Wayne State University Dissertations

1-1-2016

Novelistic Intimacies: Reading And Writing In The Late Age Of Print

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Recommended Citation

NOVELISTIC INTIMACIES: READING AND WRITING
IN THE LATE AGE OF PRINT, 1996-PRESENT

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2016

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved By:

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Advisor   Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Quotations from these primary texts are from the following editions, and are cited parenthetically with the abbreviations listed below:

IJ   David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006 [1996])

TPK   David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King,* Ed. Michael Pietsch (New York: Little, Brown, 2011)

EA   A.M. Homes, *The End of Alice* (New York: Scribner, 1996)

BS   Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 2012)

LD   Kiese Laymon, *Long Division* (Chicago: Bolden, 2013)

INTRODUCTION: "TRY TO BECOME HIM": INTIMACY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

In 1925, the British novelist and critic Virginia Woolf wrote an essay entitled "How Should One Read a Book?" for *The Yale Review*, later anthologized in the second series of her appropriately named essay collection *The Common Reader* (1935).[1] Although Woolf's title poses a question, she opens the essay by qualifying her ability to provide a universal answer: "Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you." However, her pose of reading as a personal experience heightens the contrast of her preferred term, "the common reader." In reading, we are held in common. There is, in other words, something pre-personal about our imaginative engagement with language and storytelling. Woolf defines this further. She advises that, in order to get the "deepest and widest pleasure from what we read," readers need to "train… exactly and powerfully, here on the very spot." In the context of the shifting relationships between readers, language, and novels in the so-called digital age, or what Ted Striphas calls the "late age of print," the substance of this advice is, for me, centrally important to re-consider:

> It is simple enough to say that since books have classes--fiction, biography, poetry--we should separate them and take from each what it is right that each should give us. Yet few people ask from books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices. If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; *try to become him.* (43, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Woolf provides an image of the novel as a unique reciprocal mode between author and reader, so long as the reader "try," or make themselves available, for the encounter. Novelists writing—as well as readers reading—"in the wake" of postmodernism appear re-committed to the historical form of the novel to serve in this capacity, as recent scholarly explanations of

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[1] Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" *The Yale Review* 89.1 (2001 [1925]): 41-52.

contemporary fiction as interested in "sincerity" or "post-irony" rightly suggest.[2] Against the

apparent psychic threats of new technology on inter-subjective relationships, the post-postmodern

novel could be a stabilizing force, a reciprocal mode that was durable and physical, stimulating both

the mind and body.

Woolf asserts that even the most basic categories and genres used heuristically produce

"blurred and divided minds," in part because they function counter-intuitively, as in the case of

someone who is "asking of fiction that it shall be true." Arguably, Woolf, whose technical and

stylistic innovations are now considered a hallmark of literary Modernism, might be referring to the

polemical stance of the novelist William Dean Howells, a principal flag-bearer for literary Realism,

who wrote,

> I confess that I do not care to judge any work of the imagination without first of all applying
> this test to it. We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the
> motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This
> truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry —this truth
> given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak; and without it all graces of style and
> feats of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of naughtiness. It is
> well for the truth to have all these, and shine in them, but for falsehood they are merely
> meretricious, the bedizenment of the wanton; they atone for nothing, they count for
> nothing.[3]

For Howells, re-presenting "the motives, the impulses, and the principles that shape the life of actual

men and women" provides the social significance of writing fiction. He emphasizes that without this

adherence to his interpretation of truth, "all graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of

construction" not only lose their value, but become a kind of danger. Howells claims that, without

truth, these fictional flourishes are just "so many superfluities of naughtiness." The slippage between

aesthetic judgment and a moral one in this phrase is telling, in that the phrase both infantilizes

whomever might imaginatively construct stories without a deep commitment to truth and aligns

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[2] See Adam Kelly, "The New Sincerity," *Postmodern|Postwar—And After: Rethinking American Literature,* Ed. Jason
Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2016), 197-208; Lee Konstantinou,
Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).
[3] William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 99.

these stories with "naughty" romance stories, going so far as to insinuate that artifice, or "bedizenment," is a mark of uncontrollable sexual desire. Truth, in other words, becomes a signifier for the body as well as the mind.

Howells was hardly the first to fear the relationship between fictionality and desire, re-producing arguments made over a century earlier during the "rise of the novel." Prior to the rise of the novel, reading had been viewed primarily as a form of instruction, and had only subsequently, in the early eighteenth century, become seen as a form of entertainment.[4] William Beatty Warner's study on reading as entertainment reveals that, once print became a commodity, demand and improvements in print production enabled the "publication of anything that might sell, a re-laxation of 'standards' and an unprecedented access to print for writers of all levels of quality" (Warner, 400). These rapidly produced novels were admonished for their "fecundity and filth…[and] compelling vulgarity."

According to critics at the time, readers, openly coded as young women, needed to be protected from this "compelling vulgarity," and the novel needed to maintain its relationship to reading as instruction. Samuel Johnson, for example, argued that the "wild strain of imagination" let loose by this medium needed to be disciplined by morality, lest young women lose their morals all together.[5] He noted that fiction-reading can, "take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will" (176). Similarly, Jean-Baptiste Greuze's 1758 painting *Lady Reading the Letters of Heloise and Abelard* poses a young woman in the lustful throes of reading a novel. Warner interprets this painting as a warning about reading and female desire:

> The tokens on her table—a billet-doux, a string of black pearls, a sheet of music, and a book entitled "The Art of Love"—are the details that allow the viewer of the painting to surmise

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[4] William Beatty Warner, "Staging Readers Reading," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12.2 (2000): 391-416, quotation on 400.

[5] Samuel Johnson, "Rambler No. 4." *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings,* Ed. Peter Martin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 174-177.

that this reader is involved in an affair of her own. The lighting and contiguity of book, dress and bosom invite the viewer to detect a causal relationship: it is precisely *this* kind of reading that leads to illicit affairs, it is *this* novel that has transported this lady into a state of distracted arousal. But the didacticism of this image is fraught with unintended consequences. By linking the animated white leaves of the book to the white morning dress that is slipping off the partially exposed breasts of this aroused reader, by inviting us to survey the erotic effects of novel reading upon the body of this woman, this painting becomes as lush and explicit and arousing as the novel reading it intends to warn us against. (W. B. Warner 404-5)

The perceived threat of female desire produces its own kind of "un-truth," as Warner suggests viewers would see her relationship to the book as leading to "illicit affairs." Yet, we can see from Johnson to Greuze to Howells that these men's fears of the desire and sexual impropriety of reading in part reveal their own recognition of the capacity of language and storytelling to affect. Rather, as Warner's reading of the painting's dialectic effect suggests, the primary concern is shielding this capacity to enable only certain modes of desire and not others. Thus, when Samuel Johnson, for example, commends the plot of Samuel Richardson's tragedy *Clarissa* as "agreeable to observation and experience" (Johnson 176), we can surmise that he approves of the series of punishments and misfortunes inflicted on the female protagonist as keeping young female readers "agreeable to observation and experience" as well.

But, the claim to fiction's "truthfulness," if we can put it as such, has not disappeared, and recent shifts in both aesthetic experimentation and book production have only renewed its significance. When the novelist David Foster Wallace attempted to theorize what contemporary fiction might look like "in the wake" of postmodernism, he also puts it in terms of truth:

> I mean, one of the hallmarks of postmodernism is that it's not at all clear anymore that there's some kind of platonic truth that rests behind people's interpretations of the truth, and particularly paid people's enforced interpretations of the truth. One of the things that interests me, though, is just how little we think of the fact that so much of what we voluntarily turn on and see and hear and listen to are actually human products designed by human people. I'm not a particular Luddite. I'm not particularly opposed to media. I just think it's weird that we don't often talk or think about the agenda behind a lot of this stuff. I mean, I've got a whole little story about this if you want to hear.[6]

[6] David Foster Wallace, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2012), 140.

Wallace's concerns correlate in a number of ways with both Woolf and Howells. Although he emphasizes that he is not a "Luddite," Wallace disapproves of the ways that new media obscure the "human [person]" behind the work. Without being able to situate that "human [person]," the agenda of the product, or even the fact that the product has an agenda, becomes dangerously easy to overlook.

Instead, Wallace sees the historical form of the novel as offering an important solution to this urgent problem. He aims to construct an aesthetic practice that will make it clear that not just a "human [person]" is behind the work, but that he is behind the work. Adam Kelly argues that Wallace is a figurehead for what he calls "New Sincerity," or a "reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship…[that retains] a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity."[7] Kelly goes on to explain that, for Wallace, "The author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time." ("New Sincerity" 206). Wallace wants there to be some connection to him, a signature of his presence left behind that is particular to novelistic writing.[8] Wallace's strategy in accomplishing this at times coincides with a kind of felicity to realism. As he tells in the subsequent "whole little story," he disagreed vehemently with his creative writing teacher that he should purge his writing of product names or modern technologies in order to, according to his teacher, make his fiction timeless. However, this strategy required more than this superficial understanding of the "real." In fact, precisely the "graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of construction" that Howells saw as leading to inappropriate modes of desire serve, for Wallace, as the very evidence of his agenda's "sincerity." The harmonizing of his

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[7] Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace*. Ed. David Hering (Universal City: SSMG Press, 2010), 131-146, quotation on 131.

[8] For Wallace's most detailed argument on this point, see David Foster Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 138-145.

authorial effort in *Infinite Jest*—all 1,079 pages of it—with his reader's effort, in other words, proves their sincerity. However, just as for Wallace the agendas behind new media were dangerously easy to overlook, so to has the fact that this commitment to truth relates to the body as much as it does to the mind, locating bodies in time and space to have what Wallace calls a "kind of intimate conversation."

Returning to Woolf's advice, I see in her assertion that, rather than dictate to the author, the reader should "become him," a productive lens through which to consider the body. The language of "becoming-with" the author intensifies the relationship from mere "platonic" conversation, as Wallace prefers, to what Flore Chevaillier calls "our erotic engagement with texts."[9] Chevaillier cites Georges Bataille's definition of eroticism to explain this concept: eroticism "leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity."[10] To consider the function of literature erotically is, for this reason, unambiguously political. As Chevaillier explains, our "erotic engagement with texts" is a "violation of selfhood [that] leads not only to the dissolution of self but also to the social rules that create it" (Chevaillier 9). In the novels I explore, the boundaries of the "self," between the narrator and the reader, are repeatedly crossed and re-crossed, particularly in ways that challenge the reader's relationship to truth and desire. The "dissolution of self," on the one hand, is the allure of fiction. Fiction provides safe boundaries to explore story-worlds and alternate modes of desire that one has no interest in experiencing in "real" life. On the other hand, the relationship between language and desire can often provoke and unsettle readers in ways that can never be un-experienced. For example, the reader's excitement, and even arousal, provoked by the explicit and graphic scenes of pedophilic rape in A.M. Homes's *The End of Alice* force a confrontation between the safety of fictional encounters and the embodied, "dangerous" responses felt and internalized by

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[9] Flore Chevaillier, *The Body of Writing: An Erotics of Contemporary American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 8.

[10] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, Trans. Mary Dalwood (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1987), 13.

the reader. In an obvious way, readers of *The End of Alice* would likely not become advocates of the social normalization of pedophilia, or, even more extreme, act out and commit an act of pedophilic rape—although this irrational fear of mimesis repeats itself across the history of media like the novel and comics. However, the language and storytelling "bring into play" the continuity between the pedophile's perversion and the reader's desires in ways that challenge the very idea that one has a single, coherent sexual self.

It is ironic that, once an erotic threat for Johnson and Howells, the historical form of the novel serves for Wallace a privileged space to stage an intimate encounter between two persons. However, I would argue that this erotic threat—or, as I prefer, potential—remains central to the novel's function in the present. Thus, in this dissertation, I argue for "intimacy" as an organizing principle of the aesthetic experimentations with language, storytelling, and the materiality of the book in contemporary fiction. Intimacy, like sincerity, centers on "intersubjectivity," or the relationship between persons. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in its earliest known usage in 1648, intimacy implies that one shares knowledge of another's "inner or inmost nature." This type of open access to the inner natures of characters and narrators is precisely the fictionalized ideal of the "form of the novel in place before even the rules of realism were fully formulated" that Andrew Hoberek noted was attractive to authors like Wallace.[11] However, within a single generation, by 1676, intimacy also became a euphemism for sexual intercourse.[12] In this way, "intimacy" is an ambiguous and fluid term, acquiring different meanings in different contexts. Moreover, in order to function as a euphemism, the interlocutors need to recognize or acknowledge that the word is shifting from the innocent into the sexual. In other words, to conceive of contemporary fiction as a mode of intimacy is to simultaneously consider it as a mode of sincerity as well a mode of

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[11] Andrew Hoberek, "The Novel After David Foster Wallace," *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies,* Ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 211-228, quotation on 220.
[12] OED, "Intimacy."

eroticism. When David Foster Wallace states, for example, that he views his fiction as "a kind of intimate conversation," we might pause and wonder if he means that he and his (primarily heterosexual male) readers are communicating "sincerely," or if they are crossing into the boundaries of fictionality to explore alternate modes of desire.[13]

Yet, these reading experiences do not guarantee a permanent dissolution of the "social rules that create [the sexual self]." As my first chapter explores, David Foster Wallace's audience of primarily heterosexual white men cannot articulate or figure their homosocial readerly relationship with Wallace erotically, despite the ways in which his aesthetic practice invites precisely that potentially queer "violation of selfhood." As I uncover, Wallace arguably borrows the form and content of his construction of an authorial ghost—for him, to sincerely communicate his "inner nature" for his readers—from his cited influence Walt Whitman. However, Whitman, in stark contrast to Wallace, was attempting to construct a literary space where he and another man could be together intimately—in the euphemistic sense.[14] Although it is clear that the substitution between author figure and reader asks quite literally that the reader "become-with" the author, this intimacy in Wallace's fiction has not been read as potentially erotic, or as even relating to the body. In fact, the discontinuity and continuity made visible between the (primarily heterosexual, male) readers and the masculinized, heterosexual authorial ghost can function to re-constitute and underscore problematic "social rules," like homophobia. As Clare Hayes-Brady has pointed out, this modeling of truth and sincerity provides an effective method "to entrench and defend the privileged position of white American masculinity Wallace so obstinately foregrounds, and it is certainly clear that Wallace manipulated the sincerity of his tone in ways that force a specious rapport with readers."[15]

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[13] David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway-Random, 2010), 289.

[14] Given the tellingly homoerotic reference to Whitman in *Infinite Jest*, I hypothesize that Wallace might have been aware of this connection.

[15] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 35 fn. 35.

However, in exposing the queer-ness of this aesthetic technique, thereby exposing the continuities and discontinuities between male homosocial desire and male homosexuality, I see in Wallace's fiction a kind of potentiality that has yet to be tapped in studies of his work.

For this reason, I explore the value of reading "affectively" during this literary period. My understanding of affect comes from Gilles Deleuze, who, similar to Woolf, characterizes the aesthetic encounter as a mode of "becoming," and sometimes specifically as a mode of "becoming-with" the author figure. For Deleuze, affect refers to the capacity, in this case of language and storytelling, to affect and be affected. Affective forces are not tied to subjectivity, but, as Woolf suggests, can hold us in common. As Brian Massumi explains, affect becomes communicable as emotion, or "qualified intensity," when its pre-subjective intensity is given a subjective value through the "stable" currency of language.[16] For this reason, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg define affect helpfully as "at once intimate and impersonal."[17] Rachel Greenwald-Smith argues that literature, then, is a significant site at which we might understand this process: "Affectively exciting insofar as aesthetics stimulate sensory responses, but linguistically based and therefore inevitably codifying, literature stimulates and codes relentlessly. It works both sides at once, engineering forms of emergence through the production of aesthetic pleasure."[18] Because the language of a novel constantly codifies the intensity produced by their imaginative exploration of story-worlds, novels demand that readers re-think how they feel and interact with the world around them.

For Woolf, as for Deleuze, thinking about reading in this way proves that the complex relationship between the author and the reader constructed by language and storytelling is a challenge to explain concretely. We can see this when Woolf defines this "becoming." She says the

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[16] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation,* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), 43.

[17] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "Introduction: An Inventory of Shimmers," *The Affect Theory Reader,* Ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-28, quotation on 2.

[18] Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3-4 (2011): 423-46, quotation on 431.

best way to understand the author, to "be his fellow-worker and accomplice," is to position oneself as a writer, "to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words." By considering reading from the vantage point of writing, Woolf suggests that a reader creates a different relationship with language itself,

> But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite.

By thinking of reading as an active process of co-creation, Woolf describes the way in which an author becomes available to a reader. In other words, language is the remainder of what the author has left, and encountering that remainder, as Woolf suggests, brings "you into the presence of a human being unlike any other." Opening oneself up to this encounter, the "something far more definite" that Woolf says the author is "giving you, or attempting to give you," appears to be direct contact with his or her own self through the affect preserved by language. Yet, in both of these acts of creation, writing and reading, this "something far more definite" is both physical, an embodied affective experience, and mental, an act of imaginative conjuring.

Deleuze's concepts of affect and storytelling are similar in that he considers affect to be a kind of remainder or third presence. In perhaps his most clear description of affect and art, Deleuze writes, "By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects, and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations."[19] This "bloc of sensations" is a creation of the author, but once created it is separate from him and available for another. In literature, Deleuze argues, this "material" is language itself and its capacity to construct story-worlds that readers can inhabit, touch, and feel with; as Woolf would put it, we encounter

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[19] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163-200, quotation on 167.

these as "hints of almost imperceptible fineness." Considering language in its sensuality, materiality, and tactility, one can start to see how reading and writing is not strictly-speaking a mental exercise, but a bodily one as well. In this fashion, the affective capacity of language and storytelling make the literary novel a particularly potent and relevant site to consider modes of intimacy in the present.

Given the movement between intensity and codification inherent in novelistic language, I maintain the ambiguity and undecidability of intimacy as both conversational "sincerity" and an erotic encounter. The affective intensities that can cause "violations of selfhood" remain, as it were, related to the ways in which we subsequently interpret them or make meaning of them. This, I argue, has to do with the elasticity of shifting, as Woolf does, between the pre-personal—the "common reader"—and the personal—"Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you." For this reason, throughout this dissertation, I adhere to Michael Warner's concept of "reading publics" to consider this relationship:

> Composed of strangers, not only because their participants literally do not know each other, but also because the text's address functions as an open invitation to anyone capable of inhabiting the position of addressee, and thus cannot restrict in advance the empirical characteristics of its audience. And yet this collection of strangers is not entirely without a particular personality; it is defined by the style of address that beckons it into existence and by the reaction that only some experience in response to its call.[20]

It matters that David Foster Wallace's readers are primarily, though not exclusively, white, heterosexual men who, experiencing the contemporary crises of masculinity, abide by certain, constructed social rules about homosocial relationships. It also matters that the readers of Kiese Laymon's debut novel *Long Division,* the subject of my fourth chapter, have a particular shared experience of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double-consciousness," as well as an experience of grief for the real-life murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 during the so-called "post-racial" Presidency of Barack Obama. Raymond Williams would say that these shared sets of experiences construct a "structure of feeling," which he defines in the following way:

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[20] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), quotation in Aubry, pg. 36.

> [W]e are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable). . . . We are talking about characteristic elements of impulses or restraint and tone; specifically 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. We are then defining these elements as a structure: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.[21]

Depending on which audience is called into being by a novel's address, the variability of the emotions and feelings, as well as their historicity, alters how I understand the function of intimacy in their contexts. Affect, understood as intensity, alternatively allows me to consider how language and storytelling can provoke and unsettle the "specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" that connect readers with not only themselves but also with other strangers in their reading public, potentially in political or intimate solidarity.

For this reason, I find it necessary to also consider these novels as material objects in the world. How do they circulate? How and why do readers engage with and activate them? I argue that readers have particular bodily, physical, and sensual orientations towards books themselves, as in the ways that books are, as Sara Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomology,* "as much about feeling at home as they are about finding our way."[22] In different ways, each of the novels chosen manipulates the reader's orientation towards the book as an object as a fundamental component of their aesthetic practice. And, I argue that part of the reason these manipulations are effective is because of a broader history of the book and the ways in which deep-seated habits and memories coalesce around and inform how readers engage with books.

Consider Janice Radway's ethnography of the Book-of the Month Club, founded just one year after *The Yale Review* published Woolf's "How To Read a Book?" Radway's historical analysis uncovers the ways in which literary institutions imagined and created markets of consumers by

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[21] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
[22] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

constructing a "feeling for books," or an affective attachment to the book as an object.[23] Radway's

work has been extended both Amy Blair's study on literary institutions and consumer markets of the

late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as Evan Brier's related study of the mid-twentieth

century, emphasizing the entrenchment and pervasiveness of this constructed and trained affective

attunement across upper and middle-class readers.[24] In his study of the shifting relationships

between consumers and print across the twentieth century, Ted Striphas finds that the book industry

successfully integrated this "feeling for books" so fully into Americans sense of selves, up to and

including the way they built their homes,[25] that it is hardly possible to imagine American life without

them. However, while this "feeling for books" effectively packaged specified publics as reliable

consumer groups for targeted advertising campaigns, Radway argues it did so by heightening reading

as a personalized experience:

> Middlebrow organizations such as the Book-of-the-Month Club helped acclimate us to the
> business of consumer culture and ushered us into a particular life world still complacent
> about certain social hierarchies. Middlebrow books may have endowed us with an ample and
> refined vocabulary for articulating and achieving affective states, but too often the solution
> they ventured with respect to serious social problems involved the moral, ethical, and
> spiritual rehabilitation of the individual subject alone. (Radway 12-13)

Here, Radway argues that the primary emphasis of reading and engaging with books became to

acquire a "refined vocabulary for articulating and achieving affective states." In the context of how I

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[23] Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[24] See Amy L. Blair, *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Evan. Brier, *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[25] Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerims to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 26-31. Striphas finds that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, again concurrent with Woolf's article, home construction and books became inextricably linked in the United States, exemplified by the "growing fad" of built-in bookshelves.[25] Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "fad" was the idea of a public relations "doyen" Edward L. Bernays hired by New York book publishers who feared their declining book sales figures: as Bernays figured, "Where there are book shelves…there will be books." Homes started to be built with floor to ceiling bookshelves, instigating the "ambition some day to fill them up." Accumulating books, in other words, became a learned behavior of the middle-class. What is striking about Striphas's historical analysis is how little this learned behavior has to do with "the literariness of particular titles or the pleasures of reading them" (Striphas 28). In fact, "to pre-empt any potential class anxiety book-shelves might cause," people would purchase "mimic" collections of books "designed to reproduce 'the semblance of books and not their substance.' These typically consisted of lengths of cardboard or wood, upon which would be affixed imitation leather or similar material designed to look like a row of bound printed volumes" (28).

am thinking of affect, it is important to trace the ways that books have begun to function in re-affirming the "moral, ethical, and spiritual rehabilitation of the individual subject alone."

Critics of contemporary fiction have noted that this trend of personalization has only continued and intensified since the 1980s. Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that a broader "neoliberalization" of the novel since the time of Virginia Woolf or, her example, Henry James, has all but solidified the shift of the novel from the social to the personal:

> The value of the novel in James's moment, as he describes it, was largely understood in terms of either its social value or simply its capacity to entertain. The growth of neoliberalism, however, has meant that these systems of valuation have undergone a transformation to conform to an economic matrix of investment and return. Moral instruction and amusement might still be seen as desirable effects of literary engagement, but their desirability is measured by how much morality or amusement is understood to enrich the life of the individual, according to the individual's wants and needs. While in the past these may have been social goals subject to collective definitions of appropriate behavior, today they are more likely to be understood as individual goals subject to an assessment of usefulness to and advancement of the individual subject. In other words, literary fiction is figured less as a public or social intervention and more as an individually consumable resource.[26]

Contrary to William Beatty Warner's characterization of the commoditization of the novel as initiating an agenda of the individual's role within the social, even as we know that often meant counseling women's (sexual) behaviors, Greenwald Smith argues here that the novel has increasingly become strictly defined in terms of "advancement of the individual subject." In this vein, Timothy Aubry also persuasively argues that, by the 1990s, books were advertised, distributed, and consumed almost exclusively as a form of personal therapy, popularized and universalized by institutions like Oprah's Book Club.[27] The deep-seated view that a novel trains the reader to move from the intensity of language and storytelling towards self-comprehension and self-betterment presents an obstacle for novelists interested in staging intimacies to political ends. For example, if Kiese Laymon aims to

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[26] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 32.
[27] Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

use intimacy as a way to construct a collective well-suited for the contemporary Black liberation movement, he will likely need to construct an aesthetic practice aimed at deferring or disavowing this image of the novel as strictly designed for personal therapy or improvement by providing a "refined vocabulary for articulating and achieving affective states."

In this way, it matters that the cultural production of books, as well as reader's orientations to books, has changed over the past twenty years, alternatively known as the late age of print. N. Katherine Hayles writes that, "At every stage of the production and consumption of contemporary literature, digital media are transforming the functions of writers, readers, publishers, printers, distributors, and booksellers. So massive are these cumulative changes that they outweigh all the other influences on contemporary literature—*combined.*" [28] For Hayles, "very long works such as…David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*…are undergoing a renaissance as…tests of readerly fortitude that earn one bragging rights if one successfully completes a gargantuan novel" (214). Moreover, Hayles argues that books that "openly celebrate their status as fetish objects," perhaps like the subject of my third chapter Chris Ware's *Building Stories,* similarly perform a kind of "counterlogic" against the rise of digital media. (214) Jessica Pressman coined the term the "aesthetic of bookishness" to describe such books, calling this "an emergent literary strategy…[to] exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies." [29] For Pressman, as for Hayles, the aesthetic experimentations on the form and content of the novel are inseparable from the other digital technologies that both enable their experimentations and compete with them in the cultural marketplace.

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[28] N. Katherine Hayles, "Influences of the Digital," *Postmodern|Postwar-- And After,* Ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 209-216, quotation on 209.
[29] Jessica Pressman, "The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature" *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48.4 (2009): 465-82, quotation on 465.

Strangely, these recent developments situate and privilege the novel as both anachronistic, of an earlier time, and fundamental to how readers engage with and imagine new or different futures. Put differently, readers' engagement with books can illuminate the very ways in which we might think about or experience time. Mark McGurl, in his recent essay "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon," argues that the way that Amazon has shifted reader's relationships to consuming print has contributed to shaping their orientations to temporality itself, specifically what he calls the constitutions of "real-time" and "quality time."[30] For McGurl, "real-time" modulates shrinking expectations of lag in consumption: "'real-time'…[closes] the gap between the occurrence of an event and its apprehension as information, crowding reality and representation together in the urgent space of a perpetually self-renewing *now*" (463). For Amazon, 'real-time' is synonymous with customer service, as in the shrinking of delivery times, down to the seconds it takes to transfer and download an e-book or the rumored drones that will drop packages off at one's doorstep. But, "real-time" has become a kind of psychic and physical burden, particularly as that temporality and the Amazon work model has syncopated as the dominant model of service work in the twenty-first century. "Real-time" has, in other words, increased the demand for what McGurl calls "quality time," which McGurl defines as "the time of intimacy, of analog, face-to-face, intersubjective attention" (463). Due to technological and cultural developments, McGurl goes on to argue that this concept of "quality time," which historically meant spending time with friends and family, arrived "finally at the subsidiary form known variously as 'alone time' or 'me time,' which is quality time with oneself—or with a book" (464).

It is fitting that McGurl defines "quality time" as the "time of intimacy," and that he notes a fundamental shift of this "time of intimacy" from the "face-to-face" time with friends and family to a different kind of intimacy "with a book." What is at risk from any shifts or transformations with

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[30] Mark McGurl, "Everything and Less: Contemporary Fiction in the Age of Amazon," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77.3 (2016): 447-471.

these relationships with the book in the late age of print appears to be how we conceive of our very individual "self," or our "me-time." Yet the temporality of this intimacy can also tell a different story. The habits and memories that constitute readers' affective attachments to print in the present provide the material, as Deleuze argues, to trace out alternate futures. This is the affective capacity of language and storytelling. In this dissertation, I read a diverse body of texts that each ask different questions about how to tell new stories in the present: from the encyclopedic novels of David Foster Wallace to the metafictional realism of his contemporary A.M. Homes, from the graphic experimentations of Chris Ware to the time-travelling fantasy fiction of #BlackLivesMatter activist Kiese Laymon. Yet, in asking how and to what end the form of the literary novel is an effective vehicle for storytelling in the present, these novels attempt to disentangle the relationship between individuation, or the construction of the self, and the book. In different ways, each novel explores the efficacy of intimacy as a method of dissolving the self and situating readers collectively, rather than personally or individually, in an alternate future. And, therefore, the physical allure and desire that figured so threateningly during the rise of the novel becomes the very tools with which novels might serve in, not only imagining themselves anew, but imagining life anew.

In my first chapter, "Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost," I analyze the ways in which Wallace's fiction stages homosocial intimacy "between men." I specifically contrast Wallace's use of prosopopoeia, or inducing the reader conjure the author's face through undecidability, with that of one of his unacknowledged influences, Walt Whitman. The primary difference between the two is that, whereas Wallace aims to substitute his authorial ghost with the reader in order to work through the contemporary crises of masculinity, Whitman used the technique to stage an intimate, homosexual encounter in the future between himself and his posthumous readership. In looking at Wallace's revisions of this technique from *Infinite Jest* to his unfinished novel *The Pale King*, the chapter attempts to make clear that the homosocial intimacy staged between the masculinized author

figure and his primarily, though not exclusively, white, heterosexual reading public is a fundamental effect of his aesthetic practice. However, the discontinuity between male homosocial desire and male homosexuality make this effect an unarticulated component of Wallace's fiction.

The second chapter, "Becoming-Pervert" contrasts Wallace's more celebrated, de-sexualized intimacy with the more unsettling and "perverse" intimacy staged in the novel *The End of Alice* by A.M. Homes, which, I would argue, is critically under-examined for this very reason. Produced during the height of what the *New York Times* called "The Age of the Literary Memoir," the novel adopts the structure of a confession memoir written by an unnamed, imprisoned pedophile. While the reader is supposedly meant to judge the narrator, who continues to train a female protégée in the art of child seduction from his prison cell, Homes's complex use of language and narrative complicate the clear delineation between the character and the reader. Examining the tension between the reader's co-creation of fictional scenes of adult-child rape and the metafictional interpellation of the reader as partner to the protagonist-pedophile, I explore the relationship between sexuality and Deleuze's philosophical concept of "becoming." Specifically, I argue that the "becoming-pervert" experienced by the reader demonstrates the affective capacity of novelistic intimacy in contemporary fiction, estranging the reader's orientation to the book as a safe space, with clear boundaries behind which readers can securely explore alternate modes of desire.

The third chapter, "Chris Ware's *Building Stories* as Deleuzian Fabulation," turns to the important and unique function of graphic narrative in understanding intimacy, temporality, and print in the present. The material history of comics has contributed to its subaltern position in relation to the literary novel. Chris Ware's *Building Stories* complicates this history with its open-ended collection of 14 narrative units that span the print stratosphere from flipbooks and pamphlets to children's books and newspapers, offering a distinctive window into the relationship between storytelling and the affective states associated with the late age of print. However, in opposition to critical reviews of

this graphic narrative as an elegy of print, I argue that the work mines the history of print to invent new ways of telling stories. Continuing my engagement with Deleuze's philosophy, I explore his concept of creative fabulation as a method of renewing, or unwrapping, the culturally constructed habits of reading and orientations to printed materials.

In the final chapter, "Black Love and Liberation in the Shadow of Du Bois," I analyze Kiese Laymon's debut novel *Long Division,* a time-travelling narrative that stages the book as a primary mode of mediation between intimacy and political liberation in different stages of history—1964, 1985, and 2013. City Coldson serves as both author and reader of multiple editions of *Long Division*, turning the novel into a complex vehicle of backwards-oriented time-travel in order to "change the future." I argue that *Long Division* is a model of "Afrofabulation," a method of exacerbating the tensions between representation, as in artful depiction, and representation, as in politics. Moreover, I argue that Laymon's fictional exploration of the confluence of heterosexual and homosexual male intimacies and the political function of the printed book has great significance for the current #BlackLivesMatter movement—"made famous," to use City's words, by queer women of color on digital media.

CHAPTER 1: CONJURING DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S GHOST: PROSOPOPOEIA, WHITMANIAN INTIMACY AND THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF *INFINITE JEST* AND *THE PALE KING*

"And the big thing, the big thing seems to be, sort of leapin' over that wall of self, and…setting up, I

think, a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences."

David Foster Wallace, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself,* 1996

"The wigglers find [the ghost] companionable. But no one ever speaks of him."

David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King,* 2011

David Foster Wallace's afterlife, in terms of reader reception, media attention, or even as an

avatar or character in films or TV shows,[1] is premised on a clear, albeit sometimes contradictory,

heuristic: David Foster Wallace sincerely cared. Wallace cared about language, he cared about what

he spent time thinking, and he cared what we thought about that which he was thinking. To this

end, he developed a stylistic novelty that made this care manifest: extraordinarily long Faulkneresque

sentences, extensive footnotes, and opaque philosophical musings married with a simple, accessible

gag. Perhaps Wallace's most widely seen work, fittingly, is a fan-made video of a 2005

commencement speech he delivered at Kenyon College, later entitled "This is Water" as a

standalone publication. The video attracted over 2.7 million views within just the first four days of

its release.[2] This is a staggering number compared to the then-exciting sale of 44,000 copies of

Wallace's 1,079-page magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, in its debut year, or even compared to, at its 20th

anniversary, the more than 800,000 copies currently in print.[3] In this speech, Wallace discusses our

proclivity for and cultural access to easy gratification, leading to what he calls our "natural, hard-

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[1] In addition to being memorialized by the actor Jason Segel in *The End of the Tour,* the filmic adaptation of David Lipsky's memoir-interview *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself,* Wallace has become a touchstone reference in popular culture. This includes being represented as a cartoon character for a 2012 episode of the popular animated series *The Simpsons*, parodically titled "A Totally Fun Thing Bart Will Never Do Again," from Wallace's essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."

[2] Given that the Wallace literary trust requested that the authors of the video take it down, it is difficult to estimate, in the three years since its release, exactly how many views the video has had in its multiple, pirated editions. See Rubina Madan Fillion, "David Foster Wallace Commencement Goes Viral," *The Wall Street Journal.* 10 May 2013.

[3] See Christian Houlb, "*Infinite Jest*, 20 Years Later," *Entertainment Weekly.* 16 Feb. 2016.

wired default setting…to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self."[4] What makes this so hard to combat, according to Wallace, is that, because this "default setting" is so grounded in the habits of our "day in day out…boredom, routine, and petty frustration," we do not even notice it. To make this point, Wallace repeats a short quip originally shared between the characters in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in *Infinite Jest*:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" (3-4)

The antidote to this is, according to Wallace, effort, or a conscious decision to choose how and to what we "pay attention." As Wallace puts it, "the immediate point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about" (8). Over the course of his career, what Wallace closely considered varied widely. For example, Wallace closely considered the function of postmodern irony in entertainment, the geometry and angles of tennis strokes, and the life and death of lobsters.[5] In each of these considerations, zooming in to the granular level de-familiarized these common objects and occurrences, often revealing the unnoticeable, or unnamable, elements about our relationships to them.

Given this legacy, it is ironic that the nature and construction of the reader's relationship to Wallace himself, both through his construction of authorship as well as through the aesthetic design of his work, has by and large gone unnamed: male homosocial intimacy. For example, in his examination of node networks in Amazon recommendations, professional reviews and Amazon

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[4] David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 12.

[5] See David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 151-151; *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis,* (New York: Library of America, 2016); "Consider the Lobster," *Gourmet Magazine.* August 2004.

consumer reviews, Ed Finn aptly concludes, "Wallace is *different.*"[6] The nodes revealed that, more so than any of the other contemporary writers examined by Finn, when a reader purchased a work by Wallace, they were more inclined to purchase more texts related to Wallace (including criticism, reading guides, and biographical material) than to purchase other contemporary literary fiction. Finn goes on to note that both critics and readers regularly situated Wallace, "squarely in an intellectual tradition of Serious Young Men writing in the shadow of Serious Established Men" (163). In other words, readers quite adore Wallace; their interest in him far exceeds their interest in the genres with which he is associated: contemporary fiction, literary fiction, postmodern fiction, or creative non-fiction. Likewise, just as he tapped into the gravitas of a historical art form supposedly in its death throes, readers saw Wallace as ushering in a future for literature. Gone were the days of Norman Mailer and John Updike's "literary chauvinism," and gone were the days of postmodern cynicism;[7] Wallace cared. Yet, the "difference" that Finn points to seems to elide the observable homogeneity of the readers that petition for this label for Wallace, and the ways in which this readership might be persuaded by a cultural logic of white masculinity that Wallace's "sincere" ambition amplifies.[8]

Tellingly, when asked to "imagine his readership," Wallace suggests that they are "people more or less like me…with enough experience or good education to have realized that the hard work serious fiction requires of a reader sometimes has a payoff."[9] The phrase "more or less like me" reflects an affective attunement strategically filtered through the perceived cultural necessity of "serious fiction," and whatever attendant meanings (hierarchical, elitist) and rhetorical pathos (nostalgia) that are attached to the genre. But, though Wallace does not say it, "more or less like me"

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[6] Ed Finn, "Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception," *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Ed. Samuel S. Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2012), 151-76, quotation on 152. Emphasis in original.

[7] See, respectively, David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The Observer.* 13 Oct. 1997; David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8.3 (1988): 36-53.

[8] See Molly Fischer, "Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace," *New York Magazine.* 12 Aug. 2015. http://nymag.com/thecut/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html

[9] David Foster Wallace, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* Ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 22.

also reflects his assumption that the reading public he calls into being are men like him. Wallace suggests as much in a private correspondence with David Markson, friend and fellow novelist. Despite his regular contributions to men's lifestyle magazines like *Rolling Stones* and *GQ,* Wallace complains of an upcoming interview with the women's lifestyle magazine *Harper's Bazaar* during the run-up to *IJ's* publication: "*Harper's Bazaar*? What reader of *Harper's Bazaar* is going to read my thing all the way through…I've decided to play Good Soldier and give [*Harper's Bazaar*] my recipe for brownies or whatever it is they want."[10] Following Eve Sedgwick's statement that "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved," one might argue that Wallace positions the historical form of the novel, the safe "beloved," as a field of contestation and struggle "between men."[11] Certain (male) readers will "read [his] thing all the way through," appreciating the size and weight of it, and other (female) readers simply will not. In other words, this field of contestation simultaneously produces and obscures the male homosocial intimacy between the reader and the author figure. The "literary novel," as staged by Wallace, becomes, rhetorically, the last remaining safe space for intellectual kinship and, relatedly, male homosocial intimacy.

The demographic make-up of Wallace's reading public has been widely commented on, particularly in debates about the anticipation and release of the pseudo-biopic *The End of the Tour,* starring Jason Segel in the role of David Foster Wallace. In *New York Magazine,* Molly Fischer went so far as to call Wallace's author figure and legacy as "lit-bro shorthand," a more self-aware and sensitive rendition of the "literary male chauvinism" Wallace himself charged to male authors in the past, in particular John Updike. This article prompted a firestorm of responses. For example, Jonathan Russell Clark argued, in an article titled "Re-Claiming David Foster Wallace from the Lit-

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[10] David Foster Wallace to David Markson, 28 November 1995, Box 1, File 1, Steven Moore fonds, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin Library.

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 21.

Bros: Has Anyone Actually Read *Infinite Jest,*" that Wallace's intense following among (white) men could only be the result of an incomplete engagement with or misreading of Wallace's fiction.[12] However, as I will explore in this chapter, it is precisely by reading *Infinite Jest* that a man would cultivate a homosocial desire for Wallace's author figure. That desire is planned in advance and fundamental to the aesthetic practice. Particularly in Wallace's engagement with the historical form of the novel, he actively crafts an interpellation between his figure and with this reading public of predominantly straight, white, men in particular. Moreover, this desire has everything to do with David Foster Wallace's afterlife, insofar as that afterlife provides the conceptually map for his male homosocial intimacy through his figuration of an authorial ghost.

