquito* 384-385)

Favorably comparing her strategy to Frederick Douglass's famous caveat in the eleventh chapter of his *Narrative* regarding the methods by which his escape was facilitated by the Underground Railroad,²⁰ Nadine's rationale is considerably more complex, since she has also been excluded from certain elements of the Sanctuary Movement's organizational structure,

There is some fugitives that tells everything, 'cause they wants to tell a interesting narrative, and there is probably some others that will write about the new Underground Railroad and even take y'all to one of them strategy meetings, but I ain't one of them. Of course my excuse is that Ray didn't allow me in none of them strategy meetings, and especially when learning that I have a auditory memory... (551).

What the two passages imply in light of Nadine's later incorporation as a full member of both the Sanctuary group and archive keeper for the Daughters of Nzingha is the importance of maintaining control over one's voice regardless of one's allegiances to a particular cultural heritage or community identity.²¹

With its gossipy interest in current academic trends redolent of the pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or then-current magazines such as *Lingua Franca*, *Mosquito*'s narration echoes two notable aesthetic debates among multiethnic writers: the so-called "Silko-Erdrich Controversy" and the "Chin-Kingston Debate."²² Such arguments, taking place on the periphery of literary production, explain Jones's stylistic habit of exhaustively interrogating the contemporary academy, its pedagogical practices, text selections, and disagreement, and so dramatize David Palumbo-Liu's careful distinction between institutional and critical multiculturalism. In fact, when Palumbo-Liu indicates that "the work of representing the culture and histories of diverse minorities... has been widely inscribed within college and university curricula" (2), one might look to *Mosquito* as a literary site devoted to memorializing these debates, equal parts academic satire via the irreverent eyes of its freewheeling autodidact protagonist and the playful realization of Jones's own sporadic status as a career academic. Moreover, the title character's cognitive gift of "auditory memory" affords Jones the chance to realize the thesis of her scholarly monograph *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*, in which she asserts that "the foundation of every literary tradition is oral, whether it is visible or invisible in the text" (3).

This tension between the seen and unseen, as with many classic African American novels, is analogized through plot elements that remain conspicuously unspoken in an otherwise loquacious narrative. That is, Jones's strategies are quite clearly mobilized in response to what *Liberating Voices*²³ calls the "antagonistic standards [of] Western literary tradition"—a dichotomy by which "the voice of the less powerful group, 'the other,' always must free themselves from the frame of the more powerful group, in texts of self-discovery, authority, and wholeness" (185, 192). By contrast, David Palumbo-Liu warns that ethnoracial literary diversity should not serve as an unreflective advertisement for generic multiculturalism,

The formation of an ethnic literary canon...parallels the modes of inserting ethnicity in the general curriculum—certain 'texts' deemed worthy of representing 'ethnic experience' are set forth, yet the critical and pedagogical discourses that convey those texts into the classroom and present them to students and readers in general may very well mimic and reproduce the ideological underpinnings of the dominant canon, adding 'material' to it after a necessary hermeneutic operation elides contradiction and smooths over the rough grain of history and politics, that is, those very things have constructed the 'ethnic' in the United States. (2)

These concerns are well-founded; for, in illustrating the inadvertent role canonicity plays in the social construction thesis, Palumbo-Liu's critique illuminates how easily ethnic identity is susceptible to commodification as the literary work gradually subsumes the actual history of oppression it purports to encompass.

Given the stretch between her sole work of literary criticism and the novel that would most boldly test its thesis, Jones has clearly absorbed Palumbo-Liu's warning within the clear irreverence of *Mosquito*. Steeped in both canonical and non-canonical

literary histories, Jones's final challenge to the boundary categories that demarcate these intellectual spaces is to self-educate—absorbing both how stories are told by people of color as well as how they are heard. Thus, in her closing letter to Ray, Nadine accepts his belated invitation to join the movement while rejecting one of the Daughters of Nzingha's key tenets, Malcolm X's imperative: "Do not submit to your own ignorance" (613). Implying that recognizing one's own ignorance free from the consensus-building experience of a collective is to undermine the self-righteousness of any institutionally-approved educational advance, Jones (via Nadine) suggests a cautious optimism about the corporatization of ethnic identity through canonical acceptance.

Joshua Cohen's Monstrous Monuments

A self-described anatomy of contemporary Jewish American fiction's aesthetic sins, Joshua Cohen's *Witz* ostensibly attacks the commodification of postwar Jewish suffering through a brand its author terms "the novel of Jewish kitsch, Holocausts with happy endings" (Lorentzen). Operating via formal digressions that radically elongate the conventions of structure and syntax, Cohen's surface strategy (the "joke" of his title, as the Yiddish translation explicitly indicates) thus clearly mocks the discursive charm of wise-child narrations by its target cohort. But this excessive strategy is hardly a mere satire on the precocious polymaths found in Foer, Krauss, Chabon, Auslander, Shteyngaart, and Englander among others.²⁴ Rather, Cohen advances a considerably bolder critique, one befitting his infant protagonist born bearded, bespectacled and "fullgrown" on Christmas Eve. With this imagery of accelerated (as opposed to arrested) precocity, the author clearly questions the legitimacy of a Jewish American canon

grounded in assimilation, Cohen's satirical conceit aims to suspend said closure in a demand for readerly discomfort and unease, repeatedly fracturing his story world as he constructs it.

Archiving the aftermath of either personal or public apocalypse, characters such as Alma Singer (*The History of Love*), Oskar Schell (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) and Gurion Maccabee (*The Instructions*) steel themselves against Information Age overload by functioning in the quasi-prophetic role of cultural seers. *Witz*, by contrast, embodies a striking alternative to the neat solutions for cultural authenticity suggested by this cohort—a “post-postmodern” Jewish-American *genizah*, or “store-rooms or repositories for damaged, discarded, or heretical books and papers and sacred relics” (*OED*). Curating archives the novels themselves allopoietically “become,” *Witz* evokes an explicitly post-nationalist (occasionally internationalist) approach to thinking about local and global contexts while remaining rooted in an explicit sociopolitical critique of the United States by highlighting the important role citizenship plays in the critical distance enacted between self and space, container and contained.

My discussion of Cohen's novel follows Edward Mendelson's notes referenced briefly in chapter two on the expanded conceptual scale of exceptionally large novels by Cervantes, Rabelais, and Pynchon, among others, which frequently reflects images of giants and gigantism within their storyworlds. *Giants*, recognized for their apartness or “monstrosity,” evoke a near-apocalyptic sensibility (*monstra*, “omens of dire change”) as the once-transgressive modern epic first predicts then comes to define (*monstrare*, “to show”) its author's respective national literature. Embodying the outsized ambitions of

encyclopedic authorship, figures of intratextual enormity also anticipate the scholarly receptions of the “encyclopedic narratives” that house them, transforming reputations from the cultish margins to canonical center. Accordingly, my analysis updates Mendelson’s theory of encyclopedic narrative in a twenty-first century context to examine the relationship between literary reception history and maximalist poetics in *Witz*. In this way, Cohen’s ambitious satire follows Foucault’s observation that monstrosity depends upon distortions within a chain of similitude and resemblance, attacking those writers for whom the didactic appropriation of metafictional aesthetics is little more than a handy tool for redemptive closure.

In my view, Cohen’s approach constitutes a middle distance between conceptual models of the canon that, on the one hand, evoke a “historical repository of Jewish experience” (apropos of Ruth Wisse’s critical approach), and, on the other, reflect the apocalyptic ruptures of Harold Bloom’s Kabbalah-inflected “breaking of the vessels.” Announcing a subtle departure from these models to imagine a different containment metaphor, Cohen’s position, I contend, embodies the “genizah-like” structure from which all of his writing apparently emerges. Both a “store-room . . . for damaged, discarded, or heretical books and papers and sacred relics, attached to many synagogues,” and the “contents” that fill that space (*OED*), Cohen’s admittedly messy curatorial approach to postwar Jewish American literary tradition is also a necessarily fragmented one: a container of meaning continually built to be broken. Reflecting his novel’s aggregated scale in imperfect pieces that magnify the larger whole, I examine how *Witz*’s unusually literal revision of Edward Mendelson’s encyclopedic hypothesis generates a productive

tension between literary reception history and the notably “maximalist” poetics that illustrates it.

As introduced earlier, Mendelson’s theory of encyclopedic narrative functions in a synecdochical relation with the nation-state, the genre imagined as a conceptual container “filled” by an emergent national identity “as it becomes aware of itself” (“Encyclopedic” 1268). Against this logic, *Witz*’s reflexive inclinations follow Mendelson’s most contemporary example of encyclopedic narrative, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973)—a novel that for Mendelson challenges the encyclopedic as a closed system of meaning claiming to encompass entire cosmological and philosophical schemas (Dante, Goethe, Joyce, etc.). In contrast, and as with *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Witz* presents a “book which hopes to be active in the world, not a detached observer of it” by actively promoting a meta-ethical turn that “warns and exhorts in matters ranging from the ways in which the book itself will be read, to the way in which its whole surrounding culture operates” (Mendelson, *Pynchon* 10-11). Echoing Pynchon’s inaugural open-form encyclopedic narrative appropriate to a fractured postwar age, *Witz* necessarily implies a greater degree of involvement in our world than its own—with the critical binary of ethnic heritage and national citizenship the key tension governing that involvement. By extension, my allopoietical approach posits the practice of cultural recycling in this canonical context as a nascent movement for recasting literature across the two periods that critique the various cultural milieus narrated within them.

From Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, in which a character refers to the U.S. as “the melting pot where nothing melted” (10), to earlier fictions that incorporate the

artist's fraught relationship with the social demands of tradition (Bellow, Ozick, Paley, Michaels, Roth, et al.), Jewish American writers have acknowledged the lure of cultural assimilation while often complicating the premises and formulae that define it. A wry acknowledgment of the naiveté implicit in believing the U.S. to be an unqualified success as assimilationist social imaginary, Kushner's line speaks across this divide, whether conceived in the Habermasian model of mutually beneficial social spheres interanimating each other toward a common good, or the imagined community of "nation-ness" that Benedict Anderson suggests is only possible with a thriving print culture—of which literature serves a critical part. In her study *The Modern Jewish Canon*, Ruth Wisse echoes Kushner's remark when she writes of the postwar struggle to "define a meaningful Jewishness" in American literature—a tension that Wisse argues plays itself out through the simultaneous ease of aesthetic adaptability for Jewish American writers within an emergent national literary tradition while steadfastly resisting "to be dissolved into Gentiles" (10). With a particular emphasis on the way inter-textual and allusive modes construct a palimpsest or textual overlay, Cohen's novel repudiates Wisse's model of cultural solubility to suggest that the repetitions offered by various forms of palimpsest—from allusion to direct acknowledgment—aid in the redoubling and attempted recovery of lost identity.

"Family, Immediate and Extended": *Witz*

Here we're creating a canon of our own, at the very least updating the one we've been born with, were born into, and so giving it life, a future if only in His death. Let there be negative tradition. An inheritance owed. And it was, and still is. A living life against. Be not discouraged, though; interpretation's acceptable to any

question asked, is actually encouraged, rewarded in its own time, even if it be posthumous, praise be to He, Hallelujah...however, answers are still forbidden: they shall be destroyed, scorched by the sun of days, left in the valley to blacken the beaks of our vultures.

- Joshua Cohen, *Witz* (611)

Unsurprisingly for a novel whose concerns are as much embedded in context as text, Cohen's critique begins outside his novel's diegetic frame, by announcing its intentions via four peritexts: a set of instructions to the reader; a "blank" epigraph attributed to God; a "dedication" to the author's enemies; and a note on the title's meaning. The German word "witz," as the note indicates, is Yiddish for both "joke" and "son of": a homonym that conjoins the comic with the generational. Cruelly manifested by the novel's millennial plague through which the author kills off 18 million of his fellow "Affiliated" (the word Jew and Jewish are omitted from the text)²⁵ Cohen's deconstruction of lineage properly begins with the birth of gargantuan protagonist Benjamin Israelien. Born to Hanna and Israel Israelien, an assimilated couple living in a New Jersey gated community with their twelve daughters, Ben's somewhat belated arrival occurs just prior the plague, which destroys all but a few thousand first-born Jewish males worldwide. When the survivors are discovered, they are detained on Ellis Island: a framework that echoes the novel's strident critique of assimilation, which Cohen related in an interview with the *New York Observer*, "Jewish-American fiction...always ends with assimilation back into the community, [...] They [Jewish American authors] do what they do very well, but it's only one thing. Kitsch needs to have its own built-in

critique. Anything that's nostalgic ought to also be tragic and disquieting at the same time" (Lorentzen).

Heir apparent to the dense, information-rich Mega-novels from the Long Seventies, *Witz's* uniquely "sentence-level" maximalism follows Stefano Ercolino's recent proposal that the form be seen as less generic category than "modality of representation" (245). The former approach, represented earliest in the critical work of Northrop Frye, John Barth, and John Kuehl explores maximalism as a structurally episodic, information-rich narrative phenomenon bounded by a "total body of vision" (55) or "total order of words." The latter, in departing from genre's top-down emphasis, considers maximalism's discursive features for rhetorical effect: excess, density, weight, volume and expanse (as recommended by Frederick Karl, Tom LeClair, and Gerhard Hoffmann). These discursive features, I contend, constellate the aesthetic category of scale, and so encompass the varied forms associated with maximalism as a genre, whether classified as the "Mega-Novel" or Menippean satire, the systems novel or encyclopedic narrative.

Scale as a reflexive phenomenon first appears in Susan Stewart's remarkable genealogy of "nostalgia" (ix, 23), *On Longing*, with its contention that iterations of the gigantic, the miniature, the souvenir, and the collection manifest various forms of yearning desire as a metaphor for the relationship of narrative to origin and object. In Stewart's imaginative rendering, longing figures as a projective mode that closes desire's distance through point of view, exactness, and spatial depth, the "body determin[ing] the human sense of scale" (xii). With its obsessive conjoining of the book to the body

through imageries of birth, family, lineage, and generation, *Witz*'s scalar preoccupations arguably evoke what Stewart identifies as the earliest definition of longing, the "fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy" (ix). As the critic contends, "The body represents the paradox of container and contained at once," a containment model with notably nationalist valences in the lineage of big books to which Cohen aspires.

The chapter entitled "Preparations" offers a strong example of Cohen's maximalist approach to critique by moving freely between the character's thoughts and a dense description of her home. Occurring prior the reproductive act that opens the novel (and that ultimately generates Ben as the mock-apocalyptic New Messiah) but incorporated structurally some 600 pages later, this catalogue offers a wry critique of suburban ennui via Hanna's anticipatory urges as she waits for Israel to arrive home from work. Though looking forward to the procreative activity that will ultimately produce Ben, Hanna's occupation of this notably gendered domestic space (spelled "Kitschen" in the text) reveals a notable ambiguity given the passage's length:

The longing hum of the fridge filling everything with an eerie motion, an activity, a progress, the formica, the metal and tile, sets their mixtures spinning, aswirl, stirring up these new kitchens in new houses grown within and as the eternity of her own kitchen, her old home, rooms hacked out of groutrot, faience, spiced earthenware, and the cupboard with china: kitchen's sprouting up from the neglect of her Kitsch (it's so hard to keep up, it's so hard to keep up, it's so difficult), to fill her house, which is the home of the world, with scents of their own, a whirlwind of waft: cooking, she's cooking still, which is stirring then tasting then stirring again, all the while judiciously laying aside the best cuts for him, for Israel her husband and—and he'll come, he will, he has to, imminent, it's arrived, the kiss of his keys at the cheek of the door by the side...when the kitchens' timers will become aligned—then stop all at once, stilled, their massed ticking will unravel hands of hands both chapped and chaffed, ungloved and how time will mean nothing anymore: no more preheating, defrosting, no more of this

letting sit or soak overnights; how everything then will always be ready, in a preparation suspended, preparing into itself, weeping within ever deeper, spices of spices, tastings of tastes, and then, suddenly, the phones ring out on all the lines pitched as softly high as the smokealarm or the light, individually yearning, but when sounded simultaneously bringing only darkness, thick spoiled noise. Grniinrgrginnigr. (628)

Ostensibly a parody of bourgeois domesticity, Cohen's conflation of culinary creation and romantic anticipation calls attention to the most critically important maximalist influence on *Witz's* incendiary sensibility, William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*. Occupying a slot that Tony Tanner has called a limit-text between modern and postmodern periods, *The Recognitions* (1955), narrates a bleak vision of postwar global life characterized by fakery and deceit, offering a blunt challenge to all truth-claims of "authenticity" or "originality." With its central topic of art forgery guiding this vision, the novel's acrid survey of fraudulence gets focalized through the multiple canvasses painted by protagonist Wyatt Gwyon. Wyatt approaches forgery as a higher calling, a vocation that replaces his original intention to follow in his father's footsteps in the Church. Aiming not to merely recreate Flemish masterpieces but to literally invent within existing and imaginary oeuvres, Wyatt is aided and abetted by art dealers and financiers who create a market for fictional masterpieces through rumor and innuendo. These works are then "discovered" through curatorial "happenstance," a subterfuge the novel narrates through glib art dealer Basil Valentine. In an exchange between him and Wyatt early in the novel, Basil asks—"And so when you're working, it's your own work...and when you attach the signature?" (Gaddis 251). Only then, Wyatt suggests, is the work an act of forgery.

Experiencing painting like the masters as an ecstatic, near-mystical mode, Wyatt's mastery of craft and the alchemical process that goes into post-aging these "masterpieces" provide a powerful corollary to the modern/postmodern debate over modes of canonical originality in a world in which all apparent textual modes of signification have been exhausted. Marrying form to content, the novel itself enacts these modes, as "original" protagonist Wyatt disappears by name after the novel's first 100 pages (in a 956 page text), with only occasional elusive references to his work off the page. Instead, Wyatt's identity and career become reconstructed through the conversations and commentaries of others, in particular Basil Valentine and failed playwright Otto Pivner, whose curiosity about Wyatt provides the novel's literal discussion of palimpsest. Otto recalls a story he once heard—every narrative is experienced seemingly secondhand or overheard—about a painter attempting a forgery of a Rembrandt. The individual bought an old canvas for his surface and came to realize that the canvas has something painted underneath it. Removing the copy on top revealed an original Rembrandt beneath, as if the original knew or "wanted" to surface.

