The "never-ending end of everything"

Considering post-postmodernism in the work of Percival Everett, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace

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Abstract

In his book *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, the critic Jeffrey Nealon suggests that post-postmodernism signals "the never-ending end of everything." He indicates that the term could lead to paradoxically definitive yet infinite additions of the prefix "post", as we continually comply with the often reductive scholarly expectations to periodise, historicise, and coin words for new moments or movements in literary culture. Nealon's emphasis on a position in relation to postmodernism is clear from the label "hyper postmodernism", which appears elsewhere in his book but differs from other definitional possibilities for post-postmodernism such as Andrew Hoberek's "antipostmodern" or Charles Harris' "suspiciously lively" postmodern "corpse."

The potential oversight is that the DNA of postwar postmodernism is as subject to ambivalence and contradiction, from Jürgen Habermas' obsoletion of "the new" and "alliance of postmodernists with premodernists", to Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives", to Frederic Jameson's insistence that a "celebratory posture" or conclusive "moralizing gesture" resists "freezing into place." Post-postmodernism arrives as an extension of this: provocatively declaring a new literary moment despite the conflicting evidence of the understanding. The specificity of its timing is subject to interpretation, but the 1990s-2000s saw the emergence of widespread critical interest in the idea of writing after the perceived end of postmodernism. Then and now the additional prefix is applied to writers around the turn of the century such as Percival Everett, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace, and this thesis positions these four authors together for the first time at the centre of this debate. I discuss how their most celebrated novels – *Erasure* (2001), *The Corrections* (2001), *White Teeth* (2000), and *Infinite Jest* (1996) – actively stage the problematic but appealing concept of post-postmodernism that each is considered evidence of. After untangling some of the theoretical concerns surrounding post-postmodernism, this thesis looks at details within these novels that dramatise hybridisation, multiplicity, and tensions between irony and sincerity.

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Introduction: Post-postmodernism at the Turn of the Century

In *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism,* Jeffrey Nealon suggests that post-postmodernism signals "the never-ending end of everything" (ix). He indicates that, by adding a second, the term could lead to infinite additions of the prefix "post" as we (as critics) continually comply with the often reductive scholarly expectations to periodise, historicise, and coin words for new moments or movements in literary culture. Nealon fears that the semantically provocative yet unconvincing post-postmodernism projects an exaggerated, unappealing destination for periodisation. This is fertile ground for a direct interrogation of the problems brought to the surface by post-postmodernism – rather than a continuation of using the term without this conditioning – which might alter or divert the path Nealon identifies as undesirable for contemporary literary scholarship. Within this interrogation, it is important to note that the term's lack of conviction is influenced by its position in relation to postmodernism, a position which is clear from the labels "hyper" and "late postmodernism" (both Nealon 8). These appear elsewhere in Nealon's book but differ from other definitional possibilities for post-postmodernism such as Andrew Hoberek's "antipostmodern" or Charles Harris' "suspiciously lively" postmodern "corpse" (236; 1). Other terms associated with writing after postmodernism include "metamodernism" (which David James, Urmila Seshagiri, Robin van den Akker, and Timotheus Vermeulen have published significant work on), Gilles Lipovetsky's "hypermodernism", "aftermodernism" (Nicolas Bourriaud), "cosmodernism'" (Christian Moraru), and "digimodernism" (Alan Kirby). As Lee Konstantinou, who turned my attention to this selection of terms, says:

> […] there are three broad views of our post-postmodern moment. Some see the present as a hyperextension or intensification of postmodernism. Others regard post-postmodernism as an effort to return to a moment before postmodernism (realism, modernism). Still others claim that contemporary writers have moved toward new areas of artistic and cultural concern – that post-postmodernism constitutes a genuine break with the prior cultural dominant.
> ("Introduction" 37).

I would argue that Konstantinou's list is not exhaustive, as writing after postmodernism opens far more doors conceptually than it could ever close, but these "three broad views"

(which can also be conflated and combined) demonstrate just how different the motivations of post-postmodernism can be, which is further complicated by the terminological inconsistency with which scholarship treats it. This inconsistency even extends to how post-postmodernism's letters are arranged on the page. In this thesis, I will be leaving the word lower case, hyphenated, and without scare quotes; however critical practices of capitalising it, removing the hyphen and making both one and two words, and using scare quotes have been used throughout the twenty-first century. I will also primarily be using the word as an *ism*, because further contradictions have occurred in its adjective form (post-postmodern, post-postmodernist) and when referring to authors who ostensibly write it (post-postmoderns, post-postmodernists).

Nealon, Hoberek, and Harris' conceptions of post-postmodernism offer a useful summary of the trajectory of postmodernism's transition into post-postmodernism – Nealon's belated escalation of postmodernism ("hyper" and "late"), Hoberek's attempt to turn against it ("anti"), and Harris' inability to detach from it (its "corpse" being "lively"). These three ideas intersect at the use of a second "post", so are developments of what the novelist Jonathan Lethem put more bluntly as "what postmodernism really needs is a new name" (80). Nealon's escalation is built on "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism", which is itself a "mutation and intensification of certain tendencies within modernism" (ix). While post-postmodernism sustains postmodernism's emphasis on meaning being "*made* rather than *found*", as Nealon says, there is a shift from "*understanding* something to a concern with *manipulating it* – from (postmodern) *meaning* to (post-postmodern) *usage*, one might say" (147-148). Nealon claims that postmodernism "played to an end game the thematics of innovation born in modernism", so post-postmodernism can be understood as a resurrection of this "game", towards a second "end" (166).[1] Hoberek's reaction against postmodernism, meanwhile, stems from its "waning influence" and a belief that it is "something like the afterlife of an afterlife, which temporarily forestalls the realisation that art production now proceeds in the absence of a single determinate narrative of what it should do" (233, 243). Hoberek's "afterlife of an afterlife" is similar to Harris' understanding that "Postmodernism is dead" yet "Long live postmodernism", or the paradox "the wake of the

[1] Nealon's engagement with "late postmodernism", even if he more often favors the term post-postmodernism, comes after Jeremy Green's earlier work – which uses "late" despite questioning "Isn't such a coinage patently absurd?" (1). Green also doubts the gesture of adding another prefix in front of postmodernism, wondering "What comes after postmodernism? […] At this point the preposterous and dizzying prospect of an infinite series opens up before the theorist, and all descriptions of the contemporary cultural moment can be considered as measures of a greater or lesser degree of belatedness" (1).

wake" (both 1). Harris says that "PoMo's wake has been dragged on for several years now" (1). He argues that the second wake and afterlife are reductive rather than restorative – so post-postmodernism is a reluctant reanimation of postmodernism, not a productive response to it with something new.[2] Neil Brooks and Josh Toth take this metaphor further, suggesting that "attending the wake of postmodernism is also a matter of *awakening* postmodernism", and that post-postmodernism is a "period of cultural production" defined by "mourning" (*The Mourning After* 1-2). Like Konstantinou's list of definitional possibilities, reading this main trio of Nealon, Hoberek, and Harris together may cover the main gestures of post-postmodernism, but it does not cover the whole ground here.

As well as Burn, Brooks, Green, and Toth's offerings, additional terms and alternative ways of looking at post-postmodernism can be found just by looking at article, chapter, and book titles from twenty-first century scholarship. These titles differ from Robert L. McLaughlin's 2012 chapter "Post-postmodernism", for instance, which by having a place in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* could at first glance be misinterpreted as an all-encompassing, summative, or straightforward theorisation of post-postmodernism. A common strategy is to conceptualise postmodernism's "ends" (before post-postmodernism's, as Nealon warns of), which Rachel Adams does in her 2007 article "The Ends of America, The Ends of Postmodernism", Daniel Grausan does in his 2011 book *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War*, and Ralph Clare does in "The End of Postmodernism": his contribution to *American Literature in Transition: 1999-2000* in 2017. The "death" of postmodernism is another popular association, as can be seen in Harris' work but also Alan Kirby's 2006 article "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond" and Jonathon Sturgeon's 2014 article "The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction" – the second of which specifically points to autofiction as a development of postmodernism and post-postmodernism, which is the focus of the conclusion to this thesis. Other critical angles for post-postmodernism include writing "after" postmodernism, which Jennifer Gedes looks at in *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives and Ethics* (2000); postmodernism's "passing", which is the focus of Josh Toth's *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2010); a view "beyond" postmodernism, which Christopher Brooks takes in *Beyond Postmodernism: Onto the*

[2] Harris also uses the term "second-generation innovators" when discussing post-postmodern authors such as David Foster Wallace (2). This is similar to Stephen Burn's label "second-generation postmoderns", which Wallace is again considered to be at the centre of. As Burn says, Wallace is "particularly representative of his generation's struggle to forge a new fiction in the wake of postmodernism" (both 450).

Postcontemporary (2013); and Mary K. Holland's look at the possibility of "succeeding" it, in *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (2013). Adam Kelly's article "Beginning with Postmodernism" (2011) offers a reverse engineered approach, going back to the perceived "beginning" of postmodernism to better understand what has come after it. Kelly's approach conforms with the idea that post-postmodernism does not have a fixed chronology, and that the term is a recurring interest in the new century, as shown by this list of publications from 2000-2014.

Post-postmodernism inherits its chronological instability and nonlinearity from postmodernism, which itself gravitates around a phase of recent history but cannot be strictly attributed to specific dates of occurrence. These points in history can be approximated as after the Second World War (for postmodernism's emergence) and around the turn of the twenty-first century (for post-postmodernism's). Though it is difficult to isolate a specific year responsible for postmodernism's introduction into literary culture, Hoberek says that emergence developed into "a notorious and wild ride of radical challenge to institutionalized art and its generic categories in the 1970s and 1980s" (233). Hoberek estimates that postmodern values "no longer worked by the 1990s", because "mass culture itself had appropriated the aesthetics of postmodernism" (both 233); but the timeline for post-postmodernism is not fixed either. In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Barry Lewis suggests that postmodernism "emerged at around the time of the erection of the Berlin Wall in the early 1960s" (169). As for post-postmodernism's alignment with a historical moment, in *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* Hoberek claims that "the very real and horrifying events of 9/11 offered a break from postmodernism" – but he qualifies this, saying that "there are good reasons to doubt" that "as an event in world history" 9/11 "maps easily onto the history of literary and cultural production" (498). More decisively, Brooks and Toth claim that postmodernism "was buried once and for all in the rubble of the World Trade Center (*The Mourning After* 3). Lee Konstantinou suggests that "postmodern irony was said to have died on or around September 11, 2001" ("Introduction" x). Burn says that "the real beginning of a formal response to postmodernism might be dated at the start of the 1990s", but "the problem" is that postmodernism "clearly did not end in either the nineties or the early twenty-first century" (*Cambridge History* 451). Fundamentally, as Stuart Sim says in the *Routledge Companion*, postmodernism is "more than just a brief historical episode" with a clear beginning and ending/handover (viii). This can be said for post-postmodernism too, due to its extension of how "History is unquestionably one of the most contentious areas of debate among those concerned with postmodernism", as John Duvall

says (1). Post-postmodernism inherits a vexed relationship with history, terminological uncertainty, and different conceptual possibilities from postmodernism – as Lloyd Spencer says, "postmodernity is still so amorphous" (*Routledge Companion* 217). This bleeds into the "second wave" of postmodernism, "published after 1990", as Lewis says in the same book (169).

The source of this uncertainty is evident in another list of major works of scholarship, concerning the attempt to pin down postmodernism: Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1982) and *Politics of Postmodernism* (2002), Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), and Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998). Once again, to add to the different lenses through which scholars think about postmodernism, the fact that some of these studies moved into the late 1990s and early 2000s (when they had to compete with critical interest in post-postmodernism) underlines the chronological complications generated by postmodernism, which set the tone for what came after. Raymond Federman's article "Before Postmodernism and After (Part One and Two)" (1993) foregrounds these complications in similar fashion to the explicit temporal disruptions discussed in Adam Kelly's 2011 article.[3] The subsequent overlapping of these periods and co-existence of postmodern and post-postmodern authors is described by Burn as a tension between "the emergence of a generation of writers seeking to move beyond postmodernism and the prolonged vitality of many writers – Barth, Gaddis, Pynchon, Coover – associated with the original rise of the movement" (*Jonathan Franzen* 9-10). This "prolonged vitality" of the postmodern generation contradicts how, as Burn says, the turn of the century was "a time when numerous writers struggled through what they seemed to believe were the last days of postmodernism" (1). But this also demonstrates how post-postmodernism relies on contradiction, because Burn is not alone in offering conflicting ideas on it.

The potential oversight in an understanding of post-postmodernism's gesture beyond

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[3] Caroline Edwards' work on "the contemporary" exposes chronological instability beyond post-postmodernism. As she says, there are "deep anachronisms at work within the contemporary period" – and while "There can be little doubt that postmodernity […] has now relinquished its paradigmatic position within cultural production", this relinquishment has only led to "an era defined by radical uncertainty", whose "temporal disjointedness […] has given rise to different expressions of the unevenness of the contemporary." Edwards identifies how periodisation undermines the contemporary's complexity and nonlinearity: "there might be little sense in using politico-historical dates to demarcate a period of literary production; perhaps aesthetic styles such as modernism and postmodernism might be more productive" (all 4-12). Under this rubric, post-postmodernism is useful as an unstable set of principles rather than as a fixed period.

postmodernism – and this implication of at least a degree of resolution – is that the DNA of postmodernism is equally subject to ambivalence and contradiction, from Jürgen Habermas' obsoletion of "the new" and "alliance of postmodernists with premodernists", to Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives", to Fredric Jameson's insistence that a "celebratory posture" or conclusive "moralizing gesture" resists "freezing into place" (4, 14; xxiv; 66). These different stances highlight a circular trajectory of periodisation (Habermas), active motion and progress forwards (Jameson), and a transgression or rejection of movement in a given direction, generating stasis (Lyotard). As Habermas elaborates, "The term "modern" again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old world to the new" (3). This makes it difficult to invest in the idea that phases of modernism are simply replacing one another (without overlapping or merging) and leaving behind one set of aesthetic principles as a new one is discovered. At Habermas' time of writing, postmodernism was simply "the most recent modernism", which generates "an abstract opposition between tradition and the present"; so even if "that which is merely "stylish" will soon become out-moded", literary modes and styles always leave an imprint on the next generation's trends and interests (all 4). This is what collapses distinctions between modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism, because "the anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history" is prevalent across these different movements (5). As Habermas puts it, in all its forms "modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition" and "is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time" (4).[4]

Jameson seems to agree with Habermas when claiming that "The postmodern period […] eschews temporality for space and has generally grown skeptical about deep phenomenological experience in general" (134-135). But eschewing temporality is not the same of collapsing it, and Jameson expresses a fear for "how ideology ends, on some postmodern replay of the fifties end-of-ideology theses – not by evaporating" (150). He points to the *opposite* of "freezing into place" as the way forwards for modernist

[4] Habermas does prioritise a discussion of modernism and postmodernism, but "premodernists" is a phrase that comes up in his article, as well as "anti-modernity" and "post-avant-garde" (14, 6). These foreground his belief in the interchangeability of different prefixes in a collapsed, circular, looping process of moving between old and new phases of modernism.

development.[5] Jameson considers a way out, whereas Habermas sees postmodernism as confined to a loop. Lyotard not only sees a way out, he sees postmodernism as liberated and distinct from modernism, and therefore able to break away from these strategies of periodisation in general – as he says, "It is possible to conceive the world of postmodern knowledge as governed by a game of perfect information, in the sense that the data is in principle accessible to any expert: there is no scientific secret" (52). There is an accessibility to this liberation – a perfection to this "information" – which directly intervenes in a straight line towards "the end of knowledge" (Lyotard 51). "Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief" and postmodernism's "state is constant" (Lyotard 77, 79). As Lyotard would have it, modernism and postmodernism are somewhat arbitrary distinctions. Jameson's foreword to Lyotard's book outlines differences between his own theory of postmodernism and Lyotard's, also pitting Lyotard against Habermas – he calls Lyotard's work a "thinly veiled polemic against" Habermas', and calls Habermas Lyotard's "philosophical adversary" (vii, viii). These claims and Jameson's attempts to theorise Lyotard's theorisation of postmodernism accentuate how postmodernism is convoluted and contradictory by design. In Jameson's own book he discusses "one of the fundamental features of the postmodern […] the absolute exclusion of interpretative possibilities" (144). He contradicts this "exclusion" shortly after, describing "our peculiar postmodern feeling about our own *multiple* subjectivities" (151, emphasis added). He then conforms with this logic of contradiction and multiplicity by qualifying Lyotard's work, which itself qualifies Habermas'. As Jameson highlights, "So it is that, rigorously conducted, an enquiry into this or that feature of the postmodern will end telling us little of value about postmodernism itself, but against its own well and quite unintentionally a great deal about the modern" (66). The only communication postmodernism provides is confusing, as befits postmodernism as an idea, and this confusion's only anchor is postmodernism's reliance on modernism in its conception and definition. This bottom line of postmodernism reappears in post-postmodernism, with the added reliance on postmodernism.

Equally, theorising post-postmodernism is dependent on whose hands the term is in as a critical idea, or which author (either explicitly or implicitly) is engaging with its aesthetic

[5] Jameson notes that, despite movement towards an endpoint, postmodernism is nonetheless a space in which works interdepend and cannot always be exclusively assigned to modernism, postmodernism, or something else. He applies this interdependence to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance": "when we make some initial inventory of the varied cultural artifacts that might plausibly be characterized as postmodern, the temptation is strong to seek the "family resemblance" of such heterogenous styles and products" (Jameson 55).

and stylistic potential. A consistent throughline, however, is that writing after postmodernism further complicates postmodernism's tricky relationships with affect, authenticity, and sincerity. In 1979, considering the different modes of fiction at that time, Bill Buford and Peter De Bolla memorably labelled postmodernism "easily the most popular and the most inadequate", but the attraction to it prevailed (n.p.). Despite further inadequacy and failure, the appeal of post-postmodernism has prevailed too. As Konstantinou says, "Postmodernism as a literary style, set of theoretical claims, or socioeconomic phenomenon cannot simply be evaded, side stepped, or wished away" ("Introduction" 6). It as if post-postmodernism has assumed this mantel in the new century. Postmodernism offers a set of values that trouble these relationships with affect, authenticity, and sincerity – namely, interests in irony, experiment, and manipulation of the real – and this exposes the anti-affective obstacles, inauthenticity, and insincerity that are central to this previous phase of modernism. These central tenets are subverted in post-postmodernism, by the attempt to take away the negations of each of these things. Robert McLaughlin escalates the past obstacles to a "dead end of postmodernism […] detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language" (55); but I would argue that there is more nuance to postmodernism's problem than this, and even more to post-postmodernism's own problems. I would also disagree with Konstantinou regarding post-postmodernism's inability to "evade" or "sidestep" postmodernism's obstacles, even if this is a contingent, transitionary process of *reclaiming* sincerity and authenticity (a process which brings a new set of obstacles). Here and throughout this thesis, I am using the words "irony" and "sincerity", which are at the heart of postmodernism's shift to post-postmodernism, on Lionel Trilling's terms, which is to say that they relate to a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2).[6] As Trilling posits, "society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves" (11). This understanding has been transformed into an aesthetic by post-postmodern fiction.[7] The attention paid to sincerity by post-postmodern authors can be

[6] My understanding of sincerity is also influenced by Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal's work in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* – and centrally, their idea "that sincerity consists of a performance", that "the theatricality of sincerity" relates to "its bodily, linguistic, and social performances, and the success, or felicitousness, of such performances" (3).

[7] Trilling builds authenticity into his claims about sincerity, suggesting that "I can rely on its suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does" (11). But post-postmodern fiction is more interested in sincerity than complete authenticity, precisely because of a *less* "strenuous moral experience."

extended by what Trilling calls "the moral life" being "in process of revising itself", as post-postmodernism is by definition something constantly in this cyclical "process" of self-revision. As Trilling says, "The news of such an event is often received with a degree of irony or some other sign of resistance" (both 1). Ultimately, "resistance" is pivotal for post-postmodernism – both resistance of postmodernism and, paradoxically, of being separated from postmodernism.

Trilling discusses an "enterprise of sincerity" which involves a "state of personal existence" that is "not to be attained without the most arduous effort" (5-6); but we can rethink this within the context of post-postmodernism and call it an *aesthetic project* of sincerity. This project certainly includes "arduous effort" in terms of struggles surrounding definition, conception, labelling, and categorisation; but insincerity and irony are counterproductively relied upon as much as sincerity, because sincerity is the project's objective and aspiration, not its present nor constant state. Post-postmodernism arrives as an extension of postmodernism's central problem: provocatively declaring a new literary moment/movement despite the fact there is conflicting evidence of what the new moment/movement stands for. It offers a middle ground, a negotiation between progressive innovation and established formalist tradition – and post-postmodern authors write from and for this middle ground. As we have seen, the specificity of their emergence is subject to interpretation, but the late twentieth and early twenty-first century saw widespread scholarly interest in the idea of writing after the perceived end of postmodernism. Using Baruch Spinoza's concept of the "Affective Turn", Rachel Greenwald Smith discusses how literary fiction is enacting this "turn" at this time. As Smith says, the turn "chronologically coincides with the end of the postmodernism debates" ("Postmodernism" 424). It is therefore essential here in understanding how we think about post-postmodernism. It is more convincing, I think, than claims of post-postmodern realism – such as Margaret Doherty's in the 2015 article "State-funded Fiction: Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-postmodern Age", or even Madhu Dubey's framing of this as a question in the 2011 article "Post-postmodern Realism?" Realism is too fixed or concrete to be a significant part of the post-postmodern project; it is instead buried beneath sincere storytelling that borrows experimental stylistics (but reduces the irony that often comes with them). Smith's affective turn specifically addresses incompletion and conditionality, because turning towards something does not take away what is being turned away from, it is simply no longer the priority object of attention. An affective turn towards sincerity is fitting framework for post-postmodernism then, separating it from other ideas such as David James' on postmodernism

becoming "earnest" ("How Postmodernism Became Earnest"), Konstantinou's on "a shift in U.S. literature, politics, and culture from countercultural irony through postmodern irony to contemporary postirony" ("Introduction" xii), and Adam Kelly's on the "New Sincerity" as "a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values […] a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words" ("New Sincerity" 198).[8]

Post-postmodernism's contingent movement away from postmodernism is from prioritising irony over sincerity to hybridising the two, which can be achieved via affect. Affect is the means and sincerity constitutes the ends, in other words. As Smith claims, the affective turn during the post-postmodern moment offers a "corrective or counter to postmodernist suspicion towards subjective emotion" and helps alleviate the problem of "being estranged by the performative distance of postmodernist prose" ("Postmodernism" 424, 438). Smith fears that "if we are looking for the production of affect, postmodernist literature, which seems to lack material, bodies, and people, seems to be the most unlikely place to find it"; therefore, "If there is a compelling definition of post-postmodernism, it is that contemporary experimental work increasingly seeks to engage with material realities rather than merely its own language play" ("Postmodernism" 423, 439). But this engagement with "material realities" manifests as an affective turn rather than something as fixed as realism or even post-irony or the new sincerity.[9] I argue that by extension the "corrective" implicated in Smith's turn strives for affective potential while relying on a literary *construction* of post-postmodern sincerity.[10] Affect is the determining factor here, ultimately, yet this construction of sincerity is partially anti-affective because we are constantly being shown what is being moved from (postmodern irony) in order to see what is being moved to. Post-postmodernism does not exist but also cannot function without postmodernism – making it, to an extent, postmodernism "under new management" just as postmodernism was "modernism under new management", as Barry Lewis says (*Routledge Companion* 217).

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[8] As Kelly says in this article, "being a post-postmodernist or New Sincerity writer means never being certain whether you are so, and whether your struggle to transcend narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity is even undertaken in good faith" ("New Sincerity" 204-205).

[9] I would agree with Allard den Dulk, in this respect, who in the context of Wallace suggests that "The term 'new sincerity' (without a clear definition of what that sincerity amounts to) does not fully communicate" Wallace's affective "complexity", even if den Dulk also does not settle on the term post-postmodernism (*Existentialist Engagement* 9). He also suggests that "post-irony" is not as fitting as "meta-irony", arguing that Wallace's "ironic attitude is successfully overcome by ironizing it, by being ironic about irony; that is, by employing meta-irony" (*Existentialist Engagement* 80).

[10] The affective turn in fiction opens a new set of doors conceptually, for ideas that are adjacent to post-postmodernism. Ralph Clare's "Metaffective fiction" is one of them, which as he says "does not simply 'return to affect'" but "simultaneously reflects upon the limitations and construction of affect in ways that recall postmodernism's penchant for metafiction and self-conscious textuality" ("Metaffective Fiction" 263).

What post-postmodernism offers is an even more "volatile mix of the old with the new", as Georges van den Abbeele says in *The Routledge Companion* (17). Yet this "volatile mix" is a theoretically stimulating one. The post-postmodern result has not fully relinquished performativity, so can be viewed as performed sincerity. Trilling claims that sincerity can contain irony in its construction, suggesting that "the word [sincerity] itself has lost most of its former high dignity […] if we speak it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony" (6).[11] The destabilising potential of irony threatens sincerity – threatening, as Smith suggests, a "general critical consensus that postmodernist literature tends to be tonally – and therefore affectively – cold" ("Postmodernism" 423). This justifies post-postmodern resistance to coldness. "Cold" could be considered as the antonym of the warm self-consciousness that, beneath the irony-sincerity paradox I have established, ultimately defines post-postmodern fiction.

This thesis contends that Percival Everett, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace are authors to which we can productively apply the adjective post-postmodern, even if we must do so with caution and consideration of the implications that come with doing this. Then and now the term is applied to writers at the turn of the century such as Wallace and Franzen, but less often to writers of colour such as Everett and Smith, which is a particular oversight due to the importance of sincerity to racial identity. I argue that this group's major novels actively stage problematic understandings of post-postmodernism, second-guessing this scholarly debate within the fictional narratives themselves. These four dramatise this shift or transitionary process between postmodernism and post-postmodernism (as under development) in their work in different ways, involving different components of twenty-first century sincerity such as resistance of late capitalism, mental health struggle, and racial inequality. Their works conceive of these things narratively and thematically, but the complex relationship between sincerity and irony (and resulting affective turn) also becomes the form these works take – that is, they are stylistically layered, multivalent, and hybridising. These are the two levels that post-postmodernism can be viewed as operating in Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's work, which is unsurprising given that the term, as I have outlined, is one that is inextricable from methods of explanation but also demonstration. Other authors who are contemporaneous to these four have either

[11] As Trilling proposes, "'I sincerely believe' has less weight than 'I believe'" (6). The counterproductive, irony-conditioned state of sincerity stretches to post-postmodernism's constant process of postmodern qualification, I think.

been associated with post-postmodernism in scholarship or should be, such as Paul Beatty, Joshua Cohen, Mark Z. Danielewski, Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Bernadine Evaristo, Tom McCarthy, Will Self, George Saunders, and Colson Whitehead.[12] But there is a stronger case for reading post-postmodern complication in Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace, as they are all primarily interested in the access to sincerity that different obstacles of irony limit, but do not prohibit. This thesis will unpack the persistent attempts to turn postmodern irony into post-postmodern sincerity at the centre of works by these four authors I have isolated – attempts which self-consciously address their own shortcomings and limitations, and in different ways concede that post-postmodernism, despite its definitional ambiguities, can be defined by its simultaneous dependence on postmodernism and its desire to turn towards affect. In short, these four authors place the paradoxes of post-postmodernism front and centre. Their work is imbued with but also a self-reflexive commentary on the detailed conditions of paradox. Specifically, I will look at the evidence of this in their most celebrated novels: Everett's *Erasure* (2001), Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996).

Literary Generations and Coteries

Stephen Burn argues that "both general succession and the term *post-postmodernism* are relative concepts" (*Cambridge History* 452); but a post-postmodern generation of authors has nonetheless been established by scholarship that repeatedly groups the same authors at the turn of the century together.[13] Therefore it is useful to operate within the framework of generations, networks, and coteries when thinking critically about post-postmodernism. My

[12] These authors often address post-postmodernism in their fiction, essays, or interviews. Other authors who are not generally associated with the term, but do discuss the relationship between postmodernism and post-postmodernism explicitly within their fiction, include Ali Smith and Hanya Yanagihara. Smith does so in *Winter* (2017), with the lines "Literature was dead. The book was dead. Modernism, postmodernism, realism and surrealism were all dead" and "It is the dregs, really, to be living in a time when even your dreams have to be post-postmodern consciouser-than-thou" (3, 158). Yanagihara does so in *A Little Life* (2015), which brings the term "post-black" to the conversation: "he wasn't black; he was post-black. (Postmodernism had entered Malcolm's frame of consciousness much later than everyone else's, as he tried to avoid taking literature classes in a sort of passive rebellion against his mother.)" (58-59). Yanagihara then returns to this comical undermining of "post" terms: "Post-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past […] The post-man. Jude the Postman" (94).

[13] Others, such as David Marcus, have grouped these authors under different terms to post-postmodernism. Marcus calls Wallace, Smith, Dave Eggers, and Richard Powers "a new group of avant-gardists" representing "a catchall of voices and styles" in the 1990s/2000s (n.p.).

particular coterie of authors offers a vital insight into the distinction between postmodernism and post-postmodernism because Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's novels directly expose the problems and appeals of this debate. An interconnected case study of these four authors and their landmark novels invites a critical conversation about post-postmodernism to match the one being addressed and dramatised within their fiction. They can be considered a coterie because Franzen and Wallace were good friends before Wallace's tragic suicide in 2008; Smith wrote of her admiration for Wallace in the essay "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" shortly after his suicide, and mentioned Franzen in the same breath as Wallace in her 2011 columns for *Harper's*; Franzen's 2015 novel *Purity* includes an explicit reference to Smith and he has also discussed her work in interviews, such as a 2021 one with Merve Emre for *Vulture*; and Everett's work has an inextricable link to academia shared by all three of these writers, because it fixates on the limitations of this environment.[14] It is important to bring Everett to this group because of his neglect by scholarship, particularly within the context of post-postmodernism. Konstantinou considers Smith and Wallace as part of the "Theory Generation" ("Introduction" 6); but I would argue that Franzen and Everett can be could also be categorised as such, and that academia and theory are central to post-postmodernism so this is a more useful designation. Incorporating academia – and not just using it as a narrative setting – is not the only component of these four novels' aesthetics, which is why the more generative term post-postmodern is more convincing.

After all, the academic arena was pivotal in the twentieth century emergence of postmodernism, and by extension it plays a significant role in the transition to post-postmodernism. As Hoberek says, "postmodernism's prominence in the 1970s and 1980s" was "visible" in "syllabuses and academic journals" (235-236). Considering their place within what Mark McGurl calls "the Program Era" (alluding to creative writing's growing esteem within the academy), these four authors engage differently with "the struggle between a dominant "conventional realism" and a minority "radical experimentalism"" that McGurl claims to be "an ongoing one" in the postwar university establishment (*Program Era* 33). As McGurl suggests, this is a "classically dialectical struggle in which opposing sides begin,

[14] In Smith's essay on Wallace, she says that before he died he "was my favourite living writer" (*Changing My Mind* 261). For her *Harper's* column, she writes of Paula Fox's influence on/presence in "Franzen's "Perchance to Dream": his *Harper's* essay in defence of the novel, and in DFW's classroom" (*Feel Free* 278). The line in *Purity* in question, which namedrops Smith, is "He arched an eyebrow at Pip. "And what about *Zadie Smith*? Great stuff, right?" (264). The *Vulture* interview was where Franzen echoed this line from his novel: "I think Zadie Smith is the real deal. She's the whole package" ("Jonathan Franzen Thinks" n.p.).

despite themselves, to interpenetrate" (*Program Era* 33). This interdependence and these blurred lines between experiment and realism, like those of irony and sincerity, are responsible for the unresolvable tension between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. Post-postmodernism therefore capitalises on how "a novel is, after all, a very good example of "experiential commodity" whose value to its readers is a transvaluation of the authorial labor that went into its making", as McGurl puts it (*Program Era* 15). These post-postmodern tensions thereby directly impact readers, because as McGurls says, "as an elective element of the undergraduate curriculum, creative writing issues an invitation to student-consumers to develop an intensely personal relation to literary value" (*Program Era* 15). The program era suggests the early rise of post-postmodernism and the affective turn in a proto state, so the framework for these tensions, in the case of these four authors, are their ties to institutions. This is not least because the academy historically gave license to postmodern irony in the first place, due to the university's access to dense, complex literary texts that require teaching in order to read them (which became a target of post-postmodern correction). As well as all having university degrees (and some more than one), these authors' ties are as follows: Everett is a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California, Smith a tenured professor in the Creative Writing faculty of NYU, and Wallace taught at Emerson College (Illinois State University) and Pomona College before his death. Franzen's debut novel – *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) – was completed while he was a research assistant at Harvard, beginning a long, fraught relationship with academia.

Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace complicate the relationship between author and critic further by all being prolific essayists, alongside their teaching careers. This legacy of author-as-critic is again part of post-postmodernism more broadly, because the legacy is passed down from modernism and postmodernism, with Virginia Woolf famously writing in the 1925 essay "Modern Fiction" that "In making a survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction, it is difficult not to take for granted that the modern practice of the art [of fiction writing] is somehow an improvement upon the old" (157). As for the postmodern generation, John Barth wrote "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979), the first of which Hoberek attributes with having a "status as a postmodern manifesto", and which McLaughlin describes as marking "an earlier sea change, the transition from modernism to the next thing" (235; 55). In this essay, Barth explains the motivations of his postmodern works, outlining his relationship with postmodern principles – specifically, he talks about being "invested" in exploring "narrative tradition[s] from which printed fiction evolved", and details his influence from "the "old masters" of twentieth-

century [modernist] fiction" (63, 67). Other modernists such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett and postmodern authors such as Don DeLillo and William Gaddis could be added to this list of author-critics. Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace have published nonfiction widely so can be considered as post-postmodernism's author-critics, and each has written what can be described as a manifesto essay for *this* phase of modernism.[15] These pieces can be positioned alongside *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest* as companion works that further develop the relationships between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. My chapters that follow this introduction look at these essays in detail: Everett's "Signing to the Blind" (1991), Franzen's "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels" (1996) and "Mr. Difficult" (2002), Smith's "Fail Better" and "Read Better" (both 2007), and Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction" (1993). In one of Smith's essays, she self-reflexively discusses "the special role of writer-critics", claiming that "Every critic is doing as much imaginative work as the novelist" ("Read Better" n.p.). This claim is particularly important to criticism that is attached at the hip to novels written by the same person. The "imaginative work" being done by Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace – both their novels and essays – specifically aid our understanding of their relationships to post-postmodernism.

As this thesis looks at, *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest* offer an extra layer to this pairing of fiction and criticism because they are novels that I argue entertain the possibility of what Rita Felski calls "postcritical reading." As Felski posits, postcritique concerns "the text's status as co-actor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen", even if Felski confesses to being "a little weary of "post" words", but "can find no fitter or more suitable phrase" (12). I contend that this post word is integral to post-postmodernism, due to the way the authors I am analysing themselves analyse their process and their relationships with postmodernism and post-postmodernism within their fiction – in keeping with post-postmodernism's paradoxical transparency and method of telling you what it is doing simultaneous to doing it. Judith Ryan conceives of post-postmodern fiction as being "after theory", because "In the last third of the twentieth

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[15] In a 2020 essay, Smith pokes fun at the idea of writing manifestoes and *why I write* questions and their "exigent tone" (*Intimations* 20). The subtext here is her allusions to her own, such as "Fail Better" and "Read Better." In an interview that explicitly references "Two Paths for the Novel" (which is another that I discuss in my chapter on Smith), she tells Lisa Sproull that "polemics are temporal, good for shaking things up at a particular moment, but they wilt and fade beside the incommensurable reality of individual books" ("An Interview with Zadie Smith" n.p.).

century, a new strain emerged in postmodern fiction […] an entire array of novels had appeared that might be said to "know about" literary and cultural theory. Some build on theory, some argue against it, others modify it in important ways" (1). As Ryan says, of a generation she suggests Wallace is at the front of, these works "not only put the flesh on the bones of poststructuralist theory, they fill its gaps, complete it where it stops short, and argue with it when it appears too reductive" (20). I am less concerned with the ability to read specific schools of thought (such as poststructuralism) in the fiction – although this can clearly be done – and am more interested in how fictional narrative formally replicates the aesthetics of literary criticism and scholarship, because I think post-postmodernism facilitates this.[16] Burn notes how authors like Franzen and Wallace near the millennium write with the "self-conscious awareness of a critical framework" (*Jonathan Franzen* 1) and Adam Kelly's work looks at Wallace's "more hands-on manner" to "great writers teach[ing] us how to read them" ("The Death of the Author" 49). In another article, Kelly elaborates on this, unpacking Wallace's "recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation", which have roots in "the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behaviour" as it "begins to take priority for the acting self" ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 136). Martin Paul Eve, meanwhile, suggests that *Erasure* is "one of the clearest examples of a work of twenty-first-century metafiction that blurs the boundaries between criticism and fiction, knowing the reading methods of the academy" (116). Extending this reading of Everett's novel as in line with post-theory or postcritique, "*Erasure* is a text that relies, to some degree, upon the expectations of a literary tradition and knowledge of the techniques by which it will be read in order to show that the entire novel is parody" (Eve 120). This thesis expands these mentions in passing of the specific novels' potential as postcritical fiction. I discuss all four major works by Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace with this in mind, and apply the premise of postcritique to post-postmodernism.