When Don Gately desperately needs someone to talk to while recovering from a gunshot wound, the "generic garden-variety wraith" of James O. Incandenza, the auteur of the eponymous toxic video cartridge "Infinite Jest," asserts himself as Gately's primary dialogic partner..[13] Likewise, in David Foster Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King*, when the IRS 'wiggler' Lane Dean Jr. "began imagining different high places to jump off of," the ghost of Garrity, a long-passed I.R.S line worker, comes to have a conversation that puts Dean Jr.'s depression into a proper, historical context.[14] In each case, though these spectral presences appear near the end of their respective texts, they provide a conceptual metaphoric for how Wallace conceives of each novel as a relational mode between the author figure and his posthumous readership. Wallace's revisions of this conceptual metaphoric across these novels, I argue, suggest his intention to produce an actual, immaterial presence such that he and his readers might, only in the future, share "a kind of intimate

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[12] Jonathan Russell Clark, "Reclaiming David Foster Wallace from the Lit-Bros: Has Anyone Ever Read *Infinite Jest*?" *Literary Hub*. August 20, 2015.

[13] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 829. *Infinite Jest* will be cited as *IJ* in subsequent references.

[14] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 379. *The Pale King* will be cited as *TPK* in subsequent references.

conversation."[15] For a writer as meticulous with words as Wallace, the most obvious contrast between James O. Incandenza and Garrity may also be the most illuminating: his decision to change from the ambiguous term "wraith" in *IJ* to the more precise classification of "ghosts" and "phantoms" in *TPK*. I argue that this modification correlates with a shift in Wallace's aesthetic devices, namely the construction of an ontologically ambiguous authorial presence through his endnotes in *IJ* to the meta-fictional rendering of "David Wallace" in *TPK*.

However, what has been under-estimated about these divergent devices, and what an elucidation of these spectral figures will reveal, is their contingency on the production and elision of intimacy between the (male) author-(male) reader. It is common in studies of Wallace's work to emphasize the rationality of "sincere" communication, as, for example, an antidote to the saturation of postmodern irony and cynicism in contemporary life.[16] However, this arguably happens at the risk of neutralizing the intimacy that is staged and performed between the white, heterosexual, masculine author figure and his widely, although not exclusively, white, heterosexual, male readers. Even in analyses that consider Wallace's commitment to an aesthetic production of intimacy, the word is disarmed of its sexual signification. Clare Hayes-Brady, for example, writes, "The desire and expectation of completion, the dream of complete intimacy, of clear and unambiguous information transfer, exists for Wallace."[17] Yet, we know that the "dream of complete intimacy" is only partially, and certainly not exclusively, suggestive of a dream of "clear and unambiguous information transfer," but also of a physical, potentially erotic, one as well. As I explain in the introduction, the etymology of the word suggests this duality. Originally, in 1648, intimacy was used to mean that one shared knowledge of another's "inner or inmost nature," precisely the fictionalized ideal of the

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[15] David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway, 2010), 289.

[16] See Lee Konstaninou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[17] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 7. For another approach to intimacy and Wallace, as an "empathic unsettlement," see Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network," *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace.* Ed. Samuel S. Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2012), 182-207.

Realist and even pre-Realist narrative tradition that critics have noted is fetishized in the

"antimodernist streak in contemporary fiction" by authors like Wallace and Jonathan Franzen.[18]

Within a single generation, or by 1676, intimacy also served as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.[19]

I aim to show that the intimate relational mode Wallace models through his figuration of ghosts

demonstrates a bodily, and even potentially erotic, (male) author-(male) reader relationship that

always threatens to reveal itself.

As a literary motif, ghosts have commonly been used as narrative method of thinking

through, and even staging encounters, of (queer) intimacy: from the ghostly deferral of a sexual "will

to knowledge" in Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898)[20] to the racialized sexual violence literalized

by the eponymous ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In this chapter, I specifically contrast

Wallace's practice with Walt Whitman's poetic staging of a future-oriented intimacy between a male

homosexual author figure and his posthumous (male) readership through the device of

prosopopoeia, as interpreted by one of Wallace's cited philosophical influences, Paul de Man.[21]

Through this contrast, I aim to show how Wallace's aesthetic practice produces, and is contingent

upon, the intimacies of male homosocial desire. I borrow my meaning of this term from Eve

Sedgwick's *Between Men*, in which she suggests that (white) masculinity, by defining itself in

opposition to male homosexuality, cannot acknowledge intimacy between heterosexual men as a

manifestation of desire. As Sedgwick suggests, "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of

'desire,' of the potentially erotic…is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum

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[18] See Andrew Hoberek "The Novel After David Foster Wallace," *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies.* Ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 211-228; Adam Kelly, "The New Sincerity," *Postmodern|Postwar—And After: Rethinking American Literature,* Ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Wordern (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2016), 197-208

[19] OED, "Intimacy."

[20] See Jonathan Flatley, "Reading into Henry James: Allegories of the Will to Know in The Turn of the Screw," *Affective Mapping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 85-104.

[21] Wallace called de Man a philosopher that, "the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard…as divorced from his own concerns" ("Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," *Both Flesh and Not,* 63). At the Harry Ransom Center, one can also find and examine Wallace's thoroughly annotated copy of de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1983).

between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (1-2). Continuing a critical conversation started by Mary K. Holland and Clare Hayes-Brady on the role of gender and sexuality in Wallace's fiction, this chapter examines how, to use Wallace's word, the "hideousness" of heterosexual masculinity is both critiqued and enabled by the intimate relational mode his narrative technique elicits. It is with this use of the phrase "queer potential" that I aim to make visible the continuum of desire made available in Wallace's immaterial, ghostly presence, and, moreover, why particularly male readers do not and cannot openly recognize it as such.

IJ is a narratively complex novel. Ostensibly, the novel traces three primary narrative strands: 1.) the coming of age of Hal Incandenza, a teenager who uses marijuana to grieve for his father's, James O. Incandenza, death by suicide (to make matters worse Hal found his corpse in gruesome fashion before the fabula of the text) and to cope with the immense pressures of living up to his athletic potential at the intensely competitive tennis academy his father founded, 2.) the long road to recovery of Don Gately, a petty criminal and addict who finds a second chance at life in Alcoholics Anonymous, and 3.) two (double) agents of a Québécois terrorist group in a race against the American government to track down the tennis-director-turned-avant-garde-auteur James O. Incandenza's filmic experimentation "Infinite Jest," a video so entertaining that it literally paralyzes the viewer. With a glut of digressions and narrative offshoots, the novel consistently denies readerly expectations for these narratives to intersect or clarify one another, as well as any real closure for these primary strands.

In one of these scarce instances of intersection, the narrative introduces the "wraith" of James O. Incandenza,, at the very moment when Don Gately feels at his loneliest: struggling to resist any use of painkillers to help him cope with life-threatening injuries sustained while protecting a fellow Ennet House member. Gately's loneliness is not the product of an absence of visitors, but

because he is totally bandaged and inaudible, only "a sympathetic ear, or not even a sympathetic *real* ear, more like a wooden carving statue of an ear" (831). Gately cannot speak or have his needs, wants, desires articulated and heard. Suffering in this way, the wraith asserts himself to engage Gately in both a rational conversation about their experiences as well as a reflexive, affective substitution that will offer each of them a space for an, albeit unacknowledged, intimacy.

One of the central topics of conversation between Gately and the wraith is the use of background characters who must remain silent, or figurants, in television shows and movies. Incandenza explains that "he personally spent the vast bulk of his own former animate life as pretty much a figurant, furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him, it turned out, and that's one heck of a crummy way to try to live" (835). Incandenza expounds on the impossibility of this position: "And either the wraith was saying or Gately is realizing that you can't appreciate the dramatic pathos of a figurant until you realize how completely *trapped* and *encaged* he is in his mute peripheral status…No way for a figurant to win. No possible voice or focus for the encaged figurant" (835). Each character's crisis seems to stem from the fact that they have been forced into a position of inaudibility, "furniture at the periphery." Wraith-hood, the ability to project oneself beyond the grave, allows Incandenza to shift from the supernumerary into the essential, both as a literal character in the text and as an asserted masculine figure. However, Incandenza's own sympathetic appeal to be seen and heard undercuts considerable evidence to the contrary. The repression of actual dialogue about James's suicide seems only to proliferate the ways in which his life and death can be read into the neuroses affecting not only immediate family members but also nearly every character in the text. From the Québécois terrorist group seeking Incandenza's "hostile" video cartridge "Infinite Jest," to the deeply affected youths at the Enfield Tennis Academy, nearly every character engages however obtusely with the legacy of Incandenza's life (and death). In other words, Incandenza, as well as Gately, could hardly be considered "actual" figurants

within the tome of *IJ,* they merely, but significantly, perceive and feel themselves to be figurants. Including the various nicknames "J.O.I.," "J.O. Incandenza," and "Himself," a simple digital search of the text reveals that Incandenza is mentioned or discussed over one hundred times in the novel.

And yet, what bonds Incandenza to Gately is a sense of loss, specifically in the function of fatherhood. Incandenza, in his mind, recalls that a father's role is to communicate directly with his son, to give his son advice that, through his progeny, will live beyond and into the future. However, Incandenza recognizes that, like his own experience, Hal is becoming increasingly withdrawn and non-communicative, a figurant in his own right. Incandenza characterizes his, and Hal's, plight in terms of visibility and invisibility:

> I.e. that his son had become what he (the wraith) had feared as a child he (the wraith) was. The boy, who did everything well and with a natural unslumped grace the wraith himself had always lacked, and whom the wraith had been so terribly eager to see and hear and let him (the son) know he was seen and heard, the son had become a steadily more *hidden* boy, toward the wraith's life's end; and no one else in the wraith and boy's nuclear family would see or acknowledge this, the fact that the graceful and marvelous boy was disappearing before their eyes. They looked but did not see his invisibility. (838)

A repeated emphasis is placed on the indefinite masculine pronouns "he" and "him" over the definite pronouns that the narrative situations parenthetically: "he (the wraith)…he (the wraith)…him (the son)." While at once this emphasis seems to heighten their characterization as masculine, transposed as it is the pronouns also de-face Incandenza and Hal, making them invisible, as in hard to distinguish, just as they are feeling invisible, as in disempowered. Their whiteness and masculinity becomes a burden, and Incandenza, particularly in the role of the wraith, is seeking an opportunity to become visible again and, concomitantly, reverse the process by which his boy is becoming *"hidden".* As Sally Robinson points out, "Invisibility is a privilege enjoyed by social groups who do not, thus, attract modes of surveillance and discipline; but it can also be felt as a burden in a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of differences and the symbolic currency

of identity politics."[22] As the wraith argues, the only way in which he conceived to save his son was to re-install the patriarchal order in his own family. To hear him tell it, "And they listened but did not hear the wraith's warning…The wraith says the nuclear family had believed he (the wraith) was unstable and confusing the boy with his own (the wraith's) boyhood self" (838). The more that the wraith attempted to pull from his (or his father's) history any usable past that might help his son become visible, the contemporary landscape pushes him more and more into the margins.

Hamilton Carroll argues that, through the nineties and early 2000s, white masculinity responded to its perceived crisis against the growing rights of marginalized groups through a stance of "lability," in the sense that both whiteness and masculinity are mutable, liable and "prone to lapse." As Carroll puts it, white masculinity adopts a stance of frailty only as a sleight of hand to acquire more "rights and recognition by citing itself as the most needy and the most worthy recipient of what it denies it already has."[23] Sally Robinson's study of the visibility of white masculinity similarly reveals that it most often represented in corporeal terms, as a wounded body. Robinson refers to this public display of suffering as an "aesthetic of masochism," because in these cases "the masochist's suffering must be made *visible* in order for him to experience the pleasure in pain" (13). Aside from the parallel questions of how and to whom a ghost becomes visible, the foundation of Gately and Incandenza's relationship is the reciprocal recognition that there is "no way for a [white male] to win," except, perhaps, to be with one another and to become visible by expressing their pain.

Thus conceived, the relationship that develops between Gately and his wraith provides a convincing conceptual metaphoric for the author-reader relationship that *IJ* constructs more broadly. Ghosts, as a literary device, can be understood as a direct evocation of what Paul de Man

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[22] Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.
[23] Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

calls the master trope of reading: prosopopoiea, literally meaning to give (poeia) a face (prosopon).[24] As Jonathan Flatley explains, "reading (in the sense of fixing a meaning) always requires first that you imagine a person having thoughts and feelings that the text itself leaves undecidable."[25] In the case of the wraith, we have an entity that is immediately undecidable for Don Gately. Gately's immediate reaction is to pause at the terminology of wraith: "Does *wraith* mean like a ghost, as in dead? …What would it be like to try and talk and have the person think it was just their own mind talking? Gatley could maybe Identify, to an extent, he decides" (833). As I expand in the below section on *TPK*, the term wraith does not necessarily mean "like a ghost," in fact it also suggests the possibility of being a "phantom," or a self-delusion. Yet, Gately, rehearsing his Alcoholics Anonymous platitude, "decides" to "maybe Identify," suggesting that he chooses to believe in the reality of the ghost, rather than the fictionality of the phantom.

Similarly, when the narrator describes their initial interfacing, we see this confusion inflicted on the reader: "The wraith says Just to give Gately an idea, he, the wraith, in order to appear as visible and interface with him, Gately, he, the wraith, has been sitting, still as a root, in the chair by Gately's bedside for the wraith-equivalent of *three weeks*, which Gately can't even imagine" (836). The wraith speaks through a free indirect discourse that imbibes the narrator, Don Gately, and the wraith together. The lack of punctuation between the direct discourse of the wraith and the narrator recalls the ways in which the wraith and narrator form an amalgam. But, moreover, the narrator uses a procession of "explanatory" appositions that only seem to intensify the confusion between parties. The need to clarify each of these masculine personal pronouns (he and him) only exists, in fact, because of the narrator's spectral presence. These undecidable moments construct what de Man calls "autobiographical moments" in reading: "an alignment between the two subjects involved in the

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[24] Paul De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN* 94.5 (1979): 919-30.
[25] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 88.

process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (921). In a moment like this, de Man would argue that, just as Gately reads into the wraith for clarity, the reader imaginatively conjures an authorial ghost in attempt to attribute appropriately "thoughts and feelings that the text leaves undecidable."

The process of conjuring this authorial ghost is, just as it is for Gately and the wraith, "hard work." Wallace's suggestion that his readers recognize that this "hard work…sometimes has a payoff," litigates to a certain extent both his, or the wraith's, "sincerity" and the reader's reciprocation. Authorial effort demands readerly effort, and through that exchange presumably each can become visible to the other as an act of "trust or faith," a belief in ghosts ("New Sincerity" 201). Fittingly, Adam Kelly argues that the theme of "undecidability" is therefore essential to Wallace's construction of sincerity, but I would argue that it is similarly essential for his construction of intimacy as well. (205-206) To prove this point, I will take a brief detour through Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in which he stages an intimacy "between men" through the device of prosopopoeia and the construction of a literary ghost.[26]

The relationship between Whitman and Wallace has been relatively under-explored, especially given his literary engagement with the feelings of shame adjacent to those that weigh on the men of the novel, as well as in Wallace's fiction more broadly.[27] Specifically, as Michael Warner suggests, "[Whitman] seems to have felt a vocation to answer for a great many forms of inferiority:

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[26] Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 132-138.

[27] In the few instances Whitman is brought up, it is as an antecedent for the trend of "maximalism" that many see Wallace as participating in. See Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism," Twentieth Century Literature 53.3 (2007): 327-44; Dave Eggars contribution to Steven Moore, et al. "In Memoriam David Foster Wallace," *Modernism/modernity* 16.1 (2009): 1-24. Also of note, Wallace's e-mail address ("ocapmycap@comcast.com") was also a reference to Whitman's famous poem "O Captain! My Capitain!" However, among Wallace's library housed at the Harry Ransom Center, a copy of *Leaves of Grass* is unfortunately not present to analyze. As Stephen J. Burn remarked at his keynote address of the 2015 David Foster Wallace conference, during the course of attempting to track down letters and books, he has learned that, for various reasons, much of his personal archive is either in private hands or lost forever due to Wallace's haphazard bookkeeping.

of class, of ignorance, of sex, of poverty, of disrepute and disability, of national provincialism."[28] In answering for the shame of these "forms of inferiority," Whitman viewed poetry as an extension of his body, which would allow him the means produce (male) comradeship and imagine a moment when a man's desire for another man could be shameless. *Leaves of Grass,* the collection that includes "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," is referenced directly in *IJ* when, "in part of grieving for Himself [James O. Incandenza]," the "sweat guru" Lyle "[reads] *Leaves of Grass*…going through a Whitman period" (254). One can easily read into their relationship a homosocial, if not queer, desire; when alive, Incandenza would get "libated late at night with Lyle" and "pour his heart's thickest chime right out there," while Lyle, licking the sweat off of Incandenza's skin, "would start to get tipsy himself as Himself's pores began to excrete bourbon" and read him poetry "during these all-night sessions" (379). Given this relationship, it is not inconceivable that Lyle chooses this text precisely because Whitman's poetic use of ghosts enabled one man to project himself, through language, beyond the grave to meet, and be intimate with, another man.

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman uses the liminal space of the ferry to look beyond the faces of the people physically on the boat along with him and instead towards a future (male) reader. Michael Moon characterizes this device as a "long view," or "a mode of vision and perception extended and removed beyond the specular field of two persons which situates itself between a gazing subject and a distant object."[29] The poem opens, "And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are/more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose" (132). By alternating from a "facing" of those on the boat to those in the future, Whitman creates a spectral presence that more readily equips him to "[explore] certain difficult questions of desire"

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[28] Michael Warner, "Introduction," *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Penguin, 2004) , xi-xxxvii, quotation on xxiv.
[29] Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 90.

(Moon 107). The following stanzas evidence this direct correlation between the poet's spectral

presence and the reader:

> The men and women I saw were all near to me,
> Others the same—others who look back on me, because I
> Looked forward to them.
> …
> Who was to know what should come home to me?
> Who knows but I am enjoying this?
> Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking
>   at you now, for all you cannot see me? (135-136)

Here, Whitman gestures to the conditions of reciprocal intensity for his ghost to succeed, a liminality

that allows both to occupy the same space at the same time. It is notable how Whitman constructs

these lines as a conjunction: "others who look back on me," only do so because "I looked forward

to them."

For Wallace, as it was for Whitman, the possibilities of this liminal space are incredibly

urgent. The (figurant's) need to have another sincerely hear and understand his pain is an essential

thrust of *IJ*'s Alcoholics Anonymous. Coincidentally, Whitman, too, participated in temperance

meetings of the 1840s (pre-dating Alcoholics Anonymous), and the only bestseller of his lifetime

was an alcohol addiction novel *Franklin Evans.*[30] However, some scholars have theorized that, in

contrast to Gately's platitude to "maybe Identify," Whitman enjoyed the space the early temperance

movement offered to hear and tell confessions "of that grosser kind which is rivetted by intimacy in

scenes of dissipation" (sic).[31] The deferral and foreclosure of physical intimacy between men,

imbued as it is with shame, might help explain why the second stanza is tinged by the bittersweet:

"Who knows but I am enjoying this?" The interrogative is followed by the acknowledgement that "I

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[30] Walt Whitman, *Franklin Evans or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007 [1842]).

[31] From Whitman's unfinished novel *The Madman,* excerpted in *The Early Poems and the Fiction.* Ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 243. For more on Whitman's fiction as literature of addiction, see Michael Warner, "Whitman Drunk," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies,* Ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 30-43. For more on his participation in the temperance movement and sexuality, see also Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), specifically chapters 1 & 2; Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman,* 57.

am as good as looking at you now," illustrating the slippage between metaphor "as good as" and the equivocation between bodily presence and textual presence. Moon argues that, by producing "just such an uncanny place where the reader can 'look at' the poet from the precise textual 'spot' where the poet once 'looked at' the reader,'" Whitman shows that the very recognition of this place eliminates its fixity and re-produces the liminality of the ferry crossing as a liminality between "reader and poet, past and present, on which these respective positions cross and re-cross each other's paths without being permitted by the text to 'settle' at any of the terminal points of these paths" (109).

Returning to *IJ,* the wraith, and the authorial ghost, appear also to construct a textual, or linguistic, meeting place "between men." At first, the straightforward desire of communication qualifies this goal: "No! *No! Any* conversation or interchange is better than none at all, to trust him on this, that the worst kind of gutwrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side" (839). But the dialogue that takes place between Gately and the wraith far surpass the simple "conversation or interchange" we might expect between two rational minds. Instead, Gately quickly recognizes that for the wraith to see or touch his "inner or inmost nature," they must not only be dialogic partners, but also affective and physical ones as well. When pain from Gately's wound shoots through his body, "the wraith gasps and almost falls off the monitor as if he can totally empathize with the dextral pain. Gately wonders if the wraith has to endure the same pain as Gately in order to hear his brain-voice and have a conversation with him. Even in a dream, that'd be a higher price than anybody's ever paid to interface with D.W. Gately" (839-40). Though Gately is not sure of the authenticity of the feeling, he follows the affective polarity of their communion, choosing to believe that the wraith truly cares and is paying "a higher price than anybody's ever paid to interface."

The narrative positions "interfacing" as both an opportunity for dialogue as well as an opportunity for an affective substitution, complicating the neutrality of the "conversation" between these two men as non-physical, or non-intimate. Particularly given its therapeutic content, their exchange evokes psychoanalytic dialogue and the desire sometimes said to take place between the analysand and the analyst during instances of transference (when a patient's cathexis to one object attachment is re-directed to a new one). Drawing on Freud, Jonathan Flatley argues that prosopopoeia functions similarly to the premise of psychoanalytic dialogue. Because the analyst is out of view (usually behind the analysand who is lying on a couch), the analysand must constantly "conjure the [ghostly] face" of the other. The analysand becomes innervated by this imaginative conjuring, allowing himself to feel emotions that, "like ghosts, it is in their essence to always only *return*" (89, emphasis in original). The act of conjuring displaces these returning, often repressed, desires from their original source and onto the ghostly face, the analysand.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Gately senses, and repels, the potentially sexual undercurrent to this dialogic relationship. When Gately's "brain-voice" utters the unfamiliar word "PIROUETTE," he conflates this linguistic marker of the wraith's reality as a sexual advancement: "which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape" (832). This is precisely what makes the conceptual metaphoric of the wraith so revealing. Through almost-superhuman effort and rhetorical force, taking the form of the wraith allows Incandenza the facility beyond the grave to engage in a dialogic relationship with Don Gately that was supposedly socially foreclosed to him in real life. Yet, in this relationship, the two (male) bodies are so attuned that "either the wraith was saying or Gately was realizing" at the same moment, the two are indistinguishable, they cross and re-cross one another, feel one another, and become-with one another. Yet, the potential reality of Incandenza's existence precisely poses the

threat that something more than hetero-Platonic dialogue is taking place, that a potentially queer desire is unfolding.

By describing this exchange as a "lexical rape," Gately recalls the threat that Eve Sedgwick describes as "homosexual panic," meaning when a heterosexual man might be induced to gay-bashing "by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked."[32] Sedgwick goes on to explain that,

> In effect, the homosexual panic defense performs a double act of minoritizing taxonomy: there is, it asserts, one distinct minority of gay people, and a second minority equally distinguishable from the population at large, of "latent' homosexuals" whose "insecurity about their own masculinity" is so anomalous as to permit a plea based on diminution of normal moral responsibility. At the same time, the efficacy of the plea depends on its universalizing force, on whether…it can 'create a climate in which the jurors are able to identify with the perpetrator by saying, "My goodness, maybe *I* would have reacted the same way." [20]

The use of the word "rape" seems to function to similarly distance Gately from any potentially queer intepretation that might be read into this ghostly exchange, and is in fact a temporary act of disavowing the relationship altogether. If a courtship is taking place, it is certainly not the result of any consensual agreement on his part. Meanwhile, as Andrew Warren points out, "'Lexical rape,' of course, is no more in Gately's wordbank than 'pirouette.'"[33] As a repetition of the very "violating" intrusion that induces the charge of "rape" in the first place, the phrase postpones clear interpretation. Moreover, through his self-admission of the "creepiness" of his desire to and method of interface, Incandenza also defuses the suspicion that he might be there for an intimate encounter. Through his honest self-awareness, Incandenza is simply appealing to the reader's mutual understanding that any genuine attempt to initiate an interfacing "between men" is, culturally, "creepy." Thus, as readers and critics alike accept, of course Incandenza is simply interfacing with Gately "to communicate, in some way and at some time, perhaps indirectly, with Hal" (Warren 403).

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[32] Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19.
[33] Andrew Warren, "Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*," *Studies in the Novel* 44.4 (2012): 389-408, quotation on 402.

In light of this re-assurance that no overt, or even "latent," homosexual desire is present between these characters, the narrative provides the most direct explanation of the aesthetic practice of *IJ* as a kind of mirrored reflection of Incandenza's own "Infinite Jest," a reproduction of a baby's view of his mother from a crib. Lee Konstantinou argues that if we read Incandenza as an extension of Wallace in this sentimental manifesto, we can see him "simultaneously critiquing the hyper-self involution supposedly characteristic of the avant-garde as well as the infantilizing tendencies of the mass media."[34] In other words, Wallace views his specific, "sincere" iteration of the literary novel as a liminal space between a particular reading he has of "art for art's sake" avant-garde art and mass culture, pulling from mass media the objective "*to entertain*" and from the legacy of "serious fiction" the more effortful demands of aesthetic difficulty. Given this, some critics have taken to associating Wallace with the "middlebrow," arguably the liminal space between these aesthetic aims. However, as Sally Robinson argues, "The middlebrow is associated with the establishment, the delegitimized center; while the avant-garde fits into, or can be made to fit into, revolutionary projects, and mass culture can be read as a potential source of individual collective empowerment, middlebrow appears impotent from either direction, out of touch with the masses, and out of touch with the elites" (15). In other words, Robinson would argue that claiming this liminal space between mass culture and the avant-garde allows Incandenza, and by extension Wallace, to embody the role of the victim, "the great unmarked, the phantom figure against whom differences become visible—but…himself deeply invested in coming to visibility" (14-15). Wallace's ability to construct a narratorial position as "the great unmarked, the phantom figure" is crucially how he actualizes the "mutual reflexive substitution" we see between Gately and Incandenza.

This, in part, might help us understand what role the medium itself plays in facilitating, mediating, and disciplining the, potentially erotic, intimacies staged between author and reader. In

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[34] Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2012), 83-112, quotation on 103.

the filmic "Infinite Jest," the physical relationship between the viewer and the stunningly beautiful Joelle Van Dyne, the actress playing the mother, is mimetically produced through the physical relationship the viewer has with the formal qualities of the film: the camera wobble, the bending of the light. The transferability of these attachments, from the narrator-character to the materiality of the medium and vice versa, is re-created for the reader through the endnotes of the film's echo, *IJ*. The moving back and forth in the book similarly uses the physical relationship between reader and book, and the physical relationship between the reader and the language, in order to allow David Foster Wallace's authorial ghost to cross between the frontiers of self and subject and make his body available to the reader. In this way, the endnotes function to literalize the spectral metaphor of Wallace's wraith. Yet, as Timothy Aubry and others have noted, the clearest presence of his authorial figure is when the narrator uses the space of the endnotes to correct and expand on linguistic choices of the characters. In other words, much like the use of the words "pirouette" and "lexical" indexed the potential reality of the wraith, the linguistic corrections in the endnotes make the authorial figure both a fictional and a real-life presence. In this way, Aubry convincingly argues that the effect of these endnotes in *IJ* is to elide any definitive claim to reality or fictionality: "Though self-referential, Wallace's persona does not assume the form of a tangible individual whose status as either real or fictional becomes the central object of speculation. As merely a voice, the author-protagonist in *IJ* identifies himself with the text itself and thereby evades questions about which world, real or fictional, he inhabits."[35] In other words, the reader does not question the ontological nature of the narrator, but engages, instead, directly with the contrivance that they are in communication with "another human being," the author figure himself.

But, was this not precisely the linguistic substitution that caused Gately to step back, offended at the prospect that he had been (sexually) violated, victim of a "lexical rape"?

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[35] Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2011), 125.

Appropriately, just as with Whitman's qualification "I am as good as enjoying this now," Wallace must, then, qualify this relationship as a metaphor: the wraith gasps "as if" he can totally empathize. The maintenance of his spectral metaphor as a "crossing" or liminal space is absolutely crucial in *IJ*. Don Gately immediately has concerns over whether the wraith is "real" or not, but is persuaded quite easily by the wraith that intimacy ought to supersede these concerns:

> The wraith made a weary morose gesture as if not wanting to bother to get into any sort of confusing dream-v.-real controversies. The wraith said Gately might as well stop trying to figure it out and just capitalize on its presence, the wraith's presence in the room or dream, whatever, because Gately, if he'd bothered to notice and appreciate it, at least didn't have to speak out loud to be able to interface with the wraith-figure. (830)

What is often called the "sincerity" of Wallace, or I might say the emergence of "intimacy," also initiates the process by which the face of Wallace we conjure is de-faced. By constructing an aesthetic practice by which the attributes of his face are conjured, Wallace reveals the disfigurement of that very face by revealing the double-sidedness of writing as always grounded in fictions and never "real." This is why, for de Man and for Wallace, these "mutual reflexive substitutions" are so bound up with death and the figure of a ghost. It is, ultimately, the orientation of the (white, heterosexual male) reading public that chooses to believe that Wallace is paying "a higher price than anybody's ever paid to interface," not the definitive reality of the wraith as such.

Adam Kelly's description of Wallace's gesture towards sincerity rings true in this sense, that for his novel to function properly, "The author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied,* not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time" (206). It is only the particularity of this reader that I wish to put pressure. The specific reading public Wallace calls into being makes it especially important to consider the way their orientation to the literary novel as a genre and medium reveals itself as simultaneously a rational or cognitive orientation and an affective, or bodily, one.

What distinguishes Whitman from Wallace, then, is their differing stakes in "universalizing" communication. As Michael Warner articulates, "Certainly not least of the motives behind [Whitman's] well-to-dignity is the need to 'clarify and transfigure' a kind of sex and lust that had no voice of its own, and could only be expressed in a language of the severest moral anathema" (xxv). Clearly, this function is only affectively accessible to a reader who fulfills the "mutual reflexive substitution" posited by the text. That is, only he who shares "hot wishes I dared not speak" would understand the bittersweet excitement of the communion suggested in the closing stanza, "Flow on, river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide…drench with your splendor me" (135; 137). Similarly we could ask, who is called to cross the frontiers of the body of David Foster Wallace's ghost, to love him, touch him, and become-with him? To whom does this ghost become visible?

Largely seen as an exploration of boredom as the "flip side" of entertainment, the thematic focus of *IJ*, at least on the topic of ghosts these two texts share a key conceptual metaphoric. Described as a "tornadic" novel by editor and compiler Micahel Pietsch, the unfinished novel is an episodic investigation of working at the I.R.S. through the eyes of various low- and mid-level employees.[36] The "fabula," if one can call it such, revolves around a number of characters arriving at the I.R.S. for orientation, including a metafictional rendering of David Wallace, the "living human holding the pencil." As David Hering first observed, early drafts of *TPK* suggest that the novel was initially planned to be narrated by a ghost and a ghost writer.[37] However, the "early draft" ghost that Hering refers to, as well as the ghosts that do emerge within the "final" draft of *TPK*, present a marked shift from Incandenza's wraith, namely the ways in which they are classified. This evolving spectral metaphoric is congruent with the stylistic choices in these novels: the ontologically

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[36] Michael Pietsch, "Editor's Note," *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), ix-xiv.

[37] David Hering, "Too Much and Too Little: A History of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King,*" *LA Review of Books,* 14 Sept. 2016.

ambiguous author figure posed by *IJ*'s endnotes to a metafictional rendering of the autobiographical

"David Wallace" in *TPK*—a practice one sees in early drafts of *IJ* as well as some short stories like

"Good Old Neon."[38] I do not mean to overstate that any reader, especially an experienced reader of

Wallace's, would confuse the naming of a character Wallace directly with autobiography. Instead,

suggesting that Wallace turns to autobiography more explicitly in *TPK* is, for my purposes, to

suggest that the metafictional "David Wallace" of the text discloses an altered strategy in

constructing a physical, intimate presence within his discursive loops.

In the unfinished novel, IRS employees, whose textually defined "heroism" equates to their

role as national, public "figurants,"[39] achieve an almost religious Zen from the deep concentration of

their work. One outcome of this concentration is an encounter with a phantom, a self-delusion, a

vanity, a psychoanalytic conjuring of one's own face:

> *Phantom* refers to a particular kind of hallucination that can afflict rote examiners at a certain
> threshold of concentrated boredom…One way you know they're not real ghosts: Every
> visitee's phantom is different, but their commonality is that the phantoms are always deeply,
> diametrically different from the examiners they visit. This is why they're so frightening. They
> tend to present as irruptions from a very rigid, disciplined type of personality's repressed
> side, what analysts would maybe call a person's shadow. Hypermasculine wigglers get visits
> from simpering queens in lingerie and clotted vaudevillian rouge and mascara, nancing
> about. (314)

In light of my analysis of *IJ*, that a repression of desire facilitates the "hypermasculine wigglers"

conjuring their inner "simpering queens in lingerie…nuancing about" stands out as humorously self-

aware and self-effacing. Yet, Wallace expressed deep antagonism towards this type of

spectral/specular presence, and any author-reader relationship that would enable it. In one of his

draft journals for *TPK,* Wallace sketches out a concept that would satirize this abuse of aesthetic

difficulty, and the attention or interest it requires: "New kind of Rubik cube that, when you get the

pieces aligned, are four different bodies whose 4 necks share the same head—and the head is <u>YOU</u>,

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[38] See David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," *Oblivion: Stories,* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 141-181.
[39] See all of Chapter 22 in *TPK.*

it looks like <u>YOU</u>, not like anyone else, but to you it looks just like you, maybe because of all the work you had to put into solving the puzzle."[40] To Wallace, this sort of phantom-like conjuring in which one might only reflect on the self was perhaps the worst outcome of how readers engaged with *IJ,* simply folding back in on oneself and not engaging in the conversation. This is precisely where Wallace pushes the classification of phantoms in *TPK* towards a more clear delineation of that which is pure vanity and that which is the *real* immaterial presence of the authorial figure in the work: the ghost.

Unlike the phantoms that are the product of self-delusion, the narrator explains that the "non-hallucinatory ghosts" are real, "companionable" beings that many people (or, specifically, the class of "wigglers") don't speak of.

> Ghosts are different. Most examiners of any experience believe in the phantom; few know or believe in actual ghosts. This is understandable. Ghosts can be taken for phantoms, after all. In certain ways, phantoms serve as distracting background or camouflage from which it can be difficult to pick up the fact-pattern of actual ghosts. It's the old cinematic gag of someone on Halloween being visited by a real ghost and complimenting what thinks is a kid in a really great costume. The trust is that there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room. (315)

The narrator, in a move similar to *IJ*, disavows ownership of these ghosts, stating "much of the following info comes after the fact from Claude Sylvanshine." The possibility of mistaking a phantom for a ghost and vice versa is particularly revealing in a return to *IJ* when the figure of the author is rehearsed as the "wraith" of James Incandenza. The term "wraith" has "obscure origins" and duplicitously means "an apparition or specter of a dead person: a *phantom or ghost*" (OED, emphasis mine). This undecidability of the wraith as phantom or ghost calls into question whether or not the author figure is simply a self-delusion of the reader (the vanity of a "hypermasculine wiggler") or a bodily presence, an actual projection into the future with all of the rhetorical urgency

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[40] David Foster Wallace, "Evidence Notebook: typed and handwritten freewriting, descriptive phrases, figures of speech, and story ideas," undated, MS, box 43, file 1, David Foster Wallace fonds, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin Library, pg. 62.

and assertiveness of Walt Whitman. The poles of these two definitional claims cannot be more stark, but, in Wallace's typical stylistic ambiguity, also closely related.

Similar to Incandenza stepping in when Gately most needs someone, Garrity comes to Lane Dean Jr. in a moment when Dean "felt in a position to say he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops" (379). However, unlike the wraith of James O. Incandenza, the ambiguity of the ghost's (and by extension Wallace's) presence is elided. Garrity is not a phantom; he is a ghost, the actual "immaterial part of man" that can be launched across temporal and spatial distance into the same, liminal textual space (at least for just a moment) to face the reader. The categorization of ghosts and phantoms suggests a yearning to define once-and-for-all the bodily presence that he would like to have for with his readers. Interestingly, in *TPK,* Wallace leverages this undecidability by elucidating the categories of phantoms and ghosts, thereby more narrowly defining the textual space in which reader and author might intimately connect.

The categorization of ghosts and phantoms sheds light on the shift from the ontologically ambiguous narrator of *IJ* (most evinced in the endnotes, or "voice from beyond the grave") to the metafictional rendering of "David Wallace" in *TPK.* Like the "wraith" of James O. Incandenza, we might conclude that identification with Wallace succeeds because of the nuance of the term: he is simultaneously a "phantom," or self-delusion, and a ghost, the actual immaterial presence of the author. In other words, based on the "sincere" effort of the communication, and the "sincere" effort on the part of the reader to push through the aesthetically difficult novel, both author and reader need to decide actively to believe in the other. This both/and quality allows the reader to slide from one pole (self-delusion) towards the one that promises an interminable promise of further dialogue and, therefore, intimacy (author). Relatedly, the metafictional device of deploying "David Wallace" as a character allows Wallace to explore again how the textual space of the novel allows for a physical relationship between the male author and the (male) reader. However, in the case of *TPK,*

the combination of Wallace's recent biographical suicide and the construction of the book itself by

his editor make all-too-real the closure of the textual space that the author and reader might meet.

And, it is perhaps most fitting that one example of this closure occurs in a footnote, the same space

that allowed Wallace to actualize his experiments with a "voice from beyond the grave" in *IJ*.

In "The Author's Foreword," appearing as Chapter 9 in the unfinished novel, the

metafictional David Wallace facetiously asserts that the text is true, despite the disclaimer on the

copyright page that "the characters and events in this book are fictitious," a disclaimer that by

definition must also include the voice that is insisting the book's truth. The chapter begins, "Author

here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil" (68).[41] He goes on to define his

precise location, "addressing you from my Form 8828-deductuble home office at 725 Indian Hill

Blvd., Claremont 91711 CA, on this fifth day of spring, 2005" (68-69). It is noteworthy that Wallace

considered deeply this decision to make himself into a character. In the margins of his very first

draft of this "Author's Foreword," Wallace expresses doubt about this use of his own name as a

character: "Dumb? The real-or-fiction theme is cool. But it could get annoying, especially if it keeps

interrupting the narrative" ("Evidence Notebook" 123). This definition of a time and space that the

author-narrator occupies simultaneously obscures and reveals the possibility of Whitmanian

intimacy. The author is not so much "here" as is "there," a place always separate from where the

reader is, and in a different time than the reader is. In another of his later handwritten drafts—dated

December 2006—of Chapter 24, which also opens with the line "Author here," Wallace, with

characteristic irony, writes at the top-right corner, boxed off, "I'm not here."[42] The more and more

precise that Wallace becomes in defining his location, the greater the distance between his body and

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[41] For related analyses of this section, see Henry Veggian, "Anachronisms of Authority: Authorship, Exchange Value, and David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *boundary 2* 39.3 (2012): 97-124; Marshal Boswell, "Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *English Studies* 95.1 (2014): 25-39.

[42] David Foster Wallace, "Handwritten and typescript drafts from 'Glitterer/SJF' freewriting binder, 2005-2007," undated," MS, box 39, folder 6, David Foster Wallace fonds, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin Library.

the reader's becomes; the liminality of the crossing is foreclosed. And yet, the rhetorical energy of this chapter recalls Whitman's ferry crossing, "What is it then between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? What ever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not" (135). The presence/absence of Wallace remains contingent on a reader that looks backward to him because he looks forward to them. Yet, fascinatingly, as the classification of phantoms and ghosts suggest, what is privileged here is not the mental (concentration produces the self-delusion) but the physical, the contact between these two male bodies across time and space.

