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This dissertation examines representations of wounded white masculinity in contemporary American fiction from the late 1960s to the mid-2000s through a critical perspective developed within Native-authored creative and critical work. It departs from currents within studies of contemporary U.S. fiction in approaching representations of the experience of whiteness within settlement in nonnative writing. The project's critical focus is grounded in the work of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) and Anna Lee Walters (Otoe/Pawnee). Alexie and Walters theorize white masculinity as the experience of prosthetic belonging within settlement. The project develops their theories of whiteness into a unique approach to novels typically read as exemplars of postmodern narrative. Reading works from Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Kurt Vonnegut, and Jonathan Safran Foer, *Wounded Whiteness* examines the ways these writers imagine sincerity as an emotional prosthetic for white masculinity. This examination yields a new perspective on contemporary fiction's engagement with questions of personal, spatial, and national belonging in highlighting the embodied, sensory dimensions of racial and gender identity for a category—white masculinity—typically associated with disembodied rationality. The dissertation thus demonstrates the extent to which contemporary U.S. fiction imagines performances of white masculinity's distanced disembodiment as actively dependent on the sensory inhabitation of others' identities; and how, out of those relationships, white masculinity instantiates an expansive experience of belonging within contested spaces.

WOUNDED WHITENESS: MASCULINITY, SINCERITY, AND SETTLEMENT  
IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. FICTION

by

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Approved by

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For Cindy, all of this and more.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Since at least the 1960s, white men have been wounded men within U.S. cultural representation. As Sally Robinson, David Savran, and others have argued, this pattern marks a strategic response to the destabilization of white masculinity's normatively hegemonic home at the center of U.S. cultural privilege.<sup>1</sup> Woundedness may seem like a strange strategic vehicle. However, Robinson suggests that in order for white masculinity to "most fully [represent] itself as victimized" it has to inhabit a "wounded body" (6). Though Robinson develops this claim through a focus on white men's response to the "forced embodiment of whiteness and masculinity" (4), what would it mean to read the wounded body white men inhabit as someone else's? How might the pattern of white men's victimized representation in so much of U.S. literature, film, and television from the past half-century flag a pattern of surrogation and prostheticization, affective transmissions that produce the experience of whiteness as an experience of woundedness?<sup>2</sup> For what would woundedness become a surrogate if we were to take this perspective? And how might it push us to reconsider representations of white men's victimization as less strategic than sincere?

In this project I examine representations of wounded white masculinity in contemporary U.S. fiction as expressive of a phenomenological orientation I call *wounded whiteness*. I develop this perspective from the critical-creative work of two

Native American novelists, Anna Lee Walters (Otoe/Pawnee) and Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene). In *Ghost Singer* and *Indian Killer*, Walters and Alexie respectively develop a critical phenomenology theorizing white masculinity as the experience of prosthetic belonging within settlement and suggest that whiteness inhabits its imaginary of Indianness in order to inhabit itself—a form of prosthetic attachment to a fiction borne from settler-colonial relations that becomes self-authorizing and self-generating. Alexie's and Walters's white men experience whiteness as a wound that colors their perceptual capacities and, in Walters's evocative phrasing, "plugs up" their senses. From within whiteness as a plugged-up sensorium, Alexie and Walters suggest white men sincerely experience and express their fantasies of victimhood and woundedness as the basis for their fantasies of prosthetic belonging within settlement. Wounded whiteness is thus not a strategic manipulation of embodiment but a sincere expression of what it means and how it feels to live within settlement as the experience of living within whiteness.

Following work within Indigenous studies that examines settlement as a structure not an event,<sup>3</sup> I read a selected set of nonnative texts—Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*—as archives of the phenomenology of wounded whiteness Alexie and Walters imagine and develop within *Ghost Singer* and *Indian Killer*.<sup>4</sup> Merging critical analyses of white male victimhood with Walters's and Alexie's phenomenologies of whiteness, and developing that perspective through diverse array of critical and theoretical work within Indigenous studies, gender

and sexuality studies, and feminist critiques of genre and cultural production, I read these nonnative texts' representations of wounded or victimized white masculinity as expressive of the sincere experience of whiteness as a wound that directs white men toward others as their *emotional surrogates* and *affective prosthetics*. By *emotional surrogates* I mean that other persons become the vehicles for wounded white men's feelings of woundedness within these texts, both enabling their expression and conditioning their possibilities. By *affective prosthetics*, I mean that wounded white men feel themselves durably attached to forms of belonging—to space and place as much as to personhood and plain human being—through the affective space these texts imagine others' bodies to provide. Whether through women's sexual availability, ambiguously racialized threats, other men's suggestively queered bodies, or domestic-familial spaces over which ever-watchful maternal figures preside, DeLillo, Wallace, Vonnegut, and Foer suggest whiteness is experienced as woundedness through the durable attachments to space and place others make possible.

Drawing upon Alexie's and Walters's texts as theoretical touchstones, I situate these nonnative texts' representations of wounded whiteness against the phenomenological backdrop of settler-colonial experience, or what I have called settler-feeling. Positioning them as archives for what Walters and Alexie imagine as the experience of prosthetic belonging is as unique as it is unorthodox within studies of contemporary U.S. nonnative fiction. What does DeLillo have to do with Native Americans? How does Foer's imaginative revision of 9/11 trauma intersect with settler-coloniality? These questions, while warranted, speak to the core presumption this project

challenges: that Native creative and intellectual work is applicable only when Native peoples feature as representational content. Within a U.S. frame, perceptual experience is shaped by the experience of settler-coloniality, even and especially when its contours appear inconsequential. This is what it means to say that settlement is a structure; settlement is an enduring process that unfolds in the present through the manifest content of perceptual experience. To the extent that nonnative U.S. fiction takes up, organizes, narrates, and represents lived experience—to whatever end—what features as experience in nonnative novels take shape around the experience of settler-occupation. As I show in the first chapter, Alexie's and Walters's work open up ways to chart these experiences through a focus on the phenomenological contours of white masculinity as a particularly privileged position within settlement.<sup>5</sup>

Building on analyses of white male victimhood, I argue that victimized white masculinity's typically representational affects—isolation, disorientation, insularity, and withdrawal—can be better understood as surrogates for the experience of settler-feeling. To that end, I have organized the project around three modes of wounded whiteness: sincerity, solipsism, and traumatic experience. Though the first chapter focuses explicitly on white sincerity, I track sincerity as an affective inclination throughout each chapter of the project. White sincerity for Alexie represents a particular interpersonal inclination that arises from the experience of others' subject positions' prosthetic availability, and for Walters expresses a mode of belief that colors one's perceptual capacities and conditions what one can be sincere about. Following their work with white sincerity, in the second chapter I track the relationship between sincerity and white solipsism particularly as it

works out a vision of core humanity over and against the otherwise problematic dimensions of white men's solipsistic insularity. In the third chapter, I focus on how Walters's sense of sincerity as expressive of experiential limits conditions what becomes possible when sincerity becomes a genre within which to frame wounded white men's traumas as dramas of national-familial belonging.

Each chapter thus offers a different take on sincerity, which I argue to be a core mode of wounded whiteness's expression within nonnative literary representation. I take sincerity in its usual sense, as an expression of genuine feeling that runs counter to otherwise perceptible incongruities between performance and intention. I privilege sincerity over other representational strategies at work in these nonnative narratives for two primary reasons. First, the texts stage men's sincerity as an appeal to "deep" emotional truths grounded in the body's affective inclinations. This appeal makes it possible, on the one hand, to represent whiteness or masculinity as the experience of woundedness while, on the other, to clear away space within which performances of "deep" emotions come into the foreground against the background conditions that produce them. Second, as a representational frame sincerity situates wounded whiteness's prosthetic attachments as ethically uncomplicated and emotionally necessary elements of cultural repair. In this second sense I do not mean to suggest that sincerity is equivalent to ideological dissimulation, as if the texts know not what they do. Rather, as I show in the third chapter, sincere fictions map the contours of a particularly privileged mode of existence within which others appear as already available affective prostheses and emotional surrogates. These relationships stem from the possessive attachments to spaces

and others that characterize the perceptual experience of whiteness, and I argue that through them we can see wounded whiteness as itself a prosthetic for white masculinity's possessive attachment to cultural centrality as a mode of belonging within settlement.

To these ends, my work has three primary goals. First, in departing from usual approaches to contemporary U.S. fiction, I hope to demonstrate the potential of re-reading and re-thinking contemporary U.S. writing alongside Native creative and intellectual work. Situating wounded whiteness as an experience of prosthetic belonging is among this project's unique contributions to studies of contemporary nonnative fiction. In highlighting belonging as an affective attachment articulated through whiteness, I aim to draw critical approaches to nonnative contemporary fiction into the analytical orbit of Indigenous studies in order to demonstrate the generative potential of stepping beyond canonical approaches to canonical literature. Second, in positioning nonnative U.S. fiction as an archive for Native-authored phenomenologies of whiteness, I hope to encourage scholars within Indigenous studies to reconsider contemporary nonnative writing as a fruitful site of engagement with the modalities of settler-feeling as they take form through representations of perceptual experience. And finally, in focusing on sincerity as the privileged literary representation of wounded whiteness's phenomenological orientation, I argue that critics of contemporary fiction need to reimagine the cultural work of sincerity as a generic tactic, particularly as sincerity implicates whiteness as its condition of possibility. I elaborate the context for these aims and the specific challenges this project poses in the following sections.

## **Wounded Whiteness and White Masculinity: Re-Thinking Victimization and “Invisibility”**

How do Alexie’s and Walters’s theories impact approaches to whiteness and masculinity? In particular, how does reimagining whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging reframe white male victimhood as the lens through which white masculinity has come into focus in the past several decades?<sup>6</sup> Much critical work on white male victimhood takes representations of victimization throughout what Sally Robinson calls the “post-liberationist era” as strategic manipulations of white masculinity’s supposed newly and sometimes forcibly embodied visibility in American culture.<sup>7</sup> And since at least the 1980s in popular media, white masculinity has been “in crisis.”<sup>8</sup> For Robinson, representations of wounded white men work to decenter white masculinity’s dominant position through laying claim to a “symbolic disenfranchisement” (12). David Savran makes a similar argument in focusing on the masochistic images through which white men articulate and embody victimhood and comes to a similar conclusion about the deflective potential opened up through representations of self-inflicted wounds. As Savran puts it, “masochism functions precisely as a kind of decoy” against which representations of masochistic masculinities stage “an almost magical restitution of phallic power” (37). Other more recent work on white masculinity largely follows in line.<sup>9</sup> The way woundedness (whether literal, physical wounds or the metaphorical wounds that “masochism,” “fragmentation,” or “hysteria” signal) has become a dominant representational strategy through which white masculinity comes into cultural and critical focus connects these analyses to this project.

But the question these perspectives leave unaddressed is what it means to assume that whiteness could have once been invisible and that white masculinity could have once been disembodied.

Discourses create subject positions that bodies inhabit, enact, and perform. Affective experience offers a view to the experience of living a subject position as a material part of one's embodied existence. White masculinity is always already an embodied subject position; what shifts in representational content show is thus not the experience of becoming, finally, embodied but rather changes in the experience of what it means and how it feels to inhabit white masculinity as both a subject position imbued with power and privilege and as a structure of perceptual experience. When we talk about whiteness's invisibility or masculinity's disembodiment, we are talking about affect; and when we talk about victimization or woundedness we are talking about the affective contours of embodied experience. Victimization or woundedness are affective experiences that shape how embodiment feels and direct what becomes possible as embodied experience. So rather than taking representations of white male victimization as calculated responses we can read them as sincere expressions of embodied experience, a felt woundedness that becomes another in a long line of affected performances through which white masculinity is embodied. Focusing on the representational strategies through which white men repair and maintain their privileged position work against efforts to highlight the active subordination of other subject positions embedded within processes of "co-optation," as Hamilton Carroll puts it (7). In order to co-opt, one must also inhabit a relatively stable position that one can then mask in the guise of another operation. If we



analyze how performances of crisis or victimhood point to the experiential contours of white masculinity, we can move from questions of stability toward analyzing ways of feeling and doing that produce, to paraphrase Judith Butler, the fiction of the doer behind the deed.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, woundedness is a productive performance through which masculinity articulates its presumptively stable centrality while also staking a claim to enduring coherence. Thus rather than unmasking the core of white masculinity, we can see performances of woundedness or victimhood as generative of modes of engagement and affective inclinations that are themselves constitutive of white masculinity.

The lingering notion of white masculinity's disembodiment, and through it the sense that white male victimhood must amount to an insincere dissimulation masking some essential core, within some strands of white masculinity studies owes to a set of critical assumptions that circulate through usual approaches to whiteness. Early work on whiteness examined the myriad privileges whiteness affords visibly white persons, the systemic ways in which whiteness manifests these privileges to the exclusion of others, and how whiteness fashions itself.<sup>11</sup> This work was and remains immensely valuable insofar as it corrects a critical and cultural oversight that permits whiteness to remain, as George Lipsitz put it, "everywhere in U.S. culture but very hard to see" (1). Although useful as a starting point for analyzing the ways whiteness colors white persons' perceptual capacities, to the extent that whiteness's notional invisibility serves as an analytical anchor for continued analyses of whiteness's embodied experience it raises a more knotty problem. Theorizing whiteness's ubiquity threatens to bring about its collapse into normality, what whiteness studies organized itself around contending.<sup>12</sup>

Arguing that whiteness is everywhere but also nowhere in particular, as Richard Dyer put it in *White*, might render its presence throughout a broad swath of contemporary canonical fiction too banal to warrant discussion or, worse, too malleable to substantively engage. Thus there might be an acknowledgement of the whiteness of much U.S. literature on the one hand (“yes, these writers are white, but so what?”) and on the other a casual dismissal of whiteness’s influence on the shape such narratives take (“the text isn’t *about* whiteness, really, it’s *about* XYZ”). Intertwined with this paradox is the pernicious assumption that the content of white-authored fiction can perfectly well take shape around anything but whiteness.

This project challenges the literary-critical solipsism involved in not engaging with the experiential contours of whiteness the nonnative texts I examine and others like them produce. Walters’s and Alexie’s theories of whiteness help to bring its givenness as a background for experience into focus, and draws out the relationship between the perceptual experience of whiteness and what is more directly in the foreground. In reading these foreground-background structures as representations of what white persons feel themselves able to do and of the conditions within which they feel able do it, we can read whiteness as productive of capacities and orientations that might nevertheless feel like anything but whiteness.

Some more recently have begun to examine the relationship between whiteness, perception, and affect from a phenomenological perspective.<sup>13</sup> This work’s productive implementation of phenomenology as a tool through which to address embodiment as a site of the active materializing of racial constructions helps to reframe the potential

abstraction involved in discussions of whiteness's systemic effects around how whiteness manifests through situated, embodied inclinations. However, in positioning whiteness as a part of one's perceptual schema, this work raises additional questions about the relationship between embodiment and environment.<sup>14</sup> Shannon Sullivan, for example, examines whiteness as a mode of ontological expansiveness and addresses the problem of white solipsism as stemming from the limitations that white-centered environments engender. Sullivan argues that changing one's environment can produce new habits and modes of engagement that might open up these perceptual limitations (9-10). This line of thinking, however, too narrowly defines "environment" as one's immediate surroundings rather than taking into account the relationship between one's spatial, geopolitical, and historical situatedness. The embodied experience of whiteness, like the embodied experience of other discursive formations, is lived in relation to the history of its articulation. The sense that changing one's immediate environment will work to undo this history is tenuous particularly because it misses the relation—within a U.S. frame—between the history of spatial occupation and white persons' habitual relationships to space as exceedingly capacitating of their expansiveness.

Theorizing whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging accounts for the history and endurance of settlement as the experience of a capacitating expansiveness, a largely unaddressed area of much U. S.-focused whiteness studies literature. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that this perceptual gap is the product of a historical homological relationship between proprietary ownership and citizen-subject belonging.<sup>15</sup> In "Writing Off Treaties," Moreton-Robinson argues that white persons are disciplined

“to invest in the nation as a white possession that imbues them with a sense of belonging and ownership” (86). The possessive investment in the nation as a divisible territory over which one can hold property rights “imbues” the citizen-subject with an affective sense of propriety over their citizenship as the follow-on to territorial possession.<sup>16</sup> In other words, one belongs to the extent that one owns one’s belonging. There is no affective distinction between one’s immediate and macrological environment in terms of the degree to which one feels oneself to belong to both. Whiteness in this vein names the modality through which one’s possessive attachments to the nation are articulated and through which those attachments endure as one’s felt belonging.

As the privileged mode of proprietary belonging to national space, citizenship becomes an affective structure toward which white bodies are already oriented and into which they are already grafted. Situating belonging before whiteness flips the logic through which whiteness is theorized as taking shape around what it is not. As the means through which one owns one’s citizenship as a marker of one’s belonging, propriety over territory positively constructs whiteness out of a particular relationship to land and resources that in turn delineates modes of access to those resources posited as white possessions.<sup>17</sup> Through this flipped framework we can address how whiteness becomes an experience of attachment to territorial possession, which is especially salient for thinking through late-twentieth and early twenty-first century nonnative fiction where the notion of settlement feels like a long-foregone conclusion, if it is felt at all.

## **Native Phenomenologists: Re-Reading Nonnative Writing as a Phenomenological Archive**

Focusing my work with contemporary nonnative fiction through Alexie's and Walters's phenomenological critique positions their novels as, on the one hand, developing representations of whiteness that are traceable within nonnative self-representation, and, on the other, as doing theoretical work that bears on critical studies of white masculinity as much as on literary studies of contemporary nonnative fiction. Within a U.S. frame, to the extent that racial identification has historically operated and continues to operate as one means through which Indigenous peoples are dispossessed of land, resources, and political and economic sovereignty, texts that dramatize these conditions also implicate whiteness in their continued production and endurance. *Indian Killer's* and *Ghost Singer's* close focus on how whiteness colors and contours the perceptual experience of settler-occupation is especially generative. The novels' representations of whiteness underscore its manifestation as a phenomenological surround wherein white persons can feel like anything but settlers. Though the texts' staging of whiteness in this way is strategic insofar as both novels present whiteness as a screen through which white persons feel unimplicated in the endurance of settler-colonial violence, I argue that their representations of whiteness as a phenomenological surround and affective inclination pertains equally as much to narratives wherein settlement seems a nonissue and whiteness appears as a given.

Some within Indigenous studies have sought to focus on the background conditions within which nineteenth-century American literature represents everyday

settler-experience, and it is my hope that this project reflects its indebtedness to that work's productive insights.<sup>18</sup> Few studies, however, address contemporary nonnative American fiction from Native creative writers' critical-theoretical perspectives. James Cox's *Muting White Noise* is one standout example. Cox reads canonical Native-authored fiction as challenging self-justificatory settler narratives. Employing those texts' critiques as a way of reading nonnative fiction, a strategy he calls "red readings," Cox argues that Native creative work can help to "*unmake* non-Native stories and the worlds imagined there" (205). Cox's work speaks the productive potential of approaching nonnative fiction through Native creative writing, and helpfully situates Native-authored fiction as performing literary criticism. However, the nonnative texts Cox considers call attention to settler representations of Indigenous peoples. In this project, I focus on narratives and narrative worlds that do not feature representations of Native people in order to show how Native-authored texts bring nonnative self-representation into focus, and in particular how the critical perspectives developed within Native creative writing unmake the framework wherein Indigenous absence feels like a given.

Worlds within which whiteness seems normative speak to the broader conditions that push race into the background of everyday perception. Phenomenological analysis posits a fundamental relationship between the act of perceiving and the conditions within which one perceives. Taking this relation as a starting point illustrates how habits, attitudes, and inclinations both affect and are affected by the world one inhabits. As Walters suggests throughout *Ghost Singer*, "forty years of thinking" a particular way "plugs up" the capacity to feel the fullness of this relationship. As I demonstrate in

chapter one, these “plugs” are not incapacitating but rather generative of alternate modes of engagement with the world. Walters imagines the experience of whiteness as the givenness of belonging manifest through a felt attachment to a future national space cleared of Indigenous peoples and their history. For this imaginative landscape to feel like a given, one has engage with its sensory contours from an alternate plane of perception that edits out the reality of Indigenous existence. We can draw upon this sense of alternate capacities to examine novels that take this edited perceptual horizon as a given backdrop for the experience of wounded whiteness.

Alexie’s and Walters’s focus on perception, screening, and editing out point to their novels’ theoretical position within phenomenological philosophy. Alexie’s sense of whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging develops Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s thinking about perception’s spatial anchorages in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, the ability to feel oriented in a given space depends on already having established an affective and proprioceptive anchor point (264-65). Once established this affective coordinate recedes into the background. In other words, familiar spaces do not require active orientation because the space feels as though it already provides the coordinates.<sup>19</sup> As these affective anchorages accrue, they become a “perceptual tradition” that one embodies without having to think about it (248). Alexie’s sense of “perceptual tradition” further encompasses the experiential accrual of whiteness as the habituation to spatial occupation within settlement. Walters’s “plugged-up” sensorium takes the sense of habituation further, imagining that whiteness blocks the otherwise available capacity to sense the fullness of one’s relationship to space and place.

Whiteness for Walters becomes an affective structure within which only filtered phenomena become perceptible. Whiteness in this vein is an “orientation,” in Sara Ahmed’s terms, that is experienced as a background for perception. What becomes sensible within whiteness’s orientation thus points to what has not already been edited out. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed considers the givenness of orientation through the lens of bodily motion, and suggests that the experience of being oriented within spaces depends on what is within reach. Whiteness puts “certain things within reach” that through their proximity and potential utility become “orientation devices”; “The white body in this way expands; objects, tools, instruments, and even ‘others’ allow that body to inhabit space by extending its reach” (126, 132). Walters’s sense of perceptual plugs elaborates Ahmed’s instrumental critique of whiteness’s expansiveness. Situating the transit of others’ bodies into instruments as a part of what plugs whiteness, Walters locates the experience of inhabiting space within prostheticization as whiteness’s default perceptual setting. In the context of Walters’s narrative, whiteness’s default prostheticization edits out the noninstrumentality and autonomy of Indigenous persons in the process of converting their existence into the logic of whiteness’s orientation toward settler-inhabitation.

That whiteness as the condition of possibility for these relationships remains imperceptible for the white men Alexie and Walters imagine suggests that the “plugs” blocking up the fullness of experience also work to generate whiteness as a background condition. In Ahmed’s terms, whiteness “trails behind” within spaces that are “oriented around whiteness” (*Queer* 133). Whiteness is thus not an object toward which one



becomes oriented, but rather a condition that lends a feeling of orientation within spaces that have taken shape around it. To the extent that whiteness marks a “particular privileged position within the allocation of Native lands and resources among nonnatives,” as Mark Rifkin puts it (23), the experience of that privilege speaks to the experience of settlement as a mode of orientation within which spaces, objects, and others feel like capacitating givens. Alexie and Walters portray this relationship as taking form through habitually embodied inclinations, suggesting that the sensation of being oriented within settler-structures, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, “benefits from work already completed,” “my body and my senses being precisely this habitual knowledge of the world” (247). In this sense, settler-feeling is an embodied experience and an embodied inclination toward its continual manifestation. “We do not think the object,” Merleau-Ponty writes of the relationship between the focal object of one’s perceptions and the background conditions within which one perceives, “we are directed toward the object and we merge with this body that knows more than we do about...the means available for accomplishing the synthesis” (248). Following Alexie and Walters, taking whiteness to constitute the relationship between embodiment, the historical accrual of habitual inclinations, and a sense of directedness toward what becomes sensible within whiteness’s perceptual horizon, we can come to see the experience of whiteness as already oriented toward the experiential continuance of settler-occupation as a feeling of prosthetic capacitation.

The “givenness” of whiteness in the nonnative novels I examine points to the experience of already being oriented within the space of settler-occupation as it takes

shape around whiteness. Though settlement may appear a non-issue, and Native peoples may be absent from the texts representational frame, positing settlement as a structure that conditions the parameters of felt experience calls attention to the ways it features as an enduring background of nonnative self-representation. What becomes foregrounded within these narratives thus calls attention to other ways white men imagine themselves to belong and other kinds of prosthetic attachments through which they articulate their belonging in worlds that seem to have already taken their shape.<sup>20</sup> Instead of threatening to occlude whiteness from view, reading whiteness as a “given” structure presents an opportunity to engage with how whiteness structures the perceptual traditions that DeLillo, Wallace, Vonnegut, and Foer imagine as men’s sincere experiences of woundedness.

Positioning whiteness as an affective prosthetic for settler-belonging thus opens up a way to account for white masculinity’s malleability, particularly when it is imagined as a wounded subjectivity. DeLillo’s *White Noise* for example imagines Jack Gladney’s deathward dramas to implicate a form of white solipsism. Despite most everyone else being able to see Gladney as a middle-aged white man, he remains distinctly unable to perceive the extent to which his whiteness plays a role in his spiralingly solipsistic anxieties. Imagining Gladney’s ability to embody a culturally authoritative position crumbling all around him, DeLillo suggests that whiteness’s attachment to social power is predicated on a dead foundation.<sup>21</sup> The co-dependent relationships DeLillo sketches throughout the narrative—whether between Gladney and his wife Babette or between Gladney and his nemesis “Mr. Gray”—further highlight how the social power vested in

white masculinity structurally depends on others' willingness to grant it. Aligning Gladney's whiteness with his inability to perceive the extent of his co-dependency, DeLillo echoes Walters's theory of whiteness as constitutive of a perceptual blockage but differs crucially, inasmuch as DeLillo imagines Gladney unable to notice how others make his subjective centrality possible. The direction these relationships take ultimately always situates Gladney at the center, reifying rather than critiquing white masculinity's centrality within American culture's gender and racial hierarchy.

To the extent that whiteness becomes a wound, Gladney's ability to find another affective anchorage through which to reorient his centrality speaks to ways that his orientations toward belonging are never actually at issue but that rather the habitual patterns through which those orientations take form no longer function in the ways they once did. DeLillo's characterization, though it tilts toward a critique of white solipsism, proceeds from a durable sense of Gladney's inevitably secure position. His dramas of embodied disorientation thus become the background for a narrative of his reorientation toward the structures that have never really fallen apart around him. Taking DeLillo's novel as an example, we can see how wounded whiteness becomes a phenomenological orientation that directs wounded men toward objects, others, and spaces that already feel like capacitating givens. Against the backdrop of settler-feeling, the structure of capacitation that, in this example, finds form through the prostheticization of women's bodies becomes possible within what the narrative situates as belonging's durably and unquestionably stable framework. The sense that something durable and stable remains underneath it all points to the connection between wounded whiteness as an orientation

and the ways wounds provide for sincere representations of white men's "victimization" as bridges toward their affective reorientation.

### **Sincerity and Contemporary Nonnative Fiction**

Throughout the period I examine, sincerity has become a mode of literary-aesthetic engagement that foregrounds affect and feeling as keys to genuine experience. From *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), one can readily observe this stylistic shift. Vonnegut and the dark humorists like him explored what ethical horizons remain amid the absurdities of American culture during a decade of immense political and cultural shifts in race relations, foreign policy, and global conflicts. Fast-forward nearly forty years to Foer's narrative, likewise situated against the backdrop of 9/11, two wars on global fronts, and changes in American domestic and foreign policy the effects of which endure well into the present, and what we find is not an allegorical confrontation with cultural absurdity but rather a reification of an affective status quo that turns bad feelings into an engine of hopeful restoration. DeLillo's canonically postmodern *White Noise* (1985) situates its protagonist as beset by a series of absurd anxieties that reflect his relative stasis against the rapidly changing cultural and political horizon of mid-1980s America. Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1987) sets up an equally absurd situation that rather abruptly and improbably resolves through reorienting its central characters toward the normalizing horizon of hetero-love and -couplehood. What accounts for these novels' different perspectives, I argue, is Wallace's and Foer's overt reliance on sincerity as a textual strategy meant to shift American literature, and

with its American cultural attitudes, away from Vonnegut's or DeLillo's brand of ironic diagnostics toward the felt immediacy of emotional truths.

However, many of these novel's readers attend to their micro-level details rather than pulling back the focus to account for the conditions the novels present as givens. Vonnegut's readers often focus on elaborating his invented philosophical systems, or take up the complex cosmic ironies his narratives often stage.<sup>22</sup> DeLillo's readers generally either situate his fiction as oracular of shifts in the American cultural milieu or attend to the theoretical play in which his novels and *White Noise* in particular revel.<sup>23</sup> Wallace's critics generally approach his fiction with a mix of reverence and heartfelt critique of the shortfall between his novels and the commitment to humanism he often expressed in his non-fiction.<sup>24</sup> And some of Foer's readers situate him as among the heirs to Wallace's sincere vision for American literature and culture, arguing that his work represents a new direction of American literary aesthetics following the cultural exhaustion of postmodernism.<sup>25</sup> While Wallace's influence on contemporary writers like Foer, Jonathan Franzen, Geoffrey Eugenides, Dave Eggers, Nicole Krauss, Zadie Smith, and others is difficult to ignore, I am ultimately less interested in delineating the literary-historical dimensions of a shift from irony to sincerity than I am in charting the work that sincere fiction understands itself to be doing and the conditions it imagines itself to work within.

As the critical history of these novels suggests, typical approaches overlook how their small-scale dynamics or commitments to relatively uncomplicated humanism emerge from complex and often ethically and politically vexing situations that position wounded white men as the sincere arbiters of everyone else's affective orientations. The

paradoxical positioning of sincerity as both a mode of affective solicitation and a disciplinary affective structure makes these narratives unique in a field otherwise full of representations of wounded white men. From Hemingway to Updike and everywhere between, wounded white men feature prominently in twentieth-century American nonnative fiction. However, where most of these representations posit woundedness as a limitation that hampers one's engagement with the world, whether Jake Barnes's impotence in *The Sun Also Rises* or Harry Angstrom's wanderlust in *Rabbit, Run*, DeLillo, Wallace, Foer, and Vonnegut imagine woundedness—whether physical, psychological, or metaphorical—to be productive.

Representing woundedness as a sincere experience of whiteness, the texts imagine woundedness as a workaround for the otherwise ethically complicated ways their men's prosthetic attachments position whiteness as a form of affective privilege. Staging men's sincerity about their emotional disorientations and mixed feelings thus speaks how whiteness constructs a background against which men can otherwise feel disoriented while remaining nevertheless firmly grounded. Woundedness becomes the affective vector through which the texts represent men as needing others to supplement their emotional or physical capacities; but woundedness also becomes a prosthetic through which whiteness articulates itself as a given attachment to a durable feeling of belonging and placement from which white men can sincerely perform their woundedness.

Many of my readers may wonder why, in setting out to do so much with sincerity, I have chosen not to highlight the characteristic irony or sardonic humor of these novels and novelists. For example, in the second chapter I read Wallace's *The Broom of the*

*System* as uncritically embracing heteronormative whiteness as the presumptive orientation through which it resolves its characters' solipsistic anxieties. I take Wallace's characters at face value, reading Rick Vigorous's suggestively queer embodiment as a foil for Andrew Lang's pronounced straightness, and highlight the ways these characters become central mechanisms for the novel's understanding of, in Wallace's phrase, "what it means to be a fucking human being."<sup>26</sup> Some of my readers may argue that this take on *The Broom of the System* is not only humorless but also potentially obstructive of the text's otherwise critical irony. Wouldn't taking these characters at a slant shift the reading and thus undermine the argument? Furthermore, isn't Wallace up to something more than simply staging a humanist drama against the backdrop of a postmodern world gone askew?

These questions are serious and well founded, but they express a position toward postmodern narrative of Wallace's ilk that, out of a commitment to examining whiteness's manifestations within the structure of settlement, I do not share. And with due respect to the fact that Wallace's novel could certainly be read in myriad ways, to answer these objections I would point back to the text and situate it in context. In order for irony to work, one has to mean something other than what one says. Further, that something else has to be understood through its ironic vehicle. In order for solipsism to be an ironically critical vehicle for cultural insularity, in other words, cultural insularity has to already be associated with solipsism. The same for whiteness, for straightness, and for suggestively queer bodies. Thus to the extent that Wallace might have been ironizing a set of cultural conditions, he does so through a sincere embrace of the extant conditions

that mobilize certain bodies, figurations of identity, or understandings of sexuality as vehicles for ironic critique without examining the structure within which those associations get made. Wallace himself made this argument in his famous essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” claiming that irony is akin to a “queer ontology of appearance” wherein one attempts always to deflect what one says from who one is.<sup>27</sup> For Wallace, this amounts to a full-on sense of existential dread that becomes as socially immobilizing as it does emotionally incapacitating. The antidote? Sincerity. I read *Broom* within this context, and arguably by pointing to the background conditions that mobilize what some may read as ironic critiques, I demonstrate how even when irony appears the privileged strategy some sincerity is always going on.

As Walters suggests in *Ghost Singer* through her sense of whiteness as a “plugged-up” sensorium, performances of sincerity reflect as much as produce the conditions that limit what one can be sincere about. Wallace and Foer are overtly sincere about their characterizations and representational strategies, and within the context of American literary history their narratives represent a shift away from a postmodern aesthetics of irony toward an embrace of something more stable and enduring. The impulse toward sincere representation, inasmuch as it carries with it an impulse toward a sincere embrace of something stable, points to a broader assumption that there are things about cultural experience in the United States that do not change. As I engage with the aesthetics and performances of sincerity in the last two chapters, I suggest that among the core experiences that these writers represent as unchanging settler-feeling is perhaps the most durable. Irony is thus not a useful interpretive angle precisely because it assumes



that the novels' representations are offered in the service of another unstated premise. Rather than read their representations in the negative, I argue that we can see these texts dramatizations of wounded whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging precisely through foregrounding the relationships they imagine to be in the background.

The affective transmission on which sincerity relies stretches further than the distance between characters. When sincerity becomes a generic strategy aimed toward affective refashioning, sincere fictions' focus on individual white men's travails becomes an aspiration toward cultural reorientation. As Lauren Berlant argues of sentimentality, overtly emotional texts produce disciplinary affective structures that influence readers' felt relation to the national, political, and ethical frames through which inequitable distributions of social power are articulated and maintained.<sup>28</sup> Following Moreton-Robinson's argument that white persons are disciplined into a possessive investment in the nation as a white possession, to what extent might texts whose avowed strategy is to influence readers' affective inclinations through staging white men's wounds partake in extending this disciplinary project?

As I demonstrate in chapter three, sincere fictions situate an uncomplicated form of national belonging as their aspirational horizon and generate an affective structure wherein pain, not politics, brings us together.<sup>29</sup> Foregrounding how sincerity operates as a genre, I show how the phenomenology of white masculinity that Alexie and Walters describe influences the modes of engagement that sincere fictions characterize as cultural aspiration.<sup>30</sup> The texts suggest that woundedness amounts to a condition of detachment from fully feeling one's imbrication in the affective fabric of personhood or nationhood

they imaginatively weave around white men's woundedness. The mixed feelings the texts stage as wounding whiteness or conversely as white wounds thus work to cast wounded white men as in need of something else through which to articulate their attachments. The durability of those attachments flags the sense that white men have the capacity to remake them in whatever ways and through whatever persons appear available. The work of woundedness thus functions through as much as articulates whiteness as its condition of possibility insofar as whiteness invests white bodies with the affective privilege of feeling sincere about feeling through others.

Feeling through others is more than feeling vicariously, a point that I wish to stress because it is a point that Alexie and Walters emphasize throughout their narratives. It is less that wounded white men feel for others through sympathetic imaginings of other's pain, but more that wounded white men sustain their feelings of woundedness through others' presumed capacity to endure on their behalf. Emphasizing prosthetic attachments as opposed to vicarious feeling highlights how everyday actions, relations, and affective inclinations sustain one's feelings of prosthetic belonging. In attending to the bodies, conditions, and affects that make these feelings possible as the given content of everyday perception, we can trace how nonnative self-representation articulates settler-feeling and in turn how settler-feeling structures wounded whiteness's representation as a phenomenological orientation. Thus we can see how gender and sexuality, or trauma and disorientation, become privileged pivot points of wounded whiteness in narratives where whiteness as such appears as a given; how the givenness of whiteness indexes the conditions that foreground gender or sexuality as vectors of prosthetic attachments to

personhood or national feeling; and examine how the feelings toward which wounded white men aspire as their normative horizon takes the conjunction of settler-feeling and national belonging as mutually constitutive givens.

### **Organizing *Wounded Whiteness***

*Wounded Whiteness* re-contextualizes contemporary nonnative fiction within the scope of Native-authored theories of whiteness as a phenomenological surround. Focusing on representations of wounded white masculinity and white sincerity within Anna Lee Walters's *Ghost Singer* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, I build a theoretical framework and critical methodology from which to re-examine representations of wounded white masculinity as documenting the perceptual experience of whiteness within settlement. From Walters's and Alexie's representations of whiteness's perceptual plugs, I position Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* as archives of the perceptual experience of white solipsism, and juxtapose DeLillo's more ambivalent critique against Wallace's more decidedly sincere depiction. Moving from DeLillo's and Wallace's representations of white solipsism, I turn to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, reading their novel's imaginations of traumatic experience as engendering a feeling of national-familial belonging. As with DeLillo and Wallace, I contrast Vonnegut's more direct critique of whiteness as a form of insular engagement with historical trauma to Foer's representatively traumatized family, and through that contrast show how sincerity as a genre operates to position

woundedness's inevitably traumatic return as the wellspring for a sincere vision of a better tomorrow. Each of the chapters is thus thematically organized around different modes of wounded whiteness—sincerity, solipsism, and traumatic experience—as a way to focus the different inflections of sincerity the novels imagine. Grouping the nonnative texts so that one generates a critique of the other's framework suggests that wounded whiteness is not necessarily a universally “plugged-up” condition, but that as Walters suggests what gets blocked depends on what gets foregrounded.

Chapter one, “Inhabiting Indianness: Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Anna Lee Walters's *Ghost Singer*, and the Phenomenology of White Sincerity,” argues that white sincerity is the experience of prosthetic belonging that takes form around inhabiting “Indianness.” I read Walters's and Alexie's presentations of wounded whiteness as a structure of feeling, and focus on the ways they imagine it to take shape through white men's performances of benevolence and beliefs in Indigenous erasure. In *Indian Killer* Alexie juxtaposes white men's sincere benevolence with direct, racially motivated violence to highlight the contiguity between them. Sincerity is a violent affect that permits material violence to glide past white men's perceptions. Alexie's utterly unreflective anthropology professor Clarence Mather and his mirror opposite radio talk show host Truck Shultz become the embodiment of this dialectic, and through them Alexie suggests that in inhabiting an idea of “Indianness”—whether as a sign of one's sincere solidarity or as the culprit of one's wounds—white men can feel like anything but settlers. Walters offers a way to account for what Alexie presents as a perceptual impossibility through her notion of whiteness as a “plugged-up” sensorium. I argue that

through this notion, Walters offers the stronger claim that whiteness inhabits Indianness in order to inhabit itself. I read Walters as suggesting that whiteness manifests an alternate perceptual plane within which sincere beliefs in Indigenous erasure manifests in the active editing out of Indigenous presence. Walters and Alexie thus together demonstrate the violent solipsism of white sincerity's continual manifestation of settler-occupation as the genuine experience of belonging within, and indeed through, Native space.

Walters suggests that the affective buildup of "forty years of thinking" oneself grounded in the removal of Native peoples plugs up the ability to feel otherwise while highlighting the fact that this way of thinking engenders a durable attachment to national space. Representing the "selective historical amnesia" that Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues mitigates "the fear of opening oneself up...to being a disoriented, displaced, and diasporic racialized subject" (93), Walters draws attention to the stakes involved in keeping whiteness plugged. Ending the narrative with the sense that white men, even when wounded by what they feel to be an inconceivable Indigenous presence, remain nevertheless incapable of believing it to be materially real, Walters offers a way to reimagine wounded whiteness in contexts where Indigenous presence has been thoroughly edited out of what becomes sensible within whiteness's sensorium.