Building on Jameson's foundational ideas on postmodernism, the academic institution is where the market and late capitalism become fundamentally important to the aesthetics of post-postmodernism. Embraced by authorial sincerity and impeded by stylistic difficulty in different measures (and at different textual moments of formal experimentation), readers of Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace are included in what Ryan Brooks calls "the

[16] This is something Nicoline Timmer also does, as she suggests that "Wallace creates what could be called "critical fiction", in that his work shows a heightened awareness of the twists and turns of critical theory of the last few decades" (23).

contemporary novel's contract with the reader" (27). In *The Novel Art: Elevations of Fiction After Henry James*, Mark McGurl discusses the "intellectual work" required to read "the difficult modernist text" and a process of "mental labor" (11). I argue that McGurl's idea can be linked to Brooks' on specifically post-postmodern responsibilities (of the author, critic, and reader). Post-postmodernism has inherited this complication of author-reader relations, that the critic is in the middle of. Cautious of the kind of ironic, anti-affective, and manipulative postmodern market logics laid bare by Jameson's work, these four authors reimagine threatening late capitalist transactions (between individual autonomy and institutional control) as writing/reading pursuits. For Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace, these pursuits begin in academia, where sincere students turned insincere consumers are trained to interpret literary value from a text and access something meaningful beneath its formal complexity. Another way of framing this, as Brooks does, is that the free market is responsible for post-postmodernism, because writing after postmodernism can be "understood as the means by which the American novel participates in the neoliberal turn" (27). Author, critic, and reader freedoms constantly rupture boundaries between sincerity and irony in post-postmodern fiction, but if *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest* are also suggestive of this "*neoliberal* turn" (emphasis added), they are by pointing to what is being turned from – late capitalist manipulation and postmodern irony. In these four novels, this new, liminal, post-postmodern space is built on this qualified, conflicted author-reader contract: a contract which transgresses its position at the border of the text and occupies fictional space too. These authors use narrative and character to dramatise the fundamental responsibilities to both supply autonomy (the author's) and authentically, sincerely consume (the reader's) and then turn away and use this affective agency in real scenarios. The reader's ability to consume freely is directly influenced by each author's mix of experimentalism and realism and irony and sincerity, which are at the core of post-postmodernism's problematic rehearsals of its own potential. While different, these four novels share the quality of being narratives specifically about access – of individual characters to their affective potential and subsequent sincerity, but also to personal fulfilment and existential purpose.

Order of Chapters

As well as the academic and postcritical links between them, my coterie of post-postmodern authors join together due to the relevance of specific methodologies to their work. *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest* can also be viewed through specific critical lenses such as French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "rhizome", which Deleuze and Guattari define as the result when you "subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted", yet "There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another" (6-9). I argue that post-postmodern aesthetics are used by these four novels in part to create the effect of an *impeded* rhizome, as the difficult untangling of postmodern influence while attempting to move past it offers a mediation between singularity and pluralism, between ties, lines, and points of simultaneous connection and the unique specificities being connected. Also, because of their complex treatments of temporality, these four post-postmodern novels can be usefully applied to the concept of "lost futures" written about by cultural critic Mark Fisher. In his 2014 book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*, Fisher talks about how "cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity" (17). In this sense, "simultaneity" contradicts the impulse to replace each old period of "cultural time" with a new one – which Nealon and other literary scholars are skeptical or fearful of – and I argue that this blurred temporal state is the resulting product of Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's difficult relationships with the postmodern past, their post-postmodern present, and the uncertain future.

Post-postmodernism's emphases on affect and sincerity must also be considered in the context of race, which all four authors discuss in their work but which Everett and Smith foreground as a problem. In *Erasure* and *White Teeth*, racial inequality poses an active, urgent threat to the ability to turn towards affect and to achieve individual and collective sincerity – as a narrative objective and character trait, but also as an aesthetic or formal component. In my Everett and Smith chapters I therefore discuss race more centrally – and in the context of the terms postracial and postcolonial: two more posts which have significant relationships to post-postmodernism – but race can be viewed as a point of contention in Franzen and Wallace's work too due to its suppression and more exclusive context of whiteness. In terms of methodology, I primarily analyse race within these authors' novels themselves, but I use critical race theory and literary scholarship on race alongside my readings of these primary texts. As my chapters interrogate, race is often sidelined when it comes to critical conversations on postmodernism and post-postmodernism, with Len Platt

and Sara Upstone's *Postmodern Literature and Race* being a rare body of work that refutes or challenges this. By using studies such as Platt/Upstone's and theorist Saidiya Hartman's – which looks at racialised capitalism, black experience, and "the gendered afterlife of slavery" (167) – I illustrate race's centrality to the post-postmodernism debate. I spotlight an issue of postmodern and post-postmodern canonisation and emphasise that race should be inseparable from critical work on writing after postmodernism, even if it has historically been separated. In general, my chapters look at Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace individually – with *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest* being the main focus of these chapters, though I also use other novels by these authors secondarily, as well as the nonfiction by them I have mentioned. I look at these authors in reverse chronological order of their main novel's date of publication – so from 2001, through 2000, to 1996 – which allows me to begin at post-postmodernism's latest stage of development within this coterie and work backwards to Wallace's novel, which as my introduction to post-postmodernism has shown is arguably the movement's most cited work. This structural approach also allows me to begin with what I claim to be post-postmodernism at its most frantic and socially urgent (in Everett's work), and then turn to the major works that I argue demonstrate how we arrived at this point, even if Everett has not explicitly referred to these other authors as influences whereas Smith, for instance, has.

By engaging with post-postmodern potential, Everett's work implicates postmodernism, even if the categorisation of his writing as postmodern itself does not sufficiently capture the amount of layers of irony/sincerity and metatextuality he writes with. Everett's conflicted relationship with this preceding phase of modernism is well documented in scholarship surrounding his work. Martin Paul Eve posits that "it is questionable whether the aesthetic characteristics of Everett's novel [*Erasure*] can be said to advance beyond postmodernism" (119). As Margaret Russett notes when also discussing Everett's oeuvre, "If the label "postmodern" thus seems inadequate to characterize the novels (or more than a couple of the novels) themselves, it may nonetheless offer a plausible description of Everett's career. It seems questionable, however, whether this name is preferable to those Everett has rejected" (364). It is no coincidence that the word "questionable" has come up often as critics navigate the contradictions yet temptations in describing Everett's work as postmodernism or post-postmodernism. As Michel Feith says, Everett's complex and often contradictory relationship with postmodernism is comparable to his and his work's resistance to racial classification, too: "The question of Everett's relation to "PoMo" culture mirrors another difficulty, that of assigning him a definite position along the "racial" spectrum. On the

definitional margins of both African American literature and contemporary postmodernism, Percival Everett once more wears the trickster's motley cap, and walks the line of liminality" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). In my chapter, I argue that we can describe Everett's work as post-postmodern, because discomfort with this label is actually a symptom of being a fit for it. The 2001, mid-career breakout novel *Erasure* is Everett at his most post-postmodern, and its hyper self-consciousness and metafictional acrobatics are paired with a turn towards affect and sincerity that is conditioned by the academy and the publishing industry. These narrative interests are focalised by the experiences of Thelonious "Monk" Ellison's story of academic and market exclusivity, the systemic oppression of African American literature, and the experiential and material erasure these all induce.

Anthony Stewart suggests that "what Everett's work models – what it is about – is what it looks like to see the world not in unconventional terms but in *anticonventional* ways" (*Approximate Gestures* 6). Russett claims that "By flouting the generic expectations they set up, Everett's fictions recapitulate the assault on *textual* "identity" that I have described as the paradoxical project of his work overall" (364). My chapter argues that *Erasure* actively encourages its own paradox: a paradox of postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity, which is determined by undermining "expectations" and embracing "anticonventional ways" of writing about race. Ralph Clare suggests that, "As *Erasure* has it, literary postmodernism appeared to have reached an end that by its own theoretical premise it could never reach" (*American Literature in Transition* 91). Yet as Matthew McKnight argues, Everett's work is "simultaneously satirizing the social novel and pointing to a simpler alternative for living the way we do" (n.p.). *Erasure* exemplifies postmodern exhaustion at breaking point, but only *points* to solutions such as post-postmodern sincerity and social realism, because it cannot irrevocably commit to either set of aesthetics due to the way both further problematise race. In a 2022 interview, Everett suggested that "There's really no such thing as realism, the same way that paintings are never photographs. You can have something that's representational. Then you're going to have something that pushes against the representational, or what we think realism is." In this interview he talked about how "When we step outside [of ourselves] and see the irony, I think that's where hope resides" (both "Art Makes Us Better" n.p.). This gesture of "step[ping] outside" seems to be what his fiction does generally with existing modes of fiction writing. Everett has repeatedly said that he does not subscribe to the idea of "experimental" fiction either, however his writing still draws from this mode too – as he said in another 2022 interview: "A lot of experimental novelists experiment for the sake of experimentation, but if it doesn't add meaning, I have no interest; the only reason I come to

this art form is because I'm interested in playing with how meaning gets constructed" ("I'd love to write a novel everyone hated" n.p.). In a 2004 interview with Rone Shavers, Everett collapsed the distinction between experimentalism and realism even more, emphasising that the terms are under development in his work: "I don't know what *avant-garde* or *experimental* means. Every novel is experimental" (n.p.). Everett's answers in an interview with Jared McGinnis echoed his sentiment, instead communicating an uncertainty towards the word "abstract." Responding to whether he would consider his work experimental, or his goal as "to write an abstract novel", Everett retorts "No. I would *like* to make an abstract novel, but I don't know how to do it […] I think every novel is experimental. The term is vacuous. A literary writer does not know what she or he is doing once started. So, that's an experiment" (n.p.).

As my second chapter looks at, *The Corrections* (Franzen's third novel) was published in the same year as *Erasure* and is his most recognised novel. It invites the adjective "post-postmodern" due to a non-committal, contradictory reaction against postmodern irony, which can here be framed as an issue tied to late capitalism and the market within the context of white Midwestern America. *The Corrections* contradicts Franzen's self-proclaimed rejection of postmodernism, undermining the claims of his own nonfiction which demonstrate what Hoberek calls his "antipostmodern polemics" (236). The novel instead offers a fiction imbued with the very mechanics Franzen's essays declared a need to correct: Konstantinou describes it as "an attempt to dismantle postmodernism", Jésus Blanco Hidalga "an updated realist social novel", and Hoberek claims that Franzen "champions a premodernist realism" (*American Literature in Transition* 115; 1; 234). Burn, positioning Franzen "at the end of postmodernism", nonetheless finds a middle ground and suggests that his work "simultaneously rejects and accepts the legacy of the postmodern novel" (*Jonathan Franzen* 91). These conflicting aesthetic possibilities generate a personal discussion initiated by Franzen in his essays, but they are further problematised in the way post-postmodernism plays out in the fictional narrative of *The Corrections*, which I argue dramatises and thematises the post-postmodernism debate (like *Erasure* does). The characterisation of the Lambert family offers a platform for discussing post-postmodernism's relationship with neoliberalism – the family, I argue, embody Michel Foucault's assertion that neoliberalism is "nothing at all, or anyway, nothing but always the same thing, and always the same thing but worse" (130). The Lamberts' structural patterns of consumer repetition and flawed cycles of self-correction can be read as rehearsals of post-postmodernism's grapple with sincerity, as this too is a repetitive process that must constantly compete with obstacles, that moves

forwards (and away from postmodernism) as often as it moves back towards it. Franzen's novel enacts this movement back towards postmodernism due to its hypocritical use of irony and experimentalism, but also by conforming with canonical postmodernism's homogeneity, as can be seen in the whiteness of the novel's cast of characters and the absence of racial diversity within the otherwise ambitious, sprawling narrative.

As my third chapter suggests, of the four novels I discuss Smith's *White Teeth* most directly engages with the restorative potential of post-postmodernism's affective turn. Unlike Everett and Franzen, Smith sees writing after postmodernism as grounds for hope, inclusion, and progress. David James identifies that "Smith reconfigures the sentimental mode, then, not as a supplier of disproportionate feeling […] rather as a reason to contemplate the ethical expectations and political destinations of our own responsiveness" ("Zadie Smith's Style" n.p.). I would add that the potential of reaching these "destinations" is most relevant to her 2000 debut novel. *White Teeth*'s racially diverse story of the intersecting lives of the Iqbal and Jones families during the second half of the twentieth century stages a variety of journeys towards sincerity. At its time of publication, the novel triggered James Wood's infamous claim of Smith's "hysterical realism" ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.); but it has also brought more productive observations of Smith's simultaneous postmodernism and realism, a balance which Nick Bentley calls her "main mode" ("Narrative Forms" 52). Andrzej Gasiorek discusses Smith's balance of modernism and realism, her work being "indebted to modernism's innovations and its preoccupation with ethical complexity, but also engage[s] with aspects of reality that modernism tended to neglect" (171). Philip Tew describes Smith's work differently – as "responsive to both traditional *and* avant-garde aesthetic ideas which she co-opts in her attempts to extend the practices of realism" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 248). Tew also offers the idea that "one ought to regard Smith as a champion of both a neo-individualism and what might be described as a meta-realist aesthetic" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 261).[17] As with Everett and Franzen, even if the strategies of each of these three authors differ, I contend that post-postmodern sincerity is a more productive way to look at Smith's novel than late modernism or (meta-)realism. As David James and Urmila Seshagiri identify, Smith "place[s] a conception of modernism as revolution" at the "heart of [her] fictions" – like Everett and Franzen, her work is "styling" her "twenty-first century

[17] Elsewhere in his chapter, Tew elsewhere calls Smith "neo-modernist" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 260). Similarly, Konstantinou has associated her work with what he calls "neorealist fiction", observing how "Smith seems to lament the overthrow of postmodernism by a reactionary realism" ("Neorealist Fiction" 109).

literary innovations as explicit engagements with the innovations of early-twentieth-century writing", which stakes a claim for considering her work as metamodernism. James and Seshagiri define this as "contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature" and narratives that "distinguish themselves from an earlier postmodernism" via specific alignment with the early twentieth century. While metamodernism is another useful designation, its premise of a "more fluid conception of modernity as a collection of asynchronous historical moments" is something it shares with post-postmodernism, which implicates modernism *and* postmodernism while gesturing beyond both, so I think is ultimately the best fit for Smith's novel (all 87-93). Smith herself told Ted Hodgkinson in a 2012 interview that she wishes to do away with the term "traditional", which echoes the anti-periodisation emphasis of post-postmodernism (as Nealon outlines). As Smith says in this interview, "Instead of 'traditional' I would use 'familiar', because actually the novel form has always had many traditions, existing simultaneously" (n.p.). Despite this simultaneity, Smith's interests in sincerity and authenticity (aesthetically and narratively) prevail in her work, which aligns it with Everett, Franzen, and Wallace's.

Due to its obsessive use of endnotes, which are borne out of postmodern trickery but strive for the authentic communication of necessary affective detail, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* epitomises the endless referentiality and interconnectivity of post-postmodernism. As a result, the novel and specifically its endnotes can be considered as a template for the wider post-postmodern project. My fourth chapter argues this while simultaneously showing what Wallace's novel lacks and therefore needed later post-postmodern works to fill in for it – specifically concerning race's role in an aesthetic of sincerity. Samuel Cohen says that "the artistic success of *Infinite Jest* is often seen as made possible by the success of earlier works' attempts to move beyond postmodernism, but I think it is more accurate to say that the novel is a culmination of this struggle" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 229). While I agree with this sentiment, I do think that it is useful to consider Wallace's novel alongside *later* works, as its culmination of postmodernism's struggles provides a reset for post-postmodern potential. *Jest*'s endnotes play with the idea that obstacles can prevent our (as readers) access to narrative information, which run parallel to the protagonist Hal Incandenza's difficulty of accessing existential satisfaction due to his struggles with depression and addiction, which is the main throughline of an otherwise complex narrative provided in the novel's main text. Wallace's novel effectively gives Nealon's premise of post-postmodernism as the "never-ending end of everything" a novel structure, through the multiple textual layers

presented by its endnotes. As befits post-postmodernism, these layers represent a paradox of main text and postscript, of experimentalism and realism, of irony and sincerity; they epitomise what Burn calls "Wallace's tendency to invoke *and* reject postmodernism" (*Cambridge History* 455, emphasis added). Other Wallace scholars position him slightly differently alongside postmodernism – Claire Hayes-Brady describes him as "a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of postmodernism" but also as an author "Arriving on the late-postmodern scene" who is "one of the first writers of a generation that straddled postmodernism and what would succeed it" (1, 27). Nicoline Timmer is more committed to his fit in what she calls "the post-postmodern syndrome", where a "new sense of self […] seems to be "figured out" against the background of a particular cultural milieu that can be identified as postmodern" (18).[18] As with the other three authors in this thesis' coterie, post-postmodernism becomes an additional complication within this "tendency to invoke *and* reject" (as Burn calls it), as Wallace's novel provides useful evidence of what post-postmodernism might mean, but can only do so by counterproductively and transparently revealing its conditions, failures, and problems.

In an interview with Laura Miller, Wallace underlined how the "aesthetically uninteresting", which "can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic pomo stuff can't", is "something our generation needs to feel" (60). Wallace also told Miller that "the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country is one of the things that's gutted our generation" (60), but his work is guilty of this as often as it tries to be "aesthetically uninteresting." Wallace conforms to "meta, ironic pomo stuff" as much as he writes separate from it. He conforms because, as he told Larry McCaffery in a different interview, the generation of "postmodern crank turners" is vital and has value, even if their mode is somewhat outdated. As Wallace said to McCaffery, "the best of the metafictionists – Coover, for example, Nabokov, Borges, even Barth – were criticized too much for being only interested in narcissistic, self-reflexive games, whereas these devices had very real political and historical applications" (135). Perhaps this sentiment is what attracts Everett, Franzen,

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[18] Modernism is also part of Wallace's relationship with postmodernism – as Dominik Steilhilber suggests: "Rather than reverting to a pre-postmodern style of writing, *IJ* achieves its reintegrative aims reminiscent of those of modernism by employing distinctly postmodernist strategies" (68). Steilhilber specifies that, like Smith, Wallace's relationship with modernism is influenced by Joyce: "*IJ* oscillates between coexistent postmodernist and modernist readings" by "placing itself within a distinctly Ulyssean tradition" (42, 45). Other scholarship has focused on Kafka's influence on Wallace instead – Allard den Dulk, for instance, identifies how "Wallace's fiction shows this influence of Kafka" due to "its adoption of the literalization of metaphor" ("I Am in Here" 42).

and Smith to postmodernism too, despite their different efforts to write beyond, away, or after it. In her essay on Wallace, Smith discusses the different results that come with Wallace's split interests, suggesting that "self-awareness and self-investigation are to be treated with suspicion, even horror. In part, this was Wallace's way of critiquing the previous literary generation"; but also, in Wallace's work "we can clearly watch metafiction reclaiming him, almost eating him alive" (*Changing My Mind* 268, 289). "Almost" is the operative word here, because as Adam Kelly suggests Wallace's work offers a "reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship", at the centre of which is "a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity" ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 146). Earlier in this article, Kelly emphasises that sincerity is at the heart of "Wallace's project", and this can be traced specifically "from *Infinite Jest* onward" ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 133). I agree with Kelly that Wallace's novel is primarily interested in sincerity, but due to the inextricable attachment to postmodernism that this interest cannot relinquish, post-postmodern sincerity is a more appropriate label for it. This brings *Infinite Jest* together with *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, and *White Teeth* in a clear, pivotal 1996-2001 moment, despite how different these novels also are in many ways, as the chapters of this thesis display. Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace are collectively drawn to the inescapable paradoxes generated by post-postmodernism – its anxieties *and* attractions, its problems *and* appeals.

1. *Erasure*'s Paradoxes: The post-postmodern and the postracial

While it is not considered as often as other authors' work – both within this context and as part of the contemporary literature canon in general – Percival Everett's fiction can be classified as post-postmodernism. Everett's novel *Erasure* invites a particularly generative discussion of post-postmodernism due to the way it is structured around feedback loops of postmodern irony that confront social issue. Monk Ellison is a conduit for the novel's struggle – narratively, tonally, aesthetically – to reach sincerity, despite the counterproductive embrace of a life in irony. These characteristics of Everett's most known and studied work have been unpacked in Everett scholarship specifically, but survey scholarship on post-postmodernism more broadly does not always look at them, so *Erasure* is rarely considered alongside canonical works such as *Infinite Jest* and is more often confined to single-author studies. This exclusion is self-reflexively, anticipatorily dramatised within Everett's novel, so its postcritical strategy of initiating its own analysis (meaning critics are only adding to this) will be this chapter's jumping off point, because this strategy allows Everett's narrative to begin the conversation about postmodernism/post-postmodernism's pervasive whiteness and other contradictions. I will deconstruct *Erasure*'s post-postmodernism – which explicitly uses the university insitution, publishing culture, and the settings of lecture theatres and book shops – with reference to existing Everett scholarship such as Anthony Stewart's work (including *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett*, and his curation of 2013's Everett special issue of the *Canadian Review of American Studies* and 2019's of *African American Review*), Keith B. Mitchell and Robin G. Vander's *Perspectives on Percival Everett*, and Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tissut's *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*. In keeping with the postcritical potential of post-postmodernism, I will also use what I claim to be Everett's manifesto essay for the movement: the short, 1991 piece "Signing to the Blind." But I will also use his interviews throughout the twenty-first century, which expand the self-reflexive critical practice of *Erasure*. Other Everett novels also do this, either published within or just outside the 1996-2001 focus of this thesis, such as *Glyph* (1999) and *American Desert* (2004), or works published more recently like *Telephone* (2020) and *The Trees* (2021). In the case of Everett's work, post-postmodernism's difficult place within literary and academic institutions is inseparable from the equally fraught processes of racial categorisation and labelling.

The comparably problematic term *postracial* is vital to how we can read post-postmodernism in Everett's work. As discussed by Anthony Stewart, the "always significant prefix" in postracial awkwardly "suggests not only the kind of great progress that has ostensibly been made, but also, more seductively still, the dizzying prospect of an ideological endpoint that may have already been attained, if not, indeed, surpassed" ("The Desire" 126). When connected to the postracial, post-postmodernism's relationship with endings changes. Nealon's fear of scholarship's spiral into nonsensical, endless periodisation differs from Stewart's concern that the adjacent term postracial signals the replacement of actual progress by false pretences or illusions of progress. This is a concern that a fixed end of race is first believed in and then ideologically reached, or even "surpassed"; whereas Nealon forecasts such an unproductive endpoint for post-postmodernism that it could not possibly be surpassed, which necessitates critical intervention and the prevention of reaching it in the first place. This chapter suggests that the postracial should also be stopped and interrogated rather than considered reached, and it does this by specifically looking at post-postmodernism's shared problem with race. Both terms offer an impeded rhizome of theoretical momentum, which is needed but also valuable if contemporary fiction's aesthetic of sincerity is to reconnect with race, which it must. *Erasure* dramatises the double exhaustion of postmodern irony and the hypocrisies of post-postmodern sincerity; these movements towards exhaustion take the urgent subject of race with them, threatening to desensitise its affective potential with experimentation before undermining the real concerns it offers with a post-postmodern paradox of false progress and consolidated stasis. Everett's criticisms of postmodernism, post-postmodernism, and the postracial foreground their deceptions and his frustrations, which *Erasure* draws on in an intentionally parodic yet serious effort to hold reductive processes of cultural labelling and scholarly categorisation accountable. Everett takes issue with the historicisation of these posts, and does this more centrally in *Erasure* than at any other point in his career. In *Reading Percival Everett*, Claude Julien notes Everett's "natural curiosity, his interest and sensitivity to societal issues, his need to react to the world around him", and Lesley Larkin suggests that his work contributes to the legacy of "reading" being a "central theme in African American literature", as "modern and contemporary black literature is uniquely positioned to articulate responsible and effective strategies for rereading race and reimagining the reading subject" (n.p.; 4). I argue that Everett writes with this split interest in affective "sensitivity" and necessary politicisation in *Erasure*. Larkin warns that "slave-era prohibitions market literacy as a paradoxical sign of both outlaw status and freedom" (4); I would add that *Erasure* is built on this paradox, which is infused with the similarly

contradictory gestures of progress (towards sincerity and coherence) *and* regress (back to irony and contradiction) in post-postmodernism and the postracial. These and other entries in the recent wave of Everett scholarship come after the emergence of critical interest in his work post-*Erasure*. Therefore, developments in how to categorise and think about Everett in relation to the canon of contemporary fiction have come as he has published new books prolifically from 2001 to 2023. Everett scholarship fluctuates between positioning him within the field of African American studies and actively separating him from it – as the tone of works like *Erasure* provokes – which generates a debate of critical belonging that I argue moves closer to resolution if we cautiously, conditionally think about his work alongside post-postmodernism.

This chapter is divided into four main sections, which each represent an underpinning theme in Everett's work: textual impossibility and structural entanglement, academia and the university setting, the future of thinking about race, and the future's dependence on the traumatic past. The first of these considers Monk Ellison's narratorial position and the racial connotations of afterlife, drawing on the metafictional structure of *Erasure* but also *Glyph* alongside Saidiya Hartman's ideas on a contemporary "afterlife of slavery." Julien calls *Erasure* "a prime example of the way the author plays with literary genres and theories" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.); I argue that the central theory being played with is post-postmodernism, until the play ends and via Monk the novel stresses the importance of applying post-postmodern sincerity to race. In the same book as Julien, when writing on *Glyph*, Jacqueline Berben-Masi suggests that "by portraying his black hero literally as a little boy, Everett reminds us of the long denial of responsible adult status for dark men in mixed-race societies […] The novel ends with an adult mind still imprisoned in a boy's body" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). I look at the consequences of this imprisonment beyond the events of Everett's 1999 novel, which chime with the paradoxes of *Erasure*. My second section brings the novels *American Desert* and *Telephone* to a discussion of writerly self-reflexivity in the academy during what McGurl calls the "Program Era", and considers the ways that Everett constructs affect and authenticity here. This discussion stems from *Erasure*, whose protagonist is, like Everett, a writer and professor in California (replacing Everett's USC with UCLA). My third section ties the first two together by moving from academic exclusivity to the racialised obstacles of the publishing industry, which justify the survivalist impulse defining Monk and other Everett characters' subjectivity, who seek to escape their paradoxes but are unable to do so. My final section turns to Everett's *The Trees*, which was published twenty years after *Erasure* but offers a continuation of its paradox of progress and

its temporal logics, demonstrating how the further away from the past culture moves, the easier it is for its problems to resurface and bring the "strange simultaneity" of tenses Mark Fisher writes of, which I argue precludes free movement forwards for post-postmodernism.

The essay "Signing to the Blind" can be considered as a template for some of these issues – in it, Everett expresses an anxiety surrounding the economic conditions of being a writer of colour, suggesting that "It is important to note that the economic censorship which faces us does not manifest itself in the crippling of our (African-American writers') bank accounts […] The problem that economic censorship presents is a hushing of ideas" (9). In *Post-soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, Gillian Johns says that this Everett essay communicates something he returns to time again in his work – he says it "contains a pyrotechnic display of his quite paradoxical attitude toward his readers" (85). I argue that this "attitude" is a by-product of the paradoxes the market and the academy externally impose on Everett's work, so my approach here is to do the opposite of a "hushing of ideas" and deconstruct these paradoxes (which I think can be summarised by the connected terms post-postmodernism and postracial) rather than uphold them. *Erasure* does this too: it dramatises existing problems rather than creating them, but complies with their uncomfortable realities instead of offering clear or convenient solutions. Everett's novel channels various legacies including postmodern irony/experimentalism, social realism, the campus novel, and canonical African American literature such as the work of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright; but it re-arranges these influences and gives them a new form, never being entirely satisfied by them but not able to commit to a detached critique (or even replacement) of them. The novel focuses on writer and academic Monk Ellison as he navigates the publishing industry after overnight success with a bestselling parody written under a pseudonym, which audiences and critics take at face value. The success escalates to the point that as a less successful novelist and known academic Monk is invited to judge a major book award that his own novel under the pseudonym (which, the longer the novel goes on, becomes more of an alter ego) is nominated for. Monk's creative and professional struggles all point back to the colour of his skin and the confusion of irony, seriousness, respect, and mistreatment experienced in both academia and the publishing industry as a result of this. He must also compete with his mother's declining health due to Alzheimer's, his sister's murder by an anti-abortionist (because she works at a women's health clinic), and his tenuous relationships with his brother (a doctor divorced by his wife after coming out as gay) and his farcical literary agent.

The novel ends with Monk receiving the book award as his alter ego, and this secret

being exposed – Christian Schmidt calls this ending "a double play on the issues of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility" (*Post-soul Satire* 155). Martin Paul Eve suggests that "Ellison's personal finances are saved but his parody is lost on the market and his artistic integrity is gravely compromised" (117). So the novel ends in paradox, which is fitting considering it starts in one. Everett uses clash and contention as sites for multiplicity, where postmodern irony, post-postmodern sincerity, the market, the academy, selfhood, and collectivism are all turned against one another, beginning and ending with stasis. This multiplicity extends to the novel's treatment of race, so there is potential within paradox, even if this potential is not always fulfilled or fully realised – potential in, as Larkin observes, how "Everett multiplies representations of blackness within the pages of *Erasure* itself" (162).[19] The textual layers to Everett's novel can perhaps best be explained by Monk's observation of the character Linda Mallory:

> Linda Mallory was the postmodern fuck. She was self-conscious to the point of distraction, counted her orgasms and felt none of them. She worried about how she looked while making love, about how her expression changed when she started to come, whether she was too tight, too loose, too dry, too wet, too loud, too quiet and she found need to express these concerns during the course of the event.
> (*Erasure* 256-257).

Being a writer with notable similarities to Everett, and like Linda, Monk is tirelessly self-conscious "to the point of distraction" and has a lot of fun blurring the lines between irony and sincerity that come with post-postmodern aesthetics but also his entire way of living through art, which can be viewed as living through post-postmodernism. The extent to which *Erasure* analyses itself invites categorisation as a different entity to postmodernism, not least because of the way Everett specifically addresses that term, implying that his fiction is entertaining the possibility of a new form. Through Monk, Everett lays bare postmodern acrobatics, tapping into post-postmodern neurosis in the process – whether this new set of aesthetics steps outside of postmodernism, rejects and moves beyond it, or builds on top of it. Even as post-postmodernism, *Erasure* self-deprecates at the cost of burying its seriousness beneath irony, relishing the mischief of doing the exact thing it makes fun of. Everett's novel

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[19] Multiplicity becomes a characteristic of Monk too, and this is something he projects outwards, perpetuating a cycle of mistreatment that he was first subjected to. Fritz Gysin suggests that by the end of the novel Monk has "developed an attitude towards his compatriots that may be described as a combination of arrogance and melancholy" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.).

counts its orgasms, acknowledges its changes in expression, expresses its concerns, but does so in pursuit of feeling rather than to evade it, despite the initial premise of parodying affective potential. This feeling is confined to a post-postmodern paradox, but *Erasure*'s protagonist still does the work of discussing race alongside literary canons.

Beneath its noise and after its exhaustion, Everett's novel is about attempting to reclaim truth and sincerity as an African American writer. In a 2003 interview with Richard Birnbaum, Everett confessed that "In a way the layers of irony with this book are just kind of disgusting" (n.p.). To reduce the novel to these "layers of irony" only would be a disservice to its many other components and ideas, and would be a misreading of the post-postmodern sincerity this postmodern irony is in service of. As with Linda Mallory's "event", the event of *Erasure*'s trickery and Monk's performance is determined by this affective turn, but an event in pursuit of feeling is an apt description of a book designed as *Erasure* is, full of asides and allusions that fracture the page. Smaller typographical experiments and other uses of postmodern irony to post-postmodern ends all serve the novel's eighty-page mock intertext, written by Monk under his pseudonym: "**My Pafology**, by Stagg R. Leigh" (71).[20] Discussing this – "the otherwise 265-page, first-person autotext that Monk presents – and that we read – as his diary" – Johns claims that "the novel as a whole encloses a plurality of discourses that imply metacommentary on its embedded stories, satire, and parody, and (mis)readings" (both *Post-soul Satire* 89). Ramón Saldívar suggests that with Monk, Stagg R. Leigh, and *My Pafology*'s protagonist Van Go Jenkins, *Erasure* contains a "triple-layered protagonist" (526).[21] If *My Pafology* can be read as, in miniature, *Erasure*'s movement towards sincerity being held back by irony, the novel-within-the novel's "plurality of discourses" and "triple-layered protagonist" are necessary devices for Everett to rehearse post-postmodern aesthetics, aesthetics which exacerbate the stalled progress of racial expression rather than straightforwardly resolve it. "Postmodernism has not usually been a mode that writers of colour have opted to use", as Saldívar puts it (519). "For many writers of colour, consequently, postmodernism has proven to be simply too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice and too pessimistic about the possibility of freedom"

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[20] As Margaret Russett writes, *My Pafology* was "according to Everett, originally written as a freestanding novella and only later fathered on Monk" (359). This further collapses the boundaries between fiction/reality and Monk/Everett. In a 2005 interview though, Everett does maintain that, "despite the glaring similarity between that character [Monk] and myself, he's not me. It's not an autobiographical novel" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.).

[21] Saldívar takes this further, zeroing in on the specific allusions within the wordplay of the name Stagg R. Leigh: "In song, Stagger Lee has become an archetype, the symbol and embodiment of the tough, outlaw, black man – one who is sly, streetwise, cool, lawless, amoral, and violent, and defies white authority" (524).

(Saldívar 519); whereas post-postmodernism is a license for reorientation. Ultimately, within the double paradox of post-postmodernism and the postracial, a dialogue about progress and "the *possibility* of freedom" (emphasis added) is still being had. This is a reshuffle of postmodernism's principles, which historically favour playfulness over seriousness yet exclude the subject of race from both experimental play and serious discussion.

Death, Afterlife, and My Pafology

Before looking at *My Pafology* more closely, it is important to consider how Everett's work constructs subjectivity. His novels rupture the boundary between author and character, from the more overt self-characterisation in *A History of the African-American people (proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004) – which Stewart calls Everett's "almost insane epistolary novel" ("An Assembled Coterie" 177) – to the more recent exercise in metafiction *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013), which also draws on autobiography. *Telephone* for example provides a different kind of complication of narratorial positioning, as it folds its Choose Your Own Adventure tradition into the story perspective: "So often stories begin at their ends. The truth was, I didn't know which end was the beginning or whether the middle was in the true middle or nearer to that end or the other" (10). In *Erasure,* a similar approach is taken in deliberately problematising narratorial space. Describing Everett's oeuvre, Matthew McKnight suggests that his novels "unfold according to his protagonist-narrators' internal sense of time, which often deviates from the chronology of reality" (n.p.). The hermetic space of narrative perspective is nowhere more temporally disruptive than in *Erasure*. The entire narrative occupies the space of afterlife, generated by the textual impossibility established in Everett's opening line, which suggests that we are reading Monk's "journal": "My journal is a private affair, but I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious condition of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages" (3). In the same breath as introducing himself, Monk confesses that "it should not much matter to me who sees what or when" as his death has been announced seconds before his character is born. Bolstered by the similarities between Everett and Monk, this opening can be read as Everett establishing the novel's position in relation to post-postmodernism, which is transposed into the fiction before the critic even considers it. The position of the critic within Everett's fiction, instead of

outside, is highlighted by Stewart, who draws attention to "the immediate disjunction between theory and practice" which "sets the critic up for failure, or at least disappointment" (*Approximate Gestures* 44). I would argue that the second-guessing of critical practice does not eliminate the critic's ability to take over from the novel's reading of itself, though, which generates the opposite of "disappointment." In *Erasure*, Everett places the postcritical paradox of announcing writing after postmodernism and implicating postmodern mechanics in the process front and centre – and in effect, this is the same life-death negotiation as Monk's as a character and narrator.

As mentioned, Monk's textual afterlife can be considered alongside Hartman's ideas of on "the gendered afterlife of slavery" (167); but the formulation of Everett's impossible narrator calls for an expansion of her theoretical rubric. Hartman's theory is explained as follows:

> *The slave ship is a womb/abyss.* The plantation is the belly of the world.
> […] The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women's historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery. The theft, regulation and destruction of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.
> (166).

There is a link between *Erasure*'s navigation of the publishing industry, despite the male specificity of its nominated perspective, and black labour's importance "to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital" (Hartman 167). Further complicating Hartman's idea is the pursuit of feeling discussed in the Linda Mallory passage. This pursuit defines *Erasure* but by using postmodern irony (even to post-postmodern ends) threatens to undermine the very real exploitation of black bodies for labour with the comparatively superficial manipulations of a parodic sexual experience. In that passage and many others in the novel, feeling and meaning first appear as playful experimental exercises before transforming into serious, essential realities of black experience. This is the double-edged sword of sincerity underpinning *Erasure*, and it is further complicated by the irresponsibility and deep flaws of its protagonist. I am applying Hartman's uncomfortable realities surrounding black labour in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to Everett's post-postmodernism, but the issue of the market's gatekeeping of racial sincerity recalls Jameson's understanding of the capitalism's pivotal (threatening) role in the construction of postmodernism. Postmodernism's problematisation of individual autonomy due to the control

of the capitalist state also recalls Foucault and his concerns for "the problem of neoliberalism", which he describes as "not how to cut out or contrive a free space of the market within an already given political society […] rather how the overall exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of a market economy" (both 131). That is, the market has itself been politicised, which takes precedence over individual racial struggles and their potential access to political agency. Foucault stresses this "problem" and emphasises wanting to "detach" individual autonomy "from these critiques made on the basis of the pure and simple transposition of historical moulds" (131). Later in this book he offers the concept of the "entrepreneur of himself" as a possible solution, which he defines as "being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of earnings" (226). As mentioned in my introduction, post-postmodern liberation from postmodern irony can be read alongside neoliberalism, but if the entrepreneur of himself is a productive alternate path for Monk in *Erasure*, it is a path untaken, because he fundamentally cannot decouple from postmodern irony and unconditionally embrace sincerity. In his experience, to do so would be to risk a capitalised version of racial sincerity – the contorted, manipulative version of progress built on the false promises of a free market – so Monk instead remains complicit and static, relying on irony for sincerity, qualifying individual agency and progress with the market conditions of racialised capitalism.