But, this interplay between presence and absence is never more urgent than in the decision to publish *TPK* at all, and what impact this has on this readerly relationship to the novel and the authorial ghost. Ironically, Michael Pietsch's emotional appeal to readers in closing his "Editor's Note" makes Wallace's ghostliness central:

> Given the choice between working to make this less-than-final text available as a book and placing it in a library where only scholars would read and comment on it, I didn't have a second's hesitation. Even unfinished, it is a brilliant work, an exploration of some of life's deepest challenges, and an enterprise of extraordinary artistic daring…But an unfinished novel is what we have, and how can we not look? *David, alas, isn't here* to stop us from reading, or to forgive us for wanting to. (xiii-xiv, emphasis mine)

In the biographical sense, of course, Wallace is tragically not "here" to "stop us from reading, or to forgive us for wanting to." This, on the one hand, overextends the idea that Wallace was ever present to stop readers from, for example, mis-reading, or to forgive readers for giving up halfway through *Infinite Jest*. His presence, in other words, was always already a fiction. On the other hand, this statement also under-emphasizes the ways in which, aesthetically, his ghost is designed to be "here," to haunt the reading process of *TPK*. As David Hering's research on the construction of *TPK* concludes, inserting himself as a character was perhaps the single, defining turning point in what Hering calls his "compositional crisis," from seeing the novel as impossible to possible. ("Too Much and Too Little") And, not only did Wallace aim to insert himself as a character, but as a "ghostwriter" or a "friendly ghost" remainder. Perhaps no greater evidence of the reality of the

physical intimacy for both men (author figure and reader) exists than in the potentiality of shame in the reading experience of *TPK*. Shame, significantly, is also the affect Eve Sedgwick has argued relates to queer desire because of its efficacy in prohibition, indignity, and alienation, produced by a "sincere" readerly engagement with this metafictional exercise.

In this Foreword, an intentionally crafted footnote stresses where this text should appear in the body of the book: "The Foreword's having now been moved seventy-nine pages into the text is due to yet another spasm of last-minute caution on the part of the publisher, re which please see just below" (69). When the reader follows suit and looks "just below," he sees the number sixty-seven, not seventy-nine. This might prompt the "hard-working" reader to examine if paratexts account for the discrepancy, as the listed page number often does not correspond to the actual pages of the book. What becomes evident, then, is that it is only through the inclusion of Michael Pietsch's "Editor's Note" that this page exists on the seventy-ninth page (listed sixty-seventh). While this is a benign editorial decision,[43] it is difficult to say that, given the aesthetic production of sincerity and intimacy cultivated by Wallace across these novels, a reader would encounter this discrepancy as benign. The author's sincerity in this Foreword becomes bound up with his dependence on Michael Pietsch writing an "Editor's Note" of a specific page length, and his ordering of chapters that might make this one specific stage direction achievable. Moreover, if the page formatting had broken slightly different, it would allow, as one would see in his drafts, that "re which please see just below" might not refer at all to the page number, but arguably to the next footnote. Even more problematic, in the subsequent paperback edition of *TPK*, promotional blurbs are added into the front of the text, however, this footnote is left unchanged, making the page number simply factually incorrect.[44] In

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[43] In the actual editing of the text, Pietsch is actually just following suite: Wallace's manuscripts of this chapter leave "(TK)" as the place marker for the page, which simply signifies "to come" in revisions. See draft six of the "Author's Foreword," David Foster Wallace, "From his desk: clean print outs," TS, box 36, file 1, David Foster Wallace fonds, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin Library.

[44] It is particularly telling that "blurbs" make this footnote a problem, considering the way in which they obfuscate the desire to view the book as a stand-in for authenticity and sincerity absent commercialism. Wallace often disparaged

other words, if the reader, trained to make an effort to fulfill their "sincere" obligation, were to try to assess the discrepancy, they would be sent directly to the mechanisms by which Wallace's body is disseminated and consumed commercially, rather than literarily. This, it would appear, is an unintentional, albeit powerful, manifestation of undecidability with much different stakes than whether or not the reader should "maybe Identify." Unlike in *IJ* when the endnotes nurtured an affirmative physical relationship between author-narrator and the reader by estranging the physical relationships between the reader and the object of the book, *TPK* reveals the negative side of this relationships. The promise of "serious fiction," in this case, as an affirmative marker of the last remaining safe space for intellectual kinship and, relatedly, male homosocial bonding, becomes exposed as an outcome of desire, a willingness to believe that Wallace's ghost was paying "a higher price than anybody's ever paid to interface" with the individuated, male reader. Instead, the material production of the book itself reveals itself as a monument to the "phantom" of Wallace, the unrelentingly solipsistic commercialism that neither the novel nor Wallace can ever truly escape. In other words, the material book, the safe "beloved" that arguably mediates the competing affections and desire of the two heterosexual men, is exposed as a kind of intimate betrayal.

I would like to pause on the potential of shame in this moment as a way to expose intimacy and desire as part of the author-reader relationship constructed by Wallace's fiction. As Jonathan Flatley suggests, the conjuring of another's face makes "prosopopoeia…the trope of fame and shame alike."[45] This is because, as the psychologist Silvan Tomkins has argued, despite being "felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul" shame is social;[46] shame provokes a facial reaction that

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blurbs, telling David Markson, "I…think blurbs are horseshit—I pressed the editor hard to make IJ a blurbless hardcover, to no avail." David Foster Wallace to David Markson, June 1996, Box 1, File 1, Steven Moore fonds, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin Library.

[45] Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face: Publicity and the Politics of Prosopopoeia," *Pop Out: Queer Warhol,* Ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 101-133, quotation on 106.

[46] Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader,* Ed. Eve Kosofsky. Sedgwick and Adam Frank, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 133.

provides involuntary, direct communication from one person to another. However, as Tomkins suggests, "[Shame] operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy" (134). Seeing another's face as experiencing shame, particularly when that other is someone whom we are attracted to or cherish, transfers those affects of shame to the proximate party, like a contagion.

With this in mind, Whitman's phrase "Who knows but I am enjoying this?" seems an apt description of a reader response to encountering this author's preface in the context of the book's publication. Marshall Boswell has stated that the presence of the character David Wallace is "one of the more striking, and at times, off-putting features of [his] unfinished novel" (25). But, is this strictly aesthetically off-putting, or personally and physically off-putting? By recalling the biographical author's, to borrow Hayes-Brady's phrase, "unspeakable failure," Wallace's ghost in *TPK* initiates the production of shame, and the inhibition of joy. Part of this is captured by the anxiety over whether or not it was appropriate to publish, look at, and read *TPK* at all, evidenced in "The Editor's Note," or whether or not readers should read his fiction teleologically to deliberate on the circumstances of his biographical suicide. However, these questions are, in part, bound up with the affective capacity of the language, storytelling, and the materiality of the book that Wallace constructed. I concur with Lee Konstantinou on this point when he argues, "The problem…is not that 'reading' a life as literature debases life, but rather that to assume that one 'merely' reads literature without having to take its conceptual commitments seriously—to assume that writing is merely a gesture—debases literature" (105). The production and intensity of shame in these reading moments, as the production and intensity of intimacy and homosocial desire before it, are not entirely abstract or extra-textual constructions. These spectral revisions demonstrate that the production of these affects is by aesthetic design, and with literary roots.

We might see, then, this moment as an inversion of what Whitman had hoped for in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": a space and time, in the future, when two men could be shamelessly intimate. Instead, what the production of shame, in opening and reading and conjuring Wallace's ghost in *TPK* corresponds with is the potentiality of one (male) reader's intense interest, and desire, for the (male) author. In short, this rupture simultaneously produces Wallace's real immaterial presence, and exposes it as a fictional production. In fact, this is precisely the double-bind that Paul de Man describes as the de-facement of autobiography, that which produces the authorial face also exposes it as a fiction:

> We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (920-921)

The very intensity of a readerly interest in that ghost reveals itself as a real desire to meet and cross the boundaries of one another in a "dream of complete intimacy." To be sure, in examining the Wallace's project as one determined to produce an intimate relational mode, I do not intend to read Wallace as an affirmative "queer" figure, nor his fiction as constructing queer relational modes. In fact, following Sedgwick, in Wallace's fiction one can note "the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds" (*Between Men* 5). That the cathexis between so many (male) readers and David Foster Wallace's authorial ghost has remained practically invisible despite its apparency supports Sedgwick's comment that, "what *counts* as the sexual is…variable and itself political" (15). Yet, recognizing that desire and articulating how his aesthetic practice as designed to provoke just such intimate interest, we might begin to mine the queer potential of his fiction.

Likewise, in noting the resistance to this recognition, within and outside of the novels,[47] we might question the universalizing intent to "sincere" communication that is so liberally associated with his legacy.

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[47] Potential Instances of queer romance in *IJ,* for instance long passages describing Orin Incandenza's (Hal's older brother) intense attraction for the cross-dressing undercover agent Hugh/Helen Steeply, serve primarily as a heteronormative wink and an elbow nudge between the author and reader.

CHAPTER 2: BECOMING-PERVERT: ORIENTATING ONESELF IN A.M. HOMES'S *THE END OF ALICE*

"Today on Wisconsin Public Radio we have the author of *The End of Alice,* the worst book of the

entire year. Incredibly awful. Please welcome A. M. Homes. Miss Homes, we've read your book and

we can't seem to find you in it."

WPR, 1996

"This is not a conversation, not a dialogue, but her hysterical purge."

A.M. Homes, *The End of Alice,* 1996

In September, 1996, *The New York Times Magazine* coupled short stories from two emerging

authors under the headings "On Young Love" (cover) and "Love is All You'll Need: Two Views of

Romance in the Next Century" (table of contents).[1] The two authors were David Foster Wallace and

A.M. Homes. Each had sensational new novels released in February of that year, *Infinite Jest* and *The*

End of Alice respectively, and each were similarly skewered by the same *NYT* book reviewer, Michiko

Kakutani, within ten days of each other.[2] Seeing these two authors side-by-side as authorities on love

and romance calls attention to the complex and divergent ways in which these novelists exploited

readers' orientations to language, storytelling, and the physicality of the book to produce

reciprocative modes of desire. David Foster Wallace's novel constructed a model of intimacy

between primarily heterosexual white men who saw their status and potency increasingly threatened

by, among other cultural shifts, commercial and digital culture.[3] At the same time, critics and book

reviewers, like Kakutani, viewed Homes's novel as a negation of normative intimacies altogether.

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[1] See A.M. Homes and David Foster Wallace, "Love is All You'll Need: Two Views of Romance in the Next Century," *The New York Times Magazine,* Sept. 29 1996, 188-191.

[2] See Michiko Kakutani, "A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1,079 Pages," *The New York Times*, Feb. 12 1996; Michiko Kakutani, "Like Humbert Humbert, Full of Lust and Lies," *The New York Times*, Feb. 22 1996.

[3] Fittingly, Wallace's contribution to the September issue of NYT magazine, entitled "Passion, Digitally," was an ironic etymology of the word "date" that revealed how commercial and digital culture occludes real person-to-person connection.

Kakutani described Homes's first-person account of an imprisoned, now-aged male pedophile[4] guiding a female protégée in the art of child seduction as "a willfully dirty book glossed with intellectual pretensions, a doggedly repellent piece of pornography, devoid of authentic emotion and filled with gratuitous and calculatedly disgusting scenes, scenes in which a man describes things like putting a BB gun up a woman's vagina and firing it" (Kakutani, "Like Humbert Humbert"). Following such reviews, as well as vigorous campaigning by organizations like National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), major U.K. retailer W.H. Smith as well as others banned the novel outright. Opponents widely suggested that the sexual "pathology" of the male and female pedophiles in the text might not only reflect the pathology of a (female) author, but also that through the distribution of the book this pathology might activate latent perversions in readers themselves.

That the *New York Times Magazine* titled the Wallace-Homes feature "On Young Love" might be read, given that pedophilia is a topic of Homes's novel, as firmly tongue-in-cheek. But, the juxtaposition of these two novelists as this generation's authorities for "Two Views of Romance in the Next Century," an acknowledgment of the future-oriented stakes of the models of intimacy that play out in the aesthetic practices of their novels, is curious. In other words, if intimacy might be an organizing principle for contemporary fiction after post-modernism, what can we learn from this comparison? As opposed to the celebrated, if also de-sexualized, intimacy "between men" I argue is central to Wallace's projection of himself in his novels, Homes's novel manipulates its readers' relationships to language, storytelling, and constructions of authorship to complicate normative categories of sexuality and gender as well as the modes of intimacy available therein. In its deployment of familiarly realist and metafictional literary devices, *The End of Alice* provokes an

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[4] The protagonist is left unnamed throughout the novel. In one instance, he is referred to as Chappy, a childhood nickname mentioned in passing when his second cousin visits the prison: "a reference to a perhaps extreme affection for the product Chap Stick" (43).

empathically unsettling erotic reading experience despite or because of its ethically and morally problematic descriptions of adult-child sex and sexual violence.[5] I argue that this novel performs a discomfiting process of "becoming-pervert" that simultaneously challenges and intensifies the complicated ways one "orientates" one's self, as Sarah Ahmed defines this term "feeling at home, knowing where one stands, or having objects within reach," between the fictional and the real as a sexual subject.[6]

I have chosen the term "becoming-pervert" as the primary function of *EA* because of the entangled nature of (metafictional) storytelling and sexuality that the word "pervert" entails. The process of becoming-pervert in *EA* ultimately reveals that neither pathologization nor perversion produces or reflects a stable identity, but, as the history of the word itself suggests, a movement between two binaries, truth/fiction and hetero-normal/queer, that are very much in flux. "Pervert" has a complicated etymology. As a noun it means simply one who has become perverted. Pervert, throughout its history but particularly in its earliest iterations, was based in (a threat to) religious dogma, as in a "person who has forsaken a doctrine or system regarded as true for one thought false." It is in this sense that "pervert" functions more dramatically as a verb, the process of "[turning] aside from a correct state," or becoming-pervert, than a stable noun. But, what this history suggests is that becoming-pervert has far more to do with the danger of engaging with a compelling story as it does something inherent to an individual person, the "pervert" in its noun form. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it took almost four hundred years for pervert to connote sexual misbehavior (origin 1856).[7] Moreover, the OED indicates that the discursive relation between the word itself and the law, either religious or state, shaded these meanings. The convergent

[5] A.M. Homes, *The End of Alice* (New York: Scribner, 1996). *The End of Alice* will be cited as *EA* in subsequent references.

[6] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).

[7] pervert, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014; "pervert, v." *OED Online,* Oxford Unitersity Press, September 2014.

meanings of perversion as a "turning aside" from "correct" sexual behavior goes hand-in-hand with "turning aside" from the correct religious dogma. Or, rather, one might directly or indirectly cause the other.

As I discussed in the introduction, when Virginia Woolf points out that readers all too often "ask that fiction be true," this "truth" has as much to do with the potential eroticism of language and storytelling, Bataille's "violations of selfhood," as it does a kind of literary realism, or a truth to reality. Perversions of "the truth" play a significant role in *EA*'s metafictional project, particularly in the context of the concurrent memoir boom in the 1990s with which the novel shares its basic narrative structure. It is this doubled nature of this verb that attracts me. To say that *EA* engages the reader in a process of perversion does not suggest that the novel simply titillates, though at times it certainly does, or that it simply puts in motion a cerebral thought experiment about the interiority of a pedophile, though at times it does that also. Instead, the novel engages the reader (mind and body) in a process of perversion, making visible the always-blurred lines between language, storytelling and sexuality. Thus, while this process of "becoming-pervert" stands in stark contrast to Wallace's oft-considered "affirmative" intimacy "between men," I aim to show that Homes's novelistic practice not only performs an aesthetic negation of phallocentric models of gender and sexuality, but also offers a different "affirmative" view of intimacy "for the twenty-first century:" a way to feel gender and sexuality in new and unpredictable ways.

Homes is, like most novelists of this generation, a product of what Mark McGurl has called "the Program Era"; she was a student of Grace Paley's at Sarah Lawrence College, then earned her M.F.A. from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and now teaches creative writing at Columbia. Prior to *EA,* Homes had published two novels, *Jack* (1989) and *In a Country of Mothers* (1993), as well as a collection of short stories, *The Safety of Objects* (1992). But, early on, Homes's work illustrated the ways in which the sexualized construction of her authorship was intertwined with the form and

content of her stories. Two of her short stories were anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (1994) with the stated objective to "[illuminate] the common ground of the gay male experience."[8] Although I would argue there is little doubt her storytelling accomplishes this goal regardless of her own sexual or gender identity, Homes playfully suggested that she was chosen, in part, because of confusion prompted by her use of the authorial title "A.M." instead of Amy.[9] Ironic or not, Homes is set apart from other (mainly male) popular "literary" novelists in this period because of the ways in which her lack of an incorporated persona[10] and sexual themes often made her difficult to categorize, either by genre or aesthetic tradition.

Perhaps nowhere did the struggle to contextualize *EA* surface more than in Kakutani's scathing *New York Times* book review. Kakutani lifts up a particular interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov's classic novel *Lolita* (1955) about the professorial Humbert Humbert's seduction of/by the eponymous twelve-year old Lolita as a contrast to what she saw as the related projects of *The End of Alice* and Bret Easton Ellis's infamous *American Psycho* (1991) about Wall Street serial killer Patrick Bateman.[11] These two potential literary antecedents for *EA* have undoubtedly had divergent afterlives, evidenced in no small part by the type of characterizations that Kakutani makes in her review of *EA*. She opens the review with Nabokov's definition of pornography, a word that he denounced in the wake of *Lolita's* publication and subsequent obscenity trials:

> The term "pornography" connotes mediocrity, commercialism and certain strict rules of narration: obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of esthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation…Thus, in pornographic novels

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[8] David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell, eds., *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

[9] Gregory Crewdson, "A.M. Homes in Wonder Land," *Bomb,* 55 (Spring 1996): 38-42.

[10] Unlike Wallace, in the period after *EA,* Homes has been far less skittish to broach the divide between her literary acclaim and middlebrow culture. On the one hand, each of her three novels in the nearly twenty years following *EA* were popular-literary successes, culminating in her edging out Zadie Smith and Hillary Mantel for the 2013 Women's Prize in Fiction (previously the Orange Prize, now the Baileys Women's Prize) for her novel *May We Be Forgiven* (2012). At the same time, Homes has enthusiastically participated in filmic adaptations of her work (*Jack* and *The Safety of Objects*, for example, were adapted for the small and big screens respectively), and she also contributed episodes for the *Showtime* hit television show *The L Word* (2004-2009).

[11] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita,* Second Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage International, 1997 [1955]); Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust. The novel must consist of an alternation of sexual scenes.

There is no doubt that *EA* fits Nabokov's definition in certain respects, as the narrative moves between an "alternation of sexual scenes" in the form of the narrator's memories of the past and his co-creation of scenes written by his female protégée. However, the novel also skirts "strict rules of narration" through its multi-voiced style and non-linear narrative structure, and shares a poetic sensibility with many novels that have come out of the "Program Era" generally, and the Iowa Writer's Workshop in particular. Nonetheless, Kakutani aligns the novel with *American Psycho* as an example of modern pornography masked as literature: *"The End of Alice,* in fact, turns out to be a kind of variation on Bret Easton Ellis's notorious *American Psycho*; it's a novel that proves that a woman can write as badly, violently and misogynistically as a man." However, the suggested distinction between the aesthetic projects of *Lolita* and of *American Psycho* reveals a central problem of reading *EA:* how do language and storytelling complicate our orientation to sexuality and authority?

Despite the fact that *The End of Alice* shares essential plot points and intertextual callouts to *Lolita*,[12] all of which Kakutaini dismisses as "superficial," she argues the novel shares more with the widely criticized[13] *American Psycho* because it simply espouses pornography for shock without any affirmative political value. In the set-up of her critique of *American Psycho,* and ultimately *EA,* Kakutani reads *Lolita* as "less a tale about a middle-aged man's lust for a 12-year-old girl than an astonishingly layered meditation on language, literary conventions and the American myths of innocence and the retrievable past." This description sanitizes *Lolita* through the same act of cultural

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[12] The ages and genders of the pedophiles and the victims, the cross-country romps/kidnappings of these young girls, and the primary narrative perspective of the novel's as retrospections from prison to name a few.

[13] For David Foster Wallace's famous critique of Bret Easton Ellis and his ilk for the negative value of their aesthetic practices, see his interview with Larry McCaffrey in Stephen J. Burn, ed. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2012).

forgetting that the common connotations of the now-prevalent label "Lolita" evince. As Rachel Carroll has observed, the term "Lolita" has come to describe an attractive young girl who actively and knowledgeably seduces an older man, instead of an older man's vicious application of patriarchal power dynamics to repeatedly rape a prepubescent girl.[14] Despite the countless examples of Humbert Humbert's unreliability as a narrator, as well his own voiced concerns about devastating Lolita's childhood, Kakutani's description of the text as "less a tale" about "a middle-aged man's lust for a twelve-year-old girl," but about language and generic conventions echoes the way in which "Lolita" and sexuality are rhetorically framed. Carroll contends that, "In a kind of narcissistic mirroring, critics seem to adopt Humbert's perspective in order to defend Nabokov—and implicitly themselves—against a moral slur whose source is found to be Lolita herself" (70). To speak aloud Humbert Humbert's rape seems to implicate, first, Nabokov's perverse interest in adult-child sex and, consequently, the reader's own perverted interest in co-creating those scenes in the text. Homes articulates that one reason she wrote *EA* was that she once overheard a woman assert in public that she did not believe Humbert Humbert ever had a sexual relationship with Lolita, and Homes aimed to correct the ways in which sexuality and storytelling intersect. ("A.M. Homes in Wonderland") But, as Carroll's observation echoes, the "narcissistic mirroring" that shielded particular readers from viewing Nabokov, and by extension themselves, as "perverts" might have as much to do with the gender of the author (and the reader), as well as their presumed sexual orientations, as it does to the story told. Counterintuitively, as I will argue, the way in which the narrative occupies an older, white male pedophile's voice, thereby increasing the narrative and fictional distance from her authorial self, only makes the story become more threatening to the "real" sexualities of the readers (and their potential "perversion").

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[14] Rachel Carroll, *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 70.

In contrast to her reading of Nabokov's novel, Kakutani protests that *American Psycho,* and ultimately *EA* as well*,* "show" too much, and are therefore "pornographic." Couched in this claim is the revelation that, no matter the aesthetic judgment applied, these books seem to successfully, and dangerously, produce "sexual stimulation," at least for similar-minded perverts. However, I concur with literary and cultural critic Sabine Sielke's reading of *American Psycho* as "questioning [this] mimetic notion of representation and the widespread belief that evil acts cease once we wipe out evil images."[15] As others have noted, Ellis deploys a number of literary techniques that make this design clear: the ironic stance towards the protagonist, as in his long lists of brands or deep analytical dives into popular music like Huey Lewis and the News, or the total evacuation of what E.M. Forester called "round" characters in the novel, a character that could "surprise" or could live beyond the pages of the book.[16] In what might be considered the climax of *American Psycho,* when the police are or are not finally hemming in a discombobulated Bateman, his cathartic confession illustrates the nonconcrete quality of this character, where he states,

> …there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there.* It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a non contingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. (376)

Here, Ellis deploys a metafictional device to draw attention to the unreality of Bateman and his lack of characterization (depth, motivation, contradiction), all qualities conventionally considered necessary for identification or sympathy. In other words, Kakutani reproduces a common misreading of *American Psycho* that the sexual scenes exclusively produce opportunities for stimulation, specifically from a hyper-aggressive masculine gaze, for their own sake. Instead, *American Psycho* manipulates the reader's ambivalent ethical stances towards violence and rape in

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[15] Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002), 180.
[16] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2002 [1927]), 118.

storytelling to often humorously call into question the interconnections between fiction and reality. Missed by steadfastly demarcating *Lolita,* and its playfulness with genre conventions and storytelling, from *American Psycho,* and its pornographic scenes, are the ways in which these two descriptions bleed into one another and ultimately depend on one another. To put it differently, Kakutani simultaneously understates *Lolita*'s depictions of adult-child sex and *American Psycho*'s metafictional and linguistic playfulness, prohibiting the possibility that the lines between metafiction and reality might allow us to think and, more importantly, feel gender and sexuality in new and unpredictable ways.

Ultimately, *EA* has as little in common with the anti-representational project of *American Psycho* as it does with the supposedly ambiguous sexual scenes of *Lolita.* Though *EA* is similarly told from the retrospective first-person perspective of the unnamed narrator while he is in prison, the narrative is non-linear and labyrinthine. It weaves in and out of his correspondence with his female protégée, stories which he imaginatively inhabits, as well as his concurrent experiences in prison with his abusive cellmate Clayton, and the involuntary memories that flood in about his seduction of/by Alice and the sexual abuse he suffered as a child. Whereas Ellis flattens out his central character and plot in *American Psycho*, and with it any sense of motivation, justice, and closure, into oblivion, the unnamed pedophile of *EA* is a psychologically complex and fully fleshed out character; the sexual abuse he experiences as a child at the hands of his mother provide a backstory that, at least partially, accounts for his own sexual "perversions" as an adult. Moreover, his association of the instance of his own abuse, his mother's subsequent menstruation, and ensuing death thereafter almost too-tidily relates to the murderous rage that Alice's first period triggers later on. As I will examine, just as the "roundness" of the narrator as a character betrays his utter fictionality, the apparent completeness of the narrative's themes and imagery simultaneously fulfill and subvert the reader's conditioned expectations for closure. However, through her narrative techniques, Homes does not flout the

mimetic faculty of art, but instead tests its limits: how far can reader's empathy for fictional characters extend? How much do we "know" about our own desires? Amidst layer upon layer of fictionality, including the companion book of physical evidence from the murder case of Alice, Homes shows that empathy and identification are, ultimately, messy affective zones, and language can often make the reader entertain modes of desire that they know certainly that they ought to consider morally abhorrent in "the real world." A compelling story, in other words, has the capacity to "pervert" one away from what one supposedly knows to be "truth," as in sexual behavior as it was for religious heretics before it. In this way, Homes's layers of fictionality constitute a "return to the real," or as Mary K. Holland defines it, "viewing art as itself real, rather than as simply vehicles for representation."[17] The affective capacity of language and story, manifested through the undeniable self-confession produced within the reader's physical responses to the text, constitute this "return to the real" in *EA.* But, when one returns to the "real," it is not as the same self as one was, but "orientated" towards oneself, the objects and people around one differently, not least the book(s) in their hands.

Despite A.M. Homes's success among middlebrow readers over the last quarter century, her work has earned little academic attention, especially in comparison to her male counterparts. Scholars Mary K. Holland and Kathy Knapp have recently contextualized Homes within both aesthetic (what Holland calls postmodern humanism) and cultural (fiction about contemporary white suburban masculinity) literary history,[18] but each of these significant contributions effectively detaches *The End of Alice* from Homes's oeuvre in the service of their arguments. One explanation

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[17] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 173.

[18] Holland argues that Homes's "family" novels (*Music for Torching* [1999] and *This Book Will Save Your Life* [2006]) offer a unique window into the struggle "to represent humanism simultaneously with poststructural ideas about language" (*Succeeding Postmodernism*, 8). Knapp similarly positions Homes alongside a host of male novelists, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Ford, and Chang-Rae Lee, who, after 9/11, aim to narratively re-locate the suburban white male to more historically, emotionally, and geographically diverse spaces. Kathy Knapp, "That's What She Said: The Everyman in Recent Suburban Fiction by Anne Tyler, Gish Jen, and A.M. Homes," *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 110-136.

for this detachment may be because of the ways *EA* defies either an affirmative humanist reading or a clear commentary on gender construction. But, in addition to its unsettling plot, or possibly even because of its unsettling plot, the detachment of *EA* from Homes's oeuvre prevents a full reading of her aesthetic project.

In *Succeeding Postmodernism*, Holland argues for fiction that offers "a return to the real…that evolves specifically out of our poststructural ideas about language and the world, and manifests *through* the metafiction that best demonstrates those ideas—in part because metafiction is most aware of and upfront with its need to negotiate the 'mimetic impulse' at the heart of acts of fiction" (173, emphasis in original). It is surprising in this context that Holland, based on strong readings of the "discomforting and sometimes elusive irony" of Homes's later novels, aligns her work with the tradition of "dirty realism," a category Holland disavows because it "[does] something different in comparison to traditional realism, but that what it is *not* doing is metafiction" (172, emphasis in original). For Holland, then, Homes is part of a cohort of writers, including a young David Foster Wallace, who viewed metafiction with increasing skepticism "after" postmodernism because of, as Robert Laughlin explains, its supposed "detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language, its tendency…to disappear up its own asshole."[19] According to this narrative, novelists who saw themselves as writing "in the wake" of postmodernism, attempted "to reconnect language to the social sphere or, put it another way, to reenergize literature's social mission its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives" (55). It is by this logic, as the introduction to this dissertation explains, that "sincerity" becomes an alluring and popular organizing principle of contemporary fiction. However, the critical function that I am arguing metafiction plays in *EA* is precisely to "intervene in the social world" by re-orienting the relations between "actual people"

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[19] Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-postmodern discontent: Contemporary fiction and the social world." *symploke* 12, no. 1 (2005): 53-68, quotation on 55.

through the operation of affect, a quality often dissociated from metafictional literature, and intimacy.

Patricia Waugh's foundational definition of metafiction helpfully reminds us of a central misnomer about postmodern fiction's "tendency…to disappear up its own asshole." For Waugh, metafiction is,

> Fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.[20]

As Waugh's definition outlines, aesthetic practices that deploy metafictional tropes do so not to "disappear," but to make visible the inseparability of storytelling and language with the social world. The ways that *EA* employs metafictional devices to simultaneously distance and lure the reader from the events that will unfold, and more importantly the feelings experienced, ultimately allow for an estrangement from and de-familiarization of those feelings as personal. Rachel Greenwald Smith convincingly argues that metafiction is a key vehicle of what she calls "impersonal feelings" because it can often dissociate the attribution of emotions to individual characters, and our identification with or against these characters, to instead illustrate both the constructed and shared nature of our affects.[21] In contrast to the common narrative that "post-postmodern" literature revitalizes the "un-feeling" metafictional works of postmodernism, Smith argues that these de-personalized moments help show the interconnectedness of de-individualized persons with not only each other but also non-human actors. Given my interests here, it is worthwhile to emphasize the role of books as non-human actors that have become particularly suited to ordering and defining our sense of selves in relation to others. But, in order to challenge the entrenched affective attachments that contemporary middlebrow readers have towards books and narrative as personal, self-improvement, one effective

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[20] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 2.

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

holdover from post-modern fiction may be its technique of dis-orientation. As Kakutani's review illustrates, it is the ways that Homes's form (a blend of metafiction and realism) and content (pedophilic rape) cross and re-cross each other that make *EA* difficult to "orientate" for both critics and readers alike. Moreover, it is precisely these dis-orientating moments in the text, these moments of "becoming-pervert," when readers productively "[do] not know where they stand" in relation to the author, the narrator, or their own self and sexuality.

The challenge to orientate the story and its speaker are immediate in *EA*. Even the way in which the protagonist goes unnamed, a fairly conventional narrative technique that many readers would be accustomed to, seems dis-orientating in this novel in particular because of its content: we need an individual to whom we can attribute these perversions. Consider the ways with which *EA* uses non-referential pronouns in its opening sentences:

> Who is she that she should have this afflicted addiction, this oddly acquired taste for the freshest of flesh, to tell a story that will start some of you smirking and smiling, but will leave others set afire determined this nightmare, this horror, must stop. Who is she? What will frighten you most is knowing she is either you or I, one of us. Surprise. Surprise. And perhaps you wonder who I am to be running interference, to be acting as her translator and yours. Mine is the speech, the rhythm and rhyme of an old and peculiar man who has been locked away for too long, punished for pursuing a taste of his own. (11)

As the introductory sentence, the personal pronoun "she" has no direct referent. The narrator has not yet explained that he receives loads of fan letters, and only rarely begins correspondence as he does in the case of the young female pedophile. Instead, the language repeatedly reflects on the relationship between speaker and reader; within these opening lines, there are four iterations of the pronoun "you" and one reference to "us," the alliance between speaker and reader. Moreover, before even the speaker is identified as "an old and peculiar man," the identity of the "she" is initially in flux as "either you or I," the reader or (male or female) narrator. And, what exactly is "her" afflicted addiction? Not exclusively the clause describing her "taste for the freshest of flesh," which is parallel to and not definitional of the addiction, but semantically refers to the desire to "tell

a story." The parallel construction of storytelling and sexual perversion within this sentence sets the stage for the inseparability of the two throughout the novel, while introducing the suspicious position of the remainder, the speaker, as the "interference" between language and reader. Before the revelation that the "I" is an "old and peculiar man…locked away," one might read the she who positions the narrator to "run interference" as, of course, the spectral figure of the author herself, the one whose addiction to telling stories is so base she is willing to occupy the mind of a male pedophile.

Each of these interpretations are significant because they depend on the relationships between language, authority and sexuality for their meaning, which may help to explain why the author's (potentially perverted) sexuality became so central for some readers' responses to the novel. The most humorous example of this was the Wisconsin Public Radio host who frustratedly asked why he "[couldn't] seem to find [Homes] in it," to which Homes replied, "OK, it's a work of fiction, so I'm not in the book."[22] This prompted the interviewer to demand that Homes "take responsibility" for the content, as an almost legal injunction. Homes responds again, "Well, no. I don't deny any responsibility for the book, I am the author of the book, but it isn't a book about me. I am not a character in the book." Readers' desires to project the author's autobiographical influences into a novel are certainly not new, but the context may be helpful to understand how *EA* circulated. It was, after all, *EA's* year of publication that *New York Times Magazine* termed "The Age of Literary Memoir," citing the American "culture of confession" as the flavor du jour.[23] Fittingly, Homes shared an editor with one of the most popular and far-reaching memoirs of the nineties, *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr,[24] suggesting that even the modes of literary production were shaded by

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[22] Michael Piafsky, Christie Hodgen, and A. M. Homes. "An Interview with AM Homes." *The Missouri Review* 28, no. 3 (2006): 100-120. Pages 103-104.

[23] James Atlas, "The Age of Literary Memoir is Now," *New York Times Magazine,* May 12, 1996, 25-27.

[24] In 1995*,* Viking Penguin's renowned editor Nan Graham released what was widely seen as the book that inaugurated this boom of memoirs: Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club.* In *The Liar's Club,* Karr re-constructs the memories of her childhood, and therein the origins of her mother's "hysteria." Nested in this larger narrative arc are poignant instances of

what David Shields has called "reality hunger," which he defines as "a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real."[25] The tone and structure of the novel correlate with the generic conventions of a confession memoir, a genre that Foucault famously argued in *History of Sexuality*, from its earliest religious iterations, had the primary effect "to discipline subjects by managing illegitimate desire and producing knowledge about sexuality."[26] In *EA,* the narrator's confession purportedly should define a list of manageable desires if, as some might assume, sexuality is something one can know, identify, and label (as, for example, a "pervert"). The narrator contributes to this view that sexuality is coherent, calling him and his ilk as sharing a "profession." However, the ways in which the narrative produces dis-orientation, or an incoherency of these discourses, reflects at the same time an incoherency of sexuality. To put it differently, the tension produced by defining or failing to define the narrator's sexuality through his confession simultaneously re-produces this tension for the readers constructed by the novel, struggling as they are to comprehend the self-confession elicited by their physical, affective responses to the scenes in the text.

I am not suggesting that readers are fooled into thinking that this novel actually is a confession memoir, though reader responses implying an autobiographical relationship between Homes and her sexually-explicit novels is a recurring theme across her career.[27] Hans Robert Jauss presses against the notion that generic conventions are concrete, arguing instead that they often

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child sexual abuse, which Karr interrogates as a silence-inducing trauma that her writing of the memoir attempts to overcome. Following the publication of *The Liar's Club,* Nan Graham promptly made a move to Scribner as their new editor-in-chief, and immediately helped them publish A.M. Homes's *The End of Alice.* Homes lists Graham in her brief acknowledgements of *The End of Alice.*

[25] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 5.

[26] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Part One.* Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 58.

[27] In fact, Homes had just spent months of touring for her previous novel, *In a Country of Mothers*, dodging questions about whether or not the novel about a young woman who was adopted and is lulled into an Oedipal triangle between her adoptive mother and therapist-mother was at all autobiographical given that Homes herself was adopted. Homes recounts these reader questions in her memoir, *The Mistress's Daughter* (2007)*,* which tells of her stranger-than-fiction experience being tracked down by her biological mother during the time she was touring for *Mothers* and beginning writing *The End of Alice.* Homes disdainfully recalls this question, "Do you write autobiographically?" multiple times in her memoir, responding, "No…I have yet to write anything that is truly autobiographical" (68).

change over time as a function of the canonization of particular texts and their conventions, and the ways in which new texts within and outside that genre automate, influence and reshuffle those conventions. By playing with the parameters and conventions of the confession memoir, this novel manipulates the gendered and heteronormative assumptions about the "truth" that physical, affective responses to the erotic storytelling of *EA* threaten to pervert. In other words, these opening pages manipulate what Hans Robert Jauss has called the "horizon of expectations" for a reader. Jauss argues that the reader's "horizon of expectations" with a text are ever-changing based on the active reading process, but the initial set of expectations are set by experience with genres and poetic language, as well as historical and cultural context:

> The psychic process in the reception of a text is, in the primary horizon of aesthetic experience, by no means only an arbitrary series of merely subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of directed perception, which can be comprehended according to its constitutive motivations and triggering signals, and which also can be described by a textual linguistics.[28]

The novel's mode of address intentionally obfuscates the, appropriately named, "triggering signals" or linguistic markers about the speaker's identity. This technique also puts in flux the possible ways that the reader then might comprehend the physical, affective reactions—as excitement, disgust, guilt, or shame—the co-creation of the subsequent pornographic scenes will produce. Moreover, the "reality" of the affects, as in their tangible, actual felt presence in the body of the reader, calls into question the separation of fictionality and sexuality. To put it differently, the "lure and blur of the real" in *EA* is primarily affective, a result of the (sexual) relationship between the reader and language, because of and in spite of the visible fictionality that this ambiguous opening paragraph captures.

The ways, then, that the narration forms its address to the reader is inseparable from the self-enunciation, or lack thereof, of the narrator(s) themselves. The relationship the narrator

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[28] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1982), 23.

nurtures with his reader(s) is actually multiple: he addresses the reader directly, he addresses his protégée directly, he addresses his reader (perhaps unreliably) through the story of his protégée, and finally all of these are framed by his address to the legal advisory board for adjudication of his parole (something that, given the scope of his crime, appears hardly on the table but instead as just another opportunity to hear him confess his perversion). As the narrative moves through these multiple modes of address, the nature of the narrator's confession, as well as the bond that he solicits with his readers, shifts and evolves. The literal "you" to which he continually addresses his narrative is purportedly cleared up within the opening pages as someone within his historical present who is aware of and intrigued by his celebrity: "And, by now, if you are anything at all, you know who I am—and find my disguise the silly childish senility of the long confined" (12). This address simultaneously playfully distances the "actual" reader from the "you" (we, of course, do not know who this speaker is because they are both fictional and unnamed) and draws the reader closer to the you by self-consciously acknowledging the "disguise" put on by the narrator and the mutual knowledge that this, recalling David Foster Wallace's phrase, "kind of intimate conversation" purports. Beyond this simple address to a fictional reader within his fictional space and time, the narrator regularly refers directly to the intimacy between himself and those readers who share his "profession." The narrator, when describing a fantasy of bondage, suggests, "that detail should cause some excitement in a few of you," and goes on to say that, in fact, some of these readers may be distraught that he hasn't responded yet to the letters they have written him. (12-13) The narrator subtly aligns the biographical status of the "you," still a fictional person who may or may not have written a letter to the fictional narrator, with the reader's affective and sexual responses to the stimuli presented in the narrative.