As Frederick Karl has noted, Gaddis' novel itself serves as a palimpsest for the 1950s, a period in which "layer after layer [of exaggeration, hyperbole, and rhetorical trivia] disguised the real or actual." A tapestry of ironic meta-commentary developed through the effluvia of empty cocktail party chatter, phone conversations, pillow talk, and interior monologue, Gaddis' novel rages against the mindless conformity and shallow values of the period with the bitterness of Nathanael West and the endurance of Joyce and Faulkner. This scathing satire on postwar artistic malaise engendered by the belief

that modernist modes of literary discourse had already covered every conceivable ground is best expressed through the novel's phrase: "Everything wore out. What was more, he lived in a land where everything was calculated to wear out, made from design to substance with only its wearing out and replacement in view, and that replacement to be replaced" (Gaddis 319).

A novel whose ambition and range of modernist effects would seem to suggest the aesthetic of high modernism in which originality remains an achievable hope, the work's final moments laugh off any serious consideration of this perspective, as struggling composer Stanley, the novel's sincerest proponent of "original" artistry, finally realizes his dream of playing one of his own pieces on the pipe organ of a medieval Spanish church. Unfortunately, the closing notes of Stanley's piece are so low that they cause the building's foundations to crumble, killing and burying the composer in the "rubble" of his work as the walls come down around him (Gaddis 955-956). This acid expression of Gaddis' own disillusionment with the notion of authentic "recognition" anticipates the novel's notorious misunderstanding and its author's nearly two-decade long exile between novels—a curatorial role the novel predicts in its division of Gaddis' identity between the edgy failure Otto (who survives) and earnest success Stanley (whose triumph kills him).

In *Witz*, the shape-shifting curatorial role of its similarly bleak precursor narrates a fallen social reality through either the nostalgic mode of mourning a shattered whole, or through the critical attempt to restore a fragmentary state. Given the impossibility of doing adequate justice to a novel of *Witz's* length, I confine my discussion to one

emblematic example for which the novel reserves its harshest criticism: assimilation's context as nationalist fantasy through its treatment of immigration iconography. To the extent that Benjamin and the Israelien family unit function in a synecdochical relation with the larger "Affiliated" tradition of Eastern European Jewry, Cohen's target by implication challenges an entire critical industry's attempts to codify that tradition. Moreover, the novel's use of immigration metaphors to evoke literary assimilation is particularly telling, U.S. citizenship being little more than a means to economic mobility. Cohen thus figures the New York novel as set in the *anus mundi* of Jewish American literary fashion, imagining the unnamed Ellis Island with the following:

A rumor was, you enter America through the mouth of the Green Eve—the exit for New York is through her, you know where. It'd been said that Columbus, the first of their kind ever to schlep to these shores, had been buried in her pedestal, which is the shul upon which Liberty stands. The first thing these indigenes did was change coin, barbaric practice—conversion, to redeem their souls from the shadow of their passage, to give salvation another name, yet another number and face. (151)

Here Cohen aligns himself with the surreal work of other neglected novelists in the Jewish American tradition such as Nathanael West, whose similarly intestinal *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* also deploys scatology to narrate a Pilgrim's Progress of national identity. In the same passage, Cohen goes on to call assimilation the "wide and unknown and unknowable," or "unreadable" which pressures new citizens to "keep [their] mouths shut" so their origins *remain* unknown via language (151). This silence explains Ben's survival in the ominous shadow of another *sui generis* giant, the "great green monster" (249) of American assimilation herself, Lady Liberty. In fact, though their long distance

friendship blossoms into love unrequited for the protagonist, her persistent cold shoulder (she never speaks) and the fact that they can never touch, frustrates Ben's affections. To compensate, Ben daydreams about their would-be romance, imagining "his arms too short and hers, they're holding stuff. A book. A torch. Commandments. In reward for their keeping, an icecream cone of ten scoops" (249). Sending up the often-precious conceit in novels among fashionable Jewish American authors of love-starved teen protagonists caught up in the larger romance of historicity (national identity here reduced to "playing hard to get"), Ben's mock-romantic agony here slyly restores the novel's preoccupation with origins and tradition through a national icon.

Following the pregnancy-based connotations of Susan Stewart's definition of longing, Barbara Johnson's remarks help clarify the Oedipal ambivalence at work in Cohen's American national allegory through a discussion of monumentality and the Statue of Liberty:

The fantasy is at once being a fetus inside the mother, and finding her "pregnable" to entry from the outside, the colossal mother offering both intrauterine existence and the fantasy of total potency for the child. As the monument offers the satisfactions of regression: the fetus inside the mother can scale her insides with skill and consciousness of someone who has already been born. (43)

While Johnson's remarks help to clarify Ben's parodic longing for a surrogate mother following Hanna's passing, they also illustrate the fact that Cohen's critique is not limited solely to male authors but Jewish American fiction generally. Unsurprisingly, Cohen's equal opportunity critique is especially apparent via the novel's reception history, as witness one of the more inflammatory remarks about Foer's and Krauss' works expressed

in interviews following *Witz*'s publication suggests: "When I started this book, I wanted to sleep with their wives. By the time I finished, I wanted to sleep with their mothers" (Lorentzen). Needless to say, Ben's status as a foundling—all alone in the world—moved Cohen to subtitle his book *The Story of the Last Jew on Earth*, a fairly clear allusion to the opening chapter's title in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, "The Last Words on Earth." Part romantic estrangement, part citizenship fantasy, Ben's exaggerated longing for Liberty thus complicates Johnson's remark that "[The Statue] has always held its torch for the foreigner, for the immigrant" (43).

Projecting a decidedly postnational sensibility with its parallels between childbirth trauma and the growing pains of multiple sovereignties in flux, *Witz* exceeds the boundaries of any coherent American generic tradition since its genre by definition escapes both lineage and stable patternicity. Rather, if the novel belongs to any tradition, it hearkens back to apocalyptic fiction following the Second World War: a legatee of everything from Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, with its allegory on the Third Reich's dissolution of the Free City of Danzig through Oskar Matzerath's stunted growth, to Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes* (1970, translated as *The Ogre*), whose giant narrator-protagonist Abel Tiffauges responds to the monstrous label by declaring, "A monster is something that is shown, pointed at, exhibited at fairs, and so on. And the more monstrous a creature is, the more it is to be exhibited" (4). The exhibitionistic aspects of Cohen's own narrative take a perversely commemorative turn in two separate set pieces that illustrate the author's interest in literally "burying" a certain type of Jewish American novel. First mock-eulogized through the passage entitled "In the Cemetery,"

then re-interred via the section called “The Museum of Museums,” Cohen’s Affiliated populace is led initially by a nameless Guide through

a natural monument to its own forgottenness, a mess of enclosed earth overgrown not made of layers poured upon layers, which would be like the turned and turning pages of a book, or like consecutive, linear, narrative time, but more like a book whose pages are inseparable from one another, its covers more like a time that doesn’t proceed forward or back but that stands still subsuming every moment, past, present, and future. (671)

This morbid tour culminates a hundred pages later in the grotesque form of an expensive benefit held at the “Museum of an Extinct Race, of a not quite Unconditional Surrender” to the tasteful commodification of Jewish culture into the only truly American art form, publicity—“everyone focused, on point, kept on topic: on the preservation, on memory, anticipatory of what, a holy vessel to be expertly processed, labeled for ease of digestibility” (765).

However, in a novel teeming with competing voices (and well over a hundred references to “voice” and “speech,” such decorum cannot last; for, as Cohen indicates

the manner, they can’t last forever, pleasantries live only halflives, remember, these are the Affiliated we’re talking about, you know the type and so soon, talk in its most or maybe least stupefying varieties breaks out, comes echoing loudly from whisper to shout; there’s fartalk, neartalk, eyetalk, nosetalk, sidetalk in all of its multiloquent geographic manifestations: Upper Eastsidetalk, Upper Westsidetalk, Westchestertalk, Joyseytalk, the murmurs bedabbled of Greenwich on down to Red Bank...smalltalk, largetalk, thattalk, thistalk, overtalk, undertalk, nthtalk, xtalk—a gossip apocalypse, a pack of lips...a salivary fleckflock, a herding of mouths—this mass kibitzing, this metakvetch, orbits of noise gathering around the assemblage, to ring, planetary gas, puffing the drapery.... (766)

Hardly a revelation limited to readers of his fiction, Cohen's scathing positions against the "saccharine" tendencies of the contemporary literary scene likewise constitute a key feature of his role as prolific freelance reviewer and New Books editor for *Harper's*. In this milieu, the author's indignation is nothing if not consistent: from his specific suggestion that "Franzen" be the English equivalent to the "German [word] for a writer who resurrects a writer who would have hated him" (Cohen, "No One Hates Him More") in a recent review of the *Freedom* author's long-awaited Karl Kraus project to his general contempt for "white boys who write to be liked" (Lorentzen).