Everett's novel is written specifically in this space of racialised afterlife and paradox, where the "after" prefix indicates postmodern irony's transformation into post-postmodern sincerity (in line with Charles Harris and others' theorisations of postmodernism' death), as well as the entwined, urgent cultural shift from black emancipation to renewed incarceration. Zach Linge calls *Erasure*'s textual space "hypernarrative", discussing in the special issue of *African American Review* how this space and the "hypernarrator" at its helm "exemplifies methodological uncertainty, inconclusiveness, inclusion, and an awareness of boundaries that is both physical and structural as well as thematically and allusively articulated."[22] In the *Canadian Review of American Studies*' special edition, Judith Roof (who Linge's work is a response to) suggests that "the hypernarrator emerges as an effect disguised as the source, a masquerading point of mastery and reassurance, teasing readers to be both behind and ahead of those texts that generate it" (205). Roof takes what Linge calls "uncertainty" and

[22] Linge also details how "a hypernarrative might begin somewhere, but proceeds nonchronologically through structured options for reading" and how "hypertext" appears "to decenter both author *and* reader, meaning *and* interpretation" (all 5-13, emphases added).

"inconclusiveness" further, pointing to the plurality this brings: "the hypernarrators of Everett's fiction derive from multiple manifestations, working simultaneously as a multitude of possibilities" (204). Roof goes on to say that Everett's hypernarrators "leave no mode behind, attesting, instead, to a radiant simultaneity, a beaming intra- and intertextual engagement that breaks down holistic specificity" (204). Later in her article, she zooms into *Erasure* more specifically, describing it as a novel with a "play of frames", which "produces the illusion that it is operated from somewhere beyond the point-of-view of the framing narrator's narration – by an arranging hypernarrator" (213). A term like hypernarrative or hypertext certainly fits the way *Erasure* positions Monk above his own story, which runs parallel to Everett's reluctant detachment from postmodernism and conditioned movement outside of it, but the clear racial connotations of this gesture of liberation have more gravity when describing Monk's textual space as specifically an afterlife to the alleged death of slavery.[23]

Erasure occupies postmodernism's after but only through association with slavery's, because in Everett's work stylistic play always comes with the caveat of racial consequence. Monk lives inside our knowledge that he is dead, provocatively reminding us of what happens to people in his community on a daily basis; this is comparable to the position of a novel dependent on the very irony it encourages us to distrust so we can access something serious beneath it. Both Everett and Monk's unreliability are transparent, their shared dishonesty is presented honestly – Lisa Ellison lives by this openness, confessing to her brother that "I just wish you'd write something I could read" (9). Self-reflexive jokes of this nature are at *Erasure*'s own expense because it is a novel predicated on difficulty.[24] It is a fitting candidate for post-postmodernism: a contemporary model for, if nothing else, ambivalence and equivocation, which plays with components of access and distance unrelentingly. Larkin reads "Syncopation, improvisation, call-and-response, and other techniques developed by black musicians" as having "been adopted by black writers for engaging, distancing, challenging, and otherwise influencing reader responses" (10-11); I

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[23] Another way to view Everett's liminal, intermediary post-postmodern space is Stewart's conception of his "infinite spaces", which Stewart defines as "*between* categories rather than merely fixing on the categories themselves" (*Approximate Gestures* xi, emphasis added). These "categories" can fit phases of modernism, fixed points in the history of racial progress, but also simply states of living/death.

[24] At different stages in *Approximate Gestures*, Stewart suggests that "Everett's work is "about" retraining our habits of mind", that if we approach it "as a corpus that issues a number of challenges to the reader, then we cannot help but mediate on the meaning of that challenge itself", and that it "often appears to fight against the reading process itself" and is "difficult to reader, and indeed may even appear to frustrate reading deliberately" (5, 38, 100).

would add that, when it comes to *Erasure*, these "distancing" methods are determined by postmodern irony. This can be seen in the elusiveness of the character Davis Gimbel, who is introduced by his "disturbed, certifiable, and agitated postmodern state" and who communicates in epigrams such as "we are defunct practitioners of defunct art" and references such as "*A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now*": the Thomas Pynchon line that Gimbel enters rooms declaring (all 42-43). In the same section early in the novel, prior to the academic conference Monk presents at (and is shouted out of the room during), Gimbel argues that "Postmodern fiction came and went like the wind and you missed it. And that's why you're bitter, Ellison" (43). The explicit mentions of postmodern distancing transparently tell the reader that, if postmodernism "came and went", then this book is not postmodern and has ironically put distance between its own aesthetics and past methods of ironic distancing. However, the suggestion of leaving behind postmodernism, because it is *conditioned* by postmodernism, is only performative. Everett's connections to postmodernism and post-postmodernism are equally non-committal, but the second of these is certainly engaged with as a possibility, so affective potential is available for Monk even if he does not completely reach or attain it.

Everett instructs his reader to work through the irony in order to reach the possibility of sincerity. Stewart claims that "oftentimes, what we see in Everett's work is a constant approach to something without ever actually reaching that object or ostensible destination. This asymptotic approach (in at least two senses of the word "approach") gestures toward the infinitude that exists between categories" (*Approximate Gestures* 6-7). I would expand this and call *Erasure* specifically a novel under development, because like post-postmodernism in general it is defined by the attendant circumstances of mistake, correction, and replacement. These are textual conditions which generate a postcritical aesthetic, but they are also *narrative* conditions – for Monk's experiences, interactions, conversations, and decisions. The novel is comparable to *Glyph* but also *American Desert* for this, which Stewart describes as a process of "not working toward anything so much as always working something out" and a characterisation of "the intermediate in itself […] a destination and also a route to a destination", respectively (*Approximate Gestures* 53, 81). Stewart describes *Glyph* as a novel about the "value" but also "constraints of categories", suggesting that its "infinitude" is "generative rather than prohibitive" – and similarly that the protagonist of *American Desert* (Theodore Street) embodies the intermediate, "since the street can be a destination but also a route to a destination" (52, 81). The sense that *Erasure* is also in constant development, learning its process as frantically and as last minute as Monk is discovering who he is,

destabilises the distinction between author and character. As is Everett's default setting, *Erasure* retrospectively considers the process that transported it from Everett's head to published page. The end-product, a book about the difficulty of getting a book published, has the pervasive atmosphere of struggle and failure. *Erasure* unapologetically points to the capitalist exploitation threatening to derail the publication process – exploitation of Everett (and then Monk)'s labour as a black writer working in contemporary America, post-abolition. Hartman's hypothesis expands this post-abolition afterlife of slavery, discussing "the shared vulnerabilities" of "commodity": "the fungibility of the slave, the wanton uses of the black body for producing value or pleasure […] whether male or female, trouble dominant accounts of gender" (168). Hartman's emphasis on "fungibility" can be related here to the manipulation and play reluctantly carried over from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. Everett deceptively presents exhaustive stylistic tricks, but they ultimately reveal rather than conceal something more serious and urgent concerning racialised capitalism after postmodernism. Hartman's description of the black body's fungibility echoes this idea of post-postmodern ramifications at the end of Everett's postmodern games of experimentalism. To return to the idea that *Erasure* presents these as an "event", Fred Moten suggests that Hartman's "event of captivity" (in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, which "The Belly of the World" is a companion to) pertains to "the constancy of repetition" (xii). Everett's own event of captivity is within a different imprisoned state determined by race, where Monk is constantly addicted to postmodern irony despite its absence of racial urgency, yet hopeful for post-postmodern sincerity which only partially unlocks racial truth.

Monk's addiction brings obsessions with metafictional self-referentiality and paratextual allusion rather than real experience, which can be seen in the episode when Monk casts his mind back to "Christmas break of my freshman year in college" (208) and a conversation with his father about Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Young Monk tells him that "In spite of the obvious exploitation of alphabetic and lexical space in the *Wake* and in spite of whatever typographical or structural gestures one might focus on, the most important feature of the book is the way it actually conforms to conventional narrative" (209-210). Monk is doing what Everett is, using codes of referencing critical practice to play with readerly expectation, second-guessing both the reader and critic functions. The Joyce reference has an entire scene constructed around it where Monk and his father debate whether or not Monk's reference is accurate, demonstrating Monk's tendency to conflate the serious and the inconsequential and showing how Everett's allusions speak for a broader problem of performance and inauthenticity. As Linge puts it, Everett "makes a career of obscuring" the

"signs, signifiers, and signifieds" that usually supply "answers to the problem of how meaning is made" (8). Everett comments on the historical prevention of black meaning-making by recalibrating experimental fiction and using postmodern irony to have a conversation about meaning rather than letting it relegate its importance. *Erasure* offers a shared responsibility of engaging with modernist and postmodern codes, structures, and mannerisms *and* saying something regarding the institutions that are home to them: the university, the publishing industry, and the literary text itself. In *Glyph*, post-postmodernism's referential anchor is dependent on academic philosophy as well as literature. Literate baby genius Ralph, who tells his own story in the first-person, communicates via post-structuralist theory and paraphrasing Joyce (a recurring interest in Everett's work). Berben-Masi argues that Ralph "does not "tell" his story, but orchestrates its written composition, which he embeds with forceful allusions" – "forceful" here can be linked back to postmodernism's inability to fully relinquish postmodern irony (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). As proposed by Everett in the 2004 interview with Rone Shavers, the novel is "making fun of post-structuralism"; but like *Erasure* the novel also seems to "making fun" of itself, generating a conflict between superficiality and the serious implications behind Ralph's racialised incarceration (n.p.). Johannes Kohrs' work on *Glyph* argues that the novel "can be read as a satiric commentary on the establishment of African American literature as an object and discipline of literary inquiry", but also that it "provides insight into the experience of a black writer's struggle for liberation from the reading "reflexes" that govern the reception of literary texts labelled "African American"" (both 61). Kohrs suggests that "the novel satirizes doctrinal knowledge regulation and hegemonic abuse of power", and that it "punctures the institutionalized ideal of "finding" and expressing one's voice to "give" a voice to one's racial community" (62, 66). I would challenge the idea that it is "situated somewhere between a literary-political manifesto and a childish prank", though, because if "Ralph's project shows that the struggle for aesthetic emancipation is both necessary and incomplete" it underscores something too serious to remain classifiable as "childish prank" once that prank has unravelled over the course of the novel (66).

Ralph speaks in written notes to other characters and on Everett's page to the reader, a performance he describes in the novel's opening lines as "a running commentary on the value and sense of their babbling" – them being the parents that "did not know – how could they have known? – that by the age of ten months I comprehended all they were saying" (*Glyph* 6). A reference to *Finnegans Wake* in *this* novel extends the addiction to irony, outdoing the layers of *Erasure*'s reference to Joyce's novel with one that only makes sense to those that

have read it: "Of the man who so loved metaphor, it was said that he wore a simile from ear to ear upon reading the first pages of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He was said to be counting the *dasein* until the book came out" (180-181). As with *Erasure*, the central pull of *Glyph*'s storytelling is to simultaneously create space (between Everett's novel and a reader impeded by a references list) and implicate the reader in the fictional process, (even if they can only access this from a distance) via direct address from the narrator and the transparent confession that everything being read has been written. Judith Roof identifies how *Glyph* "ups the self-conscious ante by narrating the narration, an algorithmic extension pointing infinitely within and turning inside out" (210). Crucially, Everett allows Ralph to do this openly and honestly, which invites the potential for post-postmodern sincerity even when it seems that this potential is buried too deeply beneath legacies of modernist experimentation and postmodern irony.[25] *Glyph*'s treatment of post-postmodernism is enhanced by postcritical strategies that invoke specific theory, and it uses these more directly than *Erasure*, but like that novel's *Glyph*'s treatment is evident at surface level yet is in detail.

The postcritical transparency of *Erasure* and *Glyph* is enhanced when we consider these novels alongside Everett's interviews, in which he seems to adopt a persona not dissimilar from the performances by characters within his fiction. Despite these connections, it would be a disservice to interpret characters such as Monk as thinly veiled autobiographical representations of Everett. Everett discourages this himself in interviews, and as Stewart puts it, this "habit of interpreting the character as some kind of proxy for the author of the same name" can "get us into all kinds of trouble, not unlike that of expecting certain specific things – and only those certain specific things – from novels written by African American writers" (*Approximate Gestures* 99). Margaret Russett agrees, discussing how "It is certainly easy – too easy – to identify Everett with Thelonious ("Monk") Ellison, and to read *Erasure* as a fictionalized account of Everett's career" (358). But it is still worth considering these parallels even if they are neither straight autobiography nor completely detached, "cold" (as Rachel Greenwald Smith says) metafictional devices. The way in which Everett conducts himself in interviews further develops the performativity of his fiction. As he suggests at the beginning of the 2020 interview with Jarred McGinnis, "anything that a writer says is suspect. The mere fact that I write for a living is ample reason to find me mentally deficient,

[25] Kohrs' article discusses what he calls Everett's "post-millennial project of racial satire", whose "inaugural text" is *Glyph* (65). This highlights how the turn of the century was a pivotal moment for post-postmodernism but also for Everett's writing career more broadly.

and therefore anything I say is worthless" and "the work itself is what speaks" (n.p.). Everett opens the door that should separate his authorship from the fictional narrative, having fun doing so but always feeling the gravitational pull of serious writing. He tells McGinnis that this "a mission" that separates him from the likes of Joyce: "I'm less concerned academically with my wordplay than I am with what *meaning* it adds to the project" (n.p., emphasis added). The "meaning" is postmodernism's comedown, the after-effect that highlights how irony is always in the service of something else in his work. Everett's comments in this interview on his 2009 novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*'s Percival Everett character, for example, suggest an arbitrariness to his self-referential sketches in the first place: "In *Not Sidney*, since I was making fun of everybody else, I figured I should make fun of myself too. Just as babies and drunks can say anything, as soon as I put myself as a character in the book, that character can say anything, because it's so absurd" (n.p.). Hardly an elaborate metafictional technique, *Not Sidney*'s naming joke can be linked to *Erasure*, because as Richard Schur says both novels "explore the consequences when bodies frustrate social expectations and the resulting psychic effects for the "owner" of that body" (*Perspectives on Percival Everett* 78). Post-postmodern sincerity may be obstructed by Everett's self-reflexive games, but these games and tricks are insubstantial and are not sustained, just like the interview persona that itself glitches and malfunctions and dissolves as Everett's truth bleeds into his words. McGinnis' interview teases out these types of confessions, which can be summarised by the one where Everett concedes how "As much as I love wordplay in and of itself, I'm seeking to give it a mission" (n.p.).

However inconsistent and uneven it often is, Everett's balance of manipulation and honesty is relevant to Sianne Ngai's ideas on "the gimmick." As suggested in her 2017 article "Theory of the Gimmick" (which in 2020 she expanded into a book-length work), "calling something a gimmick is a distancing judgement, a way to apotropaically ward off, by publicly disclaiming ourselves unconvinced by, or impervious to, the capitalist device's claims and attractions" (471). Positioning Everett's reader as Ngai's "ourselves" conforms with the understanding that we are being played with, that we are being subjected to a trick, but the understanding does not reduce the value of that trick nor remove the possibility that Everett could be simultaneously being serious. Everett's stylistics lean more towards "gimmick" than Ngai's definition of a neutral "device" – which "cannot be a gimmick" unless it contains a "moment of distrust and aversion" (472). But the way Everett employs "distrust" ultimately serves to reinforce *trust*, which is a paradox of honesty dishonesty, or reliable unreliability, or sincere insincerity. Ngai says that "the aspect of the gimmick which I

think irritates and charms us the most" is "the way in which it seems both to work too hard and work too little" (472). But Everett's rebranded gimmick, his subversive use of conceit renders the "work" secondary to what the reader is being led to via it – which moves beyond "the abbreviation of labor", as Ngai puts it (470). To consider this through a different lens, Sarah Wyman notices how as a writer Everett "rejects standard conceptions of abstraction" and how he fundamentally "takes on the fascinating crisis of signification" to "insist upon the value of truth-telling stories" (113, 111).[26] Narrative and character truths are the bottom lines of Everett's fiction, no matter how much he threatens to bury them beneath an excess of style and postmodern layers. As Ngai suggests, "gimmicks seem to provoke contempt simply in part because they are job related; bits of business for performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as aesthetic objects in their own right" (466). It is productive to view Everett's "aesthetic operations" similarly, as a means to an end and as an "object" that transcends aesthetics and discusses the grounded, real issue of racial inequality.

In *Erasure*, this internal conflict and debate of priorities often manifest as Monk's self-loathing, and his reactive publication of *My Pafology* (which channels this sentiment) is integral to *Erasure*'s impossible textual afterlife. Monk's entire justification behind *My Pafology* – later retitled "**FUCK**: A Novel" (237) – is in response to the perceived sell-out of a contemporary, a crime Monk puts himself on trial for later in the novel. At the beginning of chapter fifteen, he acknowledges "what I had become": "an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins, author of the runaway-bestseller-soon-to-be-a-major-motion-picture *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*" (both 247). Jenkins' choice of title and gravitation towards film optioning specifically recall Sapphire's *Push* (1996) and its 2009 adaptation *Precious*, directed by Lee Daniels and nominated for six Academy Awards. *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* is what *My Pafology* intends to satirise, but this intention backfires – as Christian Schmidt identifies, "Monk's novella is grossly unsuccessful as it teaches nothing, seems to emerge from nothing, and reinforces the stereotypes he sought to dismantle" (*Post-soul Satire* 167). The *My Pafology-Push* connection is often suggested in Everett scholarship – Gysin, for instance, suggests that "the use of anaphora, the tendency to use simple, loose sentences, the "false" verb forms, together with the self-reflexive impulse

[26] Wyman also posits that Everett's "primary concern lies with *process* rather than product" (111). I would argue the opposite, because often in his work process creates the illusion of experimentation-as-priority, of style superseding subject, but his products always offer something more urgent. As Wyman puts, which I agree with, Everett's fictions "hardly inhabit an alternate modernist world, for they are firmly ensconced in issues of contemporary culture" (112); but process is an important launching pad for this.

of the speaker/writer, may be interpreted as parodic allusions to *Push*" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.).[27] In the same book, Johns calls the novel-within-the-novel "an updated version of Richard Wright's *Native Son*" with "references to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (n.p.). Larkin unpacks "Monk's suspicion that his parodic novel, intended as an elaborate "Fuck you", may devolve into meaninglessness – in this way, "Monk's parody turns inward, casting doubt upon its efficacy even while it makes its critique legible to readers, like Monk, who are well versed in the African American literary tradition" (157). Saldívar specifies that *Erasure* is "a postmodern parody within a parody", because "despite his parodies of it, Monk *is* a kind of postmodernist, enough so that he is anxious about one of his earlier novels, written in the "realist" mode" (525).[28] To extend this last claim, I contend that by parodying Monk parodying Juanita Mae Jenkins (who *My Pafology*'s protagonist shares a surname with), Everett is himself stepping outside of postmodern parody, which implies that his own novel is post-postmodern, though as I have discussed this category is equally subject to his scepticism. *Erasure* is most aligned with it, but still doubts post-postmodern sincerity.

Near the end of *Erasure*, Monk reinforces his own self-betrayal in a conversation with his mother: "I promised myself I would not compromise my art" (285). As Russett notes, Monk selling out controls the structure of Everett's novel: "The last third of *Erasure* is concerned with how Monk reconciles his faith in art with his fame as a sell-out, and how his personality disintegrates under the pressure of *performing* the black stereotype he intended to satirize" (359). *My Pafology* was supposed to be a response to *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, the solution to its problems of mass appeal and commercial accessibility, a correction of this intertext as much as it was of Monk's own "*Second Failure*": the knowingly titled "realistic novel" that was "received nicely and sold rather well" (69). The sense of failure here is central to Monk's postmodern project, then; but this is not necessarily the case for Everett's post-postmodern project. Larkin argues that "Monk's developing sense that parody does not always work accounts for the structure of *Erasure*", but while the attempt to cleanse a

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[27] Gysin takes this further, suggesting that Monk has "developed an attitude towards his compatriots that may be described as a combination of arrogance and melancholy." Gysin argues that "one might even say that the use of an intermediate parodic text serves Everett to invert the parodic process by allowing him to show the relative linguistic superiority of his own protagonist", and that "*Erasure* is thus a satire on the fate of parody in a literary world that exploits black essentialism for commercial reasons and caters to an audience that no longer understands the function of irony and satire" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.).

[28] Johns reminds us that "it is Monk's (not Everett's) work that wins the prize, and Monk's novella compromises only 70 pages of the otherwise 265-page novel" (*Post-soul Satire* 89). Eve highlights that Monk is "also a parody, even if not to the same extent as Van Go" (131). Everett always encourages us separate what his novel is doing with what Monk's is, as if Monk's is a cautionary tale he has avoided. This distancing is complicated by the autobiographical qualities of Monk's character.

creative palate that is "sick" of "the shit that's published" and *make it new* via an impulse to "seek out new narrative territory" are things Monk fails, they are not Everett's failures (151, 151, 177). *Erasure* exposes the futility of declaring newness by undermining it – as if resigned to his own doomed career trajectory, elaborating on "new narrative territory" Monk concedes that "not all radicalism is forward looking" (177). Everett ventriloquises Monk, it seems, and does so to show how recycling past literary legacies and writing original fiction that is contingent on existing work threatens to become cold postmodern irony. Everett lets Monk become aware of this when it is too late for his career and his artistic principles. As the author determining Monk's fate, Everett dramatises shortcomings in fiction's direction towards whatever new periodisation or set of generic or stylistic interests awaits it. Amongst the possibilities on offer is something vindictive, something threatening to simultaneously invalidate social realism, the screenplay-ready commercial novel, and the stylistics *Erasure* draws on most frequently: the very self-reflexive acrobatics historically associated with postmodernism. The meeting of these failed possibilities is *Erasure*'s afterlife of impossible textual space, which is generated by the death of Everett's author. The failed possibilities leave a balance of irony and sincerity, and experimental impulses and awareness of social issues, as the only solution. While it may be too late for Monk, Everett himself finds a degree of comfort in this aspect of post-postmodernism.

Academia, Affect, and Reliability

As is often the case in Everett's work, an academic setting and a professor character are pre-requisites for post-postmodern potential. They are invitations for the exhaustive referentiality and stylistic excess reminiscent of, to use his own example once again, a work as convincingly postmodern as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Eve describes Monk's "derision of literary criticism", suggesting that this "finds its apogee in the character Davis Gimbel" (117). I would add that Gimbel is a means to specifically deride postmodern fiction too, which of course owes so much to "literary criticism" and theory. A research conference towards the beginning of *Erasure* brings the introduction of characters such as Gimbel, the postmodern referent speaking in *Gravity's Rainbow* quotes, but having a protagonist accustomed to scholarly environments justifies episodes of the novel that characterise Joyce (page 211) and stage a mock conversation between Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein

(page 217). Similarly, *Glyph* offers narrative justification for the products of Ralph's miraculous brain: "My father was a poststructuralist and my mother hated his guts" (6). These characterisations allow Everett to formally replicate a scholarly aesthetic, which could be considered as the most convincing evidence of postcritique in his work – in *Glyph*'s case, the extensive use of footnotes; in *Erasure*'s, in similar fashion to the novel's intertextual treatment of *My Pafology*, the designation of page space to Monk's conference paper, "F/V: PLACING THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL" (18-22). Eve discusses how "In the finest tradition of biting the hand that feeds, though, *Erasure* offers not only a charged satire of the literary market's racial pigeonholing, but also an insider critique of the academy" and calls the novel a "parody of useless academics" (116, 120); but Everett and Monk double down on this "critique" and "parody" to the extent that it is difficult not to take its scholarly credibility (at least partially) seriously. Like many of Everett's protagonists, Monk's role in the academia machine brings an inability to transgress postmodern irony or change register from the anti-affective, cold, clinical rhetoric that can come with scholarship; but his role in it does mean he is well-read and erudite, alluding to texts from literary postmodernism and from poststructuralist theory that both he and Everett have clearly been influenced by. As a result of this, for all his aspirations of sincerity, Monk consistently struggles to function as a three-dimensional person (even though he is not one) or exist earnestly, affectively, meaningfully. He embodies something Everett confessed to being impeded by in the Shavers interview. Everett suggested not being "interested in sentimental stuff" on account of being "a little too self-conscious to pull it off" (n.p.). As I have established, though: as if entwined in one of his own fictional plots, Everett seems to have adopted an interview persona or plural over the years. The performance encourages us to distrust anything that comes out of his mouth, but our understanding of this reverts the engagement back to sincerity. This contradiction can be summarised by something disclosed to Shavers: "the *world* is unreliable. I'm just trying to give you the real thing" (n.p., emphasis added).

Monk falls into the trap of insincerity despite endless self-awareness and the ability to notice this defect in others around him. Towards the beginning of the novel, he and his sister discuss "Tamika Jones" and her decision to name her children "Mystery and Fantasy" (31). The episode is a comically exaggerated example of the way of living through irony and fiction that Monk is anxious to avoid. As he confesses, "It used to be that I would look for the deeper meaning in everything, thinking that I was some kind of hermeneutic sleuth moving through the world, but I stopped that when I was twelve" (31); but it seems that he has not "stopped" this. In *Glyph*, the culprit for living through work is Ralph's father, who we

observe arguing with his wife over a breakdown in communication where the implied roots of the problem are academic *and* fiction writing. Ralph's mother asks

> "Whatever happened to that novel you were working on?" […]
> He stopped eating, put down his fork, and said, "Fuck novels. I've found a better way of expressing myself. Besides, nobody is fooled by fiction or poetry anymore. Writing is the only thing.[11] Criticism is my art."
> "What about after you get tenure?"
> (11).

The object of Everett's self-deprecation here is fiction writing, but as *Glyph* demonstrates via the characters around Ralph – as often as it does through him – this occupation is tied to institutionalisation.[29]

The protagonist of *Telephone* is "geologist-slash-paleobiologist" Zach Wells (3). He is defined by the same shortcomings and driven by the same insatiable desire to live affectively and meaningfully as Monk. Incarcerated in a novel whose three unique published editions emphasise his lack of agency, Zach's helplessness to save his dying daughter is the constant that afflicts him across the story's different versions. As Matthew McKnight puts it, in this, Everett's "social novel", the "only difference between clarity and confusion that matters is what you do with it" (n.p.). In an article on the twentieth century phenomenon Choose Your Own Adventure (which *Telephone* is composed around), Eli Cook highlighted something similar regarding reader authority and control: "the incredible success of solely text-based CYOA books stemmed largely from the cultural ascent of individual market choice to the heart of American notions of agency, liberty, subjectivity and selfhood." *Telephone* supports this as it stages these neoliberal conditions, but where the CYOA genre may sometimes allow "authors to quickly gesture at an assortment of creative, provocative, fun and even existential philosophical ideas or scientific theories without ever really developing a plot or characters around them", Everett does the antithesis (all Cook 1-3). *Telephone* takes what is often a mode of children's fiction and recalibrates it for use with an adult readership. As Cook

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[29] The least complex example of Everett's writerly self-deprecation is positioned outside the university system: the short story "True Romance", whose protagonist Rawley Tucker calls his work-in-progress his "latest, ever-more-like-the-last-one, piece-of-crap novel." Rawley's tirade ends with the realisation that "writing these things paid my bills and a bit more and I had decided, however much I hated writing them, I wasn't hurting anyone, not even art itself, not even myself. I gave up trying to write serious fiction because I wasn't any good at it" (both *Damned If I Do* 66-67).

suggests, the bottom line of CYOA structures is that "while the reader" is "indeed offered unprecedented interactive control by making a series of choices which determined the multiple endings he or she would reach, all the possible paths he or she could go down had been carefully chosen, designed and planned out by the authors" (23). Despite aspiring towards sincerity like Monk and Ralph, Zach's powerlessness is compounded by his academic setting, which moderate and restricts him as significantly as the rules of the CYOA genre do.

In this way, genre and narrative but also character and reader are interlinked in the *Telephone* reading experience. Cook's article discusses how "despite the supposed free choices given to the reader, almost all of the CYOA books read eerily the same. Fantastical adventures in which individualistic, ambitious, heteronormative middle-class white boys must take high-risk decisions" (26). This resonates if we frame Everett's engagement with CYOA with his career interest in sincerity and race. The genre's components of ramification and consequence are heightened when incarceration and powerlessness are the character's experience anyway, not just due to their place within a CYOA book. For Zach, this experience is as much a product of racial prejudice as it is of the anti-affective limitations of academia, which his position within never helps, academia being an arena of communication where rhetoric, irony, and rehearsed phrases are the only ways to speak to others, where "Language was [always] getting in the way" (161). These obstacles are best captured in Zach's meetings with Hilary Gill, an assistant professor at his university. Their early conversations are dry and matter of fact, dominated by topics such as tenure, grants, and publications: ""Where does your fieldwork stand? What kind of shape is that in?" / "I have a lot of data." Always a bad answer" (18). Just over halfway through the novel, Hilary fails to get tenure and, concluding that "I'm simply not cut out for academia", dies by suicide (129). Her death is abrupt and happens within Everett's pages, unlike Zach's daughter's whose is a certainty by the end of *Telephone* even if we do not read the pages describing her final moments. His daughter's future death is presented in the novel's present tense as "the process of her dying" (184). Like Hilary's suicide, it allows Zach to learn more about himself, specifically relating to his own position within academia. His conversations with Hilary highlight an academic world that is unreliable by design; the conversations in it, between its workers, draw on institutionalised irony and stall the process of granting Zach the sincerity he seeks. This is only amplified due to the colour of Zach's skin and the necessary codes he must live by in order to stay in work. As Everett's novel puts it, academia's anti-affective obstacles vary from being unreliable and inconvenient to being economically unmanageable

and actively dangerous. These obstacles all point to the pressure of publication. Zach's choice of faculty results in publishing nonfiction rather than fiction, but this missing piece of Everett self-deprecation comes in the form of Zach's wife Meg, "a college teacher too. She's a poet" (190). One of the outcomes of Zach and Meg's marriage is a child who offers *Infinite Jest* in response to her father's provocation "Most overrated novel?" (78). It is an interest beyond her years and perhaps foretells a similar intellectualised career path to her parents. But Sarah's precocious insights do not save her, remaining a redundant tool just like her father's reputation and knowledge or her mother's publication history.

These ethical and irony-sincerity debates are given a fitting stage in the academic institution, which defines *Telephone* as much as other Everett works, but can also be compared to another novel published in 2020: Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*. There are links between Everett and Taylor because, after Taylor wrote the preface to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Erasure*, he interviewed Everett for *Gagosian Quarterly*. Notably, in this interview, Everett says that "Understatement in fiction leads to overstatement in reality" ("Picture Books" n.p.). This speaks to the struggle between postmodern overstatement and (the necessary return to) post-postmodern understatement which plays out in *Erasure*, *Glyph*, and *Telephone*. In my own interview with Taylor for *ASAP/J*, I asked him what it is that draws him to Everett's work – in reference to *Erasure*, Taylor discussed how "all the stuff that I've been trying to do and trying to articulate and trying to wrap my head around, he's already done. He has already written this fiery, incredibly sophisticated. funny novel about the particular strangeness of trying to be a black writer" (Kowalik n.p.).[30] Taylor's novel is written in a realist mode whereas Everett's complicates the possibilities of realism by engaging with CYOA. Taylor's narrative focuses on the interactions of young adults in a university social circle, while Everett's centres on the domestic life of a nuclear family. *Real Life* is about isolation and grief following the death of a father, while *Telephone* primarily involves the impending loss of a daughter. *Real Life* dramatises a similar anxiety of choice to *Telephone*, but this manifests as an internal character struggle rather than being an anxiety

[30] In our interview, we talk about how *Real Life* looks at, as I put it, "break[ing] out of these restrictions posed by the academic environment, these reductions of living to data storage, to a box-ticking depository of qualifications, publications, but also experiences and relationships" (n.p.). I suggest that "The novel seems to show where institutionalised classification becomes a problem, and where that problem bleeds into real life, real relationships and people, and in Wallace's case real trauma", and at another point Taylor specifically refers to how a post-postmodern "move away from irony and from using technique as an evasive manoeuvre to get around sentiment and feeling, this direct confrontation with the matter at hand… as a mode, it perhaps *is* the most dominant mode right now" (both n.p.).

that is replicated formally, as is the case in Everett's novel. Both works are about performativity and authenticity and the desire to extract meaning from the mundane, the desire to feel – and can be categorised as campus novels as well as post-postmodernism, because they are defined by affective breakdowns despite the intention of reclaiming sincerity. *Real Life* is focalised by the experiences of Wallace: a gay, black graduate student grieving the death of his father while enrolled in a biochemistry programme at a predominantly straight white university in a Midwestern town. He is at a different stage on the career path to Everett's washed-up academics Zach and Monk, but grapples with a comparable desire to be sincere in an environment encouraging the opposite. As in *Telephone*, scientific research specifically threatens the reduction of affect in academia. As an affective state, to return to Rachel Greenwald Smith's idea, Zach and Wallace challenge coldness (and aspire for warmth) despite being held back by the maximalist and hyper-conscious tendencies of postmodern irony, which are facilitated by the restrictive codes and rhythms of scientific study programmes.

Wallace embodies the retrieval of subjective emotion. He persists in his intention of graduating with more than just a degree, of reassimilating into "real life", which becomes a refrain in Taylor's novel – as Wallace tells his friend Cole, "I'd like to live in it – in the world, I mean. I'd like to be out there with a real job, a real life" (*Real Life* 132). At later points in *Real Life*, Wallace discusses "people going about their lives, shopping and eating, laughing and arguing, doing what people in the world do" as "real life", and what "he and his friends call real people; that is, locals who are not affiliated with the university" (243, 261). His education is resistant to students around him who embrace the pursuit (and adopt the rhetoric of) intellect and knowledge more unequivocally. Wallace's turn towards affect is narrower than Zach' because Wallace specifically aspires towards a truthful version of the "real", which he must do alone and by cutting off others around him rather than depending on them, unlike Zach's affective connections with his wife and daughter. Fellow students Cole and Yngve are a distraction of this when they parrot the cohort mantra "New year, new data", as Soo-yin does, who "lives in the small lab among the chemical reagents and the tissue culture closet […] Wallace once found her there, like stumbling upon a spirit in a myth" (22, 63). Wallace is grounded by some of the more positive influences surrounding him, who help ensure that he does not end up like the obsessed (or possessed) colleagues so far removed from real life. Vincent is one, a friend who tells him that "there is more to life than your pipettes and epi tubes", that Wallace and the others are "all just playing at being adults with your plastic toys" (25). Dana is another, whose shouting match with Wallace a little later in

the novel leads to the epiphany that especially since the death of his father he has been putting all his "precious little time into this lab, and into these dumb little experiments that don't matter" (94). In the closing stages of *Real Life*, Wallace's escape from this restrictive lifestyle and register manifests verbally, where he progresses from clinical and technical to real and human within one line of dialogue. After everything, he asks himself the question "what has been hard? Specificity. Particularity. Ascertain. Navigate. What to say? How to speak. 'But I'm alive'" (264).[31] Alongside his alienation from the people around him, Wallace struggles to grieve a father who sexually abused him growing up, made more difficult by the academic atmosphere's stifling lack of space for this kind of feeling. The impacts of this grief range from platitudinous ("sympathy was a kind of ventriloquism") to more harmful ("that ugly, frothing spectacle of public mourning" – both 34). Separating Wallace's experience from Zach's, who himself must contend with the idea of loss, is the difference in faculty/subject area, relieving the possibility of adding the subject of fiction writing to an already insufferable, ironic, anti-affective environment.

Zach has inherited his academic prowess like *Glyph*'s Ralph, as we learn in the line "My father was an English professor. When I was a kid, I found him after he killed himself. I used to think he committed suicide because he didn't get tenure" (*Telephone* 98). The idea imitates the conceit of earlier novel *American Desert*, which begins with Theodore Street sitting up in his coffin despite being decapitated (in a car accident) on his way to commit suicide after a miserable career as "a college professor, teaching old English and various survey courses at the University of Southern California" (7). This is of course where Everett has worked in real life since 1999. Ted deceptively describes himself as "a good man, a devoted husband and a loving father. One doesn't have to be a good scholar to be those things and what's more important?" (11). He later debunks this, calling himself a liar whose self-realisation comes as he lies in bed in the dark. Ted's professional inadequacies saw him futilely trying to beat "the ticking of the giant tenure clock" throughout his career – as the novel's third-person narrator suggests: "perhaps in that university system in the sky, Ted will, after all, get to publish his book" (151, 11). The novel takes pleasure in satirising academia

[31] Taylor's collection *Filthy Animals* (2021) touches on the university's affective limitations in opening story "Potluck": "he [Lionel] and every other graduate student depended on the currency of their university affiliations to get by in conversations. As though academia were a satellite constantly pinging, letting him know who and where he was" (9). Lionel reappears in many of the book's other stories, such as "Proctoring," where he is described as "being moved around a chessboard he couldn't see" and his "graduate education" as "a pawn passed between two egos" (105).

even more unapologetically than *Erasure, Glyph,* and *Telephone*, painting the picture of a USC department that is home to the likes of "Orville Orson", a "Joyce scholar who despised Joyce with a passion and devoted his career to exposing the great author as a mediocre writer who happened to be very, very smart" (10). On *American Desert*'s terms, the university system is home to the ironies and pretensions of Orville Orson types or morally dubious people like Ted Street, who must "contemplate the horrors of academe alone" while his wife sleeps beside him, precisely when he "wallow[s] in the guilt he was feeling over sleeping with a senior from Alaska with overdeveloped thigh muscles from years of snowshoeing" (151). Richard Schur suggests that "Everett's critique of race and religion are fused in *American Desert* through his deconstruction of the mind-body split" and that the novel "could be profitably read as a postmodern allegory about the perils of abstract identities that are almost completely socially constructed and distinct from actual lived experience" (*Perspectives on Percival Everett* 78, 75). Michel Feith discusses Ted's representation of W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness", because like Everett Ted is "dealing with issues of ethnicity and blackness" and is under scrutiny for the entirety of the novel (by scientists, the media, and religious extremists), but equally "does not want to be limited to these themes" concerning race (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). Feith argues that "Theodore Street's return to life, being at the same time a narrative fact and a factual impossibility, endows the novel with the subversive potentialities of fantastic fiction, and undermines the cognitive consensus underlying the construction of "reality" in contemporary America", and that "Ted is the litmus test of the unknown and the irreducible which foils pretenses to total knowledge. His liminal, extra categorical, comical nature gives him some of the attributes of the trickster" (both n.p.). I would underline how this liminality is precisely because (to develop Schur's point on "postmodern allegory") Ted is a vehicle for *American Desert* to self-reflexively address the possibilities of post-postmodernism.