The ways that the novel conjures multiple audiences, both real and fictional, mirrors in key ways the form and structure of the "confession memoirs" that contemporaneously enjoyed

popularity. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson outline the genre as "addressed to an interlocutor who listens, judges, and has the power to absolve. Confession was originally doubly addressed, to God and to a confessor."[29] Within the fictional world of the novel, the narrator writes to his fans a confession that he imagines will titillate, but as the novel progresses he is asked to confess again and again his actions in front of the legal advisory board adjudicating his possible parole. The reader oscillates between these two poles throughout the novel as well: finding themselves lured in by the narrator's, as well as his female protégée's, erotic confessions, on the one hand, and put in a position to arbitrate and judge his guilt, on the other. The doubleness of this position brings into tension what book historians Timothy Aubry and Ted Striphas have separately noted as the primary function of literature, including and especially confession memoirs, for middlebrow readers during the period of the 1990s: to create a safe space to "pause to reflect on unhealthy patterns of behavior in order to correct and thereby triumph over them."[30] Because of the personal ways that these confessions are meant to order and define their own behavior, the "truthfulness" and reality of the confession is centrally at stake, and no better evidence for this exists than audiences and authors' intense allegiance to "truth" as the gold standard for memoirs, including or especially confessional ones.[31]

The narrative's instigation that "you," the singular person reading the book, might need to develop an account for what reason(s), sexual or otherwise, they acquired and are reading the

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[29] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010) 265.

[30] Theodore G. Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 134; See also Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (University of Iowa Press, 2006).

[31] In *The Late Age of Print,* Ted Striphas juxtaposes the two "scandals" that have been associated with Oprah's Book Club, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and James Frey's *Million Little Pieces,* to illustrate how readers were far more scandalized by the threat to the relationship between fiction and reality than a perceived insult about "middlebrow" fiction. Striphas examines reader responses to Franzen's discomfort over his selection (the explicit emphasis the book club places on biography over literary invention, the club's effect on the delicate balance between high and low art and its overwhelmingly gendered intonations as well as to the on-air confession by Frey that some of the events in his memoir were not exactly factual. See pages 136-137; For more on the blurring of truth in memoir, see Nancy K. Miller, "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir," *PMLA* 122.2 (2007): 537-48.

physical book in their hands (book reviews? familiarity with the author? the cover? the plot synopsis?), de-familiarizes the readers' relationship with what Michael Warner has called "reading publics," which he defines as:

> Composed of strangers, not only because their participants literally do not know each other, but also because the text's address functions as an open invitation to anyone capable of inhabiting the position of addressee, and thus cannot restrict in advance the empirical characteristics of its audience. And yet this collection of strangers is not entirely without a particular personality; it is defined by the style of address that beckons it into existence and by the reaction that only some experience in response to its call.[32]

Through these metafictional appositives or qualifications that supposedly define the "you" addressed by the narrator, the narrative makes visible the strangeness of the narrator's "reading public," of whom his "style of address beckons into existence." On the one hand, the reader likely makes an ethical divide between themselves and the specific, "perverted" minority of individuals to which the narrator refers. This perceived division may occur because both that "perverted" minority are overtly fictionalized (they write letters to the narrator), and also because the narrator names their arousal to his perverted pornographic scenes, such as bondage. On the other hand, the reader is set up by the same forces to subsequently recognize any moment in which he or she might be titillated by the "pornographic" scenes throughout the novel as evidence that she is intimately connected to this minority of the plural "you" who jealously await him to answer their letter.

Later in the novel, the narrator dissolves these borders between the general "you" and the minority "you" of his address:

> I am here. The criminal element is contained—held under lock and key—and still it [adult-child sex] happens. How could it go on without me (us)—is that too narcissistic a mind? What I'm getting at is that, with so many of us locked up, you'd think it would stop. That it continues means that it is you and not me…You are breaking your promise, the very terms of our agreement—the one that puts me in here and lets you stay out there—if I commit the crimes for you, you must be good for me. You and I, we're in this together, best not to forget. (74-75)

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[32] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), quotation in Aubry, pg. 36.

Here, the unnamed narrator breaks the "fourth wall," as he did previously. However, by moving between multiple levels of fiction and reality, the mode of address complicates how we understand the reader's relationship to the novel. In saying, for example, that the reader is breaking his or her promise, the "very terms of our agreement," he can be referring to the increasingly contractual language that has come to define author-reader relationships in what Greenwald Smith calls the "neoliberalization" of the novel, that novels be enjoyable and self-improving, or even, as in memoirs, that they be absolutely true.[33] Or, he could simultaneously be referring to the binaries of heteronormative-queer and innocent-criminal that similarly construct their meaning relationally. At once, the narrator exemplifies a sexual "perversion" to the reader. Because that perversion should only arouse (sexual) interest in a minority, the imprisonment of those who act on that perversion seems within the realm of possibility. At the same time, if, as the narrator suggests, our readerly interest proves a complicitous relation to his actions, then the wide range of sexualities an reader might exhibit make "judging" his confession more tenuous.

Homes, in this way, uses the constructed relationships between the reader and the author, as well as the relationships between the reader with the narrator and even with other readers, to make visible the incoherencies of what Eve Sedgwick calls the "minoritizing" and "universalizing" views of homosexuality. For Sedgwick, the "minoritizing" view indicates that homosexuality concerns primarily the actual people who identify as such, whereas the "universalizing" view considers homosexuality to be a concern of all people. Recalling how Sedgwick's explanation of this concept informed my reading of Wallace and Incandenza's wraith's "lexical rape" of Don Gately, this concept certainly takes on different meanings in this novel. To recap, Sedgwick explains the basic incoherencies between these positions by describing the legal framework of the widely accepted

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[33] For more on the increasingly contractual language used to define the novel in the late age of print, see Jonathan Franzen, "Mr. Difficult" *The New Yorker* 30 Sept. 2002, 100-111; For the contractual "truth" of memoirs, see Phillipe Lejeune on the "autobiographical pact" in Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Fwd. Paul John Eakin, Trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1989), 13.

defense of violence against gay people as "homosexual panic," meaning when a heterosexual man might be induced to gay-bashing "by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked."[34] Sedgwick goes on to explain,

> In effect, the homosexual panic defense performs a double act of minoritizing taxonomy: there is, it asserts, one distinct minority of gay people, and a second minority equally distinguishable from the population at large, of "latent' homosexuals" whose "insecurity about their own masculinity" is so anomalous as to permit a plea based on diminution of normal moral responsibility. At the same time, the efficacy of the plea depends on its universalizing force, on whether, as Wertheimer says, it can 'create a climate in which the jurors are able to identify with the perpetrator by saying, "My goodness, maybe *I* would have reacted the same way. (20)

I want to be clear that I am not making a comparison between homosexuality and the narrator's pedophilia, particularly given the ways that the narrator's own "latent homosexuality" and "insecurity about his masculinity," which I will analyze shortly, narratively facilitate his violent victimization of Alice in ways that precisely mirror the incoherent logic of gay-bashing that Sedgwick describes. However, the narrator's manipulation of these competing universalizing and minoritizing views of sexuality correspond with the related, competing discourses of adult-child sex, sexual freedom, and morality noted by several critics.[35] For example, Rachel Carroll, the only other literary critic to write extensively on *EA,* argues that the novel uses the theme of adult-child sex, as well as what she calls the characters' "queer heterosexuality," to complicate the radical feminist position, which aligns pedophilia and sexual violence against women as symptoms of patriarchal power, for state legislation of certain, often non-normative, sexualities. (68)[36]

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[34] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: U of California, 1990), 19.

[35] See Rachel Carroll, *Rereading Heterosexuality*; Lynne Huffer *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[36] Carroll traces, from critic Andrea Dworkin (*Intercourse* [1987]) and legal scholar Catherine Mackinnon, the ways that radical feminism has positioned pedophilia as another instance of gendered power relations and a "manifestation of the oppression females inherent in patriarchy" (Dworkin, qtd. in Carroll, 68). Radical feminism has, in these instances, uncomfortably allied with political and religious conservatives seeking to establish, as Frigga Haug puts it, "the moral majority rallying for 'law and order,' marriage and family, and both asking for more state intervention in this field" (57).

The novel's complex modes of address expose as potentially conflicting readerly relationships to their moral position regarding sexual violence and their own bodily reactions to descriptions of non-normative sex scenes. Jauss suggests that when readers experience narrative, it

> Liberate[s] one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things. The horizon of expectations of historical lived praxis in that it not only preserves actual experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behavior for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience. (41)

According to this theory, as the narrator tells of his (and his protégée's) experiences, he puts the reader in the position of experiencing them as well, offering them the vicarious experience of reacting the same ways without necessitating that they actually ever do. This experience is only enhanced by the ways the novel manipulates its realist literary devices, like the depth or "roundness" of the narrator as a character, to force the reader into the position of saying too, "My goodness, maybe *I* would have reacted the same way." In this way, by adopting and applying the language of sexual pathologization, the novel calls attention to the incoherency of these ostensibly clearly demarcated minoritizing and universalizing views by forcing the reader to constantly alternate between both positions. They slide between these modes of address that asks them to arbitrate the narrator's confession as well as to empathize with or even experience sexual freedom outside of state intervention. Concomitantly, the novel facilitates these shared moments of "perversion" across the (meta)fictional ("you" who knows who this nameless, celebrity pedophile is, and perhaps also writes him fan letters) and the real ("you" reading this "pornographic" novel). These multiple layers of address dis-orientate the reader from the impression of reading as a predominantly private place to "liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis" (Jauss), on the one hand, and a space to "pause to reflect on unhealthy patterns of behavior in order to correct and thereby triumph over them" (Striphas), on the other hand.

The next critical layer of address in the novel, the correspondence between the narrator and his protégée, a woman with a "willingness…to transcend, to flirt, outside her chosen category or group," further indexes the ways sexuality is simultaneously imagined (fictional) through storytelling and strictly defined (real) by language. (13) Moreover, the methods by which the narrator writes his protégée, imaginatively projecting himself into her experiences, mirrors the erotic reading practice that the novel constructs between reader and speaker. When, for example, the female pedophile writes of her time as a camp instructor, the narrator describes the scene thusly,

> From here, even with my obstructed view, I feel I can see them as though in the full light of day…I see them breaststroking, sidestroking, crawling their way to health and good fortune, and God, I want one, any one would do. I want not so much to see her—that would be too much, would force too many comparisons—but to blind myself, to close my eyes and simply feel her. And perhaps, as though I were some crippled old man, she would take pity on me and lie next to me on this thin, narrow cot. (25)

One might suggest that the narrator's modes of identification with his protégée are predatory—he occupies her stories, he occupies her voice, he occupies her desires. However, in this description the toggling between seeing and feeling offer an alternative perspective. While he describes the boys swimming in incredible detail ("the water beading on their skin, the nylon, the crocheted cotton of their suits, clinging…the outlines of thighs, plump and perfect buttocks, hard pin-headed nipples, the sloping, small, dainty V marking the smooth slit, the path to the queen's palace"), the intimate relation between teacher and protégée is one without significant physical description. The narrator, instead, displaces the physical description of the young boys, and the arousal such voyeurism offers him, with an intimacy with his female protégée. This intimacy at once is sexualized ("that would be too much") and platonic ("as though I were some crippled old man, she would take pity on me"). Toggling between these two positions, the narrator struggles to exactly define his imaginative intimate relation with his female protégée.

The model for this correspondence has been established throughout the novel to this point: they are almost entirely the narrator's imaginative artifices based on very little description or

narrative, where the reader knows not whether the events "actually" took place at all. Particularly after her "seduction" of Matt, an example letter would simply say, "*Matt bought Doc Martens. Took Matt to Tower. Wash Sq. Pk. Ate falafel, baba ganoush. Matt had an egg cream*" (108). The reader's access to the letters are ultimately glimpses and utterly banal, as the narrator says, "Her language, the words she uses are brainless, convey nothing. They come with no pictures, no complement" (108). Arguably the "most erotic scene" in the novel is principally imaginative, obscured behind an additional layer of narrative abstraction. And yet, in spite of and because of its fictionality, the language in that scene exhibits the affective power to "pervert," to alter the reader's perception of sexuality as a "know-able" or stable.

It is not coincidental that the more non-normative pornographic scenes in the text take place within these scenes where the reader is reading the narrator reading his protégée. One of the most memorable scenes in the novel occurs when, finally alone with her prey, Matt, in the bedroom, the protégée convinces him to reveal his most personally shameful habit: collecting his scabs and eating them. After he timidly offers her one from his container, she notices that he has a scab on his knee, and the scene goes into graphic detail of her sexual coup de grâce,

> She drops to her knees and crawls across the floor toward him, kicking the door closed along the way. He scoots to the edge of the bed. His legs are hanging over. She licks the knee, the scab, to soften it to wash and ready it. The flavor is a wondrous rich mix of dirt, sweat, and blood. She licks slowly and then, with the long nail of her index finger, pries, peeling the scab up. It comes away slowly, painfully, leaving a pink well that quickly fills with blood. She presses her tongue to the coming blood and draws it away. (101)

In the climax of the scene, she, "slips the scab into her mouth. He shudders. She is eating him. He's never seen anything like it. His eyes roll up into his head; he falls back onto the bed" (102). After this poignant moment, she has complete control over him and can set-up a sexual rendezvous at any time. Significantly, her conquest of him shifts from a heteronormative seduction into the abject. As opposed to the supposed titillation of a "minority" of readers by bondage earlier, or subsequent scenes that detail acts of analingus and fisting, this scene serves simultaneously as the most

"fictional" sexual act in the novel, as well as the most perverse and "real" one. During an interview with Homes, interviewer Gregory Crewdson frankly states, "I thought that was one of the most erotic scenes I've ever read," a statement I imagine he would not have made about the subsequent scenes of penetrative sexual acts between other couplings of adults and children in the novel (the narrator's mom with himself or the narrator with Alice). ("A.M. Homes in Wonderland") However, while those scenes have different power dynamics, the eroticism of this scene illustrates how the reader's orientation to their own sexuality can undergo a process of "perversion" through an encounter with language and storytelling.

Moreover, the ways in which these layers of narrative abstraction bring forth the aesthetic force of "perversion," they also initiate the de-personalizing of those affects experienced. The reader empathizes when the narrator says, "In these letters, and how quickly I have come to look forward to them, cannot live without them, am, in fact, living on them, in them; it is as though I am her, she is me, and we are in this together, doing this twisted tantric tango" (107). Not only does this passage describe quite literally the relationship the compelling language and storytelling have facilitated between the reader and the novel, "doing this twisted tantric tango," but it describes the violations of selfhood and language of "becoming" that are characteristic of the novel's aesthetic practice. The ways in which characters come together ("I am her, she is me") mirrors the becoming-pervert experienced by the reader. And yet, the reader is also made aware, through these explicit metafictional reminders, that it is the only narrator's deployment of particularly poetic and metafictional language to narrate those letters that make the aesthetic force "real."

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However, the overarching framework of the narrative, and the power dynamics that it preserves, is acutely reflective of what Luce Irigaray calls the "fraternal order" of language and (male) sexuality that define and limit the modes of desire that "becoming-pervert" make possible. In other words, characterizing both the narrator's linguistic and physical intimacies he desires with his protégée are the ways in which these representations are fractured by the contradictions of

masculinity and sexuality that determine them. Perhaps the narrator's climactic victory in the text occurs when he overcomes his own sexual predator and fellow inmate Clayton. From the beginning of the novel, Clayton exerted sexual dominance over the narrator with regularity, until an instance when Clayton conducts analingus and the narrator uncontrollably enjoys it. To that point, the narrator's potential queerness had been a subject that he vehemently disavowed. For example after reading a disappointingly undetailed account ("*And then we did it*") sent by his protégée, the narrator remarks, "Does she think that because I am here, because I have been here for so long, that I've gone queer?" (115) But, in this case, it is enjoyment that makes the narrator seek revenge against Clayton, not neglect. Thus, when Clayton attempts analingus a second time, he is put in his own vice of becoming-pervert: "He's doing it again, rimming me. Last time, I swore that if he tried it once more, I'd kill him. Wasn't this the very act that, although enjoyed, I railed against? Too much, too good. I don't know why, but I get hard" (160). This is, in so many words, the reading experience imagined by this novel. The reader, reading on despite these very sexual acts being ones they "railed against," does not "know why" they become excited nonetheless. The narrator, like the reader, are becoming-perverted.

Yet, this correlation between the reader and the narrator is also what makes his response so telling. The narrator's response to this second affront is to exact sexual violence back on Clayton:

> I fuck him fiercely up the ass, fuck him like I've never fucked before, with everything I've held for years. I'll not be the pussy anymore. A man, a man again, reclaimed. I have the power. I fuck him, fuck him and a crowd does gather. This is my chance to show them who I really am, the goods I've got. I do it well, do it good, do it like I didn't know I could…Beneath me now, Clayton is crying. To drown him out I start to sing—it has been that kind of a day. 'What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming…' On the last verse, while I'm still riding him, I call for audience participation. 'Everybody join in, sing along,' I say. 'And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air…' And then I really throw myself into it. 'For the land of the free and the home of the brave.' I let it come, copious amounts, great gallons of jizz, coursing up, out, and into him. I fill him with my most personal touch, a handy high colonic… 'Who wants some?' I ask, putting him up for grabs, a gracious giveaway. It's over. It's all over, anyone can have him now. And sure enough, a line forms. (161)

The narrator, as evidenced throughout the novel, is both oppressed by and occupies the representational framework that he has used to tell his story thus far: enveloping the stories of the other into his own, masculine subjectivity. The (lack of) linguistic control of this subject position determines as much the internal incoherency of the narrator's "latent homosexuality" and "insecurity about his own masculinity" as the linguistic and physical violence he exacts on the non-speaking female subjects. When he asserts his "masculinity," their relation is not one between two partners, but between a masculine subject and an object. In order to drown out Clayton's crying, the narrator sings the national anthem, aligning himself with the power of the state as well as the heterosexist/masculine logic that the narrator supposedly seeks to skirt with his relationship with Alice. That the rectum fluidly shifts as a signifier from a zone of pleasure—"Too much, too good"—to a challenge to masculinity—"I'll not be the pussy anymore." This indeterminacy simultaneously obscures and affirms Leo Bersani's claim that "the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried."[37] The narrator both is and is not the "masculine ideal of proud subjectivity" that he posits, calling into question the status of that ideal in the first place. His rape of Clayton reveals both the self-affirming power—"A man, a man again, reclaimed. I have the power…This is my chance to show them who I really am"—that this masculine ideal offers to the narrator, and presages the self-shattering that takes place in the following chapter when The narrator allows his protégée to speak for herself for the first time. After his act of sexual violence, the narrator narrates, "I'm nothing you can catch now. I am black powder, I am singe, I am the bomb that bursts the night" (161). In the same moment that the narrator "shows them who [he] really is," he reveals himself to also be "nothing."

Immediately following this scene, the narrator allows, for the first time, his protégée's letter to stand alone. His relinquishing of the narratorial position initiates a fragmentation of the narrative,

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[37] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197-222, quotation on 222.

moving at turns between her testimonies of sexual trauma and the narrator's own testimony to his

childhood sexual abuse at the hands of his mother. The narrator explains his decision to grant her

space in his memoir as follows,

> Pretentious though it may be, I remain convinced that my interpretation, my translation, is a more accurate reflection of her state of mind, far exceeding that which she is able to articulate independently. And while putting words in the mouths of others may be my specialty, my naughty narration is fast becoming a tired thing. I'm running out of steam. Perhaps in my advancing age, I have less to say, that or I've lost the strength to wrestle with her. Whatever I suggest the reason to be the truth is I quote her directly because it's time she spoke for herself, she is in fact insisting on it, asserting herself over me. And without her interpreter, her translator, you—the reader—are free to make of her what you will. Or perhaps I pull back because I know what comes next. However obvious, my retreat is an attempt to extricate myself, to surrender my responsibility—after all, I know how the story ends. Or perhaps all that's at play is the cracked logic of the old adage: If you give them enough rope, they'll hang themselves, literally. (166)

This passage offers further evidence that the relationship between the "violations of selfhood" that

occur physically and sexually and those that are primarily the cause of the capacity of language. As

the narrator points out, his "specialty" is not his profession as a sexual predator, but the similarly

positioned act of "putting words in the mouths of others." Yet, in light of the climactic sexual

machismo that the narrator has just exerted, this convoluted rationalization that he is "running out

of steam" seems out of place. He seems bound to a patriarchal view of language and narration, that

his "interpretation…is a more accurate reflection of her state of mind" than she can communicate

herself. He, despite the countless instances that suggest otherwise, retains an image of himself as one

who, "pretentious though it may be," can responsibly, objectively tell the story of the rational,

representative "I." Yet, the narrator seems to recognize that the literary model of communication of

"sincerity" can only go so far, that his "naughty narration is fast becoming a tired thing" (166). But,

as he says promptly after just a few short sentences "spoken" by his protégée, "This is not a

conversation, not a dialogue, but her hysterical purge" (166). This exclamation, chosen as an

epigraph to this chapter, illustrates how the language of "hysterics" closes off of his protégée's

ability to reasonably or rationally offer testimony to her own sexuality and desires, or, to what she

will indict, is the narrator's role in the production of those desires.

This language also played a notable role in the subtle and no so subtle ways female-authored

memoirs in the 1990s, particularly those that registered testimony of (sexual) trauma, were

discredited as "fictional." As Leigh Gilmore has argued,

> A gender politics related to truth telling has developed in relation to the legacy of the rational
> man and the ambiguities within self-representation its related exclusions entail. While the
> entry of women into autobiography did not inaugurate a debate about women's truthfulness,
> it certainly revived the rhetoric of women's deceitfulness.[38]

The "truth" status of the female voice plays an integral role with the affective capacity or flow that

the stories' capture. As Gilmore's survey of memoirs illustrates, "a backlash against reports of abuse

now means that the position of 'victim,' and the sympathy it mobilizes, is more likely to flow toward

the accused rather than the accuser" (29). As I will explore shortly, the narrator's status as 'victim' is

crucial to how the reader comprehends their own emotionally conflicted identification with him, his

methodology of reading and narrating, and his sexual desires. But the narrator's use of this phrase

that her storytelling is "not a conversation…but her hysterical purge," points to the ways in which

thinking of literature as a "kind of intimate conversation" upholds a particularly gendered

construction of storytelling and truth, complicating the emotional direction from his protégée's

imminent claims to victimhood to flow towards him, "the accused," rather than her, "the accuser."

Moreover, by defining this as a "purge," a word itself according to the OED that is relatedly

deployed across medical ("purgative medicine or treatment"), law ("clearing oneself from an

accusation or suspicion of crime or guilt"), and religious ("moral or spiritual cleansing; purification

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[38] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 21. Leigh Gilmore offers a compelling reading of, for example, "False Memory Syndrome" as a diagnosis with a sordid history of discrediting mostly children's testimony of sexual abuse on the basis that they have either invented the memory entirely or that a therapist implanted it. Despite the fact that the American Psychiatric Association does not recognize the condition, it has gained considerable cultural credibility that is "promoted by motivated parties…to discredit testimony by survivors, to pathologize, specifically, memories of sexual abuse in childhood, and to stigmatize therapies related to this abuse" (29).

by the removal of corruption, sin, guilt, or similar evil") discourses, calls attention primarily to the attempt by the female protégée to remove the "objectionable, hostile elements" of her "queer heterosexuality."[39]

The content of this "hysterical purge" is the revelation that it was, in fact, the narrator's rape of Alice—"*I know who you are and I know what you did…Her street. I live on her street*"—that produced the circumstances by which his protégée would only find safe, sexual relationships with young boys. (152) She communicates that her desires for young men stems from the need to seek out non-threatening heterosexual relationships because all of the mothers virulently protected their daughters following Alice's murder: "I live differently because of you, there is no such thing as safety" (156). Compounding this revelation are the multiple instances in the latter half of the novel when she is abused sexually by Matthew's father and by Matthew's teenaged friend. Thus, the purge of his female protégée's queerness is the deflection of all of her perversions onto the exhibition of a singular, yet representative, act of masculine, patriarchal power. For Rachel Carroll, the narrative closure of the female protégée's sexual desires as a residuum of the narrator's exertion of masculine power over Alice decades earlier critically undermines the complex ways that female "queer heterosexuality" is represented in the novel. Carroll argues, "the disclosure of a mitigating motive, a traumatic memory and ongoing sexual victimization may serve to explain, even vindicate, the girl's actions….In perhaps the final irony of the novel, the girl's victim status relieves the reader of the more troubling prospect of her deviance as a heterosexual woman" (87). While I agree with Carroll's compelling criticism, my argument would be that the same process of deflection does not tidily resolve all of the previous or subsequent moments of "becoming-pervert" undergone by the reader. Following Rachel Greenwald Smith's argument for reading metafictional devices for the "impersonal feelings" they index, we could consider that to "read affectively" is to see how works of literature

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[39] "purge, v." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 1 December 2014. See also "purgation,"

"catalyz[e] and modulat[e] human attitudes and orientations toward other humans and their environments…but once unleashed in the world can have unpredictable effects on those with whom it comes into contact" (25-26). In this view, rather than tracing out a one-to-one correlation between the ultimately socially defined "perversion" of the female protégée's "queer heterosexuality" and the possible personal relief of the reader, one might look to how the novel re-orients affects through the layering and dis-orientating quality of the narrator's storytelling and the narrator's "perversions" through his writing (and the reader's reading) of all the women in the story as reflections of the reader's own fluid orientation to their own sexuality. These would include not just his protégée, as I have explored, but also his mother, Alice, and one could include here the metafictional presence of the woman that hovers over the narrative from the opening paragraph, the author figure.

If the narrator's rape of Alice enacts the process of "becoming-pervert" for his female protégée, then it is his mother's perversion that narratively serves as ground zero. In one of the most central scenes of the novel (literally at the novel's center), the narrator reveals the instance of sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his mother. Not coincidentally, his memory is sparked when, during a rectal exam he is undergoing, the doctor asks, "Have you ever engaged in homosexual activity?" (120) The apparent emasculation of the question prompts the memory of his first act of penetration: his mother, returned home from the mental asylum, takes him to a bathhouse and forces him to violently fist her, "She reaches for my hand. I try to pull away. 'No.' 'Yes,' she says, pulling harder on the arm, leading it toward the place between her legs. 'No,' I say more desperately" (123). In this scene, the narrator describes himself in completely innocent terms, terms that he rarely applies to Alice. He first describes, "[his] embarrassment rise under the water," and seemingly cannot speak what exactly is "toward the place between her legs" until the moment of contact. His memory crystallizes around this moment, and he brings to it all of the lyrical capacity he employs with his protégée's letters and later his descriptions of Alice: "My hand goes through a dark curtain,

parting velvet drapes. My fingers slip between the lips of a secret mouth. My mother makes a sound, a guttural *ahhh.* I try to pull my hand out, but she pushes it back in. Pushes it in and then pulls it out, pushes and pulls, in and out, in, out" (123).

The conflation and distortion of the vagina and the mouth are interesting to consider in this scene, particularly as language, the narrator's "specialty," occupies such a centrally erotic, and violating, function in the novel. In *Are the Lips a Grave?,* Lynne Huffer argues that "lips" are metaphorical figures that are ambiguously related to "the real:"

> The lips are both real and unreal, both what is and what is not. They cannot be pinned down as actual vaginas for the buttressing of cultural feminist projects: utterly unreal, they are neither here (on the mouth) nor there (between the legs). And yet, at the same time, in their movement between, they offer—both here and there—utterly real forms of erotic pleasure. (41)

The narrator's transition between "the lips of a secret mouth" and his mother's "guttural *ahhh*" echoes this ambiguity between the "utterly unreal" linguistic signifiers and the "utterly real" erotic pleasure taking place. To focus for a moment on the latter, I would argue that this scene perhaps most saliently represents the complicated way in which perversion becomes intertwined with both the affective capacity of language, storytelling, and sexuality. Recalling Mary K. Holland's argument for a fiction that "view[s] art as itself real, rather than as simply vehicles for representation," the erotic elements of this scene are inseparable from the layers of fictionality that constitute it. In other words, while the emotions that the reader might comprehend as this scene unfolds, excitement or subsequently disgust and shame at that excitement, feel deeply personal, those emotions are also ungrounded, detached from a particular subject position, attributable to no singular one but also to a multiplicity of narrators, readers, and author figures.

As this scene continues, it further complicates the tension between seeing oneself as a moral subject and as a sexual subject. The mother instructs the narrator to make a fist ("Make a fist, curl your paw…Push"). This sexual act, as Lynne Huffer points out, citing David Halperin and Michael

Warner, "has held special appeal for queer theory because of its empirical status in the history of sexuality as a truly 'new practice'…More than any other particular practice, fisting seems to promise a future of bodily pleasure freed from the normalizing constrictions of sexuality and desire" (73-74). Huffer, reflecting on the "long-standing tension between moralistic feminist and libidinous gay men," asks a question relevant to this scene between mother and son: "Whose fist is it, and what is it doing?" (77-79) The fist both elicits "a body-and pleasure-centered strategy of resistance to the apparatus of sexuality"[40] as well as the ways in which that fist poses a physical threat against women. In his memory, the young the narrator seems also to be considering these multiple meanings: "My fist is inside her. My fist, like I'm angry. I turn it around, screwdriver, drill…I'm rocking, fighting. Buried in my mother, I'm boxing. Boxing Mama, punching her out" (126). The narrator's fist is simultaneously his first site of his "body-and pleasure-centered strategy of resistance to the apparatus of sexuality," the starting point for his "true calling" and "profession, and the first site of his trauma. While he conceives of himself as having some strength, "punching her out," the fist is also the body part that is overwhelmed by the strength and sexual desires of the Other:

> Afraid the contractions of her womb will amputate me at the wrist. My shoulder is stretching, nearly popping out, I can't stop. That much is clear. Whatever I do, I can't stop. She is filled with fury and frustration and there is no way of saying no…And then, with no warning the teeth of this strange second mouth bit my hand. Her head goes back and she bellows like I've killed her, and I cry out, too, because she's hurting me and I don't know what's happening. I'm scared and I want my hand back and I want my mother back and I want to be out of this place. (124)

This scene inverts and negates the fist as a symbol of masculine power, instead representing it at as a sexual tool of the libidinous mother against an innocent, even moralistic, the narrator who ends hoping for the restoration of the family order. The language that the narrator adopts in this flashback, like the childlike descriptions of body parts within short, sentimentally-charged sentences, reflects the inequality of power and consent between any adult and child and directs some readerly

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[40] David M. Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality," *Representations* 63 (1998): 93-120.

sympathy in his direction. His descriptions also reveal that female heterosexuality was, to him, indiscernible and threatening: "She reaches between her legs, plucks my hand out, and lets it drop like some discarded thing. I've failed. I turn full front toward her and begin to rub her, to poke her with my skinny stub. She laughs and pushes me away" (126). Immediately after this scene, the narrator associates his mother's menstrual blood as a sign that he has hurt her, and her imminent death thereafter as a logical culmination of his sexual act. Moreover, this basic confusion about the female body and menstruation is what later supposedly justifies his fatal, gruesome attack of Alice, creating a complicated relationship between his idea that his fist has force, especially the force to kill, and this exhibition of the greater force of female sexuality, the force that once controlled his fist completely.

Nested within the stories of the narrator's triumphant sexual dominance over Clayton, the imaginative conjuring of his protégée's successful seduction of Matt, and the disturbing recollections of his mother's sexual abuse at the bathhouse and her subsequent death, the narrator subtly introduces the story of his seduction of/by the young Alice. The narrator is tied to a tree in the woods, completely naked, while Alice playacts as his captor with a bow and arrows as her weapons, before being called in by her mother. The narrator describes his situation as follows,

> The ease with which she abandons me is thrilling. I am naked in the New Hampshire Woods, tied to a tree. The rough bark rubs my buttocks raw as I wriggle trying to free myself. I have been bound and tied by a wicked wood nymph. I writhe. My tumescence rises farther still, stimulated by my situation. A breeze stirs the trees, sweeping over, tickling me. I sneeze first, then cum, shooting off aimlessly into the afternoon. (154-155)

The narrator's story of his seduction mirrors the infamous scene in *Lolita* when the eponymous young girl sits on his lap (58-59), including the key word "nymph" that Humbert Humbert analyzes in considerable detail to illustrate the knowing, yet mysterious sexuality of children: "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is

demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets'" (16). What this scene in *EA,* as well as the corresponding scenes in *Lolita,* ultimately obscure is the ways in which the reader tunes into certain linguistic markers to absolve their "interest" in the narrative's (sexual) momentum ("nymph," "impudent child") and retrospectively tunes into other linguistic markers, particularly the clear unreliability of these narrators to assess consent, to comprehend and judge this interest.

It is only much later in the novel that the narrator reveals he is only in the woods of New Hampshire because he was already in hiding, caught abusing another child. But, this scene resonates and reverberates between the triggering signals of the scenes that surround it, namely the narrative of sexual abuse he experienced. The positioning of one story of sexual abuse to confabulate another story of sexual abuse masks the process by which, as Gilmore reminds us, sympathy and empathy are often mobilized to the accused rather than the (female, child) accuser. In comparison to the famous scene in *Lolita* when the eponymous character bounces on Humber Humbert's lap, Homes simultaneously makes this scene more explicit and more absurd. The narrator is naked, tied and bound, the victim of queer female heterosexuality once again. Except, he is also completely alone when he climaxes, only imaginatively investing the adult-child play with sexuality. His sexuality is made into a joke in a way that Humbert Humbert's is not, as it is ultimately a sneeze that causes him to ejaculate.

Fittingly, this scene capitalizes on this in-between of explicit sexual violation and parodic absurdity by articulating the narrator's dis-orientation. The narrator immediately goes on to say, "Confused. I am confusing her with another one. I am lost in time. I begged myself not to play this game, she is not that girl but some other one. Are they all the same? How many were there, can my fingers count that high? Memory is such an elusive thing" (155). The fluid status of each of these female characters as individual subjects (protégée, mother, Alice, spectral author) as well as their

often-unreadable "queer heterosexualities" complicates the readerly identification with the narrator as the speaker of the narrative. The impersonal feelings that the metafictional devices of the novel produce (who is the addressor? Who is the addressee?) only complicate the readers' (sexual) interest in his "pornographic" descriptions, groundless as they are in fictional characters and fictional audiences but deeply felt by the reader.

In the "confession" scene, in which Alice's murder is recounted in gory detail, all of these ungrounded, impersonal feelings are, at once, forced into comprehension and yet shown to have completely messy and unpredictable after-effects. During this fragmentary, final scene, the narrator is consistently encouraged to stick to the relevant facts, but seems to easy slip and out of his memories, relishing in some of the details of his sexual exploits with Alice. But, as the confession builds faster and faster towards his murder of Alice, the narrator seemingly begins to have a heart attack re-telling the scene when Alice's first period triggers his final memory of his mother's menstruation before her death (for which he mistakenly blames himself). In this memory, Alice's queer heterosexuality exhibits an aggressiveness that startles the narrator, demanding that he penetrate her with first a spoon, then fork, then knife beneath the table at a diner. Her desire to be penetrated in increasingly violent ways simultaneously obscures and reveals his imaginative relation to the "object" of his desire. As Huffer explains, for Luce Irigaray, "women's heterosexual desire for penetrative destruction…is not woman's desire at all, but rather the fantasmatic projection of woman as the Other of the Same, a desire that only functions as the complement to a masculine, phallic, macho model" (36). Alice's assertion of power in this scene seems, on the one hand, to affirm his "masculine, phallic, macho model," and yet there is something dangerous and threatening about it when it moves from the fantasmatic into the real. When the narrator declines, "I'm not your slave," Alice assumes the position of the oppressor, revealing her knowledge that "What you're doing is illegal" (262-263). Alice's power as a "sexual subject" comes at the exact moment when she

asserts herself as a sort of "moral subject" as well. The narrator, "on the verge of tears," continues to balk at her proposal, dropping the fork, calling for the check, saying, "This is awful…I feel awful." Although, as she says, she has no intention of turning him in to the police, her political power (to shift the relations between oppressed and oppressor) is nonetheless potent as a moral power. In this nexus of sexuality and morality, Alice's "queer heterosexuality" utterly undoes his fantasy.

When they return to their motel room, Alice retreats to the bathroom and returns saying, "I'm bleeding…It's blood. You've done something awful to me" (264). Despite her threateningly active sexuality, Alice reveals her now-shamed innocence through her lack of knowledge, the same that the narrator himself exhibited when his mother started bleeding and he felt it to be his fault. The narrator tastes the blood, "the flavor is thick, metallic, stale, like something that has built up for a long time. It is missing the tang, the sweet afterbite, of fresh-flowing injury. She is no longer fresh. Her body is expelling itself. I smear the sample onto the white motel notepad" (264). Then, after petulantly explaining that she's menstruating, Alice repeats, "You did this to me." Following a repetition of this back and forth, the narrator violently rapes and murders Alice, until "I don't know which blood is which, from whence it came. The scent is meaty, the putrid stink of slaughter. I'm embarrassed by the vigor, the extent of my outburst. It is as if I've lost myself, broke away. Have I made my point?" (267-268)

But, it becomes clear during this interchange between the narrator and the legal advisory board that their reasons for making him tell this story are ambiguous. The board makes him face a series of photographs (all of which the audience themselves can peruse in *Appendix A: An Elaboration on the Novel* The End of Alice), asking the narrator to "tell us what [he] see[s]" (266). His ability to articulate his crimes becomes of central importance to the board, even though of course he has no opportunity for parole nor has rehabilitation been any goal pursued by the prison itself. The

narrator responds, "'Flowers, trees, a path through the woods, a woman disappearing.' I refuse to see what they want me to see. I will see only what I want to see, my desire my vision" (266). As the narrator physically deteriorates before the board recounting this story, they revile in contempt, completely devoid of empathy: "'He's wet his pants.' 'Disgusting.' I forgot to go. This morning I forgot to go. 'Pissed his pants.'" Even after the narrator recounts this event in gory detail, the legal advisory board urgently insists, "We really should get on with it…We're running out of time," that the secretary repeat the story in a more official capacity. This repetition of the story illustrates that it is not so much that his confession was meant, in the words of Foucault, "less as an account of the crime than a part of it." These scenes ultimately expose to the parole board, a kind of stand-in for the readers constructed by the novel, of their dual role in the reading of his "confession:" a sharing in the arbitration of guilt, never minding their own complicitous relationship to the pornographic scenes that they excitedly co-created.

This tension seems to capture precisely the space between the narrator's "perversion" and brutal act of violence as simultaneously a tension between the book as a "return to the real" through the "fictional." Perhaps the clearest evidence of this verisimilitude is *Appendix A: An Elaboration on the Novel* The End of Alice.[41] In this supplementary volume, Homes offers what she calls "epistemological evidence" for the crime perpetrated by the narrator: his written confession, redacted photographs, a police report, FBI case report, oral and vaginal swabs, letters, physical evidence, and his works of visual art. The volume closes with a short academic article about sexual crimes and prison experience for sexual deviants by Dr. Robert Johnson. The physical evidence includes many of the items referenced in the novel, including Alice's watch, her toy mouse, and the murder weapon (knife) and a bag of "three teeth." These "evidence photographs" intensify what W.J.T Mitchell calls a "double consciousness about images," the fact that we retain a magical attitude

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[41] A.M. Homes, *Appendix A: An Elaboration on the Novel The End of Alice* (San Francisco: Artspace, 1996).

towards images and their ability to re-present the "truth" even though we live in an era supposedly ruled by reason.[42] In the face of the explicit subtitle to this supplementary text, *An Elaboration on the Novel* The End of Alice, as well as the disclaimer—"*Appendix A:* is a work of fiction. Any resemblance either in text or visual materials to any person living or dead is purely coincidental— readers should be clear that the materials included are works of art created for the book and are not assertions of fact"—this album of images no doubt reveals this "double consciousness about images." The reader "should be clear," on the one hand, that these images do not re-present any "real" material content. On the other hand, the images seem to make it such that the reader is not first and foremost interested in comprehending the relationship between reality and fiction. Instead, these deeply disturb, in part, because of how they reveal the reader's complicit relation to the crime itself. Mitchell explains that Barthes, who was initially skeptical of "a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning,"[43] ultimately theorizes in his analysis of photography, that "the *punctum,* or wound, left by a photograph always trumps its *stadium,* the message or semiotic content that it discloses" (Mitchell 9). In this instance, leafing through these scans of police and FBI reports and sealed evidence simultaneously intensifies and challenges any comprehension of semiotic content. The cover of *Appendix A,* a yellow-tinted photograph of a young girl (Alice) whose eyes and mouth are torn out, enacts one of Mitchell's pedagogical illustrations of this philosophy: "When students scoff at the idea of a magical relation between a picture and what it represents, ask them to take a photograph of their mother and cut out the eyes." In this case, the complicated affective response to *Appendix A* occurs because readers must confront the double consciousness about this visual compendium of evidence and the imagistic style of *The End of Alice.* That is, readers constructed by the novel are caught between their affective response to the images (shame, disgust) and their comprehension of these images as fictional.