For instance, the following passage from one of Cohen's favorite targets, Jonathan Safran Foer's acclaimed *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, can be seen to run on those twin engines of nostalgic yearning—cultural memory and collective identity—via the material density of a photographic motif that literally recurs throughout the text:

He took pictures of everything. Of the undersides of the shelves in the closet. Of the backs of mirrors. Even the broken things. The things you would not want to remember. He could have rebuilt the apartment by taping together the pictures. And the doorknobs. He took a picture of every doorknob in the apartment. Every one. As if the world and its future depended on each doorknob. As if we would be thinking about doorknobs should we ever actually need to use pictures of them. I don't know why that hurt me so much. I told him, They are not even nice doorknobs. He wrote, but they are our doorknobs. I was his too. (175)

Although more modestly scaled for a deeper intimacy with the reader, Foer's gesture toward totality trades on the favored theme of excessive fictions in recent years—the archive or repository's ability to make whole the broken past. Following the widespread infrastructural devastations and hitherto unimaginable loss of human life after the First

World War, the nostalgic register echoes modernist literature, with its vain hopes to restore human identity to a pre-war whole. Memorably articulated through one of T.S. Eliot's concluding lines in *The Waste Land*, this recovery can only be perceived in "fragments...shored against [a] ruin," embodied as the material recovery of lost objects from the fallen social reality Eliot's poem elegizes.

Unsurprisingly, Cohen's antagonistic zeal toward his contemporaries suggests a maximalism (whether postmodern, metamodern, or yet to be formulated model) best defined by Mark McGurl's hypothesis in *The Program Era*. Again, by historicizing postwar American prose fiction via three aesthetic sizes (*miniaturism*, *minimalism*, and *maximalism*), McGurl extracts specific rhetorical and thematic resonances from each model relative to the writing workshops in which they were conceived: "condensation," "understatement," and "elaboration," respectively. Although classically associated with exhaustion, encyclopedism, exaggeration, or other scalar tropes that fly under the banner of literary maximalism, Cohen might also be guilty of that saddest form of intellectual publicity: the sin of "verbal pride" (377). Apiece with the agonistic invective of those expansive postwar satires in whose long shadows they were written, *Mosquito* and *Witz* surely embody this maximalist emphasis. For if these texts' monstrous differences are their authors—giants signifying the prescience that for Mendelson manifests as "revelation" in a work's structural choices—then perhaps these knowledge workers (whether social detective or curator) might also occupy the role of cultural seers: showing the nation a reflection of itself as a prophecy of what it might become.

Notes

¹ Introduced on the second page of his groundbreaking multigenre work *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), Du Bois's veil metaphor is constellated throughout the study and refers to the heightened or "double" consciousness imposed on African American citizens by the subordinating gaze of white America. Within the veil, national consciousness for black Americans is beset by the racialized anxieties and apprehensions imagined by the dominant population, whose projections work to distort any real understanding of African American national identity.

² See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.

³ The phrase "race question" (94, 98, 108) is used interchangeably with its more specific corollary "Negro question" (2, 90, 94, 111) and follows Du Bois's rhetoric in *The Souls of Black Folk* to figure race as a "problem" (2, 90). Apropos of the novel's critique of uplift, "question" is also applied at the level of class as "opportunity" (94) and "livelihood" (114). My analysis draws upon George Stade's edition with Noelle Morrisette's Introduction: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007).

⁴ More precisely denoted by narrative theorists with the term "focalization," point of view in *The Autobiography's* diegetic discussions about racial hierarchy function as "one intermediate stage in a critical theory of body scales in the making of 'race'" (Gilroy 47). Consequently, the narrator's obsessive attention to the comportment and positionality of various collocutors within a public space underwrites these conversations with a particular alertness to the dynamics of visual scale. Invoking the period "project in ambivalence" Houston Baker has characterized as "mulatto modernism" (33), these dialogical vignettes on the social construction of racial and interracial identities highlight contemporaneous critiques of the black bourgeois discourse of racial "uplift" ideology, which advocated for greater social responsibility on the shoulders of educated African-American citizens. Apropos of historian Kevin K. Gaines's classic contention that uplift's assimilationist rhetorics of "progress" and "opportunity" often only succeeded in maintaining the racist structures they ostensibly hoped to dissolve (17), the novel's resulting "hue"-based complication of black modernism identifies uplift's critical assumption: that the continued legitimacy of early twentieth-century black cultural identity rested on darkness of complexion as a visual index inversely proportionate to the deleterious effects engendered by the progressive lightening of the race (Baker 33).

⁵ Descending from the dominant episteme of Enlightenment visual culture, uplift's damaging legacy underscores the extent to which the social construction of race depends upon a vision-centered, or "ocularcentric" epistemology. This "hegemony of the eye," in Martin Jay's words, naturalizes the "perceptual observation of the natural world" (389) in a one-to-one relationship between reality and representation—the classic subject-object division authorized by Cartesian perspectivalism constituting the "scopic regime" in

which Johnson's novel clearly participates (Foster 4). A nineteenth-century philosophical lens that authorizes morphologically inclined beliefs in the racialized body as an innately inferior category "bounded and protected by its enclosing skin" (Gilroy 46), ocularcentrism clearly provokes the narrator's alternately defensive and ambivalent quest for racial parity. In this way, Johnson's treatment of vision and visuality offers at once a powerful critique of the knowledge systems through which racializing discourses are deployed while also challenging the post-emancipatory political platform that sought to ameliorate class divisions among black Americans. Needless to say, it is in the author's literally self-effacing focalization that a furtive solidarity with contemporaneous notions of black cultural autochthony is fitfully "voiced" through subtle instances of self-exposure.

⁶ The narrator's projection (partly confirmed when he engages the man in conversation) of certain phenotypical and social characteristics recalls Houston Baker's *mulatto modernism*, the tenets of which include "bourgeois, middle-class individualism, vestimentary and hygienic impeccability, oratorical and double-conscious 'race pride,' and protonationalism." See *Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 33.

⁷ Given the willful confusion of categories his case represents, the Ex-Colored Man's predicament necessarily overlooks the liminal space Werner Sollors once identified as "neither black nor white yet both" given the illegibility of biraciality as a coherent category in the early twentieth century. In this way, the novel's challenge to essentialist premises regarding the stability of race classification calls attention to how all discourses on race—from the coded hate speech of "racial science" to defensive rhetorics of "authenticity" and "solidarity" deployed against it—depend upon socially imposed distortions in the visual field for their force. See Sollors 3-30.

⁸ Buell's new chapter on *Moby-Dick* ("Moby-Dick: From Oblivion to Great American Novel") provides a compelling symmetry with the critic's first writing on the novel, 1986's "Moby-Dick as Sacred Text" where he anticipates the novel's status as secular scripture with the acknowledgment that "[*Moby-Dick*] is read and taught by the professional priesthood with a more genuinely religious zeal than most of the priesthood probably feel toward the literal sacred texts of their own ethnic traditions" (53). Emphasizing the novel's "sacramental" language, Buell originally discusses its "mystic otherness" as the key ingredient for rehabilitating its reputation as a Post-Puritan exegesis on the spiritual significance of the natural world (akin to Emerson and Thoreau). Consistent with this analysis, his new chapter maintains Ahab's status as a "non-religiocentric thinker of the old Puritan school but a montage of old Calvinist and quasi-Zoroastrian fire-worshipper" (*Dream* 365). See *New Essays on Moby-Dick*. Ed. Richard Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 53-72.

⁹ See Allen Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 344; E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New

York: Houghton & Mifflin, 1987), 100; Charles Altieri's *Canons and Consequences* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990), 21-48; Katha Pollitt's "Why We Read: Canon to the Right of Me..." (*The Nation*, Sept. 1992); Chapter 1 ("The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition") in Henry Louis Gates' *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 17-42; Chapters 2 ("The Vanishing Classics and Other Myths: Two Episodes in the Culture War") and 6 ("Other Voices, Other Rooms") in Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: Norton, 1992), 16-26, 105-124; John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*; and Chapter 1 ("Greatness") in Marjorie Garber's *Symptoms of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000) 17-44).

¹⁰ Ironically, LeClair might have revised his statement in a *Salon.com* review of *Mosquito*, where he acknowledges the innovative inclusion of "multiethnic, multiracial, multiclass and gender perspectives" in this maximalist novel. However, LeClair goes on to malign the execution of these elements through the "hyper-realism of *Mosquito*'s meandering and maundering voice." My chapter analysis of the character's voice directly challenges LeClair's misunderstanding that "the paragraphs of implausible literary commentary explaining why these opinions should be in this book" with the claim that this commentary is precisely the point of the novel. See "Mosquito," January 12, 1999, *Salon.com*.

¹¹ The premise for Jameson's paranoia theory, developed in an earlier essay entitled "Cognitive Mapping" expands Kevin Lynch's claim that urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes. Lynch's conception of city experience serves as a spatial analogue to Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology itself (the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence). See *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988), 347-357.

¹² Given these clear postcolonial influences on Jones's work, my use of Jameson's "social detection" model follows Yumna Siddiqi's application of the term in her recent *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue*, where, because "social and state practices" are seen as "invidious, even vicious" (141) the protagonist's intellectual achievements are read as blows against the empire represented by a "repressive state apparatus" (14) rather in the service of a "conservative cultural critique" (11)—arguably, Jameson's original context for the practice.

¹³ Figured as "the Book," this secret text-as-counter-canonical achievement provides *Mumbo Jumbo*'s central mystery. Literally "buried beneath the center of the Cotton Club" (190), the "Black sacred Book" is explained by PaPa LaBas as he recites the facts of the case, sharing the revelation that "The White man will never admit his real references. He will steal everything you have and still call you those names. He will drag out standards and talk about propriety." Providing a rationale for this conspiracy, he

indicates, "...the reasons they wanted us out of the mysteries was because they were our mysteries!" (194).