Everett's frequent narrative interest in the academic/fiction writer brings a satirical depiction of the university, undermining McGurl's program era rather than seeing productivity in it. McGurl discusses how the university serves to "both facilitate and to buffer the writer's relation to the culture industry and the market culture" (*Program Era* 15). This resonates with Monk, Zach, and Ted. Everett's scepticism about being part of the program era is inseparable from his scepticism about writing after postmodernism, even though he is entertaining this possibility. To be part of it, as McGurl puts it when discussing the earlier postmodern generation and specifically Vladimir Nabokov, is to feel the "trappings of institutionality" (*Program Era* 5). Complicating the potential for liberation that might come

with a self-conscious writing style, McGurl argues that "the fate of U.S. literary modernism *after* World War II" was "when the modernist imperative to "make it new" was institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming, science-oriented universities of the cold war era" (*Program Era* 4). Later in his introduction to this book he discusses how, at this time, "the energies of the counterculture began to be integrated into business practices" (14). I would suggest that this late capitalist "business practice" is responsible for the way Everett characterises the university in his fiction, particularly in *Telephone*, which specifies the "trappings of institutionality" within STEM, which as McGurl says is what has been "booming" in academia since the Second World War (so from postmodernism through to post-postmodernism). Evoking a different paradoxical position to Hartman's model of an afterlife of slavery, Everett writes from this position of institutional entrapment and his protagonists *live* in it. Its limitations on affective and authorial agency stem from the catch-22 of depending on this environment for one's career despite the self-awareness of its adverse effect on sincerity.

This catch-22 determines the tones of these novels – *Glyph*, *American Desert*, and *Telephone* – which I argue offer different extensions of the paradoxes that *Erasure* is built on, which as this chapter has shown relate to post-postmodern aesthetics and the subject of race (two issues which become entwined consistently in Everett's work). The paradoxes, discomforts, and repeated embrace rather than evasion of conflict have contributed to Everett being side-lined by the contemporary literature canon, even though other post-postmodern works that I look at later in this thesis rehearse similar struggles concerning irony and sincerity – but with Zadie Smith as an exception do not foreground the problem of race within these struggles, which spotlights the issue within legacies of modernism and the literary establishment's attitude towards writers of colour. As Stewart notes in his introduction to the *African American Review* special edition, "Irrespective of how many or how few readers and scholars encounter this writer's work, the work itself expresses an unwavering belief that things do not have to remain as they are" ("Introduction: It's not a good thing" 2). The idea is an extension of Stewart's claim six years earlier, in his introduction to the special edition of *Canadian Review of American Studies*: "It is possible that much of what is needed in order to help understand the incomparable work of Percival Everett has been said or more likely written by Everett himself. The challenge is to get more people to read it" ("Introduction: An Assembled Coterie" 175). Everett's postcritical strategy relates to the self-conscious licenses of post-postmodernism, so it is only natural that the conflicts and contradictions that come with this are confronted within university settings,

which are recurring sites for Everett's work to both address and *be* post-postmodernism. The space his novels do this in can best be understood as an afterlife – of postmodernism, of the university and publishing industry after they sideline the author figure, of slavery as the conditions of racialised capitalism persist long after the alleged progress of equality. *American Desert* literalises this afterlife even more provocatively than *Erasure*, with Ted occupying an impossible existential state he speculates as being "Hyper-alive? Meta-alive? Sub- or super-alive?" (30). Despite cheating death and being resurrected, Ted spends the remaining novel unable to live with his transgression: "death had changed his concept of life. Then, resurrection had changed him as a person, made him so much more than he ever had been in his life" (271). He is still mistreated and objectified, and cannot completely redeem his relationships with his wife and children. In fewer than three hundred pages, Ted becomes a global news phenomenon, is captured by a religious cult, and is evaluated by scientists at Area 51; this episode list culminates in him successfully killing himself on live television so the world will stop profiling, harassing, and labelling him – and to give his family peace.

In line with expanding this metaphor to Everett's aesthetic project more broadly (across his oeuvre), the defining traits of this uncategorisable space of afterlife are the recursive loops of hybridity and hypocrisy, self-deconstruction and self-deprecation, and unresolvable tension between demonstrating post-postmodern potential and being unsure of it, which are all at the heart of Everett's work. A subject only begins to dictate this space when Everett's language wills them into existence, as can be seen in the introduction of Zach in *Telephone* and its parallels with the impossible beginning of *Erasure*: "I am Zach Wells. Wells is a good name for a geologist-slash-paleobiologist, and so I was one" (3). Ralph wrestles with this kind of predicament throughout *Glyph* – the possibility of, as he puts it, "writing myself into being" (16). He takes the inquiry into predictably philosophical territory, suggesting that the act equates to "a noise in the woods and there is no one around to hear it" (105). That is, to exist as words on a page falls apart without the certainty that someone picks up the book containing them and reads it. [32] The inception of Monk's character includes a

[32] Ralph alludes to the precarity that comes with this: "If I ended these pages here, where would I leave you? The abruptness of the ending would in a fiction be disconcerting, baffling, and disappointing, but in a reality? And what have I done by suggesting this? Have I betrayed myself as a fiction, or, by the self-conscious admission, simply reassured you that I am indeed real?" (119). He later asks his reader if he can "arrest the illusion of the tale being a fiction" (189). Stewart observes how Ralph's concern is not exclusively his when it comes to looking at Everett's body of work: "The question of who does and does not need to be legitimized in order to exist on the page is implicit on every page of Everett's considerable *oeuvre*" ("Introduction: An Assembled Coterie" 176).

necessarily direct acknowledgement of his skin colour, a reminder of the even more urgent position of racial inequality in that novel compared to *Glyph*, *American Desert*, or *Telephone*: "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by nasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race" (3). Monk is only born after Everett's permission to let him say so – which is a more arbitrary process for Zach Wells, as befits a novel about serendipity – and Monk's saying so is entwined with a defence mechanism reminding himself that he is black. *Erasure* strengthens the narrative justification for self-reflexivity, then: Monk is self-reflexive for the benefit of postmodern play and post-postmodern sincerity, for the benefit of Everett's game of autobiographical resemblance and pointing at himself while pointing at problems within the university and the publishing industry, but this self-reflexivity is also a concrete reality for African Americans. Monk and Everett know to incessantly talk about themselves because they live in worlds that put handcuffs on them and demand this information so often that self-consciousness is survival.

The Postracial and the "metalinguistic myth of the end of race"

Everett's aesthetic of restlessness/unease is instinctual, therefore, given the centrality of race to his narratives. But, as unconvincingly as the designation post-postmodern signals a complete separation from postmodern irony, *Erasure*'s association with the term postracial is inextricably attached to what Stewart calls "the metalinguistic myth of the end of race" ("The Desire" 133). Like the interminability threatened by adding a second post to postmodernism, the gesture of stepping outside of race implied by the word postracial equally contradicts the lack of resolution to the problem of race, particularly in Everett's native country. As Stewart explains, this "myth" extends the paradoxical quality of Everett's work:

> One of the many challenges issued by Everett's fiction is the mundane, although apparently fine and difficult-to-strike balance between being aware that a character is black (and engaging with all the complexities attendant to this status), on the one hand, while simultaneously resisting the urge to become preoccupied exclusively and reductively by that fact, on the other.
> ("The Desire" 133).

Supporting this, Everett's revelations that his characters are black are often arbitrary narrative moments, a notable example being baby Ralph's provocation "Have you to this point assumed that I am white?" (*Glyph* 54). Ralph's announcement can be applied to Fred Moten's idea that "black art, or the predication of blackness, is not avoidance but immersion, not aggrandizement but an absolute humility" (xii). Moten elaborates on the treatment of "blackness" by reversing the perspective: "To be committed to the anti- and ante- categorical predication of blackness […] is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure's eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness" (viii). Like Monk's introduction through telling the reader that he has been "detained by nasty white policemen", Ralph's revelation of his skin colour foregrounds how it has been treated as a problem by the country around him, though it should not have been, so it is not "celebratory" as much as proudly defiant and necessarily survivalist. Moten somewhat simplifies the "difficult-to-strike balance" discussed by Stewart, suggesting that writing about race must eliminate "anti-blackness", and like post-postmodern sincerity this process is under development in Everett's work. Resistance to anti-blackness is mobilised by Monk, Ralph, and his other protagonists; but it must perpetually confront new obstacles, as are the conditions of racial inequality in contemporary America. Moten applies the need for anti-blackness to scholarly writing about race, but it is equally useful to fiction – and Everett's, which can be considered postcritical because, at its core, it advocates (even if it cannot celebrate) black storytelling. Everett's work never rationalises nor takes seriously the "anti-" stances put forward by its peripheral or supporting characters, and instead couches them in irony, absurdity, or farce.

There is no question as to the importance of race in Everett's work, from the context of *Erasure*'s publishing industry to the academic institutions of *American Desert* and *Telephone*, from the racism rife in the American West (the 2005 novel *Wounded* and *Damned If I Do*'s "Alluvial Deposits") to the oppressive science labs of *Glyph*.[33] But its appearances

[33] "Alluvial Deposits" returns to the protagonist of 1996 novel *Watershed* – hydrologist Robert Hawkes – and details his run-ins with "Mrs. Bickers" (*Damned If I Do* 42). Mrs. Bickers first mutters racial slurs and later shoots at Hawkes when he knocks on her door for a signature to access a water source in the mountains near her property. Hawkes deduces that "As much as I love the West, the character of its contentious dealings with the rest of the country has been defined by a few rather than the many" (43). "The Appropriation of Cultures" explores similar ideas and is anchored by the persistent racism of "some white boys from a fraternity [who] yelled forward to the stage at the black man holding the acoustic guitar and began to shout, "Play 'Dixie' for us!"' (*Damned If I Do* 91). Zach Linge observes how "Everett populates his [short] stories with characters at war with themselves" (9); but those in *Damned If I Do*, more alarmingly, feature characters waging war on others.

throughout his career are perennially "problematic, precisely because it is also irresolvable", as Stewart posits ("The Desire" 127). These appearances symbolise varied modes of "immersion" in issues of race but never "aggrandizement" of it, to use Moten's words again. Stewart acknowledges that any "desire" for race's "end" must "be at least as protean and limitless" ("The Desire" 127). This impacts the complex methods of immersion Everett utilises. Later in his chapter, Stewart suggests that "it is no wonder this desire never disappears – is never truly "post" – but only changes shape, expression, and object over time" ("The Desire" 132). Everett's interest in postracial can be viewed as another conditioned, confusing, messy afterlife, which undercuts its seriousness with postmodern irony but only does so to stress the absurdity of considering America as post-race. Everett's commentaries on this absurdity are at turns fascinated and alienated by it, but his fiction invariably arrives at urgency and action. Schmidt describes *Erasure* as "effectively dissimulating blackness within this textual hall of mirrors" (*Post-soul Satire* 153); by doing so, conversations are being had and being published. While a centralised discussion of race is uncommon within modernist legacies but also the canon of contemporary fiction in general, it is not futile. Schmidt also claims that "it is the idea of racial intangibility that begins to contextualise the post-soul literary movement" (*Post-soul Satire* 163). The book Schmidt's work appears in continually entertains the possibility of the category "post-soul satire", with multiple contributions that cite Everett as a possible author we can associate with the term. So perhaps this post, just like those in post-postmodernism or postracial, is a self-consciously unstable one – one that goes against critical practises of using the prefix to suggest movement beyond something (which implies completion or resolution), and instead translates as *in transit*, or *in progress*.

Everett's interest in race under development has a collection of different evidence across his fiction, just as post-postmodernism does, and this display takes discernibly micro form in *Erasure*. In *Erasure*, the multivalence of both terms is diametrically opposed to the monolithic powers of Sherman Olney in "The Fix", which culminate in him bringing the dead back to life but begin with banality: ""Your fridge. The compressor is bad." / "Oh, yes," Douglas said. "It's loud." / "I can fix it"" (*Damned If I Do* 5). Stewart notes how this short story "thematizes its potential limitlessness, though, the infinitude of its potential readings" (*Approximate Gestures* 21-22). The monolithic ability to fix ultimately offers infinite possibilities, which can be applied as an organising principle for Everett's oeuvre and its approach to the subject of race generally. Elsewhere in his book and on different occasions, Stewart discusses the "kaleidoscopic interconnectedness" of Everett's body of work and how it is "full of provisional, suggested resolutions" (*Approximate Gestures* 29, 96). It is worth

bringing "interconnectedness" and "provisional[ity]" together as two sides of the same coin, because *Erasure*, *Glyph*, *American Desert*, *Telephone*, and more are interconnected insofar as they share an emphasis on the plural, irresolvable, the hypothetical. The conceit of "The Fix" is a useful metaphor to counteract the proliferation of genres, styles, registers, and most significantly discussions of both race and post-postmodernism that are at the heart of Everett's work. Unlike *Erasure*'s treatment of writing after postmodernism, the idea of inexplicably fixing everything is not something Everett both parodies and does; it is only something he parodies. "The Fix" remains a rare, detached exercise in fantasy and abstraction. It is an inversion of *Erasure*'s method of telling you what it is doing as it does it – his method of showing you how his work's paradoxes have connections to his authorial process, our reading process, and the critic's process within scholarly practice.

I contend that these processes are linked by post-postmodernism and race in the context of Everett's work. When positioned alongside one another, the two ideas and terms expose problems rather than ignoring them. It comes as no surprise to Ralph, the superbaby with the same skin colour as Monk, when he is captured by scientists and put in a cage like the ancestors he has unlimited access to the histories of, comparable to Ted Street being "tied to a wooden stake" (*American Desert* 144). Ralph is referred to as a "monkey" and feels incarcerated in his cage: "[…] and there I was in the lab, under the scope, my heat and energy being measured, my blood being analyzed, my eyes watched" (*Glyph* 119). Rather than merely smiling his "baby smile" and "unnerving" everyone, he keeps speaking and writing the notes despite this threat to his wellbeing, because to not would risk what he calls "a kind of self-erasure, a becoming transparent" (7, 9).[34] This "self-erasure" is comparable to Monk's situation, as initiated by Everett's choice of novel title, but the danger in Monk's case transcends the erasure of words on a page. His anxieties of racialised mistreatment do not fray at the edges of the fiction; they are internal, inescapable issues taking new forms at every turn of *Erasure*. Monk knows that the colour of his skin dictates whether he is in handcuffs, but it also has jurisdiction over his career, his success, his treatment by academics, editors, publishers. These are the market conditions for the African American writer: a world stacked against them to the extent that Monk spends time walking down bookshop aisles to see whether he is relegated to the black authors table or if he is given as fair a chance as everyone

[34] Ralph goes on to discuss allowing "the words to present themselves as what they were" and "referring to nothing other than their being." As he concedes, but knows he must work around: "I was a baby fat with words, but I made no sound" (*Glyph* 9).

else to be categorised as whatever he wants. It is effectively the equivalent to categorising his or Everett's work as postracial, when they both resist this kind of classification and only draw attention to it to emphasise its absurdity. This bookshop episode of *Erasure* sees Monk find "a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph" (34). He becomes "quickly irate", his "pulse speeding up" and "brow furrowing", before leaving the store with his sister in tow. Stewart describes Monk as "a victim of forces that he should have known would appropriate and co-opt his original intentions" (*Approximate Gestures* 97). But an assessment less indicative of blame is that Monk is an involuntary subordinate within a career that is supposed to be his, likely a mirror image of Everett's own situation when trying to get a break in the early 1980s, even if he discourages us from straightforwardly applying an autobiographical reading to *Erasure*.

To contextualise Monk's efforts, a study published in the *New York Times* in 2020 showed that a staggering 95% of 3471 authors responsible for 7124 books published between 1950 and 2018 were white. The data for this study came from Richard Jean So's book *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*, which it is worth turning to for an understanding of the implications of these statistics and of the term "redlining." So emphasises how, historically, "redlining eviscerated the economic development of black neighborhoods" (2). To this he attaches the consequence of "racial inequality": a "specific feature of postwar print culture, an indissociable constant, even as this industry experiences perpetual and profound changes in its constitution" (9).[35] So all but names the state as an afterlife, a word that has underpinned my chapter for its relevance to Everett's fiction, which in each form it takes symbolises imbalance, instability, and disparity. A condition of this afterlife – in the publishing industry but also in postwar scholarship, which is where modernist legacies and their whiteness have more relevance – is "the relative avoidance of an otherwise ubiquitous scholarly keyword – *inequality*", which as So outlines "is both symptomatic and in part contributes to this interpretative blindness", even if he concedes that this "blindness" does not quite equal complete "conceptual elision" (all 12).

[35] Zeroing in on economic obstacles within literature even further, So elaborates that "a red line runs through the American novel after the war, and this red line deprives nonwhite authors from the coveted resources of book publishing, reviews, sales, and prizes." He suggests that "this line directly shapes the content and form of this literature – the way that characters get represented, the way that social reality is portrayed, and the way that language appears on the page" (both 146).

Blindness is another useful term for Everett's work, because his fiction before and since *Erasure* is anchored by themes of seeing, perception, and visibility; these themes join as a mode of collective resistance to blindness and a persistent attempt to overthrow it. Everett has long discussed (in essays, interviews, and fiction) the pigeonhole of black writer he is reduced to fitting in, an anxiety acted on vicariously through Monk. Everett's interview with McGinnis emphasises the backseat he takes in his own publishing process as a possible result of this. Here he discusses what he calls "the Mother bear school of authorship" – where, "once a book turns of age and I kick it out of the den, it's on its own" (n.p.). Everett's prolificity has brought over thirty books of fiction and poetry in almost forty years and returns our understanding to the market obstacles between his work and success (both in terms of sales and canonisation within scholarship), which necessitate cycling through so many projects in order to live off writing. The potential implications that the work has been done, or is anywhere near being done, foreground a reductivity to "The notion of the postracial", which to return to Stewart "has the same narcotic, intoxicating, and seductive initial ring to it as other panacea terms of racial resolution like: colorblind, level playing field, tolerance, equality, and, the latest expression *du jour*, diversity" ("The Desire" 126). The more productive classification strategy Everett demands is to classify him as an author who resists classification, and only entertains possibilities when it comes to problematic periodisations like post-postmodernism and the postracial. He conflates these possibilities and his level of engagement with each is speculative and noncommittal.

In an article for *Cultural Critique* in 1987, Barbara Christian discussed the problems of both racial classification and the scholarly practice of periodisation. In "The Race for Theory", "race" is a double entendre, meaning both the competition and the identity categorisation. Christian uses the word to discuss how theorising (and racing towards a theory) had then and still has superseded the wider, deeper conversation surrounding a text that leads the critic to that theory in the first place. As she says, "critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived of himself as the center" (52). Within this competitive race towards a coined term or a theory, racial discussion is neglected or mishandled. As Christian puts it,

> the terms "minority" or "discourse" are located firmly in western dualistic or "binary" frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it *is* major, usually through force and then through language, even as it claims many

> of the ideas that we, its "historical" other, have known and spoken about for so long. For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody's *other*.
> (55).

Binary othering is the most instinctive and universal mode of classification, and literary scholarship is as guilty of it as almost any intellectual practice. Post-postmodernism does this by being inseparable from postmodernism (which is inseparable from modernism), and postracial must always be defined in relation to race. Christian's demand to resist both this othering and the relegation of the fictional text to the background is as essential as it was four decades ago. She stated then that "literary criticism is promotion as well as understanding, a response to the writer to whom there is often no response, to folk who need the writing as much as they need anything" and that "writing disappears unless there is a response to it" (both 62). To prevent this erasure, scholarship has as much responsibility as the industry to centralise the texts themselves rather than only talking about them on the terms of external classification or categorisation. Labels and categories for authors and their work should not supplant the ideas at the hearts of the texts, but they historically do this, and postmodernism has a particularly uncomfortable relationship with whiteness. Post-postmodernism, which I maintain is a useful term for thinking about Everett's fiction, does not simply resolve this past relationship, but when applied to work that explores its potential (which is not written by a white author) offers a generative discussion about obsessive profiling, defining, and the impact of both on the topic of race. Stewart concedes that, similarly, postracial is "a "post" that might actually prove useful" because "discussion of the postracial moment is helpful in emphasizing the difference between whenever racism was less intentional and when it was casually overt and explicit", and that "believers in the postracial think about race so that they will no longer have to think about race" (*Approximate Gestures* 178-179, 186).

Interrogating the term's parallels with post-postmodernism and their shared failures is an important critical exercise. The need to discuss indicates both how urgent it is that race is increasingly "overt and explicit" and the importance of the progress in conversations surrounding reductive categorisations, even if these two prefix additions at first glance threaten to oversimplify the debate, or imply success/conclusion in overcoming problems. The imperative is plurality, not singlemindedness – as Stewart says, "If many of Everett's characters are guilty of anything, it is the temerity to see the experience of being black as a complex, unresolved subjectivity and not as a problem to be solved, a condition to be endured, an oddity to be explained" (*Approximate Gestures* 160). Stewart suggests that

"Instead of explaining what it's like to be black, Everett's work encourages the perception of both the signals and the noise of information transmission", and Monk's narration in *Erasure* spells out this paradox of needing to discuss but not *only* wanting to do so: "The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers, I ended up on the very distant and very 'other' side of a line that is imaginary at best" (*Approximate Gestures* 8, 238). These increasingly partisan restrictions on duty and responsibility affect most Everett protagonists. The conditions justify self-consciousness as a default mode, account for a textual obsession with both authorial distance and reader access, and validate post-postmodernism and its hybridity as a central interest in his work. Sincerity determines Everett's brand of experimentalism, contradicting claims that writing after postmodernism absorbs its aesthetics without affect, truth, social conscience, or meaning. When attributing *Erasure* with post-postmodernism, these values apply to the complex issue of writing about race. Like Hartman's model of slavery's afterlife, Everett's paradoxical afterlives find their only solace in pointing to exit or escape from incarceration, even if there is not necessarily a clear route of access. As Hartman puts it, "the forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it" (171). For Everett too there is always the promise of an after to the after, that could never irrevocably be "post" nor translate to finality. The opening breath of *Telephone* highlights that Everett's emphasis remains on resistance (to categorisation) and hope (for when there is no longer a need to categorise), which did not waver in the nineteen-year gap between *Erasure*'s publication and its own. *Telephone* begins with a declaration from a then unnamed narrator that might well speak for Everett himself: "People, and by people I mean *them*, never look for truth, they look for satisfaction. There is nothing worse, certain painful and deadly diseases notwithstanding, than an unsatisfactory, piss-poor truth, whereas a satisfactory lie is all too easy to accept, even embrace, get cozy with" (3). For all his fiction's "satisfactory" and playful deception, its crux is precisely the "truth" his characters live holding onto, pertaining to the fact of being African American and the entitlement to existential equality that should not be diminished by this. As I have suggested, *Erasure*'s position as an interlocutor between post-postmodernism and the postracial is invited by Everett's conception of an unresolved but restless afterlife. The term is an impossible narratorial position adopted by Monk but also, as with Saidiya Hartman, an accusatory metaphor for racial oppression's prevalence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Past and the Present in The Trees

At the centre of post-postmodernism's connection with the postracial is a troubled relationship with time, which it is worth considering within the context of *The Trees*: the novel that followed *Telephone*, was published in the same year as the twentieth anniversary edition of *Erasure*, and which I argue expands the case for identifying post-postmodernism in Everett's work. In a discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Kimberly Chabot Davis acknowledges Francis Fukuyama and Fredric Jameson's postmodern end of history while underlining the imperative of, despite this end, retaining "an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future" (*Productive Postmodernism* 75). Thirty-four years on from *Beloved*, *The Trees* demonstrates a continuation of "cultural memory" after the end of history by suggesting that African American literary narrative can productively reckon with a history of mistreatment by literally digging up the past and actively (impossibly) changing it, thus constructing a new and potentially better future. *The Trees* is one of Everett's most explicit negotiations between reality and invention, though this interest takes different forms in *Erasure* and other works, as we have seen. This balance is clear from its premise: Jim Davis and Ed Morgan, two detectives from the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation (MBI) investigate a series of murders connected by the strategic placement of what appears to be Emmett Till's body at each crime scene, Till of course being the 14-year-old boy who was abducted, tortured, and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending Carolyn Bryant in her family's grocery store. The reality of this moment in African American history is that it remains painful and traumatic, characteristics which inform the distorted reality of *The Trees*: a present tense that may be over sixty years after Till's murder, but one that is still experiencing the ramifications of it. Using Davis' words about race, postmodernism, and history, *The Trees* "enacts a hybrid vision of history and time that sheds new light on issues addressed by Jameson and [Linda] Hutcheon in their theories of the postmodern – topics such as the "fictionality" of history, the blurring of past and present, and the questioning of grand historical metanarratives" (*Productive Postmodernism* 75). *The Trees* specifically does this by engaging with the possibilities of the post-postmodern, because its paradox of stasis and movement beyond postmodernism, in line with Fisher's discussion of lost futures, generates a collapsed chronology and an interdependent relationship between tenses within the same space. Fisher's ideas can be applied to *The*

Trees, particularly his suggestion of resetting the ghosts of modernism and postmodernism rather than expelling them: a mobilisation of traumatic cultural memory rather than a process of forgetting it. This premise of necessary mobilisation determines and shapes Everett's use of history in the present in *The Trees*, where post-postmodern hybridisation can be linked to a mediation "between postmodernism and African American social protest", as Davis puts it (*Productive Postmodernism* 75). Protest is a vital, integral part of African American history but is rarely at the forefront of historicised literary postmodernism, so post-postmodernism brings a reshuffle of priorities and the new treatment of aesthetics as inseparable from "social protest" against racial inequality. Saldívar treats it as no coincidence that postmodernism is "a time" that is "contemporaneous, in other words, with the end of the heroic stage of the Civil Rights era" (519). Post-postmodernism's twenty-first century moment, meanwhile, aligns with more contemporary movements motivated by racial justice and equality such as Black Lives Matter.

As Eve puts it, like other "contemporary authors seeking new ways of engaging with sincerity in their fiction", Everett is "not rejecting all aspects of postmodern literature; the complexity, fragmentation, and even the historical subject matter often remain" (125). Yet, he is adapting the postmodern, experimentalist model so it can be used to talk more frankly about race. Like his characters', Everett's resistance to the premise of talking about race does not silence the discussion entirely. In Eve's words on *Erasure*, which I think are equally applicable to *The Trees*, Everett "continues to stage this dilemma of an environment free of racial identity while, at the same time, doing so by strongly reinscribing a discursive focus on race as a real and practical identity aspect" (130). Postmodernism's decentralisation of race becomes post-postmodernism's recentralisation of it, a distinction that is at the heart of Everett's aesthetic project, even if he has never explicitly defined himself as a post-postmodern author during his career. In *The Trees*, post-postmodernism's gesture of bringing together the historical real and the absurdity of the invented is shaped by racial trauma. Till's body symbolises both the preservation of traumatic memory and the corrective promise that comes with history's afterlife. As the characters Jim Davis and Ed Morgan say, Till's body "appears to have been misplaced" (28). If we consider his body as a marker of this afterlife, Davis' suggestions of postmodern "political commitment" can be extended into the realm of post-postmodernism: a concept that, while problematic, is defined by a principle of temporal continuation and thus extends conversations between the past, present, future, and their strange simultaneity (as Fisher would have it). Specifically, post-postmodernism's "commitment" can be seen as fusing postmodern aesthetics with racial politics and both their

cemented and emerging histories, so the perceived end of postmodern history can be viewed as a component of the traumatic past symbolised by Till's centrality to the narrative of *The Trees*. As such, this body's symbolic position in the present tense of Everett's novel – which, not too far from our own present tense as I write this in 2023, sees Donald Trump appear as a character and a senator killed after the White House is broken into by rioters – informs the liminality of post-postmodern space, which in *The Trees* can be defined by the very temporal complications and problems of chronology and lineage inherited from postmodernism. The ghosts of modernism, postmodernism, and the future ghosts of post-postmodernism all leave their fixed temporalities and bleed into one, collapsing these discrete, distinct periodised phases – or, bodies are constantly being dug up and misplaced in a nonlinear drive towards the future, in other words. The fractured, permeable, "never-ending" space of post-postmodernism shares the characteristics of Till's body in *The Trees*, because as Harris puts it when, like Nealon, attempting to define the notoriously slippery term post-postmodernism, this space contains a "suspiciously lively" postmodern "corpse" (as I discussed in my introduction). The provisional semantic placeholder of a second "post" proposes futurity when post-postmodernism has and will always have an inescapable dependence on the past.

In her contribution to *Postmodern Literature and Race* on Pynchon, Sue Kim claims that, "Despite some optimism about the liberal potential of postmodern art and thought, postmodernism has proved not only politically ambiguous but also ideologically malleable" (264). Kim goes on to say that, "In this sense, Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernism as the dangerous flattening of history seems sadly accurate" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 264). This is where post-postmodernism's wilful disruption of chronology, history, and temporal logics generates a *more* productive "liberal potential." Jameson points out how postmodernism flattens, so it is at least useful that post-postmodernism fluctuates and mutates, even if this poses its own set of conceptual and definitional problems. Alongside *Erasure*, *The Trees* offers the most explicit evidence in Everett's oeuvre of giving this double bind of disruption and potential attributable to postmodernism a narrative stage. Till's body seems to appear at crime scenes next to the additional, fresh bodies of known, local, racist, and now castrated white men in Money, Mississippi, which is of course where Till was lynched in 1955. The body's possible reappearances create a frenzy within the version of twenty-first century America Everett sets his novel in. Various levels of local and national law enforcement become involved, despite Jim and Ed being assigned the case. Money's Klan branch become nervous but also irate. The longer the novel goes on, the more the scale of the situation grows. In the novel's third act, the situation is about to become, as "Whites

for Social Justice Committee" member Morris Lee Morris puts it, an all-out "race war" (239). The Committee debate what to do as white supremacist factions up and down the country are forced into action due to the fact that, as fellow member Harlan Fester says, "Somebody or bodies is killin' White people […] Our kind of white people" (239). Morris' conversation with fellow members Fester and Pete Rupter in Temecula, California devolves into a juvenile, *I told you so* performance:

> "We got to get the membership together and get prepared. That race war I been tellin' y'all about is here, I fear," Morris said.
> Rupter laughed.
> 'What you laughin' at, Rupter?" Morris barked. "And why you cover yer mouth with yer hand like some kinda Korean girl?"
> Rupter took offense. "You know I'm sensitive about my missing teeth. And what you know about Korean girls?"
> "I fought in Korea," Morris said.
> "Fuck you, Morris," Fester said. "You was too young to go to Vietnam. And you was too old for the Gulf War."
> "Shut up."
> "I'll shut up," Fester said, sarcastically.
> "But what were you laughin' at?" Morris kept on it.
> "You rhymed," Rupter said.
> "What?"
> "You said the war is here, I fear. You rhymed. I thought it was kinda funny. Sorry."
> "Jesus Christ," Morris said.
> "Shut up, both of y'all, Fester said. "You act like children."
> (240).

Morris ends the chapter with another rhyme, which this time makes both men laugh rather than exacerbating the bickering: "We'd best clean every goddamn gun we got. This thing sounds for real. If it's true, what will we do?" (241). The sardonic, mocking treatment of Morris, Fester, and Rupter draws on the absurdist sense of humour Everett often writes with, and serves to distance the reader from these characters, as is frequently the case in his work.

This is bolstered by the exaggerated names of these men, particularly Fester's and its connotations of becoming rotten/septic, a fitting name given the importance of corpses but also a morally bankrupt nation to the novel. The men's names are comparable to others such

as Junior Junior (another double, like Morris) and Granny C (a fictionalised Carolyn Bryant). Again here, the comedy which these characters create – but which is also, thanks to the third-person narration, at their expense – belies a more serious and unsettling reality about the access these men have to guns and the political validation their country gives their racist hate. Their racism here manifests as a joke about "Korean girl" stereotypes, but elsewhere in the novel those contributing to the race war have transformed jokes into violent actions. This scene's tricky fusion of irony and seriousness is representative of the way the novel does this generally, which as I have suggested is a defining tenet of post-postmodernism. Everett's expansion of postmodern play to bring absurdist comedy together with the vital, consequential subject of how black bodies are treated gives his writing a necessarily uncomfortable tone. The subject of violently abusing black bodies relates both to 1955 and to the 2020s – take George Floyd's 2020 murder by police (and its instigation of global Black Lives Matter protests) as another recent event *The Trees* seems to be in conversation with, albeit not as explicitly as the Trump administration. Eve attributes *Erasure* with "a gross social irony" (129); I would again contend that *The Trees* is an extension of *Erasure*, arguably an escalation, given how central brutal, graphic murders are to the 2021 novel. Alongside this scene's fusion of irony and seriousness, Morris, Fester, and Rupter's topic of conversation alludes to how we can conceive of post-postmodernism's temporality. With the fifteen-year gap between the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the Gulf War, Fester's claim that Morris was "too young to go to Vietnam" yet "too old for the Gulf War" holds up, but it is notable that the men must remind one another of points of overlap between their own biographical detail and the chronology of American history. As an idea, post-postmodernism is a similar temporal limbo to Morris' and is also by definition obsessed with its own timeline. This obsession leads to chronological contradictions in both looking backwards and forwards, justifying the strangeness of post-postmodern simultaneity. *The Trees*' present tense is also driven by interdependent pasts and futures and the ability for these to occupy the same space as the present. The impending threat of the "race war" Morris reminds Fester and Rupter he has been warning them about is a vector for futurity, completing the novel's strange intersection of tenses. The future race war is the consequence of the past's intrusion on the present tense of *The Trees*, which can be summarised by the catalytic appearance of Till's body at new, fictional crime scenes. The litany of alarming events that come as a result of Till's body, from the murders of white racists to the death of a senator, escalate until a race war suddenly does not seem so projected or rhetorical. It becomes the narrative reality of *The Trees* despite being an invented digression from the real

historical facts about what happened to Till, which are inserted into Everett's novel, becoming a framework for a story that is persistently suggestive about hypothetical realities. Allowing its treatment of time to become more tangled, this invented digression from real history, ironically, leads to a situation with deliberate semblance to recent American reality.

In another of the novel's many short chapters, the White House is stormed by rioters and "screaming" is said to be "all anyone could hear" – "One could not even hear the alarm for the screaming. Secret Service agents ran with their Heckler & Koch MP5s and their FN P90 submachine guns shoulder slung and ready. They ran through the halls of the West Wing of the White House, some to the Oval Office and some to the Roosevelt Room", Everett's narrator describes (all 282). Recalling the events of the 6th of January 2021, the drama of Everett's novel (which was published that September) subverts Trump's role in inciting the attack on the Capitol while rendering him equally culpable within this fictional assault on the White House. "The president cowered under the Resolute desk in the Oval Office", proceeding to get stuck trying to get out, then responding to the news of the death of one of his senators with a concern for only his own safety and not even his wife's, who in this scene he forgets the name of while demanding "Get me to the fucking bunker. I want my bunker" (282, 284). As this scene highlights, containing more scope than the Whites for Social Justice Committee meeting, *The Trees* hypothesises – then shows – what happens after history has ended but is manipulated and tampered with. This afterlife of history stages the further diminishment of/damage to cultural memory. Davis' obligation "of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future" after the end of history, then, is directly *prevented* from becoming "better" in *The Trees*. The central preventative agent is the perpetuation and amplification of racialised violence, which motivates the race war instigated by Till's body. But fundamentally, the corpse could not have resurfaced and disrupted the present tense so irrevocably if Till had not been murdered in the first place, and this most crippling hypothetical lost future hangs over *The Trees* and is the root cause of all the suffering staged by its narrative.