In chapter two, "Body Dramas: Sex, Sincerity, and White Solipsism in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System*," I track the violent solipsism of white sincerity through DeLillo's and Wallace's representations of solipsism as a wound to whiteness and sexuality as a means of overcoming it. I

demonstrate how *White Noise* presents protagonist Jack Gladney's death anxiety as a wound to his heterosexual prowess, and imagines him able to overcome it through the twinned prostheses of his wife Babbette's sexual availability and the wounded body of his racially ambiguous nemesis Willie Mink, whom he attempts to murder at the narrative's close. Mink's pain becomes Gladney's prosthetic, and through it Gladney is able to recast what Mink points out as the whiteness of his wounds as a sign of his deeply human "muddles and quirks." *The Broom of the System* imagines solipsism to be a similarly wounding affect, but this time as most problematically manifest in Lenore Beardsman's misaligned relationship to her body's fundamental "function" to reproduce. Figured through a female body, the novel suggests that the insularity and withdrawal solipsism yields can only be overcome through properly penetrative heterosexual sex. In staging its solipsistic drama as a heterosexual saga, *Broom* marks a sincere investment in gender essentialism that takes form against whiteness as its unacknowledged backdrop. Rick Vigorous's suggestively queered body, as I show, becomes a prosthetic for the novel's engagement with white hetero-reproductivity; through him, *Broom* positions wounded whiteness as the experience of a queer sort of solipsism in need of perceptual and sexual realignment.

To the extent that both of these narratives stage the body as the locus of white men's wounds as much as the vehicle for their repair, they each imagine sincerity as the affective orientation most suited for bringing about the alignment of embodied inclinations and sincere desires. Situating the body as a gateway to a fuller and more deeply human sense of personhood, the novels imagine sex, violence, and sincerity as the

affective channels through which white men build their prosthetic attachments to plain, universalized personhood. As Savran and Robinson have observed, through inhabiting a wounded or victimized body white men gain access to a felt sense of plain humanity that restores their universality by paradoxically particularizing their whiteness. However, where Robinson sees this performative victimization as the result of extrinsic pressures stemming from the expanded political and cultural enfranchisement of women and persons of color, *White Noise* and *The Broom of the System* imagine the pressures that wound whiteness as intrinsic to the limitations that accrue around whiteness itself. The narratives' representations of white solipsism thus configure whiteness as an inherently insulating formation that limits white men's and women's abilities to extend themselves (figuratively or, in Wallace's case literally through reproductive heterosexuality). In this sense, performances and representations of white victimhood appear less "reactive" as Hamilton Carroll has suggested, and instead more proactive in the sense of aiming to produce another way to inhabit personhood.<sup>31</sup> The other channels that become available in these narratives—heteroconjugality, the body's affective inclinations, redemptive violence—thus position white men's sincerity about their limits as productive of a prosthetic attachment to a universal sense of belonging.

In chapter three, "Regions of Silence: Trauma, Sentimentality, And Emotional Surrogacy In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* And Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud And Incredibly Close*," I show how the prosthetic attachments that DeLillo and Wallace suggest can repair whiteness's intrinsic limitations and restore men's fuller and more deeply human sense of personhood become attachments to

national-familial feeling. Set against the backdrop of the firebombing of Dresden Germany, the novels frame contemporaneous national traumas within the “region of silence” Dresden represents. Borrowing the concept of “regions of silence” from Merleau-Ponty, I argue that *Slaughterhouse-Five* imagines Dresden as a silent area of national history metonymic of the cultural silence about the continuum of U.S. violence Vonnegut sees stretching from Euro-colonial contact through to the contemporary war in Vietnam. I argue that insulated and solipsistic protagonist Billy Pilgrim represents Vonnegut’s critique of whiteness as the mechanism through which contiguous acts of violence, historical or contemporary, feel like the smooth glide of everyday life. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* reimagines the Dresden firebombing as the backdrop for its staging of intergenerational traumas. Sharply contrasting with Vonnegut’s sense of white insularity as the wellspring of historical violence’s continual contiguity, *Extremely Loud* self-consciously frames its familial drama through the critical and clinical discourse of trauma. As a result, Foer imagines traumatic experience to become a “region of silence” within the men who populate his narrative that enables their sincere prostheticization of women’s bodies to become the novel’s normative horizon. Relying on sentimental tropes of childhood and maternity, Foer’s trauma drama constructs a homology between domesticity and domestic national space that situates women’s care and receptivity as phenomenal contours within which wounded men experience their woundedness as a wellspring for the continuous care that always puts them at the center of everyone else’s attention.



The universalizing maneuver through which DeLillo and Wallace foreground their notions that humanity can be repaired through wounded men's sincere performances fold into the backdrop of historical trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In other words Foer does not have to take pains to demonstrate how sincerity can repair cultural wounds because the novel, hewing close to the critical and clinical discourse theorizing trauma, imagines traumatic experience to be always already universalizing.<sup>32</sup> Though whiteness is never at issue nor ever acknowledged in Foer's novel, it does not fail to account for whiteness but rather does not need to insofar as whiteness seems already given as the backdrop against which particularized pain can become representative of universalized aspirations toward heterofamiliarity as the locus of a better tomorrow when the pains of history will not hurt quite as much.

Foer's vision proceeds from an uncritical embrace of the universality of pain that points to the presumptive universality of the suffering bodies he imagines and the work those bodies in pain do to present the pained nation as having taken their shape.<sup>33</sup> Insofar as Foer's novel marks a representative turn toward sincerity within nonnative U.S. fiction, its uncritical portrayal of heterofamiliarity's enduring stability against the inevitable return of historical traumas calls for nuanced attention to what this new aesthetics encourages readers to take for granted. Though the novel's gender dynamics are as assuredly problematic as Wallace's or DeLillo's, ultimately what needs more scrutiny than even these patterns of reliance is the larger system of prostheticization in the background. Walters's and Alexie's novels provide the theoretical framework for a sustained engagement with wounded whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging,

especially when settler-occupation seems a foregone conclusion. This project sets out to demonstrate what becomes possible when nonnative fiction becomes an archive of the perceptual experience of settler-feeling.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On victimized white masculinity as a strategic response to waning cultural authority, see Carroll; DiPiero; Lotz; Malin; Robinson; Savran; and Walsh.

<sup>2</sup> For a consideration of the ways affect is transmitted between bodies, see Brennan. For the transmission of affects as shaping social and political situations, see Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* and Protevi, *Political Affect*. Brennan uses the term “transmission of affect” to “capture a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (3). In other words, affects are socially communicable and as such one’s affective inclinations can influence and shape another’s physical body. My use of the term “affective prosthetics” denotes this process.

<sup>3</sup> As Glen Coulthard puts it in *Red Skin, White Masks*, conceiving of settlement as an “event” positions it as a “temporally situated experience which occurred at some relatively fixed period in history but which unfortunately continues to have negative consequences for our communities in the present” (125). Citing Patrick Wolf’s “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” Coulthard explains that as a “structure,” “there is nothing ‘historical’ about the character of settler colonization. . . . Settler-colonial formations are *territorially acquisitive in perpetuity*” (125). Through this critique of eventalization as a tactic within the structural strategy of settler-coloniality, I seek to trace the experience of living whiteness as a privilege subject position that materializes within settlement as a structure.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this project, I use “Native” and “Indigenous” interchangeably to refer to Native peoples and polities within the United States. When referring to non-Indigenous persons, I use the term nonnative as opposed to “Non-Native” or “non-Native” in order to deemphasize the historical primacy afforded to nonnative persons within the United States and to more prominently differentiate between nonnative cultural production and Indigenous creative and scholarly work.

<sup>5</sup> On whiteness as a particularly privileged position within settlement, see Rifkin (23).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the ways white masculinity has been represented through victimized and wounded subject positions from the 1960s-1990s, see Robinson (1-21). On white male victimhood, see Savran and Silverman. For contemporary representations of white male victimhood in literature, film, and television, see Carroll; and Lotz.

<sup>7</sup> See Robinson (1-21) for an elaboration of her sense of the “post-liberationist era” and how white masculinity fashions itself in response.

<sup>8</sup> Announcements of and responses to the “crisis” of white masculinity have been varied. See for example Faludi; Gardiner; Jeffords; Kimmel, *Manhood and Angry* and “Masculinity”; Kaufman; and Malin. Kimmel is in this regard representative of a particularly problematic strain within masculinity studies. Kimmel’s work often expresses a desire to conserve “manhood” as something essential that can be remade through shifts in the construction and articulation of “masculinity.” This line of thinking reifies a fictional division between gender as a socio-discursive formation and its lived embodiment through the form of something like “manhood.” Masculinity may be in “crisis,” in other words, but we can quell the crisis if we take control of what “masculinity” means.

<sup>9</sup> On masochism and masculinity, also see Silverman. Fintan Walsh in *Male Trouble* focuses the deflectionary tactics Robinson and Savran address through the lens of performativity, reading the “crisis” of masculinity as affected through a “network of performative practices that contain the queer disruption that crisis might otherwise signify” (182). Thomas DiPiero, in *White Men Aren’t* suggests that the kinds of containment strategies Walsh illustrates signify the extent to which “whiteness and masculinity are built

around an anxiety of insufficiency” (9), an anxiety that positions the “identity ‘white male’ [as] about nothing if not a form of hysteria” (2). Hamilton Carroll’s recent examination of white masculinity, *Affirmative Reaction*, follows the logic of these arguments, positioning white masculinity as a “reactive” identity formation that “redefines the normative by citing itself a marginal identity” (6). Carroll argues that white masculinity further attempts to manage “the stakes of its own fragmentation by co-opting the forms of representational meaning secured by women, gays, and people of color over the preceding decades” (7).

<sup>10</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble* (25). For an analysis of how white masculinity performs its crisis, see Walsh.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Babb; Delgado and Stefanic, ed. *Critical*; Dyer; Hill, ed. *Whiteness*; Lipsitz; and Morrison. See Hill, *After* (173-84) for a critical survey of much early scholarship on whiteness.

<sup>12</sup> See Hill, *After*; and Frankenberg for critiques of whiteness’s “invisibility” and the conceptual challenges posed by circulating it as a critical orthodoxy.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Lee, ed. *Living*; esp. Al-Saji; Ortega; and Lee.

<sup>14</sup> On this relationship, see for example Alcoff, *Visible*; and Ahmed, *Queer* and “A Phenomenology.” On the ways this relationship articulates its connections to Indigenous landedness, see Nicoll.

<sup>15</sup> See Moreton-Robinson, “Writing off Treaties.” For further considerations of whiteness in relation to theorizing Indigenous sovereignty, see “Writing Off Indigenous,” and “Whiteness.”

<sup>16</sup> Although Moreton-Robinson contends that this logic renders whiteness studies less than useful for engaging with Indigenous sovereignty, her argument points to the immense usefulness of engaging with whiteness through a perspective informed by work within Indigenous studies. Pressing scholars concerned with whiteness to re-examine the relationship between citizenship, property, and the “black/white binary” that influences the enduring co-extensivity of these formations, Moreton-Robinson argues that examining Indigenous sovereignty through this lens yields a misunderstood relationship of Indigenous polities to the settler-states that contain them. On this issue in particular, see also Rifkin. Despite the conceptual shortcomings of typical approaches to whiteness for Indigenous sovereignty Moreton-Robinson points out, her critique of whiteness’s relationship to property holding and territoriality is especially instructive for rethinking whiteness in terms that include but move past the social construction of race as a primarily discursive dynamic. On whiteness as property, and especially the legal codification of whiteness as tied to real property, see Cheryl Harris. For the tie between whiteness and Enlightenment philosophies of self-possessive individualism that underpin the proprietary relationship Moreton-Robinson describes, see Montag.

<sup>17</sup> In *Settler Common Sense*, Mark Rifkin argues “whiteness may be understood as expressing a particular privileged position within the allocation of Native lands and resources among nonnatives.” To the extent that “whiteness names the mechanisms by which settler land tenure and jurisdiction are legitimized,” Rifkin continues, “it may not be the same whiteness as that of the black/white binary, even if both are lived in the same body, such that people of color may enact and aspire to whiteness-as-settlement while still contesting whiteness-as-allocation-of-entitlements-within-citizenship” (23). Situating whiteness as expressive of a relationship to land and resources that in turn produces an inequitable distribution of entitlements and privileges “within citizenship” reframes whiteness’s relationship to privilege as stemming primarily from its relationship to occupation.

<sup>18</sup> Special thanks to Mark Rifkin, whose work in and around *Settler Common Sense* helped me to generate and clarify my thinking throughout this project. My thanks also to Jason Cooke, whose insights, conversation, and critique sharpened my focus and helped me to move this project forward.

For an overview of this scholarship, see Rifkin, *Settler* (5-10). See Carpenter for a reading of sentimentality and anger in late-19th and early-20th century Native-authored fiction. For a reading of settler-feeling as haunted by the spectral presence of Native peoples, see Bergland. On the interaction between representations of Native peoples and settler self-fashioning, see Huhndorf; and P. Deloria.

<sup>19</sup> On the conjunction between habit and space, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, “Sensing” (214-52) and “Space” (253-311). On the habit body and habitual orientations, see Massumi (177-207). For the relationship between the body and feelings of “fitness” in spaces, and Ahmed, *Queer* (51-63).

<sup>20</sup> Such worlds, as Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology*, present themselves as comfortable fits for white bodies because those worlds seem to have already taken the shape of the bodies that inhabit them. See *Queer* (120-142).

<sup>21</sup> For this reading of DeLillo’s *White Noise*, see Engles, “Who” and “Connecting.”

<sup>22</sup> See for example Klinkowitz, *Reforming* and *The Vonnegut Effect*; Broer; and Boon.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Osteen.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Boswell, *Understanding*; Harris, “David Foster Wallace”; Hoberek, “The Novel After”; and Holland, “The Art’s Heart’s Purpose.”

<sup>25</sup> For Wallace’s influence on a literary-aesthetic shift toward sincerity, see den Dulk; Hoberek, “Introduction”; McLaughlin; and Z. Smith. For Foer’s aesthetic relationship to Wallace, see Beck; and Gates.

<sup>26</sup> See McCaffery (26).

<sup>27</sup> See Wallace, *Supposedly* (63). For the full essay, see *Supposedly* (21-82).

<sup>28</sup> See Berlant, *The Female Complaint* and *Queen*.

<sup>29</sup> On belonging and citizenship as an affective, aspirational horizon represented in texts and functioning socially through texts’ cultural circulation, see Berlant, *The Female Complaint* and *Queen*.

<sup>30</sup> In this sense, I follow Raymond Williams’ notion of structures of feeling. Ideological structures are not fixed formations, Williams argues, but rather are lived “actively, in real relationships... which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units” (130). “Structures of Feeling” in this way works to define “social experience which is still *in process*” as “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (132). I position prosthetic attachments to affective structures as this kind of “practical consciousness of a present kind” insofar as one’s feelings and thoughts present the “interrelating continuity” of broader ideological structures as they are lived and made through affective inclinations.

<sup>31</sup> See Carroll (8-10).

<sup>32</sup> On the universality of traumatic experience, see for example Caruth, *Unclaimed*; Caruth, ed. *Trauma*; and Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, ed. *Acts*. For a critique of trauma studies and its theoretical underpinnings in the history of psychology, see Leys, *Trauma*.

<sup>33</sup> On the relationship between pain, subjectivity, and citizenship, see Hartman.

## CHAPTER II

### INHABITING INDIANNESS: SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *INDIAN KILLER*, ANNA LEE WALTERS'S *GHOST SINGER*, AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF WHITE SINCERITY

Have we somehow travelled back to the nineteenth century?

— Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer*

On 9 July 1998, Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie appeared alongside President Bill Clinton on *PBS NewsHour* as a part of a series of panel discussions entitled "President Clinton's Dialogue on Race."<sup>1</sup> Turning to Alexie early in the broadcast, Clinton offers the following:

When I was running for President in 1992, I didn't know much about the American Indian condition except that we had a significant but very small population of Indians in my home state and that my grandmother was one-quarter Cherokee. That's all I knew. I spent a lot of time going around...to the reservations...to learn about this sort of nation-to-nation legal relationship that is supposed to exist between the U.S. Government and the Native American tribes...What I concluded...[was] that they have not been given enough empowerment or responsibility or tools to make the most of their own lives...So they literally got the worst of both worlds. They weren't getting enough help and they certainly didn't have enough responsibility and power, in my view, to build a future. So what do you think the most important thing is for Americans to know about American Indians?<sup>2</sup>

Asked to maneuver within this narrow framework, one that confines Native American political sovereignty to the precarious status of a "sort of...supposed to" liminality and positions Indigenous peoples themselves as living in the "worst" of possible worlds,

Alexie responds: “I think the primary thing that people need to know about Indians is...that we really do exist as political entities and sovereign political nations. That’s the most important thing for people to understand, that we are separate politically and economically. And should be.” Alexie’s “really do exist” points to the gap between Clinton’s notional “Indian” and the former President’s apparent inability to recognize the reality of Indigenous political sovereignty. Recounting the ways people talk to him about race, Alexie sharpens the point: “Usually...what [people] will do is come up to me and tell me they’re Cherokee. But that’s usually what it amounts to. Nobody talks about Indians.” Taken together, Alexie’s responses point out two related phenomena: on the one hand how claims to Indigenous identity, particularly Cherokeeness in this example, work to open up affective space for sincere claims to solidarity; and on the other, how the sincere feelings those claims generate work for those who offer them to silence Indigenous peoples’ political—and affective—sovereignty, filling space instead with talk about themselves.<sup>3</sup>

At least for most of the panel’s hour, indeed no one is talking about Indians. The irony of this relative silence, especially given Clinton’s claims, is that Alexie needed to make the point in the first place. The dynamics and tenor of Alexie’s and Clinton’s conversation, and its quick fizzling-out, reads like a scene-for-scene rewrite of the interactions between well-meaning but utterly unreflective white Anthropology professor Clarence Mather and politically motivated Spokane student Marie Polatkin in Alexie’s 1996 novel *Indian Killer*. Throughout the course of their interactions, Mather repeatedly attempts to build bridges and gain Marie’s goodwill, only to not recognize how his efforts



silence her abilities to respond from a position not already bounded by Mather's discourse. While the stakes are different, the effect is the same. In both sets of interactions between white men and the Indigenous people they attempt to stand in solidarity with, what gets most in the way of seeing their sincere ambitions realized is the degree to which their whiteness colors their affects and, as a result, screens out the violence of their good intentions.

How is it that such sincere moments, good intentions, and well-meaning gestures at solidarity—in *Indian Killer* as well as on PBS—get in the way of genuine engagement with the core problematic of continued settlement practices that manifest as an active silencing of Indigenous peoples and a dismissal of Indigenous sovereignty? How do claims to “Indianness” position Indigenous identity, for the white men in these examples, as a supplement for their affective experience of whiteness? What does it mean to see indigenous identity as an inhabitable subject position into which whiteness can expand and within which white men like Clinton or Mather can fail to recognize their ongoing complicity in settlement's enduring effects? Through their characterizations of white masculinity, Alexie's *Indian Killer* and Otoe/Pawnee writer Anna Lee Walters's novel *Ghost Singer* take up these questions and offer in response a phenomenological theory of gendered whiteness as a structure of feeling: a felt and active influence on the present that acts as a guiding impulse pressurizing and limiting experience and action.<sup>4</sup>

I have borrowed Raymond Williams' phrasing here to emphasize the texts' resistance to framing white masculinity as an ideological position conceptualized in terms of a fixed formation traceable through sets of determinate responses. Rather, they

imagine white masculinity as actively produced through the kinds of everyday social interactions for which Clinton's exchange with Alexie is exemplary. It is not that Alexie can see something about Clinton that Clinton himself does not know, nor is a similar pattern present in Alexie's and Walters's imaginative representations of white masculinity. It is more that Clinton's feeling as though he is sincerely engaging with the "plight" of Alexie's "people" takes shape around what Walters imagines in *Ghost Singer* as a set of perceptual "plugs." In the Clinton example, whiteness's "plugs" manifest as a feeling of genuine helpfulness spurred along by a pattern of thinking reflective of histories of benevolence that get remade around feelings of sincere engagement. In the narratives, as I show in this chapter, white masculinity becomes expressive of a particular relationship to space, place, and personhood the violence of which is lived as a feeling of sincere belonging.

Arguing that these texts theorize a gendered form of whiteness as a phenomenological structure of feeling is a stark departure from the majority of critical work on the novels.<sup>5</sup> Why choose to focus on whiteness in the first place, given that both novels engage with challenges to Indigenous sovereignty that range from collections of Indigenous dead in national archives to homelessness, identity, and tribal belonging? Focusing on whiteness carries the risk of shortchanging these issues and carries another of re-centering the normative position of power that both narratives work to destabilize. However, readers face an equally knotty set of problems in not focusing on the ways these writers theorize white masculinity, among them marginalizing the narratives' critiques and as a result running the risk of propping up the unnamed centrality of

whiteness at which the novels take aim.<sup>6</sup> Positioning their work as indices for “Indianness” proceeds from an assumed mimesis that the texts themselves, particularly *Indian Killer*, directly challenge. Taking them as representative of “Indian stuff,” for lack of a more direct phrase, presumes that Native intellectual and creative work emerges from a predetermined representational context out of which springs the usual suspects of “Native American” fiction. Alexie’s characterization of self-styled “Indian writer” Jack Wilson dramatizes the whiteness of this logic; and in ignoring it readers risk retrenching rather than critiquing the ways feelings about what counts as proper objects of critical analysis within “Native American” novels might emerge from the whiteness within which these kinds of assumptions about representativity are inevitably enmeshed.

Recent scholarship within Indigenous studies examining the relationship between whiteness and settler coloniality may help to account for why Alexie’s and Walters’s theories of whiteness have been overlooked. Aileen Moreton-Robinson suggests the relative absence of Indigenous concerns within U.S.-based whiteness studies scholarship stems from how thinking about race in the United States tends to evoke a “black/white binary” to the exclusion of the fact of settlement (“Writing off Treaties” 93). Given that the primary analytic of race in the U.S. stems from historical legacies of enslavement, the primary axis of redress has historically been political enfranchisement into the cultural plurality of the nation-state. This logic is structured around relationships of positive recognition that takes the desire for inclusion as a given.<sup>7</sup> The forcible occupation of Native lands problematizes this presumption by throwing into relief the relationship between possession and recognition-based models of inclusivity. In order to grant

inclusion one has to presume one's prior possession of the space into which others are to be included. To the extent that this frame may characterize histories of African American disenfranchisement and the juridical extension of citizenship, it does not map equally onto U.S.-Indigenous relations because the axis of those relations is the space within which enfranchisement becomes a possibility. The "black/white binary" may have thus rendered analyses of whiteness less apparently applicable for critiques of Indigenous creative work, but this does not also mean that this work is any less applicable to analyses of whiteness. To the extent that whiteness can be understood as "expressing a particular privileged position within the allocation of Native lands and resources among non-natives" (23), as Mark Rifkin puts it in *Settler Common Sense*, we can read Native creative work's engagement with settlement as engagements with whiteness's privileged position *within* its manifestations.

As Alexie's and Walters's novels suggest, one of the ways whiteness articulates its privileged position within settlement is through sincere gestures toward inclusivity that presume a recognition-based framework amounts to a fix for bad feelings. In this vein, the modes of white masculinity Alexie and Walters theorize offer a view to the dynamics of whiteness in relation to issues of sovereignty and settlement as well as to the ways those issues become effaced through sincere attempts to garner good will as a mode of affective redress—not necessarily for the Indigenous persons white men encounter but instead as a workaround for the felt reality of settlement.

Part of Alexie's and Walters's theory of white masculinity positions Indigenous identity, or at least an idea of "Indianness" de-linked from land and space, as something

that white men feel able to access and mobilize in order to make up for gaps in their perceptual capacities. In this sense, “Indianness” as a sign of cultural difference serves as an affective prosthetic through which white men can augment their normatively powerful positions. In this chapter, I read Alexie’s and Walters’s phenomenology of whiteness as, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms, a perceptual tradition emerging from the historical accrual of lived habituation to objects, spaces, and others as available elements of their everyday patterns of sense-making—what Sara Ahmed refers to as “orientations.”<sup>8</sup> Alexie and Walters characterize white masculinity as an orientation in this sense, but ground whiteness’s orientations within a U.S. frame in the fact of settler colonial occupancy. Furthermore, by characterizing the presumptive availability of “Indianness” as an affective prosthetic through which white sincerity and benevolence become possible, the texts point out that lived habituation to everyday forms of settler occupancy—as a perceptual tradition that accrues in one’s physical as well as affective orientations toward the world—works to screen out the very history those bodies carry with them into the present from what becomes perceptible as the present.

As the narratives demonstrate, however, this process is not always articulated through a discourse of good intentions. Some of the men who populate Alexie’s and Walters’s narratives want as little to do with “Indians” and “Indianness” as possible, and like Alexie’s Truck Schultz wonder aloud if the world in which they find themselves hasn’t somehow been dragged back to the nineteenth-century (209). These negative affects and their more directly violent results, however, are no less reliant on the notional “Indian” as an affective prosthetic than those men whose good-will screens their overt

capacity for violence. In both cases, as I show in what follows, the idea of the Indian becomes, to borrow from Jodi Byrd, a “transit” point for feelings of commonality, belonging, and emplacement that augment the otherwise disorienting feelings of displacement Schultz’s time-out-of-joint narrative belies.<sup>9</sup> In other words, one is not dragged back to the nineteenth-century, but rather one’s body—and its thickly complex attachments to history—drags the nineteenth-century into the present. Whether those modes of affect and relationality one would recognize as “belonging” to a prior time emerge as direct violence or as sincere benevolence, what these novels ultimately offer is a view toward whiteness as a double-screen. On the one hand, whiteness works to screen out connections to settlement as its condition of possibility. On the other, whiteness works to screen out the degree to which white men’s sincere intentions to protect, guard, vaunt, or otherwise “positively” engage with the problematics of continued settlement themselves participate in the direct violence of settlement practices that silence, remove, and indeed kill Indigenous peoples.

### **“A Positive Portrait of...Your People”:**

#### ***Indian Killer*, Prosthetic Indians, and White Sincerity**

How do white men’s claims to “Indian” identity enable sincere gestures of solidarity with Indigenous peoples? How does feeling “Indian” screen out feeling like a settler? And further, to what extent does the presumptive availability of “Indianness” as a mode of feeling, if not a mode of identification, form a part of the structure of feeling that “whiteness” might serve to name? In this section I chart *Indian Killer*’s presentation of

anthropology professor Clarence Mather, who seems able to feel “Indian” and as a result to feel in a position to offer “positive portrait[s] of Indian peoples” (84). Despite his seeming ease at feeling Indian, he seems equally *unable* to sense how his “portraits” participate in the enduring violence of settlement. Although he does not participate directly in the race war between whites and Natives the novel eventually stages and to which I will return in a later section, his felt detachment from that direct violence is made possible through “Indianness” as an affective prosthetic. Through inhabiting Indianness, Mather in turn feels as though his care, concern, and positive portraits of Native peoples, are signs of his sincere solidarity, a structure of feeling that screens out the degree to which his whiteness produces a mode of attachment to the settler-nation that enables him to feel like an “Indian” while not feeling like a settler.

*Indian Killer* imagines these dynamics to flow from white men’s sincere efforts to generate commonality and good will as a way to ground their otherwise contested relationship to physical and affective space. The tenuousness of this relationship becomes palpable for Mather as the titular Killer begins to stalk and murder white men on the streets of Seattle. Within this context he feels it necessary to offer “positive portrait[s] of Indian peoples” as a way to reframe public perception (84). He feels able to do so, Alexie suggests, because he already feels like an Indian, claiming to have been adopted into a Lakota family while on a research trip (61). Upsetting his notion of Indianness and with it the relative imperceptibility of his whiteness, Mather’s responses to the Killer’s presence highlight the degree to which whiteness takes shape through negotiations over the meaning and stability of the notional “Indianness” he feels himself to possess. Through

the ambiguity of the Killer's identity—as in Marie's words an Indian killer or a killer Indian (247)—Alexie dramatizes the instability of the referent grounding Mather's attachments as well as the ease with which it can be taken up as a prosthetic for whiteness. Through his efforts to mitigate the visibility of whiteness as a set of assumptions and inclinations, and stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples who progressively become the targets of a distinctively racialized form of violence, Mather responds to the uncertainty the Killer generates throughout Seattle by engendering benevolent attachments to Indigenous peoples in an effort to re-frame and stabilize the meaning of "Indian" by grafting it into their performances of sincerity.

Clinton's dialogue with Alexie can help to frame the discussion of Mather's maneuvers into and out of Indianness by drawing attention to the ways the notion serves as a transit point through which white sincerity articulates an attachment to forms of felt belonging that can then be offered up as a gesture of inclusion in national feeling. Implicitly relying on tropes of extinction and vanishment, Clinton's comments reflect the discourse of "lasting" Jean O'Brien, writing of settler-Indigenous encounters in New England, defines as a "rhetorical strategy that asserts as a fact the claim that Indians can never be modern" (107). O'Brien's compact definition puts into perspective the degree to which Clinton's framing paints Indigenous sovereignty as almost, but not quite, fully realized and casts Indigenous survival as dependent upon the benevolence of the nation-state and its more fully-fledged members. As a tactic of political-affective disenfranchisement, Clinton's "lasting" rhetoric yokes Indigenous peoples to a narrative of progression into modernity that can only find its condition of possibility within the



boundaries of the nation-state and within the embrace of national feeling he proffers. This discursive maneuver is further complicated, however, in the context of a dialogue putatively centered on diagnosing and repairing American race relations. Developing what she calls the “temporalities of race” as a product of settler-colonial epistemologies and control over the meaning of “modernity,” O’Brien argues that lasting locates “Indians in an ahistorical temporality” that binds “Indian history to a degeneracy narrative” built around theories of “blood purity” and cultural retention that positioned “mixture” as “degeneracy for Indians and progress for non-Indians” (107). To put it a little differently, to become white/modern was to no longer be Indian, whereas to draw upon Indianness—configured as lineal, genealogical descent—was for whites a way of becoming progressively more attached to the modern nation.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Clinton’s claims to Cherokee descent do more than open affective space through which he can negotiate differences; his claim marks him as more firmly attached to the nation.

Clinton’s claims to Cherokee descent, as a marker of his attachment to a narrative of progress into modernity and belonging to the nation, likewise works to imply “common ground” (Sturm 188). Analyzing “racial shifters,” persons otherwise identified as white who claim Cherokee identity, throughout *Becoming Indian*, Circe Sturm argues, “contemporary racial shifters evoke the logic of hypodescent...to reassert their claims to indigeneity. According to this logic, all it takes is one drop of Cherokee blood, one Cherokee ancestor in the family tree to make them Cherokee” (175). The inverse of this logic, however, allows white racial shifters to deny “their whiteness, for it reproduces the idea that whiteness is the one racial category that is pure and unadulterated” (175). The

double-valence of whiteness Sturm alludes to permits on the one hand claims to Indigenous descent regardless of “blood quantum” while on the other retains the possibility of continuing to “pass” as white at will. Sturm sees Clinton’s attempts at solidarity-through-identification as exactly this mode of denial: a form of “neoliberal dissimulation...a thinly veiled racism of a new variety...whose very emphasis on culture, class, individualism, and choice...[denies] not only the persistence of racism but also the meaningfulness of race” (188-89). Though certainly implying choice and capitalizing on opportunity, while retaining the core meaning of individuality to which Ross Chambers argues persons identified as white can claim unfettered access (145), the extent to which Clinton’s rhetoric involves an attempt at “dissimulation” remains an open question. It seems more useful in this regard to look back at the ways that claims to Indigenous identity appear available to white persons regardless of the degree of their descent while simultaneously making the denial of whiteness possible. To the extent that “race shifters must repeatedly perform their racial difference” from whiteness “using social and cultural markers” of Indianness in order to gain “recognition” among Cherokee persons (Sturm 177-78), it may well follow that “passing” as either white or Cherokee in these examples, to paraphrase Judith Butler, relies on a similar pattern of stylized repetition.<sup>11</sup> Here, part of the stylized performance of whiteness becomes a performative and iterative claim to Indigenous identity that sets the stage for sincere solidarity.

Alexie imagines the performances of racial difference Sturm describes to produce the experience of material difference manifest in the privileged position from which Mather feels able to arbitrate the meaning of “Indianness.” He experiences this privilege

as a sincere desire to help Native people while seeming to remain unaware of the ways his efforts as positive portraiture end up dictating the shape of who can fit within his frames. Having faced Marie's constant challenges throughout the semester, Mather is exasperated with her most recent argument against his interpretations of Native-operated casinos as threats to "cultural purity" (84), reframing her contention that casinos present a viable economic engine for reservation communities as an attempt to create an "antagonistic situation" (84).<sup>12</sup> "Indians are just plain hungry," Marie explains, "Not for money. For food... You don't know anything about that" (84). Through Marie's pointing to Mather's position of relative security, Alexie suggests the "antagonistic situation" Mather sees her trying to create already exists as a literal resource disparity that takes form through unevenly embodied affective privilege. Speaking from this privileged position, Mather's sincerity marks the extent to which his whiteness colors his affects:

'Don't you understand what I'm trying to teach? I'm trying to present a positive portrait of Indian peoples, of your people. Of you. I simply cannot do that if you insist on this kind of confrontational relationship. I mean, with all this negative publicity surrounding the murder of that white man, don't you understand I am trying to do a good thing here? People actually think an Indian killed and scalped that young man. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, people still think that Indians are savages. Don't you understand that I'm on your side?' (84-85)

Mather's brand of "help," however, appears less focused on changing the material circumstances affecting Native peoples than on capturing some "essence" he can configure and reconfigure at will.<sup>13</sup> Mather's performance of sympathy and his attempts to do a "good thing" are rooted in the essence he imagines to remain fixed as a portrait he can present for his students' consumption. His feeling that he and Marie occupy the

“same side” of the “battle” lines being drawn in the classroom and in the wider community following the Killer’s first murder connotes spatial demarcation, occupancy, and inhabitance; and if positioning himself alongside Marie on the “other” side of typical white reactions to the murders enables Mather’s feeling of occupying “Indian” space, his proximity to Marie appears to authorize his occupation. From within it, he thus feels able to frame the meaning of Indianness “positively” against Marie’s negative opposition.

Slyly rehearsing the discourse of savagery and civilization throughout his performance of sincerity, Mather’s occupation of an “Indian” perspective dictates the terms of its inhabitance for Marie. Either she continues to be obstinate and intractable, and thus remains outside modernity, or she can feature in Mather’s whitewashed portrait as a “positive” exemplar of a “progressive” Indian. Caught in Mather’s ontological catch-22, Marie’s options for response are limited. Staring up “at the tenured professor,” and asking what gives him “the right...to tell me what battles I’m fighting?” she’s incredulous when Mather explains that he “understands” what she’s going through as “an Indian woman in college” (85), and she is angry when he later closes his office door and throws the bolt. “Mather would have never treated a white student that badly, nor would he have shut the door in the face of a man,” Marie thinks, wanting “every white man to disappear. She wanted to burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke” (85). Marie’s reading of Mather’s actions as motivated by sexism and racism butts up against his frustrations with her inability to see things from his perspective, and her pointed question about authorization and the right to speak of and for her frames his whiteness as its answer.

Mather's privileged position with respect to his feeling like an Indian enables his attempts to reframe Marie's contentions as mere "antagonism" that clouds what is for him the essential fact of their occupying the "same side." Mather's notional Indianness, articulated through the privileged position his whiteness allows him to inhabit, thus converts Marie into what Ahmed calls an extension point through which Mather's affects can circumscribe the space of her responses.<sup>14</sup> Alexie's portrait metaphor thus suggests that Marie becomes the focal subject of Mather's sympathetic recognition insofar the whiteness of its background falls out of focus. Against this background, Marie becomes an "Indian woman in college" who is simply antagonistic toward what she does not yet understand. In this vein, Mather's interpellation of Marie into the subject of his positive portraiture traffics in what Jodi Byrd argues is the propagation of "empire not through frontiers but through the production of a paradigmatic Indianness" (xxxv). Staged in this way, Marie's desire to make Mather disappear and feast on his smoke is inevitably framed as a "negative" sign of willful "savagery." Mather's effacement of her more overtly political arguments, and his reframing them into "antagonistic situations" of her own contrivance, position her as in need of his benevolent pedagogy as much as beyond the scope of the positive portraits he seeks to generate.

Coming from a moment of exasperation, Mather's "same side" logic seems a desperate appeal to Marie's capacity for alliance. However, as the dynamics of the scene demonstrate, Alexie suggests that such sincere appeals operate through a disciplinary discourse of confinement that mirrors the spatial constraints of settler occupancy.<sup>15</sup> The feeling of already inhabiting Marie's "side" and the way that feeling screens out Mather's

complicity in the endurance of settlement signals Mather's historical habituation to inhabiting Indianness and its function as an affective prosthetic through which he's able not to feel like a settler. Framed as a "Wannabe" and a "real Indian lover" from the reader's first encounter (58), Mather's idea of Indianness seems already colored by these affective inclinations and by a tradition of misrepresentation and appropriation embodied in his reading list for Native American Literature. Stocked with books by nonnative authors or biographies of questionable authorship, when Marie challenges his choice of *The Education of Little Tree*, infamously written by Forrest Asa Carter, former "Grand Wizard of Ku Klux Klan" (58) and speechwriter for notoriously racist Alabama Governor George Wallace,<sup>16</sup> Mather again reframes the critique by leaning this time on the sentimentality and "beauty" of Carter's novel: "perhaps we can learn that there are beautiful things inside of everybody" (59). As a proud adoptee of a Lakota family, Mather nevertheless insists on positioning himself as able to "view the Native American world from the interior and exterior," and aims for the class to understand Native American literature through a bent Whitman paraphrase: "Every good story that belongs to Indians belongs to non-Indians, too" (61). Mather leaves off the famous line about containing multitudes, an absence that signals Alexie's framing of whiteness as a mode of conceptual and spatial givenness that takes its ability to consume and contain any form of difference as something that need not even be stated.

The democratic vision of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* here becomes a vehicle for Alexie's critique of how Mather's sincere appreciation of the goodness within everyone maps onto the racialized dynamics of liberal affective inclusion that wind up nonetheless

being unevenly applied to anyone who might actually be Indigenous. Among the things contained within the body of work Mather passes off as Native American literature include the signs of “Indianness” that have become a part of the perceptual tradition he bodies forward as a performance of sincere inclusivity. However, what he seems completely unable to feel as embodied knowledge is the degree to which those performances enact an equally real and embodied form of violence against those he otherwise seeks to present and paint positively.

Mather again falls back on signs of cultural authenticity that work to render the everydayness of lived Indigeneity illegible in defending his inclusion of self-proclaimed Shilshomish writer Jack Wilson’s novels. Mather argues that Wilson’s work, detective novels in the manner of Tony Hillerman’s Jim Chee series, “present [an]...authentic and traditional view of the Indian world” that flows from Wilson’s self-proclaimed membership among the Shilshomish (66). Mather’s measure of authenticity, however, takes *The Education of Little Tree* as its barometer, vaunting whitewashed notions of “tradition” and cinematic portrayals of visions and deep spiritualism as signs of genuine Native authorship. In response, Marie argues that not only can Wilson’s claims to ancestry not be verified through research and records of tribal membership, but that further Mather ought to find it ironic that “all these so-called Indian writers claim membership in tribes with poor records...Cherokee, Shilshomish? I mean, there’s not a whole lot of people claiming to be Spokane. And do you know why? Because we’re not glamorous and we keep damn good records” (67).<sup>17</sup> Marie highlights a distinction between “Identity” and lived experience that Mather is unable to recognize in part

because he gets his frame of recognition from texts like Wilson's. Continuing to argue about Wilson's purported Shilshomish belonging, Marie notes that he has never contributed to the American Indian College Fund, that no one knows him at the United Council of All Tribes, and that few among the Indigenous community in Seattle know him other than those who frequent a bar Wilson regularly haunts downtown. "Wilson sure doesn't have much to do with Indians," Marie argues, "I mean, there are so many real Indians out there writing real Indian books... Why teach Wilson? It's like his books are killing Indian books" (68).<sup>18</sup> Marie's critique points back to the ways that Mather's feelings of belonging are, like Wilson's, predicated on an accrued sense that signs of "Indianness" equate to Indigenous being; that those signs are available as prosthetics for otherwise ordinary whiteness; that proffering the signs rather than acknowledging their violence is equivalent to political solidarity; and finally that the logic behind the modality of inclusion Mather enacts is a tactic of settlement that kills.