¹⁴ Much has been made of the tragic circumstances that accompanied publicity surrounding *Mosquito*'s predecessor, the National Book Award-nominated *The Healing* (1998). See Henry Louis Gates' original review of *Mosquito*, entitled "Sanctuary," and an article on the police standoff between she, her husband Bob Higgins, and Lexington police released shortly before *Mosquito*'s release, Peter Manso's "Chronicle of a Tragedy Foretold," in the *New York Times*.

¹⁵ See Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1994), where the author evokes the "cubanglo" way of life as a process of "biculturation" whereby the minority individual in effect lives a double life—both fully embracing their cultural heritage and gradually synthesizing the new traditions of their adopted country (4-5).

¹⁶ My section title comes from Nadine's reference to the late Chicano playwright Rubén Sierra's incendiary 1968 satire (*Mosquito* 337-338, 562). Translated *Racial, Racial*, Sierra's indictment of the "melting pot" metaphor inspired violent reactions from white theater patrons on the eve of its San Antonio premier. As the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Theater* indicates, "conservative Anglo groups...even threatened to bomb the theater" despite the play's popularity (89). Generally used as an expression of pride in one's ethnic heritage, "*la raza*" is reconfigured as a dangerous social imaginary in Sierra's critique of interracial relationships between Anglo and Hispanic teenagers that draws freely from both *Romeo and Juliet* and its contemporary corollary *West Side Story*.

¹⁷ These observations are consistent with those of legal theorist Ian Haney-López, who notes in his seminal study of the legal implications for the social construction of race, "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice":

Human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance. The characteristics of our hair, complexion, and facial features still influence whether we are figuratively free or enslaved. Race dominates our personal lives...Race determines our economic prospects...Race permeates our politics...Race mediates every aspect of our lives. (3)

¹⁸ See especially Jefferson's remarks on slavery and ethnicity in general (New York: Library of America, 1984), 264-270.

¹⁹ The Daughters' philosophy is reminiscent of a passage in the penultimate piece from Palumbo-Liu's *The Ethnic Canon*, "A Rough Terrain: The Case of Shaping an Anthology

of Caribbean Women Writers,” by the late pioneer in African American literature Barbara Christian. Christian forcefully aligns with Palumbo-Liu’s emphasis—making a powerful case for an expanded canon by citing visibility and speech:

Such a multiplicity of selves, at least in relation to linguistic labeling, speaks to the complexity of my experience historically and presently, and is certainly an advance over the long centuries of repression and of coerced silence or narrowly constricted language within which those like myself have had to maneuver. Still, I am concerned about what each of these categories [racial, ethnic, regional, linguistic, gendered, and political affiliations] really signifies in terms of who I was, am, have meant, and, even more important, might be or mean. To what extent does each of these categories liberate the voices of Caribbean women and authentically communicate their experiences and history? To state my concern in a broader way: Is there a false unity camouflaging dominance and subordination for various groups of women writers depending on the category within which they are studied? To what extent do anthologies reproduce modes of exclusion or dominance? How does the use of one category or another affect curriculum, institution building, configurations of study within academic institutions as to what is significant enough to be studied about these various groups? Who are the users and the used, the communicators, the consumers, the audience?” (244)

²⁰ See Chapter XI of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 99-112.

²¹ Angela Naimou’s recent *Salvage Work: U.S. and Caribbean Literatures Amid the Debris of Legal Personhood* (Bronx, NY: Fordham UP, 2015) argues for *Mosquito’s* place in the growing body of literature devoted to creative *marronage*, or contemporary forms of fugitive personhood in search of postcolonial sanctuary. With a specific emphasis on the narrator’s curatorial role, Naimou relates how

The Daughters of Nzingha archive also works against the meanings of sanctuary as a bounded place and as an exceptional space that mirrors the violence of the law from which it seemingly provides refuge. It is *Mosquito’s* work as keeper of the archives, or minder of the word, that makes the novel itself a kind of textual sanctuary that is also living, mobile, and necessarily incomplete, thus linking the not-mainstream sanctuary movement with the work of keeping archives as intimately related practices of a decolonial aesthetics” (172).

²² “The Silko-Erdrich Controversy” refers to remarks made by Leslie Marmon Silko about Louise Erdrich’s novel *The Beet Queen*. As recounted by Susan Pérez Castillo,

Silko's challenge to Erdrich's "stylistic virtuosity as the product of an alienated postmodern sensibility," stems from a "restricted view of ethnicity" that essentializes "Indianness" as a coherent classification limited to a handful of salient features (17). See Susan Pérez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy." *Nothing But the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature*. Ed. John L. Purdy and James Ruppert (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 15-22. Similarly, the Chin-Kingston Debate begins with Frank Chin's scathing attack on David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan, and Kingston in his introductory essay from seminal Asian American literature anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee!* entitled "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" (New York: Meridian, 1991), 2-30. Speaking on behalf of authentic Chinese culture and repudiating "white acceptance, absorption, and assimilation," Chin castigates Kingston for selling out her originary culture and sentimentalizing "the racist mind" through a sensibility that has produced "social Darwinist works of science and fiction" (26). For further commentary on Kingston's fictional response to Chin's claims, see chapter 5, "Tripmaster Monkey, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition," of Patricia Chu's *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 169-187. In both Silko and Chin's arguments, the offending authors are susceptible to charges of "ahistoricism"; that is to say, both Erdrich and Silko violate their respective codes of ethnic membership by allowing their diversely biculturated characters and scenarios free-play within the adopted culture.

²³ Jones's suggestion that Nadine's gift as an autodidact with perfect recall of everything she hears reflects what Fred Evans calls "dialogic hybridity" in his recent Deleuze-inflected study, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*. Arguing that society is a network that describes the interplay of voices, "each of which resounds with the rest" (74), Evans explains that "Insofar as each voice cites the others and is at least partly established as the voice it is through citation, these other voices play a role in its identity and are simultaneously its 'other'" (74). Asserting that "because these voices are always 'in motion,' that is, exist as responses to one another, their interrelationship is more aptly characterized as 'interplay' than 'intersection,'" Evans's notion of dialogic hybridity is consistent with both my discussion of Charles Taylor's webs of interlocution in chapter 1.

²⁴ Cohen's influence over the Jewish American novel has been felt post-publication of *Witz* in the form of irreverent quasi-factual immigration narratives such as Yelena Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in a Suitcase*, Boris Fishman's *A Replacement Life*, and David Bezmozgis's *The Betrayers*. All three of these 2014 novels feature the experience of Russian Jews, but depart from the often-maudlin streak common to the writers attacked by Cohen.

²⁵ At 1250 pages, Phil Chernofsky's recent art-book *And Every Single One Was Someone* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2013) defies its readers to ignore the material loss of six million people in a book that features the single word "Jew" repeated six million times.

Chernofsky's daunting testament to the near-complete annihilation of European Jewry provides a kind of photo-negative to Joshua Cohen's 817-page *Witz*, which curiously avoids the word "Jew" altogether, imagining instead a period somewhere in the not-so-distant future in which the "Affiliated" declare their heritage in coded bureaucratese, albeit of an extravagantly Yiddish-inflected style.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: NETWORK AESTHETICS AND THE FUTURES OF “MEGAFICTION”

Visitors entering the New School’s recently unveiled University Center in Lower Manhattan are immediately confronted with a spectacular open plan design. Training the gaze forever upward and aslant, the lobby and ascending floors comprise a vertiginous web of lines, gradations, and levels that literally elevates the virtues of “academic freedom, tolerance, and experimentation” so central to the New School’s original “Social Research” mission. Of course, these cascading transparencies of glass and steel are not entirely without warmth, as the Center’s gentle slope of floating staircase quadrangles descends into an inviting “Event Café” venue replete with elegant dining area, performance space in bright maple, and pleasant dapple of natural lighting. Seemingly at odds with the otherwise challenging aesthetic that informs the structure as a whole, the Café’s comparative intimacy is nevertheless overwritten by a text that clarifies this juxtaposition in luminous lines of violet neon script—unfurling “ticker-tape”-style above the expanse as far as the eye can see:

| No labor-saving machine, Nor discovery have I made, Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy bequest to found a hospital or library, Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage for America, Nor literary success nor intellect, nor book for the book-shelf, But a few carols vibrating through the air I leave, For comrades and lovers. |

This panoramic selection of free verse from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* composes just one small part of Glenn Ligon's site-specific installation "For Comrades and Lovers," with a particular emphasis on the collection's "Calamus" section. Ligon's commission extends another four hundred linear feet, freely intermixing "Starting from Paumanok," "Song of Myself," "No Labor-Saving Machine" (from which it derives its title), and "Among the Multitude":

Among the men and women the multitude, I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs, Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband, brother, child, any nearer than I am, Some are baffled, but that one is not—that one knows me. Ah lover and perfect equal, I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections, And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you. |

Coalescing around a single theme common to Ligon's entire body of work—language's drive to signify the inexpressible—these stylized excerpts illuminate so-called "impossible" concepts such as "love, intimacy, the body and the soul" that often evade concrete representation ("Glenn Ligon Unveils"). In previous displays, Ligon's literary sign sculptures demonstrated the philosophical practice of "writing under erasure," in which the artist drew attention to a word or phrase's range of potential meanings by striking through, blacking out, or otherwise distorting its physical appearance in some transformative way.¹ A departure from this method, "For Comrades and Lovers" presents a dramatically different strategy as Ligon's stark font, color, and placement transparently aims for the maximum connectivity of Whitman's visionary message. In this way, the artist's radiant approach supplies a new variation on erasure's deconstructive logic,

“electrifying” its topological text in collaboration with the Center’s potentially limitless spaces: an appropriately scalar staging of the poet’s grand problematic.