The notion of a lost future of racial progress undermines the perceived finality of the term postracial, which Larkin links to how, "despite popular claims of America's postracial status, American racial obsessions are alive, well, and very much on the minds of contemporary artists and critics" (3). In his work on *American Desert,* Schur suggests that "Everett's resistance to being identified as an "African American writer" might enable readers to simply avoid questions of race altogether" (*Perspectives on Percival Everett* 91). I would disagree and argue that it only, dramatically escalates "questions of race." Talking

about the problems of talking about race is still talking about race, a bottom line that Everett's work relies on, even if it simultaneously foregrounds the absurdity of this. Till's body in *The Trees* operates by the same logic. As the novel accentuates, history's end is not actually an ending; this can be compared to the way in which both post-postmodernism and the postracial do not actually leave behind what they are claiming to move beyond. Despite these qualifications, the *intentions* to move forward remain in place, even if the intentions are transparent about just how conditional, contingent, and weighed down by obstacles they are. To return to Saldívar, the postracial is therefore "not a chronological but a conceptual matter"; it does not suggest "that we are beyond race […] Rather, the term entails a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of "race" carries in our own times" (all 520). Saldívar settles on the idea that "the "post" in postrace may simply be an indication of an attempt to clear out epistemic space for a new way of conceiving what "race" is and has been all along" (529). "This does not mean that race is superseded by the prefix "post," but that it parodies both the modern and postmodern ways of thinking about race" (Saldívar 529). Like *Erasure*, *The Trees* uses this exact platform of parody. Like the race war *The Trees* devolves into, a desirable destination for talking about race has not yet been reached, but a different, more alarming destination has instead. This space is a present tense of strange, dangerous simultaneity, haunted by both the damaging past and the projected, bleak future. This space facilitates a discussion being had regardless of the difficult trajectory required to have got to this point in conversations about race, as well as that which is needed to go much further. But paradox is again the position *The Trees* begins from. After arriving in Money and reporting to the local police station, Jim and Ed introduce themselves to the local officers responsible for handling the first crime scene: Sheriff Red Jetty, Delroy Digby, and Braden Brady. Jim and Ed's introduction plays out as follows:

> "I'm Special Detective Jim Davis and this is Special Detective Ed Morgan. We're from the MBI."
> "Special detectives," Jetty repeated.
> "And that's not just because we're Black," Jim said. "Though plenty true because we are."
> This put Jetty off-balance. The receptionist, whose name was really and from birth Hattie Berg, spat out a sudden chuckle.
> (32).

The scene compares to the moments in other Everett novels I have mentioned, where the handling and timing of the revelations that characters are black say a lot about the

discriminatory cultural expectation to announce race rather than let it go unacknowledged. These handlings also point to a defence mechanism, where black Americans need to second-guess the responses these revelations will get.

Beyond *The Trees*, *Erasure*, and *Glyph*, other revelations come less directly, via implication, and are dependent on the reader's knowledge of the author they are reading and of figures in African American cultural history more widely. In *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, the protagonist who shares Everett's name (but is not a writer) is told by his father (who shares similarities with the real Everett's father, but *is* a writer) that "I've written something for you. He looked at my face. Not to you, but for you" (1). In *A History of the African-American People*, another character with the name Percival Everett appears, this time over thirty pages in, and is again introduced with how his face looks, with an explicit reference to the colour of his skin: "After several meetings with our full staff and the help of my advisor, whom you know, we could come up with but one name that would seem likely for your purposes - - - Percival Everett. He has what you want: He is experienced, virtually unknown, and black" (38). In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, on the other hand, Everett's revelation of the character Not Sidney Poitier's race is contingent on the reader's knowledge of Sidney Poitier's: "I am tall and dark and look for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier, something my poor disturbed and now deceased mother could not have known when I was born, when she named me Not Sidney Poitier" (17). In similar fashion to these moments across Everett's oeuvre, the revelation that Jim and Ed are black and their process of second-guessing the response to this manifests as a self-deprecatory joke, which they know should not be needed but which events elsewhere in the novel justify as necessary. Like the moments scattered throughout Everett's work and at the beginning of *Erasure*, this idea in *The Trees* underlines something that Everett raises in his essay "Signing for the Blind": "to assume the race of the character[s] betrays not only an unsophisticated eye which cannot read symbolically, but the insidious colonialist reader's eye which infects America" (9).

Further complicating his fiction's relationship with the stasis-progress paradox of discussing race via post-postmodernism, and as we have come to expect of Everett, Jim unwittingly reverse engineers this scene with Sheriff Jetty and Hattie Berg. Jim becomes somewhat complicit in the same, reductive expectations of revealing/knowing someone's race that he is subjected to towards the start of *The Trees*, but also in later scenes such as when he and Ed, out following up leads, are pulled over by the police and mistaken for civilians, then not believed when they claim to be law enforcement, both because they are black. This interaction with Officer Peck – another ironic name, as Jim draws our attention to

when he wisecracks: "You are indeed right about that, Officer Pecker"– sees Peck refer to Jim and Ed as "funny darkies" and make them exit the vehicle and put their hands on the dashboard (134-135). Embarrassed at his realisation, Peck stumbles when they ask if they can put their badge away before they do so, then lets them go, leaving Ed saying that "I thought he might actually shoot us" (135). But Jim becomes complicit in making assumptions based on race, albeit more forgivably, earlier in the novel when he is uncertain about the waitress Gertrude's race, who works at "the diner called the Dinah" that he and Ed frequent as they solve the case in Money (68). Jim says: "Excuse me for asking, but are you Black?"; when Gertrude confirms that she is, Jim follows up with "I knew it […] I didn't know that you're Black. I didn't know that, but I knew there was something" (both 69). The double effect of this is that the fact of employing Jim and Ed in law enforcement deceptively indicates that progress towards racial equality has been made, when it has not: Jim and Ed are on the receiving end of assumptions made on the basis of their race, but also misstep and make this kind of assumption themselves, even if only on one occasion in Everett's novel. This postracial limbo returns us to Till's body, which like the understanding of race embedded in *The Trees* is a status of not quite being alive, a status determined by qualification and defined by liminality. Problems surrounding race live on despite markers of progress such as Jim and Ed being able to serve the law. The problems have simply been handed a new rhetorical strategy: postracial, which is as self-contradictory and paradoxical as attributing Everett's fiction with post-postmodern aesthetics. Both terms have a place in the conversation but offer implications that must be unpacked. Just like Till's status of resurrection in the novel (which differs from both Monk Ellison and Ted Street's), postracial America and post-postmodern fiction are equally suggestive of an afterlife underpinned by impossibility. Such impossibility derives from having left certain problems behind while encountering an entire set of new ones, be them aesthetic or social – which, as Everett's work often demonstrates, are inseparable.

If the term postracial hinders or even precludes the opportunity for racial progress, compounding the inability to get real work done as society conceptualises and periodises the *incomplete* work done thus far, it is worth looking at the moment in recent American history that encouraged a surge in popularity in the word. It relates to Trump's predecessor: the election win of Barack Obama, who in some ways can be seen as another (living) ghost hanging over (or from) *The Trees*. An important document discussing the possibility that the election result triggered America "officially" becoming a "postracial society" was Colson Whitehead's op-ed for *The New York Times* a year on from Obama's election victory, which

is the date Whitehead says America "became" postracial (all n.p.). In "The Year of Living Postracially", Whitehead (a novelist contemporaneous to Everett, who could also be considered post-postmodern) writes: "Sociologists say that racism is a construct, which means that our predicament is what we in the business world call a 'branding problem'" (n.p.). The tone of the piece is not dissimilar to Everett's deflections of talking about race (and the paradox surrounding this I have talked about) in his playful interviews over the years. Whitehead claims that he would "like to throw my hat in the ring for the position of secretary of postracial affairs", because of the temptation in "trying to piggyback on this whole postracial thing" (both n.p.). He ironises the chance that American society has "eradicated racism forever" and that "we've come a long way as a country", illustrating the particular strangeness of the term postracial because using it only amplifies how far the country has *not* come, even if some form of progress may have been made by electing Obama as president (all n.p.). In a piece for the *London Review of Books*, Alex Abramovich observes how "Race is America's most enduring fiction. And for all the relieved, Obama-era sighing over America's new, nominally post-racial century, that fiction can be infuriatingly hard to shake, or look past, or write one's way around. Take the career of America's pre-eminent post-racial novelist, Percival Everett" (n.p.). There is a contradiction here: Abramovich declares that Everett is a "post-racial novelist" in the same breath as acknowledging how race is so "enduring" that it is "infuriatingly hard" to "look past." The obstacle undermines the plausibility that America or Everett could be past it, or post it. Abramovich's subtext, it seems, is that Everett is trying or working to "look past" or go beyond race, so is entertaining the possibility of a postracial America. But this work-in-progress does not warrant the concrete title "post-racial novelist", which has subsequently appeared on Everett book covers including Graywolf Press' edition of *Assumption* (2011), which is particularly ironic given that novel's title and the fact that its detective story about Deputy Sheriff Ogden Walker explicitly centralises assumptions around race.

Everett's own words in "Signing to the Blind" suggest that this kind of label would hardly make him comfortable: "In one of my novels, a character considers the turmoil in his family and recalls the story of the man who, when a fire breaks out in his living room, races about trying to build a stove around it. More often than not this is how I feel as an African-American writer. I will take any fire I can get and I will not put any fire out" (9). To still be putting the fire out implies a present tense, a strange simultaneity, rather than the fulfilment of futurist potential indicated by "post." Later in this piece, Everett discusses how "we should be doing more than insisting that there be canon reformation, a mere replacement of one

faulty list with another, but rather we should be about undermining the racist thinking which generates a need for such a construction in the first place" (11). A term such as postracial, like post-postmodernism, is precisely this process of "replacement of one faulty list with another", as is the reductive periodising tendency of the academy but also society at large, particularly in the context of issues as important yet undervalued and unresolved as racial inequality. As Everett says, "It is to this problem we need to address our energies, to understanding the dynamics of the African-American reading in this culture and to creating new literary territory in which the African-American reader can find what he or she needs and wants" (10-11). This in-progress "address" is more productive than the self-congratulatory label "post-racial novelist" when it comes to how we think about Everett and his work. The bottom line, "Signing to the Blind" argues, is to work so hard for significant progress that there is no need to put our heads up for air and self-reflexively analyse the small instances of progress achieved thus far. This bottom line would minimalise the kinds of scenario where racial progress manifests as one step forward followed by many more back – a scenario like, as Everett discusses in this essay, when the film rights to his debut novel *Suder* (1983) were sold and the project even approached by Sidney Poitier (who wanted to direct and start in a supporting role), before falling apart after the production company requested that Everett change his black characters to white.

Fundamentally, both the problematic cultural implications of the term postracial and the aesthetic complications of post-postmodernism are inextricably tied to the present's reliance on the past – the past's *disruption* of the present due to the incomplete, unresolved, vitally important situation of race in America. *The Trees* re-rehearses the disruption *Erasure* is structured around by troubling the cultural claim of an end of history, as popularised by Jameson within the context of postmodernism during late capitalism after Fukuyama's original diagnosis. In his interview with Brandon Taylor, Everett discusses using "fiction as a space to take on some of the larger questions and contradictions of history." He says: "Basically, I just trip over it [history]. It's always in the room and it's hard to avoid it", because "that's essentially what we writers do: if there's trouble in the room, we will find it" ("Picture Books" n.p.). To return to Michel Feith, it is inescapably important that, "As an African-American writer, Percival Everett's attitude to racial characterizations in literature is two-pronged: on the one hand, he has written several novels dealing with issues of ethnicity and blackness […] on the other hand, he does not want to be limited to these themes" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). This "attitude" is determined by the past and is responsible for the future. As Everett himself puts it in a lecture that was collected alongside the

scholarship of *Reading Percival Everett*, "Fiction is unlike geometry, where there is a world set within the world where all things line up and fit and a triangle is merely the mutual intersecting of three straight lines. Fiction is more like mathematics where many things are what they are merely because we say so" (n.p.). Post-postmodernism, postmodernism, the postracial, and racial inequality are best viewed as precisely the "many things" that "are what they are merely because we say so" Everett mentions here. In his work, these four things collide and fuse in a complicated present tense that recognises the need for future solutions while accentuating the issues that remain unresolved from the past. Elsewhere in this piece, Everett discusses how "we are all too aware of the talk that the tricks of fiction no longer work once they have been uncovered and exposed; but that really simply underscores the power of real fictive art", and his "tricks" manifest variously as postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity, humour *and* seriousness towards the difficult state of racial inequality in contemporary America (n.p.). *Erasure* is the clearest example of an Everett novel written at the meeting point of these interests, escalating issues that Everett explored in his fiction for the decades before and since its publication. These issues can be summarised by what in an interview with Alice Mills on his "troubled relationship with the South and with the United States in general", Everett memorably described as America's "career of being fractured" (*Reading Percival Everett* n.p.). But by exposing the problems in post-postmodernism and the postracial, Everett's work does ultimately look towards the future, where America may not be so "fractured" and where it may have begun to pick up its pieces and fit them back together.

2. *The Corrections* and the Market Logics of Post-postmodernism

In *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*, Paul Crosthwaite conceives of the technique of "Market Metafiction", which he considers within the context of Jonathan Franzen's work and which can be understood as another paradox. As Crosthwaite argues, this is a "mode in which authors reflect upon or allegorize contradictory impulses towards the market in the very process of enacting them" – "impulses" which can be associated with "a putative post-postmodern turn" (all 37-38). Crosthwaite's book gives my chapter its title, because I would take his idea further and suggest that not only are the market, finance, and capital a productive critical framework for Franzen's vexed relationship with post-postmodernism, these economic conditions determine the specific obstacles in the way of an affective turn towards sincerity. Perhaps the most significant of these obstacles is obsessive self-reflexivity and, ironically, the process of being *meta*. Both *The Corrections*' aesthetics and its narrative of the Lambert family can be viewed as market-influenced representations of post-postmodernism's cycles of repetition – cycles of repeatedly trying to move away from postmodern irony and towards post-postmodern sincerity, but always moving both a step back and a step forward. This circular motion, which supports Nealon's theory of post-postmodern endlessness, particularly resonates in Franzen's novel because *The Corrections* undermines the claim of a clean break from postmodernism that Franzen's pre-*Corrections* essay "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels" (1996) put forward – a thesis which, he implies, his 2001 novel would put into practice. *The Corrections* complicates the term market metafiction because Franzen hypocritically relies on postmodern irony, complexity, and experimentation, which can all be viewed as by-products of late capitalism and the economic status of America as it approached the turn of the twenty-first century, when selfhood became a manipulated construct co-opted by the market. The contradictory claim to be moving away from these postmodern characteristics in Franzen's essay becomes the driving force of his novel, because his market metafiction relies on the transposition of personal discomfort and anxieties onto his characters. This in turn impacts the novel structure, which is designed to repeatedly false start and move sideways by shifting perspective instead of following one linear trajectory of character or narrative development. These mechanics replicate the malfunctions of stalled economic progress. The Lamberts' sincerity and claims of realness are inescapably performative; they embody how Franzen goes to such lengths trying not to write with postmodern irony that his social realism is

conditioned by it, and can therefore be better understood as post-postmodern sincerity. As with the other three authors in this thesis, I am therefore reading post-postmodernism as a dramatisation within Franzen's fictional narrative as well as a novel aesthetic, which as I have explained is a strategy that post-postmodern theory encourages.

The Corrections' irony-sincerity paradox compares to Everett's in *Erasure* then, though Monk Ellison's story distorts autobiographical detail and provides a platform to generatively, more universally discuss authenticity and race. Conversely, the Lambert family in Franzen's novel can be considered as a façade, which offers a productive extra dimension of narcissism and vanity to post-postmodern aesthetics. This chapter uses Crosthwaite's work to specifically draw attention to this possible alternative route for conceptualising post-postmodernism, which is a route untaken by Everett, Smith, or Wallace, despite the fact that their works have many similarities with *The Corrections*. Framing post-postmodern potential – which is not Franzen's intended literary mode, but which is how I argue his work can be defined – as a productive vanity project demonstrates how we can read *The Corrections* postcritically. This is also not Franzen's intention, but the novel's interpolation of his ideas in "Perchance to Dream" but also "Mr. Difficult" (2002), as well as its obsession with the literary canon, the academy, and existing modes of fiction, invite a reading of post-postmodernism's critical debate within the fiction. This is the case even if it is only partially set in academia. Franzen may not have planned to conform with post-postmodern values and principles with his third novel, but it is useful to consider this novel's dramatisation of them as an important addition to our understanding of writing after postmodernism (rather than framing this as a critique of the novel).

"Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult" are companion pieces to *The Corrections*, in similar fashion to the inextricable attachment between *Erasure* and "Signing the Blind", *White Teeth* and "Fail Better" and "Read Better", and *Infinite Jest* and "E Unibus Pluram." Later compiled as "Why Bother?" in the essay collection *How to Be Alone* (2002), and often referred to as simply "the *Harper's* essay", "Perchance to Dream" details Franzen's "despair about the American novel" (35). It was first published in 1996, which was a turning point in his writing career – four years after his second novel *Strong Motion* and five before *The Corrections*. "Mr. Difficult" was first published in *The New Yorker* in September 2002, before being republished in *How to Be Alone* the following month. It consolidates the ideas of "Perchance to Dream" and reworks its premise of a vital new trajectory for the contemporary novel into "two wildly different models of how fiction relates to its audience": "great works of art" and the "pleasurable experience" (*How to Be Alone* 239-240). Doing the

critical groundwork that the postcritical mode of *The Corrections* builds on, Franzen argues that works by the postmodern generation (authors such as William Gaddis) threaten to undermine both of these "models." This paved the way for his third novel to "correct" this, even if it only does so by self-consciously, paradoxically commenting on its correctional efforts more often than showing the results of the corrections. In the novel, the self-reflexive commentary renders the efforts conditional and contingent – which aligns *The Corrections* with post-postmodernism's simultaneous movement away from postmodernism and replication of the same aesthetics. Franzen's two manifesto essays are more self-conscious of the legacy of author-critics than Everett, Smith, and Wallace's, though. "Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult" outline Franzen's artistic intentions in a similar way to Philip Roth's "Writing American Fiction" (1961), which argues that "The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality" (n.p.). Impeding this, Roth suggests, is the fact that "the very prose style which […] is supposed to jolt and surprise us, and thereby produce a new and sharper vision, turns back upon itself, and the real world is in fact veiled from us by this elaborate and self-conscious language-making" (n.p.). Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" (1989) is another landmark example, which even includes "manifesto" in its title. Wolfe reiterates that "Roth was absolutely right" and decries "the native intelligentsia" and their "contempt for the realistic novel" (55, 47). Wolfe's essay serves as a companion to his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which he calls "a highly detailed realism based on reporting" (50). William Vollmann's "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease" (1990) continues this legacy a year later, vowing to "set right all the woes of the world" by "writing with a sense of purpose", because as he puts it "there is too much writing nowadays that is useless WITHOUT being beautiful" (355, 357).

The common ground of these essays is both a defence of and claim of renewal for social realism, so it is important to note that Franzen consciously writes into this legacy of author-critic manifesto as he approaches the twenty-first century, despite his resulting third novel (which was supposed to enact this type of renewal) instead balancing social realism with postmodern irony, making it more classifiable as post-postmodernism. Henry James' "The Art of Fiction" (1957) is perhaps an even more central influence on Franzen's essays and the postcritical approach of his fiction. James discusses what he feels to be "the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist": "the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life" (33). James describes a duty to write novels that are "personal, a

direct impression of life", because a work "must take itself seriously for the public to take it so" (29, 24). While James – like Roth, Wolfe, and Vollman – uses his essay to enthuse about social realism, his discussion of "the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel […] that it be sincere" is the main consistency between Franzen's own claims and his resulting fiction, which largely diverts from his claims (44). *The Corrections* is non-committal as social realism and contains the mannerisms of postmodern irony it claims to be detached from, so it is most convincing as post-postmodernism. In post-postmodernism, sincerity is a constant across the different works that are associated with it and the varying definitions that theorists have given it. In the foreword to *How to Be Alone*, Franzen refers back to his 1996 essay, conceding that "I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person" who "used to think it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don't read much Henry James" (4).[36] James is a conscious reference point for Franzen's essays and fiction, but so is Gaddis and other postmodern authors such as Barth, DeLillo, and Pynchon. Emulating James' social realism is Franzen's intention, whereas Gaddis in particular is emblematic of the irony, complexity, and (as Franzen calls it) "difficulty" that *The Corrections* claims to reject. I argue that these characteristics are inadvertently present in Franzen's work, constantly struggling with his more deliberate, heightened awareness of social realism. The tone of these two relationships and the nature of these influences is entirely different then, but they are equally integral to *The Corrections*' post-postmodernism, which is both caused by and replicates the conditions of paradox. *Erasure*'s social conscience is replaced by vanity, and its interest in one character's experiences of racialised capitalism is replaced by an ensemble cast of middle-class white Americans. *The Corrections* centralises this ensemble's efforts to live outside the market, prioritise authenticity and sincerity over capital, and live meaningfully and morally despite their shortcomings and hypocrisies.

Post-postmodernism's dependence on late capitalism is an extension of Jameson's theorisation of postmodernism. As he suggests, writing and reading postmodernism is a form of labour and there is an unavoidable "sociological value" imposed on "experimental high

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[36] The pieces that make up *How to Be Alone* variously extend the interests of "Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult." At different points and in the context of different subjects, Franzen discusses how "my ghostly conscience and my remarkably sturdy sense of self […] seems to me lonely and postmodern", describes TV advertisements as "luscious postmodern art", writes of the "elitism of modern literature" and an "aristocracy of alienation", and suggests that "It's healthy to adjust to reality […] to discard and then forget the values and methods of literary modernism" (10, 170, 175, 199-200).

literature" (133). Jameson claims that "the democratization of culture" has led to how "two modes (high and low culture) have begun to fold back into one another" (135); but post-postmodernism confronts market conditions more forcefully and not only collapses these "modes", but moves even further away from elitist class distinctions. Post-postmodernism reconnects institutionality, an education of being well-read, and interests in complexity and experimentation with an aesthetic of sincerity, which is influenced by the legacy of social realism but balances this with other interests. As Nealon theorises, directly engaging with Jameson's definition of postmodernism, post-postmodernism imbues modernist development with this method of reconnecting, and does so "just-in-time" because literary postmodernism emerged after the Second World War and was therefore shaped by *late* capitalism. Lee Konstantinou identifies how post-postmodernism is therefore both responsive to postmodernism and late capitalism, which is to say that it reacts against (but also uses, conditionally) both ironic experimentalism and the economics of neoliberalism. As he says, neoliberalism "has displaced postmodernism as a way of periodizing the recent cultural past", and therefore "The disappearance of postmodernism as a category is, importantly, not only a matter of critical fashion. What has also failed […] is the postmodern project of undermining the distinction between high and low culture" ("7 Neoliberal Arts" n.p.). Similarly, returning to Rachel Greenwald Smith's affective turn in writing after postmodernism, any "affective hypothesis" of postmodernism (as she puts it) relies on the failings of late capitalism ("Postmodernism" 439). Postmodernism's difficult affect "provides a powerful justification for a neoliberal turn" ("Postmodernism" 439). But post-postmodernism's turn, ultimately, is away from neoliberalism and towards a more individual, less constrained and constructed affective potential.

It is therefore important to position Franzen's relationship with postmodernism and post-postmodernism alongside market logics. This component is more central to *The Corrections* than the other three novels I am looking at, even *Erasure* because Everett fits many other interests into his novel. This chapter reads what, influenced by Crosthwaite, I am calling the market logics of post-postmodernism in *The Corrections*, and does so on the levels of narrative, character, scene, and dialogue. It does so by primarily looking at Franzen's fiction while drawing on literary criticism, but it is worth outlining the economic theory that has shaped my understanding of market logics. Daniel Rodgers writes that "The last quarter of the [twentieth] century" is "an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture", pinpointing the source of this "fracture" as the fact that economics have "encircled the self with wider and wider rings of relations, structures, contexts, and institutions" – "rings" where

"Human beings were born into social norms […] Their life chances were sorted out according to their place in the social structure; their very personalities took shape within the forces of socialization" (3, 4). Rodgers suggests that "the superstructure of "postmodern" culture" is where artistic forms have "collapsed into each other" (9). I would extend this and say that post-postmodernism's "superstructure" only brings further collapse and complexity. In *The Corrections*, Alfred, Enid, Chip, Denise, and Gary Lambert are each driven by their anxieties of fitting within a "structure", even if they recognise that they are adding to the problem of personal gain as often as competing against it with aspirations for liberated autonomy. Their shared self-awareness, desire to rectify, and frequent inability to do so highlight how post-postmodernism becomes, like market metafiction, the process of identifying a defect that cannot be changed, replaced, or irrevocably moved on from. In line with David Harvey's ideas on the neoliberal state, the Lambert family can be viewed as a micro version of what he calls "an unstable and contradictory political form" (64). *The Corrections*' characters also embody the unsuccessful attempt to use democracy to regain control over "modern economic growth", as Thomas Piketty puts it – in which there are increasingly "deep structures of capital and inequality" (both 1). Piketty stresses that "the distribution of wealth is too important an issue to be left to economists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers" (2). This justifies Franzen's address of this "issue" within his novel, in which the central characters (Alfred and Enid's adult children) are an unemployed academic (Chip), a successful chef (Denise), and a depressed banker (Gary).

A final text that is integral to how I am reading the themes of finance and capital in Franzen's novel is Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl's "Introduction: Reading and Writing the Economic Present." Johansen and Karl specifically apply economic theory to contemporary fiction, and they suggest that the 1970s (which would align with the heyday of postmodernism) saw the emergence of "the neoliberal novel" (201). They define this as "one particularly attuned to the economic rationalities of its time; it signals an attention to the way novels circulate in an economic and geopolitical field and a consideration of the apparatus that structures the exchange and distribution of texts" (201). Writing in 2014, Johansen and Karl conceive that "the multiple paths of the contemporary novel" demonstrate "a response to the capacious mobility of neoliberalism itself" (201). This and the possibility that the term neoliberalism, as they say, signals an "awareness of such texts' self-conscious reliance on the conditions that the texts might themselves trouble", invites a link between economic theory and the events of Franzen's novel (207). Before Enid can attempt to bring the family together for a Christmas reunion, Alfred struggles with Parkinson's disease and dementia, Chip must

navigate a professional crisis after losing his academic job (due to an alleged relationship with a student named Melissa Pacquette), Denise tries to open her own restaurant after feeling unfulfilled working underneath people, and Gary's experience of depression worsens when his failing marriage brings the additional possibility of losing his children. In line with Johansen and Karl's definition of the neoliberal text, *The Corrections*' aesthetic of market self-consciousness is matched by a narrative of pervasive self-destructive tendencies. The Lamberts deceive one another but also their friends and romantic partners, prioritise themselves over the wider American society around them, and unrelentingly pursue capital gain at the same time as pursuing sincerity (which places an obstacle in the way of sincerity). *The Corrections*' is a novel of conflicts, which can be associated with post-postmodernism due to how we can situate it at the intersection of three postcritical strategies: a dialogue with other literature and literary scholarship, the legacy of author-as-critic, and economic theory. These three further develop the central tension between irony and sincerity (aesthetically and narratively), that as I have outlined is the only certainty we can have when discussing writing after postmodernism. This chapter will divide these interests into three sections, which look at Franzen's failed attempt to correct postmodernism with and within *The Corrections* (whose characters Franzen vicariously speaks through), at how the novel therefore adopts a structure of cyclical repetition and patterning, and the ways in which its emphasis on futurity can be related to both the 2008 global market crash and the direction of post-postmodernism after 2001.

Correcting Postmodernism

Stephen Burn argues that *The Corrections* is "engaged in a four-way conversation with William Gaddis, Don DeLillo, [Richard] Powers, and Wallace" (*Jonathan Franzen* xiii). I would argue that Franzen's engagement with Wallace must be separated from his connection to postmodern authors (due to its tone as well as Wallace's time of writing), and that his "conversation" with Gaddis is the most prominent of these more dissatisfied relationships with the postmodern generation. In "Mr. Difficult", Franzen criticises Gaddis' novel *JR* (1975) for how it "suffers from the madness it attempts to resist" (*How to Be Alone* 262). It becomes *The Corrections*' priority "to resist" again, which leads to his own non-committal and contradictory gesture of resistance. Franzen's title alludes to Gaddis' earlier novel *The*

Recognitions (1955), but it is *JR* that "Mr. Difficult" and *The Corrections* take aim at. If as Franzen's essay puts it, and "to sign on with the postmodern program" is "to embrace the notion of formal experimentation as a heroic act of resistance", his self-appointed post-postmodern duty is to reject such "formal experimentation" (*How to Be Alone* 259). The desired outcome of this rejection is a renewed social realism, but as Robert Rebein argues the "idea that Franzen's rejection of postmodernism was primarily a *strategic* move" is an "erroneous" one (*The Mourning After* 207). As Rebein suggests, Franzen's "decision had as much to do with survival – as both a writer and a person – as with anything so pedestrian as increasing sales", yet the nature of this "survival" was uncertain and inconsistent, so *The Corrections* has foundations of instability (*The Mourning After* 207). Jeremy Green underlines how Franzen's novel is "reinventing realism as social representation" but his contradictory method of doing so results not in social realism but as unintended "tragic realism", which Green defines as "the recognition of incompleteness and contradiction" (80, 108). Similarly, McLaughlin claims that *The Corrections* does not succeed at being the "conservative novel" it sets out be (62). I would argue that what binds this critical consensus around Franzen's hypocritical dependence on postmodernism together is Harold Bloom's concept of the "anxiety of influence", which best explains Franzen's contradictions. As Bloom's seminal 1973 text states, "Self-appropriation invokes the immense anxieties of indebtedness", and the anxiety of influence specifically can be considered as "part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism" (5, 28). Bloom's provocation that "Poetic Influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness" can be applied to the bitterness of "Mr. Difficult' and *The Corrections*, but so can Bloom's specific interest in "Creative correction", which he calls "the popular mark of modern revisionism" (28-29). To describe *The Corrections* as revisionist would perhaps lean too closely to critique, which as outlined is something my chapter is avoiding; but it is clear that there is postmodern residue in Franzen's novel, even if he would say otherwise and if he tries to conceal this anxiety of influence.

The clearest evidence of postmodern experimentation in *The Corrections* is "THE CORECKTALL PROCESS", which I argue demonstrates what in "Perchance to Dream" Franzen says his novel would not do, and what "Mr. Difficult" suggests it *did* not do. Corecktall is an experimental medical method that Alfred is signed up to in the hope of curing his Parkinson's and dementia; it semantically alludes to Franzen's novel title and also signposts where Franzen's self-conscious address of the postmodern problem results in him still writing postmodernism. The episode of the novel in which Denise and Gary watch a lengthy video to explain "WHAT IS THE CORECKTALL PROCESS?" is guilty of the exact

distancing methods that Franzen criticises Gaddis for (216). The Process' eight steps of corporate jargon cover twenty pages, and as the video/pages progress an ulterior motive presents itself, telling the reader that they have only been tricked because Denise and Gary (and soon their father) have been tricked. The Process' subheadings devolve into things like "4. THE RICH GET RICHER!" and "7. NO, IT'S NOT A BOOK OF THE BIBLE!" (225, 230). The double criticism of postmodern difficulty and neoliberal economics here must replicate what it is criticising to execute its parody. This episode is the most explicit example of what Enid later calls the "evils of late capitalism", but it seems that these "evils" are often related to postmodern forms (595). The Corecktall video is not literary, but other instances in the novel point to everyday literary forms that contain the manipulative postmodern methods Franzen intends to parody. These forms include the "non-consecutive issues of *Good Housekeeping*", which are reminders to Enid of the money being taken from her, just like the "brown recipes on high-acid paper that called for wilted lettuce, the current month's telephone and gas bills" that are next to the magazine issues on her coffee table (both 7). A scene with Gary's wife Caroline shows where fiction and novels do not figure in the Lamberts' existence because they have been replaced by literary props of the market: "Among her favourite parenting books was *The Technological Imagination: What Today's Children Have to Teach Their Parents* […] contrasting the "tired paradigm" of Gifted Child as Socially Isolated Genius with the "wired paradigm" of Gifted Child as Creatively Connected Consumer" (180-181). Equally, Chip's work with the corrupt Lithuanian government after being sacked as a professor in media studies leaves him writing "text for the stock certificates and for the accompanying brochure" of his company, which defrauds American investors over the internet (506). Despite his awareness that "the more patently satirical the promises, the lustier the influx of American capital", Chip continues to be responsible for "churned out press releases, make-believe financial statements", which can be viewed as analogues for the postmodern novel (both 505). Like the postmodern novel, these different texts are criticised to the extent that *The Corrections* partially becomes them, because it offers its own transparent confession of manipulating its reader with corporate speak while still playfully manipulating them. These smaller devices in the novel all point back to Corecktall, which is its most simultaneously comprehensive, conceited, yet trusted method of postmodern and market deception. Corecktall tells the Lamberts and Franzen's reader that it will actively diminish their authenticity and sincerity, but still does this. The process of subordination is complicitly watching Corecktall's explanatory video – or in the reader's case: to read these explanatory pages of the novel – so actually signing up to the

treatment (as Alfred does) only diminishes these objectives of authenticity and sincerity further.

As the novel's third-person narrator says, "simply put, Corecktall offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and *improving* the hard wiring of an adult human brain" (217). Corecktall's implausibility announces itself to its subjects – McLaughlin describes it as a "parody", an example of the novel's "inconsistent attitude toward language, at times wanting to use it transparently, à la realism, at other times, drawing attention to it as language" (63). Jésus Blanco Hidalga suggests that Alfred's dementia is the platform for postmodern complicity in the first place: "the exploration of Alfred's consciousness becomes at times an overt formulation of typically postmodernist concerns with the constructed nature of reality" (126). Béatrice Pire more broadly discusses how postmodern irony is "the last target of Franzen's correction" (253). I would add that the unfulfillment of this "last target" is demonstrated in miniature with Corecktall, which cannot cure Alfred and does not prevent him from dying at the end of the novel. Sickness is an important metaphor to Franzen's fraught relationship with postmodernism; it connects this relationship with Bloom's idea of influence being a "disease", but it is also something Franzen himself refers to in an interview with Donald Antrim shortly after *The Corrections* was published. As he tells Antrim, "I adopted a lot of that [the postmodern] generation of writers' concerns – the great postwar freakout, the Strangelovian inconceivabilities, the sick society in need of radical critique" (n.p.). Adopting these "concerns" counterproductively competes with the things being warned against, which Franzen himself finds "sick" and "in need of critique."

Alex Hobbs' work on masculinity discusses how "it is interpreted as a physical realm based on activity as well as appearance", and then relates this idea to *The Corrections* by suggesting that the "decay of the [Lambert] house – the dry rot, the damp – accompanies the physical and mental deterioration of Alfred" (xv, 98). Hobbs also states that "Beyond the structure of the family framework, Franzen satirizes the effects of globalization on the individual" – and that "these values of greed, or at least entitlement, are pitched against those of hardworking Alfred. In this sense, he represents tradition against contemporary avarice" (both 96). The links between "decay" and disease and Franzen's stance on postmodernism are strengthened by how these condition specific narrative spaces and scenes, but using symbolism to go "beyond" this domestic "structure" is as relevant to post-postmodern practice as a discussion of "globalization", though this is another connective thread between postmodernism and late capitalism. Put simply, the postmodernism Franzen tries to avoid by writing *The Corrections* even shapes the physical space Alfred is confined to, like an author

restricting themselves to something they believe to be unhealthy for their practice and being unable to escape it. Stephen Burn suggests that Alfred "functions as an analogue for the reader" (*Jonathan Franzen* 101); but he is also to a stand-in for Franzen, or at least a physical embodiment of what he claims to correct. Postmodern themes of conspiracy and paranoia underpin Franzen's first two novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992) – themes which Alfred has in effect consumed and grown old with. In the Antrim interview, Franzen confesses to these novels' "large, externalised, heavily plotted dramas" while declaring that *The Corrections* therefore "goes about managing the drama very differently" (both n.p.). Rebein describes the career transition as Franzen's "transformation from young, hip po-mo writer to purveyor of "Tragic Realism" while also suggesting possible "signs of the realist writer hidden beneath all the po-mo machinery" even in these early works (*The Mourning After* 202, 204). This again encourages us to question the validity of Franzen's smooth transition from postmodern author to social realist. This doubt is discernible in Corecktall's flawed process, as the malfunctions of Franzen's transition and its blurred lines between parody and complicity are another clunky mechanical process that is problematised precisely because of excessive self-consciousness and telling as much as showing. As they count up, Corecktall's steps are decreasingly serious as the entire premise of the medical treatment falls apart, inviting Denise and Gary's interruptions of the video: "Could this possibly be a hoax?" (230). The Corecktall episode draws on postmodern irony for parodic purposes, but the novel around this ends up becoming too invested in its own parody, unintentionally balancing sincerity with irony and becoming a successful, useful model of post-postmodernism's experimentalist-realist middle ground.

Corecktall enacts the postcritical method of *The Corrections* that complicates the distinction between "Franzen the writer and Franzen the pundit", as Ben Marcus describes, claiming that these "are two different characters entirely" (51-52). I would suggest that their differences are drawn attention to and scrutinised to the extent that they become more similar and closer to interchangeable. While Marcus' piece becomes as inflammatory as Franzen's on Gaddis, there is something in how Marcus writes that "calling a writer experimental is now the equivalent of saying his work does not matter, is not readable, and is aggressively masturbatory. But why it is an experiment to attempt something artistic?" (42). Marcus accuses Franzen of being "shrewd enough to nod to the idea of language art. But while he's nodding, his hands have worked up a tight stranglehold on writers outside of the mainstream", and calls his own piece a "response to an [Franzen's] attack from the highest point of status culture" (43, 52). I would argue that Franzen's issues with postmodernism

may take a more bitter tone than others', but are just as symptomatic of post-postmodernism's defining discomfort and anxiety. It may be unintended, but it is Franzen's alignment with post-postmodern potential that dictates the tone of postmodern influence in his work.