Turning the lens onto Mather later in the narrative, Marie confronts him with the direct possibility that his enactments of liberal settler-feeling, screened out through his performances of white sincerity, might make him the Indian Killer stalking the streets. Marie bluntly asks Mather why he thinks he knows so much about Indians, asking him if he has ever "*lived* on a reservation" (246). Answering that he spent three months with the Navajo, and smuggled food to American Indian Movement (AIM) activists during the occupation of Wounded Knee, Mather again leans on liberal affiliation and sentiments of solidarity as prostheses for the ways his whiteness marks his disconnection from everyday life as an Indigenous person. Reminding Mather of his ability to access



resources in ways that AIM activists, surrounded by U.S. Government forces during the occupation, could not, Marie's argument points to the quotidian privileges and material access whiteness affords persons like Mather.<sup>19</sup> As if to amplify the insularity of Mather's whiteness, and his inability to sense it, Marie takes another jab: "I mean, calling him the Indian Killer doesn't make any sense, does it? If it was an Indian doing to the killing, then wouldn't he be called the Killer Indian? I mean, Custer was an Indian killer, not a killer Indian. How, about you, Doc, are you an Indian killer?" (247). Mather's response is telling, "I'm certainly no murderer" (247). Reframing the dynamics of their earlier encounter, here Marie's framing controls the tenor of Mather's response through casting him into a "modern extension of that long tradition" (61) of pointedly white Indian killers. That Mather is "no murderer" highlights the degrees of abstraction from that "long tradition" to which he's become habituated, despite the fact that for Marie, at least, his body betrays his good intentions by bringing the "tradition" of direct violence toward Indigenous peoples squarely into the present.

### **"The Very Last Shilshomish Indian": Jack Wilson's *Indian Killer*, John Smith, and the Violent Fantasies of Prosthetic Attachment**

The critical difference between Mather's claims to Indianness and Jack Wilson's felt relationship to his supposed Shilshomish identity and the fictional worlds in which he lives it out is the depth of Wilson's felt attachments. Up to this point, Mather's claims to Indian identity have largely been iterative in the manner of Clinton's on PBS. Despite that those claims may feel benign to Mather, through his conflicts with Marie, Alexie

demonstrates how claims to Indianness as a prosthetic for sincere engagement with Indigenous peoples and concerns produce material consequences. Through Wilson, on the other hand, Alexie's critical phenomenology of whiteness turns to a consideration of how inhabiting Indianness manifests as a mode of felt belonging to a fictional world of one's own making.

Alexie situates Wilson as the author of a palimpsest of fictional worlds. After retiring from the Seattle Police and growing weary of the emptiness of his new routine, Wilson turns to writing as a way to "do something" through reconnecting with the intrigue and monstrosity of the white men he had previously investigated (161-62). As a result, he invented the protagonist of his series of novels, Aristotle Little Hawk, "the very last Shilshomish Indian," a "practicing medicine man and private detective in Seattle" (162). Playing on tropes of extinction and vanishment while mocking mystery novelists like Tony Hillerman and his series of novels featuring Navajo Tribal Police detective Jim Chee (299), Alexie casts Wilson as a sincere opportunist aiming to capitalize on the "new age stuff" and "shaman thing" his literary agent tells him "publishers are looking for" by combining it with a juicy murder mystery (162-63). After receiving leaked information from the Seattle police that they had now dubbed the Killer "The Indian Killer" (165), Wilson embarks on a new project that will become Little Hawk's last case, also titled *Indian Killer*. But his more personal aims for the book extend beyond mere market share. Despite knowing "it was all sort of ridiculous" but loving "the money and attention" playing "shaman" brought him (162), "Wilson felt he'd been chosen for a special task" in writing *Indian Killer*: "more than a novel...[he] would write the book that would finally

reveal to the world what it truly meant to be Indian” (338). When writer’s block and vague dreams stall his efforts, his literary agent reminds him of a few things he seems to have lost track of, that he’s the “Indian writer” and that as the creator of fictional worlds he gets to “make shit up” (339).

Wilson’s fictional inventions mirror the fictionality of his perceptual world. Introduced as growing up “white and orphaned” and having dreamed “of being Indian” in hopes of finding “some tribal connection with his eleven foster families,” Wilson’s earliest and lasting ideas of being Indian came from reading “every book he could find about the First Americans,” and from his reading and felt disconnection he “recreated himself in the image he found inside those books” (157). As an adult, he merged his idea and image of “Indian” identity into a “complicated cornucopia of tribal influences...burned sage and tobacco, a medicine pouch worn beneath his clothes, a turquoise ring on his right hand” (178). Mixing styles on a drum he had “ordered from a catalog” and slipping into “the tradition dance outfit he’d bought at a downtown pawnshop,” Wilson dreamed “of being the best traditional dancer in the world...[seeing] himself inside a bright spotlight in a huge arena while thousands of Indians cheered for him. Real Indians” (178). As Wilson’s menagerie of Indian iconography drawn from tribes throughout North America suggests, he “did not realize” the importance of “tribal distinctions,” whether for himself or for those “Real Indians” he seems to understand were some degree of difference apart from his fictional ideas of them (179). Frequenting an “Indian bar” downtown, Wilson also didn’t realize that “white people who pretend to be Indian are gently teased, ignored, plainly ridiculed, or beaten, depending on their

degree of whiteness” (179). Mick, the bartender, reflecting on Wilson’s claims to Indian identity, “did not buy that shit. Mick’s great-grandmother was a little bit Indian, but that did not make him Indian. Besides, who the hell would want to be Indian when you could just as easily be white?” (181).

Through these last two details, Alexie generate a tension between whiteness as a stylized repetition of acts manifesting in degrees of visibility and effect and the notion of whiteness as an embodied marker of social privileges inaccessible to those whose bodies are visibly unable to pass. Whereas in Wilson’s home, or in his imagination, his whiteness can follow behind his intentions and actions because it rarely meets a stress point, in Ahmed’s sense, in the “Indian bar” Wilson’s whiteness manifests in degrees of visibility and affective influence that depend on the willingness of those around him to entertain his fantasies of belonging. Having become habituated to a past of his own invention, Wilson takes up his Indian identity as mode of navigating his perceptual milieu. He augments his otherwise apparent whiteness through inhabiting signs of belonging to “traditions” so disparate as to be indistinct of any specific tribal affiliation other than the most generic notion of “Indianness” in broader U.S. cultural circulation. In the bar, when he is not pressing folks for details about the murders or pumping them for information for his new novel, he uses them as prostheses to enable and extend the palpability of his affiliation with them and to screen out whiteness from his self-perception.

What needs to be stressed here is that Wilson is not simply “playing” at being Indian, nor “going Native” in a new-age sense.<sup>20</sup> Alexie’s characterization resists these

readings precisely because Wilson himself seems unable to always clearly discern the line between play and reality. Following Sturm's reading of "racial shifters," it might be that Wilson is reacting to a perceived cultural emptiness in whiteness and so seeks modes of attachment to a notional "tradition" that offers him a rooted feeling of belonging. However, his ability to "shift" positions at will owes to his inhabiting an otherwise recognizably white body. As Sturm puts it, "Having a choice about how to racially identify implies a social power that only white-skinned or physically ambiguous individuals can access" (52). Further, "Whiteness...hides in the language of racial choice and marks the difference between those who have racial options and those who do not...As a result, a strange racial alchemy is at work... a meaningful if somewhat delirious interplay between race, culture, and indigeneity" (60). Sturm reflects the theory of whiteness by degrees Alexie voices through Mick, a notion Marie offers as a critique of white writers like Wilson who "thought they became Indian just by saying they were Indian" (Alexie 232). Marie suggests that for white men like Wilson the ease of making claims become reality stems from their capacity to act as individuals, observing that "Only white people got to be individuals" and that as a result "they could be anybody they wanted to be" (232). Expanding Mick's observation, Marie's sense of the "racial alchemy" at work in race shifters' claims to Indian identity points to a phenomenology of whiteness as an infinitely expansive set of perceptual capacities made possible through making static the differences white persons like Wilson seek to graft into their identities as prostheses. If whiteness "hides" in these discourses and their embodied performances, as Sturm's evocative phrasing suggests, then it may be that those who feel able to conceal

it find the possibility of its dislocation precisely in the ease through which they inhabit spaces already oriented around their whiteness.

Wilson's imaginative fantasies of being Indian flag Alexie's staging of the spaces he inhabits as already oriented around whiteness. That Mather, a putative expert on Northwest Native peoples, reads Wilson's performances as authentic despite clear evidence to the contrary suggests that the logic connecting cultural iconicity to authenticity manifests through men like Wilson's ability to take up Native space, whether on the literary scene or in day-to-day life. Alexie connects Wilson's felt expansiveness to material violence against Native people through contrasting his self-styled caricature of authentic Indianness against John Smith's forcible adoption out of his tribal community and into a white, Seattle family. Daniel Grassian has observed the close parallels between Smith and Wilson, reading them as mirror opposites of one another.<sup>21</sup> Yet, if they appear as such it is arguably because Alexie uses Wilson's fantasies as the measure of "Indian" authenticity loosed from tribally specific connections and imagines the arbitration of Indianness through persons like Mather or novels like Wilson's to have direct, material consequences for someone like John, who can not "be anybody [he wants] to be" because he can not pass as white (232).

The scene of John's forced adoption, recounted in a chapter entitled "Mythology" that opens the narrative, sharply contrasts to Wilson's memories of becoming Shilshomish through reading everything he could about "the First Americans." Alexie imagines John's adoption as a "war," complete with a helicopter gunship that "[strafes] the reservation with explosive shells" as it carries John away from his screaming mother

into the arms of the waiting white family who had adopted him (6). Though some have read Alexie's imagined warzone as the stuff of the opening chapter's myth, the focus of Alexie's mythos is arguably more directed toward the absence of tribal specificity within John's memories.<sup>22</sup> He was born on "this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation" (3-4), ambiguities suggestive of a perspective from which "reservations" are synecdochic of tribal lands and "Indians" stand in for "Navajo or Lakota...Apache or Seminole...Yakama or Spokane" (4). His adoptive parents, Olivia and Daniel Smith, know nothing about John's tribal affiliation nor about his mother save that she is fourteen and according to the adoption agent "doing the right thing" by giving him up. "This child will be spared a lot of pain by growing up in a white family," the agent explains.<sup>23</sup> Desiring to be a "good mother" Olivia takes it upon herself to fill in the gaps surrounding John's origin by reading books "about the Sioux, and Navajo, and Winnebago. Crazy Horse, Geronimo, and Sitting Bull rode horses through her imagination. She bought all the children's books about Indians and read them aloud to John" (12). In this sense, John's sense of himself is derived from the stuff of myth circulated through the "Indian books" his mother purchases in an effort to give him some semblance of "authentic" identity. Alexie in effect suggests that the violent suppression constituting the imaginative circumstances of John's birth bears out in the violence of his extrusion from tribal affiliation and resultant interpellation into the generic and mythicized "Indians" riding horses through his mother's imagination.

In this sense, John lives within the interpellative schema that Alexie presents as Mather's metaphoric portraiture or Wilson's fantastical representations. Without a sense

of connectedness to tribal community or to a homeland, John is forced to invent an explanatory framework to account for his outwardly “Indian” appearance. When he first meets Marie at a protest she had organized at the University, the second question she asks him is “What tribe are you?” Knowing that “he was Indian in the most generic sense,” John does not know how to answer the question but tells Marie that he is “Navajo” because “that was what he wanted to be” (32). Marie, however, had seen him as “another urban Indian” who was as “so many Indians were...outcasts from their tribe” (38). Against Wilson’s scenes in *Big Heart*’s, Marie’s quick acceptance of John into the community of urban Indigenous persons suggests another side of identity’s uneven application within a frame circumscribed by illusive measures of authenticity. She takes John to be an “Indian” because he looks like one—described as “tall and muscular...like some cinematic warrior” (32)—and interprets his confusion and difficulty at answering her question as a sign of his “outcast” status rather than of his dissimulation. Alexie suggests that part of Marie’s sympathy toward John and suspicion toward Mather and Wilson owes to her own background of feeling like an outcast. As a precocious child, Marie had always aspired to go to a university and leave the reservation. Because Marie “did not dance or sing traditionally, and because she could not speak Spokane,” she “was often thought of as being less than Indian” (33). Her parents had not taught her Spokane because they thought it would be of “no use to her in the world outside the reservation,” and not unlike John’s parents had bought her “books by the pound” from which she might educate herself beyond the frames of traditional culture.



Whereas both of these characters' backgrounds could be interpreted as Alexie's critique of the notion of "authenticity" and in particular its impact on Indigenous identity, reading them in this way compounds rather than alleviates the imposition of a recognition-based framework wherein identity is dependent upon performance rather than on connectedness to community. John's feelings of detachment, like Marie's, stem from the logical circumscription of what counts as recognizably "Indian" performance within the framework of settler-imposition. Within such a framework, one's performance of "traditional" authenticity becomes the measure of one's belonging rather than, as Alexie suggests, one's active involvement in collective action toward advancing Indigenous sovereignty. From the latter perspective, Marie's acceptance of John may stem from John's outwardly visible identity as an "Indian" but is motivated by an effort to mobilize his interpellation within settler-frames toward counterframed collective action on behalf of the urban Indians with whom she feels in solidarity.<sup>24</sup>

I am not suggesting that Alexie's vision of being "Indian" rests on participation in political action, nor that anyone who might do so can just as easily claim Indigenous identity. Marie is in fact Spokane, and John was in fact born to an Indigenous mother within a tribal territory. These baseline conditions of belonging characterize their differences from Mather's or Wilson's appropriative stance precisely because they flag belonging to a specifically emplaced community the boundaries of which—physically and culturally—have been circumscribed by settler-occupation. Mather and Wilson, conversely, claim a sense of "Indianness" that rests on iterative and performative affiliations to what they take to mean Indigenous belonging, while remaining unaware of

the extent to which such belonging depends on one's connection to place-based communities and equally place-based traditions. The sincerity of their claims, and in particular the depth of feeling with which Wilson holds to his fantasies of Indian belonging, signal the whiteness of the space within which their claims can carry enough affective force to graft them into a sense of ontological unity with Indigenous peoples. The force of their claims equally as much does violence to members of Indigenous communities whose ties to land are effaced by Mather's or Wilson's performances of cultural authenticity and erased within the framework those performances generate as the measure of Indian belonging.

From within this frame, Wilson's imaginative reproduction of the novel's titular mystery becomes a screen for the violence his representations of Indianness enact. As the Killer's murders touch off violence across Seattle, Wilson heads out to give a reading of the few pages of his *Indian Killer* he has prepared. Marie, protesting the reading, explains to a reporter that "Wilson is a fraud," and that his novels are "dangerous" and "actually commit violence against Indians" (264). The news reporters gathered around the protest add to the pressure, asking Wilson to respond to the charge that his "books might be a prime motivating factor for the Indian Killer" (264). Yet despite the suggestion and the evidence supporting it—a violent attack a few nights before on a Makah man named Corenius and Puyallup woman named Zera that left Cornelius with "four cracked ribs, a punctured lung, carious contusions and abrasions" and a "concussion" (215)—Wilson waves away the implication by again falling back on his self-proclaimed Shilshomish ancestry. When Marie and John, who had followed him home after the reading, confront

him as he steps out of his taxi, Wilson is awestruck not with fear but with the profundity of his “shamanistic” powers: “as if he’d brought Little Hawk to life through some kind of magic. Wilson had always felt magical, but he’d had no idea how much power he really possessed” (268). Though from Wilson’s perspective the power he feels may seem a part of his possessive relationship to Shilshomish identity, in context Alexie suggests that his feelings of power owe to his powerful position as an arbiter of “Indianness,” a position from which he can conjure up John’s actual presence as the living manifestation of his character’s surrogation of his longtime fantasies.

Through his vision of John, Wilson finds a vehicle for his imaginative entry into the Killer’s perspective. Pushing through his initially stalling efforts to write the novel, Wilson begins to have vivid dreams of the killings, imagining the face of murdered university student David Rogers as “a bullet passed through his brain” and seeing “the blood fountain” stream from the first of the Killer’s victims Justin Summers (227). Yet once John becomes his affective prosthetic, his dreams become far more personal. He begins “following John’s eyes” in his fantasies of the murders, and then begins to dream about “Smith pushing the knife into the white man in the University District”, “[slitting] the throat of the business man” Edward Letterman found dead in his car outside an adult bookshop, and “smiling as he lifted” kidnapped boy Mark Jones “from his bed” (390). As if losing grip on himself as the creator of these imaginative scenes and moving from “follow[ing]” to inhabiting the fantasy John’s prosthetic body opens up, Wilson begins to see “himself with that knife...pushing the knife into one white body, then another, and another, until there were multitudes” (390-91). Alexie does more than taunt readers to

take Wilson as the actual Indian Killer in these final passages; he offers a clear view to how Wilson's whiteness, and its multitudinous expansiveness, allows him imaginative entry into a hallucinatory perspective of Indianness that permits him to screen his complicity in the direct violence he conjures up in the form of John Smith and authors throughout his own *Indian Killer*.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that within the fantasy space Wilson's prostheticization of John's body allows he imagines himself as the perpetrator of violence against a "multitude" of white bodies. Alexie suggests that through John's representativity circumscribed within a frame of recognition that takes his outward appearance as indicative of his "Indian" iconicity Wilson gains fuller affective access to his fantasies of Indigenous belonging. That those fantasies take form as violence toward white bodies throws into relief the ironic juxtaposition of savagery and positive portraiture Alexie works out through Mather's more distanced affiliations. "Indianness" becomes equated with violence against whites for the sake of their whiteness, in other words, only within the fantasy space of settler-affect articulated through the prostheticization of Indigenous bodies.

Alexie positions Wilson's whiteness as screening out the relationship between occupation and violence characteristic of settlement through transposing that history into racially motivated violence and warfare. Within this perspective, whiteness becomes the problematic sign of one's inscription into frames of Indigenous violence and removing it via sincere identification with Indigenous peoples becomes a fix that itself effaces the core problematic of occupation. Wilson's whiteness in this regard becomes akin to a

wound to his subjectivity that, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, allows his hallucinatory fantasies to be experienced as an "affective entity" with the "*value of reality*" because they are made up of the "debris of a shattered world" (355-58). Wilson thus lives within whiteness as a doubled-screen, on the one hand configured as the affective mechanism through which he feels able to belong as an Indian and not as a settler and on the other as the screen through which his fantasies become felt realities that slide over his ability to perceive himself as implicated in the spatial occupation that articulates his whiteness as a privileged position.<sup>26</sup> The fantasies of Indian belonging Wilson lives through and actively constructs as a part of his everyday affect are not, however, equivalent to "delusions" and the pathologies they imply.<sup>27</sup> Rather, as Alexie insinuates through Wilson's childhood background and adult "dreams" and fictions, Wilson's notional and affective attachments to Indianness emerge from a fiction of his own making, one that works through the wound he imagines his whiteness to constitute.

Wilson's sincere efforts to feel *for* Indians, to do "good" and to represent to the world what it means to be among his tribe of imagined "Real Indians," thus transits into his feeling *as* an Indian of his imagination. Not unlike Mather's portraits, then, the fictions Wilson creates represent the static that floats across the surface of his world; the key difference between them, however, is that Wilson, unlike Mather, gets to invent the discourse through which "Indians" become "real" and Indigenous persons like Marie drop out of the frame entirely. Wilson's good intentions and "positive portraits" follow from his hallucinatory attachments, and those attachments themselves screen out the violence of his portrayals as much as the violence of his performance of Indianness.

Alexie in effect argues that whiteness and the individuality it permits becomes a screen through which Wilson and other men like him filter their felt attachments to “Indian” identity and as a result leave the “debris” of violence behind them.<sup>28</sup>

**“Have We Somehow Travelled Back to the Nineteenth Century?”:**

**Wounded Whiteness and Settler-Violence in *Indian Killer***

Up to this point, my analysis of Alexie’s phenomenology of whiteness has been focused on the ways *Indian Killer* imagines whiteness to screen out the violence enacted by what feels like good intentions. To the extent that these dynamics play out on an interpersonal terrain, their connectedness to the materiality of violence and dispossession may still appear somewhat occluded through my focus on whiteness’s perceptual manifestations. Mather’s positive portraits and Wilson’s fantasy frames, however, generate the conditions within which their complicity in direct violence remains an unacknowledged part of their affective milieu. Through the sincerity of their intentions, they experience the effects of their gestures toward inclusion as markers of their solidarity with Indigenous persons’ “plight,” without recognizing that the frames within which their visions of “Indianness” take shape convert the material dispossession of settler-occupation into affective content about which they can feel sympathetic while doing nothing in particular. Through both of them Alexie suggests that their deflective posture articulates the felt givenness of their belonging to the contested space they occupy, and through Wilson especially, the novel frames the self-evidentness of belonging as the wellspring of a wounded subjectivity in need of a prosthetic supplement.

To demonstrate this dimension of Alexie's phenomenology of whiteness, I have intentionally held off a discussion of *Indian Killer's* representations of direct violence. In this section, I turn to those representations to demonstrate the ways that Mather's and Wilson's affects take form through the same set experiential conditions that produce material violence as a marker of whiteness's prosthetic attachment to settler-belonging.

Imagining the Killer's murder to touch off a race war, Alexie demonstrates the relationship between the presumptive whiteness of space and the affective dynamics through which whiteness becomes the lived experience of settler-belonging. The motif of mythicization returns throughout the novel's dramatizations of racially motivated violence, linking Wilson's imaginative fantasies of the Killer to the material violence that the circulation of those fantasies engenders. The ambiguity of the Killer's identity spurs a series of imaginative mythologies within which the apparently inexplicable might become the affectively intelligible. In this sense, Alexie suggests that the stories through which whiteness narrates its attachments to space as a privileged position from which to arbitrate the inexplicable are ultimately more powerful than the facts that give rise to them.<sup>29</sup>

In this vein, Alexie casts radio talk-show host Truck Schultz alongside Wilson as one of the novel's prime mythmakers. The difference between them, however, is that where Wilson longs to feel Indian, Schultz explains to the undoubtedly white "citizens" his invective conjures up: "We should have terminated Indian tribes from the very beginning" (209). Schultz continues:

And, now, through no fault of their own, two men are dead, and a little boy is missing, because they were white. If two black men had been killed because of their race, this city would be in uproar. If a black child had been kidnapped by a white man, the city would be up in arms... This whole country cares more about the lives of young black teenage hoodlums than it does about law-abiding, God-fearing white men... And now comes the news that an Indian savage is killing white men. Have we somehow travelled back to the nineteenth century? (208)

Shultz conjures up more than an angry white citizenry here. He evokes the citizen as by default white and thus produces the white body as embodying the nation. Casting white men as by default innocent victims of reverse racism, he further paints responses to racial violence as disproportionately focused on black victims of hate crimes. Through it all, in positing the white body as the anchor point of historical continuity he effects the travel back to nineteenth-century affects he seeks to locate in the “savage” now killing white men. Relying on tropes of innocence and abidance to add force to his incitement, he appeals to patriotism and citizenship as a means of mobilizing affect and galvanizing white men into a citizenry still fighting the Indian Wars for their rightful occupancy of territory. Reporting misinformation regarding David Rogers’s death, Schultz adds fuel to the fire. This time Schultz appeals to the American dream held in promise for David and dashed by the Indian Killer (344), before moving on to suggest that the Killer has “come to kill us because we have tried to help him. He has come to kill us because his children have moved beyond him... He has come to violate our women... We must defend ourselves, our families, our homes. We must arm ourselves and repel further attacks on our great country” (346). The level of hyperbole is matched by the elevation of Seattle to “our country,” a move that within the scope of Schultz’s racist invective appears an



added bit of rhetorical flourish, but within the scope of *Indian Killer*'s staging of whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging to national space appears as exactly the necessary justification for violence perpetuated in the name of home and country.

Authoring fictions that kill, Schultz becomes Wilson's mirror opposite. Utterly disinterested in inhabiting Indianness as a mode of belonging, Schultz proffers Indianness—through a discourse of savagery and a threat of sexual violence—as a prosthetic enabling the justified enactment of previously unavailable modes of affective redress. Schultz's incitement to racially motivated violence would not be possible were the "Indian Killer" not available as the anchor grounding his rhetoric in materiality. In this regard, wounded whiteness becomes the subject of an impassioned and sincerely articulated appeal through the mythic invocation of Indigenous retribution cast as directed toward whites rather than toward settlement as the terrain upon which whiteness stakes its claim to centrality. The wounds Schultz conjures are thus, like Wilson's, hallucinatory; whiteness can no more sustain the notion of racial victimhood than it can mark marginalization from the normative center. However, the effect of Schultz's sincere appeal to a wounded and hobbled whiteness carries the same force as Wilson's attempts to make up for the hollowness he feels as his orphaned vision of white identity.<sup>30</sup> Schultz's incitement to violence takes on the value of reality for the white men who hear his messages, stirring David's brother Aaron and his friends Sean Ward and Barry Church to don ski masks and commit targeted acts of violence against homeless Native people throughout the city, nearly murdering a Makah man named Cornelius (211-215). During the attack, one of them screams "Get the fuck out of our country, man!" (215),

suggesting the degree to which Schultz's mythic invective has stirred feelings of national attachment made all the stronger by viciously beating homeless Native people. Where the myths Wilson spins around the murders in his *Indian Killer* traffic in romantic tropes of vanishment, Schultz's myths actively participate in the process of making vanishment a reality because they generate sincerely held feelings of national belonging that require the violent removal of Native presence.

To the extent that Shultz's rhetoric invests in a discourse that reifies white male embodiment as metonymic of national belonging and citizenship, it stakes a possessive claim to the nation and invests that claim in white embodiment. However, the discourse of possessive investments does not quite capture how Schultz's argument actively engenders affective belonging through incitements to violence.<sup>31</sup> His appeals carry affective force because they draw upon felt "traditions" and orientations that, while not always recognizable as belonging to the present, remain effective elements of everyday perception and affective citizenship among the white men in his audience. Shultz's appeals speak to, as much as create, wounded, victimized white masculinity as a structure of feeling that posits wounds and notional victimhood as residual elements of past cultural formations. These residual elements remain active and effective to the extent that they can be taken up at will.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, Alexie's "portraits" of white masculinity position it as relying on two interarticulated prostheses: on the one hand notional victimhood and felt but-not-quite-actual wounds; and on the other the availably threatening presence of Indigenous peoples who can be made to represent variably

framed modes of victimhood at will, if they come into the frame of white male perception at all.

Positioning straight, white masculinity as reliant on prosthetic attachments for its claims to normative citizenship, victimhood, woundedness, or racial identification, suggests that a fundamental powerlessness inheres in the presumptive center of power in the American array of identity positions. Where power appears, it accrues through habitually inhabiting others' subject positions as a part of one's perceptual tradition. These traditions are taken up as much as passed down, and throughout *Indian Killer* Alexie frames the ways that white masculine embodiment and orientation is actively made through taking up power over others. The effects of these perceptual traditions, once they filter into active awareness, prompt reflection and, often, sincere gestures soliciting absolution.

As an example of this push-pull relationship between power, violence, and atonement, Alexie offers Aaron and David Rogers as cases in point. As children, Aaron and David learned from their father Buck how to "defend" their land from Indigenous people digging camas root by shooting "over their heads" (62-66), or, as Aaron later explains to his father, directly at them (284). When David expresses reluctance to fire on the "Indians" who had "been root digging for thousands of years," his father Buck, who "hated fear," assumed that David was "probably queer" (63-65). Out of a "specific sense of guilt and a vague curiosity" (61), David sought friendship and possibly romance with Marie Polatkin, a "Real Indian" in his eyes with whom he could share his childhood experiences (68, 87). After David's death, Aaron wonders aloud whether or not his

attempted murder of the Indians digging camas all those years ago might have caused the calamity erupting throughout the city (283-84). Following Aaron's, Sean's, and Barry's spree of violence against the homeless, Sean has a change of heart and heads to the Seattle police. Searching for absolution, and explaining that the trio "started doing this for a good reason" or at least a reason "people would understand," he dodges a direct confrontation with the fact that he "almost killed" his victims and instead explains:

...this white-Indian thing has gotten out of control. And the thing with the blacks and Mexicans. Everybody blaming everybody. I mean, it's like white people get blamed for everything these days. I mean, I know we did some bad stuff. I know it. I know what me and Aaron and Barry did was wrong. But it was anger. Frustration, you know? David disappeared, and...somebody had to pay for it. Somebody was to blame for it. (387)

Sean's sense of the wrongness of the "bad stuff" he, Aaron, and Barry have done, and his seemingly sincere, or at least intransigent, belief that anger and frustration motivated by filial loyalty constitute a reasonable explanation, hinges on his attempt to evoke solidarity through appealing to the wounded whiteness he now feels as a racial marker of his social identity. Like Aaron's vague sense of guilt earlier, or David's more palpable guilt, all three know they are complicit in something, but the scale of their complicity outstrips their capacities to feel it. They need someone else, in other words, to feel it for them. And those others are in all three cases Indigenous peoples whose historical victimhood, in the minds of these white men, make them available receptacles for "bad stuff" and bad feelings alike.

Arising from a sense of powerlessness at the center of their social power, compounded by a fomented sense of anger and frustration at their lack of ability to confidently wield it, these men experience wounded whiteness as a kind of power. The moments of powerlessness these men experience, and that Alexie stages through them, are small-scale and transitory. As Marie observes, because “only white people got to be individuals,” they “could be anybody they wanted to be” (232). Part of the elasticity of white individuality, and owing to the “multitudes” whiteness contains, is the ability to inhabit illusory wounds at will and from within that inhabitation to perform woundedness while retaining power.

Alexie’s layered allusions to the Ghost Dance throughout *Indian Killer* frame the degree to which wounded whiteness becomes a powerful illusion.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the novel, Marie and her cousin Reggie both at turns confront white men with the factual possibility that “Indians are dancing now, and I don’t think they’re going to stop” (418). “Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works,” Marie explains to Mather, “Maybe ten Indians are dancing. Maybe a hundred. It’s *just a theory*” (313, my emphasis). Capitalizing on Mather’s love of theories, and through it his felt insularity from the reality of the violence he not only produces but to which he is also subject, Marie’s irony finds a sharp point: “You don’t believe in the Ghost Dance, do you? Oh, you like its symbolism. You admire its metaphorical beauty, enit?... You love Indians so much you think you’re excluded from our hatred. Don’t you see? If the Ghost Dance had worked, you wouldn’t be here. You’d be dust” (313). Mather’s reliance on “theory,” “metaphor,” “beauty,” sincerity and sympathy, craft around him a metaphoric attachment to the

Indians he theorizes into existence and with whom he communes through whiteness as the vehicle of his metaphors. His whiteness screens out the reality of Marie's argument as well as the reality of settlement the Ghost Dance sought to make into "dust." Inhabiting the metaphoric beauty of Indianness and augmenting his whiteness through sincere gestures will not obviate the fact of his forcibly being in space that does not belong to him. But through appealing to the wound opened by Marie's rejection, a wound that manifests for him as whiteness, Mather can continue to inhabit the illusion that the Ghost Dance is only metaphor. So while Mather may acknowledge the historical injustices done to Native peoples; while Aaron, Barry, Sean, and David might explain away the "bad stuff" they've done through acknowledging its wrongs; while Wilson might know he is not really Shilshomish but press on nevertheless within the illusion, none of these white men seems able to feel that their acknowledgements of small-scale complicity link them to the enduring continuance of settler-violence that whiteness screens out of perception. Their senses are, as Walters suggests in *Ghost Singer*, "too damned plugged up!" (21), and so they turn to others to do their feeling.

**"Not in Our Skins, but in Our Minds":**

**Whiteness as a Plugged-Up Sensorium in *Ghost Singer***

Anna Lee Walters's *Ghost Singer* takes up the notion of whiteness as a screen through which the violence of settlement is filtered out of normative white perception, but reframes the kinds of affective intransigence Alexie imagines to characterize white masculinity throughout *Indian Killer* as stemming from a plugged-up sensorium.

Walters's theory of whiteness as articulating a set of sensory plugs that stop up engagement with the fullness of one's experience opens up alternative capacities within whiteness that counter Alexie's quite damningly determinative characterizations. Whereas Alexie puts a sharp point on his critique of white sincerity as an inevitably violent though apparently benign enactment of sympathetic identification, Walters's notion of sensory plugs helps to account for how such affective inclinations take form in a way that renders the ongoing violence of settler-occupation imperceptible and thus allows for white men like Alexie's Mather and Wilson or Walters's cast of white researchers to feel unimplicated in contributing to the conditions that ensure settler-violence's continued enactment.

Originally published in 1988, the novel participates in national arguments over the repatriation of Indigenous remains held in museums and private collections throughout the nation.<sup>34</sup> Walters's narrative intervenes in this debate through imagining the life that remains in the items housed in museum archives, and stages the political and legal arguments over rightful possession that characterized the repatriation movement as taking place on the terrain of sensation and belief. Within *Ghost Singer*, whiteness expresses a mode of belief that renders the material presence of life held within the national archives as immaterial to the supposed scientific and cultural value of retaining those remains. Casting this perspective as the result of sensory plugs, Walters destabilizes whiteness's presumptive centrality through positioning the novel's Indigenous characters' perspectives as its normative framework. In this sense, Walters's narrative situates whiteness as estranged from normative perception rather than indicative of a presumptive

centrality that needs to be deconstructed. From this perspective, arguments over the rightful “possession” of Indigenous remains for the purposes of scientific advancement or cultural preservation appear as affective intransigence. In other words, failing to sense the remains as imbued with a form of life that continues beyond death becomes equivalent to failing to sense what the novel portrays as the lived contiguity present-day Native peoples and their ancestor’s remains.

*Ghost Singer* represents this conflict through white men’s refusal to acknowledge the materiality of the narrative’s titular figure. The researchers’ sincere investments in the objects and bodies in their possession are imagined as preserving the historical violence of settler-occupation as much as manifesting a form of its continuance. Importantly, however, the violence Walters imagines whiteness to engender impacts Indigenous persons as much as those who inhabit whiteness’s plugged-up sensorium. As Russell Tallman, described as being “a little bit of half a dozen tribes,”<sup>35</sup> observes of Donald Evans, a white researcher at the National Archives who refuses to acknowledge the reality of the titular Ghost Singer, “what he is is forty years of thinking that way” (200). Tallman’s assessment frames Evans’s refusal as stemming from, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, the historical accrual of a perceptual tradition that Walters imagines to encompass the modes of belief and disbelief that tilt his feelings toward the subjects of his putative preservation. In imagining his whiteness as “forty years of thinking that way,” however, Walters leaves open the possibility of his eventual acknowledgement in a way that suggests whiteness could be unplugged through taking a different perspective. Attempting to get Evans to understand the gaps between his belief and his perceptions,



Cherokee medicine man Wilbur Snake explains that “beliefs wouldn’t ‘mount to much if what we believe didn’t have to do so much with power, our power [...] ‘cause you and me is different. Not in our skins, but in our minds” (198).

Couched as a difference in belief, or a difference “in our minds,” the narrative’s central tension might seem to point to a core epistemological difference between white and Native ways of knowing.<sup>36</sup> However, Walters’s characterization of whiteness as a sensory plug resists reducing its critique to the level of epistemology alone. What Evans refuses to acknowledge is not something he cannot know, but rather something he seems unable to fully feel. As George Daylight, a Creek/Cherokee tribal official travelling with Russell Tallman to Washington D.C., explains Evans’s and the other researchers’ inability to acknowledge the life within the archives, their inability to feel it owes to their senses being “too damned plugged up!” (21). Unable to “know” because unable to feel, *Ghost Singer* offers whiteness as a plug that stops up their capacity to sense life in forms they otherwise find inconceivable. Reframed as a modality of sensory perception, whiteness appears like Merleau-Ponty’s “wound” through which illusions mix with representational schemas to augment the actuality of sensory perception, closing off possibilities for fully feeling the reality sensation might afford.

*Ghost Singer* develops its phenomenology of whiteness as a “plugged-up” sensorium through a critique of white masculinity’s association with disembodied rationality. Despite their sense that something strange is going on in the archives, Evans and fellow researcher Geoffrey Newsome lean on rational explanation as a way to augment and mitigate feelings that seem to have no place in their perceptual schemas.

Working together in the archives to “[sort] out the fragments of history...and [make] the pieces fit into something they both understood” (40), Newsome’s and Evans’s immediate archeological project mirrors the degree to which both work to assimilate the fragments and “debris” of history into a coherent, explanatory narrative in order to locate and place the objects in their possession. Despite feeling as though something was not quite fitting, both Newsome and Evans initially follow historian David Drake’s line of reasoning to explain the strange phenomena in the archives. Early in the narrative, Drake’s sister Jean Wurly meets him in a panic, having endured the sense that something living exists in the archives for “three years;” “...[there] *are Indians there*,” she tells him, fearing he will think she is crazy, “*I’ve seen them....Davie, they’re ghosts!*” (5). No one else can confirm what Wurly feels certain she has seen, a fact that only adds to her distress. Drake, however, dismisses her concerns out of hand, implying that she needs only to eat a decent meal and get some rest. Drake’s dismissal points out the distinctively gendered character of Walters’s representations of whiteness’s plugs. Wurly cannot only sense the presence of “Indians” in the archives; she cannot stop seeing them. Despite the affective evidence of her exasperation, Drake dismisses her claims as an irrational response to something she must have imagined. When Newsome begins to feel something “unexplainable” (41), he follows suit and attempts to manage those feelings in a “rational way,” searching for a “logical explanation” (45). Evans likewise follows the pattern, dismissing the strange phenomena at the edges of his perception as “hocus pocus” and the eventual deaths of his former colleagues as owing to the ghost stories they’d allowed themselves to believe (125). Later, although having agreed to participate in a ceremony meant to help the Ghost

Singer move on from the attic room where his remains are held, Evans nevertheless remains skeptical of the process and “scares himself” with the possibility of confronting a ghost rather than a living presence (210, 216-17). The “reasonable” positions each of these men attempts to take over and against the evidence of something amiss in their affective milieu effectively argues that rationality plugs up a set of necessary perceptual capacities, not the least of which is a basic form of empathy and, from it, a recognition of shared humanity that their possessive claim on the reasonable and the logical continue to blur.

Through Drake’s, Newsome’s, and Evans’s incredulity with respect to the Ghost Singer’s materiality, Walters critiques the presumptive givenness of the spatial schemas within which their affective experiences seem to have no place. The sheer fact of Native presence itself seems not to fit into their orientations. Newsome, for instance, considers the collections in his care to be “beautiful [specimens] of extinct Indian culture” (45), and as a result cannot seem to fathom why Wurly would feel compelled to show parts of the collections to a “group of American Indians” who were “looking into business that had nothing to do with them” (44). Drake, despite “writing a history of the people” and seeking help from Johnnie Navajo (25), ultimately abandons his efforts out of fear of his colleague’s dismissal of Navajo’s stories as “sentimental hogwash that could be construed as romanticism” (225). Evans had fully expected Native Americans to “become extinct by all the rules of the game” (91), and as such “the last thing” he wanted was “involvement with George[ Daylight’s] kind” (122). Rejecting living Native peoples’ presence spurs the refusal to acknowledge the sensation that something lives in the

archives. The strange feelings plaguing Newsome at work were “directly related to where he was, physically” (40), a fact that at first seems to root them in the office but later forms a part of his sensorium, manifesting as auditory and visual hallucinations—an “intense” buzzing and “white dots of light that flashed before him” (47). Evans, for his part, tries to rationalize the presence he feels as owing to the “heathen” culture he vociferously argues is “dead” (125), but like Newsome before him his attempts to rationalize the presence falter as its power over him grows stronger (130-31).

Because Newsome and Evans reject out of hand the fact that Native peoples continue to live in the present but still sense that some presence in the archives follows them around, the novel suggests that Native space circumscribes whiteness’s sensory capacities. In this regard, the men’s refusal to acknowledge Native life suggests that they plug their senses as a way to mitigate their sense that their possession of Indigenous remains metonymically suggests their possession of Indigenous space. The distance Newsome and Evans try to maintain between their sensory perceptions and their rational perspective highlights Walters’s characterization of their lack of perceptual capacity as owing in part to their gendered performances. Their felt attachments to space and place, and their palpable disorientation when the presences challenge those attachments, suggests that part of their performances of masculinity involves a habituation to spaces that, in Ahmed’s phrase, seem to have already taken their shape.<sup>37</sup> Their habituation, in this sense, finds its condition of possibility in active efforts to screen out the fact of Native endurance. These efforts manifest in their attitudes and inclinations toward the

objects in the archives over which they claim possession and through which they eventually become possessed.