This dissertation has worked in similarly extra-dimensional terms to define the narrative phenomenon of scale in late twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction as a fundamentally long-form experience. Toward examining the three critical tropes of the encyclopedia, the labyrinth, and the canon, my allopoietic method has targeted big novels that synthesize the self-reflexivity common to metafictional aesthetics with the size and density of the maximalist tradition in American literary history—“megafictions,” as Brian McHale has recently termed them, which combine “the features of difficulty...with length” (*The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* 75). However, this tendency is far from the only way to conceptualize scalarity in literary aesthetics. In fact, true to the logic of Aristotle’s orders of magnitude, each of the preceding chapters has opened with a glimpse of maximalism’s scalar opposite: a comparatively condensed mode that gestures toward infinitude without fully achieving its exhausting effects. Ever aware of the material limitations imposed on textual scale, these smaller texts by Kaufman, Kiš, Borges, Johnson, and Ligon (+ Whitman) suggest a parallel, or at least, *hybrid*, variant to maximalism’s more conspicuous footprint.

With due deference to the “miniaturist” imaginary suggested above,² my final chapter proposes two possible futures for literary scale in contemporary American narrative. The first considers the way this aesthetic inaugurates a new form of “scale-free”³ connectivity that shares the expansive values of maximalist metafiction but in a substantially reduced form. Taking for granted “the popular discourse of cyberspace as a

global frontier or as a digital commons...[where] getting connected and staying connected” requires considerably less effort than in earlier eras (Galloway and Thacker 62-63), such texts are enhanced by the projective capacities of oral and visual media. This context that allows them to aggrandize the minimalist poetics of writers like Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, or Tobias Wolff, while resisting the maximalist length of a Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, or McElroy. Specifically, the short fiction of George Saunders and the (recently) shorter novels of Don DeLillo read an American scene where the commodification of “access” engenders a multiplicity of unusual rhetorical effects, putting this project’s maximalist focus into sharp relief by mocking “the aesthetics of verbal pride” that McGurl argues is an inherent part of maximalist poetics (*The Program Era* 301). As that critic suggests, miniaturism in American literary history lies somewhere between the “agonized articulacy” of minimalism and the “shameless” prolixity of maximalism (*The Program Era* 300)—a middle ground that can be seen to evoke the discursive dynamics associated with the early twenty-first century’s bellicose exceptionalism.

The second “future,” in a somewhat retro-reactionary vein, expresses a mode of connectivity that draws from cinematic and televisual media for a more explicitly “networked” narrative format in the aftermath of the World Wide Web’s pervasive influence on American intellectual life. With the proliferation of information and communication technologies following the Second World War, the network is increasingly understood as the dominant organizational mode for contemporary society. This social imaginary, through which Manuel Castells has grounded his influential

Information Age concept of the “network society,” provides the logical step beyond the three maximalist discourses from chapters two, three, and four to arguably present the next phase beyond the older epistemological effects of encyclopedism, labyrinthicity, and the canonical. As Sam Anderson has argued in his essay “When Lit Blew into Bits,” the diminishing popularity of maximalism in the first decade of the twenty-first century is related to “the technology that infinitely distracted us” during the first decade of the twenty-first century: a period during which the informational plenitude of the Internet stood in for (and at times, short-circuited altogether) both the value and utility of long-form fiction (“When Lit”). These “Web” or—more appropriately for this project—“interface” effects Anderson contends have two consequences: the first, related to craft and composition, the second, marketability and publishing.

On the one hand, novels literally “shrink” to shorter lengths, given the cognitive pressures that force attention spans to match the speed, immediacy, and ephemerality of touch-click technology. On the other, those authors still inclined toward larger-scale productions have allowed their work to be disseminated in ever-more fragmentary ways for a reading public delighted with immersion but exhausted with the physically intimidating heft that often accompanies it. From Roberto Bolaño’s critically and commercially acclaimed posthumous epic *2666* (intended as six separate short novels) to Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (available in both chunky paperback and, in eBook form exclusively as ten discrete novellas), the advent of digital publishing has facilitated the experimentation with a variety of textual forms. I maintain that this two-fold trend does not affect the maximalist novel as a genre so much as it alters the scalar dynamics of

maximalism as a reading (and speaking) experience—a factor that holds true of both older examples of miniaturism (novel and short story) and contemporary forms of maximalism. Read together, these new miniaturist and maximalist variants consolidate the three “exceptional topologies” used to organize this study (including *individuation*, *multiplicity*, and *movement*) under the fourth and final mode of network *connectivity*.

Voice at National Volume: Miniaturism and Maximalism Redux

Become the patriot that your loud voice proclaims you to be...

- Phil Donahue, in conversation with Bill O'Reilly, 2005

George Saunders's inspired use of amplitude as an index for hyperbolic nationalism and nativist entitlement alike has generated a growing body of criticism on scale's significance for literary studies. This critical lens, through which the writer's own fiction has been analyzed by recent scholarship, extends from Michael Trussler's argument that faux-totalizing pieces such as “Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz” herald the miniaturist sub-genre of the “encyclopedic short story” to Mark McGurl's recent remarks on the way nationalism gets pathologized through severely compressed geographical boundaries in *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. Although limiting his discussion to the subject of scale as a sociospatial phenomenon, McGurl nevertheless implies that there are numerous ways a critical turn to scale might be framed in literary criticism. Hence, the rhetorical implications of scale in the context of national audience are once again invoked in reference to the critic's question about “the relationship between a work's form and its presumed scale of address” (402). Scale in this context serves as a

useful heuristic for considering how national identity takes shape under the duress of contemporary political discourse, a relationship analogous to the rhetorical “reach” of a given rhetor’s message in which ever-louder, more grandstanding rhetoric attempts to shout down a space increasingly “crowded out” by the voices of others.

Echoing a chapter from *Democracy in America* entitled “Why American Writers and Speakers are Often Bombastic,” Saunders’s work in the 2000s picks up De Tocqueville’s critique of the American voice as a distinctly hyperbolic instrument. A vehicle through which the individual might close the distance between the country’s expansive imaginary and the self dwarfed within it (565-567), exaggeration here begets a kind of pressurized speech given the citizen’s need to assert his comparative smallness against the capaciousness of U.S. territorial space. Following this logic, George Saunders’s 2007 essay “The Braindead Megaphone” offers a twenty-first century reboot of De Tocqueville’s caustic pronouncement by charting the development of a similarly shrill subject position via the mindless outrages of contemporary news media outlets. This confident expression of overwrought, underdeveloped ideas at the expense of thoughtful public debate the author considers a new media paradigm defined by two reactionary effects: “volume” and “omnipresence.” “Volume,” Saunders elaborates, “has a habit of turning the conversation to whatever the loudest conversant is talking about,” while “omnipresence”—embodied by the archetypal “Megaphone Guy” who expresses this pugnacious style—describes the conditions by which other voices are “crowded out.” For Saunders, this “rhetoric becomes the central rhetoric because of its unavoidability” (3).

A test run for what might be called Saunders's "Megaphonocentric" hypothesis, the author's second story collection, *In Persuasion Nation* (2006) imagines a twenty-first century America nearly engulfed by the varied social, cultural, and political discourses that construct what passes for contemporary citizenship. Indeed, to inhabit this noisy national imaginary is to hear the American self literally "hailed into recognition" by assorted institutional and ideological forces—an action the shared historical milieu of *Persuasion* and its essay counterpart bears out. Unsurprising for its historical context (the grim middle years of the George W. Bush presidency), Saunders's collection dramatizes how increasingly hyper-mediated forms of nationalist bombast and anti-intellectualism reached (to use Sean McCann's evocative phrasing) new "pinnacle[s] of feeling" in the traumatic post-9/11 era. Lauren Berlant's recent cultural hypothesis of "ambient citizenship" speaks to this shrill shift by citing a telling remark by the embattled president, in which he once expressed the desire to "speak above the filter" (223-224)—a remarkably perceptive admission about the way twenty-first century national identity gets voiced. Berlant's "mode of belonging," whereby authenticity is achieved in calculated departures from the protocols of mass-mediated discourse, ambient citizenship expands the larger conversation about how "*politicians* imagine occupying a public sphere where they might [...] make an unmediated transmission to the body politic" (223-228).

Underexamined in studies of prose fiction, the relative amplitude or loudness of "the written voice" is most usefully taken up by the history and theory of rhetoric. Richard Lanham's standard *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, for instance, defines volume through the figure of *augendi causa* ("for the purpose of increasing"). Accordingly,

Saunders's persuasive nationalism suggests that one makes one's points by "raising the voice for emphasis." Such uniquely American valences of bombast and intellectual incuriosity are manifest in the key motifs of voice, volume, speech, and speaking used throughout Saunders's most acutely "national" collection, and especially the family-themed stories that compose its first part: "I CAN SPEAK!™," "My Flamboyant Grandson," and "Jon." Whether invoked through direct description or indirectly (i.e. signal phrase), each story narrates voice through characters that frequently do not possess their own. Given the competitive urgency with which Saunders invests the storytelling role as a vehicle for action in a world of exponentially louder, dumber "Megaphone Guys," the author's work explores to what extent so-called American identity is predicated on an ability to connect space to self through a national voice that must grow ever-louder to claim that space. With an eye on the reconfiguring of citizenship that constitutes their critique, miniaturist writers—like their maximalist counterparts—evoke the American nation's appetite for greater space and span while carrying a pervasive defeatism about the paradoxical "smallness" of American citizenship, despite its triumphalist protestations to the contrary.