Similar to Henry James' torch passing when it comes to author manifesto essays, and in keeping with the idea that post-postmodernism is a paradox that creates more paradoxes, Ryan Brooks' 2017 article on Franzen, Marcus, and "the contemporary novel's contract with the reader" is useful to return to here. Brooks notes that "Marcus joins Franzen in obscuring the difference between author and reader", acknowledging that "Franzen's attacks on "the big social novel" and formal experimentation […] all seem to resolve themselves, over the course of the essays in which they appear, into declarations of personal identity rather than aesthetic critiques" (both 23). Brooks draws attention to Franzen's contradictions and the cyclical process of critical response they have brought – with Marcus responding to Franzen's response to Gaddis, and Brooks being aware that he is now responding to that response. Brooks suggests that this critical feedback loop, which is further complicated by the postcritical quality of Franzen's fiction and recalls the structure of *The Corrections* specifically, points to the "fundamental rhetorical gestures" of the free market, because Marcus and Franzen "perform this discourse's fundamental gesture, the disavowal of structural antagonism" (24). *The Corrections* does indeed perpetuate "structural antagonism", but in doing so provides evidence that post-postmodern fictional narratives are built on oppositions and tensions.[37] Post-postmodern fictions are inscribed with failures, shortcomings, and inconsistencies; so it is fitting for these novels to write characters who are defined by these things, who are paralysed by their awareness of them yet inability to change the fact.

Another point of overlap between Franzen's essays and his third novel is an interest in language breakdown. Structurally, *The Corrections* shows how this process repeats and

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[37] As a novel both about time and tension, James Wood writes just after it was published that *The Corrections* is both "of its time and properly resistant to its time" ("Abhorring" n.p.). Woods relates this to the fact of its publication ten days before 9/11: "If anyone still had a longing for the great American "social novel," the events of September 11 may have corrected it […] whatever the novel gets up to, the "culture" can always get up to something bigger" (n.p.). Drawing on his essays, Wood says that "Franzen has so lengthily lamented the possibility of producing the social novel that he seems, really, to be longing for its renewed possibility", which resonates differently when considering the novel as (albeit accidentally) amongst the first to come out since 9/11 (n.p.). Wood feels that Franzen is constantly undercutting hope with pessimism in *The Corrections* – he "seems somewhat desperate to be suddenly suggesting that their [the Lamberts'] inner changes are akin to the economy's changes, or to the society's" (n.p.).

regresses, so Nealon's conception of just-in-time, post-postmodern capitalism is applicable here as a last-minute disruption of this process of breakdown. I would therefore argue that Brooks' claim that in *The Corrections* "disavowal is predicated on a logic that personalizes impersonal relationships and thereby resolves irresolvable conflicts" is not completely accurate (24). Brooks suggests that the novel's "narrative logic" is that "being a dedicated member of a family can substitute for (and thus resolve the conflicts of) being a participant in the global economy", but "conflicts" are never convincingly resolved in the novel because they are only attempted at the last moment (30). This is despite the restorative potential of the "family" and the aspirations for sincerity that being in one gives the Lamberts. Like post-postmodernism's distribution and manufacturing networks – and expanded from postmodernism's, which Corecktall exemplifies – conflict is only replaced with what can be read as false hope at the end of *The Corrections*. Franzen fast-forwards beyond the chronology of the novel thus far and suggests that Chip "was going to be the father of twins […] he then invited Enid to a wedding at which the bride was *seven months pregnant*" (650). This spreads to Gary, who "returned to St. Jude with Jonah a few months after the catastrophic Christmas", where Enid "had nothing but fun with them" (648). The flashforward reveals that Denise also spends valuable time with her mother, during which she "looked so much happier than she had at Christmas", finally comfortable with the fact "that she still didn't have a man in her life or any discernible desire to get one" (648-649). These projections are personal developments, which can be considered cathartic because the Lamberts' anxiety over the "evils of late capitalism" has been superseded by a concern for themselves and their immediate families. But they do not converge as *one* family, and can only be hopeful of futures where they each see their mother infrequently and individually. In terms of their hopes for language, it has become a private space for each of them.

The sudden shift from struggle to epiphany can be interpreted as a concession that the Lamberts are contained within a fictional narrative, that their aspirations for sincerity can only ever reach a qualified, unconvincing, performative version of this – as are the conditions of post-postmodernism. The Lamberts' respective journeys towards self-improvement are determined by their language uses, which culminate in them first either not knowing what to say to each other or only being able to argue during the Christmas reunion, and then brings an unrealistic, artificial, rushed set of individual resolutions. At Christmas, Gary arrives without the grandson Enid was so desperate to see, Chip turns up late (after his appearance being uncertain in the first place), and Alfred spends the day confusing which of his children is which. As Gary says, "Jonah's disappointed. I'm disappointed. You're disappointed. Can we

leave it at that? We're all disappointed" (549). As Franzen suggested in the interview with Antrim, "Christmas is Enid's novel. Christmas is the thing to be achieved. She wants it to have formal perfection. It's something she works on, she's obsessed with it, year round" (n.p.).[38] In *The Corrections*, prior to the festive season the Lamberts are divided up along the East Coast – Gary and Denise in Philadelphia, Chip in New York City (before he moves to Lithuania) – and only a Christmas in the fictional Midwestern setting of St. Jude can bring that "formal perfection." The chapter "ONE LAST CHRISTMAS" instead becomes a footnote to the novel, restricting characters to different rooms more often than they are in the same one, reducing its geographical scale to a household and the distinctions of city, region, and nation to the segregation of four domestic walls. Again, my claim of unfulfilled sincerity at the Lamberts' Christmas links to the way *The Corrections* transposes post-postmodern paradox and late capitalist manipulation into its storytelling, and is not a criticism of the quality of Franzen's writing. Alfred is the only character not to receive a (misleadingly) happy ending, with Corecktall failing and Christmas barely fulfilling his hopes of reconnecting with his three children. Instead, over the festive period his neurological breakdown continues, just with a bigger audience.

Earlier in the novel, when he and Enid are on a cruise and she leaves him alone for a short while, he is said to be "terribly agitated and not finishing his sentences, not even making his verbs and nouns agree in number and person" (360).[39] At Christmas, Alfred's inability to associate words with meanings and thoughts with actions becomes more alarming, with Denise discovering her father's gun, in what could be viewed as a reverse of Anton Chekhov's dramatic model – a just-in-time, third act introduction of a gun instead of one in the first act. Franzen writes that,

> Stacked up on one of the old family bedspreads that had long served as a dropcloth were wicker chairs and tables in early stages of scraping and painting. Lidded coffee cans were clustered on an open section of newspaper; a gun in a canvas case was by the workbench.

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[38] Franzen's comments in his 2006 memoir *The Discomfort Zone* suggest that Enid may be the surrogate of his own mother, for whom "Christmas" was the house generally: "the house had been my mother's novel, the concrete story she told about herself" (24). *The Discomfort Zone* elaborates on Franzen's understanding of his mother's relationship with the house, after she passes away: "What lived on – in me – was the discomfort of how completely I'd outgrown the novel I'd once been so happy to live in, and how little I even cared about the final sale price" (25). Similar association between Alfred and Franzen's father is made in the essay "My Father's Brain" (*How to Be Alone*).

[39] Another example of the idea during "AT SEA" is Alfred's confused flashback – where he remembers ""Noun adjective," his mother said, "contraction possessive noun. Conjunction conjunction stressed pronoun counter-factual verb pronoun I'd just gobble that up and temporal adverb pronoun conditional auxiliary infinitive –" Peculiar how unconstrained he felt to understand the words that were spoken to him" (303).

> "What are you doing with the gun, Dad?" Denise said.
> "Oh, he's been meaning to sell that for years," Enid said.
> "AL, ARE YOU EVER GOING TO SELL THAT GUN?"
> Alfred seemed to run this sentence through his brain several times in order to extract its meaning. Very slowly, he nodded his head. "Yes," he said. "I will sell the gun." (590-591).

Alongside Franzen's unfulfilled correction of postmodernism is Alfred's failed correction of his own health, or its correction by external forces. The family's solution for the final period of his life is a nursing home, because Corecktall has failed and he is no longer able to make his own decisions.

The Lamberts' Cycle of Mistake and Repetition

Visiting his father at the nursing home, Chip is greeted by Alfred's inability to hold a conversation or find the words for the desired expression: "Whenever he entered his father's field of vision, a smile of recognition and pleasure spread over Alfred's face. This recognition might have had the character of mistaken identity if it hadn't been accompanied by Alfred's exclamation of Chip's name" (629). The narrative strands may have converged, and the individual character chapters given way to the shared epilogue "THE CORRECTIONS", but in the chapter before this ("ONE LAST CHRISTMAS") Franzen's novel derails the Lamberts' redemptive trajectories, instead staging an untaken opportunity for the family's accumulated problems to be ironed out, followed by a fast-forward through their isolated happinesses and Alfred's decline, then death. In this final chapter, at Christmas, Franzen returns to the linguistic stasis of the prologue ("ST. JUDE"), where Alfred is trapped behind words: "Enid was waiting for him, unaware of any woods – "packing my suitcase," he heard himself say. This sounded right. Verb, possessive, noun" (13). The inability to use language is not unique to Alfred, with Chip's screenplay (which he works on alongside his job for the Lithuanian government) also never settling on linguistic clarity and artistic purpose. This screenplay is titled "*The Academy Purple*" (507)It is an intertext like Monk's My Pafology in *Erasure*, also highlighting the problem of circumnavigating postmodern irony, for both *The Corrections*' characters and Franzen's reader. Mirroring Franzen's novel's attempt to reach structural convergence – which puts it into conversation with

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the continuously horizontally growing rhizome – Chip's screenplay only offers success that leads to further editing, which is therefore neither closure nor completion. As the narrator says, "He said that "his" producer in New York had "loved" his "new" version and asked for a rewrite" (650). Green suggests that *The Academy Purple* "provides the novel with one of its running jokes" (115). I would extend this and say that it gives the novel its punchline, because Chip spends so long on something that leads to nothing, and in line with an impeded rhizome of post-postmodern stasis (wherein the tension between irony and sincerity is left unresolved), neither the screenplay nor Alfred's health nor Franzen's novel reaches its projected destination, with *The Corrections* even mocking the possibility of closure with its flashforward ending. Chip's own anticlimactic ending of false hope stretches to his screenplay, which is "loved" by his producer, which the narrator puts in scare quotes to underline how a "rewrite" is necessary regardless of his producer's excitement.

In "Mr. Difficult", Franzen hints that the screenplay thread is semi-autobiographical. In between anecdotes of his experiences reading Gaddis, he reveals how "while my father, in a different time zone, was losing his mind, I'd written two treatments and four full drafts of an "original" screenplay" (*How to Be Alone* 242). *The Academy Purple* mirrors its author's struggle with literary aesthetics and career direction, like this real screenplay, which "bore a fatal resemblance to *Fun with Dick and Jane* […] had double and triple crosses and characters who used prosthetic makeup to impersonate other characters" (*How to Be Alone* 242). Chip is said to have "been awakening most nights before dawn, his stomach churning and his teeth clenched, and had wrestled with the nightmarish certainty that a long academic monologue on Tudor drama had no place in Act I of a commercial script" (*The Corrections* 29). If the persistent rewrites of *The Academy Purple* not only mirror Franzen's real life, but also offer a micro version of *The Corrections*' cyclical structure of repeated mistakes, Chip's situation is comparable to Enid's hopes for convergence and harmony and one final, idealised family Christmas. Chip confesses to being in a "battle with a commercialized, medicalized, totalitarian modernity" he claims to be "losing" (36). Chip and the entire novel's deliberately unfulfilling ending signals remaining in post-postmodern limbo, and this is amplified by how this "loved" screenplay draft came about, which underlines sincerity's dependence on irony: "*tragedy rewritten as a farce*" (618). Chip's inability to use language sincerely (in his work and in his life) is signposted throughout his dedicated chapter earlier in the novel, "THE FAILURE", including one point where "He read *Cross Pens* as *Cross Penises*, he read *ALTERATIONS* as *ALTERCATIONS*" (121). Chip and the Lamberts are a family falling apart

and constantly needing to rewrite themselves and their lives, and the composition of Franzen's novel shows this in its structure, which stages the very replication, repetition, and persistent failures (of words, sentences, chapters) that the family is guilty of. They are conditioned both by the market (and doing whatever is needed for capital gain) and postmodern irony (and the comfort of rhetoric, spin, and manipulating words).

Burns writes that "a strong case can be made for the multi-generational family novel as the dominant post-postmodern genre", which he relates to "staccato jumps across time, often pairing childhood with incipient adulthood" (*Cambridge History* 460). It is these "staccato jumps across time" in *The Corrections*, as well as the parallels between its static beginning and ending, which confuse the role of temporality within its conception of post-postmodernism. Franzen's opening sentence begins outside of its present tense and warns of this approach to temporality – which can be linked to Fisher's ideas on lost futures – with the line "something terrible was going to happen" (3). This opening points most clearly to Alfred's death, but this comes after the novel stages various "terrible" happenings, which Enid summarises retrospectively at the end. In its final chapter, she calls attention to "Gary's materialism and Chip's failures and Denise's childlessness" (650); but the list could include Denise's adultery, Chip's professional scandal and its fallout, Gary's mental health crisis, and her own failure (as well as her husband's) to hold the family together. The Lamberts' consistent failure to correct anything (despite their self-awareness) is anticipated by a "ringing" reverberating "throughout the house": a pervasive, ominous "alarm bell that no one but Alfred and Enid could hear directly" (3). The Lambert home offers the opposite of serenity, so it is fitting that it is introduced by this "ringing", which refutes calmness or closure and is immediately clarified as "the alarm bell of anxiety" (3). Sustaining the idea that the narrative dramatises Franzen's relationship with postmodernism, this "alarm bell" is one specifically of an anxiety of influence by postmodern irony. The paradox of awareness yet inability to change – the stasis that comes with hearing warning sirens throughout the novel but each character being incapable of turning them off – is captured by the idea that the "bell had been ringing in their heads for as long as they could remember; ringing for so many months that the sound had given way to a kind of metasound" (4). The Lamberts are Franzen's post-postmodern project in miniature, so their inability to step outside of themselves productively, to correct themselves sincerely, is due to the obstacle of postmodernism; this can be seen here in how the "bell" is not just a "sound", but a "metasound."

The novel's beginning and ending are in conversation with one another, taking place in

the same locale to highlight spatial confinement. The Lamberts' individual progresses are undone by the way Franzen presents them as illusive and unconvincing; they are flash forwards at the end that are referenced hypothetically (and fleetingly) from the present tense. Franzen's globetrotting, perspective-shifting, seven-chapter trajectory is static, leaving St. Jude and dividing the family only to reunite them in the same claustrophobic geographical setting. It is unsurprising that the opening even uses the words "coming to an end": "The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end" (3). The promises of "disorder" and "restless[ness]" anticipate the Lamberts' individual struggles and, like the post-postmodern aesthetics the novel around them imitates, these conditions are challenged by ambitions of upwards movement (and on economic terms: upwards mobility) and convergence. These ambitions are of *reaching* sincerity by moving past the challenges. Gary's marriage may precariously hold together, Chip may opt for a career change and move to Lithuania to work for his girlfriend's husband, and Denise's affairs with her boss and his wife may never cause the irreparable harm that seems inevitable throughout the novel, but the damage the Lamberts are doing to their family dynamic only escalates with the tense, difficult Christmas reunion. The first and seventh chapters of the novel overrule the other five, where the story persistently reworks and corrects itself, introducing passages that cover the same ground as previous ones, from a new perspective within the Lambert family. The exceptions to the individual character chapters include when Chip appears in Denise's chapter (titled "THE GENERATOR") and she appears in Gary's ("THE MORE HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT, THE ANGRIER HE GOT") via flashback. The opening sentence's assertion of untaken opportunities and unfulfilled potentials is determined by the fact of six remaining chapters, but the end of summer signals "The *madness* of an autumn prairie cold front coming through" (3). Equally, the circular motion (like the seasons cycle) of Franzen's novel is driven by resets and returns, which can be viewed as post-postmodern principles due to their inseparability from problems with lineage, chronology, and periodisation.

This structural, character, and aesthetic stasis to Franzen's novel is intensified by the repetitive functions of finance, capital, and the market – which as I have argued are intertwined with the logics of post-postmodernism and its development from previous phases of modernism. Crosthwaite claims that postmodernism "is defined by the market's total penetration of culture" (14). While Franzen's cautionary tale of the Lamberts aligns this postmodern failure with neoliberalism, the fear of "total penetration" is only replaced by the contingent resistance of totality or absolutism, because liberated autonomy is itself controlled

(and is never an entirely authentic or sincere gesture). This is the structural pattern of the novel, but it is also represented on the additional level of specific formal experiments such as the Chip-Denise email exchange during "THE GENERATOR." Franzen offers six pages of detail, but the passage exposes misinformation and ambiguity more often than clarity, as determined by the pair's fractured conversation. Denise's opening email signs off with "Hope all's well wherever the fuck you are", but her disclosure carries the exact propensity to withhold information she criticises of her brother: "Other than that, not much to report" (497). Only in later emails does she confess "I'm a mess […] I was fired for sleeping with my boss's wife" (501). Their exchange is driven by agenda and subtext, which are mutual Lambert problems, so Denise's sincere truth only comes when Chip's replies become less frequent and her desperation to get something out of him escalates – knowing what the reunion means to their mother, she asks her brother to "Please come for Christmas" (502). The emails are both a mode of character communication and the kind of postmodern stunt Franzen criticised in "Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult" – McLaughlin calls them "extranovelistic discourse" (63). Not simply an epistolary device, the emails highlight the proliferation of performative communication methods in the emerging technological age at the turn of the century, which extend the market's opportunity to turn to postmodern irony as a means of manipulating the consumer/user of new technology. That is, the hyper-attentive capitalist market relates to how Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl describe the central "tenet" of neoliberalism – that it "presumes and produces scenarios of radical individualism and self-proprietorship that are predicated upon a competitive ethos" (203). Language is exploited by "radical individualism" to further disrupt the Lamberts' collective inability to communicate, competitively upping the ante by making communication more difficult through rhetoric or code. As Konstantinou suggests, "Innovation and experimentation have transformed from modernist watchwords into structural features of the economy" ("7 Neoliberal Arts" n.p.). With these "features" comes active harm on individual sincerity as it attempts to resist postmodern irony – a stage of in-progress, under development, or in limbo that defines post-postmodernism. The tendency to perform, experiment, and speak around a subject rather than address it forthrightly is a shared Lambert flaw, demonstrating how Franzen's story of one repressed white Midwestern family uncoincidentally recalls arguments put forward in "Perchance to Dream" (which were echoed in "Mr. Difficult") on contemporary fiction's need to turn away from past postmodernism.

The Chip-Denise email exchange is also a useful example of Franzen's injection of personal grievances into the Lambert story, with Chip hiding behind the "@" and not only

adopting an email handle but opting for a Gaddis reference: "exprof@gaddisfly.com" (497).[40] As Burn puts it, "exprof@gaddisfly.com" sees Franzen "combine allusion and distancing mechanism: *fly* implies that we're in some way escaping Gaddis' postmodernism" (*Cambridge History* 453). Franzen's perceived, necessary escape is from the allegedly difficult writing style Gaddis' *JR* and *The Recognitions* contain, but his novel ultimately cannot commit to doing this and his characters cling onto the same irony he diagnosed as an issue within these Gaddis novels. The emails infuse technological anxiety with Franzen's anxiety of literary influence – these can also be joined by what Rob Turner calls a danger that "the conscious counterfeit might become a dominant American mode" (7). Turner identifies a "duplicated and second-hand nature of American culture" (3). He suggests that this poses a threat to sincerity, and Franzen expands this threat to a literary aesthetic of sincerity. Only further complicating this aesthetic are what Crosthwaite calls "the prodigious information-gathering capacities of the financial markets" (140).

The double technological and literary anxieties of Corecktall/the email exchange are not the only devices *The Corrections* uses in its strategy of postcritically rehearsing the post-postmodernism debate. Another is Gary's engagement with therapy in his section of the novel, though the situation of his mental health bleeds into other chapters and also draws comparisons with Chip's own dependence on therapy and Alfred's reliance on a different kind of medical help. As Rachel Greenwald Smith says, Gary "maps his mental health as if he were trading stocks" ("Introduction" 6). Gary's defining correction is that "his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life" (*The Corrections* 207). This triggers an interminable debate with his wife Caroline on the state of his mental health because he constantly feels weigh down by this pressure. He deflects her suggestions that he is depressed and keeps "resisting ANHEDONIA", somewhat like Chip earlier in the novel, who claims that "The very definition of mental 'health' is the ability to participate in the consumer economy. When you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying" (207, 36). The Lambert brothers fear that "health" has become a market construct which has been manipulated beyond recognition. Their shared paranoia specifically links to postmodernism because that

[40] Taking his interpolation of other published work in a different direction, Franzen's fifth novel – *Purity* (2015) – sees him come close to self-characterisation. It includes a passage in which embittered novelist Charles Blenheim complains that there are "So many *Jonathans*. A plague of literary *Jonathans*. If you read only the *New York Times Book Review* you'd think it was the most common name in America" (264). Through Charles, Franzen is scoping out and self-deprecating after a thinly veiled reference to the author Jonathan Safran Foer: "Jonathan Savoir Faire" (264).

literary mode always returns to narratives of uncertainty and conspiracy – as Franzen mentions in the Antrim interview: "There's all the stuff you might get in a typical conspiracy novel, except that here the conspiracy is a family matter" (n.p.). Like Chip, Gary is concerned for the way he might accidentally be "buying into buying", which would render him a consumer rather than an authentic, sincere individual trying to overcome a real crisis of mental illness. Gary tries to find what Mark Banks calls "opportunities for meaningful self-expression" despite late capitalism's "limits" (252). One of these limits is how his conversations with his wife become a sinister "verbal currency" (*The Corrections* 179).[41]

So, the central focus of Gary's chapter is precisely to resist this exploitation of his mental health:

> He'd had the sense, moments earlier, that Caroline was on the verge of accusing him of being "depressed", and he was afraid that if the idea that he was depressed gained currency, he would forfeit his right to his opinions. He would forfeit his moral certainties; every word he spoke would become a symptom of disease; he would never again win an argument.
> (184-185).

Gary's worry recalls the one Franzen expresses in "Perchance to Dream", where Franzen describes how ""mystery" (how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence) and "manners" (the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave)" are being lost as independence is replaced with a machinic role within consumer culture (42). [42] Enid expresses this too when worrying over an "exchange of family data" (345). This "exchange" has replaced a functional, reciprocated, meaningful conversation. Like their mother, Gary and Chip conform with diagnosis being a vital stage in achieving reform and self-improvement,

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[41] The phrase can be found elsewhere in Gary's chapter, usually when his son Jonah comes up in his thinking/the conversation. Gary observes the potential inheritance of his personality flaw: "Clearly the boy was prepared to spend any amount of devalued verbal currency to buy his father's acquiescence" (179). Later, during "ONE LAST CHRISTMAS", he excuses Jonah's absence as something autonomous and independent, which he cannot achieve: "Gary might have seen in Jonah's decision a parable of the crisis of moral duty in a culture of consumer choice" (562).

[42] This anxiety reappears in Franzen's fourth novel *Freedom* (2010) as well as in *Purity*. In the former, Joey Berglund is at one point given "a once-over, head to toe, the way a person might confirm that a product she'd ordered had arrived in acceptable condition"; Patty Berglund is said to have "meekly presented progress reports" at the "regular Monday-evening dinners" with daughter Jessica; and the family generally is described by their "monopolizing conversations" (*Freedom* 446, 566, 131). In *Purity*, protagonist Pip Tyler introduces herself as "like a bank too big in her mother's economy to fail", surrounded by friends whose parents "had resources that consisted of more than just their single offspring" (4). Pip (full name Purity) belongs to the generation feeling the impact of the damage to the economy done by the Berglunds and Lamberts; she is a"mess of debts and duties" who cannot even "afford being depressed" (13, 9).

but these two characters never reach these things, and this is Franzen's intention, whereas his own contradiction of the diagnoses of "Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult" is unintended.

This discrepancy can be viewed as condition of the market, as well as a contributing factor to post-postmodernism's definitional ambiguities and contradictions-by-design. Post-postmodernism can be aligned with neoliberalism in various ways, so there are shared faults and problems with them. For instance, Foucault discusses how neoliberals are motivated by the potential correction to a "problem of the handicap of monopoly" (137). Foucault describes "Economics" as "not therefore the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity" (223). It is this persistent impulse of "analysis" rather than simply "activity" that links neoliberalism's failings or failures with post-postmodernism's shortcomings and uncertainties – though I would argue that these are inevitable realities of trying to categorise (and produce) writing after postmodernism rather than failings/failures in terms of the quality of post-postmodernism fiction. Konstantinou touches on this link between neoliberalism and post-postmodernism when discussing how neoliberalism is "increasingly attuned to its reception in the realm of circulation", having "sought to reconfigure the terms of judgement" ("7 Neoliberal Arts" n.p.). Crosthwaite emphasises the necessary "heavily financialized restructuring" within his market logics, which rely on "artistic and intellectual autonomy" and therefore takes these understandings of unfulfilled neoliberal potential further (2-3). Crosthwaite argues that contemporary novels often do not succeed at being liberated from influence, instead "respond[ing] to the power of stock exchanges and other sites of financial trade in narratives that lurch between reverence, doubt, and renunciation in patterns that mimic the ebbing and flowing rhythms of finance itself" (15). This premise of self-regulating markets rather than individual people is a useful way to view the structure of *The Corrections* and its treatment of its ensemble cast. Under the impression that they are acting independently, the Lamberts reproduce market "rhythms" and in doing so remind us that they are fictional characters being controlled by an author. This is fitting, because Franzen writes so obsessively self-consciously that although he is not an autofictional figure within his novel (because his novel is not an autofictional work), the traces of him and his opinions can often be found in *The Corrections*' pages.

Speculation, Futurity, and the Market Crash

As Béatrice Pire suggests, in Franzen's novel "the word "correction" is given different meanings and understood in its medical, economic and judicial sense along with its classical biblical connotation" (248). Rachel Greenwald Smith offers other possible different meanings to "corrections" in the novel, writing that "while the title of the novel has valences that range from the penitentiary system (correctional facilities) to generational change (making corrections in the behaviour of one's parents) to revision (the endless corrections that Chip, one of the main characters, makes to his doomed screenplay), the metaphor that looms most dramatically over the novel is that of market correction" ("Introduction" 8). As Franzen's reader, while we may not be convinced by the continuation of his criticism of Gaddis, nor by his claims that postmodern fiction generally is *only* ironic and experimental, it is clear that both post-postmodernism and the market have "internalized the lessons of earlier waves of postmodern fiction", as Crosthwaite puts it (54).[43] So there are grounds for justifying some form of correction to contemporary fiction (and its market logics) as postmodernism somewhat loses its value, and Franzen's novel dramatises this as an appropriately transitional, uncertain struggle concerning exactly what it is being corrected and what comes after the corrections.

As a result, the characters in *The Corrections* must constantly compete with their ability to be autonomous, affective, and sincere rather than simply achieving these things, and by the end of Franzen's novel they are still locked in their individual corrective processes. Enid, who is arguably the protagonist, is the most hopeful about her own corrections, because as Franzen's narrator says in the final moments of the novel:

> All of her correction had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she'd met him. And yet when he was dead, when she'd pressed her lips to his forehead and walked out with Denise and Gary into the warm spring night, she felt that nothing could kill her hope now, nothing. She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life. (653).

[43] At one point in the novel, Alfred says "that the real and the true were a minority that the world was bent on exterminating", and shortly after how "the "real" and "authentic" might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with" (296-297, 315-316). Ironically, these work as defences of postmodernism, because authenticity and realism are themselves not fixed literary modes like they perhaps used to be at, say, Henry James' time of writing – so postmodernism is only moving away from something that is already slippery and elusive.

This ending echoes the closing epiphany of Molly Bloom in James Joyce's modernist epic *Ulysses* (1922), as Pire looks at in her work on "errors" in Franzen's novel. After chronicling her husband Leopold's exploits over the course of the 16th of June, Joyce's novel devotes its entire final chapter to Molly's near-unpunctuated stream of consciousness. Like Molly before her, Enid is finally given the agency she is deprived of throughout the novel, transforming reiteration and recurrence into "changes" at the last opportunity, which is both an internal correction to her own life and a generational dialogue with modernist legacy – now grown up into the aging parent but still understanding and defining itself as it competes with new generations (her children, their children, postmodernism, post-postmodernism).[44] By relinquishing her desire for a perfect Christmas, Enid terminates the cycle of mistake-correction-mistake that the Lambert family are otherwise limited to (and which would carry on if Enid did not end the novel and stop the pages from coming). Molly Bloom's disruptive, metafictional outburst of "Jamesy let me up out of this" is replaced here by Enid's break from existing structures and aesthetic patterns (*Ulysses* 914). As Pire says, *The Corrections*' ending and the Enid-Molly connection doubles as a "metaphorical summary of Franzen's fictional path", which recalls Hidalga's discussion of Franzen's career "metanarrative" (255; 7). I would argue that this metanarrative is built on a consistent dialogue with legacies of modernism, including post-postmodernism – as this underpins *The Corrections*, but also (in different ways) the novels that Franzen wrote before and after it.

To return to Pire's suggestion of correction's "classical biblical connotation", she extends this reading and says that, "Flawed and erring, America is seen as deserving divine punishment and responsible for the failure of a Last Supper that otherwise would have redeemed and cured it" (248). Pire applies the metaphor of "Last Supper" to the Lamberts with concrete finality, despite how "last" is another relative term, just like the "post" of post-postmodernism. Enid's Christmas dinner is only *a* last supper and not one that necessitates the definite article, because to be last can mean the final moment of a set of events, which does not preclude a reset button and the introduction of a new set of events (that need correcting). Even if her children lack the same self-empowering clarity over the new potential in an additional set of corrections – and if the door to future potential is closed for her

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[44] Franzen's novel *Freedom* somewhat reverses this approach to gender, putting Patty Berglund front and centre more often than husband Walter or Richard Katz, with whom she has an affair. Patty's agency is signalled as early as the second chapter, which assumes the form of "MISTAKES WERE MADE: Autobiography of Patty Berglund, by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist's Suggestion)" (29).

husband irrevocably – Enid finds hope in futurity. In Hidalga's terms, this returns to the state of the Lambert world as one of "relentless individualism" (149). I would add that this "individualism" is specifically white middle-class American, because another issue with Franzen's post-postmodernism is the homogeneity with which it appears within his narrative – that is, sincerity is an exclusive term, trying to be accessed by one type of family whose flaws and mistakes are limited to only causing a certain amount of economic damage (limits most tested by Chip when he spends a section of the novel unemployed). Hidalga observes how "the Lamberts' offspring live in a late postmodern world of cool sophistication, instant gratification by means of consumption, financial speculation and relentless individualism" (149). So entwined restrictions of postmodern irony and the market may limit the Lamberts, but they do not eliminate a future where their struggles to hold on to their autonomy and sincerity might no longer compete with these conditions. There is a survivalist potential to their post-postmodern futures, even if the same cannot be said about the flashforward summaries of the year that follows the failed Christmas reunion for Chip, Denise, Gary, and Enid.

The Corrections ends with the confirmation that the Lamberts' corrections are each still in progress, that their resistance to the "fluid, postmodern era of playful consumption and guilt-free pleasure" remains under development (Green 106). This is despite how the novel must not be read as a self-help guide that is taking itself completely seriously.[45] Green claims that "the Lambert children *do not* move" into the "fluid, postmodern era" (106, emphasis added); but I would argue that by being part of a narrative that is fixated on the postmodern problem Franzen first diagnosed in "Perchance to Dream", they are complicit in certain mechanics of this "postmodern era." The Lamberts' elevation above or outside of postmodernism and alignment with post-postmodern aesthetics (because their novel is doing this) must be paired with "a coming to widespread self-consciousness" of the "agonizingly conflicted imperatives in its relation to market forces", as Crosthwaite puts it (38). But the "market forces" and postmodern irony often prevail in *The Corrections*, so post-postmodern futurist potential is yet another unresolved conflict in Franzen's novel, that itself generates a

[45] In *Freedom*, self-liberation resonates in the title but also the myriad discussions of "freedom" throughout in the novel. Rachel Greenwald Smith attributes the novel with an interest in "lifestyle consumerism" due to the "use of free indirect discourse" ("Postmodernism" 426). A conversation between Patty, Walter, and Richard considers freedom in this way (as both topic and aesthetic): "Walter thinks the liberal state can self-correct," Richard said. He thinks the American bourgeoisie will voluntarily accept increasing restrictions on its personal freedoms" (108). Richard reiterates his worry later: "The real problem, though," Katz said, is free-market capitalism. Right?" (383).

conveyor belt effect of replacing unfinished corrections with reworked, new ones (which becomes a task of again trying to resolve these). The most unfinished corrections concern the Lamberts' relationships with Alfred before he dies, who as I have read can be read as a stand-in for Franzen. This particular irresolution is captured by the scene in which he struggles to untangle the Christmas lights as his children argue with their mother downstairs:

> Unfortunately, he didn't know how to fix the lights. He didn't understand how a stretch of fifteen bulbs could go dead. He examined the transition from light to darkness and saw no change in the wiring pattern between the last burning bulb and the first dead one. He couldn't follow the three constituent wires through all their twists and braidings. The circuit was semiparallel in some complex way he didn't see the point of.
> (532).

Alfred never asks for help, leaving the "wiring" in knots, the lights unfixed and in a heap in the attic. They are left to "go dead" in their untangled state, which is a mirror to his own imminent fate. The speed of his decline distracts him from making peace with his family, and this episode of the novel concludes with the severe side effects of Parkinson's, which take precedence over the mess of responsibilities he will soon run out of time for. Despite the desperate internal reminder that "His children were coming" and awareness of a "very important question" for Chip, this section ends as he scrambles to remember it, with the open-ended "The question was:" (537). Christmas proceeds, without the lights and with a continuation of longstanding family tensions and conflicts. Returning to the novel's opening lines, the "something terrible" still happens to Alfred, and his wife and children fail to save him.

As *The Corrections*' narrator outlines, "*The* [definitive] *correction*" is ultimately not one of Alfred's health, nor "an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets" (647). After all, "Franzen satirises the emotional consequences of neoliberal ideology", to quote Rachel Greenwald Smith ("Introduction" 6). As Smith claims, Franzen "trains readers to see these patterns in their daily lives" (11). He therefore he also "trains readers" to be anxious of the cultural acceleration of both the economic market and literary aesthetics. *The Corrections* spends over six hundred pages tying itself up in knots and blurring the lines between an objective response to the failings of late capitalism and neoliberalism and its author's subjective response to postmodernism, which are both inescapably major developments in the early

stages of twenty-first century American culture.[46] In line with post-postmodernism's premise of collapsed but confused temporality, *The Corrections* sees Franzen write anxiously and inconsistently about recent economic and literary pasts, but it also sees him write with this tone about the uncertain future. Narratively, the story of the Lamberts builds towards a self-destructive denouement: an economic crash which anticipates the 2008 global financial meltdown. Another component of *The Corrections*' unintended, valuable contribution to the post-postmodernism debate, then, is its unplanned alignment with the 2008 crash. This is comparable to its relevance to post-9/11 discontent – relevance which is inevitable given the novel's publication ten days after the crisis and the tone of its narrative, relevance which Franzen of course did not plan for.

To return to Johansen and Karl, the 2008 crisis can be understood as "a moment where one might have expected a re-thinking of neoliberal consensus but a further affirmation and commitment to this consensus occurred instead" (208). In his work, Crosthwaite considers the 2008 crash alongside the "questioning of the idea of the self-correcting market so central to neoliberal theory" (10). Reading the 2008 crash alongside the fictional market crash in Franzen's novel accentuates a shared paradox of "re-thinking" or "questioning" despite a lack of progress. This strengthens my reading of the unconvincing, artificial list of endings *The Corrections* provides for Chip, Denise, and Gary, which do not contain either the finality of Alfred's ending or the more convincing sincerity and hope of Enid's. The Lambert children's non-endings, which is what I think we should call them, demonstrate how the novel has returned to the space of incarceration, limitation, and precarity that it started in – aesthetically, structurally, and (for its characters) both economically and concerning their aspirations for existential purpose/self-fulfilment. As Burn notes, as befits post-postmodernism's semantic entanglements: "taken together, these first letters of the family members' names also offer a pertinent anagram: CAGED" (*Jonathan Franzen* 123-124). Green takes this further, suggesting that the novel is, in effect, "a series of five related novellas, each a little more than a hundred pages, enclosed between a brief prologue and briefer epilogue" (105). Green links this back to Paula Fox's novel *Desperate Characters* (1970), which Franzen famously declared "a perfectly realised book" ("Perchance to Dream"

[46] McLaughlin discusses the danger that post-postmodernism leaves authors "self-consciously pointing to themselves trying to point to the world", rather than just pointing to the world (58). I would suggest that it is specifically post-postmodernism's emphasis on futurity – no matter how hypothetical or speculative – that removes this danger.

36). Green says how *The Corrections*, "modelled to some extent on *Desperate Characters*, follows the protagonists through a brief period of crisis to the brink of major, even catastrophic, change" (105). This "change" must be qualified though, as something that is only hypothetical. Despite Enid's "changes", Chip still remains in what, in his chapter of the novel, he calls a "prison" (155). For Gary, the "universe was mechanistic" and for him it remains this at the end of the novel (174).