*Ghost Singer*'s portrayal of arguments about the possession of Indigenous remains, situated within the historical and political context of debates leading up to NAGPRA's enactment, draws clear lines between the supposed anthropological necessity of such holdings and the implications of them for Native sovereignty and the wholeness of Native peoples. Staging the novel's series of white researchers as utterly disinterested in Native life, and in the progression and evolution of Native cultures across time, underscores the novel's basic claim that the existence of such archives does little but compound the discourse of "lasting," to draw on Jean O'Brien, that propagates notions of Native vanishment and participates quite literally in the process of discursively conjuring Native death.<sup>38</sup> Walters folds the processes of making dead embedded in the existence of the archives into everyday settler-feeling articulated and made visible as white masculinity. Importantly, however, the "plugs" that block these men's sensory capacities appear not as permanent ontological features of their being as such, but instead as temporary blockages "in [their/]our minds" that could be unplugged given the right set of circumstances. The first of these plugs that need removal in order to open up the white sensorium is the notion of possessiveness, and with it ownership, implied in "holding" archives of Native remains.

Walters develops a critique of possessiveness as a characteristic of whiteness, and of white patriarchy in particular, by suggesting its realization within discourses of Native extinction. Among the white researchers who come into direct contact with the remains in

the attic, Evans is the only one who survives. He lives because, at Daylight's behest, he begins to attempt to unplug reason and rationality from his sensorium, and as a result tries to begin recognizing the reality of Native life. This transformation does not come easily, in part because Evans "is forty years of thinking that way," and as Russell Tallman puts it, "It'd be unrealistic to expect too much" (200). Evans believes in the notion that Indigenous peoples are doomed to extinction, that they "can never be modern" as O'Brien puts it (107), because they were "on borrowed time" (Walters 123).<sup>39</sup> Because "all the groups would be sucked up into one big vacuum" that would eventually obliterate difference through assimilation into implied whiteness, "Donald couldn't...encourage ethnic plurality and diversity...it was an unrealistic way of thinking. He couldn't condone such indulgence" (123). The logic, on its face, shows Evans's racism, but also asserts his sense of the archive's value. When Indigenous peoples become extinct, an inevitability of linear progress into modernity, the remains in the archives will be all that is left behind, and from those remains, Evans, like Newsome, can assemble the parts into a whole that makes sense.

Evans's future-anterior logic presents Native extinction a foregone conclusion and suggests the progression toward assimilation he imagines is already underway. As a guard against a future he experiences as his present, the sincerity of Evans's commitment to the archive speaks to the sincerity of his investments in Indigenous extinction, which are articulated through his experience of possessiveness over the remains he hopes to preserve. Evans's denial of continued Indigenous existence thus represents a more straightforward characterization of Mather's brand of white sincerity in *Indian Killer*.

Dismissing with the liberal posture of benevolent inclusion, Walters's characterization of white sincerity points out the extent to which the impetus to preserve Native culture through possessing Indigenous remains assumes that Native culture is already dead and thus already a part of the national historical archive of settler-feeling. Keeping the lid on this history works to seal off its potential continuance, thus becoming a "plug" that generates an attachment to national belonging predicated on maintaining the illusion that Native peoples only exist as subjects of history.

Evans's possessiveness over the archives thus suggests his possessive investment in whiteness, in George Lipsitz's terms, as the only possible eventuality.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting Daylight's argument that "such [things] can't be *owned*" because "The extent of feeling, or cultural belief, of a particular tribal person, or tribal group, creating a religious or sacred item goes beyond *possession* or *ownership* of it" (124), Evans claims that the legacy represented in the archives "is an embarrassment" to Native peoples that "with education and enculturation" they would "wisely" choose to put behind them (125). Evans's implied paternalism over Native peoples, here not a gesture of sincerity but a sincerely held belief, stems from his "forty years" of accrued perceptual traditions that place Native peoples in a supplicant position to the power invested within and exercised through his knowledge. Moreton-Robinson reads this kind of patriarchal white sovereignty as elaborating a "possessive investment" that produces the nation as a "white possession" ("Writing Off Indigenous Sovereignty" 88). Though writing of Australian politics, Moreton-Robinson's argument describes the manifestation of Evans's "anxiety" over "dispossession" (102) as a possessive investment in the archives' function to make

and keep Native peoples “dead,” and thus to secure his attachment to the white nation he envisions as an inevitability (Walters 125). Whiteness thus serves to screen out the enduring violence of settlement—making “dead” Indigenous peoples whether discursively or actually—as its predicate condition, and the “plugged-up” sensorium whiteness engenders around Evans blocks up his ability to feel complicit in the process.

Walters frames the sincerity of Evans’s belief in the inevitable eventuality of Native termination as the experience of whiteness’s possessive attachments to national space, and situates that experience as expressive of self-possessive individualism. In imagining self-possession and white male personhood as contoured around the sensory experience of protective benevolence, Walters foregrounds the importance of framing whiteness as a set of sensory plugs. Evans feels like a dutiful citizen doing what he can to protect what he imagines to remain of Indigenous culture against what he experiences as the eventuality of its dying out. Though he may not express his sense of benevolence through a notional attachment to Indianness as the terrain of solidarity, as Mather does in *Indian Killer*, his sense of a future-to-come when Native peoples will not live in relation to tribal histories articulates a similar desire to frame Indigenous life through a “positive portrait” against its eventual negation. That eventual negation, as Evans sees it, will manifest as assimilation into modernity, national belonging, and thus eventually whiteness. As signs of the past out of which this progression toward modernity moves forward, the archives represent the material anchor for the experience of its inevitability. If whiteness thus marks a mode of experiencing oneself as belonging to the nation as something one can possess within one’s sense of selfhood, then Walters imagines that



experience to depend on the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in a manner that forecloses upon Indigeneity. In this sense, Evans is sincere in his commitment to an inclusive horizon because he imagines himself to be already in possession of the space into which Indigenous people might be included. The plugs that prevent him from acknowledging George Daylight's argument that Indigenous sovereignty surpasses the notion of possessiveness thus also produce his commitment to Indigenous erasure as a feeling of protective benevolence toward Native peoples' histories.

Walters's sense of plugs thus goes two ways, preventing acknowledgement of the full scope of Evans's historical entanglements within settlement while producing a sense of historically rooted attachment to national space that effaces the history of its manifestation. Because these relationships play out on the terrain of sensation and take form as a mode of belief, Walters suggests that in order for Evans's senses to become "unplugged" he has to experience his complicity directly through his body. Confronting the Tall Man, the name given to the titular "Ghost Singer," Evans feels "himself being lifted upward and then dropped" (130). The second time this happens, "Donald felt the impact" (131). The "impact" seems to shake loose the plugs blocking his ability to sense the Tall Man's material presence. Yet despite this physical encounter, Evans remains fixated on the notion that "Indian ghosts" haunt the attic (174). His unwillingness to recognize this experience as materially efficacious points back to his accrued reliance on self-possession, which Walters frames here as too sedimented in his self-concept to be shaken loose because too much is at stake to let it go. Were he to recognize the Tall Man's materiality, in other words, he would have to recognize that the continuum of

Indigenous existence Daylight had earlier tried to explain outstrips his ability to possess and contain it.

Walters's characterization of whiteness as a plugged-up sensorium, in addition to positing its impermeability to sensations of violence and complicity, suggests that whiteness contains something white persons might be unwilling to let flow out. As Wilbur Snake explains to Russell Tallman, "we got power... This power we got is to live. Our bodies is connected to that power just like the unseen part of ourselves is tied to it too" (202). Evans's experiences are "in his mind," but, as Junior Snake adds, "Our minds are the boundaries of our physical selves" (203). Evans knows he has experienced something, in other words, but his attempts to rationalize the experience block his ability to feel its connection to the power to live that Wilbur contends connects our bodies as well as the parts of bodies Evans oversees to the world. "Any part of it [the body] stands for the whole," Wilbur Snake explains, "...a hand, fingers, a breast, the hair. And the body itself—the blood, flesh, and bones—stands for the unseen part of man... his memory, his mind, and his spirit. A man ain't fully a man without them" (202). The parts of bodies and "relics" held in the archives retain this power, are still part of the "whole," and convey memory, mind, and spirit as, to merge Walters's phenomenology with Merleau-Ponty's language, the historical accrual of a perceptual tradition. Evans's refusal to acknowledge this power marks a doubled refusal to acknowledge himself as implicated in Wilbur's synecdochic logic. The body stands for the whole, and Evans's plugged-up experiences of his body's imbrication within settlement both articulates and blocks his ability to sense his privileged position within its manifestation. Letting go, unplugging his

sensorium, would threaten to release his possessive hold on his way of being attached to the nation, and with it the notion of nationhood as anything other than an illusory construction that “slide[s] across the world” (Merleau-Ponty 355) of Indigenous lands. Rather than “save [himself]” as Russell Tallman urges him to do at the close of the narrative, by taking responsibility for his life and trying to “fix it...and if you can’t...then open up your mind and prepare to learn something form the next experience” (240), Evans thinks only of “how one would kill” the Tall Man (241). Lost within the “forty years of thinking that way” that makes up his orientations toward the world, Evans—and the white men he metonymically represents—seem to remain hopelessly plugged by the narrative’s close.

Walters offers Evans’s inability to feel himself changed by the powerful encounters he has experienced as a way to focalize the novel’s critique of white masculinity. The differences “not *in* our skins, but in our minds” are manifest legacies of historical traditions that work to divide perceptual continuity into discrete experience and to pull power away from place. Though Walters implies that Wilbur Snake’s phenomenology applies to everyone, throughout *Ghost Singer* whiteness remains a screen that masks extent to which settlement is an ongoing project articulated, in part, through refusing to acknowledge the materiality of sensory experiences. Evans’s intransigence points back to the sincerity of his belief in the discreteness of things, a belief that Walters argues plugs up his ability to acknowledge the reality of Native endurance over and against attempts to make and keep it dead. His sincerity remains possible despite the sensory evidence he experiences because, within his plugged-up sensorium, extinction

and vanishment are the only sensible shape the “debris” of Indian cultures can take. White sincerity thus becomes, at the close of *Ghost Singer*, a performance of the durability of one’s sensory attachments to an illusory feeling of belonging. Evans remains attached to the extent that Indians—or at least his idea of them—remain dead relics of a bygone past; a past that forms the prelude to the assimilative modernity in which he feels himself firmly emplaced. As *Ghost Singer* demonstrates, this feeling is illusory, but has the value of reality because it remains grounded in the sensory experience of removal and possession. Attempts to suture the “gaping wound” that whiteness represents, through which the illusions of Native extinction authorize reasonable attachments to the nation-state, ultimately fail to close up the gap. What remains is a prosthetic attachment to national belonging articulated through the sincere feeling that Native peoples’ presence will eventually fade. Through yoking white men’s ideas of Indianness, however spectral, to self-authorization and assimilative erasure, *Ghost Singer* frames whiteness as inhabiting Indianness in order to inhabit itself.

### **Structures of Feeling: Wounded Whiteness as Inhabiting Indianness**

As Alexie and Walters theorize, the ability to make others into emotional and affective prostheses is among the powers of white embodiment that seems to slip away into the self-made wounds of white phenomenology. Alexie’s portrayals of white sincerity throughout *Indian Killer* demonstrate how white men’s appeals to benevolent solidarity through inhabiting “Indianness” create the conditions within which sincere attachments to national space produce material violence against Indigenous people.

*Indian Killer* suggests that the sincerity of these men's inclinations, whether toward physical violence or violent benevolence, is articulated through a prosthetic relationship to notions of Indianness that can circulate as both supplement for and agent of whiteness's wounds. Thus we see Mather able to imagine himself the victim of Marie's intransigent refusal to become a feature of his positive portraiture; Wilson able to imagine himself as the very last of his tribe so as to supplement his experience of whiteness's emptiness; and Truck Shultz able to imagine Indians as engaged in a race war against whites so as to position whiteness as a wounded subject position in need of violent defense. To the extent that none of these men seem able to acknowledge their whiteness as the perceptual anchor for their active prostheticization of "Indianness," *Indian Killer* dramatizes the experiences Walters frames in *Ghost Singer* as stemming from perceptual plugs. The active reliance on Indigenous removal, termination, and eventual extinction through which Walters's cast of white men experience their holding of Indigenous remains as an act of sincere protection of Native culture demonstrates how their notions of "Indianness" anchor their experiences of whiteness. In this vein, Walters takes Alexie's sense of wounded whiteness in *Indian Killer* further, reframing whiteness as a wound through which fantasies of self-possessive autonomy are superimposed over the material conditions that give rise to them.

*Indian Killer* and *Ghost Singer* thus suggest that whiteness inhabits "Indianness" in order to inhabit itself. This claim is not merely metaphoric. As the novels suggest, it is instead descriptive of the process through which the experience of whiteness can feel like the experience of belonging and circulate as the background condition for the perceptual

prostheticization of others' bodies. White sincerity is thus a gestural mode of wounded whiteness's plugged-up perceptual schema and indicative of one of the ways whiteness's plugs produce prosthetic attachments. The felt alliances Alexie portrays between white men's inhabitation of "Indianness" and the Indigenous people with whom they imagine themselves in solidarity express the violence of whiteness's prosthetic engagements as a disciplinary demand to become a recognizable subject within whiteness's perceptual milieu. As Walters suggests, however, recognition is not the only frame through which whiteness's prosthetic attachments becomes possible. From within the privileged position to arbitrate the meaning and contours of "Indianness," white men like Walters's researchers fashion their belonging against the unrecognizability of Indigenous life, and, through inhabiting its insensibility, reproduce themselves as continually in possession of the tools through which to shape its materialization.

To the extent that these modes of inhabitation remain perceptually unavailable within whiteness's plugged-up sensorium, Alexie and Walters suggest that wounded whiteness is a structure of feeling, in Raymond Williams's terms "practical consciousness of a present kind" (132), that through the experience of sincere solidarity or protective benevolence articulates its privileged position within settler-colonial violence and occupation as historical and institutional forces that themselves may remain too abstract to become sensible. In contexts where settlement appears to be a non-issue, where Indigenous persons are absent from the perceptual milieu of settler self-representation, Alexie's and Walters's phenomenologies of whiteness are no less applicable. The structure of feeling they imagine wounded whiteness to articulate expresses a relationship

to settlement that structures the perceptual experience of whiteness as an experience of prosthetic belonging.

Through examining the experiential contours of “atomized” individuality, in Ross Chambers’ terms (145), we can see how white men’s performances of woundedness become a marker of their alienation from social power as much as a means of attaining it through attempts to galvanizing a body of feeling around the discreteness of their specific, individual wounds. In the following two chapters, I trace Alexie’s and Walters’s theory of wounded whiteness as it takes shape within nonnative self-representation. As one among several modalities of the phenomenology of white masculinity, wounded whiteness emerges as perhaps the most powerful among them, inasmuch as performing woundedness makes possible the kinds of illusory acknowledgements of complicity that render the scales of violence complicity implicates illegible as well as imperceptible. Through the others who do their feeling for them, wounded white men orient themselves within the alliances their sincerity disciplines into existence, and within those illusory orientations, they build worlds across which their fantasies of belonging smoothly slide.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the epigraph, see Alexie (209). The PBS panel consisted of Alexie, President Clinton, Richard Rodriguez, Roger Rosenblatt, Clarence Page and Cynthia Tucker, Roberto Suro, Kay James, and Elaine Chao. The dialogues were in support of a national Presidential initiative dubbed “One America in the 21st Century.” The initiative, as its title suggests, aimed to spark national conversations among everyday Americans about the differences between them and ways, as Clinton put it in the dialogue, “to identify the common values that hold us together as a country.” As a part of the initiative, the President created a commission tasked with producing a report on race and race-related issues in the United States. The panel, chaired by John Hope Franklin, notably excluded Native American representation. For a critique of the panel’s composition and its relationship to whiteness and settler-colonialism, see Moreton-Robinson, “Writing Off Treaties.” Commentators of the period, as well as those writing more recently, were largely skeptical of Clinton’s aims and the political agenda underwriting his initiative on race. For a critique of the panel’s application of multiculturalist policies and its marked departure from earlier studies of racism in America, see Kim, “Clinton’s Race Initiative.” For a substantive introduction to critiques of multiculturalism in the 1990s, see Gordon and Newfield, *Mapping*. For a critique of the electoral and political agendas underwriting Clinton’s initiative more broadly, see Kim, “Managing.”

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the dialogue reference the transcript available on PBS.org and listed on the Works Cited page as “A Dialogue on Race with President Clinton.”

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Clinton’s claims as they pertain to “shifting” into Cherokee identity, and how those claims map onto neoliberal discourse and its effacement of race, see Sturm (183-192).

<sup>4</sup> Here I am paraphrasing Raymond Williams’s development of “Structures of Feeling” in *Marxism and Literature*. See esp. 128-135 for his elaboration of the concept.

<sup>5</sup> Most readings of Alexie’s *Indian Killer* follow one of two related trajectories. Either readers contextualize the novel’s violence and focus on racism within Native American literature more broadly, or position the novel within arguments over the content and practice of teaching Native American studies. For readings of *Indian Killer*’s focus on violence and racism and its position and significance within Native American literature more broadly, see Bracewell; Carpenter, “Fancydancing”; Christie; L. Cooper; Coulombe; Dean; Grassain, “*Indian Killer*” and *Understanding*; Krupat; and Van Styvendale. For readings of *Indian Killer* as an argument over the practices of Native American studies, see Herman; Hollrah; McFarland; and Owens. For an overview of the critical reception of Alexie’s work more broadly, see Wahpeconiah,

Walters’s *Ghost Singer* has received far less critical attention since its publication in 1989. The three published articles on the novel contextualize its central focus—Indigenous remains held within the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History—within the history and politics of the 1990 enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). See Aigner-Alvarez; Graber; and Tillett.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of whiteness as unmarked or invisible is something of a critical commonplace within whiteness studies. For selected elaborations of the notion, see Chambers; Montag; Lipsitz; and Babb.

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between cultural and legal forms of recognition within settler-colonial nations and Indigenous sovereignty, see Povinelli, *Cunning*; and Coulthard.



<sup>8</sup> Describing ordinary sensation and perception, Merleau-Ponty argues “every sensation belongs to a certain *field*” and that as a result “simultaneously vision is always limited...there is always a horizon of unseen or even invisible things around my present vision. Vision is *a thought subjugated to a certain field* and this is what is called a *sense*” (224-25). The notion that sensation belongs to and constitutes a certain “field,” and as such creates boundaries around the sensible that can not include the “horizon of unseen or invisible things” around one’s active perception suggests that in every act of perception one is, by virtue of perceiving, *editing out* the “things around” one that become invisible. Developing the notion further, Merleau-Ponty argues that one’s act of perception can come to occupy one’s capacity to perceive: “my act of perception *occupies me*, and it occupies me sufficiently such that I cannot, when I am actually perceiving the table, perceive myself perceiving it” (247). In other words, in taking up a particular act of perception one loses track of the act, *editing out* elements of the stream of sensory data that do not match the occupation. As a result, the act of perceiving supervenes one’s ability to be consciously aware of the act. As a result, Merleau-Ponty argues, “The *perceiving person* is not spread out before himself in the manner that a consciousness must be: he has a historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present. In perception, we do not thing the object and we do not think the thinking, we are directed toward the object and we merge with this body that knows more about the object than we do about the world, about motives, and about the means available for accomplishing synthesis” (247-48).

Ahmed sketches the notion of “orientation” and what she calls “orientation devices” early in *Queer Phenomenology* as shaping “not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy toward” (3). In addition to considering whiteness as a way of naming systemic sets of privileges afforded to persons identified as white, I also consider whiteness at it is lived to constitute an “orientation” toward the world of “shared inhabitance” as well as a way of describing how the “world,” or more specifically spaces within the U.S. that white persons inhabit alongside persons of color, as itself oriented around whiteness in ways that shape how “energy and attention” is directed toward them. For more on orientations and racialization in *Queer Phenomenology*, see especially chapter 3, “The Orient and Other Others.” For an earlier article covering a similar set of issues, see Ahmed, “A Phenomenology.”

<sup>9</sup> See Byrd, esp. “Indigenous Critical Theory and the Diminishing Returns of Civilization,” xv-xxxix.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Byrd.

<sup>11</sup> I am referring to Butler’s notion of gender performance as a stylized repetition of acts. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*. For a consideration of whiteness as a “perspective,” in the sense of a way of seeing and knowing, and the ways that perspective is performed, see Nicoll.

<sup>12</sup> For considerations of Native American gaming industries on reservation economies, see Bruyneel; and Harmon. For a brief consideration of Native American gaming and its impact on Indigenous peoples in California, see Ramirez, (163-65).

<sup>13</sup> In this vein, Mather’s character suggests an allusion to the self-serving anthropologists Vine Deloria mocked in his famous essay “Anthropologists and Other Friends.” For the essay, see V. Deloria (78-100).

<sup>14</sup> In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed considers whiteness as an “orientation” that becomes habitual to the extent that it “does not have [one’s] attention” (131). Whiteness as a set of embodied powers and privileges also extends to the spaces that white bodies are able to easily and habitually inhabit. White bodies expand into space through the “objects, tools, instruments, and even ‘others’ [that] allow [the body] to inhabit space by” extending its reach, and in this way the “whiteness of space” takes form around “such ‘points’ of extension” (132).

Ahmed’s sense of whiteness as a background borne out of habitual inclinations toward spaces and others draws heavily upon the work of Merleau-Ponty and Linda Martin Alcoff. For Merleau-Ponty’s considerations of space, orientation, and background, see 254-65. Alcoff theorizes identities more broadly in ways similar to Ahmed’s framing of whiteness, as “horizon[s] of agency” constructed through “located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experiences and historical narratives” (42).

<sup>15</sup> On disciplinary discourses of knowledge-production, see Foucault, *Discipline*.

<sup>16</sup> For an extended analysis of *The Education of Little Tree* and the life of Forrest Asa Carter, see Huhndorf, esp. Chapter 3, “The Making of an Indian: ‘Forrest Carter’s Literary Inventions.’”

<sup>17</sup> Circe Sturm notes that among the federally recognized tribes within the United States, racial shifters on the whole most often claim Cherokee identity, in part because “as they see it—real Cherokee look and act white...and are in many ways no different from the larger Euro-American population” (60). See Sturm, *Becoming Indian*.

<sup>18</sup> Marie’s argument echoes arguments for reforming the canon of Native American literature around tribally specific concerns and sets of experiences and grounding it solely in Native-authored texts. These arguments stand in stark opposition to Mather’s whitewashed syllabus, and position such approaches to Native American literature as participating in a broader project of assimilative erasure that overlooks and silences continual Native-authored literary production. For two important arguments within this frame, see Womack; and Weaver, Womack and Warrior. For readings of this argument as it emerges through *Indian Killer*, see Carpenter, “Fancydancing; Chen; Cox, “Muting”; and Hollrah.

<sup>19</sup> In February-May of 1973, Oglala Lakota members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the site of an 1890 massacre of more than 200 Lakotas. For a history of the American Indian Movement and Red Power activism throughout the period, including the occupation of Wounded Knee, see Nagel. For a collection of essays reflecting on the earlier occupation of Alcatraz Island by AIM activists, see Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne, Eds.

*Indian Killer* reflects ideas of Native nationalism and pan-Indigenous solidarity that formed cornerstones of AIM activism and the period of ethnic renewal Nagel charts, in particular with respect to Native peoples living in urban areas. For a consideration of the ways Indigenous peoples in urban areas live their connections to tribal homelands and form pan-tribal communities, see Ramirez.

<sup>20</sup> On the interconnections between new age spiritualism and the white co-optation of a menagerie of “Native” ways of life, see P. Deloria; and Huhndorf.

<sup>21</sup> See Grassian, *Understanding* (121-124). Grassian’s reading of the novel is largely centered on providing possible clues as the identity of titular murder, and as a result the similarities he reads between Jack Wilson and John Smith are aimed toward resolving this core question.

<sup>22</sup> On the mythos of John’s adoption, see Grassian, (106-109).

<sup>23</sup> The timeline of John's adoption is vague, but the circumstances of the scene suggest Alexie's allusion to the conditions that warranted the 1978 passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

<sup>24</sup> On urban Indigenous communities, pan-tribal affiliation, and action, see Ramirez.

<sup>25</sup> See Sullivan for considerations of whiteness as a kind of "ontological expansiveness" (10).

<sup>26</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the body's capacity for direct sensory perception grounds us in the world perception makes possible, and produces the world as fundamentally co-extensive with our bodies and other's bodies. In this vein, the substance of identity is not but for the body's connection to the world as its affective milieu. Persons experiencing hallucinations remain grounded in the world in this sense, because they remain embodied beings in the world.

<sup>27</sup> In *The National Uncanny*, Renée Bergland argues "the ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal," and reads the "discursive technique of describing [Indians as]...spectral beings" as a part of the "interior logic of the modern nation [that requires] citizens be haunted" (3-4). The problem with Bergland's reading is that, on the whole, it presumes the actual as well as discursive ghosting of Indigenous peoples at the expense of facing the reality of continual Indigenous presence; and the repression of participation in removal, conceived of as an event within American history, among American citizens rather than their enduring, active participation in the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands. My thanks to Jason Cooke for a thoughtful conversation that helped me develop this critique.

<sup>28</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer* (132).

<sup>29</sup> On this point, see Cox, *Muting*.

<sup>30</sup> On the notion of contemporary appeals to white male victimhood, see Kimmel, *Angry*. For more complex readings of the phenomena of white male victimhood, particularly as it applies to rhetorically inhabiting a victimized body, see Savran.

<sup>31</sup> On the circulation of negative affects as means to engender national feeling or communal belonging, see Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, esp. Chapter 3, "The Organisation of Hate," and Chapter 4, "The Affective Politics of Fear."

<sup>32</sup> See Williams (121-123) for his explanation of the "residual" as it applies to cultural and social formations.

<sup>33</sup> The Ghost Dance emerged as a movement following the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. Led by Wovoka, whose given name was Jack Wilson, the Ghost Dance centered on a prophecy that through collective action Indigenous peoples could bring about the annihilation of white settlers from Native lands. For an early though problematic history of the Ghost Dance religion, see James Mooney's 1896 *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee*.

<sup>34</sup> Two landmark Congressional acts—the National Museum of the American Indian Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)—followed within two years of the novel's publication and, despite contested caveats, made affordances for the cataloging and repatriation of Indigenous dead held throughout the country. However, in 1988, the future status of these coming acts of legislation was far from a foregone conclusion. In broad strokes, these arguments typically voiced on the one hand the potential of breakthrough anthropological findings that might be dashed were indigenous remains to be repatriated, and on the other complex arguments from Indigenous groups pertaining to

sovereignty and the historical and present-day theft of remains from Indigenous lands. For further considerations of NAGPRA, see K. Cooper; Fine-Dare; Mihesuah, Ed.; Trope and Echo-Hawk; and Vizenor.

<sup>35</sup> Russel Tallman identifies as being part Kiowa, part Caddo, part Pawnee, part Comanche, and part Cheyenne (52). For the sake of clarity and to avoid a lengthy list, I've placed Tallman's tribal affiliation here rather than in the body of the main text.

<sup>36</sup> For a consideration of the way this epistemological divide implicates theories of time, linearity, and archival research, see Aigner-Alvarez. For a consideration of the ways Walters's framing of epistemological difference implicates a "specifically Euro-American worldview," see Tillet.

<sup>37</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer* (131-135).

<sup>38</sup> See O'Brien (105-43).

<sup>39</sup> For a reading of Euro-American temporality and assimilation in *Ghost Singer*, see Aigner-Alvarez.

<sup>40</sup> For the elaboration of Lipsitz's notion of whiteness as a possessive investment, see 1-23. Also see Moreton-Robinson, "Writing Off," for a consideration of whiteness as grounded in a logic of possessiveness.

## CHAPTER III

### BODY DRAMAS: SEX, SINCERITY, AND WHITE SOLIPSISM IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE* AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *THE BROOM OF THE SYSTEM*

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

— David Foster Wallace, interview with Larry McCaffery

If you want to locate the hegemonic home of liberal logics and aspirations, look to love in the settler colonies.

— Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*

What makes the kind of detachment David Foster Wallace imagines above possible, and how might the ability to feel it implicate whiteness?<sup>1</sup> What parts of being a “fucking *human being*” get dramatized in fictions that disavow the influence of politics and social life? And what, if anything, does “fucking” have to do with it? In the context of his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace is searching for solutions for his complaint over then-recent American fiction's emphasis on surface rather than depth, irony without substance, and play without purpose.<sup>2</sup> In the context of Wallace's work, however, this complaint manifests as a sincere commitment to a particularly apolitical brand of humanism centered on longing to feel like a “fucking *human being*” and imagining love and sex as the way to get there.<sup>3</sup> How is it, then, that sex and sexuality,

love and intimacy, the desire for care and the longing for someone else to do the caring, can feel like pathways to an apolitically plain personhood unencumbered by the messy details of race, gender, or sexuality? How might Alexie's and Walters's representations of whiteness, masculinity, and sincerity help to theorize the conditions that allow for sex and love to feel simply human and that make all the rest seem like stuff that makes it tough? At the close of the previous chapter, I argued that Alexie's and Walters's theories of white masculinity open out toward a theory of wounded whiteness: a performance of powerless alienation aimed toward enjoining others to serve as prostheses for the limitations white men's self-perceived wounds generate. In this chapter, I focus on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1987) and examine how the narratives produce this sense of wounded whiteness as a phenomenal field wherein performances of wounded detachment appear resolvable against the emotional backdrops of love, intimacy, sex, and violence.<sup>4</sup>

*White Noise* and *Broom* both stage their protagonists' subjective detachment as a response to their bodies' vulnerability. The body dramas that result from that sense of detachment posit the body as an anchor point amid the otherwise disorienting anxieties the narratives imagine to characterize (white) solipsism. I have placed "white" in parentheses here because despite the fact that both novels' central characters are presumptively white, neither *White Noise* nor especially *Broom* seems able to sustain more than an oblique focus on the racial dynamics of their otherwise palpably gendered body dramas. The narratives thus dramatize but also perform a kind of white solipsism that articulates whiteness through staging its perceptual unavailability against the more

“human” dimensions of love and sex. Paying attention to the emotional backdrops against which the body seems and feels most “human” repositions these novels as archives of the plugged-up sensorium Walters theorizes in *Ghost Singer*. Approaching them through the lens Walters develops highlights the ways that the perceptual blockages DeLillo and Wallace imagine as solipsism characterize a mode of perception reliant on relationships of dominance and possession and underscores how the violence as well as the whiteness of those relationships remain unavailable for the men who live through them and within the narratives that articulate them.

The violence and whiteness of these possessive relationships gets filtered out through performances of sincerity that rely on the body as their conceptual and material anchor. Sincerity thus comes to seem like a moment of self-recognition stemming from the harmonious alignment of two previously disjunctive and perceptually distinct modes: solipsistic detachment and embodied sensation. Yet this paradoxical ability, to feel one’s body as one’s anchor while also feeling detached from the world, belies the disjunction Wallace and DeLillo imagine. The ways the body gets used in these narratives thus provides a way to track the deployment of sincerity as a modality of wounded whiteness in contexts where issues of race, possession, and dominance may otherwise appear wholly inconsequential, and provides as well a way to theorize the conditions within which it becomes possible not to notice them.

Hegemonic white heteronormative masculinity already produces conditions that limit white straight men’s perceptual capacities.<sup>5</sup> However, Walters’s notion of the plugged-up-ness of white masculinity opens another approach. If white men keep their

senses plugged, as Walters suggests in *Ghost Singer*, then solipsism seems less like a passively endured metaphysical condition and more like an actively stylized performance. As I demonstrate in this chapter, white men's performances of solipsism rely on others for their extension.<sup>6</sup> *Broom* screens out the ethical difficulties of such possessive instrumentality through positioning straight men's inequitable interdependency on women's receptivity and other men's suggestively queer bodies as the normal result of sincere love and intimacy. *White Noise* similarly stages white men's reliance on women and other men as straight, white solipsists' affective prosthetics. Unlike Wallace's narrative, however, *White Noise* offers an ambivalently ironic critique of protagonist Jack Gladney's solipsistic travails that accents sincerity's effacement of the conditions that make its expression possible. Whiteness is the background horizon that permits *White Noise*'s and *Broom*'s men's disorientation to resolve into an experiential reorientation toward their bodies; yet, as a background condition, whiteness remains out of focus.

The backdrops of love and violence *Broom* and *White Noise* stage permit white bodies and selves to expand while positioning whiteness as a given that once made to disappear from view need not return. Against these backdrops, sincerity offers the opportunity for white straight men to performatively strip away the conflicting or confounding parts of their identities and appeal instead to something missed (or missing) at the core of themselves. Insofar as sincere appeals to core personhood allow for white people to be anyone they want to be, as Marie puts it in *Indian Killer*, the efficacy of those appeals owes in part to the ways whiteness seems to afford unencumbered access to



the body's performative plasticity.<sup>7</sup> The space sincerity affords expands around a sense of self-possessiveness as a feeling of ontological security that is itself secured through the kinds of investments in others sincerity makes possible.

I chart these investments and their implications first through a reading of *White Noise* in order to examine how DeLillo's portrayal of white male anxiety frames whiteness as the condition of possibility within which violent performances of masculinity yield revelations of core humanity. Made to confront the reality of his embodiment, and with it his mortality, Gladney finds a figure for his anxiety in the aptly named "Mr. Gray," whose identity, whether understood racially, ethnically, or geopolitically, is impossible to determine. As a generic "other" against which to judge his own fate, Mr. Gray's presence allows Gladney to experience a moment of heightened perception that borders on epiphany, only to feel that moment collapse again into insularity.<sup>8</sup> DeLillo offers this collapse as an ambivalently critical commentary on Gladney's experience of his waning socio-cultural authority as a "wound" to his self-assurance. Wallace, on the other hand, is neither critical nor ambivalent in his reworking of a similar set of anxieties in *Broom*. Wallace's novel emphasizes sincerity, love, and sex as antidotes for his men's otherwise problematically political personhood, thus muting the "noise" of DeLillo's imagined white male world. Choosing to embody the "wounds" DeLillo's Gladney perceives to be existentially threatening as physically incapacitating for Rick Vigorous, Wallace imagines Gladney's kind of masculinity as terminal. In its place Andrew Lang, a man whose body is more than fit for the novel's heterosexual drama, emerges as the only man up to the task of bringing solipsistic white

woman Lenore Beadsman into full personhood. Refocusing its solipsistic drama around female embodiment, *Broom* casts sincerity as essential to reproductivity. Although race remains occluded in the background, the novel's reproductive anxieties articulate whiteness as their primary catalyst.

The disappearing act that sincerity performs for whiteness, possessiveness, and dominance in these novels calls for another way to make sense of how they stage white men's longing to feel like "fucking *human beings*." Positing heteronormative love as merely human sustains the fantasy that a core apolitical personhood lies beneath the discursive fabric of problematically politicized identities. As I demonstrate, this fantasy finds a figure in men who mitigate their disorientations through enacting drives that seem natural to the body, whether violence or sex, in the service of love.

### **Whiteness, Crisis, and Victimhood:**

#### ***White Noise* and White Men's Plugged-Up Sensorium**

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* likens whiteness to white noise—ambient, uniform, but indistinct—and throughout protagonist Jack Gladney hears the sound but cannot place its origin. The gnawing uncertainty as to the meaning of the "dull roar" (36) he hears prompts his anxious search for a sense of clarity he ultimately fails to find. The irony of his failure suggests DeLillo's critique that the noise Gladney hears might be the swell of his own anxious decline. Walters's notion of white masculinity as a plugged-up sensorium offers a different perspective. White noise drowns out other frequencies; and Gladney's failure to find clarity amid the white noise of his world points back to

whiteness as the governing set of assumptions and inclinations that obscures the violence his quest does to the others who becomes its instruments. Eschewing a redemptive ending, DeLillo suggests that through it all Gladney will remain as static as the noise that plagues him. To the extent that DeLillo's take on white masculinity presents it as ultimately unchanging, *White Noise* implies that white male anxiety stems from the privilege of having nothing to be all that anxious about. However, that suggestion remains ambivalent for precisely the same reason. Gladney's unaffected endurance is purchased through the others who pay the price of having to bear his burdens, others who in turn he seems unable to fully acknowledge.

DeLillo's portrait of white male anxiety hews close to the discourse of white masculinity in crisis through its staging of Gladney's crises as body dramas, imagining what happens when a white man accustomed to living in his head has to instead live in his body. To the extent that these dramas entertain the fantasy of white men's detachment, the novel intersects with the twin assumptions of masculinity in crisis discourse: whiteness's invisibility and masculinity's notional disembodiment.<sup>9</sup> Walters's theory of white masculinity calls these assumptions into question and moves the analysis toward examining how "crisis" and sincerity modulate the ways white men take up embodiment. Approaching solipsistic detachment as a performance helps to unmake *White Noise*'s framing fantasy, pointing out how through others white men like Gladney remain unable to sense the conditions that make their detachments possible. So, although *White Noise*'s initial framing makes it clear that Gladney's anxieties stem from his sense of disorientation, what seems less clear within the narrative and for many of the novel's

critical readers is the extent to which Gladney's disorientation and anxiety signal DeLillo's commentary on anxious *white* masculinity.

Although some of *White Noise*'s readers have focused on DeLillo's representations of masculinity or of gender dynamics, few have focused on whiteness, and in particular on the ways that whiteness forms the phenomenal field within which Gladney's disorientations find purchase as his experience of embodied anxiety.<sup>10</sup> Leonard Wilcox, for instance, reads the narrative against the backdrop of postmodernism as a cultural logic, and sees Gladney as a displaced modernist facing a new and perplexing horizon. For Wilcox the "composite" effects of others' "undecideable ethnicit[ies]" make the novel's world "postmodern" and as a result confound Gladney's sense of existential security (197, 204). However, Wilcox stops short of pursuing his argument's evocative implications. If Gladney experiences disorientation in part because he is unable to discern others' ethnicities, then DeLillo's portrayal seems also to point to the ways white men rely on others as orientation devices to find their way back to the center.<sup>11</sup>

Gladney's feeling as though he has lost his way through his world structures the narrative's portrayal of white masculinity in crisis. Imagining the normative cultural and political centrality of white masculinity to be akin to solipsism, DeLillo suggests that in Gladney's typical perceptual experience he rarely has to take account of his position with respect to others. In ways similar to Alexie's characterization of Clarence Mather in *Indian Killer*, Gladney has become habituated to taking up the center of whatever spaces he enters in part because he is able to fix his location relative to the presumptive stasis of others' identities. Where Alexie imagines the "portrait" as the metaphoric vehicle for the

spatial locatedness whiteness affords Mather, within *White Noise*'s phenomenal field this sense of locatedness appears as a given backdrop against which Gladney's anxieties become visible. Alongside those rising anxieties, Gladney's sense of his body's situatedness rises in tandem. The extent to which Gladney feels his body, whether as a limit or at all, provides an index for how his everyday perceptual capacities stem from his durable experience of subjective centrality, and provide as well a way to track the conditions within which DeLillo imagines that sense of security to break into anxiety. Gladney's affects thus situate his body dramas throughout *White Noise* as a series of encounters with stress points, in Ahmed's terms, moments of resistance or push-back that mark out the limits of white bodies' abilities to assume the givenness of their spatial orientations.<sup>12</sup> The situations and others that constitute stress points within Gladney's perceptual field trace the shape of DeLillo's representation of white masculinity in crisis and, in the inverse, track the habitual arrangements and orientations that permit white men to feel at ease in the center of their worlds.

Within the phenomenal field *White Noise* imagines the primary stress point Gladney encounters is his own body. Gladney's swelling anxiety about his inevitable mortality confronts him with his fundamentally embodied vulnerability, a fact that seems out of joint with his typically analytical approach to life's philosophical quandaries. This is especially evident throughout Part I of the novel, "Waves and Radiation." His thoughts of death and his own demise come through in waves, and when these waves of data become disorienting, he finds solace in the comforting availability of his wife Babette. Whether the idea of her or her actual body, throughout the narrative Babette serves as

Gladney's anchor point.<sup>13</sup> Though these dynamics play out across nearly all of the first part of the novel, an early scene clearly illustrates Gladney's reliance on Babette's emotional surrogacy. Taking a family trip to the supermarket, Gladney runs into his colleague Murray J. Siskind, who is pondering the products and attempting to theorize the "energy waves" emanating from the "cultural material" lining the shelves (37-38). Murray's notions confront Gladney with the possibility that "some form of swarming life just outside the range of human comprehension" lurks all around him (36). The disorientation Gladney feels in this moment owes to a perceptual experience he intuits but cannot process, suggesting that his body's situatedness within this field of stray "psychic data" has become a stress point pushing his habitual posture off balance (37). Attempting to mitigate this feeling he turns to Babette for reassurance, placing his hands first on her breasts before trying to fit them into her skirt and finally grazing them over her belly (40). Fusing maternal symbolism with sexuality, Gladney's desire to literally connect himself to Babette's body illustrates his reliance on its materiality as a surrogate for his own feelings of solidity and emplacement. Her reciprocity thus reorients his anxieties about death toward his desires for sex.