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[42] WJT Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 8.
[43] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), quotation in Mitchell, 8.

I would argue that the metafictional layer that *Appendix A* adds to *EA* contributes to an overall project of dis-orientating the reader from the material book in their hands as a part and of the same method that dis-orientates them from their sexuality as know-able or stable. For instance, in a corresponding scene in the novel where the narrator takes out his frustration on the physical correspondences with his protégée, one can follow a metaphor for the reader's own orientation to the physical object of the book:

> Taking matters in hand, I would remind her that though I am caged, I remain viable—a man. I would dilly myself, shoot onto the page, leave it to dry, then fold the crusty wad into even sections and slip it into an envelope, mailing it to her for reconstitution. In the comfort and privacy of her room, she would collect in her mouth a fine blue loogie, a big ball of spit and drop it down onto my page and, then with either the tip of a pencil or her pinky finger, would swirl the two together. And then as if applying a plaster, a medical paste, she would collect the material on her finger or perhaps raise the page itself, pull down her panties, and rub it against herself. Like that, we would be together. And I, in my cell, connected to my fluid as though it were my faith, would shudder and ripple as she worked the paper back and forth until our wetnesses mixed and the thin blue lines that rule were all worn off, until the paper itself was just a sliver, thin as a pathologist's cross section. Finished, she would drop this page onto the floor by the bed, and later in the afternoon she'd slide it—still not quite dry—back into the envelope, tape the seal, and with a red pen mark it *Return to Sender.* (68, emphasis in original)

This detailed description of a more sexual, physical use of paper, within these apparatus of scenes where the reader is reading the narrator reading his protégée, presents an early example of how the competing modes of address, between fictional and real, dis-orientate the reader and the physical book. In this scene, the narrator proposes a way in which, "Like that, we would be together:" but the "that" suggests none of the "intimate conversation between two consciences" that Wallace stated the acts of writing and reading enable. Here, paper is the site of the purely physical, a site of exchange for bodily fluids. His imaginative conjuring of her, in fact, proceeds until "the thin blue lines that rule were all worn off, until the paper itself was just a sliver." Between him and her, he seeks no "story" of her or about her, only what he can use or possess. The circuitous sending of the paper back and forth suggests, not a sharing of a story of the other, but a way, nonetheless, to "feel less alone," to borrow Wallace's phrase. Meanwhile, the "triggering signals" for this dis-orientation

from the book in the reader's hands comes not from the paper itself, or any physical experimentation on the body of the book like some of the "visual" novels I will analyze in later chapters, but only from the affective capacity of language. Each of the physical descriptions of the paper call attention to the actual, real capacity of the page itself to become "perverted" in the ways the narrator describes, stained by the reader's physical fluids, but also to the fictionality of the corresponder to whom it would be sent.

If postmodernist literature used metafiction to illustrate that language cannot adequately re-present reality, then, through the combination of the novel and this "elaboration," Homes reveals that readers remain mired in the so-called "naïve beliefs" about the "magical character" of art to do just that. (Mitchell 8) The fact that the photographs were compiled by Homes during actual research of criminal cases, or that a number of these trinkets (the Alice watch and the yellow toy truck) belonged to Homes as a child, or that the disturbingly graphic collaged "self-portraits" and portrait of Alice were painted by Homes herself, is at once continuous with the "reality hunger" of the memoir boom, and yet a total blurring of the capacity of fictionality and eroticism. The specter of the author haunts this "double consciousness about images" in ways that readers might always slide back in to; the perversion must be hers, mustn't it? Or must we face that they were ours as well? The process of "becoming-pervert" puts these relations in flux, moves the reader from one pole of the binary, "hetero-normal," towards another, "queer." In this way, *The End of Alice* serves as a crucial node from the strictly metafictional projects in the "postmodern" period to a more contemporary novel like Alissa Nutting's *Tampa* (2013), an entirely first-person account of Celeste Parker, a "beautiful" twenty-six-year-old junior high school teacher who seduces two teenage boys in consecutive school years, only to have their rivalry ultimately expose her. In that novel, Celeste Parker's narrative voice is not that of a "hysterical purge," like her counterpoint in *EA,* but instead

baldly states, "[Adult-child sex] is just what I like."[44] Moreover, by occupying so firmly the self-centered, representative "I" that the male gaze affords, Celeste reveals that this public/private axis of power relations is innate to all reading practices. *Tampa* makes the reader aware that while the allure of confession might be to make "queer" sexualities knowable to a rational arbitrator of "normality," the reader's own arousal to these questionable modes of desire firmly remain private, a privilege the narrator is often quick to point out. The freedom enjoyed by this (male) readerly position is pushed against by the physical features of the book, a pink cover with the close-up image of a button hole, open on the front and visually suggestive of a vagina, buttoned on the back cover, in the words of Eve Sedgwick, an "open secret that always reveals itself."

Leigh Gilmore asserts that "as a genre, autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts" (3). *EA* bends these formal elements of the confession memoir into a multiplicity of configurations, making visible the masculinized language that limit the modes of desire readers think possible, but also pushing against those limits, luring the reader into impersonal feelings of perversion. In the closing paragraphs of *EA,* the narrator's heart failure has reached its apex, and he is dying. In a move remarkably similar to Wallace echoing Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," death allows for an image of his self as finally entering a time and space where he and his lover (the reader) can share an intimate moment: "To you alone I've told the tale, do with it what you will. That's all there is, there isn't any more. I'm out of breath…Finally free. It is summer, the end of summer now. I feel the tired heat that comes in August. There is sky and trees, a high wire fence, a long road, and at the end of it you are there, waiting for me. So glad to see you, I say. Missed you so much, thought about you every day" (269-270). In the space of interpretation of who the "you" is, who he has been waiting for him, who he has been thinking of every day, there is the possibility of

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[44] Alissa Nutting, *Tampa* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2013), 252.

Alice, his mother, his protégée, and, of course, "you," the reader. In a sense, all four of these possibilities remain only an "object" of the narrator's masculinized language ("[I] see you," "[I] missed you," "[I] thought about you every day"). But, I read this as returning the reader to that ambiguity of the opening paragraph of the novel, a remembrance that the "afflicted addiction" both is and is not sexual: "To tell a story that will start some of you smirking and smiling" (11). *EA* attacks the space between fiction and reality, which, according to critics of autobiography,[45] is crucial to how we structure our images and narratives of our self, and not least our sexuality. The reading experience of this novel is not so much one that adhesively affirms this image of our self as coherent, particularly as constituted by a so-called rational orientation to the "truth" of certain narratives over others, but shatters it and replaces it with a different, affirmative kind of intimacy: a perverted one.

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[45] See Paul John Eakin. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-invention.* Princeton University Press, 2014. Print.

CHAPTER 3: CHRIS WARE'S *BUILDING STORIES* AS DELEUZIAN FABULATION, OR HOW AND WHY TO READ GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AFFECTIVELY

In a harrowing, full-page image from Chris Ware's graphic narrative *Building Stories,*[1] the protagonist meekly hovers over her husband, arms planted firmly at her sides and clothes strewn at her feet, with a look of mixed dismay, shame, and forlornness. Her husband is lying in bed, completely naked, legs crossed; his face and chest are illuminated by the glow of his iPad, his averted eyes absorbed by the magical aura of a digital screen. This snapshot of failed domestic intimacy juxtaposes physical presence and technology, heightening the contrast between the mediums sometimes unevenly blamed for the replacement of the very physical, human intimacy she seeks: the digital tablet and the physical book.[2] Ware incorporates this juxtaposition into the packaging of his work, stating on the back cover,

> With the increasing electronic incorporeality of existence, sometimes it's reassuring—perhaps even necessary—to have something to hold on to…Whether you're feeling alone by yourself or alone with someone else, this book is sure to sympathize with the crushing sense of life wasted, opportunities missed and creative dreams dashed which afflict the middle- and upper-class literary public (and which can return to them in somewhat damaged form during REM sleep).[3]

Here, Ware assigns an active, even emotional, capacity to the book itself—"this book is sure to sympathize"—for which the protagonist, and the reader, yearn. The intimacy posited is not between two persons, but between a person and an object. But, how would a book have the capacity to sympathize? What makes the book, a technological innovation in its own right, more capable of transporting these affects than an iPad? And, although self-identified as such, what does *Building Stories* really say about the malleability of the word "book"?

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[1] Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

[2] These themes have been a staple in literature and literary studies over the last decade. See, for example, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2006); Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (Columbia University Press, 2009); Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] *Building Stories* does not use page numbers. Throughout this chapter I will detail as fully as possible where the excerpts appear in the text.

This full-page image appears near the end of a narrative unit of entitled "Disconnect," and continues the familiar narrative about how the narrator, as a stand-in for "the middle- and upper-class literary public," mourns for the purer intimacies of yesteryear, untainted by the distractions of digital technologies. Given that Ware's graphic experimentation introduces 14 non-consecutive narrative units and no direction about how to interact with them, this may be the first or second or last unit the reader reads. The units focalize on various characters living in an apartment building in Chicago. The often-depressed female protagonist pictured is the central character of the text, and separate units give the reader insights into her life at different moments. Other characters living in the apartment complex include an elderly landlady, whose involuntary memories of the past often visually put her in multiple temporal registers simultaneously, and a mild-mannered young woman emotionally and verbally abused by her loafer boyfriend. But, because a unique print vehicle transports each unit, including a children's book, game board, newspaper, and flipbook, the tactility of print is a fundamental aspect to engaging with the work.

For some critics and reviewers of *BS,* among the chief achievements of the work is its disavowal of digital reading platforms.[4] Shaun Huston's characterization is fairly representative: "If the digital e-reader has made anything clear, it's that the physicality of the book is, for most practical purposes, incidental, an accident of time and place. *BS*, by contrast, is deliberately material in a way that most books are not." Characterizations like this, which I will return to in the conclusion of this chapter, presume, first, that the physicality of the book is "incidental, an accident of time and place" except in instances when it is centralized, and, second, that *BS* primarily assumes a position of loss or mourning for print. As my previous analyses of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and A.M. Homes's *The End of Alice*, even novels that are not "deliberately material," in their own ways rely on,

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[4] See Rick Moody, "Fugue for Centrifuges: On Chris Ware's "Building Stories," *LA Review of Books,* Oct. 25, 2012; Douglas Wolk, "Inside the Box," *The New York Times*, Oct. 18 2012; Mark O'Connell "Infographics of Despair: Chris Ware's *Building Stories,*" *The Millions,* Nov. 26 2012; Shaun Huston, "The Conscious Materiality of Chris Ware's *Building Stories,*" *PopMatters*, Jan. 22, 2013.

affirm, and complicate the affective attachments middlebrow readers have towards print and the printed novel in the present. Specifically in the case of *BS*, however, reviewers and readers seem attuned to associate the depression that the protagonist suffers throughout the narrative, not least as a search for intimacy, as an echo for the reader's sadness that print is dying, or dead, and their modes of reciprocal intimacy have fundamentally changed. These questions of intimacy and belonging in the graphic narrative are filtered through, most directly, the protagonist's disability, the amputation of her leg from the knee down, and the resulting double-consciousness she experiences in her social and romantic relationships.[5] The intense doubts and isolation she experiences as a result of this disability serves as a strange, if not problematic, analog for the reader's self-image in a world without print. What's more, this analog is comprehended in the starkest of terms, as reviewer Mark O'Connell subtitles the work, "Infographics of Despair." However, this framing of despair, as in the process of losing hope or entering a state of hopelessness, undercuts the vital efforts on the part of the protagonist to continue on and trace out new, better pathways for her life. And, in a related way, the aesthetic experimentations of the novel seem not to despair, but provide a similar opportunity to trace out new pathways for storytelling and fictionality in the present. In other words, reading Ware's aesthetic project as an ode to print, borne out by images like the one of the protagonist standing over her distracted husband, belie the text's complex engagement with how, why, and through what vehicles, we "build" stories in the present.

The overture captured by this image, that newer digital technology strains our ability to be intimate in "real" life, is a bit of misdirection from the aesthetic encounter I read into *BS*. At a second look, the image calls forth print's own history as a technological force, and the fears that the book as a technology elicited as a threatening surrogate of physical intimacy. The fluorescent light of

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[5] I do not deal with disability extensively in this chapter. For an in-depth reading of the function of disability, see, Margaret Fink Berman, "Imagining and Idiosyncratic Belonging: Representing Disability in Chris Ware's 'Building Stories,'" *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 191-205.

the iPad draws the reader's eyes initially, but its bright glow poses a clear contrast with the softer, yellow light of the lamp on the protagonist's bedside table, gently illuming a book and a newspaper. The contrast reveals that her husband has no bedside table whatsoever, emphasizing his almost total abandonment of the material book in favor of this newer, all-absorbing technology. Arguably, the distinction between these two media is not the intrusion of one form of media in the private space of the bedroom versus another, but of the illuminated screen's visible byproduct of impotency, her husband's flaccid penis, as compared to the vibrancy of the book, the very object in the reader's hands. It is only the "something [we] hold on to" that seems uniquely capable of communicating with nuance why our attempts at intimacy misfire in the modern moment.

As early as debates about the rise of the novel in the early eighteenth century, the capacity of language and storytelling to affect readers—to innervate, animate, and even arouse—was often signaled as a danger of reading fiction. Shading these fears, of course, was the technology itself, conveniently packaged in a bound, sometimes pocket-sized object, easily smuggled in and out of the bedroom. There, the novel trafficked titillating scenes for the reader to imaginatively co-create in total privacy. The reception of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740*,* an epistolary novel about a young woman fastidiously staving off the aggressive sexual advances of her employer, illustrates the complex, yet always-present interrelationship between materiality and fictionality as well, an interrelationship central to *BS's* aesthetic project.[6] As James Grantham Turner points out, the "touching" that narratively takes place in *Pamela*, Mr. B advancing upon and touching the innocent Pamela within the privacy of her bedroom, came to emblematize how this new medium "operates on the [reader's] body as immediately as a hand."[7] As reading became an increasingly private affair, the capacity of storytelling to affect readers became increasingly concerning, especially in regards to

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[6] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, Or Virtue Rewarded* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1740]).
[7] James Grantham Turner, "Novel Panic: Picture and Performance in the Reception of Richardson's Pamela," *Representations*, no. 48. 1994: 70–96, quotation on 70.

young female readers who might lock themselves away in their "reading closets" and enjoy, a bit too vociferously, the "touching" of the book. Ironically, the genre of the novel, whose distribution was enabled by a widening circulation of print, spurred handwringing among men, causing them to mourn for the purer intimacies of an even earlier time.

Instigating the early, ambivalent responses to novels like *Pamela* was a two-pronged fear about the increased access to and proliferation of physical texts and objects, and what, in 1750, the literary critic Samuel Johnson called "the wild strain of imagination" that fiction-writing excited in both writers and readers.[8] As to the former, one cannot separate the materiality of this new medium from the ways in which readers orientated themselves to the stories contained within. Turner lays out an incredible context for how the single novel *Pamela* exploded into a glut of material:

> The novel inspired a tidal wave of texts and objects, a riot of consumeristic exploitation; recent critics compare *Pamela* to modern industrial products like Superman or Minnie Mouse. A keen Pamela hunter in the 1740s could buy the novel in large or small format, with or without Francis Hayman's engravings and Richardson's sequel, plus *The Life of Pamela, The Celebrated Pamela, Pamela in High Life, Pamela, or Virtue Triumphant, Shamela Andrews, Pamela Censured, Joseph Andrews, Pamela, or the Fair Impostor, The True Anti-Pamela,* and *Anti-Pamela, or Feign'd Innocence Detected*…She could visit two Pamela waxworks, drop in on Joseph Highmore's studio to see his twelve Pamela paintings and buy the set of his engravings, then see David Garrick in *Pamela, a Comedy*…The day would end in Vauxhall Gardens, sitting in front of Hayman's Pamela murals, cooling herself with the Pamela fan and opening a magazine to read 'Remarks on Pamela, by a Prude.' (71)

The proliferation of multiple editions and responses, satires, and sequels, as well as the physical sites of visual art related to the novel, speaks to the ways in which not only print structured readers' relationships to the text, but also the relationship between print and the other ways narrative forms could be imagined. Turner's description of *Pamela* as similar to "modern industrial products like Superman or Minnie Mouse" precisely captures the congruity between the early novel's relationship to materiality and mass culture and comics' later stigmatization by those same forces. It was in part this materiality of comics that at first signaled to children the disposability of comics, but later,

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[8] Samuel Johnson, "Rambler No. 4," *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings,* Ed. Peter Martin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 174-177, quotation on 174.

interestingly, became the trademark of their value. The strong emotional attachments readers made with characters and narratives conjoined with the fragility of the cheaply made print products to create an industry of collection and preservation.[9] Publishers sold multiple editions of the same issue, in addition to plush toys, plastic figurines, and molded statues, literally surrounding readers with "a tidal wave of texts and objects." Moreover, one can rightly note how this process of collecting and ownership structures these readers' personal relationships to the stories themselves and how they animate them. Unfortunately, this materiality relatedly contributed to the low-culture designation of comics, a "riot of consumeristic exploitation," which precluded it from being a highly considered form of "literature" for nearly the entire twentieth century, at least outside of niche communities. Andreas Huyssen famously argued that one of the principle features of modernism was a "conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture."[10] It seems fitting then that increasingly opaque and aesthetically difficult modernist literature was produced just as the medium of comics, with its principal superhero Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster in 1933, utterly captured the imagination of mass culture in much the same way *Pamela* had nearly two centuries earlier.

However, fears about the explosion of mass and material culture around the rise of the novel, and later comics, only make sense in tandem with fears about the immersive potential of storytelling in these new respective mediums. For early worrywarts like Samuel Johnson, the "wild strain of imagination" was dangerous when it was employed without clear authorial direction, leaving the innocent female reader to come to her own, potentially debased interpretations of the text.[11] This danger, though, was not primarily a question of rationality. Johnson noted that fiction-

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[9] For more on this history, see Jared Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the Mew Media Work of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 787-806.

[10] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii.

[11] Samuel Johnson, "Rambler No. 4," *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings,* Ed. Peter Martin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 174-177.

reading can, "take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will" (176). As these early critics watched readers become physically consumed by these new vehicles of storytelling, it was a given that female readers were animated by these technological devices, literally made into "automatons" and unable to exercise judgment. One does not need to look hard to find the parallel between this concern about the affective capacity of prose fiction and similar concerns over the rise of comics. In 1955, the Comics Code Authority was established to censor potentially harmful content from reaching youth largely based on the contemporaneous national rise in juvenile crime and delinquency and the testimony of psychologist Frederic Wertham. The common historical account of this censoring organization suggests that the images of superhero violence would instigate young boys to act out violently as well. However, as Jared Gardner points out, Wertham not only protested representations of violence, but the capacity of the medium's storytelling to pervert young minds, and more importantly, bodies.[12] Moreover, given Wertham's tellingly close readings on the homoerotic domesticity of Batman and Robin, he echoes almost verbatim Johnson's fears about the affective capacity of prose fiction to make automatons of its female readers, and to express a concern about how the comics might "[operate] on the [reader's] body as immediately as a hand."[13] Of course, it is no coincidence that these anti-heteronormative expressions of sexuality, female desire in the eighteenth century and male homosexuality in the 1950s, underscore the fears of the affective capacity of storytelling in these respective mediums.

In this context, the image of *BS*'s protagonist, helplessly standing by her naked husband while he is drawn into his magical tablet, indexes the complex, historical ways in which the vehicles of storytelling intertwine with the very "building" of those stories, and subsequently the ways readers

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[12] Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-first-Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2012), 86.
[13] For more on the Comics Code Authority and Frederic Wertham's critique, see Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2005); Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-first-century Storytelling* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

orientate themselves in relation to those objects and stories. To put it differently, the blankness of the screen in this image and the flaccidity of the protagonist's husband's penis relate to one another precisely at the intersection of materiality—"something to hold on to"—and fictionality—"the wild strain of imagination." In fact, these contextual fears about the impact of novels on, not only the minds, but the bodies of readers, female readers in particular, presents a kind of total inversion of Ware's image: a middle-aged male literally made flaccid by the lack of imaginative engagement provoked by his chosen mode of entertainment. Certain literary experiences, on the other hand, might have the capacity to arouse, inflame, and innervate. With this in mind, I aim to counter the ways this work has been reviewed and discussed in many popular and even academic forums as expressing a melancholic feeling about the loss of print, which in its very expression would seem to define a limitation of the "wild strain of imagination" to create or "build" stories in the present. Instead, *BS,* through experimentations with the spatial and temporal organization of the comics form, illustrates how language, storytelling, and materiality significantly organize not only what we comprehend about the world around us, but also what Jonathan Flatley calls our "affective map." *BS,* in other words, offers a model of creativity that attempts to break out from the reactive (stories aren't packaged and consumed the way they used to) to the active (how do we make new stories that can help us imagine new futures).

To this end, I argue that Chris Ware exercises a strategy of what Gilles Deleuze calls "fabulation," which could conveniently be translated as "building stories." Deleuze adopts the term from fellow French philosopher Henri Bergson, for whom it actually has a negative connotation. Bergson understood fabulation as a production of stories so "vivid and haunting" that they "may precisely imitate perception, and thereby prevent or modify action." [14] Deleuze revises this connotative association of fabulation by arguing that the power of story-building, particularly stories

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[14] Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 109.

that experiment with temporality and spatiality, can enact modes of becoming-other and provide alternate visions for the future. As Gregg Lambert explains, Deleuzian fabulation is the process by which an auteur and reader "go toward one another" in a process of mutual becoming: "the becoming-popular of the creator or intellectual and the becoming-creative of the people."[15] Creativity, here, is meant specifically as the undertaking of a journey of which one has no prior plan and does not already know the conclusion. These creative journeys can unsettle our relationships to our past, the habits and memories that limit our sense of what is possible in the present, and can provide us new visions of what is possible in the future. Readers of *BS* will immediately recognize a relation to the reading experience of this work, left with no direction to navigate the non-consecutive narrative units.

Richardson, reflecting on and responding to the contemporaneous critiques of the rise of the novel like that of Samuel Johnson, saw the way for the reader and author to "go toward one another" through exercising precise narrative control over what and how to interpret the text. He published several revisions of *Pamela*, including increasingly detailed introductions and reading guides, to prevent any so-called mis-readings of his intentions or the scenes.[16] Through his subsequent novel, *Clarissa,* Richardson aimed to further correct the mis-readings of *Pamela* by intensely mapping out the behavioral cause and effect of his characters for his readers (1,534 pages of mapping to be exact). Unsurprisingly, Samuel Johnson lauded *Clarissa,* stating that, "the train of events is agreeable to observation and experience" (176). And yet, Deleuzian fabulation would suggest that we neither want a coherent "train" of sequenced events, nor should we unilaterally trust our "observation and experience." Luckily, literary experiences do not often work the way Johnson or Richardson desires. The unpredictability of readers privately and imaginatively co-creating

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[15] Gregg Lambert, "On the Uses and Abuses of Literature for Life: Gilles Deleuze and the Literary Clinic," *Postmodern Culture* 8.3 (1998).

[16] For more, see William B Warner, "The *Pamela* Media Event," *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 176-230.

fictional scenes, or what I have been calling the affective capacity of storytelling, nearly blotted out all of these attempts by Richardson to define the reading experiences of his novels. Readers continued, to his dismay, to engage with the fictional scenes in the novel with uncontainable passion and excitement. One might note an ironic similarity between Richardson's paranoiac revisions and multiple editions with Ware's absurdly expansive paratextual material, in which he mockingly offers some faux instruction to the work, as well as the narrative alterations sometimes made from one edition to the next.[17] Even more relevant, though, is one of his trademark idiosyncrasies: the use of diagrams.[18] While these diagrams seem to suggest authorial order and a pathway to "making sense" of the page, it is a central contestation of this chapter that their function counterintuitively is the opposite: to create moments of non-sense, thereby providing a multiplicity of possible reading pathways and relationships to the past, present, and future of the narrative. I will show that the seeming narrative control exercised through *BS's* frequent diagrammatic structures actually open the text up for the reader to "fabulate," or "build stories," on their own, to exercise their "wild strain of imagination" in creating new stories and possible visions for the future. Yet, this process of story-building is not separate from but deeply entwined with the embodied act of reading, forcing a confrontation between the questions of why we tell stories in the present and how, or through what physical vehicles, we share them.

Interested scholars from various disciplines have approached comics with the shared objective that graphic narrative is a distinct medium that requires its own distinct reading practices. In service of this cause, this chapter has a related objective to illustrate how "reading comics affectively" depends upon and amplifies the reading practices determined by both a medium's

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[17] See, for example, the softcover edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* added an "unpublished epilogue" not included in the hardcover edition. Though this may rankle some textual purists, adding content to different editions of a comics text is, as collectors know, constitutive of the material and cultural history of the form. What is sometimes less noted is that, since its earliest iterations, the novel industry has had a similarly haphazard relationship to the "purity" of a text.

[18] See, for example, Johanna Drucker, "Graphic devices: narration and navigation." *Narrative* 16, no. 2 (2008): 121-139.

formal elements and the cultural, material history that organizes and orientates readers to stories. More specifically, I contest that the semiotic undertow in comics analysis, what Barbara Postema calls "making sense of fragments," can limit how we might understand the affective capacity of storytelling in the comics medium.[19] Instead, retaining the messiness of the comics form depends on conceding that our engagement with comics is not exclusively one of "meaning-making," that is, to say, semiotic in nature. Moments of non-sense may reveal why particular experiments with the comics form are so riveting, offering the basis for how and why readers animate them with such passion. Remember, it was not only the rational analysis of Richardson's sentence structure, characters, or even narratives, but also the uncontrollable innervation of readers as they co-created his lustful scenes that made his novels so riveting and widely read. And, it is the uncontrollable innervation, or affective capacity, of graphic storytelling that remains more difficult to capture in explanations of our reading experiences.

As I discussed in the introduction, for Deleuze, affect is a pre-personal force, or intensity, not tied to subjectivity. This intensity is "wrested" by the auteur from the world as well as their imagination and put into the materials of the work of art.[20] Approaching comics from this vantage point, we would consider an aesthetic encounter with a panel or braided sequence of panels as an "event" that, as renée c. hoogland explains, "engages us on the level of affect as much as it invites us to analyze and interpret its formal and semiotic operations."[21] Considering the affective capacity of comics, first and foremost, is to acknowledge that a reader's experience with the artwork, as hoogland continues, "cannot be fully captured in language, nor fully determined by form nor by the chains of signification" (14). In contradistinction, emotions are, according to Deleuzian scholar

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[19] See, for instance, Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994); Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2007) and *Comics and Narration* (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2013); Barbara Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* (Rochester: RIT, 2013).

[20] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Affect, Percept, and Concept," *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press), 163-200.

[21] renée c. hoogland, *A Violent Embrace: Art and Aesthetics After Representation* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), 14.

Brian Massumi, what we comprehend affect to mean.[22] (27-28). In other words, when readers identify a story as making them feel disgusted or shameful, they are comprehending, or making sense of, a physical, bodily reaction that has already happened. Massumi terms the site at which emotion and affect touch one another as the "seeping edge," or the moment when affect becomes actual because its pre-subjective intensity is given a subjective value through the "stable" currency of language (43). As I stated in the introduction, it is also at this site that affect can induce change, unsettling our subjective notions of emotion and meaning. Rachel Greenwald-Smith points out that, for these reasons, literature is a significant site at which we might understand this seeping edge: "Affectively exciting insofar as aesthetics stimulate sensory responses, but linguistically based and therefore inevitably codifying, literature stimulates and codes relentlessly. It works both sides at once, engineering forms of emergence through the production of aesthetic pleasure."[23] Following Greenwald Smith, I aim to employ the significant contributions to the grammar of comics in order to expand what we think of as the living function of that poetic language, even and especially when that poetic language is visual.

In his recent monograph *The Visual Language of Comics,* Neil Cohn builds an original and compelling grammar for what he calls a "visual language of sequential images."[24] When Neil Cohn makes this statement, he is quite simply making the case that, as a visual language, comics use a structure motivated by modality, meaning, and grammar similar to that verbal language. His work, as well as that of Barbara Postema and Thierry Groensteen, significantly helps define the complex, "codifying" function of this visual language. However, that comics deploy a visual language of sequential images does not preclude non-semiotic modes of analysis, in fact it necessitates it. In

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[22] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), 27-28.
[23] Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3 (2011): 423-46, quotation on 431.
[24] Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 2.

other words, as some affect theorists have hypothesized about prose fiction, affect reveals breakdowns in the structures of language and therefore in subjectivity itself. Understanding the grammatical structure of how visual language means or signifies, as Cohn's text offers, could be considered a precursor to the question, how do disruptions of the grammar of visual language stimulate new images of what is possible?

While Chris Ware's narrative and artistic style is by no means representative of a broad swath of comics artists, and therefore perhaps a debatable figure to base claims on how we might develop a reading practice of comics more generally, he has become one face of the "the graphic novel," quite literally.[25] Comics have made huge gains as both a cultural and artistic form over the past twenty-five years, featured prominently in visual art installations as well as adapted into Broadway and art-house cinema productions;[26] since the highly regarded publication of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* in 2000, Chris Ware has been at the center of these trends.[27] General literary audiences were likely introduced to Ware through his multiple covers of *The New Yorker* or, in 2004, when he was charged with editing an issue on the rise of comics for the widely popular *McSweeney's Quarterly.*[28] Not only is he one of the most widely read comics auteurs among general audiences, but also one of the most widely celebrated among academics. In the very young field of Comics Studies, only a very select group of auteurs have entire single-author academic studies devoted to analyzing their work; two such texts have been published on Chris Ware alone.[29] On the one hand, one could

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[25] His artwork dons the cover of Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's comprehensive *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) as well as the cover of Thierry Groensteen's widely influential monograph *Comics and Narration* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

[26] See, for example, the filmic adaptation of Phoebe Gloeckner's graphic memoir of the same name, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl,* directed by Marielle Heller (2015; New York City: Sony Pictures Classics) and the Tony Award winning Broadway adaptation of Allison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home,* directed by Sam Gold, adapted by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori (2015; New York City).

[27] Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000).

[28] Chris Ware, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* #13: *An Assorted Sampler of North American Comics, Drawings, Strips, and Illustrated Stories* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004).

[29] In terms of either edited collections or academic monographs about single cartoonists/authors, the list is quite short: Deborah R. Geis, ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust,* (University Alabama Press, 2003); Andrew Hoberek, *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 2014); Daniel

argue, as some critics rightly have, that Ware occupies this position precisely because of his self-conscious negotiation of the history of comics as mass culture and the aesthetic difficulty associated with works of Modernism.[30] Chris Ware has expressed ambivalence on both his exalted position in the art world and his position as a cartoonist working in the same form as superheroes.[31] And, this negotiation between the material and the aesthetic is often integral to the themes he addresses, even when the work is not, as a reviewer called *BS,* "deliberately material."[32] On the other hand, one could also say that, while his work is not representative of comics art, it stands as a benchmark by which those pushing the creative envelope of the form are measured. A Deleuzian approach to reading Ware's comics introduces one possible remedy to formal analyses that approach comics as a closed system of meaning, bringing to the fore, instead, the extent to which the affective and semiotic dimensions of reading interpenetrate one another.

Two sets of sequences from a single unit of *Building Stories,* the hardcover bound 8"X12" book, contrast how both the protagonist and the reader relate to what they see as settled in the past and through what avenues they might see new possibilities in the future. This particular unit puts into motion several false starts for the protagonist. In her each of her attempts to find happiness, she longingly looks backwards at the lost moments that she should have employed more fruitfully. She struggles to establish meaningful relationships or "discover love" in any of the places she is looking. The main analogs for her backwards feelings are the old, crotchety landlady and the apartment building itself. In an early set of recto pages, the building is viewed as a constant presence over two juxtaposed "time frames," although at a closer look there are several established times and

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Worden, ed. *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2015). On Chris Ware, see Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware,* (Yale University Press, 2004); David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman eds., *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking,* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

[30] See Martha B. Kulhman and David M. Ball, "Introduction: Chris Ware and the Cult of Difficulty," *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), ix-xxiii.

[31] See Katherine Roeder, "Chris Ware and the Burden of Art History," *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 65-77.

[32] See Jacob Brogan, "Masked Fathers: Jimmy Corrigan and the Superheroic Legacy," *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 14-27.

memories that become refracted through the building. On the first recto page, a diagram, interesting in itself, captures the romantic memories of the old landlady. The next recto page is braided with this image through an almost identical image (coloring, shading, structure) of the apartment building. Because this second page more immediately contributes to the primary narrative of this unit, the story of the protagonist, one would think that the pull to "make meaning" privileges this page over the previous one. But, a fuller analysis shows that this is not so straightforward.

On this second recto page, the reader's primary contemplation is focused on the top-central image: a hook in a spherical frame. However, its nature as a hook is only informed by subsequent reading. The hook's initial capture is predicated by its graphical centricity, yet its actual character is fairly indecipherable because it is made up of only a few graphic lines. The reader's eyes dart left *and* right: to the left she is informed by a cursive text image—"The same morning many decades later: A young woman her mind gone idle over the overwhelming reality of her loneliness, muses as to the original use of a hook, worming its way out of the ceiling, directly above her head"—and to the right she is informed by an image of the protagonist. The thought cloud that is retraced to the spherical frame of a hook completes an entire graphic organizer. The protagonist is represented as being affected by the hook, imagining it as the support for a dividing curtain, of a hanging plant, of a child plaything, and of drying clothes. She is sent into the zone by the hook, "her mind gone idle." There is, however, a braiding effect between these panels. The reader, vaguely recalling the possibility this hook was seen before, is inclined to traverse backwards in time, to return to the first recto page of this brief sequence. Here, a page that had little to do with the main narrative of this sub-system of *BS* commands new attention. The reader sees a similarly depressed young boy, with a plane hanging from the hook that has new significance. And, in fact, it is precisely this hook, and its extensional object, which provides the map for the boy to "dream of the future, and how he might win the heart and the body of the girl downstairs." In this way, the protagonist's sense of temporality is put out of

joint by what Deleuze would call a "non-human becoming," a becoming-hook. As Deleuze defines

it, "A becoming is always in the middle; …it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a

no-man's land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying

one into the proximity of the other."[33] Contained within the hook is a capacity to innervate or

animate the protagonist within multiple temporal registers simultaneously. She is no longer a stable

subject with a firm position, but with "her mind gone idle," she becomes-with the hook to access a

different historical point with the aim of re-directing her towards a different future. In this way, for

the young boy, the protagonist, and even the reader, the hook has an affective capacity.

Affect, recalling Deleuze's definition, is not synonymous with how a comic series, or, in the

case of this image, an inorganic object like a hook, "make one feel." Instead, what we would note

about this graphic organizer around the hook, as well as the ways that it is braided with the previous

page, is how it dis-orientates one's relationship to the past and then re-orientates one differently

towards the future. In other words, affect is both spatially and temporally dynamic, making comics a

crucially fertile medium to consider its function. Thierry Groensteen observes that narration in

comics is a fundamentally imbued with a "pastness;" comics, in other words, is a closed system of

meaning and therefore primarily narrated from the past. Working through Deleuze, Groensteen

concludes that,

> The idea that successive presents can coexist is paradoxical: unlike the past, the present
> cannot be cumulative…To put this another way, in cinema, the future destiny of the image
> seems, at every moment, to remain open, because it is hidden from us—but in comics, the
> image does not surge up from nowhere. The next stage is already accessible, and it is
> possible for us to glance ahead and catch a glimpse of events yet to take place—or even to
> go straight to the end of an album and start by looking at its final page. (*Comics and Narration*
> 86)

I would argue that, as in the braided images explored, *BS* complicates this claim. For Deleuze, the

present is polytemporal; it is constituted of dimensions or syntheses of time. The first synthesis of

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[33] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987), 293.

time for Deleuze is habit, "the pre-conscious contractions of elements within the organism" (Bogue 34). The nuanced differences between these pre-conscious contractions are what begin to constitute "subjectivity," or the recognition of the self as a subject. Habits, in other words, though often automatic, are the basis of how a subject recalls the past, adapts his or her expectations in the present, and make predictions of the future.[34] (*Difference and Repetition,* 70). But, they are changeable when one engages with an object or artwork on the level of affect. The second synthesis can be thought of as "memory," meaning that we interpret the past in terms of signs or signals that send us from the present into the past, all of the "successive presents" in between (77). By this, Deleuze means that when a subject perceives a signal that triggers a memory, he or she simultaneously exists, just as the signal does, in multiple temporal registers, making our conception of the "present," as a singular entity, more complex. Crucially, for these reasons, the past has, as Deleuzian scholar Ronald Bogue explains, a virtual component: "The present passes within the virtual past, and with each successive present there is the presupposition of that virtual medium as already existing" (39). To consider the representation of these panels as in the past, as already-memories, is actually to suggest that these memories are plucked from a virtual plane of other memories, the very juxtaposition of which illustrates the flexibility or openness of this "virtual" past and how it might inform a "virtual" future. In other words, the past, like the future, always could be otherwise. This seems like an odd claim about one single comic book; it is in our hands, we see the first page and the last page and thus it certain seems like a settled matter. But *BS* as a whole shows that this need not be a fixed quality we attribute to the medium of comics. A simple reminder of how *BS* plays with temporality more broadly illustrates this point: as one is reading one unit, there are always alternate possibilities of what the past was, and relatedly, what the future may hold.

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[34] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 70.

The task of fabulation is to cause these passive syntheses—habits and memories—to vibrate and change. In other words, the task is to make time "out of joint." Constructing new connections between the past and the present detaches "signs from their customary referents and reconnect them in new configurations" (Bogue 45). By mixing and matching different possible signs from their customary referents, fabulation seeks out the virtual pasts from their actual representations in order to discover unexplored pathways, the multiplicity of ways a life could be lived. These unexplored pathways are what Deleuze calls "lines of flight." As Deleuze argues, "But to flee is not to renounce action: nothing is more active than flight. It is the opposite of the imaginary. It is also to put to flight—not necessarily others, but to put something to flight, to put a system to flight as one bursts a tube…to flee is to trace a line, lines, and a whole cartography."[35] In short, fabulation is meant to undo the ways in which habit and memory limit or block the protagonist from moving forward, and, concomitantly, to offer her routes to escape through the very fulguration of time. The protagonist only traces these lines of flight through a process of becoming-hook, of encountering a virtual memory of the hook, one that is populated with movement and life. The hook is literally the site from which these abstract lines to alternate pasts are drawn (both as image and as narrative). Without these abstract lines, her path is blocked (and, so is the reader's). The artist's graphic lines are what open these pasts up to be actualized, for the protagonist's new future to be drawn. And, while this particular moment is not a particularly intense aesthetic encounter for the reader, it functions as both an affective and cognitive itinerary, a habit of reading that will later facilitate the non-human becoming of the reader. These lines of flight, by moving between the actual and the virtual, intensity and codification, are fundamental to how a subject situates and understands themselves in relation to their environment.

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[35] Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, Ed. Claire Parnet (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 36.

Fabulation, instantiated in this way, operates on a reader in a similar manner as it does the protagonist. Later in this same volume, the reader's experience of time is complicated by a series of three consecutive juxtapositions of the past as a manifestation in present consciousness. The verso pages represent the "living present;" the recto pages represent a memory. Each recto page strips the protagonist more and more: on the first page, she is fully clothed in her work outfit, on the second, she is physically naked, and on the final page, she is shown as a combination of her muscular and skeletal system. Each time the reader turns a page, the verso and recto pages enter his or her field of vision almost simultaneously. While the prior two pages allow the reader to form an expectation of what is coming, the image of the skeletal protagonist, nonetheless, produces movement and intensity.

Looking more closely, reading habits trained to move from the upper left to lower right and verso before recto lead the reader to read the verso page, while being pulled by the more visually complex and compelling recto page. The reader's gaze can devour these panels representing the "passing present" fairly quickly. These rapid moment-to-moment sequences utterly lack text (with the exception of three onomatopoeic words) and require little imaginative closure on the part of the reader. There is symmetry to the panels: the top and bottom rows have the same paneling format, as do the second and fourth rows. The center row is merely an inversion of the second and fourth row. One could say that these panels first effect on the reader is boredom, a mode to move them out of the living present and into a different dimension of time. Following this path, one can bracket the effect of this "silent" paneled page and look where the reader's eyes locate the force of the image: the chaotic recto page.