Just as his portrayal of turn of the century America transparently shows the shortcomings, failings, and entrapments that lead to a socio-economic crisis, Franzen's aesthetic crisis is one of going back on his word and contradicting the essay claims that *The Corrections* was supposed to put into practice. Whether the resulting paradox is framed as the postcritical, post-postmodern limbo that I have suggested Everett's *Erasure* writes from and of (and which Smith's *White Teeth* and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* also centralise), or if it is framed as an impeded rhizome or representation of temporal simultaneity, the way out of paradox is spotlighted as a desire to "reconnect language to the social sphere", as McLaughlin puts it (53). This would transform the stasis Chip fears from the novel's second chapter – of "the unchanging historical roots of things" – into mobility (*The Corrections* 76). Misleading, falsehoods, and backwards steps abound in Franzen's narrative because it rehearses the same tensions his novel aesthetics are wrestling with, which undermine Alfred's realisation that he "understood what modernity expected of him now" (531). As it attempts to write beyond postmodernism, after its author took such issue with the irony and experimentalism that came with that previous phase of modernism, *The Corrections* does *not* understand what post-postmodernism expects of it now. It is the responsibility of other works of fiction to clarify things that Franzen cannot, while he generates a discussion of market logics that other convincingly post-postmodern novels do not. It is also the responsibility of the critic to add to the debate around post-postmodernism, not least because it implicates critical discussion within its fiction. For example, race is an integral issue in post-postmodernism, which I looked at in my previous chapter on *Erasure* but which is framed exclusively, glaringly as whiteness in *The Corrections*. This is something that *White Teeth* and in a different way *Infinite Jest* offer valuable contributions on. As part of his market logics but separate to his (and my own) assessment of Franzen's novel, Crosthwaite suggests that Everett's novel explores the "pressure on African American cultural producers to exaggerate the social problems of Black urban America to the point of caricature for voyeuristic consumption by a predominantly white audience" (50). Race's position within the market logics of Franzen's post-postmodernism is not as a central problem. As well as

Everett's, an additional correction of this deferral can be found in Smith's *White Teeth*, which I turn my attention to next.

3. Association and Organisation in *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's debut novel is designed such that the reader's attention is on its structure, shape, and organisation. This intention is put into practice even before page one of *White Teeth*, as Smith gives her reader a chapter list that almost resembles an abbreviated Joyce schema, as the critic Matthew Paproth has recognised. *Ulysses* was famously assigned the "Linati schema" by Joyce in 1920 to help friend Carlo Linati understand his book, which supplied a breakdown of novel section headings and their time of day, "colour", "science/art", and other defining characteristics. As Paproth puts it, "like a Joycean schema, the table of contents prefacing *White Teeth* makes visible Smith's interest in constructing a web of parallels and correspondences among the four parts of her novel" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 20). This contents page plays a similar role to Joyce's Linati schema in offering a structural breakdown of the narrative that is about to begin, albeit a breakdown which has a more expansive interest in character and a broader chronology than Joyce's single-day story, but which demands a similarly scholarly approach to reading the novel. The sense of beginning with an index puts *White Teeth* (like *Erasure*) into conversation with Rita Felski's postcritique, which strengthens the role of the university in the development of post-postmodernism. Emphasising how her novel is specifically about the interplay between writers and readers, Smith's contents page does not provide immediate clarity, as a structural breakdown might do. The narrative roadmap remains complicated: the contents page is divided into four lists of five chapters each, under the headings "*Archie 1974, 1945*", "*Samad 1984, 1857*", "*Irie 1990, 1907*", "*Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999*" (*White Teeth* v). For the reader, specific comprehension of these names and dates come as the novel unfolds. But at this point every symmetry or logical connection in this information is paired with an incongruity. Each section has two dates, but these dates are in reverse chronological order. Each section is given the title of a character name, except the final section which has three. And within these sections, there are scattered consistencies and parallels, each having a chapter title related to their character that begins with a definite article and *belongs* to that character, as it were: "The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones"; "The Temptation of Samad Iqbal"; "The Miseducation of Irie Jones"; "The Return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal." Most also have two or three that include a dental metaphor: Archie's "Teething Trouble" and "The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal"; Samad's "Molars", "Mitosis", and "The Root Canals of Mangal Pande"; Irie's

"Canines: The Ripping Teeth" and "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden."

From the outset, Smith encourages her reader to work to recognise links, find attachments, and make associations, so it is fitting that the critical conversation surrounding her debut novel and body of work generally does this too, with earlier generations of writers and different legacies of British and American fiction. As addressed in the scholarship on her fiction, Smith's relationship with previous generations of writers is not defined by the kind of "anxiety of influence" Harold Bloom has famously written about (an anxiety I looked at in Franzen's work). Both Smith's work and the scholarship on it are instead interested in a positive appreciation and use of influence, an optimistic version of Fisher's lost futures, his *no longer* strange simultaneity. In this sense, simultaneity contradicts anxiety and the impulse to replace each old period of cultural time with a new one. Instead of being anxious, Smith's work is content to harmoniously co-exist alongside the work of earlier literary generations that have come before her and does so by bringing their work into the present. In one of the entries in *Feel Free: Essays*, Smith does not namedrop Fisher but, after confessing that she is an "analog person, born in 1975", says that she "can still be overwhelmed by simultaneity" (201). She worries that "We have become so used to summoning up dead images of ourselves that we barely notice we live among ghosts, and it is left to our artists to truly spook us, to make us see anew what has become second nature" (211). So the worry is not that there are "ghosts", but that artists (novelists) are not noticing the ghosts and benefitting from their place in the present. Her characters share this contentment of living alongside different generations, demonstrating how narrative and authorial intention are intertwined in Smith's work. It is productive to consider the possibilities of post-postmodernism with this prioritisation of appreciation over anxiety in mind, rather than limiting writing after postmodernism to a paranoid rejection of influence, as Franzen's nonfiction famously did prior to the publication of *The Corrections*. As this chapter will argue, post-postmodernism manifests in *White Teeth* through a pervasive interest in association, organisation, narrative maps, and structural networks, but these ideas are connected by simultaneity rather than replacement. Smith's project chimes with Fisher's ideas, and form and structure are her vehicles for doing this, which together are representative of a map or network of generations of novels and writers. The formal and structural components Smith offers to a critical conversation on post-postmodernism at the turn of the century diverge slightly from the ways we can think about Everett and Franzen within this next phase of postmodernism, then.

Like Everett, particularly Franzen, but also Wallace, Smith's post-postmodern project is outlined in her own nonfiction. Equivalent to Franzen's *Harper's* and *New Yorker* essays

and Wallace's nonfiction manifesto "E Unibus Pluram", Smith's pair of *Guardian* pieces "Fail Better" and "Read Better" provide a framework for her fiction's internal discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. Smith's essays were published in 2007, so after her first three novels had come out, which separates her nonfiction from Franzen's pre- and immediately post-*Corrections* work in *Harper's*/*The New Yorker* and Wallace's pre-*Infinite Jest* essay. "Fail Better" primarily suggests that failure is a natural, hardwired component of the writing process, which Smith filters through the lens of the writer. As she says, borrowing from Samuel Beckett, "Readers fail writers just as often as writers fail readers" ("Fail Better" n.p.).[47] Competing with this, "each writer asks himself which serviceable truths he can live with, which alliances are strong enough to hold. The answers to those questions separate experimentalists from so-called 'realists'" ("Fail Better" n.p.). Smith highlights that the differences between these sets of answers and writers are somewhat arbitrary, suggesting that "Somewhere between a critic's necessary superficiality and a writer's natural dishonesty, the truth of how we judge literary success or failure is lost" (n.p.). Ultimately, she claims, "writers know that between the platonic ideal of the novel and the actual novel there is always the pesky self – vain, deluded, myopic, cowardly, compromised" (n.p.). She concedes that, despite this universal similarity amongst different writers, "In our public literary conversations we are squeamish about the connection between selves and novels" (n.p.). "We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator […] Though we rarely say it publicly, we know that our fictions are not as disconnected from our selves as you like to imagine and we like to pretend", as she puts it, including co-existing writers and the legacies of previous generations of writers within the reach of these "selves" (n.p.).

Similarly, "Read Better" diagnoses the contemporary novelist and rejects the way different novel styles are often compartmentalised and neatly positioned within their own spheres of expectation and execution. Specifically, this second *Guardian* piece complains about how

> In writing schools, in reading groups, in universities, various general reading systems are offered – the post-colonial, the gendered, the postmodern, the state-of-the-nation and so

[47] Expanding this point, Smith calls the novel "a two-way street, in which the labour required on either side is, in the end, equal. Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing" ("Fail Better" n.p.). She embraces the readerly notion of "difficulty" rather than suggesting that it must be avoided, then – which is the opposite standpoint to Franzen.

> on. They are like the instructions that come with furniture at IKEA. All one need do is seek out the flatpack novels that most closely resemble the blueprints already to hand. There is always, within each reading system, an ur novel – the one with which all the other novels are forced into uncomfortable conformity. The first blueprint is drawn from this original novel, which is usually a work of individual brilliance, one that shines so brightly it creates a shadow large enough for a little cottage industry of novels to survive in its shade. Such novels have a guaranteed audience: an appropriate reading system has been created around the first novel and now makes room for them.
> ("Read Better" n.p.).

Smith posits that "This state of affairs might explain some of the present animosity the experimentalist feels for the realist or the cult writer or the bestseller" (n.p.). Smith signposts how these binaries are reductive, *telling* in these short *Guardian* thought experiments and *showing* in *White Teeth* and her other fiction how the distinctions do not acknowledge the possibility of middle ground. Smith writes precisely from this middle ground. Most prominently in *White Teeth*, but also in later works, she draws on experimental and realist styles in equal measure. Smith's aesthetic template is a generative, hybridising model that invites interesting connections to the premise of post-postmodernism, in which associative connections and organisational logic are the driving force behind the work.

The thread running through *White Teeth* is the concept of association, which defines Smith's character ensemble as much as her narrative structure. But as her contents page shows via its distinctions between the Archie, Samad, Irie, and Magid-Millat-Marcus sections of the novel, the two entities of character and structure are co-dependent and inseparable. As we soon learn, the binding connection between Archie and Samad (and their sections of the novel) is their friendship, which can be traced back to serving together in the British Army in the Second World War. The link between Archie and Irie is fatherhood, and Clara Bowden is the interlocutor for these sections. Archie meets Clara on New Year's Eve in 1974, a meeting that dissuades him from suicide and is the first step leading to their marriage and the conception of Irie. Magid and Millat are Irie's friends and Samad's sons, by his wife Alsana. Marcus Chalfen is the anomaly and evidence of Smith's tendency to give you a cohesive map of her fiction only to then complicate it, just at the moment the reader thinks they have a hold on her organisational logic. The Chalfens (Marcus, wife Joyce, and son Joshua) become a surrogate family to Millat as he falls out with his own family and loses his way. Marcus also strikes up a relationship with Millat's brother Magid when the latter is sent back to

Bangladesh; they work together on the FutureMouse experiment, which ties the novel together and brings the ensemble to the same place in its final chapter. Paproth offers the idea that FutureMouse can also be used as a lens for considering Smith's relationship to postmodernism – as he says, "like the FutureMouse, Smith's novels are alive and kicking, unable to be labelled either modernist or postmodernist, and rushing away from us as we attempt to pin them down" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 27). Towards the end of the novel, Irie literally refers to the experiment as a challenge to "*physical fact*" and "fiction on the wings of fantasy" (*White Teeth* 368).[48] This supports Paproth's contention that FutureMouse is a vector of modern and postmodern experimental potential, which together pose a direct challenge to but do not eliminate realism. *White Teeth* refutes singular aesthetic or stylistic categorisation even more so than Smith's other novels, highlighting plurality on narrative and thematic levels too by focusing on two generations of three different families that come together in London at the end of the century.

As my chapter demonstrates, considering *White Teeth* as a networked novel defined by simultaneity is a useful way in to discussing its relationship with modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. Within critical conversation, each of these three should be as unrestricted by periodisation as the different sections of *White Teeth*'s chronology, before the FutureMouse finale. As I suggested in my previous two chapters, post-postmodernism's plurality and ambivalence come with an inherently contradictory rationale of association and detachment, of attraction *to* and separation *from*. This is inherited from historicised conceptions of postmodernism, such as those offered by Habermas, Lyotard, and Jameson. In *Posing In-between: Postcolonial Englishness and the Commodification of Hybridity*, Tobias Wachinger draws attention to Smith's work's "regard to the negotiation(s) of subject-positions that inhabit cultural spaces in-between [...] Smith seems to know all too well that the 'in-between' position is likely to prove a condition of (comic) entrapment and (self-parodic) repetition" (195). I would add that Smith's space "in-between" is one defined by the

[48] Irie repeats this notion in the last few chapters of *White Teeth*. If FutureMouse offers the promise of structural convergence and (within the novel's philosophy of striving towards social harmony) existential clarity, the experiment also offers a way out of the difficulties of reality, via the embrace of fiction and its ability to distort and correct these difficulties. As Irie says, "she had in her hand a cold key, and surrounding her lives that were stranger than fiction, funnier than fiction, crueller than fiction, and with consequences fiction can never have. She didn't *want* to be involved in the long story of those lives, but she *was*" (*White Teeth* 393). Irie's realisation is ironic, of course, given that she is trapped within a fictional narrative. FutureMouse is a strategy of internalising a discussion of post-postmodernism within *White Teeth*, then, as it both alludes to legacies of postmodern metafiction and shows how those legacies have been replaced by difficult twenty-first century realities.

double bind of engaging with past legacies of modernism and postmodernism while simultaneously entertaining the possibility of a post-postmodern moment after these preceding phases of literary history. The new historical moment becomes a restless, amorphous, complicated one. The debate surrounding Smith's connection to post-postmodernism is given a narrative stage in her debut novel, which is entirely *about* moving away from singularity and embracing plurality, multiplicity, diversity – which is captured by the FutureMouse's success in bringing the characters together at the end.

These interests in plurality, multiplicity, and particularly diversity are linked by the idea of being able to live harmoniously and simultaneously as a society, with those who are different and with those who come from a different time. These interests link to the simultaneity Fisher discusses and they provide the angle for much of the scholarship surrounding Smith's work, often leading to studies into her fiction's value as multicultural literature, as social realism, as work that has something urgent to say about twenty-first century Britain and experiences of race at this time, when the problematic term *postcolonial* gained popularity. Acknowledging the important work done by Tracey Walters in *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* and Philip Tew in *Zadie Smith* – the two major pre-2010 Smith studies this chapter will challenge and expand most – I argue that Smith's work comes from, is about, and is for authentic British society yet is equally preoccupied with its own status as a literary construction, which manifests as an anticipatory discussion of modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern categorisation within the fiction itself. This is characteristic of postcritique, but also fits Judith Ryan's "array of novels" that "might be said to "know about" literary and cultural theory", which she groups under "post-theory" (as discussed in my introduction). As both of these things, *White Teeth* invites conversations about how to situate it within the phases of modernism but also how to categorise it generally, conversations beginning with literary criticism which are inextricably linked to our very real cultural obsession with labels and definitions outside of the academy – which, in part, can be viewed as a failure of neoliberal individualism during late capitalism. As Tew posits, "Smith adapts several traditional forms, the comic picaresque inter-fused with a family saga, adding narratives of identity and authenticity" (*Zadie Smith* 13-14). With her debut novel, Smith's stylistic interest is in merging different existing literary modes and practices rather than using just one, which applies to her treatment of different evidence of postmodernism and engagement with post-postmodernism too. As with Everett and Franzen, a problematic but stimulating engagement with the possibilities of post-postmodernism can be defined by an associative impulse that is somehow impeded, by a paradox of simultaneous stylistic

liberation *and* restriction. Like *Erasure* and *The Corrections*, *White Teeth* invites connections to post-postmodernism (and its attachment to postmodernism) but establishes its associative tendency with the contents page when the book has been opened but before its story has begun. As Smith's novel begins, it soon marries the organisational logic of the contents page to the idea of serendipity, offering a further complication to aspirations of structural and social unity. *White Teeth* introduces us to Archie (and his section of the novel) "Early in the morning, late in the century […] At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975" (3). As the opening moments of Smith's narrative proper describe, "Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him" (3). My chapter primarily uses Archie's opening section of *White Teeth*, as it offers a micro version of the novel, inviting a connection between Smith's organisational logic and the consideration of *White Teeth* as post-postmodern.

As Tew suggests, Smith's novel is preoccupied by "the aleatory, the perversities of her characters, and an occasional humour inherent in death and suffering, an inflection of the absurd. Such elements constantly subvert her realist topography" (*Zadie Smith* 46).[49] This opening and Archie's plan to commit suicide bring together the "aleatory" and this component of Smith's "humour", and the link complicates her realism, but so does her explicit engagement with a brand of experimentalism passed down from modernism and postmodernism. The black humour in failed suicides recalls Beckett, who occupies the slippery period between modernism and postmodernism and is perhaps best described as a late modernist. Paproth includes "rejecting absolutes" in this engagement with modernist legacies, in this process of "embracing a postmodernist perspective" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 10). Paproth also suggests that Smith is simultaneously reliant on "determinedly *modernist*" constructions (emphasis added) when *White Teeth* "demonstrates the problems of living in a postmodern world" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 9-10).[50] The stylistics she draws on are very much passed down, then – first from modernism to postmodernism, then to this

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[49] Similary, Tew has talked about how the "narrative voice of the novel" is "variously arch, complex, ironic, and comic in terms of various English traditions", specifying that there is wider cultural value to both Smith's realism and her comedy ("Samad, Hancock" 295).

[50] Paproth goes on to specify these constructions which modernism passed to postmodernism, discussing how Smith "picks apart traditional understandings of the world by poking holes in language, religion, culture, history, and other structures through which people typically give meaning to their lives" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 10). I would add that particularly in *White Teeth*, Smith's mobilises modern and postmodern influence by "poking holes" but not just poking *fun*. Her post-postmodern sensibility reflects a balance of parody and pastiche with sincerity, with a deep appreciation of and respect for the previous generations of writers she has been influenced by.

third phase of modernist evolution, so the case for considering *White Teeth* as post-postmodernism is strengthened by its relationships with both modernism *and* postmodernism. This chapter first focuses on Smith's emphasis on narrative chance and her use of both rhizomatic framework and what I call *page-fracturing devices*, then on her interest in intergenerational relationships (both between her characters and between her and other writers), and finally on her approach to the idea of the postcolonial (a term as useful to a discussion of her work as postracial is to a discussion of Everett's) and its meaning as we position Smith and her work within academia during McGurl's program era. These three aspects of Smith's novel are all products of its organisational logic, which can itself be considered a product of her engagement with the premise (and promise) of post-postmodernism. Separating her work from Everett and Franzen's somewhat, which are generally more concerned with postmodernism than modernism, Smith constructs a post-postmodern model that pays simultaneous attention to postmodernism's precedent and postmodernism itself. Alongside the landmark novels of Smith's American contemporaries, *White Teeth*'s justification of the additional "post" prefix is a comparably complex negotiation between association and detachment, but for her this negotiation is most relevant to a process of narrative organisation. Structure is the essential component of Smith's conversation with post-postmodernism, once again separating the claim to categorising *White Teeth* as this from the claims in *Erasure* and *The Corrections*.

Finality and closure are recurring aspirations of *White Teeth*'s structure, whether it comes in the form of the novel's closing century change – which Smith herself would have been writing in anticipation of – or as the "WELCOME TO THE 'END OF THE WORLD' PARTY, 1975", which is painted in "large rainbow-coloured lettering" at the doorstep of the house party Archie first stumbles on and meets Clara at (17). As Smith elaborates in the second chapter of Archie's section of the novel, "The end of the world was nigh. And this was not – the Lambeth branch of the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses was to be assured – like the mistakes of 1914 and 1925 […] this time the entrails of sinners around the trunks of trees *would* appear" (27). Whether imagined or concrete, these endings are initially greeted with apathy by the novel's characters. At a later point, the Chalfen family have transformed apathy into a complete disinterest – over dinner, they are said to be "gobbling silently. Speaking only to retrieve the salt or the pepper – the boredom was *palpable*. The century was drawing to a close and the Chalfens were bored" (271). In a 2002 interview with Kathleen O'Grady, Smith herself said that *White Teeth* "is about people who are obsessed and who build a kind of world which is entirely rational to them. And I don't have contempt for that;

I'm kind of totally impressed by it" (107). Using her own metaphor, Smith's novel is one that builds itself as much as its characters build their individual worlds. Restlessly expanding its simultaneity rather than rejecting or replacing anything, *White Teeth* builds itself upward to the extent that it reaches a ceiling, imagined by its characters as the end of the world, or the end of history. In the O'Grady interview, Smith touched on precisely this notion of all encompassing "human history", suggesting that "if you take all of human history as a body or a human person then there are events within that which are like trauma, like childhood traumas" (105).

The end of history again symbolises the kind of unproductive destination modernist categorisation may be headed towards, achievable due to the tendency of strict periodisation and historicisation that can come with postmodernism replacing modernism, and post-postmodernism replacing postmodernism. Peter Childs indicates that *White Teeth* specifically has a "postmodern faux-proleptic ending" (215); but it does not seem to be uniquely *post*modern in ending like this. If the novel dramatises cultural acceleration towards an unproductive endpoint it only does so to show that arriving there offers the opposite of an ending anyway, because the past has never truly left that present tense, derailing its effort to reach an ending because "trauma" would always remain beyond this point, as Smith suggested to O'Grady. As the narrator puts it towards the end of *White Teeth*, this is what makes the story of the novel "no movie" as "there is no fucking end to it, just as there is no fucking beginning to it" – where "it" is "the stinking shit of the past", which in a heated debate between Magid and Millat at a pivotal point in the novel is metaphorically "smear[ed]" on the walls, "cover[ing] the room with history – past, present and future history (for there is such a thing)" (397). Simultaneity and trauma are at the centre of a complex relationship between the three tenses in Smith's novel, and its position within a debate about post-postmodernism only escalates the complexity, not least because the trauma does not derive from ill feelings towards postmodernism, as it does for Franzen. Like in Everett's *The Trees*, in *White Teeth* trauma is instead attached to experiences of racial mistreatment and inequality: the necessary subjects of fiction after postmodernism due to that phase of modernism somewhat neglecting them in favour of stylistic, experimental priorities. *White Teeth*'s internal, self-reflexive engagement with this debate of modernist categorisation specifically exposes the debate's problems, helping to *prevent* an unproductive destination for itself in terms of a position both on the spectrum of modernist genealogy and within literary culture generally.

Rhizomes and Page-fracturing Devices

Smith's emphasis on post-postmodern association and organisation puts her work into conversation with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. Even more so than Everett and Franzen's, Smith's novel offers an impeded or incomplete rhizome, illustrating how the aesthetic aspirations of modernism and postmodernism must now confront the real, lived experience of race and its attendant, debilitating cultural uncertainty. As Deleuze and Guattari posit, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order" (7). We are invited to consider Smith's work within this kind of theoretical framework of networks, mapping, and territorialisation, but *her* use of a roots metaphor (teeth and trees) complicates the alignment of her work with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. *White Teeth* holds up as a rhizome until that concept is distinguished from that of the tree – as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree or branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome" (15). But the two are not one and the same. Perhaps it is productive to consider *White Teeth* as layered, then; it may share the characteristics of a rhizome, but within this the novel contains more productive tree and root structures of connectivity and genealogy, which is where the continuously horizontally growing rhizome stops being a rhizome. It is useful to think about Smith's novel within rhizomatic framework, but not to limit it to a straightforward example of this, as that framework is itself built on negotiations and oppositions – as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (3).[51] It is with the same approach of reservation and qualification that we can apply the premise of post-postmodernism to Smith's fiction.

The stasis that may come with post-postmodern rhizomatic framework is discernible from the opening lines of *White Teeth*. This opening and introduction to the suicidal Archie somewhat echoes the beginning of Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) and the elaborate description of

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[51] Elsewhere in Deleuze and Guattari's introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* – part one in their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* study – the pair claim that "A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters […] To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters", that the book can be considered "as an assemblage […] in connection with other assemblages", and that "Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (3, 4, 4-5).

precisely how the eponymous hero is tied to his rocking chair – stasis which in that novel we learn is self-inflicted, leaving Murphy rocking back and forth in the dark in his West Brompton flat. Smith goes into similar detail with Archie's positioning and arrangement of owned objects, creating an illusion of order and stability within Archie's characterisation that is as deceptive as Beckett's Murphy. After this detail, Smith writes that Archie "had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution" (*White Teeth* 3). Like the organisation of the novel he is in, Archie functions within a dialectic of chance; as a character, throughout the novel he has design and direction due to the authority of a coin toss, an external organisational force. As Bruce King puts it, Smith's "world is governed by chance and personalities rather than the abstractions of science, ideologies, and literary criticism" (290). This logic is nowhere more relevant than in *White Teeth*, as symbolised by Archie's coin toss. Equally, Childs acknowledges that "life in *White Teeth* is itself characterised by contingency, coincidence, and the drive to freedom" (209). King's claim speaks for the novel generally, which dramatises an aesthetic debate over modernist categorisation but does not often explicitly engage with specific literary criticism or theory (so, unlike Everett's work). The evidence of postcritique is different Smith's fiction, but it is still present. Ged Pope suggests that "this acceptance of the random as a principle of contemporary life is related, in turn, to the novel's celebrated exploration of cultural and racial hybridity", which also underlines a deeper cultural significance to the function of chance in *White Teeth* (171). Pope continues by saying that "hybridity here also equates to chance, to random combinations and the comedic overturning of any drives towards certainty and purity […] the novel's overall sense is the suburb as benign chaos, as site of farce, experimentation and the provisional" (171).

The tension between structure and chance within Smith's novel is governed by a similar understanding of the equal power of the systematic and the arbitrary. Smith presents this as both symmetry and incongruity in her contents page and as narrative moments like the coin toss, which first occurs on her opening page. This balance of similarity and difference, as Tew puts it, help to establish "architectonics [which] are interwoven with a plethora of action, dialogue and memory, creating a historiography of both personal and cultural identity" (*Zadie Smith* 24). It is precisely the complexity and multiplicity of "personal and cultural identity" that provokes tensions between similarity and difference, between structure and disorder, between stasis and movement – tensions which are sustained for over four hundred pages due to the novel's firm hold on simultaneity. Tew goes on to describe what he calls Smith's "social coordinates", which due to the way she "mixes symbolism with eclectic

realism" are "transformed by compulsiveness and repetition, creating an 'obsessional' mimesis of life's minutiae" (*Zadie Smith* 24). It seems that the wider "social" representation of *White Teeth* manifests as a network of complex, often contradictory narrative and stylistic coordinates though, too, which as I have suggested can be justified by an underlying interest in the possibilities but problems of post-postmodern expansion and extension.

Archie's coin toss moves the narrative along and is a device ensuring that the novel works towards its finality and closure, sustaining its simultaneity until it reaches its end of postmodern history, even if this endpoint carries enough trauma to necessitate a reset, as I have discussed. Within a novel about holding together as a harmonious multicultural English community – or at least trying to do this, or recognising the social responsibility to – Archie's coin offers chances to reduce further tension between characters. As he says in the chapter "Two Families", "This is a nice neighbourhood, new life, you know. Look, let's not argue. Let's flip a coin; heads it stays, tails…" (46). In this scene, he and Clara are arguing over what to do with a coat-stand Clara bought her husband, which he claims he never wanted, which if relinquished would help make space for their guests that evening: Samad and Alsana. Smith's narrator then zooms out and contextualises their disagreement, highlighting how

> True lovers row, then fall the next second back into each other's arms; more seasoned lovers will walk up the stairs or into the next room before they relent and retrace their steps. A relationship on the brink of collapse will find one partner two blocks down the road or two countries to the east before something tugs, some responsibility, some memory, a pull of a child's hand or a heart string, which induces them to make the long journey back to their other half.
> (46-47).

The ramifications of the coin toss are bigger than victory in an argument, then. And as Smith's generalising, omniscient narration indicates, the act is more important than just Archie and Clara's relationship. It transcends the specific connection of their characters and their self-contained fictional lives and stories. The coin toss has authority over the entire narrative trajectory, but only because Smith has allowed it to, which reminds her reader that the author of *White Teeth* is the only person or thing truly in control of it.

Structurally, Smith's novel is predicated on authority and control, which feature as

character traits to symbolise the authority and control of their author.[52] The coin toss is the narrative equivalent of Smith's frequent typographical insertions, comparable structural agents that offer interludes which disrupt the organisation of her novel. These page-fracturing insertions accentuate her interest in simultaneously letting us become acclimatised to her structure and diverting from a consistent rhythm to such a structure. Smith does this with transparency, walking us through what to expect from her novel's organisation before the opening page, but also frequently interspersing the pages that follow with lists, charts, diagrams, and at one point an equation. I will turn to some specific examples of these moments as they expand what I have called Smith's organisational logic and rhizomatic framework, which can be applied to the categorisation of her work as post-postmodern. These moments of formal experimentation and narrative disruption also represent the kind of stylistic mannerism that might connect Smith's work to the postmodern characteristics and metafictional leanings of, say, Donald Barthelme (particularly *Snow White* (1967)), William H. Gass (*Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968)), or Barth (*Chimera* (1972)). However, *White Teeth* "uses an omniscient narrator that is able to float between the consciousnesses of a series of characters", constituting a "main mode" of "realism" which functions concurrently with her experimentalism, as Nick Bentley puts it ("Narrative Forms" 52). [53] Smith's intention to both write authentic social realism and engage with this brand of page-fracturing postmodernism shows how we can best understand her post-postmodernism: a *hybrid* fiction, existing in the simultaneous space of drawing on influence while merging this with new stylistics.

This page-fracturing technique, as I am calling it, is the style Smith adopts from postmodernism most significantly. I define it as the authorial intention of actively disrupting

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[52] Tew applies this control to comedy, suggesting that in Smith's fiction "the comedy remains largely an authorial and readerly experience, a position of knowingness, of judgement" (*White Teeth* 48). To him, the control belongs to *White Teeth*'s reader as much as it does to its author, though – which takes us back to the function of chance in Smith's novel, or what Tew describes as "a notion of improbable causality." Tew links this to comedy, calling the improbable causality "a comic concatenation that is repeated and structurally can be charted in almost every section [of the novel]" (both *White Teeth* 51). I would suggest that the readerly control is always on Smith's authorial terms in *White Teeth*, as is the construction of chance, which undermines how inadvertent or uncalculated narrative events ever truly are.

[53] I will not go into it in detail here, but Heather Houser talks about how the narrator of *White Teeth*'s authority and access relate to what she calls "shimmering description", which she defines as "a class of intriguing paradoxes of description, ones that undermine the act of putting forth in the midst of performing that act", which lead to how, "to put forth and distribute things, these narrators must simultaneously defer, render absent, or withhold" (all 1). Houser posits that Smith's narrator operates "in unsettled descriptive waters" (1). The novel also "approaches a retreating substance that it can never quite touch", which stems from the way, "especially in their shared penchant for copious detail, Smith writes minor characters in a mold formed by Dickens", as she says (all 11-12). Fundamentally, these "unsettled descriptive waters" and this general narratorial trickery inform the influence of postmodern experimentalism on *White Teeth*, I think.

the formal and structural organisation of the words on the page, as the Barthelme, Gass, and Barth novels mentioned do visually, via lists, charts, tables, and diagrams. Smith's use of past stylistics, to return to Tew, informs the "textual ironies *and* the hard-nosed and concise parodic worldview that underlies her narrative of the contemporary", which as he says is signified by "its often hubristic relation with the past" (both *Zadie Smith* 131). Smith's use of page-fracturing devices influenced by (and often parodying) past postmodern experimentalism begins with a series of letters to Archie on pages fourteen and fifteen, and later include modes of communication that are similarly internal to the narrative – that is, Smith creates the illusion that they are appearing on her page as they are appearing to one of her characters. These page-fracturing devices heighten the post-postmodern, present-tense simultaneity – for example: Archie encountering a door plaque reading "**Kelvin Hero** / **Company Director** / **Morgan*Hero*** / **Direct Mail Specialists**"; Samad filling in a visitors' book with "*Name*: Samad Miah Iqbal / *College*: Educated elsewhere (Delhi) / *Research project*: Truth"; Millat reading a notice at Willesden Green Station that says "Thursday, December 31st 1992, New Year's Eve / Signalling problems at Baker Street / No Southbound Jubilee Line Trains from Baker Street"; and Millat finding where he carved his name into a bench near Trafalgar Square as a child (60, 223, 426, 431).

Smith uses similar methods in instances where her characters are *imagining* what she inserts into her text, a different license for the disruption of her page and her prose but a gesture bringing similar results – such as Samad while at work "wanting desperately to be wearing a sign" that reads "I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER…"; Samad listing the "**nine acts which invalidate fast**"; the equation he uses to work out the "Reason why I am a regular" at O'Connell's (the pub-cum-restaurant he and Archie spend all their free time at); Irie projecting her body type (which Smith sketches) if she loses weight after acknowledging that "she was thirteen stone and had thirteen pounds in her saving account"; and Millat's four criteria when self-analysing "the problem with Millat's subconscious" (50, 120, 211, 229-230, 380). There is a third category of moments that are somewhat separate to these abstractions or narratively justified visual markers, where Smith's third-person narrator does the imagining – such as the *Woman's Own* style, three-part questionnaire supplied to Alsana and her reader after she claims that "You could divide the whole of humanity into two distinct camps", and the elaborate "*Post-War Reconstruction and Growth of O'Connell's Pool House*" section (182, 212-213). In the case of each of these three stylistic variants, Smith's insertions consolidate the only reliability when it comes to her approach to structure: *White Teeth* can extend its rhizomatic web of

simultaneous associations and connections at any given moment by fracturing its page on its own terms.

Due to this page-fracturing technique and other aspects of *White Teeth*'s style, Smith's novel was famously categorised as "not magical realism", but "hysterical realism" by James Wood, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. The label has never been far from the conversation of how we classify Smith's work generally for two decades, and despite Wood's application of it as a criticism – as his article claims, Smith's work is complicit in how "the big contemporary novel is a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity" (Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.).[54] The term hysterical realism is a problematic but productive one in thinking about how Smith can be positioned in relationship to postmodernism. As David Marcus identifies, "Zadie Smith was one of the first to be labelled a hysterical realist and, fittingly, she was also one of the first to rebel against its growing orthodoxies" (n.p.). So not only does Smith have a difficult relationship with the term, her work also opened the door for a critical conversation around fiction that might be classified as it, transcending specifically Smith's body of work. Despite this, it is useful to focus on the characteristics of Smith's work that might be "hysterical" more so than the work of others associated with Wood's term. The word is particularly problematic in the context of her work due to its gendered implications, but it is still useful to consider Smith's complicity with at least the components of hysterical realism, even if she rebels against the term more broadly, because these components are more conscious and less of a problem than Wood suggests. Wood claims that "the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked", which make Smith's realism hysterical ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.). Exhaustion and overworking are specific tenets of postmodernism, though.

Wood's term can be compared to Tew's "eclectic realism" (which I discussed earlier), or to Pope's indication that "Smith uses a kind of 'realism plus' in *White Teeth*, which, as per classic realism, is lengthy and exhaustively detailed, descriptive, character-driven and

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[54] "Human, All Too Inhuman" includes many criticisms of the big 1990s novels by canonical postmodernists such as DeLillo (1997's *Underworld*) and Pynchon (1997's *Mason & Dixon*), as well as writers occupying the more slippery and uncategorisable moment after that generation but publishing at the same time, such as Wallace and *Infinite Jest*. Wood claims that "these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion" and that "Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on" ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.). But these characteristics can be subverted and viewed through a more productive lens, and brought to a debate about the transition from postmodernism to whatever came after – and about how that after has one foot in experimentalism and another in social realism.

intricately plotted" (169). Wood says that "stories and sub-stories sprout on every page", which fits the terms "eclectic", "realism plus", and "hysterical realism" equally, and that these "different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels" ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.).[55] But these desired effects of duplication, multiplicity, and simultaneity point to the way Smith channels postmodernism, and are characteristics of the restlessness Smith embraces in her novel style. Wood considers these aspects on the level of narrative, but they have equal authority over *White Teeth*'s typography. Marcus calls *The Autograph Man* (2002), Smith's second novel, "*even* more hysterical" (emphasis added), and it could be justified as such because of the way it levels up *White Teeth*'s experimental typography and page-fracturing techniques. The effects of duplication and proliferation in *White Teeth* contribute to the conviction with which we can describe it as post-postmodern because, to contradict Wood, the hysterical and exhaustive qualities of Smith's narrative and style function with a direct link to (rather than *reaction* to) realism. Of course, I am not the first to disagree with Wood – Heather Houser, for example, has discussed how his "predilection was decidedly wrong" (18). Not addressing Wood explicitly, Bentley points out that "if the realist novel presents the ideal literary expression of Englishness, then formal experimentation (for example, modernism and postmodernism) can be said to function ideologically as a disruption of that dominant narrative" ("Rewriting Englishness" 488).[56] It seems that the characteristics of hybridity and multiplicity that are central to "Englishness" here are simultaneously infused with postmodernism and post-postmodernism's associative and organisational logics.

Hybridity and multiplicity constitute the identities of these characters as they struggle to be sincere in twentieth century Britain, showing how *White Teeth* is not "full of inhuman stories" and that it is not "evasive of reality" despite "borrowing from realism itself", as Wood puts it ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.). Instead, it is more apt to view Smith's novel

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[55] Wood goes on to argue that "since the characters in these novels are not really alive, not fully human, their connectedness can only be insisted on." Later in the article he suggests that the lack of humanity and complication of realism in White Teeth is "not a cock-up, but a cover-up" ("Human, All Too Inhuman" n.p.); but I would argue that it is neither.