DeLillo thus suggest that insofar as Gladney's death anxiety gnaws away at his otherwise detached analytical posture, his ability to take recourse to Babette's body and its sexual significance provides him a sense of emotional as much as existential stability. As much as she functions in this way as his affective prosthetic, she also works as an anchor for the "security" of his identity. Earlier in the narrative, Gladney muses that his love for Babette helps him to "develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to placed

in another's care and protection" (29). Their love becomes all the more meaningful against the backdrop of Gladney's fear of death, particularly because, as Gladney imagines, death "cures us of our innocence of the future" (15). What Gladney cannot countenance, however, is how his possessive attachment to Babette hems in her agency and limits her ability to process her own swelling death anxiety. Gladney's blockages with respect to the full dimensions of Babette's affective experience point back toward Walters's representations of white masculinity as plugged up and illustrates how, against whiteness's given backdrop, limited female agency functions as one of those plugs.

Despite the ironic distance that throughout Part I characterizes Gladney's identity crisis as melodrama, Gladney's prosthetic investments in his subjective centrality through Babette's sexual availability amplify his crisis's magnitude as the narrative unfolds, tilting the perspective from critique toward sincerity. In this respect, *White Noise* implies that Gladney's anxieties about death reach the level of genuine crisis when those feelings merge with his fear that he might lose Babette to another man, and thus lose the primary prosthetic through which he experiences his identity as "secure" within a world that has taken shape around him. *White Noise* articulates the emergence of what it frames as a genuine crisis through two interrelated dramas: Gladney's progressively more palpable connection to his body's vulnerability and a developing homosocial competition that threatens the security of his attachment to Babette. Both trajectories implicate his possessive attachments, but importantly the situations that arise from them unfold around the vaguely racialized threat of Gladney's physical penetration, whether embodied in the

“black billowing cloud” (113) that enters Gladney or Mr. Gray’s ambiguously raced body.

*White Noise*’s final parts situate Gladney’s existential crisis as secondary to what seems the more genuine concern over ambiguously raced figures and their threatening penetration. Gladney himself, however, seems not quite able to face the source of his fears. For example, despite the more progressively threatening “blackness” of the toxic cloud, Gladney continues to enact his favored retreat to Babette’s sexuality (113-116). Observing that “this death would penetrate” (116), he seems otherwise wholly unaware of how his sense of Babette’s surrogacy in these instances emerges from a distinctively racialized anxiety that this “black death” might penetrate his and his wife’s white bodies. Following his exposure to the toxin, Gladney is forced to confront that death has in fact “entered” his body (142), but this realization again comes at a distance to the way the threat has been previously marked. Faced with the “big numbers” his data profile generates in the screening technician’s computer (140), Gladney reframes his penetration anxiety as an angst-ridden existential quandary: “You are said to be dying, yet you are separate from the dying, ... [you can] literally see on the x-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of at all ... [You] sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying” (142). His sense of separation suggests the “condition” he experiences is not his fear that the blackness of the cloud might contaminate the insular purity of his whiteness, but instead his sense that technology has intervened into what ought to be, following the Heideggerian echoes of his existential musing, his “ownmost” finality.<sup>14</sup>



The gap between what Gladney can process and the otherwise suggestively racialized tenor of the events leading up to this dramatic encounter with existential estrangement point toward the plugged-up phenomenal field DeLillo imagines Gladney to inhabit. The threat of blackness's penetration thus remains an atmospherically abstract possibility because what becomes perceptible as stimuli for his fears, anxieties, or rationalizations has already passed through a perceptual filter. The end product is an abstract, deracinated sense of existential dread that drones on in the background like "white noise." DeLillo thus suggests that Gladney's attachments enable the racial overtones of what readers can otherwise see as his white anxiety to escape his perception, in part because his whiteness, like the white noise he hears, seems to fall "just outside the range of human comprehension" (36). Whether through death or its associations with blackness, the fact that his being penetrated makes it through the filter suggests that sexuality, but not necessarily race, is by contrast perfectly intelligible.

The scene detailing Gladney's confrontation with the "condition" of his death generates an implicit analogy between heterosexual desire and humanity that becomes the backdrop against which Gladney's body dramas seem like dramas of human hubris and frailty rather than like the enactment of a particularly cerebral white man's mundane anxieties. In fact, only one of *White Noise*'s characters seems able to see Gladney for who he is, the ambiguously raced Mr. Gray/Willie Mink. Gladney first learns of Mr. Gray from Babette, who it turns out has been exchanging sex for Dylar, Mr. Gray's experimental drug designed to alleviate death anxiety. When Babette finally confides her own death anxiety and the extent to which she had gone to find relief, all Gladney can

concentrate on are the “genitals,” asking Babette “how many sets are we talking about?” while obsessing over Mr. Gray’s “entry” into her (194). Using language that mirrors his concerns over the billowing black mass having “entered” him, the love triangle Gladney now finds himself within suggests that, through Babette as the vehicle, Mr. Gray has also figuratively entered him. Gray thus effectively embodies the penetrative threat that Babette’s body had earlier kept in the background.<sup>15</sup> The love triangle amplifies the gendered dynamics at work throughout the novel, but also interweaves Gladney’s sexual anxieties with his racial anxieties, expressed as his obsessive concern over “entry.”

Up to this point, Gladney’s prosthetic relationships have largely been instrumental for navigating disorienting shifts in his affective milieu. Through Babette’s availability as a sexual orientation point, Gladney manages to route the racialized tenor of his anxieties into the background of his perceptual field. This mechanism fails, however, through Gladney’s double-exposure to the atmospheric toxin and to the penetrative reality of Mr. Gray’s body. Situated as a romantic betrayal made worse by Mr. Gray’s ambiguous body, *White Noise* thus suggests that Babette’s liaisons doubly wound Gladney’s whiteness insofar as they render immaterial his experience of possessiveness over Babette and likewise situate her betrayal as a point of physical contamination for the otherwise insular detachments he experiences through her prostheticization. Gladney’s “crisis” thus becomes genuine as his victimhood becomes tied to Babette’s romantic betrayal. What gets wounded is thus not Gladney’s pride but his sense of propriety. And what elevates his woundedness from existential dread and genuine crisis is the ambiguous body that has come to take something from him. Constructing a homology between atmospheric threats

and domestic-romantic betrayals, DeLillo positions Gladney as a victim of something so far beyond his control that he can barely perceive it and, eventually, as a victim of his own solipsistic interiority. In finding his ability to feel centered collapsing at every turn, Gladney's solipsism suggests that for DeLillo, the last unencumbered space within which white men are able to feel centered is within the bounds of their own interior worlds.

Solipsism in this sense becomes a performance of victimhood, a way of inhabiting a world that pushes back. DeLillo's representation of solipsism as the last resort of white masculinity plays out in the novel's penultimate scene. When Mr. Gray re-enters the narrative, this time in the flesh, Gladney finds a figure for his feeling of being off-balance, but the figure turns out not to be quite what he had expected. Having gone pistol-in-hand to the hotel where Mr. Gray is holed up planning to restore the balance by enacting an elaborate revenge plot, when Gladney gets there he finds Willie Mink, an addled man in a "Hawaiian shirt and Budweiser shorts" slumping in front of a motel television set and speaking in lines from commercial breaks (305). Despite Mink's wholly non-threatening presence, Gladney remains firmly fixed to his plan to kill, and as such begins pondering Mink's confusingly "composite" ethnicity. His speculations as to the "geography" of Mink's "spoon-shaped face" and "skin the color of a Planter's peanut" (306-307) suggest that for Gladney Mink's apparent non-whiteness means he must belong to an elsewhere. The racial geography he ponders is an instrument of possession, and the violence he intends to carry out against Mink's racially ambiguous body depends on Gladney's ability to feel already in possession of the terrain so that Mink can be made not to belong. The feeling of prior possession stems from a feeling of

propriety over spaces, including spaces that are most decidedly not already in Gladney's possession. That those feelings are imagined as capacious of vengeance carried out in the name of restoring a homosocial and racial hierarchy suggest that spatial expansiveness is a core element of settler-feeling, one that extends from proprietary relationships to persons like Babette through to proprietary relationships to the spaces. Here Gladney experiences settler-feeling as coterminous with white masculinity, and feels the need to protect these interrelated privileges as the experience of a wound to his hetero-patriarchal power. Mink, however, sees Gladney for who he is: "a heavysset white man about fifty. Does this describe your anguish?" (308). Mink's instant ability to recognize Gladney's whiteness highlights the gap between Mink's nonthreatening posture and Gladney's complicity in constructing him as a direct threat to his authority and to his whiteness. Gladney is driven by his need to complete a plot that exists entirely within his imagination. And despite the reality of Mink's non-threatening state, within the plot Gladney has invented Mink is already attached to its deathward trajectory because Mink is in the wrong place.

Gladney's desire to avenge Mink's sexual transgressions with Babette suggests that the majority of his "anguish" owes to the threat Mink poses to his possessive attachments to Babette and to the identity that through her he experiences as secure. Gladney's elaborate plot in this respect appears an attempt to graft himself into a narrative he can control. Where Mink falls short of embodying the nemesis he had imagined, Gladney makes up for it by selectively amplifying Mink's ambiguous identity so as to make him a better fit within the vengeance plot he has concocted. Secure now as

the hero, Gladney begins to feel the space around him change. His senses tuned to elements of perception that earlier swirled beyond his comprehension, Gladney experiences a profound feeling of ontological expansiveness.<sup>16</sup> Preparing to pull the trigger on Mr. Gray, he notes that “Things began to glow...The air was rich with extrasensory material...a secret life rising out of [things]...I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams...Great stuff, everywhere, racing through the room...I believed everything” (309-310). His experience of perceptual dilation permits him access even to Mink’s perspective: “I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink’s viewpoint, magnified, threatening” (311-312). Having access to all of the sensory data, Gladney feels in tune with the white noise around him, “the intensity...the same at all frequencies,” and finally understood “who I was in the network of meanings” (312). Positioning Mink as his antagonist in this micro-drama of victimhood-turned-vengeance allows Gladney to sense himself expanded outward into the world in full possession of the “network of meanings” he is able to wield as the author of his self-styled fantasies.

What falls completely out of Gladney’s “super perceptions” (313), however, is the underlying fact that this momentary feeling of ontological expansiveness comes at the cost of another person’s literally being made a victim of premeditated violence carried out to set aright a decidedly race-inflected anxiety over the sexual propriety of white womanhood. In the place of those more pressing elements of reality comes the experience of Gladney’s own victimhood when Mink unexpectedly shoots him in the wrist. “The world collapsed inward,” Gladney reports, and with it “all those vivid textures and

connections...the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter...meaningless” (313). Gladney’s now literally wounded body enables his narrative to detour into martyrdom. Gazing upon Mink’s bloody body with something like clarity, Gladney observes “with the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy” (313). Though here again, Gladney’s view to the “human” emotions and capacities that enable him to acknowledge Mink’s personhood apart from the caricature he had earlier invented are made possible by exactly the return to the “normal order of matter and sensation” that Gladney feels as the world collapsing inward. The normal order of things, in other words, feels like the solipsistic insularity of wounded white masculinity, a mode of perception that permits one to feel sincerely as victimizer and victim at one and the same time.

To the extent that Gladney’s becoming wounded restores the “normal order” of things, *White Noise*’s final scenes offer up a literal figure for its more abstract dramatizations of white male victimhood. Given the dynamics of the final scene, it seems as well that DeLillo suggests white male fantasies of possession, dominance, and control, like the plots through which they are carried out, “tend to move deathward” (26). Who and what these fantasies mark for death, however, remains ambivalent at best. Tim Engles sees the novel as DeLillo’s argument over “the fundamental relationality of identity formation” (175). Citing the “severed connections” between Gladney’s self-identity and the historicity of whiteness, Engles positions the narrative as a commentary on the “emptiness in whiteness itself...not unlike...the idea that death itself may be

nothing more than nothing” (183). However, Engles’s ultimately hopeful argument that *White Noise* amounts to DeLillo’s claim that recognizing one’s whiteness brings one “a step closer to relinquishing the fantasy of autonomous selfhood” (192) takes Gladney’s brief moment of recognition in the novel’s penultimate scene in terms of the sincerity it generates, and as a result overlooks the extent to which Gladney’s enactment of a decisively masculine fantasy makes his experience of shared humanity possible. Too quickly bracketing one or another set of the terms through which the narrative constructs identity threatens to obscure the effects of their interarticulation and thus to make invisible the ways that temporarily revelatory experiences like Gladney’s come at a cost. Moreover, Engles’s suggestion that recognizing one’s whiteness might hopefully lead to relinquishing one’s possessive claims to autonomy seems a leap given the ways that Gladney’s recognition of his whiteness leads to a temporary moment of “super perception” (313) that just as quickly fades back into the same old shtick. If anything, what Gladney seems most sincerely to recognize is his capacity for compassion and mercy, humanizing emotions that serve to clear the problematic dimensions of his white masculine fantasies out of the affective space Mink’s near-death experience opens up.

If whiteness’s problematic associations with possessive autonomy, domination, and violence are marked for demise in *White Noise*, then in their place the narrative rolls in the prospect of deracinated humanism. Sincerity performs this disappearing act in part because Gladney’s sudden but “normal” recognition of his capacities for compassion and mercy, the “old human muddles and quirks,” situate those capacities as held in reserve beneath the otherwise apparently scripted performance of violent, vengeful white

masculinity. To the extent that Gladney's performance of vengeful violence is only a performance, the narrative implies that empathy and recognition are deeply and genuinely human emotions. However, that Gladney's super perceptions collapse back into this older order suggest the same sort of perceptual experiences that characterize his initial meeting with Mink, this time elevated to a different and more abstract register. Gladney is able to see Mink as another person only because the two share a wound in kind. In other words, Gladney has to feel himself literally and physically victimized by Mink's out-of-place presence in order to recognize Mink as something other than an intruder in a space over which Gladney already feels in possession. And yet here again, within the perceptual experience of settler-feeling, Gladney's whiteness seems like the victimizer and Gladney seems like its victim. As Sally Robinson observes in *Marked Men*, white men can "most...convincingly represent [themselves] as victims by inhabiting a wounded body" (20). The shape and color of the body white men inhabit in order to perform their victimhood, however, seems most at issue in *White Noise*. Through Mink's wounded body, Gladney finds himself able to inhabit his own. But Mink's racial ambiguity allows for Gladney's whiteness to slip behind his more profoundly human feelings of woundedness and as well to slip past the narrative's focalization of Gladney's wounds as the pathway to sincerely recognizing another's mutual humanity. What's curious about this formation, however, is that though it appears to resonate with David Savran's reading of white male masochism, Gladney does not need to "feminize and/or blacken himself" to



appear as a victim (33). He needs only to keep himself plugged up within the insularity whiteness affords in order to find the sincere person he is, or at least can be, beneath it all.

The restoration of the “normal order of matter and sensation” that DeLillo imagines to follow from literal wounds enfolds the competing ideological registers structuring the novel’s portrayal of white male anxiety and identity crisis. Made available through a wound, “normal” here signifies embodied vulnerability as a baseline condition grounding the alignment of “matter,” the bald fact of the body’s existence, and “sensation,” Gladney’s recognition that the limits of his perceptions follow from the limits of his body. Against this alignment Gladney’s otherwise detached perspective seems abnormal. The contrast gives some force to DeLillo’s critique of whiteness as insulated from the conditions it generates for those who inhabit white bodies and for those who cannot. Irony creates the distance necessary for DeLillo’s commentary to emerge against the backdrop of Gladney’s otherwise absurdly vengeful plot and its absurd conclusion. DeLillo’s critical view to whiteness as an insular modality of existence remains ambivalent, however, because the ironic perspective it relies on seems unable to pull back quite far enough to examine the consequences of producing normal human being through a textual amplification of whiteness’s alignment with violence, possessiveness, and dominance. To the extent that DeLillo may ultimately be offering a view to whiteness’s emptiness, as Engles suggests, what fills the void is a “normal order” that articulates an extension of the racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies upon which whiteness and more specifically white masculinity depends. As Julian Carter points out,

claims that whiteness is either dangerous and so useless or simply empty of specific content “may work to renaturalize the category in ways that produce political stasis rather than transformation” by making the content whiteness names appear otherwise normal (29). Though *White Noise* may aim to diagnose whiteness as the instrument of white men’s solipsistic malaise, the novel’s turn back to normality re-routes its critique toward reification.

Despite imagining an alternate set of perceptual capacities able to pick up on the interconnections and relations between bodies and things as a contrast to whiteness’s solipsistic insularity, *White Noise* seems not unable but unwilling to sustain its momentary departure from the normal order of things. The narrative seems unwilling to entertain the alternatives it imagines because doing so insinuates political and ethical questions that threaten to upset the structural conventions through which white men’s enactments of violent possessiveness seem like pathways to normal human being. *White Noise* sidesteps these questions through its staging of sincerity, even if only a brief moment at the conclusion of DeLillo’s otherwise ironically critical narrative. On the other hand, sincerity forms *The Broom of the System*’s ethical framework as well as its aspirational horizon. The result is a narrative that dramatizes heterosexual desire and heteronormative love as pathways to normal human being. Whiteness, however, falls almost entirely out of the frame. In the next section, I examine how *Broom*’s heterosexual dramas articulate whiteness in ways the novel seems unable to focalize because its sincere strategy assumes whiteness as something so stable that it need not be, as it is in *White Noise*, problematized into disappearance.

**“Fiction’s about What It Means to Be a Fucking *Human Being*”:**

**Sincerity, Sexuality, and Whiteness’s Disappearance in *The Broom of the System***

Bracketing the allusions to philosophers, the lengthy stories-within-the-story, and the comic vignettes, what’s left of David Foster Wallace’s *The Broom of the System* is a basic, heteronormative love triangle.<sup>17</sup> *Broom* pits two differently-able white men—Rick Vigorous and Andrew Lang—against one another in competition for the love and sexual reciprocity of twenty-four year old white woman Lenore Beadsman, a wealthy businessman’s brilliantly smart daughter who by her family’s account is squandering her education, her romantic prospects, and her life by working as a telephone switchboard operator and dating Rick Vigorous. Throughout the novel Lenore’s family problems manifest as a profound sense of “disorientation and identity confusion” (61), a feeling that “all that really exists of [her] life is what can be said about it” (119). Feeling like a character in someone else’s story, Lenore’s solipsistic disorientation mirrors Jack Gladney’s feeling as though he is the “false character who follows the name around” (DeLillo 17). However, two things are notably different about *Broom*’s characterization of its centrally solipsistic protagonist: her gender and, as a result of the ways it is imagined, how *Broom* frames Lenore’s agency as already profoundly limited by her family, her job, her romantic prospects, and her presumptive orientation toward finding another who will allow her to find herself.

If white male solipsism is a performance of victimhood marking a way of inhabiting a world that pushes back, as DeLillo imagines it in *White Noise*, then what happens when this performance is articulated through a female body? How does female

embodiment enable *Broom* to construct a phenomenal field wherein heterosexual couplehood becomes a self-evident means of extending one's reach? And how might this shift in perspective enable the narrative's heterosexual dramas to make whiteness as their racial corollary seem to disappear from view? In this section, I examine how *Broom*'s love triangle structures its staging of sincerity as a path to deracinated, normal personhood envisioned as finding and feeling hetero-love through fulfilling sex. *Broom* positions Lenore at the apex of its love triangle. As its point, Lenore's body orients the novel's men toward her fulfillment and establishes sincerity as the straightest, most direct approach. *Broom* thus imagines that sincerity works like a gendering and straightening machine, disciplining its men's bodies toward fulfilling (or not) Lenore's orientation toward hetero-love as much as disciplining her affects into line with her body's inclinations.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to Gladney's appeals to love throughout *White Noise*, which seem aimed toward keeping his senses plugged, *Broom*'s dramatization of white solipsisms takes the opposite course. White women's plugged up senses need unplugging, and plugged up white men aren't the right men for the job. As I show, *Broom* suggests that men who live in the plugged-up sensorium structuring Gladney's limited field are terminal cases who are neither quite straight nor quite white enough to measure up to the novel's imagination of normal human personhood. Although race seems very much in the background of *Broom*'s body dramas, its distribution of capacities, orientations, and quite literally fitness for reproductive sex articulates whiteness as a hetero-familial investment that plugged-up white men cannot make and that plugged-up white women cannot reproduce. Sincerity and sexuality become the

means of casting aside solipsistic white men in hopes of reaching another, more sincere kind of white masculinity that can unplug solipsistic white women and secure a return on whiteness's investments.

Within the rather narrow field of Wallace criticism, focusing on how *Broom's* heterosexual melodramas mime whiteness is highly unorthodox. *The Broom of the System* is Wallace's first novel and by many accounts his weakest effort, though most readers agree that despite its shortcomings *Broom* begins to articulate themes that Wallace would go on to develop in his later novels and story collections.<sup>19</sup> Among those themes, Wallace's commitment to sincerity garners the majority of critical attention.<sup>20</sup> Many of Wallace's early works including *Broom* often articulate this commitment as an intra-canonical parody of literary metafiction's impossibly solipsistic gaze.<sup>21</sup> Some of *Broom's* readers have suggested its gendered dynamics make up its pointed satire of writers ranging from Vladimir Nabokov to John Updike.<sup>22</sup> Despite calling attention to the ways gender features in *Broom*, these readings overlook two critical angles that yoke Wallace's intra-canonical contention against irony to the narrative's representation of white heterosexuality. First, these readings overlook how *Broom* situates Lenore's solipsism as stemming from her virginity, representing it as the result of her refusal to properly take up her body's putatively natural inclination toward sexual penetration. In this way *Broom* implies that white female solipsism is a performative mode of inhabiting a world that pushes back, but expresses that performance as a pathological response to the otherwise normative expectation of feminine receptivity and reproductivity. Second, though Marshall Boswell has argued that Rick Vigorous's many micro-stories represent

Wallace's satirical take on women's often flat characterization throughout mid-century male-authored fiction, he stops short of examining the frame within which Rick's stories as much as his body make sense as satire.<sup>23</sup> Viewed from within *Broom*'s intra-canonical parody, irony's reliance on a "queer ontology of appearance," as Wallace put it in his essay "E Unibus Pluram" (63), becomes equivalent to a particularly queer kind of solipsism where queer signifies in its most pejorative sense, that is that solipsistic irony is at its base non-productive. Rick embodies irony's fundamental non-productivity, and, as if to ensure that the argument comes through, Wallace elects to make Rick's body literally incapable of engaging in reproductive sex by giving him a penis too small to enter Lenore's body.

Although sex and penis jokes make up the metaphors through which Wallace calls for sincerity against irony, continuing to frame this argument in literary-historical terms compounds rather than critiques how the narrative imagines sex and sincerity to be intertwined with white solipsism. I take Wallace's claim that "fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" at face value, and read *Broom* as producing a vision of deracinated human being wherein humanity becomes structurally dependent on straight sexuality. Paying closer attention to how the narrative relies on heterosexuality for its frame challenges the apparent political neutrality of Wallace's call for sincerity as the lens through which human being ought to be focalized in literary fiction. Through its explicitly sexual metaphors, the narrative further ties its vision of sincerity articulates whiteness as an equally normative orientation. Yet against the backdrop of love the ways that whiteness colors the narrative's understanding of sincerity and human being slip into

analytical invisibility. Working to undo these slippages and to call attention to what remains stable and visible around them draws out the whiteness of *Broom's* sincerity and demonstrates how the frames within which (white) human being becomes recognizable depend on making some bodies incapable of participating in the economy of sincere emotion, exchange, and sex while compelling other bodies to fully participate.

*The Broom of the System's* sincere economy of heterosexual desire emerges out of Lenore's body. In turn, her body becomes an icon of the titular system that works to sweep her toward her most fit companion. The problem is that as a result of her "disorientation and identity confusion" (61) she seems unable to "*feel the way [her] life is*" (122), as her therapist Dr. Curtis Jay puts it. Jay's comment puts into perspective the narrative's reliance on the kinds of detachment DeLillo imagines to plague Gladney in *White Noise*. The "way" of Lenore's life marks an orientation toward heterosexual identification, an identification that emanates from what her body "is," female and thus receptive and reproductive.<sup>24</sup> Yet, because she cannot feel the way her life is, she appears detached from the sensations that ought otherwise to carry her along her life's path. Re-routing these feelings of detached disorientation through a female body thus works to situate feeling one's life as an embodied imperative rather than as an available option. In contradistinction to the seemingly limitless agency Gladney can exercise through others as his attachments, Lenore's only option is to align her subjective feelings with her body's inclinations. Within the heterosexual field *Broom* imagines as a compulsory "system," Lenore's *body* inclines her only toward men who might help her to feel the way her life is, regardless of her subjective inclinations toward them.<sup>25</sup>

Sincerity becomes the privileged mechanism of this kind of perceptual realignment. In order to carry off its vision of sincerity as the felicitous alignment of subjective feelings and embodied inclinations, *Broom* needs to situate Lenore's affects as out of joint with her body but needs also to position her as unwilling, blocked, from feeling her way toward the thing that promises to bring her back into line. The narrative positions Lenore's sexual blockage as a pathology stemming from a missed connection with Andrew Lang, the man who will eventually return to bring Lenore into being as a full person because he is the only man whose penis seems up to the task. However, on their first meeting during a visit to her sister Clarice's dorm room at Mount Holyoke college, then fifteen year-old Lenore confronts a very real reason to dodge the expectations that come to disorient her later in the narrative. Lang and his pledge brother Biff Diggerance, both from neighboring Amherst College, burst into Clarice's room and refuse to leave until the women sign their asses as a part of their fraternity initiation (17).<sup>26</sup> The sudden and menacing appearance of Lang and Diggerance, both drunk and already undoing their pants, suggests that their invasive penetration of the girls' space marks an early and traumatic experience in Lenore's developing sense of herself and of her body's situatedness within a masculine economy of desire.

Lenore's sense of her body carries with it a sense of direction and directedness, an orientation the narrative suggests ought to incline her toward men like Lang and Diggerance despite their unexpected and violent intrusion. Moments before Lang's sudden entrance, Clarice's roommate Mindy Metalman's suggestively bare body had



prompted Lenore to reflect on her felt alignment with her body as the capaciting object that makes such intrusive moments seem not only possible but welcome:

Lenore can at this point divide all the girls she's known neatly into girls who think deep down they're pretty and girls who deep down think they're really not. Girls who think they're pretty don't care much about their bathrobes being undone and are good at makeup and like to walk when people are watching, and they act different when there are boys around; and girls like Lenore, who don't think they're too pretty, tend not to wear makeup, and run track, and wear black Converse sneakers, and keep their bathrobes pretty well fastened at all times. (4)

The directions of Lenore's "deep down" feelings—outwardly oriented toward men's gazes or inwardly oriented toward herself—suggest the disjuncture between the way her life "is" and her subjective feelings about her body's position within the field of male desire. That field conditions the "way" that life might take her, a path she sees through Lang's and Diggerance's intrusively violent performances.

Taken together, these scenes suggest that Wallace imagines men's gazes to function as an instrument through which women learn to imagine and take up their bodies as surfaces of exchange. The text imagines that women's responsiveness to men's desire lends men the capacity to control and direct the way women become oriented toward their embodiment. In other words, women's bodies are situated as projective—able to extend themselves—to the extent that men's gazes lend them this capacity. Men's capacity to extend themselves beyond the limits of their bodies likewise appears to depend on women's bodies' reciprocity. Enfolding this symbiotic system of exchange into a fraternity initiation ritual suggests that Lang and Diggerance literally need to wear the sign of women's reciprocity on their bodies in order to join the "fraternity" of adult

male heterosexual performance. To the extent that these women become instruments of their sexual initiation, they also serve as markers of Lang's and Diggerance's "initiation" into the collegiate variety of the exclusively male and often exclusively white fraternal organizations that provide potential access to networks of professional, political, and personal privilege.<sup>27</sup> In this sense the "initiation" cuts both ways insofar as the women must either sign on to this inequitably advantageous system, one that promises to inevitably limit their agency, or be cast aside or worse made victims of violence. Faced with these prospects, all of the women except Lenore eventually accede to Lang's and Diggerance's demands. Mindy Metalman, who by Lenore's account seemed the most comfortable of all the women with her body's signification, is the first to sign. Lenore, in contrast, chucks her high heel at Lang's head and demands to be let out of the room (19-21), an action the narrative suggests marks her exit from the "system" that will for the remainder of the plot begin to pull her back in.

Lenore's exit runs counter to what the narrative imagines as the "deep down" knowledge her body represents, collapsing what might otherwise be read as a moment of tacitly feminist resistance into the gender essentialism necessary to mark out Lenore's resistance to Lang's penetrative threat as a refusal to properly inhabit her body. The scene's threateningly violent overtones further work to suggest that Lenore's refusal stems from a traumatic encounter that eventually manifests as a pathological blockage preventing her from feeling the otherwise normative alignment of her subjectivity with her body's inclinations.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, whereas *White Noise* imagines solipsistic interiority to be the last resort of victimized white masculinity, *Broom* imagines white

female solipsism to be a willed performance of victimhood in response to a pathological misreading of one's world as threateningly invasive. The scene's language paints Lenore's early encounter with Lang and Diggerance in precisely these terms. Lenore's wandering gaze and wandering thoughts, particularly with respect to her sense of her body as a sexual commodity in the masculinist economy of desire that Lang's gaze represents, suggests that she mis- or dis-identifies with heterofemininity. This failure to identify her self with her body, and her body with men's capacities, propels her "disorientation and identity confusion." Lenore thus misreads the signs as much as the act of signing as indications of her willed participation in the system of heterosexual exchange, a misreading that sets her on the wrong course. Had she seen the signs for what they were—in other words, had she taken them sincerely—she would have seen herself as already a part of that system.

However the color of that system remains occluded through the scenes' explicit focus on sex and sexuality. The narrative's selective focus on Lenore's emergent sexuality dramatizes the degree to which her later feelings of "disorientation and identity confusion" might owe to this traumatic kernel in her past, but remains unable to sustain a focus on the racial dynamics that are nonetheless already somewhat visible through Lang's "initiation." Instead, the signs Lenore ought to have seen point readers to the banality of the scene's otherwise violent dynamics as a part of coming into adulthood at two among the nation's most exclusive private universities. As Clarice had earlier tried to explain to Lenore regarding the prospect of rape on women's college campuses, "you get used to it. It's really just common sense" (9). In other words, one must learn to endure

and ignore a little violence as another part of the commonsensical backdrop that makes up what it means to be a well-bred (white) woman in a wealthy (white) man's world.

This kind of violence and the need to endure it appears as common sense in part because the "system" it serves to support appears too ordinary to name. Lenore's exit from the room and apparent "refusal" to participate marks her misidentification with, or at least willful refusal to participate in, a filial system of hereditary privilege and lineal investment, the family dynamics of which again occlude whiteness as their racial corollary. Lenore comes from a long line of Mount Holyoke and Amherst College alumni stretching back to her great-great grandparents (63), and as Rick explains is daughter to one of "Cleveland's first families," noting that her father practically "owns the city" (58). The Cleveland neighborhood where Lenore lives, East Corinth, was founded and built by her grandfather Stonecipher Beadsman II (45). Lenore's father, Stonecipher III, owns and operates the family business, an international baby food conglomerate named Stoneciphico. Lenore's sister Clarice had gone on to marry Alvin Spaniard, who was in turn promoted to Vice President of Advertising at her father's company (160). Lenore's brothers both attended Amherst college, but unlike Clarice aren't doing too well. Few family members hear from her older brother, and her younger brother Stonecipher IV appears destined to deal drugs and read philosophy at Amherst indefinitely (237-54). This leaves Lenore as the family's last best hope for extending its legacy of wealth and privilege, and according to the family tradition Lenore ought to have gone to Mount Holyoke and settled in with a wealthy Amherst man. As Rick recounts, despite the incomparable privileges that ought to have set on her a path to wealth if not necessarily

happiness she “works answering telephones for something like four dollars an hour” (58), a fact that does not sit well with her father. Stonecipher III makes Lenore’s “failures” to continue the family legacy painfully obvious: “Planless, still? Distinguished graduate of Oberlin? Most highly educated receptionist and telephone operator in Cleveland history?...How long?...I won’t even say marriage because my glasses will break, but *how long?*” (147). Lenore’s father’s repeated question points to the expectations Lenore thwarted by initially refusing Lang’s advance, and although the implications come obliquely, it is quite clear that what Stonecipher III wants most is for Lenore to become a (re)productive member of the family.

In the aggregate, these details initially suggest that Lenore comes from a wealthy, well-connected, and long-established family whose continuance depends on her performing her filial duties. The expectation to perform those duties by reproducing the investments her family has made through her suggests that whiteness may be among those investments. Cheryl Harris’s powerful reading of whiteness as property helps to draw out the occluded racial dynamics of Lenore’s familial history. Though Harris’s argument primarily focuses on the legal framework through which whiteness is established as a form of property, her conclusions bear on the ways that Lenore’s familial wealth construes whiteness as a form of what Harris calls “status property” (1734). Harris argues that ensconcing whiteness as a form of property accomplishes the “ideological move” of “[conceptualizing] white racial identity as an external thing in a constitutive sense—an ‘object or resource necessary to be a person’” (1734). To the extent that Lenore’s familial wealth is both an object and a resource, to which her access is

contingent on performing in accord with her family's expectations to inhabit a certain "status," the family pressures she feels as "identity confusion" articulate her identity in terms of the whiteness she is expected to perform and reproduce. The "system" that Lenore departs from, then, appears as a system of hereditary whiteness that, through the narrative's articulation of it as familial wealth and privilege, appears normal and unremarkable.

The sense that Lenore has failed to reproduce her family's investments in whiteness, merged with the commonsensical aspects of (white) femininity Lenore's sister Clarice expects her to have already known and that her father couches in terms of marriage, suggests that the novel's heterosexual drama stages a drama of anxious white patriarchy. Lenore's father expects her to put her "expensive degree to remunerative use" but feels her "refusal" as "embarrassment and sadness" (147). He situates her lack of "romantic involvement" in terms of "aimlessness," and dismisses her relationship with Rick, telling her not to "deny involvement" but to "deny extent" (148). The "extent" of her involvement with Rick points back to Rick's body's failure to measure up to the task of capacitating Lenore's ability successfully to carry on the family legacy. As her father explains to her, and as her grandmother who was a student of Wittgenstein had explained to them both, Lenore's "meaning is nothing more or less" than her "function" within the system (149). So long as she remains aimless, underpaid, and involved with Rick to the extent that his body allows, she remains functionless. The layers of investment here mark out the ways the narrative implicitly portrays investments in female heterosexuality as investments in whiteness conceived as a form of property expected to be remunerated

through women's selective reproductivity. When white women fail to intuit the commonsensical dimensions of this systemic investment, white men like Lenore's father become anxious about their future status.

However, at this juncture it remains unclear specifically how Rick's body renders Lenore "functionless" and, reciprocally, how Lenore's body produces Rick as equally barred from functioning, within the white patriarchal system the novel imagines. If simple reproductivity were the only issue, then Rick's body would appear to be just as able as Lang's. As Rick explains during one of his many frantic attempts to secure Lenore's love, his penis regardless of its size enables him to be "close enough for the risk of pregnancy" (286). Something other than sheer biological potential, in other words, has to get in the way of Rick's ability to operate within the system *Broom* images. In the absence of physical impotence, then, Wallace relies on solipsism and anxiety as a way to call into question Rick's sexual efficaciousness. In other words, though he might be physically capable of impregnating Lenore, Wallace imagines Rick as psychologically incapable of "fulfilling" her as a person because he is incapable of orienting himself toward her.

*Broom* positions Rick Vigorous as an incorrigible solipsist through the ways it imagines his body to exclude him from the system of heterosexual exchange that will eventually bring Lenore back into being as a full person. That Rick's exclusion from the system excludes him from redemption suggests that Wallace imagines his form of white solipsism as stemming not from disidentification with the body, as is the case for Lenore, but directly from the body's specifically physical capacities. Yoking Rick's insularity to

his inability to sexually “fulfill” Lenore (286), Wallace likewise casts Rick’s body as terminal and implies that its potential reproduction is inherently threatening. Yet, because Rick is clearly capable of reproducing, having fathered a child with his previous wife Veronica (58), and because his racial identity seems never in doubt throughout the narrative, what does it mean here to imagine his solipsism as something he embodies? How does the narrative’s ontology of gendered bodies’ “natural” inclinations toward their opposites produce Rick as on the one hand apparently white, physically male, and biologically capable, but on the other hand as threatening through all of those same capacities? Quite paradoxically given the ways the narrative imagines Lenore’s resistance to heterosexual identification as a pathological “refusal,” Rick’s terminal embodiment appears to stem from his suggestively queer sexuality. Whereas women are imagined as oriented along overlapping vectors toward straight couplehood and “remunerative” reproduction, within *Broom*’s phenomenal field men can perform straightness over and against their bodies’ queer inclinations. Rick’s *performance* of straight masculinity thus becomes the problem because he tries to appear to be something he is not.

*Broom* begins to build Rick’s performances of straightness through illustrating his reliance on discourse as a means of inventing a system within which he can function. In this sense, *Broom* re-imagines the plotting Gladney relies on to maintain his subjective centrality throughout *White Noise* as instead necessary to maintain the illusion of functionality within an otherwise normatively heterosexual system. Among the elements of Gladney’s character that Wallace queers through Rick, the most significant appears to be Rick’s reliance on a manipulative, instrumental relationship with Lenore as his means



of maintaining a possessive stake in an outward performance of heterosexuality. As Rick explains, “My inability to be truly inside of and surrounded by Lenore Beadsman arouses in me the purely natural...desire to have her inside of and contained by me. I am possessive. I want to own her...” (72). This possessive claim manifests in metaphors of real property as Rick constructs Lenore’s body as a “Great House of Love” (58). Unable to physically enter it, Rick relies on Lenore’s emotional reciprocity to build its walls. Whether through the many stories in which he allegorizes their relationship or through his seemingly incessant demands that she narrate for him the extent of their love, so long as she continues to imagine her involvement with him in terms of the discourse he offers her she continues to function as a “house” within which Rick can imagine his “sense of it and me” enlarged and expanded (60). In further contrast to the ways *White Noise* seemed unable to imagine Babbette’s reciprocity as ever in doubt, Rick seems terminally anxious about the efficacy of his ability to “possess” Lenore’s body as a sign of his proprietary control over his sexuality. He begins to “feel physical pain” when Lenore is apart from him (171), and explains to Lang that he “can be truly comfortable only in the context of an explicit recognition...of the fact that Lenore is mine” (270). Accustomed to generating his own context through stories and elaborately allegorical metaphors—“telling stories...is at this point what I do, after all” (74)—Rick’s anxiety swells in proportion to the faltering efficacy of his ability to maintain discursive control over the characters within his plots. Rick’s anxiety thus provides an index for the novel’s reliance on the body as the physical anchorage of its sense of love and sincerity. Illustrating the ways that Rick’s elaborate textual web serves to abstract from physicality, *Broom* implies

fantasies of bodily detachment as well as fantasies of inhabiting the body through others are only efficacious within a “queer ontology of appearance” that blurs the line between “meaning” and “function.”

If manipulative possessiveness is among the characteristics of white male solipsism that *Broom* imagines as terminal because manipulative men like Rick are incapable of meaning what they say, that critique’s articulation depends on aligning solipsism with queerness, and queerness with an ontologically embodied sense of “intrinsic inadequacy” (286). Through Dr. Jay’s therapy sessions, *Broom* describes Rick’s manipulative possessiveness as the byproduct of his putatively repressed sexuality. Jay explains that Rick’s “insecurity” with respect to his identity makes him “erratic and dangerous” because it threatens to “[bleed] out into and [contaminate]” the cleanliness of Lenore’s “network” (137). Jay solidifies these implications through a reading of Rick’s dream, where a nude Lang draws a picture of Lenore that comes to life to sign Lang’s rear, grasp his “heroic front” and elicit a “rush of foam” (324-25). Asking why Rick and Lang are naked in the dream, and why the beer bottle “with all of the image’s attendant phallic and urological overtones” appears so prominently (345), Jay suggests that Rick’s anxiety owes to his misplaced identification of himself as the object of Lenore’s desire and his misplaced focus on Lang as the agent of the system’s disruption. Instead, Jay explains, “The Lang drawing” makes Lenore “two-dimensional, non-real, existing and defined wholly within the border of a page... a network very definitely of your own construction” (343). Watching Lenore rise from the page, Jay claims, is equivalent to watching “Lang and Lenore give birth to validity” (344), a

process Rick can only “watch” because his body renders him entirely inefficacious.