On this page, the panels have no uniformity in space or size. The text images similarly have no logic, with five different typographic layouts presented on the page. Yet, the reader has seen this graphic organizer before as envisioned by the protagonist with the "becoming-hook" image. The

reader's gaze is drawn to the complexity of the protagonist's skeleton, the redness of her face and the redness of her heart. Its scale, its location, and its chaos all contribute to a becoming-other, unsettled, not routinized. The overlaying complexity of arrows, vertical and horizontal, left to right and right to left, demand an intensification of focus, an intensification that was not possible on the verso page. The reader looks to the large surface text that states, "the obvious first choice." Thicker lines protrude from it to the redness of both the face and the heart, the locus of her gaze, facilitating this shift. And yet, the text below is so small that as the reader's eyes focus in to read his or her vision is tunneled so profoundly that he or she only just loses sight of the entire image. However, the words quickly make no sense. The "correct" obvious first choice is the upper left, as culturally-constructed habits of reading would have informed the reader had those same habits not been unsettled by the violence of the image. Beginning to trust the arrows, the reader might become equally frustrated: the upper-left also connects with the lower-left as well as the traditional reading pattern from the upper-left to upper-right. As the reader's eyes search to read, his or her frustration cannot help but always extend the duration of his or her gaze on the skeleton in the center. As the first text image states, the both the reader and the protagonist are "searching for where her I is," but in so doing, both begin to see themselves as more and more as a material body, a body engaged in the physical act of reading, rather than an insubstantial rational mind unaffected by their body. This stripping away to the protagonist's "bare bones," to her very material, color, lines, literalizes the sort of "violence" that Samuel Johnson warned was always an unpredictable effect of building stories: reading can "take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will."

In this page's violence, the reader might turn to their habits as instructed by that early recto sequence with the hook. The reader may move backward in the system, and look differently at the habits depicted in the structured panels of the verso page, picking out new differences among the

images that the reader was unwilling to dedicate our vision to on her first look: the slight movements of the protagonist's hand, her quiet frustration, the quotidian yet utterly invaluable chore of feeding one's pet. Significantly, the reader encounters the image in a way that was not available to the reader in her initial encounter of the image. The reader is taken in the zone, her "mind gone idle," and taken out of that zone with shudders or ruptures that allow him or her to see themselves differently than he or she could before. Within the literary-visual totality of the verso and recto pages, the reader's experience of time intensifies, as in the instance of the protagonist and the hook. The dynamism, this moving back and forth, affectively marks these habits and memories on the reader's body. Considering the aesthetic project as a total system, one might conceive of two options: Option 1.) The reader does not yet know neglect of the cat is urgent or real. After all, the habits quietly show her being fed. The "lick, lick" on the lower right hand of the skeletal image, is responded to with a dismissal: "Oh, Miss Kitty, I'm not…ignoring you…I"m just tired…that's all…snf…I'm just tired." In this scenario, the ambivalence of this image will persist in the form of compellingness, the habits themselves are riveting and the difference to be extracted is crucial. Option 2.) The reader does know, and sees this moment as one among a series that "actualizes" one of a multiplicity of alternate pasts. If the protagonist could trace alternate lines in this moment*,* the future could be different. In both instances, there is an explicit "non-closure" of the signs available. In fact, *BS* produces signs and allows for this free traversal between different dimensions of time.

One of the central sites of "meaning-making" for semiotic-based comics studies is, of course, "the gutter." Groensteen points out, "the gutter, insignificant in itself, is invested with an arthologic function that can only be deciphered in light of the singular images that it separates and unites" (*System of Comics* 114). In other words, it is the constant moving back and forth between elements of a sequence that allows comics to "signify" (Postema 66). This process is imbued with imagination, yet this approach implies that each panel in a sequence (or in this case a series) only has

within it a lack, which is why readers move backwards and forwards to fill in the gaps. Furthermore, the movement between different levels of what Groensteen calls the *tressage*, or those panels that are "bridged" by a particular visual or thematic logic, leads Barbara Postema to claim, "the creation of action in a comic is an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time, based on visual information that panels, as signifying syntagms, provide" (66). When these processes become particularly complex, as in the case of *BS*, Postema asserts that this movement back and forth "keeps one very aware that one *is* reading, and consequently creates awareness of the normal process of reading that usually goes unnoticed" (66).

However, what if we consider individual panels not by their lack, but perhaps by their possibility or potentiality? Each panel in *BS* serves as a site of extraction of the new, of what was always present in the virtual but not yet actualized. Just as the story itself approaches the protagonist's stuttering through life with astounding ambivalence, the narrative retains the elliptical nature of that "life…" The reader is not closed into an interpretation. Instead, he or she is able to see and feel the intensities that guide the protagonist's movements through time and space, and, more importantly, actualize alternate pasts and prod into alternate futures that would otherwise remain only virtual. This is true as the reader moves beyond the panels, sequences, or series within a unit and considers the system at large. These "fragments" are understood not by their fixed position in time but by their defiance of time, the ways in which they unsettle habits and memories and they prod and explore a future that is not settled. The cartography of lines in, for example, the image of the skeleton move the reader not only in multiple directions within that image, but vertically and horizontally off of the page, into other panels, into other units and dimensions, to seek out the multiplicities of information, the affective and semiotic tenor of information. If the reader desired to look ahead to "see what happens," he or she would not know where to look, let alone what it might mean for "the present." The reader is dependent on the dimensions of the present in the object they

are holding, and the promise of new novelties in the other objects in the box of texts. Put differently, in precisely the same manner that the abstract lines traced out from the skeletal image exacerbate and vibrate the habits and memories of the protagonist, and by extension the reader herself, these abstract lines are traced off of the page and to the other dimensions of the narrative. New lines of flight are drawn, but so much of this cartography is virtual, always just on the verge of being actual.

I'd like to close this chapter by returning to the interrelationship of materiality and fictionality, and the affective relationship between the two. According to Phillip Thurtle and Robert Mitchell, packaging often serves as the insulation that protects us from the magnitude and "scales of force and energy demanded by industrialization."[36] However, when a subject encounters an anomaly in their experience, or we might say a rupture in their habits, this packaging is removed (282). Considering these ruptures as "new modes of intensity," or affective engagements, Thurtle and Mitchell argue that superhero comics offer a wide range of "novelties" that "allow one to glimpse unseen aspects of the world; it allows one to discern a consistency to the world that had previously escaped understanding" (283). The novelty itself does not break the narrative or start a new narrative. Instead, it is added into a series, like what Gilles Deleuze calls a rhizome:

> Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature…It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overspills. It constitutes multiplicities. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21).

Each of what is mistakenly called fragments in *BS* function as a dimension of an eternal middle, both as in the protagonist's life and as in the reader's aesthetic encounter with the unit. These dimensions are constantly in movement and are only understood as traversal between Deleuze's three syntheses time: habit, memory, and an un-tethered, virtual future. Each dimension in *BS*

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[36] Phillip Thurtle and Robert Mitchell. "The Acme Novelty Library: Comic Books, Repetition, and the Return of the New." *Configurations* 15.3 (2007): 267-97, quotation on 282.

functions similarly to those of a continuous serial narrative: as novelty. The reader anticipates that new, valuable information will be added to the puzzle of the protagonist's life.

However, unlike superhero comics, this novelty is not explicit, as in the cover images advertising a particularly exciting battle. Nor, as in superhero comics, does this narrative build on itself in a single direction, towards a single culmination. The novelty is implicit in the print object as distinct from other print objects. I do not mean to say that each print object corresponds to or foreshadows the novelty inside. In fact, the opposite is the case. For example, the children's book is not indicative that the reader will learn some crucial meaning about the protagonist's childhood, nor does the game board indicate the content will be more fun, nor does the unfolded newspaper indicate the content will be more informative. The reader is required to disassociate what they comprehend the physicality of those objects to mean. Then, they must substitute the meaning of that object with a direct, affective encounter with whatever is inside, adding that new piece into the series. In this way, the utter novelty is implicit in the embodied act of touching and unwrapping a new package. The novelty is, in other words, reinforced by the multiplicity of print media as such and of the habits that we routinized with these packages, but also undone by the same processes. As Thurtle and Mitchell cogently argue, engaging with comics on the level of affect allow for a subject to "unwrap" these packages and trace new lines of flight.

In this way, the reading experience of *BS* similarly resembles what Jonathan Flatley calls "affective mapping": a conceptual metaphoric about how we experience our environment and how moods make possible, or more likely, certain feelings and block others. According to Flatley, because we "always bring with us a range of intentions, beliefs, desires, moods, and affective attachments to [different environments]…, our spatial environments are inevitably imbued with the feelings we have about the places we are going, the things that happen to us along the way, and the

people we meet, and these emotional valences, of course, affect how we create itineraries."[37]

However, these maps are "neither fixed nor stable." Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome,

> Such maps must be able to incorporate new information as one has new experiences in new environments; but this does not mean they are entirely self-invented. Rather the maps are cobbled together in processes of accretion and palimpsetic rewriting from other persons' maps, first of all those defined in infancy by one's parents, and later the maps that come to one by way of one's historical context and the social formations one lives in. (78)

Of course, stories are an integral component of how these affective maps are constructed, often completely altering the processes by which a subject conceives of oneself as stable and situated in time and space. In other words, the tension between past and present is constantly enfolded into our navigation and of the networks of panels. Similar to the ways in which subjects bring different intentions, attitudes and moods to different spatial environments, cued by certain relationships with different buildings and architectural spaces, readers bring different intentions, attitudes and moods to the different sites of *BS*. However, the aesthetic practice estranges the user's navigation of panels, of past and present, of habit and memory, creating space for a vitalized imagination of what is possible in the future. Through these moments of "self-estrangement," Flatley argues, aesthetic practices allow readers make otherwise untouchable connections with their past, to see and recognize the historicity of their affects, and, most importantly, draw new lines of flight.

As these readings have shown, the graphic line is both that which affects and which codifies affect; this moving back and forth does not simply indicate, recalling Postema's phrase, "retroactive signification," but a means to "encourage perceptions of life." Moreover, the ways these abstract lines vibrate between dimensions of the poly-temporal present depend on the unwrapping of the packages of storytelling, the estrangement of the objects that readers have used throughout their lives as constitutive elements of their affective map. The aesthetic force of *BS,* the force that "sends us into the zone," estranges our relationship with each object in hand. Jared Gardner rightly argues

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[37] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambrdige: Harvard University Press, 2008), 77-78.

that, "Graphic narrative…does not offer the possibility of ever forgetting the medium, losing sight of the material text or the physical labor of its production."[38] The physical labor, in this case, is not solely attributable to Chris Ware, the human being, but also to the interrelationship between imagination and materiality that Samuel Johnson noted as ever-present in reading. Recalling Postema's argument that "retroactive signification" in some cases de-familiarizes reading, one could argue that the affective component of *BS* allows one to become self-estranged from the objects of storytelling themselves, unwrapping the packaging and exposing the intensity at its center. By constructing an encounter with the very moods and intentions readers attach to these printed objects, Ware complicates the outcomes that this exposure might produce. These printed objects, children's books, posters, magazines, flip books, are imbued with such rich affective traces that our habits of reading, expecting, adapting, and sharing books become a way in which readers conceive of happiness itself. But, in order "to flee," these sites need to be opened up as multiplicities, an actualization of alternate pasts, rather than closed off as nostalgic memories.

Reviews of *BS* consistently and without fail attribute varied ranges of attachment to the keepsake box and its packaging. When, for example, Rick Moody remarks in his review of *BS* that it serves as a "big *f#%&* you* to the e-book," he reveals how packaging informs our approach to storytelling. The very materials of the story, understandably, become palpably significant in the reader response to this story. Doug Wolk, similarly, states, "You will never be able to read 'Building Stories' on a digital tablet, by design. It is a physical object, printed on wood pulp, darn it." Except, of course, until "you" can read it on a digital tablet. Ware published one 14-page final unit exclusively through McSweeney's iPad app, which prompted another review to humorously exclaim: "Chris Ware goes digital? Judas!"[39] These feelings of betrayal are bound up with a reading of *BS* as fundamentally melancholic and nostalgic. In fact, that same reviewer, "betrayed" by Ware, goes on

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[38] Jared Gardner, "Storylines." *SubStance*. 40.1 (2011): 53-69, quotation on 65.
[39] Sean T. Collins, "Touch Sensitive," *The Comics Journal*, 23 Sept. 2011.

to suggest, "Held in two hands and horizontally aligned (the comic insists upon this before it allows itself to be read), 'Touch Sensitive' is, after all, a Chris Ware comic, and thus a melancholy delight almost by definition. This is true even though the content doesn't share the container's nominal innovation." This review illustrates the layers of this complex relationship: the story is both "melancholic" and a "delight." And yet, there is something about the material that does not exhaustively define what renee hoogland calls the "violent embrace" of *BS*'s aesthetic project. Tellingly, this reviewer reduces the affective force of the original aesthetic encounter to a "nominal innovation." The ways in which *BS* complicates the reader's relationship to the past, even those elements of the past he or she is fond of, are not entirely comprehensible. And this is precisely the point, this is the affective capacity of stories: stories, and the visual language used to tell them, put us on the verge between intensity and codification.

As a point of comparison, we might consider the apartment building itself, which often gives form and content to the tenants' lives, as an analogy for the aesthetic practice of the text in general. Daniel Worden argues that Ware's representations of the apartment building "contrasts the possibilities embedded within architectural space in the early twentieth century with the archival fantasies about the same space that provide comfort in late twentieth-century."[40] Worden describes the characters of *BS* as primarily melancholic, struggling to become interested in the world, mired in their own sticky attachments with, in addition to their technological devices as I noted in the image of the protagonist's husband lying in bed, the vacuous space of the building with which they have filled with "archival fantasies" about the past. In one particular elevation and cross-section architectural drawing of the apartment building, the narrative compresses and quantifies the building's ninety-eight year history into dozens of events occurring at specific locations, ranging

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[40] Daniel Worden, "On Modernism's Ruins: The Architecture of 'Building Stories'" *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking*, Ed. David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2010), 107-20, quotation on 108.

from mundane habits to harrowing memories: in a third-story bedroom, 68,418 orgasms, in another, 106,323 breakfasts and 6 suicide notes. By quantifying these events, the building simultaneously erases the individual subjectivity of the tenants and transports them outside of their historical specificity. Yet, the cumulative tally of these habits and memories suggests both that the tenants' experiences are existentially meaningless and personally profound. What does it matter that five suicide notes were penned in that same room to the tenant who authors the sixth one? Or, rather, does this suggest that misery and aloneness are themselves historical, attached to the space and time of the building itself? These archival fantasies are simultaneously historical record, totally imaginary, and potentially actualizing for the tenants and for the reader. The imaginary effect of the "archival fantasy," in other words, may produce real outcomes in the present. In this way, the building serves as the monument at which the characters' sticky attachments to the past become ensconced in the passing present, at times blocking entirely the very happiness they seek in the world. It would not be a stretch to consider the building as a metaphor for *BS* itself, the game board box filled with printed materials that readers treat as "archival fantasies," the comfort drawn from images of how storytelling and intimacy were somehow purer in a time past. However, this view under-sells the ways in which the building, like with its hook from the ceiling, also provides the characters with ways of escape or new ways of seeing, and, similarly, how Ware's experimentation with temporality (diegetic and actual time) and materiality through the comics medium provoke a similar, primarily affective experience for the reader.

Highlighting this reading is the fact that this elevation and cross-sectional drawing of the building appears in the children's "golden book," with the inviting image of a blank open book on the inside cover for the child to mark their ownership and write his or her name. As Leonard S. Marcus's history *Golden Legacy* reveals, the "Little Golden Books" were launched during WWII as a publishing and marketing experiment to get quality books in the hands of children at a price, twenty-

five cents, that "nearly everyone could afford."[41] Kathleen McDowell shows that this experiment comes after the habits and memories around print had already become a well-entrenched part of children's lives, as the "period from 1890 to 1930 saw the establishment of children's publishing, children's librarianship, and the dawn of the 'century of the child.'"[42] The opening page has the date in large type-face, "September 23rd, 2000," quite literally marking the end of that "century of the child" and indexing an anxiety over children's literacy in the age of digitization. In 2004, the National Endowment of the Arts published their study, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America,* outlining that the "number of literature-reading young adults dropped 20 percent between 1982 and 2002—the greatest recorded loss of readership in the country's history."[43] This distressing survey stands in stark contrast to the period of the dawning "golden books," with the dream extending endlessly into the future of affordable, quality books in the hand of every child, during which, as McDowell documents, reading books was as the chief hobby of both young girls and boys. This suggests that when we nostalgically look backward to a time when reading books and engaging with print was integral, little golden books are precisely what might be imaginatively conjured.

But, the question becomes, is this encounter with the material a nostalgic memory or an opportunity to consider the future? This ambiguity is never as clear as in the most cheaply bound unit of *BS*: an approximately 8" by 1" flipbook held together by a single staple. This relatively small unit spans the longest window of diegetic time, covering about the first eight years of the protagonist's daughter's life, all without a single word. The unit simultaneously spans no time at all, as the first and last pages show the protagonist to be simply reflecting on her life while tossing and turning in bed, left with only the company of her cat as the shadowy figure of her husband walks out

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[41] Leonard S. Marcus, *Golden Legacy: How Golden Books Won Children's Hearts, Changed Publishing Forever, and Became an American Icon Along the Way* (New York: Golden Books, 2007).

[42] Kathleen McDowell, "Toward a History of Children as Readers, 1890–1930," *Book History* 12.1 (2009): 240-265, quotation on 240.

[43] Hannah Withers and Lauren Ross, "Young People are Reading More Than You," *Timothy McSweeney's: Internet Tendency,* Feb. 2, 2011.

the open door of the bedroom. The wordless representation of motherhood that unfolds over the unit is perhaps the most emotionally powerful of the entire work. But one sequence stands out as particularly relevant for this conversation: the protagonist and her daughter sitting together in the living room. In a role reversal of the image I opened the chapter discussing, the mother recognizes herself working on a laptop while her daughter sits, immersed in what looks to be a prose novel. She looks up, with her characteristically weary eyes and blank expression, and then returns to her work. The narrative of progress, from the codex to the screen, is complicated by the generational reversal. The child's immersion in a book—after all, she does not look up distractedly—is juxtaposed with an open window and possibility for the future of the codex. This had become a strange truth of the state of reading fiction. Six short years after the National Endowment for the Arts published their panicked *Reading at Risk,* the enthusiasm of young people towards books boomed. And, why? A short answer might be that, in part, according to a survey by Scholastic of 9-11-year-olds (as we might estimate the young daughter fitting in), because this demographic found "the most important outcome of reading books for fun is to open up the imagination" (Withers and Ross). Surprisingly, the same young female reader that Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson once worried so intensely about strangely becomes the beacon of hope for the printed book in a way even the protagonist cannot because of her belief in the "wild strain of imagination."

This reading is bolstered by the fact that what appears to be one of the least aesthetically difficult units of the graphic narrative, with no complex diagrams or typographic mazes, is actually temporally layered, particularly as it returns to the private space of the bedroom, the space and time of intimacy. In the opening of the unit, the protagonist is alone with her cat in bed before succumbing to perhaps an involuntary memory of her pregnancy and labor in similarly color-shaded beds. From then on, the narrative appears straightforward, as the reader watches as the protagonist spend "quality time" with her daughter, and then becoming saddened as the daughter grows older

and begins school, leaving the protagonist alone again. However, as it appears the narrative neatly returns the reader to bedroom, the narrative jumps from the now-toddler climbing in her parent's bed scared through quick, albeit non-linear, succession between pregnancy, nursing, conception, and the parents snuggling with and without the toddler to child-aged daughter in bed, all before the protagonist awakens to her husband leaving, or not, her (already?) alone in bed. Does she regret the departure of her husband, or is this the start of a new beginning? Is she despairing? Or is she hopeful? This, it would seem, depends entirely on how the reader comprehends what they are seeing more than what the image itself offers. She awakens frowning, with one eye open, then both. When she sits up, the graphic line representing her mouth flattens, and then the image zooms out to the point where her expression is un-readable. Following this panel, the unit ends with a blank, borderless one. What she does or wants is for the reader only to imagine, not to comprehend. At once, she is constrained by her memories, and, at the same time, she is set free by them.

In conclusion, it is the way in which the material of the text, like the hook for the protagonist, comes to be animated by the reader's imagination that, recalling James Grantham Turner's observation about early reader responses to *Pamela*, this graphic narrative "operates on the [reader's] body as immediately as a hand." The reader touches the material book, animates the material and gives life to it. The danger of this affective force comes in how we comprehend it. One potential outcome of an encounter with *BS,* particularly depending on how the reader's moods orientate them to the objects in hand, is to ultimately conflate the status of print, "something to hold on to," and fictionality, "the wild strain of imagination." When print feels like a last stand against the "electronic incorporeality of existence," paper itself becomes a kind of "archival fantasy" in which readers invest feelings of optimism, of solidity, and of connectedness. Because many readers perceive the avenues of communication in the digital era to be constrained, the proximate feelings and moods that they bring to the different units of *BS* depend on the sensual variations of each

object and the archival fantasies they have invested in it. And yet *BS*'s eternal middle draws attention to its material body to expand the imagination of storytelling, not constrict it. *BS* is not a melancholic swan song to print, nor does *BS* disavow print. *BS* unsettles the image of the book as a purveyor of a private, pure intimacy, illustrating that this need not be the only signal we follow into the history of the book, via our habits and memories. Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the fact that *BS* is packaged in a large game board box, making it utterly unsuitable to interact with and animate in the bedroom. Instead, the packaging prompts the reader to take the text out of the private space and into a social one. *BS* becomes a shared, collective act of creativity. To put it cheekily, *BS* is meant for the living room, not the bedroom.

And, perhaps this is part of what makes graphic narratives such a unique form of storytelling in the present. Against the fluctuations of independent bookstores caused by the initial, then ebbing, success of big-box bookstores and subsequently on-line shopping (and reading), comic bookstores have seemingly preserved their role as a physical conduit for reading publics to meet and discuss texts, as well as collect and trade material texts and objects.[44] Although, it may be more accurate to suggest that works like Chris Ware's *BS* exemplify a re-alignment of graphic novels within more traditional book markets. Bart Beaty persuasively argues that the introduction of the bound collections of superhero comics and the single-authored graphic novels have enabled an "integration of comics into the cultural industries."[45] Whereas, up until the 1990s, independent and big-box bookstores avoided selling comics because of "their slim format, low cost, and monthly frequency," these more bookish formats were "a different story" (Beaty, 204). Yet, while a certain kind of market-integration has taken place, these relationships remain complex and muddy. First of all,

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[44] See the introduction for details about recent successes among independent bookstores.

[45] Bart Beaty,"The Recession and the American Comic Book Industry: From Inelastic Cultural Good to Economic Integration," *Popular Communication* 8.3 (2010), 203-207, quotation on 204. See also, Benjamin Woo, "The Android's Dungeon: Comic-Bookstores, Cultural Spaces, and the Social Practices of Audiences," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 2.2 (2011), 125-136.

comic bookstores range in their niches, with most selling primarily superhero comics and a smaller, often separate, set of shops curating more independent and literary graphic narratives. In other words, a consumer is more likely to find Chris Ware's *BS* in Barnes and Noble's "comics and graphic novels" section, than one would be to find this comic at the neighborhood comic bookstore, precisely because those stores rely on the frequency of regular monthly and bi-monthly visits from their customers purchasing low-cost, low-margin goods. In fact, one could make the case that *BS's* list price, at $60, and physical size makes it untenable for these kinds of neighborhood comic bookstores to stock and shelve at all. Nor would one expect either general consumers of literature, or the specific niche market of comics readers, to reliably choose to purchase the graphic narrative at this price when they could just as well purchase it from the on-line retailer Amazon, who sells the hefty, six-pound box of materials at around $30, all, of course, with free two-day shipping. Amazon can sell the book at nearly half the price in part because of the volume of their other sales. As my introduction explains, Amazon would rather build their brand capitalizing on the culturally constructed "feeling for books," like, for example, despair over the loss of print, even if that means they only break even, or even take a loss, on book sales.[46] In other words, as a cultural product, *BS* does not appear all that syncopated with the traditional book marketplace, but in fact relies on the recent digitization and technologization of the book marketplace. And yet, as a work of art, *BS* also seems best suited to force a confrontation between these complex and often conflicting relationships, and to trace out new ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling about fictionality and materiality in the present.

There is, no doubt, an intense connection between storytelling and materiality. Reading comics affectively offers one avenue to theorize that connection, to consider how the work functions before we project culturally-constructed emotions onto it. *BS* preserves affect in the

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[46] Daniel Gross, "Amazon Stock May Be Up, but the Company Still Doesn't Make Any Money," *The Daily Beast.* Oct. 25, 2013.

materials of its storytelling, the graphic lines, the colors, the printed pulp, and this intensity "unwraps" the packaging of the book that readers all too often rely on to navigate the "seeping edge" between language and intensity. *BS* experiments on the grammar of the visual language of comics, and its unique capacity to represent multiple dimensions of space and time simultaneously, to tell a story that turns into an ellipsis, a way to, in the words of Deleuze, "[traverse] both the livable and the lived" (*Essays Critical and Clinical,* 1).

CHAPTER 4: BLACK LOVE AND LIBERATION IN THE SHADOW OF DU BOIS: KIESE LAYMON'S
***LONG DIVISION* AS AFRO-FABULATION**

"What is the relation between the work of art and communication? There isn't one. The work of art

is not an instrument of communication…On the other hand, there is a fundamental affinity between

the work of art and the act of resistance."

-Gilles Deleuze, "What is the Creative Act?" 1987

"Fuck white folks…For real!"

-City Coldson, *Long Division,* 2013

For Citoyen ("City") Coldson, the precocious and jaunty fourteen-year-old Black protagonist

of Kiese Laymon's debut novel *Long Division,* the City Coldson and revolutionary-minded Shalaya

Crump he encounters in the pages of an embedded novel titled *Long Division* are just fictional

characters. While struggling to reckon with the ever-present racialized terror of the so-called "post-

racial" era of America's first Black President, City (hereafter C1) reads this mysterious volume and

becomes enchanted by the philosophical conversations, playful courtships, and fantastical time-

travelling adventures City (hereafter C2) and Shalaya have together in 1985. Prompted by his reading

experiences, C1 decides to author his own life narrative and titles it *Long Division,* which is then

found and read by C2. Kiese Laymon's *LD* presents the resonances between these narratives for the

real-life reader in a labyrinthine interpellation of the two books, toggling back and forth with

typographic cues. Yet, the historical form of the book actually appears, immediately, to be

anachronistic to the central conceit of the narrative: the future. In the opening of the volume

authored by C2, Shalaya urges C2 to help her change the future, specifically 2013, the very year that

C1 is reading the book. Shalaya's proposition is admittedly vague, but it initiates a process of

speculation that the entire novel then plays out: "Look, if we could take a spaceship to the future, and we ain't know if we'd ever come back, would you go with me?"[1]

In his recent book on science fiction, Steven Shaviro elucidates how science fiction allows for the particular exercise of speculation that Shalaya seeks:

> Science fiction…operates through *speculation* and *extrapolation,* and that takes place (conceptually, if not grammatically) in the future tense. It is a kind of thought experiment, a way of entertaining odd ideas, and of asking off-the-wall *what if?* questions. But instead of approaching its issues abstractly, as philosophy does, or breaking them down into empirically testable propositions, as physical science does, science fiction *embodies* these issues in characters and narratives.[2]

Shaviro's explanation highlights the relationship between the exercise of "speculation" and the unique capacity of storytelling to imagine the (im)possible. Specifically, as Shaviro puts it, speculative storytelling allows social conditions and ideologies to be "embodied" in characters and narrative, and it therefore offers opportunities to explore alternative futures as those narratives play out textually.[3] Asking C2 to imagine or speculate on how and by what routes they would or could "change the future," Shalaya opens up the text to all sorts of other questions about politics and liberation: how will they know what changes are positive changes? How will they define progress from what was, to what is, to what will be? On whose behalf will they make these decisions? Who confers authority on them to make these decisions?

Contrary to the quasi sci-fi, future-tense undercurrents of her question, Shalaya is already well aware of how to time-travel to the future, and it is hardly as high-tech as a spaceship; instead, in the middle of the backwoods, the two will have to huddle close together in a magical underground

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[1] Kiese Laymon, *Long Division: A Novel*, (Chicago: Bolden, 2013), 23.

[2] Steven Shaviro, *Discognition* (London: Repeater Books, 2015), 8.

[3] Sheree R. Thomas provides an alternate reason why "speculative fiction" is particularly crucial for African American fiction in the first volume of her edited series *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora.* For Thomas, "speculative" is a particularly important signifier for African American science fiction because white supremacy has rendered African Americans invisible such that their existence can and must only be "speculated," like the dark matter in the universe that "has not been directly observed but whose existence has been deduced by its gravitational effects" (Thomas 2). For Thomas, as with Shaviro, the characters and narratives themselves provoke and unsettle what we imagine as possible or thinkable in the future particularly because storytelling relies on an imaginary based in the physical and the real, but also that extends beyond those purviews and into the virtual and the possible.

portal in order to supernaturally re-emerge in 2013. However, "magic," as a "backwards" kind of alternative to science, provides an analogous vehicle for the characters either to speculate themselves on what is possible politically. Or, following Shaviro, as textual characters Shalaya and C2 "embody" stories that a reader, either C1 reading the embedded narrative or the reader, can ultimately make sense.

As the reader will come to find out, these two young teenagers quickly learn that one does not "change the future" by travelling to the future. Rather, they will need to travel backwards, locating the source of the racial habits and memories that prepared their misery in the historical present. Given this narrative structure, *LD* contributes to a small oeuvre of backwards-oriented time-travel narratives authored by African Americans: including John Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). In stark contrast to the glut of white-authored time-travelling narratives popularized by H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), African American storytellers share none of the white-centric fantasy and nostalgia for earlier times that has been a mainstay of genre fiction written and consumed over the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, as *Kindred's* protagonist Edana Franklin points out, speculating on the past may not be just politically disheartening but downright dangerous.[4] The future tense, at the same time, has offered African American artists a sometimes more politically hopeful narrative speculation; for example, "Afrofuturism," defined by poet and visual artist Krista Franklin as "a cultural movement that revolves around the intersection between the lives of people of color and technology, science, science fiction and speculative fiction," has become an increasingly popular organizing principle for

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[4] Dana, prompted by bouts of physical sickness, involuntarily transports from 1970s California to a plantation in pre-Civil War Maryland in order to shield from death the white man who ultimately, through repeated acts of rape, begets her ancestor. In one of her fits of sickness, her white husband holds her and is transported into the past with her, prompting this exchange: "We said nothing for a while, as he leaned back and seemed to let go of tensions of his own. Finally, he said, "There are so many really fascinating times we could have gone back to visit." I laughed without humor. "I can't think of any time I'd like to go back to. But of all of them, this must be one of the most dangerous—for me anyway." "Not while I'm with you." (77)

African American creators of literature, comics, hip-hop, and visual art.[5] And yet, while backwards-oriented stories can often be more physically dangerous to undergo, *LD* resists the notion that looking backwards is politically counter-productive. As the young revolutionary Shalaya looks off into the distant future of 2013, she witnesses that even the symbolic progress represented by the election of Barack Obama will not substantively change the daily lives of the so-called "backwards" Black residents of her rural town of Melahatchie, Mississippi.

Given this speculative opportunity, C2 tellingly shifts the conversation from politics to intimacy. Much like C1 will in 2013, C2 is convinced that his pursuit for intimacy with Shalaya is a form of magic with the power to "change the future" all on its own. When Shalaya approaches him about her plan to "change the future," C2 puts this proposal in the context of intimacy: "What I gotta do to make you love me?" (23). City re-formulates her question about time-travelling into one of love: "Girl…when we take that spaceship…umm, I think Michael Jackson and New Edition are gonna come together and sing a song at our wedding, but ain't nobody at the wedding gonna care because everyone at the wedding is gonna finally know" (23-24). Though City characterizes the future humorously in an effort to lay "GAME" on Shalaya, his co-mingling of love and the future is sincere. Shalaya views love as a digression from the task of liberation:

'Uh, finally know what?' She stopped and let go of my wrists. 'Finally know, you know, what that real love looks like, baby.' 'City! Why you gotta get all Vienna sausage school bus when you start trying to spit game?…Just stop. You stuck on talking about love but I'm talking about *the future*. Can we just talk about that?…Can't you just be yourself?' (24)

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[5] Krista Franklin, *Futures//Afrofuturism: An Interview with Krista Franklin* TL Andrews. Berlin: Berlin Art Link: The Insider's Guide to Contemporary Art and Culture, 21 June 2016. For more on this trend, see, Andre M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Rasheedah Phillips, ed, *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice* Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Afrofuturist Affair, 2015); Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013. For specific examples of fiction produced in this trend, see, Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall, eds. *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (College Park: Rosarium Publishing, 2013); Rose Fox and Daniel Jose Older, eds. *Long Hidden: Speculative Fictions from the Margins of History* (Framingham: Crossed Genres, 2014); Walidah Imarisha and adrienne m brown*, eds. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland: AK Press, 2015).

In Shalaya's view, C2's emphasis on love is more than frivolous, it is evidence that he is not "himself." The fictionality of (either) City is a recurring motif throughout the novel, and is particularly put into flux in contrast to the "realness" of his feelings for Shalaya. His very emotions contribute in making him a fiction. Their argument over love or liberation turns into one over authenticity. City excoriates Shalaya accordingly, "I am being myself…You talk all that mess about me, but you the one who didn't always talk about the future like you do now…No offense, girl, but you talk about the future way more than I talk about love" (24). Shalaya responds, "But I'm not just talking…That's the difference. I'm asking about what you'd do with me in the future, like in 2013. For real!" (24). The tension between "just talking" and what they would or could do to alter the future ("For real!") brings attention the interdependency of both politics and intimacy, liberation and love, on the "magical" capacity of language to either alternatively or simultaneously affect and signify. Neither City's proposal of intimacy ("I talk about love") nor Shalaya's proposal of liberation ("I'm not just talking") emerge in the absence of the language. Language itself, what qualifies as real or fictional language, is precisely what mediates their debate. Thought of in this way, their connection to language is what calls into question the "realness" of either of their desires, for love or liberation. The argument culminates in a kind of political treaty between these two forces, a verbal agreement that C2 will take seriously and repeat through his narrative. Shalaya agrees that once the political struggle is over, then they can be in love: "Look, City…I could love you the way you want me to, really. I could if you found a way to help me change the future in, I don't know dot-dot-dot a special way" (25).

The irony, here, is that the claims each make about "realness," the very entanglement of love and liberation, is taking place in the fictional embedded narrative *Long Division* read by C1 in the "present." Or, is this *Long Division* the "real" one, and C1 just the fictional author-protagonist of the "real" book *Long Division* that C2 later finds and reads during his time-travel escapades? In this

second (or first) edition of *Long Division*, C1 struggles with the aftermath of his blowout at the regional "Can You Use that Word in a Sentence" contest, an alteration on the "geographically-biased" Scripps Spelling Bee in which students are rewarded for "dynamic" sentences that Signify on the word rather than the content of the words themselves. When asked to use the word "niggardly" in a sentence, City explodes in a racial tirade on stage that subsequently goes viral on YouTube. Urged to pursue a reality television career, his celebrity simultaneously validates his tirade as a representation of Black anger writ large and leads white characters in the text to feel their racial prejudices are justified, to the point that a group of older white boys feel empowered to mercilessly and brutally assault City, demonstrating maybe not so much has changed in this "future" after all. Thrust into the position of "representative," at least his ninth grade class if not of an entire people, City's performance puts him in the position to think himself about how to "change the future" and he looks to his copy of *Long Division* for guidance and instruction.

Significantly, the structural integrity of the novel ultimately hinges on C2's digression from liberation to intimacy. As the narrative unfolds, the antagonism between these two commitments comes to a head in the literal figuration of love and futurity: a child. Moreover, it is precisely the (in)existence of a future child that challenges the ability to neatly confine the stories of C1 and C2 to their respective editions of *Long Division*. The stories of C1 and C2 converge in the person of Baize Shepherd, a teenage girl from a neighboring town of Melahatchie who disappears in 2013 and emerges in the pages of C2's time travel narrative. As is ultimately revealed, she is the future daughter of Shalaya and C2. However, in the climax of the narrative, Shalaya upends her question to C2 about whether or not he would go with her on a spaceship into the future. Quite the opposite, she decides to stay in 1964 to dedicate her life to changing the future "dot-dot-dot in a special way" with another boy, "Jewish Evan Altshuler," consciously erasing her daughter Baize from existence in 2013. As their first conversation anticipates, Shalaya discovers that, because of the inescapability of

racialized terror and white supremacy across time and space, choosing between a prospective, or even speculative, future or the future of a child she does not know is really not to have a choice at all. Her deeply ambivalent decision to stay in 1964 leaves C2, and C1 as the reader, to mourn the literally inexplicable disappearance of yet another young black person in the "real" world. In order to remedy this failure of love, *LD* concludes with C2 planning to travel back in time perhaps ad infinitum to secure a future where their child can live again, or where love and liberation can move forward in tandem, messily and unpredictably.

The movement between backwards/backwardness with "*the future"*/progress manifests in the magical editions of *LD* and magical undergrounds that transport these young Black revolutionaries in time. Yet, the payoff of these time-travelling portals will ultimately be unclear. The printed book, in particular, becomes as much a magical object for time-travel and potential revolution as it appears to be an instrument of fraudulence. The history of print as a hegemonic tool of white supremacy inflicts its own literal "two-ness" on City, making the act of looking to the future an necessarily an exercise of simultaneously staring backwards. As C2 puts it, *LD* is the "saddest story in the history of Mississippi. And it's really hard to have the saddest story in the history of a state like Mississippi, where there are even more sad stories than there are hungry mosquitoes and sticker bushes. It really is" (22). C2 puts his time-travelling story squarely in the context of the "history of Mississippi," a historical of racial terror, sexual violence, and lynching. The added emphasis that this story "really is" the "saddest story in the history of Mississippi" suggests that "realness" is more than untangling fact and fiction. "Realness" is both historical and present, both external and affective. "Realness" is a matter of folding in Black love and liberation in the past, present, and future in order to expose the fictionality that undergirds progress narratives of both love and liberation, including, as they are, embedded in affective orientations to the material book.

In this chapter, I will argue that, as each City tells their story, attempting to represent themselves to the other with an explicit political purpose, each character "becomes-with" the author of the other story and applies the story to what they imagine as possible in theirs. In this way, *LD* experiments with metafictional literary devices and readerly orientations to print in order to "disclose the powers of the false to create new possibilities."[6] Put differently, story invention becomes the primary vehicle of not just understanding the historical present, but of changing it. Specifically, the fictionality of *LD* exposes the related falsehoods of "double-consciousness" and racial progress as such. Recalling the previous chapter's analysis of Deleuzian fabulation, I argue that the multiplicity of textual productions (C1's authored text that C2 co-creates as a reader, C2's authored text that C1 co-creates as a reader, and the collated text that the real-life reader co-creates) ultimately produce a kind of "Afrofabulation" for the contemporary Black liberation movement. Gilles Deleuze has another word for these "fabulists," a word that he shares with W.E.B. Du Bois, a frequent referential presence in *LD*: "seer." These "seers" are utterly untimely. Their connections with history enable "visions splendid" of a collective future. People are drawn to their authenticity, but their power comes from their fictionality, or mastery of the fictional. Exploring the space and friction between these two thinker's images of the "seer," I argue that the multiple material and metafictional variations of *LD* allow City to become a "teller of tales" who invents a path forward by exposing the falsity of progress and embracing the backward: historically, geographically, culturally, and intimately.