By contrast, Don DeLillo's recent miniaturist novella, *Point Omega* (2010) mutes this volumetric dynamic by occluding national identity entirely through a purely aesthetic alternative. Offering itself as a truly arresting piece of film criticism⁴ on the uncontested pioneer of transgressive postwar cinema, DeLillo's micronarrative proves that allopoiesis is not merely limited to literary maximalism by occupying the sort of "third row" vantage point Susan Sontag once championed for an unobstructed perspective inside the *mise-en-*

scène. In this way, DeLillo invites readers to consider the aleatory effects of Alfred Hitchcock's most manipulative celebration of narrativity (*Psycho*) in an extended series of pseudo-program notes that open and close the novel. Less a "close" than "slow reading" of *Psycho*, *Point Omega* operates at a necessary distance, refracting its analytical observations through the 2006 MoMA revival of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993).

Far from constituting some avant-garde distortion of classical Hollywood narration, the novel's recasts Hitchcock's sordid shocker for the museal spaces of gallery exhibition via Gordon to arguably perfect the original work's grindhouse milieu by notably reducing the film's visual scale to nearly a quarter (ten by fourteen feet) of its theatrical release's aspect ratio. This miniaturizing of *Psycho*'s initial impact paradoxically heightens the reflexive awareness of spectatorial activity in a director's oeuvre famously devoted to foregrounding audience apprehensions as a crucial part of its creative practice. Ironically, in DeLillo's reimagining, Gordon's video installation perversely realizes *Psycho*'s original reception conditions⁵ by slowing its original frame rate to a glacial 2 frames per second. Most visible in the nameless spectator-narrator who compulsively attends *24 Hour Psycho*, "interface" here refers to the desire for "complete immersion" in the film or "deeper involvement of eye and mind...the thing tunneling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing consciousness with him" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 115). While pining for the possibility of this total immersion experience, DeLillo's allodiegetic narrator for instance observes the fact that the length of Gordon's film exceeds the institutional parameters of a museum's hours of operation and thus

encourages only a fleeting commitment to the piece's demands. This limited commitment offers a clear parallel with the novel's primary plotline involving a retired Pentagon analyst whose last job included brainstorming philosophical justifications for the Iraq invasion, and who unsurprisingly continues to be haunted by that strategy's unpredictable denouement. Following Gordon's digressively dilatory or "loiterly" ethic as a critical pressure, DeLillo's *Psycho* actually recovers a non-narrative dimension already present in the original source.

In his monograph on DeLillo ("with Gaddis, Powers, and Danielewski), Mark C. Taylor highlights this immersive approach by exploring the different forms of reading demanded by a network text. Speculating on the implications the continuous navigation of electronic screens might have had on the reading habits of a millennial demographic, Taylor makes the following observation:

The webs in which we are evermore entangled are not merely computer networks but are also global financial, media, and information networks. These changes are far from superficial; as we become inseparably joined to these prostheses by feedback loops, our very being is transformed. Young people, who are already living this future, are wired differently from previous generations. If one is patient enough to listen, though most adults are not, it quickly becomes clear that they do not see or think like their parents. The point is not that they think different ideas but that they actually *think differently*. The common complaint about students not reading enough is misguided; they read – perhaps not always as much as their parents and professors think they should – but they do not read the way their parents and teachers read. (110)

This largely supportive response eschews apocalyptic prognostications on literature's imminent, digitally-inspired demise to highlight networks as a resilient new paradigm for literary studies due to the advent of digital literacy. Singling out *House of Leaves* as an

exemplary text of this idiosyncratic form, Taylor's text charts the forty-year emergence of a proto-networked form—beginning as early as Gaddis's *The Recognitions* and concluding with Danielewski's innovative novel.

Likewise, David Bordwell's long article, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance" (2008) positions film criticism as a key critical tool in the development of a network aesthetics equally at home in contemporary fiction. Calling his theory "network narrative," Bordwell explains that the form "frankly exposes the act of narration, invit[ing] the viewer to build inferences out of teases, hints, and gaps" (200). A precursor to Taylor's discussion of electronic media's impact on creative writing (and DeLillo's willingness to draw at length from cinematic discourses), Bordwell describes his theory of network narrative in a filmic context, with storyworld as running on a multiverse organizing principle guided by a thread structure in which "tales of interlocking lives, converging fates, web of life, and multiple protagonist narratives," present an important alternative to the "single- or paired-protagonist plot" (191). Unsurprisingly, a number of twenty-first century "megafictions" seek to close the distance between or "fill" these teases, hints, and gaps, demonstrating the extent to which Bordwell's tenets exemplify the pervasive impact of narrative fiction film on the network aesthetics of twenty-first century maximalism. In Garth Risk Hallberg's soon-to-be released novel *City on Fire*, for example, the author spends 628 pages (in a total page count of 944) exhaustively filling out the back-stories of virtually every major character in the novel. This exhilarating effect, coupled with the novel's comparative accessibility in the context of those maximalist works examined in this study, leaves readers with the impression that almost

nothing will take place “off-stage,” so to speak, in Hallberg’s marvelously comprehensive imagining.

Indeed, the author sustains this bravura structural conceit for two-thirds of the novel’s length before contriving a stunning prolepsis set 26 years in the future that casually reveals the twenty-first century fates of its late-1970s cast. Incorporated into the novel’s generically diffuse “interlude” structure of character testimonials and creative texts (a confessional letter from parent to child, an unfinished piece of New Journalism-style writing, a punk rock “zine,” a long poem, and a private email) the psychiatric evaluation form in question synthesizes a variety of plot threads through a character whose childhood was susceptible to the terrible decisions of many adults in whose care he was placed. Although almost naturalistic in its determinism, the prolepsis⁶ serves to align the reader’s perspective with the narrator’s omniscience, and by extension with aesthetic judgment as a whole. Like many maximalist fictions, Hallberg’s novel reveals works-in-progress by “artists-*in-process*” whose paintings, films, sculptures, and/or novels often mirror the books that frame them. For instance, when the transplanted black Southerner and prep school instructor Mercer Goodman reflects on the Great American Novel he’s been secretly composing (about NYC) throughout the entire novel, his remarks might be read as telling revelation about Hallberg’s own anxieties for *City on Fire*:

And there was his own work, the manuscript he never talked about. One of the reasons he started avoiding it in the first place was the swelling contradiction between the world and the novel as he imagined it. In his head, the book kept growing and growing in length and complexity, almost as if it had taken on the burden of supplanting real life, rather than evoking it. But how was it possible for

a book to be as big as life? Such a book would have to allocate 30-odd pages for each hour spent living...which was like 800 pages a day. Times 365 equals roughly 280,000 pages a year: call it 3 million per decade, or 24 million in an average human lifespan. A 24-million-page book, when it had taken Mercer four months to draft his 40 pages—wildly imperfect ones! At this rate, it would take him 2.4 million months to finish. 2,500 lifetimes, all consumed by writing. Or the lifetimes of 2,500 writers. That was probably—2,500—as many good writers as had ever existed, from Homer on. And clearly, he was no Homer. (881)

Mercer's authorial counterpart, the edgy journalist Richard Groskoph, also embarks on a larger evocation of the New York City experience with a nod to New Journalism and the "true life novels" of Capote and Mailer. Groskoph's desire for a medium that can accommodate the "web of relationships a dozen column inches had never been enough to contain" (183) extends to a range of social categories

Family, work, romance, church, municipality, history, happenstance...He wanted to follow the soul far enough out along these lines of relationship to discover that there was no fixed point where one person ended and another began. He wanted his articles to be, not infinite exactly, but big enough to suggest infinitude (183).

In this way, Hallberg's entire novel meditates on the way network aesthetics reveal identity as a fundamentally collective enterprise, the individual not "being individuated as a subject" but "as a node integrated into one or more networks" (Galloway and Thacker 60). An accessible revision of the multitudinal approaches to identity in this study's second chapter, *City on Fire's* reflexive meditation on its characters' various struggles to "make it all connect" perhaps owes as much to the pop noir of *The Naked City* ("There are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them") as it does the avant-garde spectacles of Pynchon or McElroy. Indeed, Hallberg's novel joins a host of other megafictions in a year that might well spark a definitive revival of literary

maximalism that popularizes the work of their obscurer predecessors to offer a new way of thinking about national identity across the boundaries of age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

Closing 2015 alongside a larger-than-usual class of big novels suggests that traditional reading platforms are far from finished, and *City on Fire*'s cohort accordingly revisits many of the salient features that inform my project's primary texts. The legacies of Gayl Jones and Samuel R. Delany, for example, are significantly complicated by the multiethnic and queer maximalist fictions of both new author Hanya Yanagihara and living legend Larry Kramer. With its multiracial circle of friends functioning as an almost after-thought only to set up a gritty case study into the sole racially illegible character's harrowing child abuse, Yanagihara's intriguingly post-ethnic trauma narrative *A Little Life* (736 pages), argues for a form of friendship beyond its implied skin-deep critique of identity politics. Ideologically at odds with Yanahigara's apolitical perspective but posited in similarly moving terms, Larry Kramer's courageous attempt to rewrite U.S. history (the 800-page, first volume of *The American People* trilogy) from an unapologetically gay perspective restores the subject of sexual identity to the legal and political spheres in which it finds itself in the summer of 2015. Regardless of where they stand, these novels are the clear beneficiaries of both the radical critical traditions and expanded literary canons that made their interventions possible in the first place, revisiting the uneasy dialectic between private life and public commitment dramatized in *The Mad Man* and *Mosquito*.