Rick’s possessive voyeurism can only contaminate. Jay continues, “You soil, Rick... You enter the networks by dirtying” (347). Having rendered Rick’s inefficaciousness in terms of his inability to see himself for what he is except in the domain of dreams, Jay’s final act with Rick is to impart the moral lesson the narrative seems otherwise at pains to dramatize:

Do we love truly? Do we love...enough to afford...validity, reality, three-dimensionality...? Do we, recognizing our inability to enter and fertilize and permeate and validate...an Other, let that Other out...to a...place where she can find fullness, fulfillment, realness?...Have we the wherewithal to allow that Other to be Self? (347)

Rick’s solipsism, in other words, places him beyond the borders of “validity” because he lacks the “wherewithal” to truly love Lenore. He has not been able to come to this realization because that same solipsistic outlook inverts his “Self-Other” orientation, so that others become instruments of his self-expansion. The terms of the scene recall early-twentieth-century psychosexual discourse and link solipsism’s inward gaze to a sense of inversion in a way that suggests the only kind of love Rick might be able to effect through Lenore is an “enlarged” sense of self-love that makes up for a profound lack of “security” in his own identity.

Insinuating that Rick’s love for Lenore is an ultimately self-serving performance of possessive straightness, the narrative aims to expose the hollow core of solipsistic possessiveness. Staging Rick’s performances as utterly inefficacious in this way becomes instrumental for situating “validly” straight masculinity as indubitably embodied in an

efficacious phallus that loves truly. The only blockage that remains, then, is Lenore's misaligned subjectivity. Jay's advice to Lenore runs parallel to his interpretations of Rick's core problem, but moves in the opposite direction. Although Rick's and Lenore's "disorientation and identity confusion" seem to radiate out from their mutual inability to recognize themselves for what they are, within the narrative's gendered ontology what they "are" carries them along different trajectories. Jay urges Lenore to locate her sense of being "pushed" toward Lang as "coming from inside you," and during a therapeutic role-play he asks her to "be an ovum" and "suck in a sperm" (331). Lenore has to admit that "her inclinations and attractions come from inside" and direct her toward Lang, "this blond Adonis who can offer [her] realms of self-Other interaction [she's] never dreamed of," because "Rick is trapped" and "hasn't the equipment to get out...He wants you in him...He's a sick man" (331-32). Rick's "sickness" is positioned as among the pathological blockages that keeps Lenore from recognizing her body's inclinations. In other words, Rick's textually queer influence has "contaminated" her self-concept, and as a result she needs to be coaxed back toward feeling the "way her life is" (122). Jay's final moral lesson for Lenore is in this vein as instructive as his final dismissal of Rick: "We are all helpless and inefficacious as members of a system until we recognize the existence of the system...Your pupils don't lie. Make it real. Bring it into the network...Take an Other inside" (333). In other words, Lenore needs to recognize the "common sense" lesson her sister Clarice had much earlier tried to impart, that her body does not lie and that, in short, her desires are sincere.

Lenore's body creates the system within which *Broom's* identity dramas become dramas of disoriented embodiment. Within its gendered ontology the narrative positions the female body as the primary orientation point of its phenomenal field, and its men succeed or fail as a result of their ability to solicit Lenore's genuine identification with her body's sincere desires. Imagining those desires to be inextricably tied to the body, and further imagining the body to always be sincere in its expression of desire, engenders the framework within which Rick's disorientingly queer solipsism can be made to seem like the result of a pathological need to possess and contain femininity, and Lenore's identity confusion can become intelligible as her pathological refusal to properly take up her body. Further, yoking each of their "failures" to confusion and *disorientation* maintains heterosexual desire as the normative orientation from which these characters have lost their way. Rick's eventual drop into oblivion at the conclusion of the narrative seals his fate as hopelessly inefficacious within *Broom's* system, largely because he seems unable to acknowledge himself for what and who he is. Lenore, on the other hand, finds her way back to her body opened up through Lang's performance of sincerity at the close of the narrative. When they finally come together, Lenore explains that his violent intrusion was the catalyst for her confusing disorientation, "You came in that time, and terrorized us, and were drunk...I've just felt so *dirty*, so out of control" (405). The revelations she experiences are coupled with a sense of her body's inclinations. As they talk, she begins to feel "a lot of little lines...of heat" radiating out from her body (402). Within the space his body appears to condition, this time through a sincere approach, Lang confesses that the "good old boy stuff...became my thing, at school" (411), but that

it is not indicative of who he really is. This different, more sincere version of Andrew Lang breaks Lenore's memories into "pieces that didn't fit" (403). Lang begins to delve deeper into his past, telling Lenore about his brother who was killed in Vietnam, and about his grandmother who he used to visit in a nursing home in Texas before she died (413-17), and as he and Lenore begin to cry together they also fall into each other's arms. Lang's touching moment of sincerity opens Lenore to her body's inclinations, and once she begins to feel them his continued revelations of himself as a person and his care for her "as a person" (403, 442) enable her to feel finally "three-dimensional" in a way that Rick seemed never able to offer. Lang's sincerity works to accomplish this alignment, the narrative suggests, because it permits him the space to be honest about the difference between his prior performances and his "deep down" ability to be caring and compassionate.

Against the emotional backdrop of love and the quest to find it, the narrative's resolution of its love triangle seems rather unremarkable. It appears only to take a man sincere enough about his compassionate acknowledgment of a woman "as a person" and not as an instrument to help Lenore feel her way back to her body. However, the sense of personhood the narrative imagines to reorient Lenore comes at the expense of Rick's being made to seem like something less than a person, a move that implicates his sexual "invalidity" as a sign of his not being quite white enough to reproduce. Julian Carter's history of whiteness's articulation as normal suggests that the discursive suturing of sexual reciprocity, heterosexuality, marriage, and love produced a vision of "normality" that enabled whiteness to "gradually become 'invisible,' its racial specificity obscured by

its claim to normality” (79). Part of whiteness’s gradual self-articulation as normal depended on aligning homosexuality with “fears about white reproductive weakness,” such that “queer forms of sexual desire and gender expression acquired the capacity to represent sexual disability” and which in turn provided a powerful point of contrast for the otherwise self-disciplined regime of normatively white heterosexual couplehood (13-14).

*Broom*’s alignment of Rick’s body with the threateningly queer contamination of sexual weakness and inefficacy points to the enduring effects of these historical phenomena on the ways writers like Wallace imagine what it means to be a normal human being. As Carter observes of whiteness’s relationship to normalcy, norms “appear to be inherently solipsistic,” a perceptual limit expressed through the collapse of whiteness into love that “could not have appeared possible outside the narrow bounds of a securely all-white context in which explicit discussions of contested race relations were already otiose” (21). That *Broom* seems unable to sustain a focus on whiteness suggests the relative insularity of its own presumptive context, as much as the whiteness of the phenomenal field wherein its imagination of the body’s sincerity can appear as simply the effect of normal and normative expectations. Lenore’s eventual couplehood with Lang, in this sense, demonstrates how *Broom* takes part in advancing the discursive suturing of white heterosexual couplehood to normality in ways that obscure the solipsistic whiteness of its imaginary.

The abnormality of Rick’s embodiment or of Lenore’s “refusal” to recognize her body’s inclinations further suggest that the whiteness they all hold in common as

“common sense” becomes the way their disorientations signal their departures from the norm. By virtue of his unexamined and uncontested whiteness, Rick’s queerly abnormal body manifests the white patriarchal anxiety within which he is situated. Lenore’s father’s exasperation with her choice of romantic partners and the narrative machinations that bring her into line with a more able-bodied counterpart signal Rick’s abject commonality with them, the “ground zero” as Marlon Ross puts it, “for the observed split between heterosexual and homosexual Anglo Saxon men” (168). The threatening “perversion” homosexual men pose to the conjoined expression of whiteness and heterosexuality also carries with it “a latent racial perversion, implicitly fostering the threat of racial reversion by failing to...propagate the Anglo Saxon race” (168). To the extent that Rick’s body reflects these anxieties, the narrative’s imagination of Lang as iconic of (white) heterosexual reproduction mimes whiteness’s alignment with able-bodied, healthy, and indeed loving masculinity, a way of taking up the body that finds its most felicitous expression through (white) women’s healthy alignment with their bodies’ inclinations to receive men’s sincere gestures and reproduce love as the gift that keeps on taking.<sup>29</sup>

*Broom*’s sexual dramas unfold against a backdrop of the kinds of white patriarchal anxiety that *White Noise* foregrounds and focalizes through Gladney’s solipsistic travails. Made into a “system,” *Broom* thus offers a view to how such anxieties function both systemically and interpersonally. Woven together through Lenore’s mis- or dis-identification with the demands of white heterofemininity, what the novel presents as personal pathology points back to whiteness as a systemic investment that requires



women's compliance as much as men's sincerity about who and what they are for its future return. In this sense, one can distill the novel's core problem down to the failure of communication, whether as language or body language, to convey the truth of what one really means as much as what one really needs. However, the novel's core problem also, in this way, speaks to a dimension of settler-feeling with regard to securing one's possession over space, place, and indeed over the meaning and "function" of being a person. The anxiety that for DeLillo drives Gladney to nearly murder the racially ambiguous other who he fears will take his wife, and thus his prosthetic anchor, away from him, for Wallace becomes a distorting influence, noise in the channel that threatens to obscure the body's desires from reaching their most felicitous ends. Overcoming this anxiety becomes equivalent to really feeling the body, to feeling the lines of heat Wallace imagines to emanate from each of us toward the others who solicit our most deeply human desires. Though this may appear a humanist response to the distortions of language or the endlessly referential loops of deconstructive theories, what does it mean to imagine white heteroreproductivity as both an investment and an affect? Lang's performance of white sincerity in this respect becomes emblematic of a cluster of presumptions about the body, about sex, and about love in the context of settlement. It is a micrological portrayal of the macrological structures of liberalism Elizabeth Povinelli describes when she speaks of love in the settler-colonies (*Empire* 17). It is, in short, a distillation of the possessiveness and prosthetization that characterize whiteness, and a distillation of love as the remedy for whiteness's wounds.

### **“Just Human”: White Solipsism and the Fantasy of Plain Personhood**

In *White*, Richard Dyer argues that no position is more powerful than being “just human” because the capacity to speak on behalf of the “commonality of humanity” presumes that one can first identify as a member of that “just human” community (2). Dyer sees this as a possibility open to “non-raced” people unburdened by the presumption of speaking first for their race (2). Dyer’s non-raced points evocatively to whiteness, and captures the ways that persons who inhabit white bodies seem largely unable to see themselves as much more than “non-raced” persons. “As long as white people are not racially seen and named,” Dyer contends, “they/we function as a human norm” (1). The perceptual slippage Dyer articulates as a form of race-blindness speaks to Walters’s sense of whiteness as a sensory blockage that enfolds white persons into the limitations that whiteness has historically cast around itself. Defined by what it is not, codified as a form of exclusionary property, gradually associated with heterosexual love and couplehood, and envisioned as the normative baseline of a collective politics that sidesteps the political, whiteness generates an illusion of normal centrality against which everything but whiteness appears obviously visible, different enough from the norm to warrant examination. What gets unexamined, as Ross Chambers argues, is whiteness itself.<sup>30</sup> What I take Chambers to mean is that the content of whiteness goes unexamined because it is assumed to be the “normal” content of everyday life, knowledge, history, sexuality, perception, modes of feeling, and ways of being. The sense that everything whiteness permeates is simply part of human normality contributes to the forms of white solipsism DeLillo and Wallace imagine, as well as the perceptual solipsism that limns

their narratives' focus on the conditions of possibility that must be in place in order for whiteness to appear as either empty of content or as simply so normal as to pass below perception.

To the extent that *White Noise* and *Broom* constitute fictions about what it means to be a human being, in order to see them as such one has to inhabit the solipsistic perspective the narratives generate. This is not to say that sex, love, intimacy, or violence are not part of what it means to be a human being, nor that white persons are somehow not also humans. What I mean to suggest is that seeing the privileged articulations of what constitutes humanity within *White Noise*'s and *Broom*'s imaginaries—heterosexuality, possessive masculinity, and the instrumental ethics under which others become white men's prosthetic attachments—as simply and unqualifiedly human requires not conscious identification with those ways of being but simply the habitual inhabitation of a limited perspective. The relative dearth of critical attention paid to the ways race and sexuality inflect these narratives' body dramas suggest that the typical, habitual approaches to them yield limited results.

This is especially true with respect to criticism of Wallace's work, and of the sincere fictions his arguments against irony arguably helped to generate. Accustomed to mining works like DeLillo's for nuance and depth, readers would be forgiven for finding themselves perplexed by a narrative that purports to mean just what it says. However, as I hope to have shown through my reading of *Broom*, paying attention to just what the narrative says helps to draw out its reliance on an inequitable framework wherein love and penetrative sex become the means through which a woman becomes a person, a

white man with a small penis becomes queer and less than white, and a white man with a large penis becomes a hero because he says what he means. These are only human dramas from a perspective that presumes humanity to inhere in heterosexual love, and female fulfillment to be derived only from full penetration and reproduction. Whether as a narrative mechanism or as a critical assumption, sincerity seems to have occluded these dynamics and as a result seems to have excluded Wallace's work from the kinds of political critique he hoped to sidestep through dramatizing what it means to be a "fucking *human being*."

Insofar as the perceptual limitations Wallace's and DeLillo's narratives dramatize and perform implicate whiteness as their phenomenal field, Walters's sense of whiteness as a set of sensory blockages helps to name the dynamics within them as well as the fields within which those dynamics pass below notice. From this perspective, the narratives' staging of sincerity seems to operate within a field that inherently limits what the narratives can be sincere about. Alexie's representations of white sincerity in *Indian Killer* further demonstrate the confluence of white solipsism and sincerity, such that what one means to say is inevitably filtered through the means one has to say it. What appears as apolitical personhood, then, appears as such through a perceptual filter that screens what counts as political from what does not. *Broom*'s envisioning of what constitutes Lenore's personhood illustrates the effects of this perceptual filter on what writers like Wallace find themselves able to sincerely express. For instance, although the narrative represents heterosexuality as a compulsory system radiating out from the expectation that women's bodies constitute the full parameters of their identity, it seems entirely unable to

imagine how such a presumptive orientation implies a profoundly essentialist and inherently political production of gender. Despite its suggestion that Lenore's orientation toward heterosexual couplehood becomes compulsory through imagining the whiteness invested in her as a gift she must give back, *Broom* seems unable to account for the sincerity of its investments in the discourse that articulates whiteness's heterofamilial inheritance as the normal order of filial duty. And finally, despite its representation of Lang's body as triumphantly valid only against Rick's sexual invalidity, *Broom's* sincere presentation of love sidesteps the political implications of casting queerness as a foil to whiteness so as to ensure whiteness's uncontested reproduction as merely normal personhood.

That these representations nevertheless aim to articulate a vision of what it means to be a human being calls for a different way to approach sincere fictions that traffic in the fantasy of plain personhood, an approach that tries to move beyond the solipsistic borders such (white) fantasies throw up around themselves. What might result, for instance, from looking at sincerity in the ways that feminist scholars have read sentimentality? As Lauren Berlant argues in *The Female Complaint*, sentimentalists strive to "save the political from politics" by imagining their notional citizen "not as someone with potentially jeopardizing qualities or with a status in a hierarchy...but as someone with attachments and intentions and pain capacities...as a *subject of feeling*...who longs for...vague belonging, a sense of unanxious general social membership" (145). Wallace and the sincere fictionists who follow him imagine exactly the kinds of subjects of feeling Berlant describes, and the offer representations of human

beings who long for generality in the face of political jeopardy. Such an approach helps to situate sincere fictions as performing affective cultural work, and as I show in the next chapter, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* works to align pain with personhood in ways that render the whiteness of wounded whiteness, as much as the whiteness of the wounded nation Foer imagines, invisible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the first epigraph, see McCaffery (26). For the second, see Povinelli, *Empire* (17).

<sup>2</sup> Wallace's interview with McCaffery was originally published in a 1993 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* alongside his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." In the essay, he critiques contemporaneous American fiction for its lack of serious engagement with everyday life and suggests that this lack owes to two sources: televisual irony and contemporary author's indebtedness to literary metafiction. For the essay, see *A Supposedly Fun Thing* (21-83). For additional essays critiquing contemporary American fiction, see Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated" in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*; and "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would sort of Have to Think" in *Consider*.

<sup>3</sup> For especially salient examples of this theme in Wallace's work, see Wallace, "Little Expressionless Animals," in *Girl*; and "Brief Interview #20" also referred to as "The Granola Cruncher" in *Brief Interviews*. For a critical reading of the "Granola Cruncher," see Holland, "Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*." Wallace also articulates this theme in his non-fiction. See especially Wallace, "Big Red Son" in *Consider*.

<sup>4</sup> By "emotional backdrop" I mean to signal two related structures. First, emotional backdrop names the range of emotional responses that become available within a narrative. The second structure (or set of structures) I mean to indicate by emotional backdrop is the condition within which a given range of emotional responses appears not only possible but also appropriate. The prevailing conditions that make up emotional backdrops encompass race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, location, and other elements of one's affective milieu and identity schema. I use the term "phenomenal field" to refer to the dynamic interarticulation of these prevailing sets of conditions.

My use of these terms is informed by Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, contemporary work in phenomenology and affect, in particular Ahmed, *Queer* and *Cultural Politics*; and work within cultural studies on genre, especially Berlant, *Queen of America* and *The Female Complaint*. Berlant's reading of genre as a disciplinary instrument is especially influential for my thinking about "emotional backdrops" in these narratives. Hamilton Carroll's recent work on whiteness and masculinity in contemporary television has also been influential, in particular his reading of genres as "affective structures." See Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction*.

<sup>5</sup> "Hegemonic Masculinity" refers to the dominant representation of idealized masculinity within a given cultural formation. These representations stylize privileged affects, performances, and ways of doing the male body that encompass both the ideal form of that body as well as the most ideal way of inhabiting it and taking it up. Hegemonic masculinities, like other forms of cultural hegemony, are dynamic and responsive but are usually described as unattainable forms of being masculine toward which men are nevertheless encouraged to aspire.

Australian sociologist R.W. Connell is widely credited with having coined "hegemonic masculinity" in the 1980s to describe the prevailing images and attitudes ascribed to dominant understandings of masculinity in a given culture. See Carrigan, Connell, and Lee; Connell; and Connell and Messerschmidt. For considerations of American hegemonic masculinity and its historical development, see Kimmel, *Manhood* and *Angry*. For an example of shifting representations of hegemonic masculinity, see Jeffords.

<sup>6</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer* 132-136. Ahmed considers the ways that objects and others extend white bodies' feelings of place and belonging. Although Ahmed focuses on primarily on space, her reading of bodily motility as it inflects race helps to describe the effects of white solipsism imagined as a limit for one's perceptual capacity as well as one's motility.

<sup>7</sup> See Savran. David Savran's notion of the "masochistic fantasmatic" offers up a sense of white men's access to performances of victimhood through co-opting the signification of other subject positions, a point of access their whiteness makes possible. Masochistic performances of white male victimhood allow the "white male subject to... feminize and/or blacken himself fantasmatically... all the while reproducing his own unimpeachable virility" (33). Bracketing Savran's psychoanalytic register, the ability to take up victimhood by fantasmatically inhabiting a feminized or blackened body suggests that those bodies already appear as spaces for white masculine extension. In this vein, one could read Savran's argument in phenomenological terms as articulating a kind of performative plasticity that feels possible as a result of other bodies' availability.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended consideration of "epiphanic moments" in DeLillo's fiction, including *White Noise*, see Maltby. Maltby's primary interest lies in critiquing conventional understandings of postmodernism. My interest in Gladney's momentarily epiphanic experience in *White Noise* lies instead in the conditions that make Gladney's feeling appear possible.

<sup>9</sup> Masculinity's notional disembodiment refers to historical associations of masculinity with reason and rationality, and femininity with the body. For an overview of these historical associations' outgrowth from Western philosophy, see Grosz. Whiteness's presumptive invisibility within a U.S. framework refers to the historical constitution of race as difference from whiteness. "Race" is thus seen as blackness, for instance, from a perspective that does not take account of blackness's production against whiteness. On whiteness's reliance on negative identification for its coherent meaning, see Carroll; Chambers; DiPiero; Dyer; Hill; and Lipsitz.

Arguments concerning white masculinity in crisis locate its impetus in the mid-1960s. As historically marginalized persons gained access to greater political and cultural representation, whiteness became more visible as a racial construction and masculinity's disassociation with the body became more untenable. The "crisis" names the proliferation of political and cultural representations of visibly embodied masculinities, and white men's difficulties maneuvering within the confines of their newfound visibility.

For arguments that position white masculinity in crisis in response to feminism and identity politics, see Gardiner; Faludi; Jeffords; Kimmel, *Manhood* and *Angry*; and Malin. For an overview white masculinity in crisis discourse and critical readings of its representations in twentieth-century U.S. fiction, see Robinson. For critical analyses of white masculinity in crisis and white male performances of victimhood, see Berlant, *Queen*; Carroll; DiPiero; Savran; Silverman; and Walsh.

<sup>10</sup> For considerations of gender and *White Noise*, see Nel, "Amazons" and "Homicidal Men"; and Helyer, "DeLillo and Masculinity" and "Taking Possession." For readings of whiteness and white noise, see Gordon; and Engles, "Who Are you Literally?" and "Connecting *White Noise*."

<sup>11</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer* (109-156). For Ahmed, orientation devices are involved in the "work of inhabitation," as "ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable spaces" (11). Ahmed draws heavily on Merleau-Ponty's reading of bodily motility and blindness in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty considers a blind man's cane to have become a part of his body schema and thus part of his ability to "orient" himself in space. Ahmed extends Merleau-Ponty's considerations towards how objects, others, and expectations work to "orient" one's perceptions of situatedness and belonging. I use the concept here to indicate the ways white men orient themselves toward a feeling of subjective centrality and secure belonging through locating others at the periphery of their milieu.

<sup>12</sup> On whiteness as a sense of ease, and stress points as challenges to the habitual ease with which white bodies ordinarily inhabit spaces, see Ahmed, *Queer* (130-33) and "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."



<sup>13</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* (262-65). Merleau-Ponty suggests that one's ability to sense one's orientation depends one's being already anchored in a prior perceptual level.

<sup>14</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes death as the "possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein" (the "there-being" at the center of Heidegger's phenomenological ontology), continuing that "death reveals itself as the *ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed*" (232). For readings of Heidegger's influence on *White Noise*, see Bonca. For considerations of Heideggerian philosophy, technology, and Gladney's angst toward death, see Valdez-Moses. For further considerations of *White Noise*'s emphatic focus on death and anxiety, see Barrett; Olster; Osteen; Weekes; and Wilcox.

<sup>15</sup> In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick argues that a homosocial continuum of male-male desire (a term she uses to encompass erotic and non-erotic feelings between men) could be usefully read through the asymmetries that male-male-female love triangles form between men. For Sedgwick's description of a male homosocial continuum distinct from female homosociality, see *Between Men* (1-5). For further elaboration of homosocial bonds, see Sedgwick, *Epistemology* (184-87).

<sup>16</sup> In *Revealing Whiteness*, Shannon Sullivan defines "ontological expansiveness" as "a particular co-constitutive relationship between self and environment in which the self assumes that it can and should have total mastery of its environment" (10). Sullivan's study discusses the habitual patterns that structure the articulation of whiteness as a set of privileges and privileged access to persons, spaces, and resources. Her discussion of ontological expansiveness is especially salient in terms of white solipsism. As habitual, whiteness is ordinarily not available for conscious reflection among persons who benefit from being understood as white, and when it is it is often understood in terms that again arise out of habit, thus leading to a kind of reflective double-bind that retrenches rather than alleviates white solipsism (25).

<sup>17</sup> *The Broom of the System* envelops its love plot with allusions to philosophers ranging from Hegel to Wittgenstein, and authors encompassing Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and John Updike, as Marshall Boswell usefully surveys *Understanding* (21-64). Wittgenstein's philosophy of language bears especially on the shape of *Broom*'s dramas. For Wallace's discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophy, "The Empty Plenum." For more on Wittgenstein's influence on *Broom*, see Olsen; and Max.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant reads sentimental women's texts as "gendering machines, locating the ideality of femininity in fantasies of unconflicted subjectivity in an intimate world organized by a sense of emotional recognition, reciprocity, and self-mastery" (35). *Broom* positions sincerity to work in much the same, securing a sense gendered ideality in world imagined to cohere around intimate reciprocity and self-mastery. Wallace's staging of sincerity as the means through which men and women become sexually oriented adds sexuality to Berlant's notion of intimate fictions as "gendering machines."

<sup>19</sup> See O'Donnell; and Boswell, *Understanding*. O'Donnell reads *Broom* as an "apprentice work" in the manner of Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (though the comparison ought to strike anyone familiar with either novel as more than a bit of a stretch). Yet despite the novel consisting of a "series of intersecting plots that are almost plots," O'Donnell offers an interesting insight into the narrative that I pursue in this chapter, writing that the novel explores "the nature...of personhood existentially and affectively" (8). Wallace also all but dismissed *Broom* in his interview with McCaffery, calling it "sensitive little...bildungsroman" (41).

<sup>20</sup> Wallace called for a turn to sincerity within American fiction in his often-cited essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." For commentary on the essay and its importance for Wallace's work, see Boswell, *Understanding*; McLaughlin; and Scott. For readings of sincerity and sentiment throughout Wallace's fiction and non-fiction see Boswell, *Understanding*; den Dulk; Franzen, "Farther Away"; Giles;

Harris; Hoborek, "Introduction" and "The Novel after David Foster Wallace"; Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose"; Kirsch; and Scott. For discussions of Wallace's influence on later writers, see Kirsh; Scott; and Smith.

<sup>21</sup> Literary metafiction is solipsistic to the extent that it dramatizes its own fictionality. Framing a story as being about itself, in other words, does little more than call attention to itself as its own conditions of production. Wallace's critique in this vein is accurate insofar as literary metafiction does very little in the way of representing the lives of people who are not conscious of being characters in a story. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace maps this critique onto the whiteness and masculinity of the authors of literary metafiction, a critique that seems to run out of steam in his fictional send-ups. See "E Unibus Pluram" (54-69). For Wallace's satire of literary metafiction and John Barth in particular, see Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," in *Girl*.

<sup>22</sup> See Boswell *Understanding*. See also Hayes-Brady.

<sup>23</sup> See Boswell, *Understanding*. Boswell offers a brief consideration of *Broom*'s love plot and goes as far as to consider its homosocial dynamics, but ultimately suggests that Wallace's staging of them amounts to a joke on Nabokov and Updike (45).

<sup>24</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer*. Ahmed argues that part of the naturalization of heterosexuality involves the naturalization of gender as "in line" with sex: "The line of straight orientation takes the subject toward what it 'is'... The naturalization of heterosexuality as a line that directs bodies depends on the construction of women's bodies as being 'made' for men, such that women's sexuality is seen as directed toward men" (70-71). Wallace arguably imagines exactly such a phenomenology of gender in which women's bodies are in line with and oriented along a line toward men's bodies, as if they are "made for" each other.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase "compulsory heterosexuality" and its usefulness for describing frameworks wherein heterosexuality is presumptively prior to other vectors of desire owes to Adrienne Rich's work with the concept. See Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." For a phenomenological consideration of compulsory heterosexuality as "congealed" in with the history of one's body, see Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* (145).

<sup>26</sup> Wallace attended Amherst College during the mid-1980s, and was on campus when the university enacted a ban on college fraternities in 1984 in response to allegations of sexual assault and abuse. His attendance at Amherst also overlapped with Eve Sedgwick's tenure there. The extent to which these occurrences amount to more than a coincidence is difficult to determine, but *Broom* bears the influence of feminist theory generally and Sedgwick's considerations of male homosocial desire in *Between Men*, if only obliquely and at times negatively. For details of Wallace's life at Amherst, including some description of the courses he took there and the influence of his experiences there on *Broom*, see Max.

<sup>27</sup> On fraternal organizations, whiteness, and privilege, see Nelson; and Kimmel, *Manhood*.

<sup>28</sup> The scene positions Lenore's resistance as a series of refusals, thus situating her actions as the result of a willful disconnect between her feeling and her body's inclinations in a way that suggests her traumatic encounter with this very real threat of rape produces a pathological blockage rather than a choice to evade sexual violence. I take up the connections between sincerity and trauma more fully in the next chapter, and so here rather than dwell on the ways the narrative uses the prospect of sexual trauma as a means of articulating female embodiment, I instead want to the focus how that implication functions to produce Lenore's specifically female form of solipsism as the result of a pathological blockage that shapes her ability to perform normative, white femininity.

<sup>29</sup> I am here paraphrasing Berlant's opening lines in *The Female Complaint* (1).

<sup>30</sup> See Chambers, "The Unexamined."

## CHAPTER IV

### REGIONS OF SILENCE: TRAUMA, SENTIMENTALITY, AND EMOTIONAL SURROGACY IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE* AND JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.

— Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

In order to benefit from the therapeutic promises of sentimental discourse, you must imagine yourself with someone else's stress, pain, or humiliated identity; the possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic.

— Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* imagines a family fractured by two historical traumas, the 1945 allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany and the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The intergenerational framework Foer imagines presents the Schell family as the focal point for historical violence's continuity, arguably positioning them as representative of the kinds of "impossible histories" Cathy Caruth claims victims of trauma carry within them but cannot entirely possess.<sup>1</sup> The inability of the Schells to possess and thus to fully process the historical traumas into which Foer enmeshes them invites readers to witness their suffering as representative of the past's infiltration into the present. In this sense, Dresden survivor Thomas, Sr., who loses his ability to speak in the years following the Dresden raid, invites readers to imagine their own emotional responses in the space his

silence leaves open. His wife, who eventually loses her sight, invites us to bear witness to the pains she feels as the shape of her existence. And nine year-old Oskar, whose father died on 9/11, invites us to identify with his loss and aspire toward his restoration.

To read the narrative this way, however, is to take the relationship Caruth and other humanities-based trauma theorists build between traumatic experience and physical-affective symptoms as a given.<sup>2</sup> In other words, to see Thomas, Sr.'s silence as symptomatic of the ways Dresden's trauma comes to literally possess his subjective experience is to hold to the notion of trauma's repetition through altered physical capacities. If those alterations become an invitation for sympathetic identification and vicarious witnessing, then one must invest in the apparently self-evident ethics through which theories of trauma frame survivor's symptoms as prostheses for witnesses' access to the truth of "impossible histories."<sup>3</sup> Positioning Foer's characters as bridges toward a different and more intimate relationship to the truth of historical pain and its present-day manifestations further takes their representativity for granted, assuming that they can stand in for the broader histories of loss and violence and the hopes for a better tomorrow that Foer imagines through them.

This chapter explores the relationship between the presumed representativity and emotional surrogacy that traumatic frames make possible and the forms of prostheticization and attachments to national feeling that Walters envisions as a part of whiteness's plugged-up sensorium. The sense that through others one can feel a way toward a better horizon where complex entanglements to historical and present-day violence will fall away against the uncomplicated feeling of affective redress drives what

Lauren Berlant calls an “intimate public.”<sup>4</sup> Berlant argues that sentimental texts are the privileged cultural circulation devices for these publics’ intimacy, and she cites their “therapeutic promise” as reliant on one’s buying into a prosthetic relationship whereby one’s sense of self can transit through another’s more durable pain into a different and more emotionally complex identity (47). Trauma studies discourse positions victims of historical traumas, particularly of what Marianne Hirsch calls cultural collective traumas, as representatives of a history they bear through their bodies. Within trauma studies discourse, then, victims of trauma become affective transit points in ways similar to Berlant’s reading of the ways sentimental texts represent suffering bodies.<sup>5</sup>

The ways sentimentality makes alterity available as a point of vicarious living has become the subject of critique. The similar structures within theories of trauma, however, have gone largely unexamined. As *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*’s representative family demonstrates, through the framework of trauma’s presumptively universal effects questions over representativity become attached to traumatic histories rather than to how those bodies inflect representations of the histories that shape them. From this vantage, Foer’s Dresden survivors’ affective silences become iconic of the silence around their historical suffering. For some readers, their silences point further to Foer’s revision of Holocaust trauma via his figurations of the Dresden firebombing.<sup>6</sup> In order to make the leap between representations of Dresden and oblique echoes of Holocaust trauma, however, one has to again hold fast to the notion that traumatic frames offer bridges to “impossible histories” or even to histories that may not feature directly in a narrative’s representational milieu.

What would it mean to read traumatic representations not as attempts to overcome the impossible nor as bridges toward deferred experience but rather as attempts to stage trauma's impossibility as a wellspring for the promises of tomorrow? How might representations of traumatic histories and dramatic historical violence participate in what Berlant calls the "unfinished business of sentimentality" by generating intimate attachments to sentimental-national feeling through a sincere directive toward suffering bodies' representativity? And how might such a framework implicate whiteness as its given phenomenological surround? To the extent that whiteness plugs up engagement with the fullness of one's historical entanglements, Walters's notion offers a critical perspective from which to reimagine Foer's novel as an archive of the unexamined relationship between theories of trauma and whiteness's expansion through others' emotional surrogacy. The kinds of invitations Foer's novel extends toward its readers and literally performs, as I show in the final section of this chapter, speak to the sense of prosthetic attachment that Walters develops. In this sense, affective silences are indeed indicative of historical silences, but silence is also indicative of a particular way of relating to historical violence rather than a manifestation of its devastating impact.<sup>7</sup>

I theorize representations of traumatic silences as marking out areas of feeling that remain perceptually active but practically unavailable, a notion I borrow from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's sense of "regions of silence" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>8</sup> I adapt the concept from Merleau-Ponty's original description of areas of the perceptual body schema that are no longer practically available, mapping it onto the affective schema in order to better capture the relationship between feeling, inclination, and

performance that Foer's narrative imagines as sets of particularly gendered silences. I argue that the relationship between gendered inclinations toward historical traumatic violence and present-day hopes for a better tomorrow can be best understood through the frame of affective "regions of silence." Doing so opens questions about how gender and whiteness become "silent" within representations of the "impossible histories" Foer's novel takes up as a part of its sincere-sentimental aims to re-envision historical pain as the wellspring for national-familial intimacy. Throughout *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the presumptive accessibility of women's pained lives and the space their pain opens for wounded men's repair relies on an assumed relationship to heteronormative receptivity. As I argued in the previous chapter, this relationship produces the structural conditions necessary for white masculinity to perform woundedness while remaining grounded within a durable feeling of belonging. Within the national frames of Foer's intimate public, however, women's attachment to heterofamiliarity works out a sense of national familiarity as equally grounded within women's bodies' surrogation of sentimental intimacy.

I contrast Foer's representations of Dresden and its effects on the Schell family's domestic arrangements with Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Published nearly forty years before, Vonnegut's narrative is also centered on the firebombing of Dresden, but in the absence of an explicitly trauma-inflected framework, the text uses Dresden's centrality to construct a critique of whiteness's insular relationship to the continuation of historical violence.<sup>9</sup> Vonnegut's characteristically dark irony gives *Slaughterhouse-Five* the critical distance from its protagonist necessary to



work out a critique of his representative embodiment. Through that critique, Vonnegut demonstrates how Billy Pilgrim's silence and "quietist" acceptance of historical violence, including the violence of the Dresden firebombing that dramatically impacts his life, perpetuates the individual affective conditions within which the continuum of historical violence—which *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents as encompassing American national history from colonial settlement to the war in Vietnam—can come to feel like an everyday backdrop for Billy's general feelings of belonging.

Foer's straightforward sincerity, on the other hand, stages intergenerational familial trauma as a sentimental re-envisioning of national-familial ties. I read *Extremely Loud*'s reliance on notions of traumatic experience as propelling its positioning of the Schell family's representative pains as well as their national-familial representativity. I argue that through trauma as a representational framework the narrative articulates the self-evidentness of its wounded characters' attachments in a way that brings wounded whiteness's reliance on others' prostheticization into clear view.

I organize the chapter into four sections. In the first, I examine the contrast between Foer's and Vonnegut's representations of the Dresden bombing's direct corporeal impact. I contextualize the differences between them through reference to the prevalent notions of traumatic experience that inform Foer's imagination of the bombing as manifesting in silence. Those notions inform the shape of the symptoms Foer imagines, but borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's reading of the relationship between sexuality and "regions of silence" I situate Foer's presentation of symptoms as gendered performances that lay the groundwork for the novel's re-imagining of heterofamilial

repair. In the second and third sections, I examine the ways Vonnegut and Foer respectively imagine the domestic impact of their characters' Dresden experiences. Bringing their "traumas" home, Billy's and Thomas, Sr.'s lives sharply depart from one another along the lines of their representative utility for the novels' suggestive aims. In the second section, I work out Vonnegut's critique of whiteness as insularity and show how it relates national-domestic feeling to the historical contiguity between Dresden's erasure from U.S. cultural memory and the then-ongoing air war in Vietnam. In the third section, I position the absence of these frames within Foer's narrative as generative of the novel's vision for an intimate public organized around shared pain and anchored through women's presumptively given attachments to domestic space. In the final section, I argue that the critical differences between the two narratives indicate the cultural work sincere sentimentality performs for representations of wounded whiteness. Through generating a felt alliance predicated on pain's prostheticization, sincere fictions like Foer's engender a region of silence around whiteness that propels readers to seek their attachments to national-intimate belonging in the more available comforting durability of heterofemininity.

**Absorbing Violence, Performing Silence: Trauma and "Life's Hiding Place" in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

Much of the criticism on *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and some more recent work on Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* readers the novels as documenting the symptomatology of traumatic experience.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the presentation of symptoms

rather than on the representation of experiences, these arguments risk overlooking what may otherwise be at stake in the narratives' productions. Trauma provides a powerful emotional backdrop against which the narratives can position wounded white men as synecdochic of the effects of historical violence, and for Foer, trauma theory provides a ready-made frame through which *Extremely Loud* brings men's wounds and the relationship to history they serve to represent into focus. Throughout *Extremely Loud*, silence's symptomatic relationship to trauma illustrates Foer's distribution of survivorship and victimhood along gendered lines. Reading silence as pointing back to a singular, casual traumatic event does little to examine this distribution and further overlooks, as Rachel Greenwald Smith notes, how Foer's sincere aesthetics attempt to palliate national feeling through a familial drama pitched as representative of a national-familial crisis.<sup>11</sup>

In this section, I compare Foer's and Vonnegut's representations of the Dresden firebombing and examine the effects they imagine it to produce for the men at the center of their narratives. The silences each author portrays in the aftermath puts into relief the productive relationship between affective and experiential blockages and alternate ways of feeling attached to the "impossible" histories traumatic experiences represent. The presumptive "impossibility" of histories of traumatic experience thus takes on a different shape in each narrative, producing alternately configured "regions of silence." In Vonnegut's narrative, Pilgrim's "regions of silence" become avowedly national-historical. *Extremely Loud's* "regions of silence," on the other hand, become descriptive of familial traumas and embodied failures that cannot be passed on if the national family

for whom the Schells are representative are to move forward and “work through” the traumas they’ve endured.<sup>12</sup>

A possible explanation for Foer’s gendered distribution may lie in how humanities-based trauma theorists imagine traumatic experience. Theories of trauma posit a relationship between embodiment, affect, and cognition that separates the content of one’s experience from one’s ability to process it fully in order to bracket questions as to the veracity of traumatic experience while simultaneously rendering unethical attempts to interrogate the logic underpinning the theory.<sup>13</sup> As the pivot point of this relationship, the body’s affective capacities are imagined to lie beyond the reach of the distortive threat narrative memory might otherwise pose.<sup>14</sup> The veridical relationship between traumatic affects and historical events thus works out a metonymic relationship between victim and history that makes it possible to witness historical traumas at a remove through paradoxically witnessing the body’s presentation of symptoms. Cathy Caruth offers this perspective as an ethical solution to what she argues amounts to a “crisis of truth” (*TEM* 5). Witnessing the body resolves this ethical dilemma because through it witnesses can gain access to a fuller dimension of historical experience.