A later argument between C2 and Shalaya sets up the theoretical framework for what ultimately are two diverging views of authenticity, or "realness," and its political efficacy in "changing the future." Again attempting to court Shalaya, City engages her in a conversation about the future, but is criticized for taking too long: "City, speed that up. Why you gotta be so long

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[6] Tavia Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 70-80, quotation on 70.

division? For real, you don't have to tell me all the background. The story doesn't have to go on and on and on" (56). The two proceed to argue, City suggests, "But my favorite part of long division was the work…I hate the answer. I do." Shalaya agrees, "I hate the answer because I don't believe in mastering the smaller steps…They never teach you to like, you know, linger in the smaller steps…They just tell you that you gotta master the small steps if you wanna get to the big answer…But I wish we could really pause at each step in long division and talk about it." Shirking the shaded difference between mastery and lingering at each step, City says, "Okay, well, I wanna linger, too," before launching into another story of flattery and getting rejected. However, at the heart of this disagreement is really a way of defining progress. For both Shalaya and City, the pursuit of the "big answer" can sometimes leave behind the valuable lessons of the smaller steps that lead successfully, or not, to that answer. For City, however, the analogy is all too clear: Shalaya and he ought to linger, together, on the stories of their courtship, working out those lessons and cementing their future intimacies together. For Shalaya, these steps remain strategic and political. Even without mastering what that "dot-dot-dot" future will be, they need to urgently discuss the planning and relentless pursuit of that future.

Shalaya's competing definition of "long division" demonstrates a kind of faith she has in the future, if the two exercise a struggle. She believes that, with the right training and planning, they can expedite political and racial progress even if the final answer is not exactly right. In this way, one could read her as aiming to become, or even aid City in becoming, what W.E.B. Du Bois called a "seer." For Du Bois, a "seer" was the quintessence of charismatic black leadership, a person whose vision and vibrancy cause others to "instinctively…[bow] before [them] as one bows before the prophets of the world."[7] Marking a successful visionary was a seer's recognition that, while they must connect with the "souls of black folk" (as in reckoning with the shared history and legacy of

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[7] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* Ed. Robert Gooding-Williams and David Blight, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 164.

slavery), Du Bois echoes that "the age…demanded new ideas" (*Souls,* 161). In other words, seers

exhibit an ability to simultaneously merge with the collective by tapping into racial affects and habits

grounded in a shared history and subsequently imagine a place and space for that collective to move

forward towards a shared future or striving.

Du Bois describes this collectivity, the "souls of black folk," through his concept of the

"veil," or the moment of recognition, with "certain suddenness," that one is "shut out from their

world by a vast veil." Du Bois synthesizes this concept from an an allegorical-autobiographical

childhood story of rejection, with interesting correlations to what City experiences with Shalaya:

> It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England…In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, --refused it peremptorily with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others. (*Souls,* 7)

Du Bois's subsequent conceptualization of what he called "double-consciousness" provided

the primary articulation of what it felt like to be Black in America for both scholars and citizens up

to and including the present—which is why the almost-verbatim references in *LD* I will discuss

shortly are hardly out of the norm.[8] Du Bois's well-known concept of "double-consciousness," or

the false self-consciousness that America inflicts on African Americans: "It is a peculiar sensation,

this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of

measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (*Souls,* 7).

Du Bois adopts Wordsworth's poetic phrase "Vision Splendid" to describe a seer's ability to touch

or retain some of the glow of childhood that over time, as the "shades of the prison house" close on

him, becomes warped by the constant repetition of racism in daily life: double-consciousness (*Souls,*

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[8] For more on his influence on literary history, see Herbert Aptheker, *The Literary Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois* (White Plains, NY: Kraus International, 1989).

148).[9] As both Robert Gooding-Williams and Jonathan Flatley emphasize, Du Bois describes double-consciousness in primarily affective terms: as a "peculiar sensation."[10] I am persuaded by Jonathan Flately's description of the veil and double-consciousness as what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling," which Williams defines as,

> [W]e are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable). . . . We are talking about characteristic elements of impulses or restraint and tone; specifically 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. We are then defining these elements as a structure: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.[11]

In other words, considering double-consciousness as the unifying or organizing affective structure of African-Americans, would be to say, as Flatley argues, loss, and specifically the loss of a coherent notion of the "self," binds the "souls of black folk." Yet, while this affective orientation served for Du Bois as the principle way white supremacy constrained the Black imaginary, muddying the "vision splendid," it also offers a method of collectivity holding within it a path forward.

Gooding-Williams offers a strong reading of Du Bois's work that I would like to consider more deeply here, arguing that Du Bois "holds that leadership is authoritative, or legitimate, if, and only if, it avows and embodies the collectively shared spirit, or ethos, that unites all African Americans" (Gooding-Williams 147). In other words, the "realness" that City strives for throughout the novel, and that is constantly under threat from Shalaya as well as LaVander Peeler, is also that which defines his potentiality as a legitimate vehicle for a better future. In this way, it is particularly noteworthy for my purposes to consider the ways in which this understanding of race is retroactively comprehended by Du Bois as a sensation felt in pursuit of intimacy. Just as City seeks validation for

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[9] For an analysis of Wordsworth's influence on this phrase, see Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 71-73.

[10] See Robert Gooding-Williams, 79; Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 119-123.

[11] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

his "realness" from Shalaya, the acceptance or denial of the visiting card acquires its depth of meaning from the implications of a heterosexual courtship. In other words, in his writing of the event, Du Bois confers on the memory of his six-year-old self a significance that he might only understand later as possibly informed by the intersecting forces of gender and sexuality. Shawn Michelle Smith compellingly argues that the risk posed to Du Bois's masculinity adds demonstrably to the trauma he endures:

> The assumed cultural privilege of the masculine gaze is trumped by race in this scene, as whiteness bestows the prerogative of looking (and refusing to look) on the white girl. Indeed, the trauma of racialization, for Du Bois, is marked by a disavowal of his masculine claim to the gaze. Du Bois thus poses the process of racial recognition as a visual dynamic that is not only racialized, but also gendered, that figures 'race' through a gendered gaze.[12]

Du Bois's pursuit to correct the conditions that reproduce the "peculiar sensation" of double consciousness for every African American living in a racist culture contains within it a pursuit to correct the conditions of a man being denied recognition from a woman. In this way, Du Bois's conceptualization of racism, and the politics needed to combat racism, is intertwined with (failed) intimacies and the affective scars those events leave.

Moreover, the role of print in this scene to mediate intimacy is key. Du Bois recalls that "something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards," the ephemerae that the young girl will then reject. The practice of exchanging visiting cards, as contemporaneous texts like Mrs. Longstreet's *Good Form: Cards, Their Significance, and Proper Uses* outline, was integral in mediating (and disciplining) proper modes of intimacy. As Robert Gooding-Williams points out, the "practice of exchanging visiting cards was a normative enterprise governed by distinctions of good and bad form, between proper and improper uses" (75). Consider three of Mrs. Longstreet's guidelines: "A man cannot leave his card upon a lady even after a pleasant acquaintance with her at

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[12] Shawn Michelle Smith, "Second-Sight: Du Bois and the Black Masculine Gaze." *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W.E.B. Du Bois.* Ed. Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 350-377, quotation on 351.

parties and elsewhere, unless she has intimated that he may," "when a man calls upon a woman who is a visitor in a family that is unknown to him, he must ask to see both hostess and guest, and send in a card for each," and, "An unmistakably older woman, or one who is professionally occupied with literary or artistic work, or one who is recognized as an active philanthropist, may send her card to a younger or less occupied woman, if, having been introduced to her, she wishes to see her again."[13] Mrs. Longstreet's guidelines make clear that both gender, as a man's proper claim on a woman, and heteronormativity, as when Mrs. Longstreet equivocates on the potential queerer uses of the visiting cards between women, structure and determine acceptable modes of intimacy. When Du Bois remarks that "something put it into the boy's and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards," this undefined "something" is actually an unseen history of print culture which imbues material objects with the affective capacity to mediate and discipline intimacy.

Du Bois's story demonstrates the interactive, dynamic relationship between orientations to the material object of the book—orientations that are very much developed in the "rollicking days" of childhood—and the capacity of language and storytelling to facilitate, define, police, or condemn intimacy. The material objects that order, define, and even make public an acknowledged intimacy are fundamental in exacerbating the wound suffered by the young Du Bois when the young girl does not reciprocate his gesture. The wounding that takes place in this story can be meaningfully linked to the singular opportunity that literature offered Du Bois to exist, if only temporarily, "above the veil" or transcending double-consciousness: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls… and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension" (*Souls,* 76). The reciprocal recognition that Du Bois notes in this passage is an affectively powerful fiction that previous chapters have attempted to disentangle.

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[13] Mrs. Longstreet, *Good Form: Cards, Their Significance, and Proper Uses* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1889), 18, 31, 33, quoted in Gooding-Williams, 75.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the same unseen "something" that "put it into [their] heads" will contribute in Du Bois's privileging of the "good and bad form, proper and improper uses" both print and bodies in the adherence of white middle-class norms to achieve the ideal of white-black reciprocity. Du Bois argues that a leader who can overcome the falsity of double-consciousness is equipped to improve what he called the "problem of the twentieth century…the problem of the color line" (*Souls,* 1). Jonathan Flatley observes, "by drawing attention to the 'color line' (rather than, say, 'race' or 'racism' or 'white people'), Du Bois locates the problem at the moment of division, that which is between the 'colors,' signaling that the meaning of black being is relational" (114). Du Bois expresses this idea directly in the following paragraph when he ambivalently describes the "strife" of double-consciousness:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed or spit upon by his fellows. (*Souls,* 9)

Du Bois masters this in-between space, arguing that both worlds have tangible and intangible gifts to offer the other world. On the one hand, this relationality helps to show that the condition for this split self is the product of white supremacy. On the other hand, the ambivalence about America's offer to "teach the world and Africa" also lends itself to the production or re-production of certain aspersions about certain behaviors, or even "perversions," that might be better fixed. As Gooding-Williams reads Du Bois, part of his solution to the "problem of the color line" was to exercise a form of Black leadership that would "combat racial prejudice and cultural backwardness and thus to bring about the incorporation of the otherwise excluded Negro masses into the group life of society" (Gooding-Williams 71). But, what does this mean to combat the "cultural backwardness" of the Negro masses, especially in relation to the potentiality of the collective? Recalling that Raymond

Williams describes a structure of feeling, like double-consciousness, as "a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension," one can here see the space between the interlocking of the souls of black folk, and their tension.

"Backwardness," for Du Bois, essentially entailed two related defects of the Negro masses: "his small knowledge of the art of organized social life" and "the grosser forms of sexual immorality…and crime."[14] In other words, while Du Bois aimed his critique at the political and economic barricades instantiated by white supremacy, he also maintained that the "cultural backwardness" of the "Negro masses" reinforces prejudices held by "the other world," and therefore requires correction. Moreover, these corrections manifest simultaneously as a need for increased literary exposure and heteronormative discipline. The way in which Du Bois folds back in, from his failed courtship as a child, the role of literature as a political force suggests that a "seer" can rise above sexuality, from their "bodily sensations," and thus become a disimpassioned, rational leader of the movement. But, given this characterization, we can begin to note the paradoxical set-up of the novel. Du Bois has set-up a clear masculinized role for the "seer;" after all, the "history of the American Negro…is the longing to attain self-conscious manhood." The stigmatization of being beholden to one's bodily sensations was a key rhetorical tactic to rejecting a woman's political access. Yet, in the novel, "bodily sensations" drive City's actions and perceived wounded ego, echoing the young Du Bois, far more than they do Shalaya, who meanwhile is rationally constructing a plot to liberation. And, as I will suggest below, Shalaya's (lack of) decisions at the end of their embedded narrative bear the weight of this gendered imbalance.

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[14] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Study of Negro Problems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (1898): 1-23, quotation on 8. Although this is not a pronounced feature of Du Bois's argument, I would argue that it has particular relevance in the contemporary Black liberation movement #BlackLivesMatter, which I will discuss shortly. What separates this movement from earlier liberation movements is that it has put at the forefront what they call a "queer affirming" agenda. See https://www.blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles

Therefore, it is as an intermediary between the "seer" and "the other world" that one can trace the important political implications of Du Bois's notion of "authority." Under this guise of disembodied rationality, a Du Boisian "seer" has a capacity to represent. However, as Gayatri Spivak points out, the meaning of represent is really dual and oppositional: "The complicity of *vertreten* [to speak for] and *darstellen* [to depict], their identity-in-difference as the place of practice…can only be appreciated if they are not conflated by a sleight of hand."[15] A Du Boisian seer, in other words, effectively operates in this space "between" the colors precisely because, with his connection to the "souls of black folk," he can effectively "depict" them in artistic terms, as Du Bois effectively does in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Yet, with an adherence to white middle-class norms, a seer might also be well-positioned to "speak for" the people, as in the layered address to a white audience that the constructed authorial voice of *Souls* also calls into being.[16] Tavia Nyong'o argues that, by viewing this duality as coherent, power becomes "naturalized as a mode of political authority" (Nyong'o 72). In other words, a seer's unique capacity as mediator and depicter of collective visions can all too easily become a pathway to justify the subjugation of visions and peoples unrecognized as valid or forward-thinking. The coupling of aesthetics and political authority, as well as the conflation of these terms of representation is constitutive of Du Bois's project of combating racism, specifically as a way to have talented black leaders exhibit the best qualities of black folk, and therefore represent them, to "the other world."

City's multiple textual productions interest me particularly because of the ways in which they operate as a means to exclude the "other world" entirely from its representational project. Within the metafictional construct of the novel, the composite City is both the sole author and sole reader

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[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 260.

[16] One could argue, especially in the context of the history of the book that this chapter analyzes, that the very success of the *Souls of Black Folk* conferred onto Du Bois this power to "speak for" his people to the "other world." In other words, this itself suggests the value of the individual author, the name on the book's spine, to cohere and depict a singular, collective vision to both the masses and to the other world. There is a different opportunity in having a book with no name on the cover, as the textual editions of *Long Division* demonstrate.

of *LD*. Strangely, City, with his deeper interest in crafting and lingering on stories, resembles more closely Gilles Deleuze's solitudinous figuration of a "seer." Deleuze links the term "seer" to the fundamental function of the artist or novelist: "Creative fabulation has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated, or with a fantasy. In fact, the artist, including the novelist, goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer [voyant], a becomer [devenant]."[17] What sets the seer apart, for Deleuze, is his or her ability to "wrest" visions from the real and expose them to the collective. Ronald Bogue helpfully summarizes this relationship,

> In acting as a seer and becomer, the artist fashions an "effective presence," a genuine "being of sensation" that has the solidity and materiality of a monument. In rendering sensation "monumental," the artist fills the work with a non-personal life, that of the 'nonhuman landscapes of nature' and the 'nonhuman becomings' of humans.[18]

This notion that fabulation is not fantasy is significant for Deleuze, as it is for Du Bois. Deleuze emphasizes here and elsewhere that, although these visions are "beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived," they "are not fantasies but veritable Ideas."[19] The power of fabulation originates in real, material conditions, and objects. And yet, politically speaking, as Deleuze suggests, once these visions are "wrested from the real," they have a life of their own and are therefore inherently unpredictable. Recalling Shalaya's phrase that they might change the future in "dot-dot-dot a special way," City will pick up and amplify the figuration of the ellipsis for this reason. The ellipsis suggests an elongated middle, a lingering and stuttering of the story that denies the assertions of validity or finality of an "answer" to the long division.

Strikingly, both Du Bois and Deleuze point to a reader's bodily responses to the "effective presence" and genuine "being of sensation" that seers offer: an "instinctive" bodily response to bow, to follow, and to become-with the seer. For both Du Bois and Deleuze, the aesthetic is a

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[17] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171.
[18] Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 17.
[19] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

fundamental mediator for this becoming-with the collective, as in the example of the "souls of black folk." As Aidan Tynan explains, a Deleuzian seer "can become a relay for the populous body which…does not think or formalize for itself but nevertheless constitutes the forces of creativity animating the author's work."[20] However, Deleuze diverges slightly but crucially from Du Bois's concept of a seer accessing a historically-grounded collective spirit or folk to formulate and sanction "new ideas." Deleuze writes that seers "invoke a people, and find they 'lack a people.'"[21] The implications of this are two-fold: first, their situatedness in time is in flux, and, second, their ability to "represent" a people to an "other world" is not a given or fundamental component of their function.

Concerning a seer's position in time, Aidan Tynan explains Deleuze's argument, "art is not made for any actually existing or already constituted people, but for a people to come who are not yet recognizable as a group. Great artists are, in this sense, radically untimely, like a watch that ticks too fast" (Tynan 154). In *LD,* this "radical untimeliness" is all too clear. Shalaya and C2 use a magical underground portal to move through time and space in order to find one that can facilitate both their love and liberation. C1 consults his own magical portal, the textual production of *Long Division,* and through this reading experience, through the character who shares his name, the emergence of Baize Shepherd in the book, the multiple temporal narrative shifts, finds himself out of joint with time as well. C1 and C2 are divided and pulled across past(s), present(s), and future(s). The fictionality of some of these timelines and the historical validity of others facilitate City's speculative attempts to invoke a people that might love and embrace him. But, in this untimeliness, the "people to come" is, in essence, always a virtual people, or a potential people. Aidan Tynan explains, "the author renders the virtual processes of group formation tangible by diagramming them, and allows us in this way to conceive of new possibilities for collective life. The relation, then,

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[20] Aidan Tynan, *Deleuze's Literary Clinic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 156.
[21] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, Trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 174.

is one between the author as an actual individual and the people to come as a virtual community" (155). "Diagramming" these virtual processes seems to be precisely what Shaviro articulated to be the opportunity of speculative fiction. By speculating on these multiple pasts, presents, and futures, and writing and reading those self-crafted narratives, the "new possibilities for collective life" are rendered available. In addition, the authenticity and fictionality of City as a character, a central trope throughout the novel, requires an always un-realness of his "people to come," exemplified most directly in the novel by the emblematic "person to come," his daughter Baize, always both fictional and real, possible and impossible.

The virtual nature of this "people to come" City invents differentiates his goals of representation, aesthetic and political, from Du Bois. Opposed to the view of a single leader and an obedient masses, Deleuze's concept of fabulation seeks to collapse the two: "The author can be marginalized or separate from his more or less illiterate community as much as you like; this condition puts him all the more in a position to express potential forces and, in his very solitude, to be a true collective agent."[22] In other words, the act of fabulation is not an opportunity to represent the collective to the outside world, but instead for the seer to exclusively become-with the people and the people to become-with the seer.

Tavia Nyong'o's concept of "Afro-fabulation" offers a way of thinking about aesthetic production that builds on this idea. Noting that Deleuze developed the idea of "fabulation" through readings of works by African Americans, like Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*, Nyong'o argues that the experiences and talents of African American artists may equip them with a unique capacity to "fabulate." Nyong'o explains that the chief benefit in considering "Afro-fabulation" is that it may best un-settle Spivak's two conflated views of representation ("to speak for" and "to depict"):

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[22] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 213.

> However much [these two meanings of representation] can and do align, it is their tendency to pull out of sync with each other, for their alignment to be less than seamless, that enables possibilities. This misalignment of political and artistic representation is exploited by Afro-fabulation, which is thus not properly speaking solely an aesthetic strategy, or a political one, but a tactic for taking up the time and space between them. This space, however, will be foreclosed if we understand political representation in bourgeois democratic terms. It is not only the terms of artistic or cultural representation in other words, but equally political representation that must be interrogated. (Nyong'o 72)

To me, this concept offers a productive critique of Du Bois's thinking for the present social and political conditions facing African Americans. By producing stories whose very fictionality pulls these notions of representation out of sync, "Afro-fabulation" shifts the ways we might think of the aesthetic encounter as an interrogation of representation rather than an act of representation. In what follows, I will systematically move from City's fundamental striving for "realness" against "double-consciousness," the role of intimacy in mediating or denying this authenticity altogether ("sexual immorality…and crimes"), and ultimately the textual productions (i.e. the printed books) that deploy the "powers of the false" to create new possibilities for political storytelling, including ones that move beyond (the falsity of) the printed book as itself an "real" or neutral medium.

The young and brash C1 exhibits a hyper-sensitivity to the lack of authenticity precipitated by double-consciousness throughout the text. In just one example of this,[23] C1 is scolded by another adult, "Coach," when he attempts to buy a watermelon for his grandma while in the company of a young white girl, My-My: "Wide Load, you worse than them ignorant-ass rappers grabbing hard on them dicks, selling that poison…You don't eat no watermelon in front of white folks" (91). City objects to this, telling Coach, "I hear what you saying back there, but can I give you some advice? Fuck white folks…For real! Their eyes ain't gotta be everywhere you are. Y'all are too old to care about them so much. They can only do as much harm as you let them, and all y'all oldheads are

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[23] In another important moment, City watches his grandmother, perhaps the most well-respected, powerful and beautiful character in his eyes, intentionally follow suit of a white woman at the mall who mispronounces Jheri curl as Gary curl: "I couldn't believe Grandma was talking like that in front of that lady. Her voice, her body, everything shrunk. It was like she wasn't even Grandma anymore. The rumor was that Grandma actually brought the Jheri (not 'Gary') curl to Melahatchie from Milwaukee back in the early '80s. Now she was acting like she couldn't even pronounce it right, all because she was talking in front of a weird-looking white woman who couldn't even pronounce 'so' and 'do.'" (81)

letting them do way too much" (93). City's mantra of "Fuck white folks" purportedly shields him from the conditioning that has apparently deeply affected those older figures in his life. Growing up in 2013, under the symbolic progress of the first Black president (a fact C2 and Shalaya will literally find unbelievable when the travel to 2013), in a primarily black Mississippi community, C1 seems to shirk the "peculiar sensation" Du Bois experiences when he "was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England." His bravado resembles more closely what fellow-Southerner Zora Neale Hurston describes in her essay "How it Feels to be Colored Me," a title which directly recalls Du Bois's "peculiar sensation" of being Black in America. A total inversion of Du Bois's "rollicking boyhood," Hurston contrasts, from "the gallery seat" of her front porch, the vibrancy and lushness her all-Black Floridian community and the bland white folks that would pass through the town. She learns of her difference not through rejection, but in rejecting a white man with his own defect. Watching this man, "drumming the table with his fingertips," fail to connect with the music while she "[dances] wildly inside [herself],"[24] Hurston recognizes that white folks, lacking the experiences that give the music its spirit, are simply less interesting. Identifying herself among the "Negro masses," Hurston articulates a divergent account about the "peculiar sensation" of "how it feels to be colored me": "I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong. Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me" (Hurston, 216). Put differently, City, like Hurston before him, views white people as, by and large, mediocre. If they do not love him, the defect is theirs and he is not going to sacrifice his authenticity to satiate their fundamentally deficient norms.

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[24] Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me." *The World Tomorrow* May 1928: 215-216. Quotation on 215.

City's disappointment in his interactions with the adults who have seemed to succumb to this shameful inauthenticity is put into flux when Coach outlines the physical protection "double-consciousness" offers by evoking the real-life murder of Trayvon Martin:

> It's like this Wide Load. I'mo say it to you one more time. White man see you acting a nigga, he liable to think we all still niggas. Niggas are *less than* white folks in they eyes. Look what they did to that young brother, Trayvon. If they think you less than human, you don't deserve no respect. Period. You are a smart young man. I know you understand. (92)

On February 26, 2012, the unarmed teenager, on his way home from 7-Eleven with a bag of Skittles for his younger brother and a can of iced tea for himself, was accosted by "neighborhood watch volunteer" George Zimmerman, who then shot and killed Martin during a hotly-debated encounter (Zimmerman's self-defense plea relied on his bloody nose and a laceration to the back of his head). In a 911 recording, Zimmerman asserted that the young African American was suspicious, the basis of which was essentially his choice to wear a hoodie and the color of his skin.[25] The 911 operator proceeded to instruct Zimmerman not to approach or confront Martin. A little over one year later, in July 2013, Zimmerman was found not guilty on the charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter under the auspices of Florida's controversial "Stand Your Ground" law, which waives any requirement of retreating before using force when the individual feels doing so will "prevent death or great bodily harm." Of course, neither the conditions nor the politics of Martin's murder are entirely new. Indeed, as Mychal Denzel Smith writes, the legal efficacy of George Zimmerman's defense is "a story as old as America itself. It's a story about black men's inclination toward violence, our reliance on animal instincts, our general unfitness for civilized society, our preference for death

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[25] George Zimmerman's racial profiling was reported widely from his 911 call. "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about…He looks black…A dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie, and either jeans or sweatpants and white tennis shoes…He's just staring…looking at all the houses…He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male. Something's wrong with him. Yup, he's coming to check me out, he's got something in his hands, I don't know what his deal is…These assholes, they always get away." For contemporaneous analysis and background on this event, see Lizette Alvarez, "Zimmerman is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing," *New York Times,* July 13, 2013*;* Charles Blow, "The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin," *New York Times,* March 16, 2012; Sari Horowitz, "George Zimmerman is Charged with 2nd-Degree Murder in Trayvon Martin Shooting," *Washington Post,* April 11, 2012.

and destruction."[26] For City, Trayvon Martin is a poignant reminder that simply "being yourself," or having the attitude "fuck white folks," does not necessarily shield him from the violence that white supremacy indiscriminately inflicts on black bodies. Despite living in 2013, in a so-called "post-racial" America, City's own (violent) encounters with white people quickly undercut any impression that he operates outside of or is safe from a system of white supremacy and racial violence.

Martin's murder has had the subsidiary effect of inspiring young Black women and men to start a new liberation movement, namely the #BlackLivesMatter movement.[27] In the short years since the harrowing and captivating event of Trayvon Martin's murder, years each punctuated by black victim after victim of police violence caught on cell phone and dash cameras and shared widely on social media, a robust collection of aesthetic and critical work has emerged that collectively positions Martin's murder as the exigency for their intellectual and political pursuits.[28] The facts of Martin's story, as well as the rhetoric of his image, facilitated the production of cultural texts, essays, and memoirs that substitute a figuration of Martin with an array of others' personal experiences with white supremacy and violence, including Kiese Laymon's popular essay "How to

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[26] Mychal Denzel Smith, *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education*. New York: Nation Books, 2016), 2.

[27] The murder was ultimately brought to the public's attention in a bottom-up campaign, local activists brought the case to the attention of then-lesser-known journalists like *The Atlantic*'s Ta-Nahesi Coates and *The New York Times's* Charles M. Blow who then persisted in covering the case until it became a mainstream media spectacle. From this point to the acquittal, rallies and protests emerged spontaneously across the United States, including a day in which people wore a hoodie in public spaces, including work or school. This event initiated much of the network-construction that three young women Aliza Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, along with Deray McKesson and others would mobilize in staging protests for what would become known as the #BlackLivesMatter movement crucial in opposing, among numerous others, the deaths of Michael Brown (August 9, 2014, Ferguson, MO), Eric Garner (July 17, 2014, New York, NY), Tamir Rice (November 23, 2014, Cleveland, OH), and Freddie Gray (April 19, 2015, Baltimore, MD).

[28] For critical works across several disciplines, like sociology, political science, law, and African American studies, see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016); Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria Books, 2016); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Betina Cutaia Wilkinson, *Partners or Rivals?: Power and Latino, Black, and White Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); For critical-aesthetic works like political memoirs, see Ta-Nahesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); Mychal Denzel Smith, *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education* (New York: Nation Books, 2016)

Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: A Remembrance."[29] Several critically-acclaimed novels

by African American (male) novelists in this period have also included politically-active, whether by

choice or necessity, teen-aged African American males.[30] This concurrence makes a great deal of

intuitive sense; as Du Bois outlined over a century earlier, it is in the "early days of rollicking

boyhood" that the conditions of racism and white supremacy become a form of behavioral and

affective conditioning that limit how African Americans move through time and space.

A number of these critical and aesthetic works developed during or for the politics of a post-

Trayvon Martin movement have recognized, in occupying the perspective of young teenage African

American males like City Coldson, that liberation is also bound up with other, sexual "bodily

sensations" that are sometimes, depending on their orientation and gender, socially defined as

"peculiar" as well. In other words, given the intertwined forces of love and liberation, texts in this

vein have argued that any triumph over that "peculiar sensation" cannot and will not happen

without demanding we not uncouple white supremacy from the pathologization of gender and

sexuality.[31] In re-orienting readers towards liberation in the present, City's *Long Division*(s) revise and

destabilize a number of Du Bois's assumptions and ideas: namely, the interactions between cultural

production, as the viable pathway to progress and racial equality, and what Du Bois calls "cultural

backwardness," a shorthand for unsophistication and sexual deviance. All too often, the very

notions of backwardness, particularly inflected through the lens of sexuality, can come to define and

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[29] In his widely read essay "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: A Remembrance," Kiese Laymon splices personal accounts of encounters with threats of gun violence in Mississippi with eulogies for Martin and a litany of other black victims of gun violence. See also, Ta-Nahesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); Mychal Denzel Smith, *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education* (New York: Nation Books, 2016)

[30] See, 2013 National Book Award Winner *Good Lord Bird* by James McBride; of course, 2014 Saroyan International Writing Award Winner *Long Division* by Kiese Laymon; 2015 Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence Winner *Welcome to Braggsville* by T. Geronimo Johnson; 2016 Pen/Faulkner Winner *Delicious Foods* by James Hannaham.

[31] Mychal Denzel Smith puts this idea powerfully: "Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old black boy in America. White supremacy tells a lot of lies about seventeen-year-old black boys in America, but we can't escape the fact that those black boys absorb a culture of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, class-based elitism, self-hatred, violence, untreated mental illness, and a host of other American problems that translate differently when experienced through the lens of racism" (M. D. Smith 5-6).

direct the political movements and how they will define "progress." As Heather K. Love explains, modernity acquires its very meaning from "backwardness:"

> The idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity's key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others…If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind—and so seriously compromised the ability of these others ever to catch up. Not only sexual and gender deviants but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite, the disabled, the poor and criminals were marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness.[32]

Heather Love's characterization that modernization moved forward by "perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind" resonates with *LD's* effort at Afrofabulation: to challenge and complicate orientations to sexuality by de-familiarizing orientations to the printed book. In other words, by integrating multiple variations of "backwards" into the novel, the space of the backwoods, the temporal fixation on the backwards, and the suggestions of sexual "backwardness," will heighten the contradictions of racial progress in the Obama era.

The "backwards" is put front and center for the reader in the very opening sequence of *LD*: a scuffle between City (C1) and his primary rival as leader of their 9th grade class, LaVander Peeler. Each boy attempts to undermine the other's position as leader by calling into question their authenticity: "LaVander Peeler cares too much what white folks think about him. Last quarter, instead of voting for me for ninth-grade CF (Class Favorite), he wrote on the back of his ballot, 'All things considered, I shall withhold my CF vote rather than support Toni Whitaker, Jerome Wallace, or the White Homeless Fat Homosexual" (7). City somewhat cleverly includes a positive attribute about himself (that his consideration for Class Favorite") in his degradation of LaVander (he "cares too much what white folks think about him") City immediately constructs an inside/outside through this description, outlining what constitutes belonging and what constitutes Blackness. But, this

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[32] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5-6.

meaningfully is a challenge to the reader to work to stay on the inside, from the foregrounding of

the "insider" acronym "CF" over the word phrase "Class Favorite" to the listing of classmates that

the reader has no way of knowing. City goes on to complain,

> He actually capitalized all five words when he wrote the sentence, too. You would expect
> more from the only boy at Fannie Lou Hamer Magnet School with blue-black patent leather
> Adidas and an ellipsis tattoo on the inside of his wrist, wouldn't you? The tattoo and the
> shoes are the only reason he gets away with using sentences with 'all things considered' and
> the word 'shall' an average of fourteen times a day. Therefore (I know Principal Reeves said
> that we should never write the 'n-word' if white folks might be reading, but…), I hate that
> wack nigga, too. (7)

City reveals a careful slipperiness of the racial hierarchy at play between the two boys. City allows

that clothing (blue-black patent leather Adidas) and a tattoo (the ellipsis that will be a central motif

in the novel) bequeath LaVander a certain amount of Black credence in the school and authenticity

as a black leader in his class. However, his apparently over-the-top linguistic propriety demonstrates

the immediate falsity of his self-consciousness. LaVander literally embodies the definition of double-

consciousness: he "cares too much what white people think about him." For good measure, City

emphasizes his use of the n-word despite or especially because "white folks might be reading,"

illustrating that unlike LaVander he does not care too much what white people think of him. It is

clear that in defining LaVander, City believes that he is also defining himself. Or, to put it slightly

differently, each depends on the other for their self-definition.

However, in introducing the text with a description of LaVander Peeler, City reveals the

extent to which these self-definitions are bound up with the relationship between not only whiteness

and blackness, but progress and backwardness. Ironically, the first description we get of City is not

in his words, but the schoolyard name LaVander assigns him: a White Homeless Fat Homosexual.

This leads City to open the following paragraph with the necessary disclaimers, "My name is City.

I'm not white, homeless, or homosexual" (7). In other words, City cannot introduce himself by who

he is, but by who he is not. Interestingly, LaVander levies against City multiple allegations of

backwardness: class, physical disability, and sexual deviance. City has to then explain the origins of

these quips: "because he claims that my house is a rich white lady's garage, that I'm fatter than Sean

Kingston, and that I like to watch boys piss without saying 'Kindly Pause'" (8).

It is this final charge, that of sexual deviance, that becomes a central point of concern for

City throughout the text. Rather than immediately disqualify the claims of his fatness or his poverty,

City explains why the charge of homosexuality is unwarranted:

> LaVander Peeler invented saying 'Kindly pause' in the bathroom last year at the end of eight grade. If you were pissing and another dude just walked in the bathroom and you wondered who was walking in the bathroom, or if you walked in the bathroom and just looked a little bit toward the dude already at a urinal, you had to say 'Kindly pause'…But I don't say 'Kindly pause' and its not because I think I'm slightly homosexual. I just don't want to use some wack cathphrase created by La Vander Peeler, and folks don't give me a hard time for it because I've got the best waves of anyone in the history of Hamer. If I sound tight, it's because I used to love going to the bathroom at Hamer. They just renovated the bathrooms for the first time in fifteen years and these rectangular tiles behind the urinal are now this deep dark blue that makes you know that falling down and floating up are the same thing, even if you have severe bubble guts or constipation. (8-9)

These bathroom experiences encapsulate intricate politics and unwritten rules of masculinity that

will often return to consume City throughout the novel. But, similar to City's granting of authenticity

to LaVander's blackness because of his shoes and tattoo or disqualifying that authenticity by the

language he uses and the code-switching he deploys, the rules of masculinity seem to be utterly

arbitrary but crucially meaningful to City. Just a few pages later, City continues these

disqualifications:

> I guess you should also know that no else at Hamer or in the world ever called me a 'faggot' or 'homosexual' except for LaVander Peeler. I'm not trying to make you think I've gotten nice with lots of girls or anything because I haven't. I felt on Toni's bra in a dark closet in Art and she twerked on my sack a few times after school. And I guess I talked nasty with a few people who claimed they were girls on this website WhatYouGotOnMyFreak.com, but really that was it. (13)

The shyness of these confessions, like his multiple statements of "I guess" and the assertions that

"really that was it," run counter to the braggadocio that City puts forward throughout the text.

Sexuality, in other words, appears to muddy the gap between what the outside world values, or what the norms are, and what his body desires.

As it turns out, it is the bathroom visits themselves that call into question how forward City is actually being with the reader, which is arguably himself, about his own sexual behavior. When Principal Reeves cautiously brings up City's bathroom visits, he says little in his defense:

> 'One more thing,' she said and closed the office door. 'I hear from LaVander Peeler and a few other teachers that you're spending a lot of time in the bathroom stalls.' I looked down at the stains on my brown Adidas. 'Have you been—' 'What?' 'Touching yourself inappropriately at lunch time?' 'Lunch time?' 'Yes. I've heard that after many of the boys go into the bathroom to yell 'Kindly pause,' that you go in there and…listen. We don't want to halt natural human functions at Fannie Lou Hamer, but that activity might be better suited for home, possibly before you go to sleep or maybe even when you wake up.' I raised my eyes to Principal Reeves. 'Do you understand what I'm saying, Citoyen?' 'I'm good,' I told Principal Reeves. 'You're telling me not to get nice with myself on school property. I hear you.' (18-19)

With the return of an uncharacteristic shyness, as City meekly repeats the questions being asked of him, the reader discovers that there may be more to the story of the bathroom than originally disclosed. In the original bathroom story, City acknowledges that he has a certain fascination with the newly renovated bathroom: "these rectangular tiles behind the urinal are now this deep dark blue that makes you know that falling down and floating up are the same thing." He even seems to prepare in advance a defense of why he might be in the bathroom for an extended period of time, "bubble guts or constipation." The possibility that City is regularly going into the bathroom to "get nice with [himself]" alters the way a reader might understand the euphoric description City offers of the tiles. Moreover, there seems to be a direct link made by Principal Reeves between the other boys in the bathroom and City's actions, "after many of the boys go into the bathroom to yell 'Kindly pause,' that you go in there." What this suggests is not proof of whether or not City is or is not homosexual, but of a broader system of policing and discipline at the school beyond yet instantiated by LaVander Peeler's bathroom rules. It is equally plausible that City goes into the empty bathroom for extended periods of time out of embarrassment of his "bubble guts and constipation" or that he

simply does not like to use LaVander's catchprase, as it is that he also uses that time to "get nice with [himself]." What is certain, however, is that the system of rules in place that determine and define how he can use the time in the bathroom extend beyond playground quips and become crucial to the institution itself. After all, not only has LaVander pointed out this behavior, but "a few other teachers" have as well.

In this setting, language serves as both the path forward and backward, realness and fakeness. Before the official "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence" contest, LaVander and City stage a pre-game battle in the playground, an amalgam of yo' mama jokes and a rap battle. The set-up for this battle recalls what James T. Peterson defines as a "cipher" in multiple iterations of African American undergrounds:

> Ciphers are mini-speech communities. They are inviting, but they are also very challenging. They have become a litmus test for modern day griots…The ritual of rhyming is reinforced by the physical arrangement of hip-hop bodies into a form that powerfully indicates the inside-outside dynamic that…has no center except space or possibly the voice rhyming in turn; it is also secretly encoded by its participants.[33]

Surrounded by a circle of their peers, LaVander and City conduct a verbal battle in which they simultaneously adopt the arbitrary rules of the contest, that a sophisticated and "dynamic" linguist can ether their opponent in a single sentence, and the arbitrary rules of authenticity that dictate Blackness and leadership. We can see how these simultaneously overlapping and diverging rules come to bear in how each character judges the other. LaVander opens with a sentence that has echoes of Du Bois:

> 'African Americans are generally a lot more ignorant than white Americans, and if you're an African-American boy and you beat not only African-American girls but white American boys and white American girls, who are, all things considered, less ignorant than you by nature—in something like making sentences, in a white American state like Mississippi—you are all things considered, a special African-American boy destined for riches, unless you're a homeless white fat homosexual African-American boy with mommy issues, and City, you are indeed the white fat homosexual African-American boy with mommy issues who I shall beat

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[33] James Braxton Peterson, *The Hip-Hop Underground and African American Culture: Beneath the Surface* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84.

like a knock-kneed slave tonight at the nationals.' Then he got closer to me and whispered, 'One sentence, Homosexual. I shall not be fucked with.' LaVander Peeler backed up and looked at the crowd, some of whom were pumping their fists, covering their mouths, and laughing to themselves. Then he kissed the ellipsis tattoo on his wrist and pointed toward the sky. (10)

The success of LaVander's barbs, as the response of the audience suggests, relies on the repetition of City's backwardness, particularly his accused homosexuality. City surprisingly admires LaVander's linguistic and grammatical proficiency, but observes the argumentative deficiency or circularity of his attack: "It's true that LaVander Peeler has mastered the comma, the dash, and the long 'if-then' sentence…I don't think he understands what the sentences he uses really mean. He's always praising white people in his sentences, but then he'll turn around and call me 'white' in the same sentence like it's a diss." In this unsanctioned, or even "underground," battle, understanding and employing sophisticated grammar rules for a "white" contest does not mean, for City, that one necessarily adopts the norms that inform the "white" perspective. In fact, that moment necessitates more than ever a shirking of those norms and expectations.