Similarly, for a project about the impact extra-literary discourses have on shaping a reflexive “reciprocity of contemplation” between creative authorship and reading audience, the endless scholarship that shapes the black hole at *House of Leaves*’s singular center surely informs the immensity of Danielewski’s projected 27-volume series *The Familiar*. With volumes one and two (at 880 pages apiece) arriving within months of each other to considerable excitement and attention, these fictions make good on the promise (or threat, in the Borgesian view) of moving beyond an *imagined* impact on the world around them to engulf that world completely. In the same vein, Joshua Cohen’s *Book of Numbers* (a modest 597 pages) reboots *Witz*’s apocalyptic future as a field of pure potential, logically taking the Internet as its source subject in a stunningly faithful representation of everything from chatspeak to web protocols and even coding. Featuring a writer named “Joshua Cohen” who ghostwrites the autobiography of a tech billionaire also named Joshua Cohen, Cohen’s infinite regress turns the network form against itself by interrogating its formal principles as dramatic content—all in the service of defending traditional literary culture from the technologies that would destroy it.

Such elaborated depictions of what Yann Moulier-Boutang has elsewhere called the “cognitive capitalism” that drives our Information Age, I argue, define a uniquely American reading experience; for in making exceptional demands on the reader’s time, these maximalist fictions make the writer’s laborious process part of our own. Unsurprisingly, the critical value of scale as a key aesthetic category in contemporary U.S. narrative lies in its ability to pass beyond a merely acknowledgment of the boundaries between real and fictional worlds into an understanding of how their surface

effects mark the reader's deeper experience of long-form novels. While the contested critical category of "national literature" gets figured in terms of the "coterminous" and "coherent"—thinly veiled analogues for realist convention in the postwar era—these metaphors of containment break down into the exponentially fragmentary forms described above: whether miniaturist, maximalist, or some novel form of scalarity as yet unknown.

Notes

¹ The artist is best known for his installation using Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" from *Three Lives* (1909). One of "Melanctha's" many inflammatory phrases—"the warm broad glow of negro sunshine"—provided the centerpiece of the Whitney's 2012 career retrospective, *Glenn Ligon: America*. Taking its title from the inflammatory couplet at the end of Stein's phrase, Ligon's neon sculpture entitled "negro sunshine" takes the form of "blacking out" the front portion of the phrase's words so that the "warm broad glow" of harsh fluorescence illuminates the wall behind it. The sculpture's powerful illumination of Stein's work highlights the author's alertness to language's performative dimension and so dismisses the novella's reputation as mere racist folly to recover its parodic potential.

² Committed to the sensibility of macronarrative without forcing his reader's hand in the process, renowned Swiss writer Max Frisch's acclaimed 1979 novel *Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (*Man in the Holocene*), for example, is one such indelible but underappreciated "illustration" among the earliest practitioners of miniaturism. Relating the story of aged pensioner Herr Geiser, whose paranoid speculations about a possible landslide that threatens to engulf his secluded Ticino canton home, Frisch's novel meditates on the fears that exacerbate the creeping loneliness of old age and its attendant disconnections from the modern world. Ostensibly a red herring of sorts intended to explain away a number of behavioral idiosyncrasies (subtle cues are offered about the old man's declining cognitive faculties), the landslide ultimately reflects Geiser's sudden desire for community from the solitary confinement of old age. In an attempt to assuage his fears about the home's seemingly crumbling structure (and his intensifying isolation), the retiree papers its walls over with pages from an encyclopedia, because "knowledge is reassuring" (12). Geiser's actions are enacted materially on the surface of the text by snipping excerpts from the actual encyclopedia *Der Grosse Brockhaus*—"in twelve volumes, 16th, fully revised edition, Wiesbaden, 1953" as the source list indicates at the novel's end (Frisch 113). That is to say, when he pins an excerpt to the wall, readers receive the snippet in-text, aligning our perspectives (and visual field) with his project. As Geiser's knowledge work becomes our own, the panoply of reference volumes is reduced to so many paper dolls across the "wall" of pages. Almost cinematic in its faux-tactile format, Frisch's approach analogizes the reading process as one would a splicing together of film-frames. To this end, the fragments of Geiser's memories become indistinguishable from the most benignly impersonal knowledge products thumbed haphazardly from his library—bits of random information suddenly invested with deep, personal significance.

³ Albert-László Barabási's theory proposes a drastically different form of network topology in comparison with the conventional wisdom about random network structures. In the traditional view, networks are divided into a system of nodes that logically include roughly the same number of links. By contrast, scale-free networks—such as the World Wide Web, cell structures, and human relationships—operate on a hub principle whereby

some nodes possess a greater number of links than others resulting in a decentralized and non-hierarchical form of connectivity.

⁴ With respect to the author's contribution to film criticism, it is worth considering the evolving discursive role that film assumes in DeLillo's fiction and the film-based criticism that surrounds it. Even prior its emplotment in his 1971 debut *Americana*, let alone *Players*, *The Names*, *Underworld*, or *The Body Artist*, film form emerges as a key aesthetic feature of DeLillo's uniquely ocularcentric style. Figuring, in David Cowart's recent genealogy, as early as the 1970 short story "The Uniforms," DeLillo's early experiments subordinated print to image. "The Uniforms," for example, invents the first (and perhaps last) "reverse-adaption" of what must arguably be the least marketable novelization attempted in movie history: Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End* (1967). Even more notably, scholarship examining the impact of film both on and across Don DeLillo's fiction has grown to the status of a near-subfield within critical studies of the author's work, appearing at least as early as John Frow's *Marxism and Literary History* in 1986 and remaining an important thematic through recent multimedia-inflected discussions of *Point Omega*. Indeed, Frow's lengthy analysis of *Running Dog's* rare erotic art subculture consumed by the acquisition of a rumored Reich Chancellery stag film featuring Hitler and Eva Braun sets the conversational parameters for DeLillo and film over the next two decades. Combining formalist and historicist approaches, this trend reads cinematic form as a handmaiden to the craft of prose fiction through two overlapping lenses. On the one hand, in the earlier novels, filmic effects are deployed as formal aesthetic features akin to the tropes of Russian Formalism and the New Criticism, defamiliarization, irony, and paradox translated as discourses of imagery, surface effect, collage, and montage. On the other hand, this aesthetic impulse gives way to the later film historian in DeLillo, with layers of transtextual cinematic reference serving as a historical palimpsest upon which the author freely elaborates (one here thinks of DeLillo's treatment of the Zapruder film, or Robert Frank's unreleased Stones documentary *Cocksucker Blues*, in *Underworld*). Though both forms of critique have expanded conversations about DeLillo's work in an explicitly intermedial direction, the formalist- historicist intersection rarely invokes DeLillo's own acknowledged cinephilia—the point of departure for this study.

⁵ A far cry from its original conditions of post-production, as David Thomson relates in his recent cultural history of *Psycho*, Hitchcock's thriller was originally accompanied by a truly sensational public relations campaign, in which the picture's suspenseful effects were sustained under certain extra-diegetic conditions. Upon entering the theaters where *Psycho* was initially shown in 1960, for example, patrons were greeted with the insistence that they would absolutely "not be admitted to screenings already in progress" – a command issuing forth from Hitchcock's droll, disembodied voice via pre-recorded lobby announcements. This admittedly carceral demand, while perhaps expressing the sheer novelty of a kind one would expect from *Psycho's* hucksterish producer William Castle, simultaneously frames the film itself as a sordid secret to be protected from the

cursory glances accorded other exploitation fare in the period. As Mark McGurl has elsewhere suggested about critical approaches to postwar aesthetics generally, this interface effect positions *Psycho*'s severely circumscribed reception as itself an "auratic object seeded with deep hidden meanings that only reveal upon close—which is also to say, slow—inspection" (400).

⁶ Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) likewise uses this flash-forward technique to powerful effect (in a considerably lower page count) as a means of illustrating the assaultive nature of time on American conceptions of identity and community. As with Hallberg's depiction of the Bowery circa 1976-77, Egan's encyclopedically informed take on the West Coast punk rock milieu in roughly the same era uses pop music (and youth culture generally) to generate a dialectic between adolescence and adulthood that subverts the classic "innocence to experience" arc of coming of age narratives. A fractured (and fractal) update of the classic "development" or "formation novel," Egan's apparent *Nihil-dungsroman* uses the immediacy and energy of punk against itself by repeatedly reconfiguring characterization and event across wide swaths of time. With this in mind, the repeated slogan "time's a goon"—from which the novel grabs its title—ironizes and neutralizes the romantic valences of a safety pin-pierced, mohawked and jackbooted punk goon, whose days as a figure of relevance are always already numbered given the impermanence of cultural trends.

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