However, what Caruth calls a “crisis of truth” Ruth Leys calls a “crisis of representation” (252). Leys contends, “We might put it that the entire theory of trauma proposed by...Caruth is designed to preserve the truth of the trauma as the failure of representation—thereby permitting it to be passed on to others who can not only imaginatively identify with it but literally share in the communion of suffering” (253). Leys’s pointed critique questions one of humanities-based trauma theory’s core

assumptions: that traumatic experience manifests in the present through bodily symptoms whose literality allows for witness's sympathy to become empathy. In this regard the failure of representation ensures the "truth" of bodily affects, as Leys puts it "the subject's not-knowing of the trauma—his inability to speak or represent his experience—is what *guarantees* the return of the truth in the patient's traumatic repetitions" (252). To the extent that this configuration of embodiment and experience becomes instrumental for securing trauma's truth and literality, the body likewise becomes an instrument through which witnesses and victims alike share in the "communion of suffering" (253).

Leys's phrase is evocative of the economy of pain theories of traumatic experience engender around the act of witnessing and suggests that pain becomes something witnesses consume in order to join in the body of feeling victims of trauma present. Following Leys' critique, theories of trauma proceed from a prosthetic relationship that enables witnesses to feel the ethical dimensions of their selfhood as well as their attachments to historical experiences extended and expanded through victims' bodies. The modes of emotional, ethical, and historical-affective surrogacy that theories of traumatic witnessing produce are anchored in bodies that in turn become representative of whole histories of violence. The logic of representativity embedded in such prosthetic relationships propels identifications with forms of feeling that build from small-scale interpersonal interactions out toward large-scale national-affective formations.

From this perspective, silence becomes symptomatic of traumatic affect, which in turn becomes a representational strategy through which to generate durable affective attachments. Out of those attachments, representations of trauma stage relationships to

national-historical feeling that operate through the bodies of survivors as witnesses' prostheses and direct attention toward specific pains as representative of general orientations toward national histories. In articulating traumatic experience as first a blockage and finally a working through, theories of traumatic witnessing produce gendered orientations that presume a masculine, heteronormative frame. To the extent that these presumptions structure Foer's fictional representations of traumatic experience, the narrative's production of gendered affects flags a relationship to heteronormative masculinity and whiteness as given orientations that produce women's bodies as receptacles for traumatic violence and spaces of wounded men's repair.

Foer articulates this presumed relationship through infusing his descriptions of the Dresden firebombing with a narrative of Thomas Sr.'s sexual awakening and hopes for familial reproduction, the destruction of which comes to serve as an explanatory frame for his resultant silence. A few weeks before the Dresden raid, concealed behind a bookshelf that "protected" them, Thomas and his first love Anna, who will later be consumed in the Dresden firestorm, negotiate their first sexual encounter (126-27). Thomas reports that he "felt on the verge of bursting into flames," foreshadowing the impending destruction of Dresden he would soon witness and yoking his nascent sexuality to the violence he would soon endure. Framing the buildup to the Dresden firebombing as Thomas's sexual awakening, Foer ties Dresden's destruction to the erasure of Thomas's object of desire and thus produces Anna as one among the "regions of silence" he will carry within him.

Expressed through representations of lost love as a metaphor for trauma's "impossible history," Thomas, Sr.'s silence further corresponds to conventional understandings of traumatic affects. Anna's body's erasure, literally and figuratively, becomes the mechanism through which Thomas's silence guarantees the truth of his experiences. In this vein, his silence emerges as a gendered affect that through the same lens couches his survivorship as dependent on his embodiment of masculinity. Foer's representation of the firebombing suggests as much, beginning with a silence that "pressed down...like a hand":

One hundred planes flew overhead...I knew that something unimaginable was about to happen, I was thinking of Anna, I was overjoyed. I ran downstairs four steps at a time, they saw the look on my face, before I had time to say anything—what would I have said?—we hear a horrible noise, rapid, approaching explosions, like an applauding audience running toward us, then they were atop us, we were thrown into the corners, our cellar filled with fire and smoke, more powerful explosions, the walls lifted from the floor and separated just long enough to let light flood in before banging back to the ground...I later read that the first bombing lasted half an hour, but it felt like days and weeks, like the world was going to end... (210-11)

Throughout the description, Foer positions the silencing effects of the firebombing as a forcible imposition on Thomas's body. As something imposed and endured, the experience suggests his body's inviolability against the otherwise penetrative and erasing effects of the blast for the rest of family and, in particular, for Anna with whom he would have soon had a family of his own. In other words, the literal reproduction Anna's body promises to deliver has to be erased in order for Thomas's "silent" performance of survivorship to seem like result of an external imposition. The violence of the air raid

thus shatters his familial fantasy while at the same time producing it as an “impossible history” he nevertheless continues to carry as a “region of silence” within his experience.

If we read this scene as documenting a traumatic experience then we must also confront how love and sexuality articulate a vision of traumatic experience as an “impossible” and “silent” history. We must also confront how that history finds an alternate outlet through the vehicle of textual reproduction. As a gendered affect, silence in this sense emerges as less a direct symptom of traumatic experience than a strategy through which *Extremely Loud* represents Thomas’s relationship to historical events and to the absence that makes his personal history impossible. To the extent that his silence arises from what amounts to forestalled reproduction, Foer arguably mobilizes the discourse of trauma’s inevitable return through configuring familial reproduction as the narrative’s ultimate aspirational horizon. In doing so, *Extremely Loud* drives a wedge between the threateningly intergenerational reproduction of traumatic loss—from Thomas, Sr. through to Oskar—and heterofamilial reproduction as the horizon against which his Schell family becomes representative.

*Extremely Loud* couches Thomas’s trauma in terms of lost love and thwarted sexuality in order to situate narrative as the vehicle through which the reality of “unspeakable” historical traumas might find form. This choice raises questions over the ways gender and sexuality influence representations of traumatic symptomatology. Though the narrative presents this connection as a given and assumes its readers will intuit the logic that structures it, we ought to ask why lost love and silence seem to fit together so easily and why, in this regard, men’s love for women endures as a “region of



silence” within their corporeal capacities while women’s bodies are, as if by necessity, erased.

The sense that lost love manifests in physical but not necessarily cognitive silence suggests a structural relationship between sexuality, desire, and embodied affects that takes heterosexuality as a given orientation. Imagined as the result of Anna’s erasure, Thomas’s silence is also imagined to eventually strip him of his ability to express the most basic form of identity, the pronoun “I” (17), a loss directly tied to the perceptually active but practically absent capacity to reproduce through Anna’s now lost body. Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of “regions of silence” in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which sketches a similar relationship between the erasure of desire and physical silence, helps to draw out how Foer’s presentation takes heterosexuality to be, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, an “intentional arc...that for the normal subject gives experience its degree of vitality and fecundity” (160). Reading the case of a young girl who had fallen silent after her mother forbid her to see her lover, Merleau-Ponty argues that the impossibility of seeing her love manifests as silence because “speech is, among all bodily functions, the most tightly linked to communal existence....Aphonia...represents a refusal of coexistence...The patient breaks with her the relational life of the familial milieu” (163). The “sexual signification” of these symptoms thus signifies for Merleau-Ponty a relation “to past and future, self and others...to the fundamental dimensions of existence” (164). The young girl regains her voice when she is “let free by her family to again see the young man she loves,” an affective restoration that suggests “that sensory messages or memories are only explicitly grasped or known by us given a general adhesion to the

zone of our body and of our life that they concern” (164-65). To the extent that one’s desire for “communal existence” remains foreclosed, “the power to learn, to mature, and to enter into communication with others are all somehow blocked by a bodily symptom; existence has become entangled and the body has become ‘life’s hiding place’” (167).

The movement between the personal and the general throughout Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of silence and sexuality is quite evocative of the ways that sexual capacity is taken to underpin “coexistence” as the basic strata of perceptual life. As Merleau-Ponty’s reading of the young girl’s case illustrates, the body’s capacity for affective response is imagined as enfolded with one’s intentional directedness toward the body’s sexual complement. One’s capacity to remember is further linked to the areas of the body one’s memories actualize. When those capacities cannot find their outlet, they become blockages that entangle the “vitality and fecundity” of existence into what in this context appears to signal the non-reproductivity of the body as “life’s hiding place.”

Tying “existence” in its barest form to a notion of “fecundity” that articulates itself via sexuality as an “intentional arc,” silence emerges as a fundamentality non-productive orientation toward the world that stems from a set of “blocked up” experiences. Foer’s representations of silence and foreclosed reproductivity generate a similar structural relationship that posits Thomas, Sr.’s inability speak about Anna’s erasure as a “block” that produces his silent body as “life’s hiding place.” Foer’s suggestion that textual reproduction can serve as a prosthetic through which one can mitigate these blocks points to narrative as a mode of prosthetic engagement with otherwise “impossible histories” while simultaneously presenting Thomas’s body as

representative of a blockage that cannot be overcome. As Thomas explains, “the distance that wedged itself between me and my happiness wasn’t the world, it wasn’t the bombs or the burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go” (17).

Against the backdrop of his Dresden experiences and the metaphor of reproductive release as “bursting into flames,” Thomas’s inability to reproduce appears as a necessary element of the narrative’s progression toward a reparative, reproductive future wherein traumatic experiences might only manifest in narratives of never letting go.

*Extremely Loud* thus represents the firebombing of Dresden as traumatic catalyst for Thomas Sr.’s nonproductivity, situates his memories of Anna as an incapacitating region of silence within his affective and sexual schema, and positions his wounded and traumatized body as the vehicle for an impossible history he must carry within him. Framed through sexual and reproductive metaphors, Thomas’s silence becomes a necessarily gendered affect through which his body’s durability serves as a testament to the locatedness of his experiences as much as his affective anchorage in Anna’s absent body. Through taking up the discourse of trauma, *Extremely Loud* presents Thomas Sr.’s affects as a particularly emotionally powerful representational strategy through which to frame the Dresden firebombing as generative of belated national-familial consequences. But those consequences become confined to Thomas’s body through the same gesture inasmuch as his silence marks the foreclosure of their reproductivity.

Vonnegut represents the Dresden firebombing as producing similarly silencing effects, but offers those effects in the service of a different and more critical end. The contrast between the narratives’ representations of Dresden highlights *Extremely Loud*’s

reliance on the discourse of trauma as the vehicle for its sentimental strategy. As Vonnegut's rendering of the firebombing makes clear, notions of silence and impossible histories are not universal symptoms of traumatic experience but rather selected elements of a strategic representation. Where Foer uses silence as a surrogate for forestalled reproductivity and "blocked up" desire, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* "reproduction was not the main business of the evening" but rather total destruction (Vonnegut 107).

The setting for Billy Pilgrim's survival amplifies this immediate difference. Quartered in an underground meat locker of the titular slaughterhouse-turned-barracks for American prisoners, Pilgrim survives the bombardment locked in a "cement block cube" designed initially to house the carcasses of animals slaughtered on the killing floors above. In further contrast to the unspeakable core of Thomas's Dresden memory, Billy remembers the scene "shimmeringly—as follows":

There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked...

A guard would go to the head of the stairs every so often to see what it was like outside... Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn.

It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke.... Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead.

So it goes.

The guards drew together instinctively... They experimented with one expression after another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet. (226-227)

Compared to Foer's rendering, Vonnegut characterizes the firebombing as consuming "everything organic" and leaving behind a moonscape the profundity of which renders further explanation superfluous. The guard's silence at first surveying the scene is thus not "imposed" nor imagined as stemming from a traumatic loss, but is rather the only available response to a scene that otherwise has no context. Furthermore, the pathos of Foer's pregnant maternal body is absent against the flatness of Pilgrim's memory and the deflective dismissal of his "so it goes" catchphrase. Taken together, the guards' stunned silence and Pilgrim's relatively flat memory point to the instrumentality of Foer's overtly emotional representation for reframing Dresden's destruction as one family's representative devastation. Rather than isolate its effects through a representative figure and his thwarted familial desires, Vonnegut's spare descriptions frame the bombing as the result of a voracious nationalism for which the novel's titular slaughterhouse becomes synecdochic.

In further contrast to Foer, Vonnegut translates this desire for violence through figuratively pregnant *men* who serve as a critique, rather than a retrenchment, of national-familial feeling. Former high school teacher and elected leader of the American prisoners of war Edgar Derby is "mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom" in the weeks before the Dresden bombing. Defending the mythos of American unity and democratic equality before defector-turned-Nazi propagandist Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Derby wearily becomes the spokesman for a kind of masculine national belonging that Vonnegut frames as generationally specific and temporally vanishing. Linking his defense of American mythos to his being "mournfully pregnant,"

Vonnegut suggests that Derby's patriotism makes him into a surrogate for a sense of national unity that proves ultimately fruitless against the absurdity of Dresden's devastation. The irony of Derby's "mournful pregnancy" suggests Vonnegut's critique of the narrative machinations through which war is made to seem like a virtuously filial duty and it further illustrates the ways that national feeling manifests as "imaginary wisdom" in the face of uncontextualizable violence.

In this vein, Derby's fate carries a different sort of pathos than Foer's pregnant Dresden victim. Anna's death becomes what Thomas seems incapable of moving beyond, and his "unborn child" illustrates the overtly familial and yet impossibly deferred disruption and devastation of the Dresden raid. Her body places Thomas's object of forestalled reproductive desire in conventional and unthreatening terms that reify the effects of dramatically rupturing and penetrative trauma. Derby's "mournful" pregnancy, on the other hand, telegraphs its terminus from the outset. As both receptacle and vehicle, Derby embodies the ideological as much as biological reproductivity through which nationalism takes personal form. As Foucault argues, "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (*Discipline and Punish* 202), and for Vonnegut, Derby's pregnant body signals the continued reproduction of a mechanically enacted patriotism born from the fictitious relation that binds bodies to the conscriptive logics of the state.

## **“Frames Are Where the Money Is”:**

### **Whiteness, Insularity, and National Feeling in *Slaughterhouse-Five***

The differences between *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s and *Extremely Loud*'s representations of Dresden's effects flag a critical difference between the ways Vonnegut and Foer frame the narratives' historical and cultural context. Vonnegut, like Foer, frames *Slaughterhouse-Five* through allusions to literary and mythic narratives: evoking several popular histories of Dresden, citing and quoting from Céline and Horace, and explaining that writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* has turned him like Lot's wife into a pillar of salt. However, these allusions aim to contextualize *Slaughterhouse-Five* within a history of national violence that appears unavailable or at least unnecessary within Foer's imaginary. Vonnegut's reference to the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, alludes to the British firebombing of Hamburg, Germany, codenamed "Operation Gomorrah."<sup>15</sup> The strategy of total war that underpinned this operation would be reprised in the 1960s as the U.S. began its lengthy bombing campaign over North Vietnam, what the *Pentagon Papers* described as a shift from an event-reprisal strategy to a generalized response to North Vietnamese aggression.<sup>16</sup> In the final chapter, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrator points to the 1968 assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and notes that "every day my government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes" (268). Vonnegut generates a relationship between the extraordinary and the everyday by linking national public tragedies to the banality of climbing body counts on nightly news reports. Appending Billy's catchphrase to the end of line is not a dismissal of this relationship but rather a

demonstration of the ways his “quietist” rationalization of violence’s repetition performs the affective inclination through which it becomes a banal part of daily life.

In this respect, Billy’s silence is more performative than symptomatic.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as Billy’s Dresden experiences may have propelled his “so it goes” acceptance of violence on an incomprehensible scale, the incomprehensibility and absurdity of the level of destruction for which Dresden is representative but not exhaustive critiques forms of representativity that seek otherwise to contain the scale of its devastation within the boundaries of particular bodies or particularized experiences. The totality of Dresden’s destruction is too vast to be captured within one person’s, or one family’s, experiences. Vonnegut’s framing allusions to historical and contemporaneous acts of violence thus situate Billy’s so-it-goes response as an equally absurd rationalization that, for him, silences the relation between Vonnegut’s narrative framing, but, for readers, amplifies how his being borne along by a current of violence does little to address the conditions within which such a floating feeling becomes possible.

Vonnegut’s historical framing thus aims to produce a different orientation toward the generalizable affective belonging Billy expresses as a “so it goes” relationship. His characteristic irony and dark humor clears space for *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s critique of Derby’s war-time nationalism to extend into a critique of Billy Pilgrim’s floating feelings as indicative of white insularity. Through detailing Pilgrim’s home-life, *Slaughterhouse-Five* focuses its staging of national and personal “regions of silence” as areas of public and personal feeling that remain perceptually active but practically unavailable. Those unavailable feelings become alternate ways to engage with historical violence for which



“official histories” cannot account (235). Tying the firebombing of Dresden to the ongoing war in Vietnam and the struggle for rights and equal protection for all persons to a “so it goes” feeling that glides past them, Vonnegut’s ironic caricature is not representative of an affirmative aspiration. Rather, through Billy, Vonnegut encourages readers’ disidentification with the plugged-up insularity that generates Billy’s feelings as a normative, everyday orientation, and asks them to see how it maintains a region of silence around national and personal violence.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*’s opening scenes call attention to the “regions of silence” in the narrator’s memories of Dresden and presents Billy Pilgrim as a caricature invented to fill the void. The narrator explains that he had set out to visit his old war buddy Bernard O’Hare to gather material for his book about Dresden. When he arrives he meets O’Hare’s wife Mary, a nurse, who has prepared an “operating room” around the kitchen table (16). Revealing that neither of the old soldiers could remember “anything good” (17), the scene transitions into an autopsy of dead memories. Having been “talking to herself,” Mary finally interjects:

‘You were just *babies* then!’ she said... ‘But I know you’re not going to write it that way, are you? [...] You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played by in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.’ (18)

Mary’s protest links the contemporary backdrop of the war in Vietnam to the cultural production of stylized narratives of war-time heroism and clear-cut causes and implicates

iconic masculinities as among the circulation devices for young men's identification with romanticized patriotic violence. Taking her counter-feeling seriously, the narrator gives us the hapless, drifting, and decidedly counter-iconic figure of Billy Pilgrim as *Slaughterhouse-Five's* focal point.

Presenting Mary's argument as the impetus for the narrative's ironic characterization, Vonnegut suggests that Pilgrim's counter-iconic embodiment is on the one hand offered as a critique of hardened and conventionally masculine heroism and on the other as a critique of the sentimentality through which conventional war narratives convert violence into an affective inclination toward national identification. However, expressing Mary's argument through the conventionally sentimental figure of children and in terms of protective motherhood raises questions about why the narrative's critique takes shape through a specifically feminine counter-narrative. Why, in other words, choose to frame the novel as emerging from a kitchen table operation nursed along by a figural Mother Mary? To the extent that the narrator's memories remain perceptually active but practically unavailable, the scene suggests that Mary's presence serves as a prosthetic through which the narrator finds a means of expressing them. In this sense, the narrative appears to need a maternal figure to serve as the emotional surrogate for its critique of nationalist masculine sentimentality. However, insofar as Mary becomes the prosthetic through whom the narrator overcomes the blockages that might otherwise plug up his critical focus, her prostheticization suggests that conventionally sentimental domesticity is a region of silence within the form of wounded white masculinity the narrator's voided memories represent. Unable to give them a place or a shape without her

intervention, the narrator becomes able to construct an elaborate and imaginative framework through her “operative” presence.

In this vein, *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests the forms of prosthetic relationships that wounded whiteness as insularity relies on for its extension, and the novel positions the forms of counter-feeling Mary voices as unavailable within traditional masculinity’s orientations. As Elizabeth Barnes observes of sentimental narratives, women’s bodies serve as “synecdoche for...*emotional susceptibility*” (8). In drawing upon sentimental conventions Vonnegut implies that his “old soldiers” silences about their memories of Dresden are performative attempts to keep their own emotional susceptibility quiet. Yet through Mary as a vehicle for this more explicitly sentimental kind of emotional identification, the narrative can unfold its story of Billy Pilgrim as a cautionary critique of how more traditionally masculine sentimentality around war, heroism, duty, and patriotic belonging manifests a more pernicious region of silence around their relationship to the continual reproduction of historical violence in the name of securing domestic space. Vonnegut’s caricature thus speaks to the sense that homemaking, as a feeling that manifests a particular relationship to space, is an ongoing process that generates women as surrogates for men’s otherwise threateningly sentimental feelings of emplacement.<sup>18</sup>

As the narrative unfolds around the story of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut’s critique of masculinist sentimentality’s prostheticization of women’s attachments to domesticity takes shape around the notion of woundedness as rootless and aimless memories, or being “unstuck in time” (29). Named “Pilgrim,” Vonnegut plainly signals Billy’s placelessness,

and through the story of his domestic resettlement following the war, Vonnegut presents Billy's "unstuckness" as reliant on the felt solidity of his attachments to home and place. Billy becomes an optometrist and marries a wealthy ophthalmologist's daughter named Valencia. The scenes detailing their honeymoon position Billy's post-war settlement as a metaphor for broader forms of emplacement through which "pilgrims" make their homes in new worlds. Set during an "Indian Summer" in "New England," Valencia fantasizes their consummation as the conjoining of Queen Elizabeth I and Christopher Columbus (151). Merging narratives of "discovery" and British settlement against the backdrop of an "Indian Summer," Vonnegut presents Valencia's fantasy as representative of the affective continuance of settler-feeling and its rootedness in metaphors of sexual conquest and reproductivity. Their consummation produces their son Robert, who would go on to become a Green Beret, suggesting that Vonnegut's allusions to American colonial settlement work out an implicit critique of its fantasy-enactment as continually reproductive of the forms of American nationalist expansiveness then underway in Vietnam. Through Valencia, Billy thus becomes attached to the fantasy of colonial expansiveness within which she frames their consummation. Through her reproductivity he finds himself emplaced within that fantasy's manifestation. As a "reward" for "marrying a girl nobody in his right mind would have married," Billy's father-in-law gives him "a new Buick Roadmaster, an all-electric home" and makes him "manager of his most prosperous office...where Billy could expect thirty thousand dollars a year" (152).<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on this newfound prosperity, Billy's mother reports that the "Pilgrims are moving up in the world" (152). Configured as essentially a dowry, Billy's

inheritances mark out the relationship between heterofamilial reproductivity and capital investment that the narrative positions as secured through his connubial joining with Valencia's body.

Calling attention to this relationship as taking the form of a fantasy, Vonnegut suggests that Billy's emplacement within the hetero-reproductive economy of capitalized whiteness generates insularity as a zone of feeling around conjugal ties and settler-colonial domesticity. His insularity becomes more profound as his father-in-law's capital investments push Billy toward a set of political investments that situate him as among the members of what George Lipsitz called the "countersubversive conservative mobilization" sparked by the American political right following the 1964 Civil Rights Act (35). For example, by 1967 Billy had adorned his Cadillac with a bumper sticker calling for the impeachment of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, a gift from his father-in-law who was a member of the John Birch Society (Vonnegut 73). An unwittingly dutiful son-in-law, Billy seems not to notice how his bumper-sticker affiliations mark his membership in a tacitly racist political organization that aimed to undo some of the Warren court's most lasting decisions with respect to equal protection under the law.<sup>20</sup> Billy's passive association with these organizations and ideologies in effect delimit the ethical frame of reference through which he becomes able to view the world. "Saving the republic," as Klaus Fischer notes Birch Society billboards implored passers-by during the 1960s (159), through dismantling juridical protections for historically and contemporaneously disenfranchised persons depends on seeing those persons as less than deserving of equal protection under the law. This logic likewise

depends on seeing oneself as always already more deserving of those protections as a result of the durability of one's feelings of attachment to the "republic." Through situating Billy's affiliation with these organizations and their arguments as the result of an unwittingly dutiful sense of familial belonging, Vonnegut suggests that Billy's passive acceptance of the logics behind the exclusivity of white belonging slips into his normal, everyday perceptual surround and feeds into the continuing violence of exclusion.

Vonnegut compounds the irony of Billy's insularity and unwitting identifications through using his occupation as a metaphor for whiteness manifest through a particularly myopic way of seeing. As an optometrist, Billy's business is "prescribing corrective lenses," but as he notes "frames...are where the money is" (31). Alluding to the narrative's subversive framing of Billy's insularity, Vonnegut points out how his capacity to see himself as implicated within a particular ethical and perceptual milieu depends on the frames through which his situation comes into focus. Vonnegut demonstrates the effects of these frames' myopic insularity during a scene ironically set at a meeting of the local Lions Club. The evening's speaker is a Marine Corps major who explains that he is "in favor of...bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason" (76).<sup>21</sup> The major's logic depends on framing North Vietnam's survival and future existence as dependent on the exceptionality of Euro-American rationality and the limits of U.S. benevolence. That sense of "rationality" is thus configured as generating the conditions of its imposition as well as the conditions within which wholesale annihilation becomes a reasonable response to another nation's willful resistance.

Staging his critique of the Major's logic as an address offered to a group of philanthropic businessmen whose mission is to distribute frames and lenses, Vonnegut positions the Lion's Club as ironically synecdochic of the kinds of forums wherein individual perceptions and limited ethical horizons—well-intentioned or otherwise—generate the collective conditions for these logical contortions. Vonnegut continues this ironic play with optometric metaphors when Billy, reading from his trade journal the *Review of Optometry*, comes across an auspicious political forecast:

*What happens in 1968 will rule the fate of European optometrists for at least 50 years! Billy read. With this warning, Jean Thiriat, Secretary of the National Union of Belgium Opticians, is pressing for formation of a 'European Optometry Society.' The alternatives, he says, will be the obtaining of professional status, or, by 1971, reduction to the role of spectacle-sellers. (73)*

Given the prior allusions to European colonialism and the political affiliations into which Billy rather haplessly finds himself grafted, the notion of a “European Optometry Society” becomes a clear indicator of Vonnegut's ironic critique of the ways whiteness becomes a collective investment that manifests as a shared way of seeing. Situating Billy's insularity as sustained through calls to invest in one's racial exceptionalism as a guard against being reduced to “spectacle sellers,” Vonnegut configures whiteness as a frame that delimits one's perceptual surround while generating the felt urgency of retrenching those limitations. Vonnegut's portrayal of Billy's domestic life thus takes shape around the ways whiteness manifests in a particularly myopic relation to history, nationalism, and past and present violence. Further Vonnegut demonstrates the ways that

whiteness consolidates its investments through generating collective affects that incline persons like Billy toward sustaining the status quo.

To the extent that myopic whiteness bounds Billy's everyday perceptions of his home-life in Illium, his visits to Tralfamadore offer a "corrective lens" through which to see his insularity in context. While on one of his travels to the planet, the Tralfamadorians teach him that his gaze is irrevocably shortsighted using an elaborate and evocative metaphor:

...this poor earthling...his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe. [...] All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe. He [...] didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation. (147)

This lesson in perspective serves to highlight the otherwise insulating limitations Billy lives within at home. However, given that this lesson comes from *another planet*, it broadens the scope of Vonnegut's critique of wounded whiteness's insularity to encompass Billy's representatively national-domestic perspective. At home, he can only see a "little dot" of an otherwise impossibly broad field. The Tralfamadorian metaphor thus becomes a way to focus on what lies beyond Billy's limiting frames. The apparatus between his capacity to sense the fullness of his situation and his limited horizon serves as a metaphor for the "frames" he sells at home. Through that metaphor, we can see those frames as representative of the plugs Walters imagines to manifest as whiteness's perceptual insularity. Billy's daily life articulates a relationship to broader histories that Vonnegut situates as a continuum stretching from Euro-colonial settlement to present-day



imperial nationalism. Seeing those broader histories and sensing their violent implications depends on the “frames” one wears.

The juxtaposition in perspective Vonnegut builds throughout these scenes speaks to the novel’s characterization of the continuity of U.S. history as a region of silence within national feeling, a recognition of situatedness along a historical continuum that remains perceptually active but practically unavailable. That Billy eventually comes to understand the limits of his own perspective through fantastical visits to a distant planet further demonstrates how such recognition remains unavailable within U.S.-framed history’s limiting perspectives. Billy’s “so it goes” dismissal and quiet acceptance in this way suggests an individual mode of relation to these broader historical entanglements. As Walters’s notion of sensory plugs suggests, Vonnegut’s layered critique of whiteness through his representations of Billy’s myopic insularity points out how whiteness plugs his engagement with his situation’s broader conditions. Those blockages also serve to simultaneously plug him into a collective feeling of attachment to domestic space, an experience of wounded whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging.

Vonnegut demonstrates the relationship between perceptual plugs and the prosthetic attachments they generate through staging Billy’s confrontation with “official Air Force Historian” Bertram Copeland Rumfoord (234). Setting their fated encounter in a shared hospital recovery room, Vonnegut further suggests that their mutual woundedness becomes the medium through which they are able to come to a new understanding with respect to the contiguity between historical and present violence. Tasked with writing “the official Air Force standpoint” on the Dresden bombing in a

“one-volume history of the United States Army Air Corps in World War II” (235), Rumfoord feels the burden of reframing Dresden “[for] fear that a lot of bleeding hearts might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do” (244-45). While Rumfoord contemplates this “new history” Billy continues to say that he “was there” on the ground in Dresden (245), a fact Rumfoord dismisses as a historical impossibility given that anything left alive would represent “a flaw in the design” of the air raid (230). Rumfoord initially speculates that Billy has “echolalia,” insisting “for his own comfort, . . . that [a] person . . . whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, was suffering from a repulsive disease” (246). Yet in imagining Billy as an “echo” Vonnegut suggests that Rumfoord feels repulsed by the history he is responsible for documenting, a feeling that seems to have no place within his sense of the air war as something that “had to be done” (235). However, as Billy begins to reveal details of his experience, Rumfoord backs away from his initial diagnosis and begins to “reluctantly [become] interested in Billy as a human being” (253). His recognition of their mutual humanity comes through the slow recognition of their mutual woundedness—Billy’s literal wounds from Dresden and Rumfoord’s more apparently emotional wounds at having come face to face with a “human” “flaw in the design”—suggesting that through Billy as his emotional surrogate, Rumfoord can find an outlet for his outpouring of sympathy: ““It must have been hell on the ground” he begins (253), “Pity the men who had to *do* it. [...] You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground” (254).

As in the novel’s opening kitchen table operation, an allusion to political sentimentality comes between this recognition and Rumfoord’s expressions of sympathy.

Billy closes his story of Dresden with a memory of having been shipped home on a freighter named the *Lucretia A. Mott*. Configured as a literal vessel ferrying these men's affects, Vonnegut's reference to Mott points back to the narrative's opening suggestion that women serve as the emotional surrogates through which men actualize alternate feeling toward national histories. Here that suggestion is situated as a conflict between an "official historian" and an actual though "impossible" survivor of history's effects. The novel's critique of the "official" erasure of sympathy from everyday masculine feeling thus comes full circle. As Billy's domestic scenes illustrate, the pattern of gendered reliance *Slaughterhouse-Five* produces is a necessary part of its strategic re-envisioning of nationalist masculinity and myopic and insular whiteness. Where the regions of silence within the narrator's memories are indicative of blockages around a sympathetic narration of war trauma, the narrative he writes envisions regions of silence as national-affective zones of unspeakably "mixed feelings" over the effects of historical violence over there "on the ground."

*Slaughterhouse-Five* in this way suggests that within a masculinist economy of feeling national history, Billy's insularity and "so it goes" acceptance become the mechanism of historical erasure. Confronting the violence of national history would require a perceptual shift that would unplug whiteness's blockages. That this potential repair goes no further than two wounded men's acknowledgement of each other's pain, however, highlights how such pain alliances prop up the insularity necessary to articulate interpersonal resolution as national-historical recognition. Thus, Rumfoord's acknowledgement of Billy's historical suffering becomes a performance of affective

recognition that generates rather than alleviates how suffering is kept silent within national histories. Vonnegut suggests that this sort of “official” recognition becomes representative of a performance of national sympathy that through recognizing the personal maintains a silence around its imbrication with the historical.

Actively silencing the historical contiguity that suffering bodies represent converts those bodies into prosthetics. Through them, the historical continuum of U.S. violence Vonnegut imagines across *Slaughterhouse-Five* is broken up into a series of representative events. As events for which bodies like Billy’s become representative, national-historical acts of violence can be framed as extraordinary exceptions to the otherwise smooth flow of everyday life. Ironizing this process through positioning Billy’s relationship to his own history of violence, silence, and erasure as whiteness’s insularity, Vonnegut pushes his readers to see emotional surrogacy and prosthetic engagements as the background conditions against which a “so it goes” feeling becomes a marker of ahistorical belonging, a feeling buoyed by the representative exceptionality of traumas and their “impossible histories.”

**“It’s Unspeakable, Write It!”:**

**Sentimentality and National Familiality in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

Vonnegut’s representations of “regions of silence” contrast with Foer’s domestic scenes, wherein the effects of the firebombing and Thomas Sr.’s silence are imagined to manifest in the Schell family’s fractured familial life. *Extremely Loud*’s straightforward sincerity configures the Schells as representatively embodying intergenerational

traumatic affects. The novel ties their domestic processes of working through to national repair and restoration, and organizes that repair around a vision of what Berlant calls an “intimate public.” The intimacy of pain draws persons together into an affective collective expressed through a sense of “vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real” (5). The difficult stuff of life—pain, loss, detachment, separation—forms a sense of alliance that becomes a surrogate for engagement with the conditions that continually generate mixed feelings. Foer imagines women’s bodies as surrogates for these feelings and as prosthetics through whom wounded men migrate their traumatic experiences into durable attachments to what the novel presents as the collective aspirational horizon of national-familial fantasy.

The allusions to histories of settler-colonial violence, racism, nationalist sentimentality, and masculine representativity through which *Slaughterhouse-Five* staged its critique of whiteness’s insularity fall away. The explicitly familial drama that comes in their place suggests that such concerns form the given backdrop against which the Schells can be positioned as representative. *Extremely Loud*’s sincerity suggests that the given normality of whiteness and heterofamiliarity inform the shape of the narrative’s imaginary and take form through affects of pain, loss, and traumatic experience. In not calling attention to these affects as indicative of the social formations that take form through them, *Extremely Loud* effectively frames their givenness as a region of silence within the sincerity that traumatic exceptionality makes possible.

The wounded men at the center of *Extremely Loud*’s representative drama, Thomas, Sr. and Oskar, each experience the kind of floating relationship to time and

place that Billy feels throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In *Extremely Loud*, however, these floating feelings are situated as signs of trauma's insulating effects. Their emplacement within women's relatively durable bodies points to another of *Extremely Loud*'s sincere revisions, this time aimed toward literalizing the forms of emotional surrogacy that *Slaughterhouse-Five* highlighted as ironic critiques of white insularity. Foer's sincere reliance on women's literal emotional surrogacy situates his female characters' overt objectification and limited agency as given elements of wounded men's phenomenal surround. Thomas's or Oskar's floating feelings thus express a felt independence from place made possible through women's emplacement within a gendered hierarchy that positions women's bodies as spaces within which wounded men can anchor their pains. The sense of placeless feelings and surrogate anchorages that Foer's gendered dichotomies imply are inflections settler-affect. Not needing to take account of the ways others provide domestic security, the men Foer imagines are thus able to live through their woundedness because they are able to live their day-to-day lives vicariously. In this sense, despite the narrative's focalization through wounded men it is ultimately women's bodies that become the pivot points of *Extremely Loud*'s vision of an intimate public because the durability of their attachments to heterofamiliarity form the surface upon which men can project wounded sincerity as an aspirational orientation toward future repair.

The relationships between women's durable attachments to heterofamiliarity and the novel's sincere aspirations open up around the shattering domestic effects of Thomas, Sr.'s Dresden traumas. Following his immigration to the United States, he serendipitously

meets and marries Anna's sister, but their marriage never took form as the blissful union for which he had hoped. Instead, Thomas describes it as a "marking off of distance," "a marriage of millimeters and rules," that ensure his and his unnamed wife's isolation from their pasts (109). Experienced as a form of distanced isolation, their marriage provides him with an affective anchorage from which to remember and reorient his past experiences. Thinking of Anna's absence, for instance, he explains, "the center of me followed her, but I was left with the shell of me" (113). From within the relative rigidity of the measured and "ruled" domestic space he creates with Anna's sister, he is able to feel his sense of "self" as having "followed" Anna. In this vein his feeling of being out of place owes to the relative durability of his attachments to a home he is thus able to regard as a "nothing space" because he experiences it as a "no place" (110).

Foer positions Thomas, Sr.'s ability to experience his home and his marriage as "nothing spaces" into which he can pour his memories of Dresden as owing to his wife's ability to become the surrogate for his feelings of attachment. As a sculptor by trade, his wife's body quite literally becomes the palette upon which he sculpts the shape of the life he would rather have lived with Anna. As if to compound the sense that Thomas's actual life becomes hidden away within the fantasy space of his memorial attachments, Foer describes the sculpting scenes from his wife's nameless perspective:

I took off my clothes...He came over and moved my body like I was a doll...all that mattered was him looking at me...[After] a few sessions it becomes clear that he was sculpting Anna. He was trying to remake the girl he knew seven years before. He looked at me as he sculpted, but he saw her...he was trying to make me so he could fall in love with me...We were looking for an acceptable compromise...It was the first time I had ever made love...I wondered if he knew

that. It felt like crying...I looked at the unfinished sculpture of my sister, and the unfinished girl looked back at me. (83-84)

Presented as needing Thomas's attention in order to bring herself into being, she becomes pliant under the pressure of his desire to remake her. In identifying herself with Thomas's "unfinished girl," she characterizes herself as becoming the vehicle for Thomas's memorial fantasy as well as the surrogate through which his "impossible history" manifests its traumatic reproductivity in a way that permits his detachment from its present domestic effects.

That this self-limitation seems not only appropriate but also necessary to "fill the hole in the middle" of Anna's sister calls attention to the sincerity of Foer's characterization (83). This nameless woman appears to serve only as the conduit for Thomas's active rearrangement of his life and later for Oskar's negotiations of his mixed feelings about his father's death. Caught between each of their conflicting demands while attempting to deal with the death of her son, her identification as the stuff of someone else's affective sculpting makes her inability to navigate her own traumas the condition within which *Extremely Loud*'s men find it possible to work through theirs. In this sense, her body's durable emplacement as a domestic-affective anchor provides the space from within which Thomas Sr. can fantasize about the life he could not live and Oskar can keep the extent of his pain secret from his mother. That her instrumentality is yoked to a sense of positive objectification, as needing men's attention to complete her, frames the narrative's production of shattered domesticity around a distinctively gendered economy wherein men's pains are positioned as the stuff of women's emotional fulfillment.



Yet in imagining women as needing to absorb the painful surplus of men's wounded emotions and lives not lived, Foer's reciprocally imagines men's lives to be exceedingly productive. Men's experiences, as *Extremely Loud* represents them, spill over into others' emotional lives. The excesses of feeling that thus become "unspeakable" nevertheless continue to take up women's affective space. Conjoined as they are to physical, domestic space within the novel's sincere imaginary, women's bodies as well as their affective lives are imagined as another plane of men's spatial expansiveness. This kind of limitless expansiveness, the experience of feeling more than one can describe and yet finding others through whom one can channel and manage the excess, points toward another dimension of settler-affect within whiteness.

*Extremely Loud*'s aspiration toward future repair depends on generating and maintaining this gendered economy. The sympathy the novel aims to garner from its readers relies on situating women's emotional emptiness as a bridge toward the kind of better tomorrow Berlant argues is characteristic of sentimental narrative's work in engendering intimate publics around representatively personal pains. The "hole in the middle of me" that Thomas's wife fills with his attention manifests in the "two-thousand white pages" of the blank autobiography she writes at Thomas's behest (124). Urging her to find the exhilaration he had felt at "building the world anew" (120), Thomas set her up with a typewriter and reams of paper. He had thought "if she could express herself rather than suffer herself, if she had a way to relieve the burden" she might have found a way through her own pain (119). Realizing that he had pulled the ribbon from the typewriter in order to "[unwind] the negative it held—the future homes I had created for Anna, the

letters I wrote without response—as if it would protect me from my actual life,” he comes to a far more unsettling realization: “it’s unspeakable, write it!—I realized that your mother couldn’t see the emptiness, she couldn’t see anything” (124). However, what he perceives as an “emptiness” she could not see, Foer positions as an accurate record of her life. In answer to Thomas’s prodding suggestions about what she might write, she explains “My life story is the story of everyone I’ve ever met,” and asks in response to his suggestion that she write about her feelings “Aren’t my life and my feelings the same thing?” (130). Through the blank record of her life’s feelings, Foer couches her emotional dependency on Thomas’s fulfillment as a tragically impossible goal out of which Thomas becomes able to recognize the profundity of his wounded fantasy’s shattering effects. She remains unable to extricate herself from these effects because she has become the surrogate for the parts of Thomas’s life that he seems otherwise unable to manage.