In contrast to LaVander, City concludes his long sentence, similarly attacking Peeler's backwardness, by saying, "Hell, LaVander Peeler can be the first African American to win the title all he wants y'all…But me, I'm striving to be legendary, you feel me?" (12). City seems able to separate, at this early stage, the defining modes of success for African Americans seeking reciprocal recognition from the white world (accolades, titles, awards), from the, albeit much vaguer, goal of becoming "legendary." He seems to want to embody that role of "seer" that both Du Bois and Deleuze wrestle with, a "prophet" who is able to become-with his people, rather than pleasing the "other world." LaVander immediately criticizes the immateriality, and even mysticism, of this view: "I also do feel that all your sentences rely on fakeness and magic. All things considered, I feel like there's nothing real in your sentences because you aren't real" (12). The statement that City "[isn't] real" has a double meaning here. Narratively, LaVander is suggesting that City's use of language is

not "authentic," and therefore he is neither a valid participant in the cipher nor a future "seer" in the community. For the reader of the text, however, LaVander also sets up the metafictional turn that City is not actually "real," he is fictional, just a character in a book. Both of these meanings, LaVander suggest, demonstrate the reliance on "fakeness and magic" of City's storytelling. But, it is only in this space between the fictional and the real that City can ultimately expose the falsity of narratives of racial progress, that even LaVander, at this point, believes in as "real."

City's internal conflict and open feud with LaVander Peeler do not transpire in a vacuum, but instead appear to be the outcome of global historical forces. In the opening paragraph, we learn that City and LaVander attend a school named after Fannie Lou Hamer, a voting rights activist whose work organizing the Freedom Summer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee becomes a central feature of the text. Fittingly, it is Fannie Lou Hamer who, in 1964 (the year that C2 travels back in time) was "awarded," after staged protests and vicious opposition, the status of a delegate at the Democratic National Convention. Although this event does not take place in the novel, its daily memorialization through the naming of the school comes to determine in many ways, what Joesph R. Winters calls, the "agony of progress" weighing on City. As Winters puts it, the same notion of "progress" that inspired and motivated "many struggles, acts of resistance, and movements that many of us admire" all too often re-affirm the validity of "exceptionalism, the American Dream, a postracial society leaving the past behind, and spreading democracy and capitalism;"[34] each of which are contingent on groups of persons or sets of behaviors to occupy the position of "backwards." As City puts it, his teachers and principal, following the logic of the school's name, "[taught] us how we were practically farting on the chests of the teenagers on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee if we didn't conduct ourselves with dignity" (15). But, what "dignity" means and what the function of "backwards" might be remain in question for City.

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[34] Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.

The language of backwardness, progress, and authenticity transfers continuously from the schoolyard cipher into the official space of the "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence Contest." City and LaVander are supposedly given an opportunity to reap the rewards of racial progress by competing against each other in the 2013 "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence Contest." Devised as a less geographically, and evidently racially, biased version of the Scripps Spelling Bee, contestants are given a word to use in a "dynamic" sentence. Rated on their "correct sentence usage, appropriateness, and dynamism," the contestants vie for "$75,000 toward college tuition if they decide to go to college." In other words, a school named after and predicated on the history of racial progress puts forward City and LaVander as representatives and recipients of potentially even greater progress through the opportunity of paid-for higher education.

As it turns out, this view of progress only serves to advance the rightness of those in power who granted this progress possible. It becomes immediately evident that their acceptance into and attendance at the event is part of this grander narrative, particularly when they are greeted by "a lanky woman with an aqua fanny pack around her waist and the name 'Cindy' on her left breast" (30). Cindy's excitement at the arrival of the two Black representatives ("We've heard so much about you two and your ordeal with Hurricane Katrina") is immediately followed by an act of discipline ("She ignored me and pointed at the brush. 'So cute. But there will be no props beyond this point either.' She held out her hand for my brush. 'We can't change the rules just for you, no matter how special you gents are'"). Referring to City's brush as a "prop" simultaneously suggests that he is an actor or character, not "real," and that he is being "propped" up by their generosity. His adherence to the arbitrary norms of the contest illustrates acquiescence on both of these fronts; he must accept his un-reality as a person, his role as an actor, in order to tap into the racial progress made available to him through the agonizing work of leaders before him, like Fannie Lou Hamer.

During the contest, City inelegantly assumes and disavows his position as a relay between the masses and the "other world." After he is asked to use the word "niggardly" by a host of white judges, City refuses to answer their question, offering instead a brutally uncomfortable diatribe against LaVander: "*I truly hate LaBander Veeler sometimes more than some of y'all hate President Obama and I wonder if LaBander Veeler should behave like the exceptional African-American boy he was groomed to be in public by his UPS-working father, or the, um, weird, brilliant, niggardly joker he really is when we're the only ones watching*" (38). City proceeds in planting himself in front of the microphone, ignoring pleas from Cindy and the judges to return to his seat. City's brush becomes prominent again: "I started brushing the skin on my forearm, then pointed my brush toward the light…I threw my brush toward the light and the buzzer kept going off" (38-39). Seeing himself become "un-real" in front of the camera with this "prop" in his hand, City awkwardly and disturbingly responds initially by not speaking up to power, but to degrade those he perceives as below him: LaVander and also the Mexican contestants on stage alongside him. But, after one Mexican contestant comes up to the stage and kicks him in the shin, he qualifies, "What was I supposed to do?" and then makes an abrupt shift in his diatribe:

> Bet you know my name next time. And I bet you won't do this to another black boy from Mississippi. Shout out to my Jackson confidants: Toni, Jannay, Octavia, Jerome, and all my country niggas: Shay, Gunn, and even MyMy down in Melahatchie just trying to stay above water. I got y'all. President Obama, you see how they do us down here? You see? (40)

This moment when City enters into public view, and pointedly conducts a "shout out" of all those similarly obscured by the white public sphere, results in both opportunities for a particular kind of continuation of his publicity (YouTube sensation, a negotiated reality TV show) and the revelation that perhaps another, more literary intervention is preferable politically. But, as City "represents" his friends on stage to "the other world," he exhibits little interest to speak for them or on behalf of them. Instead, his phrase "I got y'all" offers some nuance on how he will he sees his future role as a leader. One can simultaneously read this statement in two ways: first, that this attempted racial

degradation allows him to now "get," as in understand, all of his friends listed as a collective unit, whether they are from the city or from the "backwards" country, and second, that he will not allow them to be erased by the narrative of progress that everyone attempted to situate him as inheriting.

Moments later, this narrative of progress proceeds in erasing the difference between LaVander and City constructed in their playground cipher. The judges, after determining that LaVander was the more preferable "token," ask him to use the word "chitterlings" in a sentence. Ironically, this is precisely the word that City had been asked in the qualifying round to make it into the tournament, and LaVander is not shy in pointing out the insulting preferential treatment the word implies. LaVander, with "tears streaming down his face," constructs a dynamic sentence employing the correct usage of the term, though attempts to couch it in a cipher-like yo' mama joke about City's grandmother. Under a cascade of balloons and popguns, the "voice from behind the light" articulates the very process of historical erasure that the textual productions of *LD* will struggle to undo: "LaVander Peeler, you have done the unbelievable! Times are a-changing and you, you exceptional young Mississippian, are a symbol of the American Progress. The past is the past and today can be tomorrow" (43). This statement almost directly echoes the paradox that John O'Sullivan, a pro-Manifest Destiny journalist, exemplified during the thicket of American slavery in 1839:

> The American people having derived their origin from many other nations…have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history…which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.[35]

John O'Sullivan's orientation of the narrative of American exceptionalism as connected "with the future only" is appallingly at odds with his assumption that America has "little connection with the

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[35] O'Sullivan, John. "The Great Nation of Futurity." *The Democratic Review* November 1839: 426-430, quotation on 426.

past history [of Europe], and still less…its crimes." Already in 1839, the logic of white supremacy sought to pre-emptively erase slavery, or its historical connection to Europe, in the service of this narrative of American progress. For the judges of the "racially sensitive" contest in 2013, any and all racial progress that could be claimed by LaVander Peeler functions as an affirmation that the United States really is "the great nation of futurity," where they would not need to reckon with the history (and future) of white supremacy.

Given this context, I would like to return to City's racial diatribe, and the somewhat impotent calling out to President Obama: "President Obama, you see how they do us down here? You see?" (39). The repetition of "you see," implying that perhaps Obama does not already know or needs to see the continuing racialized oppression and terror, underscores the feeling that in this historical present having a Black President does not itself shield these characters from white supremacy. As a matter of fact, as the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the murder of Trayvon Martin has made visible, the material and affective conditions of African Americans have, to the deliberate surprise of many, worsened. After the financial crisis of 2008, which, by 2011, had erased 53% of all wealth accumulated by black families during the 1990s, the sharply disproportionate assault on black progress put into focus the disparity between the haves and the have-nots, even and especially among African Americans.[36] The fact of "how little anyone outside black America seems to care" about this erasure of black wealth was exacerbated, as Eddie S. Glaude Jr. points out, when Obama stated baldly that he "wasn't the president of black America." For Glaude Jr., this statement punctuated the lack of meaningful political action targeting racism and revealed how little "the black political class" was willing to do for the majority of African Americans, even as they exercised the power of speaking for them. Glaude Jr., along with African American Studies scholars Marc Lamont Hill and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, have unanimously suggested that

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[36] Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016), 18.

these modern Black liberation movements, like #BlackLivesMatter, have been a direct outcome of

the de-valuation of the Black economic and political under-class precisely because of the relative rise

of a small group of black elites.[37] Taylor argues, "this unprecedented display of Black political [and

economic] power appears to mean very little in the lives of ordinary Black people, who wield almost

no power at all" (Taylor 6). Mirroring what Glaude Jr. calls the "value gap" that inspired the

#BlackLivesMatter movement, that white lives have a higher value in America than black and brown

lives, has been a growing chasm within the Black community of the perceived "values" of the elites

and the masses. Taylor cites a Pew Research Poll from 2007 that shows forty percent of African

Americans no longer see blacks as part of a "single race," and relatedly, "61 percent of Blacks

believed that the 'values held by middle-class Black people and the values held by poor Black people

have become different'" (Taylor 7).

Predictably, the so-called "value gap" mirrors the tension within the collective "souls of

black folk" that Du Bois suggested over a century earlier: from a perceived lack of literary sensibility,

or taste, to sexual promiscuity and deviance. For Taylor, the perception of this related "values gap"

contributes to a broader economic and political logic of "personal responsibility" that the continued,

relative success of Black elites only confirm. As Taylor puts it, "For Black elites, in particular, their

success validates the political and economic underpinnings of US society while reaffirming the

apparent personal defects of those who have not succeeded" (Taylor 8). According to Taylor,

Glaude Jr., and others, the #BlackLivesMatter protest movement has become an effective vehicle of

critique against the failures of black political elites and the Democratic Party to fight against white

supremacy and advocate on behalf of precisely who Du Bois viewed as "the masses." To put it

differently, it is common to hear that the "problem of the color line" is the result of a gap between

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[37] Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond.* (New York: Atria Books, 2016); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016)

the social and political practices of the country and the aspirational American ideals of democracy and equality. Every step in narrowing the gap between these practices and ideals marks progress, "an arc bending toward justice" as Barack Obama routinely states. However, the emotional disappointment and economic despair of many black Americans under the first black President has shown incontrovertibly, as Eddie S. Glaude Jr. puts it, that "our democratic principles do not exist in a space apart from our national commitment to white supremacy. They have always been bound tightly together, sharing bone and tissue" (9). As a result, exposing the falsity of this narrative of progress requires itself a process of imagination and invention.

Both City and LaVander, following this hysterical celebration of racial progress, recognize the falsity of this narrative of futurity and the impotency of joining or contributing in the chorus of progress. Instead, they both, in their own way, turn back inwards to the cipher and the underground. LaVander immediately backtracks on his victory, changing his response to an incorrect answer. After a brief interruption, the judges embarrassedly scramble to hand the trophy off to another contestant. LaVander recognizes that the burden of representing Blackness to the "other world" through the avenues mediated and controlled by this "other world" only served to continue a deeper oppression of his race. But, equally as significant is City's response after watching this unfold on his television, and the process of recognition that he undergoes:

> I turned the television off and sat on the floor of the garage with one of Mama's old brushes. I wanted to get nice with myself at the thought of something I knew. But there was too much I didn't know…if LaVander Peeler would be my best friend now…and how LaVander Peeler collected the courage to go from Fade Don't Fade to that adolescent black superhero on stage. I knew I could never hate LaVander Peeler again after that night. And crazy as it sounds, that was enough to make me feel good about…getting nice with myself like a true champ, and writing my story until Mama came home to tell me why what I did was wrong for me, wrong for black people yet to be born, and wrong for the globe. (45)

A reciprocal recognition occurs not between City or LaVander and the "other world," but actually between City and LaVander (as well as between City and City). LaVander's shunning of the white

awards and accolades allow him to acquire, at least temporarily, the "legendary" status City sought in the cipher, as an "adolescent black superhero."

But, City also begins to recognize in himself a sexual bodily sensation wash over him as he recognizes LaVander's authenticity. City employs the familiar euphemism "getting nice with myself" that the reader first encountered in the embarrassing lecture administered by Principal Reeves. However, in this passage, City expresses none of the shame that saturates that earlier encounter. LaVander was "enough to make [City] feel good about…getting nice with [himself]." But, even more than a straightforward euphemism, the phrase itself "getting nice with myself" suggests as well a kind of coming to understand and accept one's own sexuality. The phrase simultaneously initiates, strangely, the entangled sensations of love and liberation that the reciprocal recognition of City's concurrent writing and reading will offer. The scene significantly City moves from "getting nice with myself like a true champ" directly to him beginning to write what we will come to know is the version of *LD* we, and C2, are currently reading. And in this brief moment, just as City recognizes in himself an opportunity to be "nice with [himself]," he also recognizes in himself a kind of pure, unadulterated moment to write himself without or before his vision is shuttered by his mother's pending lecture, and beating, on the merits of racial progress.

It is with this in mind that I will conclude this chapter by examining the textual role of "the book" as mediator in politically and sexually becoming "nice with [oneself]." An analogous set of problems face LaVander and City rising as "representatives" of Black progress in the white-sanctioned sentence contest and the history of representatives in various modes of cultural production, including, of course, novels. Art historian Kobena Mercer articulates how tokenization is inseparable from the burden of "representation" and the means of cultural production:

> When black artists become publicly visible only *one at a time*…they are seen as 'representatives' who speak on behalf of, and are thus accountable to, their communities. In such a political economy of racial representation where the part stands in for the whole, the

visibility of a few token black public figures serves to legitimate, and reproduce, the invisibility, and lack of access to public discourse, of the community as a whole.[38]

By placing black artists in a position of "representing," as in speaking for the community at large, by definition frames "the other world," or the white world, as a primary imagined audience of the work. This framing replicates, rather than undermines, the conditions that make black self-hood for Du Bois an impossibility. And yet, access to print has obvious material significance in acquiring either reciprocal recognition from the "other world," as Du Bois saw available in literature, or nurturing a community's own liberation movement. For example, Zora Neale Hurston, with whom City shares so much of beautiful bravado, linked her confident feeling of "being colored me" to a more biting criticism of a public sphere that elevates and institutionalizes the mediocrity of white people in her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print": "I have been amazed by the Anglo Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes, and for that matter, any non-Anglo-Saxon peoples within our borders, above the class of unskilled labor."[39] Although Hurston places the moral and philosophical defect squarely with white publishers, she ultimately recognizes that access to the materials of the medium determine what is and is not politically possible with language.

The textual *Long Division*(s) in the novel experiment quite deliberately with this history. First, the narrative uses the form of the book to experiment with voice, in particular the fictionality of "realness." One could understand City's multiple, and magical, textual productions as playing with what Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition: the "talking book." As Gates explains, the trope of the talking book, as appeared in slave narratives, constructed a double-voiced discourse with which African Americans could "make a white written text speak with a black voice."[40] Gates explains that Black artists have conceptually played with this trope to construct

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[38] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 240.

[39] Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *Negro Digest* April 1950: 85.

[40] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 143.

layered voices that pull multiple narrative modes of representation in and out of sync.[41] Gates notes

that the talking book,

> Reveals, rather surprisingly, that the curious tension between the black vernacular and the
> literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the
> printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at
> least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by
> literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language
> of the black self. (143-144)

Through the metafictional layers of the novel, each City finds himself magically reflected in the

autobiographical imprint made by the other City, black writer speaking directly and only to the black

reader. Their linguistic particularities are differentiated from one another not by class or race, but by

historical setting. Knowledge of pop culture references and fashion ("I sat out on the porch in some

faded cutoff jeans and the Magic Johnson Converse Weapons" [51]) determine difference as much

as linguistic fashions ("What does 'keep it one hundred' even mean?" [66]). These linguistic

particularities illustrate how history itself, via the markers of fashion, can pull these different modes

of story construction and representation, or fabulation, in and out of sync.

This process plays out materially as well in the physical and aesthetic encounters constructed

between each City and their copies of *Long Division*. During his reprimand from Principal Reeves, C1

first notices the book *Long Division* lying on the ground: "She had every book in her bookshelf

placed in alphabetical order but on the floor underneath the shelf was a book called *Long Division*.

There wasn't an author's name on the cover or the spine. I couldn't tell from looking at it if it was

fiction or a real story. The cover had the words 'Long Division' written in thick black marker over

what looked like the outside of this peeling work shed behind my grandma's house" (17). This copy

of *Long Division* lacks any of the traditional forms of "puffery," like book reviews, recommendations,

physical ornamentation, or even a designation of author, that African American book historian Lara

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[41] Describing Zora Neale Hurston's narrative strategy, for example, Gates states, "the concept of voice is complex, oscillating as representation among direct discourse, indirect discourse, and a unique form of free indirect voice that serves to privilege the speaking voice" (143).

Langer Cohen, as well as others, have shown to be integral to the construction of the white public sphere's discursive and political resources particularly from the antebellum period onward.[42] The only visual suggestions of value are its marks of erosion, the cover, "looked like the outside of this peeling…shed." One could say that these marks suggest that the book had the potential to offer a connection to history and thus a way to tap into the "souls of black folk." Yet, City also revealingly points out that, without any of these ornamental signifiers, he cannot tell "from looking at if it was fiction or a real story."

Of course, as he begins to read and reference the book, this distinction of whether or not is "fiction or a real story" only becomes increasingly blurred to the character-reader. City asks, "what's that? That's so crazy," to which the principal responds, "Be careful with that, Citoyen…Some books can completely change how we see ourselves and everything else in the world. Keep your eyes on the prize" (19). This recommendation from the principal is curious. Contrary to Du Bois's highlighting of books and literature as offering a "life above the veil" because of the reciprocal recognition they allow with the "other world," the principal urges City to not change how he sees himself or the world, but rather "keep [his] eyes on the prize." Perhaps part of the reason this is the case is that the principal knows that the reciprocal recognition available within this book will not be with the "other world," but will only offer an insulated environment for City, as both reader and author, to ultimately recognize himself.

This revision of the use value of literature is continued when C2 discovers his copy of *Long Division*. In his first visit to the future with Shalaya, he independently approaches a young girl on a stoop whom he comes to learn is Baize Shepherd. She has two possessions that catch his eye: a deeply puzzling briefcase called a "lap top" and a book. His description of the physical ornamentation of this copy of *Long Division* is starkly different than C1:

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[42] See Lara Cohen, *The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 101-133.

I could really see its cover for the first time. On the cover was a husky black boy's body standing in the middle of a stage. The picture cut off right above his shoulder blades so we couldn't see his face. His left hand was in his pocket and his right hand was clutching a wave brush. Behind the boy was another, lankier boy with his head down and both of his balled-up fists dangling between his legs. Near the bottom of the cover were the words 'YouTube,' 'views,' and the number '41,197,508.' At the top of the cover in bold letters were the words 'Long Division.' (67).

This more visually evocative cover obviously depicts C1's experiences in the "Can You Use That Word in a Sentence" Contest. Similar to the other edition of the book, the name of the author is not used as a form of "puffery." The fictional representation of these material books suggest that the very construction of authorship, embedded as it is in the history of print and white hegemony, inscribes the authority to represent, artistically and politically. Thus, to shed that authority enables one to become-with the audience rather than stand out from, discipline, and speak for the audience. This cover image pointedly cuts off C1's head, suggesting to the reader that they might project or see themselves as the title character (even more so when that title character is also named City Coldson). Moreover, the image adds an additional layer of abstraction to C1's depicted experience. Framed as a YouTube video, this cover demands of C2 a different process of speculation as to what is inside. Without any reference point for what this visual mode of representation is, this copy of *Long Division* seems to not so much promise City a connection to history and the "souls of black folk," but, in Du Bois's words, instead to the "new ideas" required for the "new age" that Shalaya wants to unlock.

Interestingly, the book is juxtaposed in these scenes with Baize's other magical "talking book," her lap top. After his interactions with Baize, City ultimately decides to steal both the book and the laptop in order to help Shalaya "change the future in a dot-dot-dot special way." However, when he opens up this book, he marvels at its unique capacities as a vehicle for language and publication that print historically denied African Americans. Opening a "Word" document of Baize's socially conscious hip-hop lyrics, C2 remarks, "the words on Baize's computer screen looked

famous, like words in a book, even if you wrote something that you would never see in a book…I started typing and erasing a lot. It took me about ten minutes to come up with: *My name is City. Shalaya says I'm long division"* (76). The computer makes available a starkly opposite self-introduction than C1 had made at the opening of the novel ("My name is City. I'm not white, homeless, or homosexual"). Both self-introductions are filtered through the projections of other characters, in these cases Shalaya Crump and LaVander Peeler. However, by stating that he actually is "long division" suggests that he is ready to tell stories that he would like to linger on with another. In other words, typing the words on screen provides access to becoming public, like the publication of a book, that print has so long denied African Americans.

By bringing attention to both the physicality of the book as well as its mysterious, magical appearances in the different spaces and times, *LD* echoes Leon Jackson's observation that, despite the ubiquity of "the Talking Book" in critical analyses of African American literature, "we know very little about the production, dissemination, or consumption of the books that deployed that trope, and still less of the books that were begged, borrowed, stolen, owned, or encountered by the authors who wrote them"—to say nothing of African Americans' engagements with forms of print other than books."[43] Moreover, as Lara Cohen points out, far too many studies of African American literature that look at print, "have generally done so with a dependence on critical models that assume that print is a stabilizing technology that subtends the establishment of African American identity. Such models understand literature as a primary tool with which African Americans articulated their personhood, forged bonds of racial solidarity, and laid claims to history."[44] Rather, for as much as each copy of *Long Division* offers each City an avenue, through the other City, to re-conceptualize their own bodies in space and time, to conceptualize themselves as selves to forge

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[43] Leon Jackson, "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print--The State of the Discipline." *Book History* 13 (2010): 251-308, quotation on 252.

[44] Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein eds., *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

connections with black struggles in separate historical moments and to facilitate intimacy, these books also fail. They routinely fail to offer either City a way out from the totality of white power that the covered protection of a time-travelling hole in the woods augurs, and they fail to protect Baize from disappearing.

The interrelationship between politics and intimacy, liberation and love, come to the fore in the conclusion of the novel through these an interrogation of both of these magical portals, the printed book and the underground. C2 and Shalaya, joined by Baize who pursues C2 in search for her stolen lap top, ultimately are convinced by an out-of-place Jewish boy that, in order to change the future, they need to travel to 1964 and help him stop a violent KKK attack on a local Freedom School. This, it is thought, would give Shalaya the insight needed to change the future, save their ancestors, and provide a continuation of the good work of the Freedom School. However, the group quickly learns that Evan's family, benevolent Northern white liberals who aided in setting up the school, were the ones donning the white robes and enacting violence on their Black friends. Though threatened by the KKK, the lability and mediocrity of whiteness infuriate the time-travellers. In this moment, Shalaya and C2 simultaneously recognize how whiteness, even when well-intentioned iterations of whiteness, works towards their oppression.

Against the backdrop of C2 and Shalaya witnessing the violence of white supremacy first hand, Shalaya re-doubles her commitment to changing the future through social activism and decides once-and-for-all that she will stay in the past and work with Evan to continue to make a better future ("I know you hate me for this, City, but I really want to change the future" [228]). This decision is complicated when Baize interjects that her parents names are City Coldson and Shalaya Crump-Coldson, making clear that this decision will cause her to never have lived. This exchange returns these characters to their disagreement at the start of the novel, when City asked, "What I gotta do to make you love me?" (23). However, in this case, City has a slightly different reaction

than he had in the beginning of their story. Rather than negotiating with Shalaya, City internalizes his

disappointment and putting it all in terms of speculative frames of "could" and "would":

> She could only be born if Shalaya Crump and I had her in 1999, but the longer we were in
> 1964, the more Shalaya Crump and I knew that Baize would have to eventually disappear. I
> wanted to beg Shalaya Crump to save Baize's life and come back to 1985 with me. I wanted
> to tell her that we could go close the hole, go home, eat sardines together, dig in the dirt, and
> never travel again. We could do all the stuff we were supposed to do until 1999. Then we
> could kiss with tongue. And we could act like we were HBO after dark. And we could have
> our baby. Deep down, I knew it couldn't work like that anymore. (243-244)

Intimacy and futurity seem all too bound together in this moment. However, City's disappointment

breaks from his simplified assumption at the start of the story that he had a claim on Shalaya's

affection. He recognizes the deep ambivalence of Shalaya's position, that a future without liberation

may not be a future she wants to live in regardless of the love and intimacies she may have in that

time line. As City suggests, "[Shalaya] seemed stuck in a long, lonely silence that, I figured, only pops

up when a parent has to decide whether to save the future in a special way or save the life of the

special child they never really knew" (244). The deep ambivalence and speculative nuance of

Shalaya's rejection complicates the gendered gaze by which City, via Du Bois's allegorical-

autobiographical story of childhood, understands the "peculiar sensation" of being Black in

America.

The only way for City to attempt to understand the decision is by thinking through the

relationship between story invention, language, and the book itself. The three say goodbye to Baize

through a discussion of the recurring motif of the ellipsis. Shalaya reveals that she misunderstood

the meaning when she asks, "It's what you use when someone is about to cut someone else off,

right?" Baize, just before vanishing, ultimately corrects her, asserting, "The ellipsis always knows

something more came before it and something more is coming after it" (245). It is this virtuality of

the "more" that will attract City, as he frames the ellipsis as both an authorial and readerly

intervention. City desperately asks Baize what this would mean for a book, "So you'd have pages

filled with dot-dot-dot in your book?" Baize responds, "No…I'd have a front cover with the words 'Long Division' across the top and below 'Long Division' would be a blue-black ellipsis. We'd all be inside the book, too, with those other characters already in the book and we'd all fall in love with each other" (245). Baize's suggestion that the ellipsis be seen on the cover sends the reader to the beginnings of each edition of *Long Division* (6, 20), each bearing the mark of the ellipsis. The open-endedness of the image suggests that the "more" to come will be the opportunity for each of these characters to re-work and revise the stories until they "all fall in love with each other."

The temporary dissolution of the cohort finds its only potential resolution through a re-conceptualization of writing itself. When C2 re-arrives in the future, what he finds in place of the community center is the "Lerthon Coldson Civil Rights Museum" (the name of C2's grandfather killed in 1964) with "lots of black folks and Mexican folks of all ages walking down the sidewalks talking and laughing out loud" (255). This memorial is, as far as we will ever learn in the novel, the primary tangible difference that Shalaya has made by staying in 1964. Not much is elucidated in the text about the museum itself or whether C2 finds the museum a worthwhile payoff for Shalaya's sacrifice of Baize. But, I would assert that the memorial is not the only material addition to this "future" scene. C2, and perhaps more importantly C1 as a reader of this text's conclusion, witness Shalaya's literal "invention of a people to come." Evoking the "Can You Use that Word in a Sentence Contest," when C1 abruptly scapegoated his Hispanic counterparts on stage, the convergence of "lots of black folks and Mexican folks of all ages walking down the sidewalks talking and laughing out loud" suggests a conclusive vision of a "people to come" that unites Black and Latino people, rather than allow white supremacy to divide them.

Seeing Shalaya's work arguably informs and inspires the creative fabulation that C2 will perform. C2 enters the museum determined to relentlessly pursue a historical intervention that will bring Baize back, finding the disappearance of another black body to be incompatible with the ideals

of a positive collective incorporation of black peoples against racial violence and white supremacy. In the museum, he converses with the magical Mama Lara, C2's grandmother, whose apparent mastery of storytelling allows her to show up in each historical period throughout the novel, about how while the "worst of white folks," their hatred, their power, and their deficient moral and storytelling imaginative capacities, cause black bodies to disappear. However, Mama Lara divulges that by the same mechanism, love, movement, and language might allow those same bodies to re-appear. And yet, she does not view the physical object of the book that takes precedence in the act of writing as it does in so many instances of contemporary fiction as the primary vehicle to facilitate this function, fraught as it is with the duplicitousness and inauthenticity of white supremacy. After repeatedly insisting several times that City "close the book," City reluctantly obliges and accepts Baize's laptop and runs back to the hole in the woods. At this conclusive moment of his edition of *Long Division*, when City decides he needs to time travel again to bring Baize back, he trades his book for a method of writing that makes words look famous:

> When I got in the hole, I opened the computer. A revised version of the paragraph I'd written when I first took Baize's computer back to 1985 was on the screen…I reread it. And I wondered. And I wandered. And I wrote. And I reread that. And I wrote more. And I erased some lies. And I wrote more. And I erased some truth…And I wrote more. And the more I wrote and erased, the more I felt Baize and other characters slowly—word by word, maybe even sense by sense—coming back. (261)

C2 defines here the difficult yet creative process of Afro-fabulation. Wondering, wandering, erasing lies and erasing truths, this is the process that will bring back Baize. As opposed to perhaps a more traditional time-travel narrative, in which C2 may go back in time and convince Shalaya to love him, that his masculinity has a rightful claim on her affection, he discovers that writing has the potential to construct the intimacy to bring Baize back. Typing away in the hole in the woods, there appears a body in the darkness who's identity is undecidable: "who is that?...How'd you get down here?...*You!?*" The indeterminacy of this final subject (Baize, Shalaya, the other City, the reader herself) is conjoined with the positive incorporation that this new type of writing produces:

"Slowly, we opened our red eyes in the dark and taught each other how to love. Hand in hand, deep in the underground of Mississippi, we all ran away to tomorrow because we finally could" (263). By having City disavow this symbolic relationship with the printed object for the physical intimacy with the person invoked by his typed words, *LD* revises the novel's relevance for Black liberation. To develop a mode of storytelling where every young African American could feel simultaneously famous and intimate would be needed for this new liberation movement. Yet, the ways in which the book, as a cultural and political product of the white public sphere, has become a central feature of the individuation of the (white) self as well as a critical site for the conflation and complicity between "*vertreten* [to speak for] and *darstellen* [to depict]," makes it an imperfect fit for the contemporary Black liberation movement.

And yet, at the same time, the novel—language, narrative, and the printed book—offers City a unique capacity to dis-orientate and re-orientate his composite self, as reader and writer, to his self, his realness and their fictionality, his sexuality, and his capability as a political actor for Black liberation. The metafictional layers of the narrative, the textures of voice, and backwards and forwards movement through diegetic time all expose to the City, and the reader, to a nuanced speculation on race, history, and the future. The novel concludes with C1 and LaVander Peeler re-united, huddled together in the hole in the woods, reading C2's *Long Division*. The two boys are C2's "people to come," the audience that he invokes into existence with his writing. The failures and successes of his heterosexual courtship with Shalaya assist C1 to recognize the interrelationship between story invention and his feelings for LaVander:

> 'We didn't really have no other choice or no other story to tell, so we had to make one.' I waited for him to say something back but he didn't, so I looked right in his face and said what I should have found a way to say to him after the contest. 'I love you, LaVander Peeler. I do, man, and I don't care what you say about that homosexual stuff. I know you love me, too. You ain't even gotta say it…' (267).

The recognition that, in the face of white-perpetrated erasure of their stories and their physical existence, together they had to invent their own story transitions directly into City verbalizing that their story ought to embrace the "backwardness" that defined and constricted their early relationship. This acknowledgment and affirmation of love smoothens the surface for a new story, one that at the very least will allow for the construction of "splendid visions" that break free from damning commitments to heteronormative masculinity. And, for City, the affective capacity of language and storytelling remains as it ever was a crucial tool in this process. C1's *Long Division,* and as well as the collated version, closes,

> In that hole, right in that second, I felt as far away from Melahatchie and I felt as close to a real character as I had ever felt. And the craziest thing is that I wasn't sure if that was a good, bad, or sad thing. With LaVander Peeler's head on my shoulder, we started rereading *Long Division* from the beginning, knowing that all we needed to know about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi was in our hands. The sentences had always been there. (267)

Survival, life, and love converge in the book that they hold and in the contact of reading together, "head on shoulder." Imaginatively co-creating the scenes of *LD* clarifies the ambivalence of his own commitment to the novel—"I wasn't sure if that was a good, bad, or sad, thing." On the one hand, the printed book has an embedded history of double-consciousness and inauthenticity that he must escape to become a seer. On the other hand, his novelistic method has a kind of magic that makes available, like in no other medium, a "realness" in the reciprocal recognition and intimacy necessary for liberation. Fittingly, the final page conjures Baize's proclamation that the novel may always have "something more" before and after and that they continue to re-work and revise the stories until they "all fall in love with each other."

<p align="center">"…"</p>

CONCLUSION: READING AND WRITING INTIMACY AND THE SELF NOW

At my own opportunity to look backward, I can now see that the heterogeneous arrangement of contemporary storytellers collected under the rubric of intimacy and materiality reveal unpredictable and fruitful continuities and discontinuities. Each of these storytellers are working with and through materials that are deeply entrenched in American culture as well as in the hardwiring of readers' habits, memories, and bodily orientations to the people and objects around them. Their commitments to the material form of the book itself vary: whereas Wallace's project might depend on the grounded-ness and physicality of the historical form of the physical novel to establish the authority (and intimacy) of his future-oriented posthumous ghost, Chris Ware arguably uses that very physicality to dismantle the historicity and conventions of novel-reading and create space for the new. Whereas A.M. Homes's *EA* uses the perversion of language and narrative to de-familiarize the sociality of reading and reading publics, Kiese Laymon sees the narrative of perversion and backwardness as an obstacle of the very sociality necessary for political solidarity in the Black liberation movement. But what can these continuities and discontinuities tell us about the social function of the novel in the present, as well as the future?

For one, these revelations demonstrate, especially to me as author, the value of a Deleuzian approach to scholarship; by arranging a diverse tapestry of aesthetic forms, techniques, and goals side by side, I was able to consider how these literary machines manufacture intimacy, as well as the political and aesthetic structure of intimacy itself. One such revelation was the extent to which the celebrated intimacy of David Foster Wallace's aesthetic project depended on a particular construction of the reader and author as stable selves, situated in a particular time and place. The homosocial desire embraced, obscured, and disavowed in, for example, the scene of "lexical rape" staged between the wraith and Don Gately in *Infinite Jest* depends on a view of the self as a distinct entity whose borders can be penetrated and violated. This view of the self as a distinct entity has,

furthermore, been integral to the cultural formation of the novel with a single (genius) author. In Wallace's own commentary on the theory of the "death of the author," he affirms this view: "For those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane."[1] For Wallace, the layers of fictionality that he might construct around the "reality" of his authorial figure can ever be peeled back to this "gut" truth that he is here, and the reader is there. However, contesting the nature and structure of these intimacies exposes how the violation of "self" presumes a claim to selfhood available only to certain persons and unavailable to others. For example, Kiese Laymon's protagonist City Coldson is split in half by the reality and fictionality of his "self" in ways that, as Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, is the very structure of feeling that defines the Black experience. Additionally, the difference in how language and affect construct the self when considered through the lenses of race, gender, and sexuality determines the potential outcomes of the intimacies staged. The very fact that Wallace and his (straight, male) reader are not able to articulate the erotic potential of their bond is arguably a central feature of their political solidarity negotiating the crisis of white masculinity and perceived threats to their selfhood in the 1990s. In contrast, City's articulation of his love for LaVander Peeler is fundamental and necessary to establishing their political solidarity for the Black liberation movement.

Relatedly, in tracing these continuities and discontinuities, this project's affective approach to language and materiality reveals cracks in the very dependence on print and the novel as a form that has been a central feature of literary production and criticism over the last quarter century. As City learns and teaches, the historical form of the novel facilitates a limited view of who can communicate or stage novelistic intimacy and how they do so—the author's name on the front cover of a book marks this history. On the contrary, City sees in modern technology a way for many

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[1] David Foster Wallace, *A Supposeduly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments,* (Back Bay Books, 1997), 144.

voices to communicate—typing on a computer makes a disenfranchised City feel "famous," as he says, but also interconnected and intimately impersonal. Yet, this view of modern technology is not utopic, as it is subject to the same political and aesthetic structures of intimacy that the novel helped establish. Rather, for City, the novel's efficacy in the present is a question of how the affective capacity of language can connect readers and writers and objects to the social rather than, as the novel has tilted in the late age of print, the personal. Imagining a people to come, as Deleuze calls it, is a social practice of imagination, not a singular exercise of "me-time" and the "self-improvements." At the same time, the hard lesson that City learns at the conclusion of *Long Division* is that these imaginings often fail, and may require dozens of repetitions with minor differences. But, the attention required to co-create novelistic narratives and the affective force of language to tear down, to re-construct, to enact modes of becoming-other, these are the qualities of the novel that are most worthy of identifying, celebrating, and exercising, with or without the printed book to mediate them.

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ABSTRACT

**NOVELISTIC INTIMACIES: READING AND WRITING
IN THE LATE AGE OF PRINT, 1996-PRESENT**

by

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December 2016

Advisor: Dr. renée c. hoogland

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In *Novelistic Intimacies*, I consider the political and aesthetic structure of intimacy in a diverse set of narrative forms produced in the so-called digital age, or the late age of print—from encyclopedic and metafictional novels to graphic storytelling and Afrofuturist fantasy. As an organizing principle, intimacy forces us to consider, at once, how novelists have attempted to restore language and narrative with personal meaning after postmodernism—often termed New Sincerity or post-irony. At the same time, intimacy allows us to see how novelists have experimented on the materiality of the book and the eroticism of language to invent new, impersonal modes of storytelling in the present. In this way, I think about reading and writing in contemporary fiction affectively, as acting on both the body and the mind. This requires that I consider these novels as material objects in the world. How do they circulate? How and why do readers engage with and activate them in the present? I argue that, in the late age of print, readers have particular bodily, physical, and sensual orientations towards books themselves. In different ways, each of the novels chosen manipulates the reader's orientation towards the book as an object as a fundamental component of their aesthetic practice. And, I argue that part of the reason these manipulations are effective is because of a broader history of the book and the ways in which deep-seated habits and memories coalesce around and inform how readers engage with books. In doing so, I examine the

contemporary novel in the context of a longer history of the book as an erotic threat and/or tool, looking backwards to literary figures like Samuel Richardson, Walt Whitman, and W.E.B. Du Bois to illuminate the aesthetic techniques of these contemporary storytellers. Beginning with an interrogation of the unacknowledged homosocial intimacy between men staged by one of the popular originators of New Sincerity, David Foster Wallace, I develop an alternative account of literary production in the late age of print. Through close readings of the works of Wallace, his contemporary A.M. Homes, the graphic auteur Chris Ware, and #BlackLivesMatter activist Kiese Laymon, I analyze the ways in which intimacy—filtered through the categories of race, gender, and sexuality—undergird and determine the relationships between the reader, narrative, and the book.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Vincent Haddad received his bachelor's degree in English and Chemistry from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, his master's degree in English from Wayne State University in 2015, and his Ph.D. in English from Wayne State University in 2016. An early version of chapter one, "Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost: Prosopopoeia, Whitmanian Intimacy, and the Queer Potential of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*" was published in a special issue on the author's work for the peer-reviewed journal *Orbit: Writing around Thomas Pynchon*. The third chapter, "Chris Ware's *Building Stories* as Deleuzian Fabulation, or How and Why to Read Comics Affectively" was published by the peer-reviewed journal *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. Haddad has also published encyclopedia entries on Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* and three book reviews for the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. He has presented papers at the Association for the Study of Arts in the Present (ASAP) annual conferences, the Annual David Foster Wallace Conference as a featured panelist, the Midwest MLA conferences, and the Louisville Conference on Culture and Literature since 1900. His research interests include the modern American novel post-1865, African American literature, gender and sexuality, book history and print culture, and Comics Studies.