*Extremely Loud* thus divides its sense of Dresden’s shattering domestic effects along the gendered differences its two survivors embody. For Thomas’s wife, the only measure of *her* life is her capacity to feel for others, a capacity that she is compelled to articulate as a blank space. Within it, Thomas can reimagine and revise an alternate for the life with Anna, Dresden made into an impossible history. As he explains, “it’s a shame that we have to live, but it’s a tragedy that we get to live only one life, because if I’d had two lives, I would have spent one of them with her” (133). The tragedy of their mutual impossibility acts as a sympathy machine that works to resolve the inequitable division of gendered pain Foer imagines into a point of affective identification for the narrative’s readers. In this sense, rather than inviting readers to contextualize the

narrative's focal traumas within a continuum of historical and present-day violence through ironic distance from its focal characters, *Extremely Loud* brings its readers incredibly close to the pains it asks them to feel in kind. The characters' differently configured victimhood—whether of Dresden, of lost love, or of love as a form of emotional instrumentality—produces them as vehicles for an affective identification predicated on the universality of pain rather than on the historically violent conditions that cause it.

Using these survivors and their pain as the backdrop for the novel's reimagining of 9/11's national traumas, Foer positions Oskar's troubled relationship to his father's absence as an allegory for national familial crisis. Through representing his childhood frustrations with emotions he cannot fully process, Foer offers Oskar as a synecdoche for his two Dresden survivors embodiment of the gendered difference between feeling too much and "the cancer of never letting go" (17). Throughout the novel, he embarks on a quest to find the lock that fits a key he discovers in the bottom of a vase his father had hidden in the closet. Foer uses Oskar's journeys throughout New York to construct the sense that shared pain binds an otherwise motley cast of strangers together into an intimate public. On his journeys, Oskar meets a paralyzed man who cannot leave his apartment, a saddened woman negotiating the end of her marriage, and an old man named "Mr. Black" who keeps an encyclopedic catalog of world events in his apartment. The latter of these characters becomes Oskar's companion on his journeys through the city, and as a result of Oskar's influence decides to turn on his hearing aid for the first time in a "long, long time," breaking into tears at the sounds of the world he'd been missing

including most of all his own voice (168). Wondering how such a “lonely person could have been living so close to me my whole life,” Oskar shares his numerous “inventions” with Mr. Black, including the especially touching notion of water treated with a chemical that would allow one’s skin to change color with one’s mood, so that “everyone could know what everyone else felt, and we could be more careful with each other” (163). With Mr. Black’s help, Oskar eventually comes to discover the strange man living in his Grandmother’s apartment who, it turns out, is in fact his Grandfather, Thomas, Sr. Mr. Black having said his goodbyes and thanking Oskar for getting him “back into the world” (254), Oskar and his Grandfather work together to take up what’s left of Oskar’s great quest. When it finally comes to an end, Oskar learns that his father had initially purchased the vase as an anniversary present for his mother that he had planned to give her three days after 9/11.

Oskar’s happy-go-lucky journey through New York follows in the track of his grandfather’s far more woeful journey from Dresden to the U.S. Having lost his central anchor, Oskar is left to both figure out his identity and to configure it with the help of those he meets along the way. Whereas his Grandfather lost his voice, and eventually the word “I,” Oskar has lost his father and thus his sense of how to best manage his pains and confusions. Though not told as a romantic tragedy, Oskar’s process for working his way through his father’s untimely absence involves the emotional surrogacy of a city’s worth of people whom he did not know before. Knocking on strangers’ doors as he moves through the New York City phone book, he fully expects to be greeted, understood, and aided by those whom he calls upon. However, as in the previous chapter’s discussion of

love, here we might ask how telling this particular story through a child's perspective renders the relation between Oskar's expectations, Foer's characterization, and whiteness's relation to space and to gender difficult to see. If not for Oskar's age or his implacable and quirky demeanor, we might more easily see that the expectation that anyone and everyone can intuit one's personal pains stems from the relative privilege of presuming one's pain to be universally accessible. Reciprocally, Oskar's seemingly limitless capacity to insinuate himself into other people's lives, often without their solicitation, and to improve them all the more by virtue of his youthful energy and innocent hopefulness is suggestive of the experiences of affective expansiveness involved in treating others as emotional prosthetics. In other words, Oskar seamlessly experiences himself as belonging to a community of strangers because he experiences those strangers as extensions of himself. In this regard, much like his grandfather before him, the overwhelming surplus of emotions with which he is often personally at odds generates additional space within which he can move, adapt, and expand.

In *Extremely Loud's* sentimental vision of New York's representative pains, one can never feel too much. The excess of feeling that marks the tragedy of Thomas's wife's blank life, when channeled through Oskar's youthfully fresh optimism, becomes the wellspring of a city's-worth of repair and reemergence. Oskar likewise reproduces his Grandfather's "cancer of never letting go," but this time as the benign tenacity of never giving up hope. In this sense, Oskar becomes representative of intergenerational pains and traumatic histories re-imagined as the propellant for aspiring toward the less painful future he figuratively embodies. Deploying Oskar as the vehicle for the narrative's

imagined resolution of New York City's saddened and lonely residents, Foer draws upon the conventionally sentimental associations between childhood, innocence, and hope, and merges them into a trauma-framed bildungsroman. That the narrative tracks Oskar's restorative journey against the threat of erasure his Dresden-survivor grandparents embody points to *Extremely Loud's* reliance on the notion of future productivity embedded within its sentimental figurations. The forward thrust of this notion pushes the novel to turn the loss and impossibility of historically exceptional traumas into the backdrop for its everyday lessons in feeling that Oskar sums up in his sense that we ought to be "more careful with each other" (163).

However, inasmuch as Oskar's journey pushes readers to dig deep and find a sense of emotional tenacity in the face of seemingly "impossible histories," it carries off this affective lesson through a sincerely represented sense of feminine emotional surrogacy. Foer uses Oskar's pained frustrations in the face of forced fatherlessness as a well of universal sympathy from which to draw yet another affective lesson in loss. Though Oskar is without his father and may believe his mother simply cannot understand his pain, when he finally begins to assemble the parts of his journey that might otherwise seem improbable he realizes that she has been behind him all the way through. Initially suspecting that he had carried out an elaborate ruse, Oskar discovers that his search had been "a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning" (292). Her direction takes him back to the saddened divorcé Abby Black who he had encountered eight months earlier at the start of his search and whose husband he learns has the lock for which he had been searching. When he arrives to meet this Mr.

Black, he learns that he too had had a troubled relationship with his father. The similarities in their stories open up space for Oskar to tell Mr. Black about his father's five answering machine messages that Oskar had been keeping from his mother throughout the narrative (302). Unburdened of his quest as much as the secret that propelled it, Oskar returns home only to embark on a quest with his grandfather to dig up his father's empty coffin and bury his grandfather's passel of letters in the place of his father's body (321-22).

The sheer improbability of such a scheme vanishes against its sentimentality, particularly as it, like the longer quest before it, becomes another allegorical lesson in Oskar's mother's script of his working through. His Grandfather reminds him "just because you bury something, you don't really *bury* it" (322), teaching Oskar that attempting to bury the mix of feelings that had kept him from processing his father's loss will only compound his suffering into the "cancer of never letting go" (17). Thus through this final of his mother's engineered lessons, he learns that loss is an inevitably tragic part of living that every one must learn to endure so that tomorrow can become a better day. Finding his mother patiently awaiting his return to their apartment, he expresses the fruits of this profound life lesson as his permission for her to fall in love again and then retreats to his bedroom to reverse the order of his lengthy journey, imagining finally that his father's bedtime story would have moved backward from "'I love you' to 'Once upon a time'" (326). Within the fantasy space of that fairytale opening, Foer voices the novel's final sincere hope that "We would have been safe" (326).

### **Mixed Feelings: What We Talk about When We Talk about Sincerity**

Foer's final "we" refers to both the Schell family and the national family it gathers into its embrace. Embedding the "falling man" photos as the narrative's final pages and arranging them as a flipbook so that readers can find themselves inhabiting Oskar's perspective, *Extremely Loud* literally performs its aesthetic imaginary of reversing the effects of trauma's inevitable return into the gentle comfort of a bedtime story that begins with "I love you" and ends with "Once upon a time." It is through the impossibility of this kind of temporal reversal that *Extremely Loud* partakes of the sentimental economy of shared pain and intimate publicity it aims to engender as an affective inclination toward the nation's traumatic past. Although readers know they cannot reverse the direction of pain's progress, if for the moment they align themselves with Oskar and feel themselves feeling his pained desire for a time when "we" would have been safe, then they too can feel the safe embrace of a mother's watchful guidance that unlike undoing trauma never really goes away. The novel's presentations of feminine emotional surrogacy throughout thus merge with its generic performance of sentimental surrogacy. Inasmuch as *Extremely Loud* asks its readers to identify with Oskar's pain, or with his mother's painfully loving relationship to him, or with his Grandmother's painfully tragic nameless blankness, or with his Grandfather's self-imposed silence under the tremendous burden of love's impossible history, it invites readers into the kind of "dis-interpellation" that Lauren Berlant argues is characteristic of sentimentality's imaginative transportation of everyday pain into transcendent repair (47). The critical difference between *Extremely Loud's* sentimental vision and Berlant's otherwise



comprehensive notion of the prosthetic relationships such a vision implores readers to take up and feel through is that Foer's novel performs these dynamics through its characterizations as much as through its materiality.

Published in 2005, and admittedly an attempt to "create art out of tragedy," *Extremely Loud* sparked an intense display of acrimony in the popular press.<sup>22</sup> Michael Faber sums up most reviewers' conflicting sentiments: "I can't deny how frequently and furiously I've scribbled 'Aaaarrghh!'" in the margins of the novel, he writes, yet adds "[inauthentic] though Foer's creations may seem, they are suffused with a profound sadness for things lost, a yearning to reconstitute a shattered past, to retrieve the irretrievable, repair the irreparable, express the inexpressible. In this he is as sincere and committed as he needs to be" (1, 7). Faber zeroes in on the novel's crystallization the immense cultural work sentimentality's invitation for prosthetic identification performs. "The turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety," Berlant argues, "constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions or intimacies, are epiphenomenal" (21). Sentimental fictions cohere readers into an intimate public through generating a shared sense that "the world is out of joint" that subverts discussion or consideration of the various, conflicting, and ethically unbalanced reasons for its being off-kilter. The sense that feeling wrong and then feeling better amounts to a fix for the problems that push one's world off-center, in the context of *Extremely Loud*'s vision of trauma's undoing, stems from the experiences of insularity that Vonnegut's ironic caricature of a "so it goes" philosophy of life tied to whiteness. Projecting a utopic fantasy where emotional, but not structural, inequities are resolved

through frames of “affective justice,” as Berlant puts it, sentimental narratives depend upon readers’ prosthetic identification with other persons’ actual pain. Thus in feeling bad about another person’s bad feelings, readers are invited to imagine their capacities for recognition as surrogates for materially engaging with the structural problems that manifest through experiences of emotional pain. Faber’s review, though it balks at Foer’s schmaltz, points at least to the ways *Extremely Loud* appears to hit the mark on building an alliance around the decidedly intimate emotions of sadness, loss, yearning for a distant and “irretrievable” past, and above all the desire to speak within silences that seem irrevocable. Within this conceptual framework Faber argues, and his phrasing bears repeating, Foer *is as sincere as he needs to be*.

When we talk about sincerity, then, we are talking about a fantasy. Like many, Faber reads Foer’s flipbook as an “attempt to fuse the aesthetics of fairyland with the unresolved trauma of Bush’s America” (10).<sup>23</sup> The “aesthetics of fairyland” must, in other words, mark the emotional and affective aesthetics of sentimentality, merged with a different (although not that different) sense of sincere desire for what is otherwise normatively impossible. Acknowledging that historical traumas are impossible to undo, Foer’s sincere desires emerge through wounded characters whose very woundedness becomes the paradoxical guarantor of their ongoing and irreparable suffering and the means through which readers are able to identify themselves as belonging to the pain alliance he constructs as trauma’s “communion of suffering.” However, the wounded bodies of Foer’s sincere fiction ultimately strive not to undo the past but to solidify in the present the heterofamilial alliances his sentimental staging presents as unquestionably

representative of national familiarity. The hinge point between sentimental fictions and sincere fictions thus appears not to be only, or simply, fantasy, but a decidedly gendered fantasy inflected through white women's relatively durable emotional availability and white men's relatively enduring ability to feel themselves expanded through them.

Sincere fictions enact the desire to feel something for another and to open channels between reader, text, and author that encourage a direct, mimetic identification with the story world and the real world those fictions putatively attempt to bring into order. Foer is "sincere" in his emotional investments because those emotions are invested in wounded men capable of "working through" traumas by *working through* the bodies of women who seem always and improbably to continue to care for them. The mixed feelings Foer's wounded men enact and embody are resolvable because the women in their lives appear as wholly constituted surfaces upon which they can project, organize, and assimilate the mix. Foer paints the maternal embrace as the most sincere of all sincere fictions, but in doing so, he limits the possibility of traumatic repair to wounded masculinity. The falling man returning to the embrace of the tower, Thomas, Jr. returning to embrace Oskar, Oskar returning to the embrace of his mother, Foer's imaginative undoing—though impossible—forges an intimate public around the sincere fiction of the family while figuring the "we" to whom his sincere address is directed as wounded men he represents throughout the narrative. In this sense, the narrative's refusal to acknowledge nor engage with its women's pains, although politically and culturally troubling in its own right, is simultaneously productive of the intimacy *Extremely Loud* offers in the form of their emotional closeness. Anchored in their unshakeable emotional

availability, the narrative relies on women's keeping home so that wounded men can find a place to return from their protracted quests to reimagine themselves anew.

As a prism through which fictions depicting men in traumatic scenarios focus readers' attention on pain, wounded men emerge as a way of sidestepping the problematic cultural politics of racialized and gendered representativity. Throughout Foer's novel, the critical and clinical discourse of trauma becomes the backdrop against which these potent political deflections are possible because traumatic scenarios establish a teleological narrative arc that projects the subject toward his eventual return to normal functioning. On the way toward healing, the victim of traumatic experience needs a community of sympathetic witnesses who can vicariously identify with his pain, align themselves with his feelings, and provide him with the comfort, stability, and felt safety necessary to rebuild his shattered sense of subjectivity. The core presumption within this narrative, however, is a normatively whole body that is never actually threatened nor dismembered by trauma's rupturing effects. The wholeness of the subject trauma discourse imagines becomes, within Foer's imaginary, the wounded white male body whose wounds are never quite deep enough to incapacitate their ability to find space to heal. In a broader cultural frame, trauma discourse and its clinical and communal imperatives work through fictions like Foer's to build pain alliances as a "politico-sentimental" tactic, in Berlant's phrase, aimed toward harnessing emotional energy and directing it toward a phantasmal projection of an "unconflicted world" where pain trumps politics and structural inequities are sublimated into personal turmoil (21).

Contrasted to *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s ironic acknowledgement of its own framing conditions, *Extremely Loud*'s sincere buy-in to forms of feminine emotional surrogacy and traumatic prostheticization thus also articulates a broader fantasy of national collectivity that can be represented through the unacknowledged whiteness of heterofamiliarity as a sentimental figuration of hope for a better tomorrow. If the narrative's solicitation of readers' identification with its characters is indicative of one manifestation of this fantasy, it suggests at least that within Foer's imaginary whiteness continues to represent the nation's pains as well as its hopes. Thus in the years between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, it appears that whiteness's insularity has grown more rather than less profound, and that the silences bordering its representations have grown more troublingly loud. We might ask in this vein, following Vonnegut's implicit critique of settler-feeling in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, why a feeling of historical entanglement in the continual manifestation of whiteness's belonging appears unavailable within *Extremely Loud*. An unexamined whiteness within the discourse through which trauma is theorized and understood may account for a part of this absence, but arguably also the sense of pain and woundedness as attaching the body to a history and history to a nation that trauma discourse produces is another side of the same coin. Insofar as wounds signify a body's history, they serve as the connective tissue between the personal and national-historical. Wounded whiteness thus manifests its attachments to national-historical belonging even and especially when whiteness appears to be sublimated to woundedness in the service of representativity. This is perhaps the

most sincere of the sincere fictions Foer's narrative brings into focus, the sense that whiteness can transit through something else and yet remain the same.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the first epigraph, see Caruth, *Trauma* (5). For the second, see Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (47).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the critical literature on trauma suggests that silence, or the inability to communicate the traumatic event to another, is a foundational characteristic of traumatic experience. See Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, eds.; Caruth, *Trama* and *Unclaimed*; Felman and Laub; Haaken; Herman; and Vickroy.

<sup>3</sup> See Caruth, *Trauma* (5).

<sup>4</sup> For the development of Berlant's sense of "intimate publics" see *The Female Complaint* (1-31).

<sup>5</sup> For other considerations of the ways sentimentality is expressed in relation to suffering bodies, albeit from very different contexts, see Hartman; and Hinton. Hirsch develops the notion of "Postmemory" as a way to account for the lingering, intergenerational effects of historical traumas, particularly of the Holocaust on second- and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors. See Hirsch, *Family*, "Surviving," and "The Generation of Postmemory."

<sup>6</sup> See Codde, "Philomela," and "Keeping." Codde argues that Thomas, Sr.'s silence, Thomas Jr.'s death on 9/11, and Oskar's attempts to work through his father's absence constitute a metaphor through which to understand third-generation Jewish American fiction's relationship to Holocaust trauma. Owing to his three-step "ontological" remove from the traumas of first-generation survivors, Codde argues that Foer and writers of his generation "can only witness documents" of the historical traumas that second-generation writers could read on the bodies of survivors ("Keeping History" 676). Indirectly experiencing the traumas of previous generations, as a result Foer and other third-generation writers become what Norma Rosen called "witness through the imagination" (676). See Rosen, esp. "The Second Life of Holocaust Imagery" (47-54). On the intergenerational transfer of traumatic experience, see Hirsch, *Family Frames*, "Surviving," and "The Generation of Postmemory."

As a theory of contemporary Jewish American fiction's relationship to intergenerational cultural trauma, Codde's claims offer some insight into Foer's earlier *Everything is Illuminated*, wherein the protagonist embarks on a search for his family history in the Ukraine. For *Extremely Loud*, however, Codde's argument and others like it run into the problematic fact that it is not about Holocaust trauma but rather about Dresden and 9/11.

Foer does indirectly mention the Holocaust through allusions to hiding Jewish refugees in Dresden. See *Extremely* (125-26). However, this vague and fleeting passage does not, to my reading, position the narrative as intervening in the literary-historical tradition of Jewish American fictional representations of Holocaust traumas. To read it as such would be to assume that all Jewish-American writing in which traumas of any kind feature must be using those traumas to metaphorize the cultural experience of the Holocaust, which seems at best dubious and at worst essentializing. Though making a different argument, Amy Hungerford and Richard Crownshaw each contend that "Postmemory" work like Codde's often involves mistaking persons with textual personae, obscuring the degree to which fiction is meant to be fictional. See Hungerford; and Crownshaw.

<sup>7</sup> On silence and trauma, see Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, eds.; Caruth, *Trama* and *Unclaimed*; Felman and Laub; Haaken; Herman; and Vickroy.

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Gayle Salamon, whose work with Merleau-Ponty helped me develop the connections between "regions of silence" and national affective capacities. See Salamon, *Assuming* and "The Place Where Life Hides Away."

As Merleau-Ponty conceives of them in *Phenomenology of Perception*, regions of silence describe the remaining sensory impressions of areas of the body one no longer possesses the capacity to actualize. He develops the concept from observations of patients who experience phantom limb pain. Regions of silence “are delimited” when an object—a cup, a pencil—that one would grasp out of habit with one’s right hand, for example, calls for the use of the hand one no longer has. The object actualizes the sense of the missing hand, but the body’s ability to carry out the action remains silent; one then experiences that area of the body—that lost capacity—as a region of silence. Compelled through the course of everyday experience to re-actualize lost corporeal capacities, regions of silence become sites of one’s impossible intentions.

<sup>9</sup> *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published in 1969, and recounts events that occurred in 1945. Pilgrim’s coming “unstuck in time” signals the kinds of “flashback” symptoms conventionally associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, PTSD was not codified into diagnosable criteria until its 1980 inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition (DSM-III)*. In this sense, a “framework of trauma” was historically unavailable when Vonnegut was writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For a history of post-trauma and the development of the criteria for PTSD, as well as a critique of “flashbacks” as symptoms of traumatic experience, see Leys, *Trauma*. For a discussion of the implementation of these criteria for victims of trauma, see Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations*.

<sup>10</sup> The majority of articles published on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* argue that Foer’s “crackpot” characters are each affected by one or another symptom of trauma, and that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* reflects the etiology of traumatic experience. See Atchison; Codde, “Philomela”; Saal; and Versluys.

Several recently published articles on *Slaughterhouse-Five* have attempted to diagnose Billy Pilgrim, and Vonnegut by extension, with PTSD, and as a result have read the novel as a testament to the traumatic effects of his surviving the bombing of Dresden. See Broer; Brown; Cacicedo; Rigney; and Veegulani, *Trauma and Guilt* and “Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim.”

Rigney and Veegulani contextualize the narrative’s representations of the Dresden firebombing within its actual historical circumstances, and read Vonnegut’s framing against German cultural memory of the firebombing. For histories of the Dresden firebombing and the air war over Germany, see Friedrich; Irving; and Kennet.

Much of the remaining criticism on *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be divided into three camps. For those who read the novel as documenting Vonnegut’s actual avowal of fatalist philosophy and a “so it goes” theory of time, agency, and determinism, see Coleman; Edelstein; Harris, “Illusion and Absurdity”; Tanner; and Merrill and Scholl. For arguments regarding the place of *Slaughterhouse-Five* amid narrative and stylistic innovations of the nascent postmodern period, see Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions, Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, Structuring the Void*, and *The Vonnegut Effect*. For arguments regarding Vonnegut’s embrace of a folksy humanism, see Abele; Davis, “Apocalyptic Grumbling” and “*Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade*”; Glover; Lingel; Lundquist; McCoppin; Spatt; Thomas; and Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country*. The argument over Vonnegut’s relationship to technology and science fiction reaches back to his earliest incorporation into academic critical conversation. See K. and C. Wood; Glen Meeter, “Vonnegut’s Formal and Moral Otherworldliness: *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*”; and Willis McNeely, “Kurt Vonnegut as Science-Fiction Writer,” in *The Vonnegut Statement*.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Smith.

<sup>12</sup> On the notion of “working through” traumatic experiences, see LaCapra.



<sup>13</sup> In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Leys argues that Caruth and psychologist Bessel van der Kolk, from whose work Caruth draws her theories of trauma,

are committed to the widespread post-Holocaust assumption according to which any attempt to represent trauma... is distortive.... From this perspective, the concept of trauma as literal provides an essentially *ethical* solution to the crisis of representation posed by trauma in our time. As such a solution, trauma in its literality, muteness, and unavailability for representation becomes a sacred object or 'icon' that would be a 'sacrilege' to misappropriate or tamper with in any way. (252-53)

Leys critique puts into perspective the extent to which theories of trauma create the conditions of their own veracity through insinuating an ethical dilemma between the presumptive truth of embodied symptoms and unassailability of the historical experiences to which those symptoms are argued to testify. For further critiques of the relationship between trauma and affect, see Goldman and Leys, "Navigating."

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between the body and traumatic symptomatology, see van der Kolk and van der Hart; Crawford; and Cuddy-Keane.

<sup>15</sup> For a history of the bombing of Hamburg, see Lowe. As he explains the title of the British operation, "the symbolic implication... was clear: God's power to rain down fire and destruction upon the earth now lay in man's hands, and was being wielded in what the British Establishment saw as just retribution for the damage that the Luftwaffe had caused during the Blitz" (64).

<sup>16</sup> For the "Pentagon Papers" descriptions of Rolling Thunder, see United States. For histories of the operation, see Weist, ed.; and Preston.

<sup>17</sup> Many arguments throughout Vonnegut's reception history have oscillated between reading the frequency of "so it goes" as indicating either Vonnegut's "quietism," "fatalism," or his humanist hope for redemption. Yet as Donald Morse has suggested, we can more productively read Billy's character as a caricature whose quietism is a caution. See Morse, *Imagining*.

<sup>18</sup> On homemaking and "at-homeness" as continual processes, see Kaplan. For a reading of masculinity and domestic fiction, see Jacobson. Jacobson argues that "neodestic fiction," her term for fiction since the 1980s engaged with scripts of nineteenth century domestic novels, breaks into two distinctive modes according to the gender of the author. Male-authored neodestic fiction is usually bound up with property disputes, and the home is usually couched as a space of confinement. Conversely, she reads female-authored domestic fiction as inclusive and fostering, and the domestic space as open, ranging, and transitory. Though she attempts throughout her project to "trouble" these divisive frames, she inevitably reinscribes the traditional division of spheres that many critics working on nineteenth-century domestic and sentimental fiction, from Nina Baym's 1978 *Woman's Fiction* through to the present, have sought to deconstruct. See Cathy N. Davidson's special issue of *American Literature* entitled *No More Separate Spheres!* for landmark arguments in the debate over the traditionally gendered divisions of domestic fiction.

<sup>19</sup> Adjusted for inflation, Billy's projected income is roughly equivalent to between two-hundred fifty and three-hundred thousand dollars per year in 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Noting that the John Birch Society's outlook on the Warren courts supposed threat to the unity of the Republic struck many as "paranoid," historical Klaus Fischer argues that "what made the Warren

Court so menacing to conservative Americans was its unabashed liberal activism” (159). The Warren Court issued decisions in several monumental cases during the 1960s and early 1970s, most of which revolved around securing constitutional rights for persons of color, women, and the accused. These decisions range from the groundbreaking though ultimately difficult to implement decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) to *Roe v. Wade* (1973). The Warren court’s decision in *Brown v. Board* provoked heightened racial tensions throughout the United States. Fischer reports that President Eisenhower, who appointed Warren to the court, “had second thoughts...” later claiming, “it was ‘the biggest damnfool decision I ever made’” (52).

<sup>21</sup> For a reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the air war in Vietnam, see Donald Morse, *Imagining*. On LeMay’s and Mitchell’s role in developing the strategy of total war through advancements in U.S. air power, see Kennet.

Voiced through optometric metaphors, the Major’s argument suggests Vonnegut’s allusion to a strange turn of 1968 presidential politics. During his campaign for president, Alabama Governor and avowed white supremacist George Wallace selected retired Air Force General Curtis LeMay as his running mate. As Klaus Fischer reports LeMay, who along with Billy Mitchell was instrumental in developing strategic bombing as a means of waging a total war of attrition, made Wallace “look even more menacing than he really was, talking freely about his fondness for nuclear weapons. One way to win the Vietnam War, the general had already advised, ‘was to bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age’” (237). Through setting these national-political arguments in a meeting of a suburban Lion’s Club, Vonnegut suggests that arguments for unchecked violence on a nation-to-nation scale gain affective traction through generating and sustaining a myopic focus on the local and the individual.

<sup>22</sup> See Siegel for an acerbic but representative example of many popular-press reviews. See also Beck; Gates; and Meyers.

<sup>23</sup> For a reading of the intertwining of temporality, Bush-era politics, the response to 9/11, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, see Huehls, “Foer” and *Qualified*.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

To argue that white men represent themselves as wounded in contemporary U.S. culture is in a sense to state the obvious. From Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* through to Amanda Lotz's recent study of contemporary U.S. television dramas, *Cable Guys*, since at least the early 1990s scholars interested in fictional representations of white masculinity have pointed out the ways white men are imagined to inhabit wounded bodies as metonyms for their wounded subject positions. Announcements of the "crisis of masculinity" in the 1990s were echoed in the early 2010s, as Lotz notes, through magazine articles announcing the "end of men."<sup>1</sup> Nearly all of these announcements center on the core notion that previously hegemonic modes of white masculinity have run out of steam against waning cultural patience with their uncritical recycling. One might argue that contemporary gender dynamics are simply different now, that heteronorms have come under intense deconstructive scrutiny, that race is a more visible and more palpable element of U.S. cultural conversation than at any time since the 1960s, and so representations of the traditional center of power in U.S. gender and racial hierarchies have to shift in accordance with the reality that grounds the logic of their representativity. However this line of argument carries on the one hand the presumption that shifts in cultural attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and race are what wounds white masculinity, and on the other the presumption that wounded white men are performing

their woundedness in response to these shifts. Wounded men cannot possibly be sincere about their wounds, in other words, because despite the changes to which some critics may point as evidence of shifting power dynamics in U.S. culture, white masculinity retains its centrality through mobilizing its mutability as a form of its power.<sup>2</sup>

If whiteness can be everywhere and nowhere, continuously in focus and yet very hard to see,<sup>3</sup> and if through these assumptions white masculinity can be mutable and central, wounded and strong, anxious and stable, why can it not be sincere? In writing this project, I set out to challenge the assumptions that underpin wounded white masculinity's apparently fundamental insincerity, but through the process I came to a different understanding of the relationship between insincerity, dissimulation, irony, and performances of sincerity that stretch beyond the frameworks offered within previous studies. Rather than holding to a more orthodox notion of performances of wounded white masculinity as dissimulation, I have read the sincerity through which those performances are articulated as expressive of the content they supposedly mask.

Following Alexie's and Walters's phenomenologies of white masculinity, and contextualizing my work with nonnative self-representation within the critical orbit of Indigenous studies scholarship, gender studies, and queer studies, I have argued throughout this project that performances of sincerity, through their performativity, manifest the relationships between bodies and the resultant experiences and perceptual contours that otherwise appear as fixed formations filtering their way down from the plane of ideology into the realm of social interactivity. In this sense, performances of sincerity manifest the ideological content about which wounded white men imagine

themselves to be sincere, whether it is presented as durable attachments to spatial occupation as in Alexie's and Walters's novels, as attachments to plain human personhood as in DeLillo's and Wallace's, or as figurations of national familial domesticity and maternal care in Vonnegut's and Foer's work.

In this sense, we can read fictional representations of wounded whiteness not as strategic misrepresentations of whiteness's enduring centrality but as sincere fictions that represent whiteness as the experience of prosthetic belonging. As Alexie and Walters suggest, the experience of prosthetic belonging inheres in the structure of settler-coloniality and is expressed through whiteness as a structure of feeling within which the experience of settlement fades into the background. Experiencing whiteness as a wound thus flags a relationship to belonging and emplacement rather than a reaction to changes in one's position within a shifting cultural milieu.<sup>4</sup> It is the experience of woundedness as propelling the capacity to position others as emotional and affective prostheses, to seek out alternate ways to work one's attachments to space and place, that wounded whiteness names, and it is the shape of those experiences that I have attempted to trace through the examples of contemporary, male-authored, male-centered, nonnative self-representation featured in this project.

To the extent that Wallace or Foer can imagine themselves as speaking on behalf of human emotionality rather than as producing a particularized notion of humanity through representatively affected white men, fictional representations take on a degree of representativity that lends them the self-authorized gravity in which their authors can feel vested. In other words, sincere fictions imagine the world as already having taken shape

around what they can be sincere about. To the extent that the worlds that come into view in their novels take shape around the experience of whiteness, the centrality of that experience speaks to whiteness's relationship to the settler-colonial structures that produce it as a privileged subject position. When that central experience is rendered as a wound, we see the privileged centrality of settler-feeling as settler-belonging become even more deeply entrenched into the discourse of plain humanity. Wounded whiteness thus becomes a surrogate for one's presumptively plain belonging because within a U.S.-frame whiteness is presumed as a given formation stable enough to withstand being wounded.

### **Everyday Forms of Wounded Whiteness**

Taking Alexie's and Walters's theories of wounded whiteness seriously, however, involves widening the angle of our critical lens beyond a focus on fictional representations of wounded white men toward the terrain of everyday life sincere fictions attempt to capture. To illustrate the ways these representations emerge in everyday life, I want to introduce a local, small-scale example of how wounded whiteness takes shape and of how quickly whiteness can toggle between a description of systemic concerns and a marker of individual victimization.

While serving on the county Housing Authority board, Rowan County, North Carolina Elections Board Chairman Malcom Butner took to Facebook to add his perspective to a series of what were called "Moral Monday" protests held in Raleigh.<sup>5</sup> Josh Bergeron of the *Salisbury Post* reports that Butner's Facebook post argued whites

were not participating in the Moral Monday actions because “they were too busy working, being productive, good citizens.” A year later, Butner’s seat on the Elections Board came under scrutiny after North Carolina GOP Press Secretary Kara Carter reported to the Associated Press that his Facebook comments were “offensive,” and that, as if to add to the embarrassment, his nomination had been the result of a clerical error and as a result the party had asked him to step down.<sup>6</sup> As Elections Board Chairman, Butner would oversee and certify final vote counts, and as Bergeron reports, would have a hand in “deciding early voting sites and approving provisional ballots.” Worry that Butner’s racist commentary might filter into the execution of his duties as Elections Board Chairman, calls for his resignation began to grow louder. Butner, however, called the fear “poppycock,” explained that he would follow the “letter and spirit” of the law, and further that he had been made the victim of political correctness and would not resign under any circumstances.

What stands out about this incident and the reporting around it is not so much the racism embedded in Butner’s commentary, nor the sense that his attitudes might manifest in his job performance, but instead his own sense of victimhood in the face of public calls for his acknowledgement of the interrelationship between systemic racism and everyday life. Consigning concern about a public official’s attitudes to little more than “poppycock” and “political correctness,” Butner’s tactics suggest the evasiveness one might expect. However, his characterization of whiteness as a surrogate for good, upstanding citizenship and productive labor point to the ways whiteness is experienced as prosthetic belonging to the state configured as shaped around white bodies whose labor

secures the impossibility of their incongruity with the state's aims. Butner's comment suggests that white persons simply do not have the time to engage in political protest because they have chosen to invest it in ensuring the state's future. Butner thus implies that persons of color experience their relationship to the state as a surplus of time stemming from their bodies' nonproductive relationship to the furtherance of its goals.

These implications mark the contortions performed by a phrase like "political correctness," especially when that phrase is used to describe an improper relationship to political reality. Butner's attachment of white bodies to citizenship points to the "correct" orientation toward politics and the state and generates a disciplinary structure wherein whiteness is assumed to produce an orientation toward state-supporting labor and good citizenship. By making political correctness the subject of irony, Butner's comments enable his victimhood to seem genuine on the one hand and, on the other, to seem like the result of his attachment to the correct orientation his comments envision whiteness to produce. Within this logic, one can appeal to one's physical whiteness as a marker of one's victimhood while likewise appealing to its systemic configuration as a marker of one's durable attachment to a virtuous and productive relationship with the state. Butner's refusal to resign suggests that the sincerity of his attachments elaborate a felt part of his everyday experience of whiteness, and it points to the ways that whiteness as a systemic set of concerns, public anxieties, and political implications fall away against the horizon of individuated opinion and expression. It is through this logic that whiteness toggles between a visible marker descriptive of one's body and a framework wherein



marking oneself becomes a way to sincerely express one's attachments to durable forms of belonging and productivity.

The conjunction of race, gender, and affect this example puts on display speaks to the enduring applicability of Walters's notion of whiteness as a plugged-up sensorium. From within it, the work one performs to attach oneself to the state feels like an absence borne by the bodies of others; when that work is called into question victimhood becomes an available position through which one can situate oneself as more closely and durably attached. The simplicity of Walters's theory of whiteness is thus arguably its greatest strength for examining wounded whiteness as a representational structure as much as a manifestation within everyday life. Rather than search for some other catalyst for changing representations of white masculinity, Walters's sense of experiences, attitudes, and inclinations accumulating into habitual orientations calls for turning toward the experiences and attitudes that get taken up as representative and for beginning to read them as exactly the stuff that pushes white masculinity toward other bodies as anchor points through which to express a sincere, deeply felt sense of belonging and attachment.

### **Re-Reading Contemporary Fiction as Nonnative Self-Representation**

Walters's and Alexie's phenomenologies of whiteness confront readers of contemporary nonnative fiction with the process of settlement's enduring continuance and with the enduring effects of settlement as a lived, affective structure on the shape of contemporary nonnative self-representation and experience. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues with respect to whiteness studies, so long as manifestations of settler-

feeling and settler-belonging remain out of focus in contemporary U.S. fiction the blur at the center of our critical lens will continue to occlude the stakes of their imperceptibility.<sup>7</sup> This may be another, broader function of the “plugged-up” sensorium Walters represents throughout *Ghost Singer*. But as Walters’s novel indicates, the kinds of blockages that plug up one’s ability to perceive the contours of settlement as a part of one’s everyday, lived surround are no more permanent than they are obstructive. As I have shown throughout my work with DeLillo, Wallace, Vonnegut, and Foer, perceptual blockages are generative of other modes of feeling and ways of engaging. Though ethically complicated and certainly conceptually difficult, as Walters suggests throughout *Ghost Singer*, it remains possible to reorient one’s inclinations and attitudes toward different ways of understanding and perceiving one’s relationship to the historical and present-day violence that produces settler-belonging as the given experience of whiteness.

I have attempted to demonstrate what this different orientation might look like as a way of reading contemporary nonnative representations of wounds, whiteness, and masculinity and how those representations become focused through the lens of sincerity. This is not, nor do I hope for it to be, the only way to examine the contours of settler-belonging in nonnative fiction. In examining wounded whiteness as an affective formation through which settler-feeling is articulated, I have sought to extend the scope of scholarship on representations of white masculinity and to push critics of contemporary nonnative fiction toward alternate ways of reading that are as attuned to affect and relationality as they are politically mindful of the resultant imbrication of settler-structures and modes of feeling that such representations produce. The broader

goal running alongside this more direct focus is to encourage fellow scholars of contemporary U.S. narrative to consider the extent to which such a frame applies to the bulk of contemporary U.S. writing.

If wounded whiteness is the experience of prosthetic belonging within settlement, then other forms of prosthetic relations to a felt sense of being in place through occupying space are equally as palpable across the corpus of U.S. nonnative writing. What would it mean in this vein to look again at something as seemingly remote from Indigenous concerns as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) for the ways it represents the transitory character of affective belonging to U.S. space? What would come into focus in a much more contemporary novel like Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) if we were to re-read the characters' protracted relationships to existential freedom as stemming from a secure sense of locatedness that permits their wandering affects to feel rootless? How could we reinterpret the Vietnam trauma and subsequent personality play of Tim O'Brien's protagonist from *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) against the narrative's titular backdrop of Ojibwe lands? Or Chang-Rae Lee's embattled protagonist's relationship to the American promise of wealth, happiness, and home in *Aloft* (2004)? That such a list of narratives and questions could go on for some time suggests the potential of re-reading contemporary U.S. writing as nonnative self-representation, and of theorizing it alongside Native-authored creative and intellectual work as an affective archive of settler-feeling through which one can trace the ways settlement comes to feel like a given.

To the extent that settlement feels like a given it follows that settlement remains something one can feel. The narratives this project has examined demonstrate that the relationship between what can be felt and how it feels is a function of one's broader phenomenological situatedness and the degree of access to persons, spaces, and objects one's situatedness produces. Where wounded whiteness becomes a strategy, as in sincere fictions or everyday examples, it can be critically deconstructed and recontextualized in hopes of defamiliarizing the given content through which it takes form. As a structure of feeling, wounded whiteness articulates the lived manifestation and interarticulation of the large- and small-scale frames through which settler-belonging becomes familiar. Defamiliarizing this relationship requires a different way to focus its representations, one informed by the critical, political, and ethical perspective of Indigenous writers and thinkers and oriented toward continuing the manifestation of Indigenous sovereignty, survival, and self-determination through disarticulating the givenness of settler-belonging across the variety of its everyday representations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Lotz (179-85).

<sup>2</sup> On the “lability” of white masculinity as a reactive formation, see Carroll (9-10).

<sup>3</sup> I am paraphrasing from Richard Dyer, *White* and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> On reactive formations, see Carroll (1-23).

<sup>5</sup> The information regarding Butner’s comments and response is drawn from Bergeron’s reporting for the *Salisbury Post*. See Bergeron, “Update.”

<sup>6</sup> As of August 2015, Butner had not yet resigned his post as County Elections Board Chairman. All references to his current office are thus dated.

<sup>7</sup> See Moreton-Robinson, “Writing off Treaties.”

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