[56] As Bentley specifies, *White Teeth* "offers a competing version of contemporary Englishness, one that emphasizes and addresses the multicultural make-up of late twentieth/early twenty-first century England, and in turn is keen, on one level, to challenge concerns that Englishness and multiculturalism are mutually antagonistic concepts" ("Re-writing Englishness" 495). Smith's debut novel then, which is at turns realist and experimental, is about Englishness but it also interrogates the idea of being about Englishness; this adds an additional layer to the novel's treatment of hybridity.

as a balancing act of relying on (rather than evading) social realism and using postmodern aesthetics to bolster the content of this realism. The scholarship and thinking around Smith's work over the past two decades seems to fall too convincingly on one side of the debate, prioritising a discussion of its authentic social realism or reducing it to postmodern experimentalism when it draws from *both* authorial intentions. *White Teeth* does this by rejecting a doubly flawed historicised and periodised understanding of post-postmodernism and embracing its simultaneity. Smith's page-fracturing devices in particular threaten to unsettle or distract from her discussion of the real issues of pervasive racial inequality and necessary multiculturalism but are ultimately tactical extensions of these issues, which form an urgent present tense by both drawing from pasts and anticipating futures, both aesthetic and social. This negotiation underpins Smith's example of post-postmodernism, which differs from Franzen's because her stylistic abundance, multiplicity, and excess come from a place of postmodern influence and twenty-first century social commentary equally. These aspects of her style ultimately do not conform with severing ties with postmodern style and only writing fiction that is *real* (as Franzen claims, which for him becomes problematic and self-contradictory).

These fracturing (mislabelled as "hysterical") moments in *White Teeth* conform with an experimental impulse shared with postmodern fiction: to resist the preconception that realist narrative must be presented in a way that ignores its artifice. Smith's novel shows how this experimentalism can be fused with realism, suggesting that these two modes of writing are not so disparate, that the "difficulty" by which Franzen characterised postmodernism (and Gaddis in particular) in his *New Yorker* essay does not have to come *without* sincerity and a social conscience. Gaddis' position within emergent postwar postmodernism is altogether different to Franzen's within post-postmodernism. For Gaddis, postmodernism was the new dominant and therefore no longer speculative, but itself became insufficient when a stronger need to contend with lived experience resurfaced. Whether writers during this new phase turn against postmodernism (as Franzen does) or are more content with modifying and updating it (as Smith is), post-postmodernism contains something at the turn of the twenty-first century that earlier postmodernism did not have. Post-postmodernism after 2000 is entwined with the cultural fact of being unable to escape the postmodern components of deceptive irony and endless information that, for the 2000-2001 society that *The Corrections* and *White Teeth* were published during, are so prevalent as a result of new technologies and the popularisation of the internet. Another issue with Franzen's assessment is that there was still the potential to engage with both experimental and realist modes prior to the twenty-first century and these

developments of new media, and this potential is detectable in Barth, Gaddis, or Pynchon's postmodernism and is only heightened in works by the wave of Anglo-American writers that Franzen and Smith are part of. The angle from which we can identify Smith's post-postmodernism is through her use of structural and formal play, which she builds on top of an organised, rhizomatic framework of simultaneity. *White Teeth*'s meticulous self-mapping, driven by an interest in cultural connectivity and heterogeneity, undermine Wood's claim that excess equals superficiality, that formal and structural play equal a lack of urgency. Smith's playfulness is most usefully read as evidence of a balance between realism and experiment, between sincerity and irony. The moment in *White Teeth* when Samad, "first amused and then depressed by the items his wife and son determined essential", and is then interrupted by Smith supplying these "items" in list form on her page exemplifies this balance (192). It is a moment that foregrounds another central tenet of post-postmodernism: alongside an associative impulse is a tendency to be restive or restless. This restlessness is perhaps a result of post-postmodernism's place in the internet age. Post-postmodern endlessness is influenced by technological capitalism, so Smith and her contemporaries are directly challenging this due to the threat to sincerity and authenticity. Restlessness, then, is a necessary condition of post-postmodern aesthetics even if it points back to a state of postmodernism that Franzen seeks to correct. Smith shows how this state does not *have* to be a "difficult" one, underlining the potential for aesthetic liberation that comes with restlessness/endlessness as she converts this state into a new, post-postmodern form imbued with affect and feeling.

To return to a claim I begun this chapter making, this is where we might compare Smith's style to Joyce's. Just as the "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses* slips into a play script complete with stage directions – and "Aeolus", set at the office of the *Freeman's Journal* as Bloom attempts to place an ad, is broken into segments beneath newspaper-style headlines – *White Teeth* also refuses to sit still in terms of the presentation of its prose and the layout of its page. This aligns it with European modernism but also American legacies of the networked novel such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), whose typographical insertions include whole pages devoted to tables of biological whale details.[57] A comparable example to Joyce or Melville in Smith's novel is when it supplies a formal transcript of one

[57] There is a moment in *White Teeth* that specifically recalls *Moby-Dick*: Smith supplies an index entry for "**Thrips,** common name for minute insects that feed on a wide range of plants", taken from horticulturalist/writer Joyce Chalfen's "*The Inner Life of Houseplants*" (273).

of the school meetings Samad attends with other parents and their children's teachers. Smith begins

> *13.0 Mrs Janet Trott wishes to propose a second climbing frame be built in the playground to accommodate the large number of children who enjoy the present climbing frame but unfortunately have made it a safety risk through dangerous overcrowding. Mrs Trott's husband, the architect Hanover Trott, is willing to design and oversee the building of such a frame at no cost to the school.*
> (110).

The need to sustain its own mode of simultaneity is why *White Teeth*'s entire design is driven by restless association. This tendency justifies the novel's categorisation as post-postmodern, determining its style and structure but carrying the same authority into its treatment of story and character: the components most identifiable as products of realism, but ones that in Smith's case lose no strength nor substance despite her equal interest in experimentalism. From *White Teeth*'s contents page onwards, Smith's emphasis on intergenerational relationships and tensions is at the forefront of her approach to character, a rhizomatic method of links and connections just like the inevitable need to define post-postmodernism through its inextricable attachment to the postwar postmodern generation, then to the earlier twentieth century modernists.

"life is not a line": Collapsing generational distinctions

Alongside Archie and Irie, Samad is a strong contender for the protagonist of *White Teeth*. To return to Tew, as a character Samad is a conduit for the idea of cultural hybridity – he represents "a defining split in people's existence, a bifurcation of their lives", which he "makes emphatic by dividing his sons" (*Zadie Smith* 28). Samad also embodies "a subtle inflection of various English traditions, ones that the novel incorporates both in an interrogation and celebration" (Tew, "Samad, Hancock" 308). As Z. Esra Mirze suggests, "while he can negotiate the coexistence of national and racial affiliations as interdependent categories, he refuses the erasure of one for the sake of the other" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 191). The word "celebration" takes us back to Fred Moten's ideas on blackness in art, which apply to Smith's work differently than they do to Everett's. At the end of Archie's

section of the novel, Samad verbalises the novel's interest in generations: "'What I have realized, is that the generations,' Samad continued as they sped through miles and miles of unchanging flatlands, 'they speak to each other, Jones. It's not a line, life is not a line – this is not palm-reading – it's a circle, and they speak to us. That is why you cannot *read* fate; you must *experience* it'" (*White Teeth* 102). Samad's thoughts during the car journey are described as "all the information in the universe and all the information on walls" coming to him "in one fantastic revelation" (102).[58] Samad's idea manifests as a page-fracturing device on page 290-291 when Marcus Chalfen digs out the Chalfen family tree, which prompts Irie to imagine her own, which Smith then gives us in full on her page. This precedes a conversation between Marcus and Irie on the truth and fiction of family trees, with particular reference to the fiction of the Iqbals' (as determined by Samad's exaggerated stories about his great-great-grandfather). This generational simultaneity and the collapse of a straight line of lineage, as Tew says, "stresses that trauma is not culturally imbued, but can be shared empathically. Certain realities transcend difference even though interpreted at an individual level, which perspective permeates her fiction" (*White Teeth 24*). Shared trauma is the connective thread in *White Teeth*, bringing together its different generations of characters; whereas it cannot be as convincingly applied to the relationship between Smith's post-postmodernism and postmodern fiction, as it might be when thinking about Franzen's traumatised relationship with postmodernism. Smith's *rejection* of anxious influence brings a more rewarding, positively inflected relationship with legacy. At the time of writing *White Teeth*, alongside an awareness that the contemporary moment needed new, different writing, Smith's project was one of admiring, then channeling previous modernist phases and literary moments. In 2000, what was needed was something both new *and* old. Like Samad's epiphany, which highlights both "read[ing]" and "experience", what was needed was both style and substance, irony and experimentation but also the sincerity and urgency that can come with social commentary.

Smith's attachment to the generation of American writers spearheaded by Barth and Pynchon – the latter, in particular, she has written at length about, on various occasions including in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* and in the piece "Love, Actually" – is

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[58] The revelation influences something Samad says in a later argument with his wife. After her husband is infuriated by a letter from Magid in Bangladesh, Alsana reminds him to "Let the boy go. He is second generation – he was born here – naturally he will do things differently" (249). Even angrier, Samad responds by claiming that generational distinctions have collapsed, in his family and everywhere: "[…] don't speak to me of second generation! One generation! Indivisible! Eternal!'" (250).

not a straightforward process of postmodern traits and mannerisms being relinquished, then transformed into post-postmodern form. Rather, Smith draws on these influences alongside others from different literary-historical moments to varying degrees and in different ways, not simply reworking postmodernism or modernism into an updated contemporary version. Smith adds her literary interests into her already overflowing stylistic mixing pot. Exuberance and maximalism and variety (more productive terms than "hysterical") *become* her aesthetics. Smith's self-proclaimed debt to Pynchon has been unpacked in her nonfiction but also in literary scholarship in depth.[59] Smith has also written extensively on Vladimir Nabokov's importance to her work (a postmodernism-adjacent writer).[60] She has with 2005 novel *On Beauty* (which I will discuss in the final section of this chapter) written an ode to the modernist E. M. Forster, and has frequently declared Wallace's fiction a formative reading experience (doing so most comprehensively alongside essays on Nabokov and Forster in *Changing My Mind*), despite his relative contemporaneity and equal claim to being categorised as post-postmodern. On the level of narrative, Smith's novel collapses distinctions between different generations, allowing them to occupy different temporal spaces beyond just their own, coming together in the present tense and sharing rooms and conversations. This expands Smith's emphasis on simultaneity, as this collapse also happens on the bigger scale of literary generations and her metatextual dialogue with other authors and work, particularly those within the different phases of modernism.

She channels the influence of everyone from Joyce to Pynchon, writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a way that is not revisionist and is only nostalgic in order to steer contemporary fiction in a new direction, looking towards the future, even if on Fisher's terms it may be "lost" – though "loss is itself lost", particularly "in conditions of digital recall", as he says (12). Smith's affective orientation recalls Fisher but is different to it, with her work highlighting trauma but not tragedy, and hope rather than desensitised defeat. Smith is indebted to writers that came before her but allows them to exist in the present alongside her, but she simultaneously draws on the influence of her contemporaries, as well as always looking ahead to where fiction might go next. This gesture is captured in

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[59] In *Changing My Mind*, Smith famously discusses how "For five years I had a line from *Gravity's Rainbow* stuck to my door" (101). In "Love, Actually" (for *The Guardian*), she talks about she "wanted to be like Pynchon" in her first two novels, "in pursuit of hidden information" because she "thought it the novel's responsibility to chase and pin down the ghost in the machine" (n.p.).

[60] Smith critics analyse this connection to Nabokov and Pynchon, even if Smith initiated the connection herself. Andrzej Gasiorek, for example, discusses Smith's "passion for Nabokov and Pynchon" and then reads their work alongside hers (176).

another of her most famous essays, "Two Paths for the Novel" – which was first published in the *New York Review of Books* in 2008 before being collected in *Changing My Mind*, and discusses Tom McCarthy and Joseph O'Neill as embodiments of two future paths for the contemporary novel. Smith's essay laments how "These aren't particularly healthy times. A breed of lyrical Realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked" ("Two Paths" n.p.). Smith defines this capital "r" Realism as "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self", which she pits against the "American metafiction that stood in opposition to Realism", which "has been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules and dismissed" (all n.p.). "Two Paths" compares McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) and O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), but even if Smith places them in diametric opposition, she only does so to demonstrate how oppositional thinking can be reductive, how the notion of *either/or* is fundamentally more disruptive than *both/and*.[61]

A detailed close reading of these two novels belongs in a different study, but it is worth considering what Smith thinks the pair symbolise. *Netherland* is not even responsible for its own problem, as Smith sees it: "It seems perfectly done—in a sense that's the problem. It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait" ("Two Paths" n.p.). *Remainder*, on the other hand, "works by accumulation and repetition, closing in on its subject in ever-decreasing revolutions […] It plays a long, meticulous game […] *Remainder*'s way turns out to be an extreme form of dialectical materialism" ("Two Paths" n.p.). The bottom line, though, is that despite its experimentalism and games McCarthy's novel is one "about a man who builds in order to *feel*" (n.p., emphasis added). Smith undermines the premise of her own essay and argues that these two novels do

[61] In a 2015 interview with Jennifer Hodgson for *The White Review*, Smith (perhaps not giving her essay enough credit) did distance herself from some of the deliberate contradictions in the thesis of "Two Paths." She tells Hodgson that "I think the binary thinking of that essay has been elegantly exploded in variety", that since 2008 "the fashionable argument against 'realism' has become a bit simple-minded" (n.p.). Smith distances herself from her own argument that realism poses problems for contemporary fiction, calling it "naïve – to both parties in the literary exchange – the reader and the writer – an almost childlike innocence in the face of literary artifice" (n.p.). She tells Hodgson that she regrets the definition of realism she gives in "Two Paths": "As if only writing that draws attention to its own constructed and artificial nature can be considered writing-without-illusion" (n.p.). I disagree and think that she is not giving herself enough credit, that this criticism of realism – and support for surrealism, the avant-garde, the experimental – was ultimately secondary in her 2008 essay to a criticism of binary distinctions more generally.

not neatly fit into "two paths" of realism and experimentalism because these two literary modes are not necessarily such distinct stylistic/aesthetic spheres. As Smith puts it, *Remainder* shows how the experimental or the avant-garde can be fused with components of realism such as sincerity. Smith's two paths, then, are really *Netherland*'s complicity with this binary separating the principles of social realism and experimental fiction, and *Remainder*'s contradiction of the distinction. This anti-distinction within Smith's distinction, if you will, foregrounds the contradictory logics of post-postmodernism, which builds paths in all directions creating a chaotic simultaneity. But at its core, post-postmodern potential offers Smith an opportunity to more transparently balance stylistics and feeling – the chance to expand upon the postmodern project rather than continue perpetuating a falsehood about its intentions, a treatment of postmodernism which in this essay she calls a dismissal "by our most famous public critics, as a fascinating failure" and as "intellectual brinkmanship that lacked heart" ("Two Paths" n.p.). In Smith's essay "Fail Better", which as I have said can be considered as a template for her post-postmodernism, she describes the idea of being "naturally sceptical of the concept of authenticity", which she sees as a shared trait amongst those "of us who came of age under postmodernity" (n.p.). She may have inherited the postmodern approach of being "sceptical" of it, but it is perhaps the increased awareness of "authenticity" that prevents her from being inauthentic or not having "heart" – not that scepticism straightforwardly translates to inauthenticity, insincerity, or irony without feeling (or the experimental without the real) amongst postmodern fiction anyway. In "Two Paths", Smith cites "Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo, David Foster Wallace" as examples of stylists who write with heart within that generation (n.p.). This echoes a sentiment she expresses in "Love, Actually": Smith labelled Pynchon "no less a moralist" than "Forster or anyone else" (n.p.). Wallace is an outlier and a bridge between Pynchon's generation and Smith's; his work helps instigate the shift from postmodernism to what comes next, something I will deliberate in more detail in my next chapter. Taken from Smith's own essay, though, the creation of paths forwards and backwards is a fundamentally useful metaphor for *White Teeth*, whose structural network or map is completely dependent on forging pathways, even if this invites complications, confusions, and the ability to become lost.

The collapse of generational distinctions and embrace of paths, of points of connection that are susceptible to shift or change direction, dictates the style and structure of Smith's novel but are also narrative components of it. *White Teeth*'s active complication of a fixed modernist genealogy, passing through postmodernism to reach potential post-postmodernism,

lends itself to Fisher's idea of temporal "stasis", which "has been buried, interred behind a superficial frenzy of 'newness', of perpetual movement" (15). "The 'jumbling up of time', the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that it is no longer even noticed" (Fisher 15). While Fisher's study primarily applies this understanding to generations of music since the 1980s, it is as "prevalent" to the conversation surrounding literary generations and the transitions between them, particularly the simultaneity of modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism by the time we reach the third of these. Fisher explains that "Rather than the old recoiling from the 'new' in fear and incomprehension, those whose expectations were formed in an earlier era are more likely to be startled by the sheer persistence of recognizable forms" (15). While this may provoke cultural stasis, the consistent engagement with the future ensures that even if the "persistence" of the past threatens to confine to a complicated present, there is at least projection outside, to the *possibility* of a fully realised future that is not so lost. This double haunting of both the past and the future is something Fisher takes from Jacques Derrida: "to haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept" (Derrida 202). So, we can understand haunting the present as not actually being present, but to occupy its space in an insubstantial, spectral, suggestive form. This is where we can situate the present of *White Teeth*, which is distracted by a split priority to look both backwards and forwards in time, but ultimately both gestures are suggestive rather than concrete. As Fisher writes, the present becomes locked in stasis despite this, but the stasis is itself insubstantial and artificial; this is a productive place to position Smith's post-postmodernism, which is perpetually aware that modernism, postmodernism, and whatever comes next are all insubstantial, unstable, malleable terms.

In line with postcritique, Smith's fiction dramatises this idea, addressing it on the level of narrative and even in character conversations. The flexibility of the term "generation" appears in the chapter "Three Coming" for example, which comes slightly earlier than Samad and Archie's debate in the car in this first section of *White Teeth*. When their wives and Neena (Alsana's niece who is more often referred to by characters as "Niece-of-Shame") discuss the topic in one of their lunch meetings in Kilburn, Alsana missteps with the line "'What you don't understand, my Niece-of-Shame, what none of your generation understands…" (67). Irate, Neena interrupts her, correcting her with "'My *generation*? For fuckssake, you're two years older than me, Alsi" (67). In *White Teeth*, generational distinctions are not as important as different generations occupying the same temporal space, which can be compared to the stylistic transition from postmodernism's spatial dynamics to

post-postmodernism's temporal dynamics. In this conversation between Neena and Alsana, different generations' abilities to stick to their own temporal spheres are undermined by an infinite, inclusive present tense – a space that *shares* generations. This idea is acknowledged on each level of the fiction: by characters, by the novel's narrator, and by Smith's treatment of stylistic influence. "Three Coming" returns to this idea towards its end, at which point it uses the novel's teeth metaphor to illuminate the understanding, ventriloquised by Alsana in the line "[…] We married old men, you see? These bumps' – Alsana pats them both – 'they will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled" (69-70). As Peter Childs puts it, in *White Teeth* "teeth are being used as a symbol of history, memory, and a shared colonial past" (213).[62] They are also a symbol of shame and judgement, which act as residue from the pain of the "colonial past" in a microcosmic, daily form. If we maintain a connection between teeth and the colonial past, the negative residue of trauma takes other forms in the novel. The idiomatic expression "'I'm sick of it! Sick to the back fucking teeth with it!'" resonates differently, for example (345). After he gets in the middle of an ongoing argument between his mother Joyce and Irie (who he fancies), Joshua Chalfen tells this to Irie, referring to her heritage, which she herself calls "the particular magic of [her Jamaican] *homeland*" (345). We also see this in the scene during the second half of the novel where Irie discovers her mother's secret false teeth, which she has been hiding from her daughter – "'Fucking hell! What the fuck are they?'" is how Irie responds after standing on them by mistake (325). But the line from Alsana on having "One leg in the present, one leg in the past" foregrounds the idea of teeth, specifying the role of gender in generational connections, which in the relationship between postmodernism and post-postmodernism draws important attention to the homogeneous white male dominance of these categories.

Smith writes with the unapologetic intention of including a characters list of mixed genders and racial identities. And as Clifford Thompson says, her characters are "well drawn" and "whatever their skin colors or religious beliefs" are "human beings first and foremost, their racial/social/cultural/political concerns, when they had them, in the service of character definition and story, not the other way around" (15). Thompson goes on to discuss

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[62] Childs examines how "the commonsensical idea of the uniformity of teeth" is "itself a fiction within the novel" (212). Irie's decision towards the end of the novel "that she is going to become a dentist", as Childs posits, is "arguably a metafictional reference to the fact that her closest real-life equivalent, Zadie Smith, is writing a book called *White Teeth*" (213). The possibility that Irie can be read as a Smith surrogate is worth considering given that *White Teeth* is partially complicit in postmodern methods such as metafiction.

how Smith's balance of "character definition" and diversity is a testament to the importance of her work, and perhaps the reason *White Teeth* was such an instant hit. As he says: "When Zadie strode onto the literary stage in 2000, at all of twenty-four years old, she made short work of a problem whose solution, in retrospect, seems as simple as the wheel. The problem had been how to reconcile the traditional concerns of literature – character development and the beautiful illumination of the human condition, however unbeautiful it might be – with the attempt to be representative of the best of all humanity, i.e., multicultural" (15). I would suggest that the conviction of Smith's novelistic priorities – characters first, their politics second and organically stemming from their lives and experiences on the page – should mean that we do not even have to doubt how "well drawn" these characters are. Furthermore, this approach to character is inextricably linked to Smith's attitude towards influence, an attitude defined by appreciation rather than paranoid anxiety, but also one that leaves something behind for caution and reservation. If *White Teeth* is to be considered a work that channels but also steps outside of postmodernism and other earlier modes of fiction (while simultaneously applying a degree of scepticism to post-postmodernism), Smith does so to both be influenced by those generations of writers *and* to acknowledge the limitations of putting them on pedestals. I am extending her metaphor of "two paths" in contemporary fiction to *three*: modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. The projected routes of these three become muddled and overlap, though, so Smith's work instead finds productivity in these crossed paths, using the past and conditional tenses in order to reach clarity, urgency, and a prevailing sense of social priority in the present.

Specifically, excepting the likes of Lydia Davis and Grace Paley, the boys club of postmodernism hardly exemplifies diversity and inclusivity in terms of the identities of its authors. In the Kathleen O'Grady interview, Smith discussed this problem on the broader scale of the literary canon in general, drawing on her own personal experience of studying literature at the University of Cambridge to frame her understanding. As she puts it, "A very difficult thing about writing if you've been to Cambridge at all is the influence of all these old dead men who wrote so brilliantly and who you have to read all the time and sometimes sleep in their rooms or pass plaques of them and stuff" (108). Smith claims that these "role models are another crock and something which limit you", reflecting in 2002 on how she "tried to say this in *White Teeth*" (108). As such, Smith's expansion of the postmodernism she found as formative as reading Forster/other modernists is a gesture of diversifying it, which she does at the same time as broadening postmodern stylistics by adding to the layers of formal complexity and play. It is these aims that in Smith's case justify the additional

"post" when categorising *White Teeth*. Her debut novel stages the debate of how to categorise her in the fiction itself, even if it does so a little more implicitly than *Erasure* and with fewer namedrops than Everett of words like postmodernism. Smith's organisational logic and page-fracturing devices emphasise this staging, as do her character's explicit conversations about intergenerational relationships. Tew posits that "Smith's characters are not only prisms, viewpoints, but part of typology", self-engaging with "their possibilities as archetypes" (*White Teeth* 55); but they are also entwined with her novel's typo*graphy*. Perhaps best demonstrated by Samad's imagined work nametag, Smith's characters are constructed in terms of their page layout at different moments in her text, which emphasises the interdependence between form and character in *White Teeth*, which is bolstered by the generational influence that contributes to both her writing style and her characters' identities. The episode with Samad's nametag accentuates his need to remind the world around him that he is as qualified, intelligent, interesting, and valid a human being as London's white men; elsewhere in Smith's novel, this notion of form-as-character comes with an equally urgent communication by its female characters of being treated fairly as women.

With this in mind, it is worth returning to Smith's teeth metaphor. As Bentley identifies, "*white* teeth are a mark of sameness; Smith, however, draws attention to the way in which they have been culturally constructed to mark out difference" ("Narrative Forms" 55). The awareness of racial and gender inequality that comes from generational simultaneity can be explained on the terms of teeth. The narrator of *White Teeth*'s words at the beginning of the final chapter of Archie's section of the novel, which lean on the idea of tooth "marrow", shed light on this:

> A propos: it's all very well, this instruction of Alsana's to look at the thing close up; to look at it dead-straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the root – but the question is how far back do you want? How far will *do*? The old American question: what do you want – *blood*? Most probably more than blood is required: whispered asides; lost conversations; medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates. Back, back, *back*. (72).

This process of pivoting from the present – turning to the past in order to look again in a forward direction – renders a "meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter" inevitable, one of tracing roots and using a magnifying glass to accentuate the dental

detail. Doing this, *White Teeth* notices the deep problems of the past, their severity directly correlating with "how far back" Smith goes. Gasiorek suggests that in this novel "the past is to be expunged so that a completely new beginning might be imagined; it isn't old roots or new links that are desired, but a *tabula rasa* where the self can be remade without reference to any antecedents" (178). More pressingly, Smith's novel looks at *why* the past must "be expunged", which means it cannot be removed from the equation completely. Maeve Tynan suggests that "In Smith's novels identity is as much about forging links in the present as it is about staking a claim on the past" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 74). To me, "staking a claim" demands a significant amount of time spent with or in that past, and Smith's narrative facilitates this.

This past escalates issues of homogenous white male literary generations to a whole lineage of mistreating women and people of colour in broader socio-political contexts. This past is defined by an archaic "question" of privileged populations looking after themselves and not challenging the mistreatment of others that does not directly affect them, within literary culture as much as anywhere – as Smith's narrator puts it, this past is determined by the primitive, destructive question "what do you want – *blood*?" It is even more essential that the relevant, affected people who are products of a problematic past pivot from the present because the unaffected, the irrelevant, the ignorant can *also* pivot. This is shown in the scene later in the novel involving the elderly white man Mr. J. P. Hamilton and Magid, Millat, and Irie, who visit him as part of a community initiative for school. Discussing his memories of London to the trio, using a racial slur, Hamilton tells them that "'I'm afraid you must be mistaken'", because (as he says) "'There were certainly no wogs as I remember – though you're probably not allowed to say that these days are you? But no … no Pakistanis" (both 149). Smith's narrator acknowledges that Hamilton is "assessing the question as if he were being given the opportunity to rewrite history here and now" (149). This shows how readily available this "opportunity to rewrite" is to people like Hamilton.[63] Conversely, people from minority backgrounds like Magid, Millat, and Irie must go to unreasonable lengths to earn the opportunity. Samad philosophises this when giving his and Archie's children a life lesson

[63] The defeated, clinical narrator here differs from elsewhere in the novel, such as when they are at their most inflammatory and cynical: "Ah, but you are not convinced by coincidence? You want fact fact fact? You want brushes with the Big Man with black hood and scythe? OK: on the 28th of April, 1989, a tornado whisked the Chittagong kitchen up into the sky, taking everything with it except Magid, left miraculously curled up in a ball on the floor" (*White Teeth* 109). The narrator is at their most characterised and reckless here, even challenging the framework of "coincidence" that, after the work of Smith's contents page, they are themselves otherwise conforming to and sustaining.

during the chapter "Mutiny!" As he tells Millat and Irie, "It is simply that if you are to throw over an old order, you must be sure that you can offer something of substance to replace it" (207). It seems that it is not a question of having the "substance", it is one of prejudiced society deeming that substance worthy. The nature of this relationship between generations – and between adjacent communities within the same generation, of different races – can be applied to post-postmodernism's cross-generational relationship to postmodernism.

Like Franzen, but with elevated profundity considering her identity as a black woman, Smith captures this notion of a messy, problematic literary lineage with the image of men fiddling with wires. In *The Corrections*, this scene came towards the end of the novel, as Alfred Lambert experienced the impacts of dementia while struggling to untangle the Christmas lights. The struggle spoke for his broader failures as a father and husband, left at this moment in the story with a deeply dysfunctional and conflicted family that is barely holding together despite his wife Enid's desperate hopes for one last family festive period. *The Corrections* is structured as an anatomical effort to achieve this with corresponding chapter cohesion, leaving behind standalone family member's chapters at the end and giving the Lamberts a shared one. Despite this, Alfred does not host a happy, productive family reunion in this chapter: an organisational failure symbolised by the futile attempt to untangle the lights. In *White Teeth*, the fiddling with wires comes at the end of the first section of the novel, specifically in the chapter "The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal."[64] It also comes with a duplication of the image in Franzen's novel: Archie and Samad struggle to untangle them *together*, "fixing the radio" during their time together in the army rather than trying to set up Christmas lights in a domestic space. Smith writes that they should be perfect for this job, that "Samad knew *how*, he knew the *theory*, but Archie had the hands, and a certain knack when it came to wires and nails and glue" (80). She elaborates that "it was a funny kind of struggle between knowledge and practical ability which went on between them as they pieced together the tiny metal strips that might save them both" (80). Like in *The Corrections*, the scene can be applied to a broader theme of striving for coherent organisational logic, despite the limitations of and tensions within the model of the rhizome, which after all Deleuze and Guattari emphasise is fundamentally "an anti-genealogy" (11).

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[64] There is also a section in *On Beauty* that uses "Christmas lights" as a symbol for something larger concerning expectations of stable, productive masculinity. Howard Belsey's university classroom set-up is said to be influenced by how "He always requested this projector for his first presentation of the year, when his class was 'shopped'; it was as much of a ritual as unpacking the Christmas lights. As homely, as dispiriting. In what new way, this year, would it fail to light up?" (141).

But in the case of *White Teeth* the irony of the untangling scene is more pointed than Franzen's. If the structural challenges Smith's novel sets up for itself speak for an understanding of how to make associations and connections between postmodern and post-postmodern generations, then this Archie and Samad scene has greater resonance. This is again what separates Smith's engagement with the possibilities of post-postmodernism from Franzen's, stemming from the inescapable fact that Franzen extends white male dominance of literary history's different phases of modernism. Conversely, as a woman of colour writing about a far more diverse set of characters, Smith offers an antidote, a correction if you will, to this problem. This fact defines *White Teeth*'s post-postmodernism because the novel generates parallels between the experiences of its characters and its author's position within literary culture. The novel does so with the same importance as Everett's discussions of racial categorisation and the reductivity of the term postracial in *Erasure*.

Complicating the Term Postcolonial

In an essay on the Jordan Peele film *Get Out* (2017), Smith provocatively discusses "race as the fundamental American lens through which everything is seen" – and because of this, works like *Get Out* are "the opposite of post-black, or post-racial", as she says (both *Feel Free* 223). I would argue that this "lens" stretches beyond America, and that it applies to Smith's own work. Race is an essential component of Smith's post-postmodernism, but just as the posts in post-postmodernism do not signify a finite end to or completion of postmodernism or modernism, terms like postracial and postcolonial carry a similar lack of resolution to problems concerning race and colonialism. Postcolonial is the term that comes up most frequently in critical conversation surrounding Smith's work, so it is the one I will focus on here, whereas postracial had a more significant relationship to Everett's work and was therefore the interest of my earlier chapter. These two terms are neither identical nor interchangeable, but do illustrate a shared, fundamental issue of cultural categorisation within the context of race. Jonathan Sell's article on "chance and gesture" in Smith's work doubts "multi- or mono-culturality because any such assessment would rely on an essentialist view of identity which Smith's novels quite plainly reject" (28). I would add there are even more problematic, "essentialist" implications in the term postcolonial. As Tew says, *White Teeth*'s "ambitions are to transcend the postcolonial condition without either abandoning or being

trapped by its potentially reductive and essentialist dynamics" (*White Teeth* 71). Or as Tew puts it later in his book, highlighting this reductivity from the perspective of scholarship: "many postcolonial critics project onto Smith's work a neoliberal, multicultural positivism, the very perspective her novel parodies and subverts" (*Zadie Smith* 125). These "postcolonial critics" do often acknowledge Smith's parody, subversion, and complication of postcolonialism, though. Postcolonialism suggests an after effect of colonialism but it also implies a destination of racial harmony that would come after "neoliberal, multicultural positivism." Smith's debut novel does engage with multicultural potential even if it distrusts postcolonialism's proclaimed finality and absolutism. *White Teeth* qualifies "multiculturalism" too, though – as Bentley recognises when outlining how Smith's novel "emphasises" that the multicultural "should accept a mixing of ethnicity identified at the level of the individual rather than the nation […] This is distinctly and radically different from the model of multiculturalism that represents a series of monoethnic individuals who combine to produce a multicultural nation" ("Narrative Forms" 53). A decade before Smith's novel was published, Kwame Anthony Appiah specifically paired postcolonialism (which is responsible for terms like multiculturalism) with postmodernism, arguing that "the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the clearing space gesture […] many areas of contemporary African cultural life – what has come to be theorized as popular culture, in particular – are not in this way concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality" (348). I would argue that Smith's work extends this "clearing space gesture" to post-postmodernism during a time of proclaimed but questionable multiculturalism, when the postmodern and the postcolonial remain objects of investigation and critique.

In another essay collected in *Feel Free*, Smith defines herself as "bi-racial" (218). Smith's life outside of Africa (where her mother was born), first in London and then in New York, offers another justification of this clearing of space and stepping outside – if not quite "transcending" or "going beyond", as Appiah takes issue with. This justification is strengthened by her characters also being immigrants in London, giving stepping outside a geographical definition alongside an aesthetic one (concerning post-postmodernism's treatment of postmodernism). The term postcolonial has specific relevance to British academia – and more so than the postracial – which fits a novel written before she moved from London to New York, and while she was a student at Cambridge. In his chapter for *Re-assessing the Twentieth-Century Canon: From Joseph Conrad to Zadie Smith*, Tew expanded his discussion of the hypocrisies of the critic after colonialism: "For critics, at least in terms of Smith's work, a postcolonial tendency mostly represents a reinterpretation of the core

values underpinning *White Teeth*, away from the muddle Smith celebrates, rejecting the paradoxes of human beliefs and opinions, steering the reader toward the critic's own certain and essentialist ideological principles" ("Samad, Hancock" 308). Elsewhere in his chapter, Tew talks about how critics may be "co-opting or dragooning Smith into the ideological constraints that animate so much postcolonial criticism" (306). While I would perhaps not call it something as severe as "dragooning", there does indeed seem to be a problem in the way that earlier Smith critics assumed the status of postcolonialism – Childs, for example, provocatively declared that "*White Teeth* can be seen as a *Midnight's Children* for postcolonial Britain" (202). But I think the importance here is that Smith's work more interestingly unpacks the "ideological constraints" of postcolonialism, rather than second-guessing the role of the postcolonial critic (if we are even able to have a fixed understanding of what it means to be this kind of critic). Smith's work demonstrates the problems of postcolonialism but is equally preoccupied by potential solutions. *White Teeth* in particular unpacks the limitations of a culture that has supposedly moved away from colonialism, because even if there is some movement, there is not enough to have eradicated or be free from colonialism's disruption of fair representation, its prevention of equal opportunity, its obstacle of prejudice in the way of experience. This gesture of some movement but not much, of having one foot in the past and one foot in the present, has parallels with Smith's relationship with post-postmodernism.

Paproth defines this complication of postcolonialism as an "impossibility of maintaining", suggesting that "The traditionally modernist structures that Smith employs to present her novels are the same ones she is arguing for the impossibility of maintaining in a postmodernist postcolonial world" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 11). That is, the prefixes in post-postmodernism unconvincingly symbolise the end of a process (*twice* – of modernism and postmodernism) and the inability to carry on maintaining it (them), and this notion of unconvincing endings is a productive way of thinking about *White Teeth*'s link to postcolonialism. Z. Esra Mirze examines how "otherness is no longer limited to the colonial designation of racial difference, but can include those born in postcolonial England" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 188). Mirze specifies that the thing making maintaining impossible is "otherness." Otherness, polarisation, and division are passed from postmodernism to post-postmodernism just as they are passed on in the transition from a colonial moment in history to a supposedly postcolonial one; this is the failure of terms like post-postmodernism and postcolonialism, which means the terms struggle to maintain their conviction and value in literary culture. But Smith dramatises this failure, and post-postmodernism and

postcolonialism are to an extent synonymous in her depiction of a culture broken and beaten down, fractured and fragmented by processes of social labelling and categorising. As Bentley puts it, "Although the subject matter [of Smith's work] could be described as post-colonial, postmodern, post-Marxist, and post-feminist, it nevertheless addresses those ideas in the familiar frame of the comic realist mode" ("Re-writing Englishness" 497). The licenses of comic realism – which is by no means the only or even primary form Smith employs – facilitate dramatising the failures of these "ideas", particularly in the postmodern and postcolonial from Bentley's list.

This depiction of a broken, fractured culture underpins *White Teeth*, but it reappears in Smith's later fiction. *The Autograph Man* follows Jewish-Chinese Londoner Alex-Li Tandem as he buys and sells autographs and tracks down celebrities for a living, centralising themes of authenticity and facsimile.[65] *On Beauty*, meanwhile, reworks Forster's *Howards End* and focuses on the academic rivalry of Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps at a fictional East Coast university. Smith diversifies Forster's story of a different set of characters living in turn of the century England: while himself a white Englishman, Howard's wife Kiki is African American, and Monty is a Trinidadian living in Britain. Through its academic setting, Smith's third novel demonstrates escalated tensions between identity labels and unhealthy environments that provoke cultural categorisation, particularly during the program era. Her fifth novel, *Swing Time* (2016), considers the stakes of performativity and expectations of competitive otherness within the context of tap dance, telling the story of mixed-race girls from the perspective of an unnamed narrator whose lifelong friendship with the character Tracey anchors the narrative. I will leave *The Autograph Man* and *Swing Time* to the side, because although they would further expand a discussion of Smith's intertwined aesthetics and narrative themes of hybridity, they are less explicit examples of this balance than *White Teeth*. These remain, however, a continuation of (to borrow Maeve Tynan's description of Smith's second and third novels, which paraphrases Forster), "rejecting the hollowness of a

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[65] Tew offers many illuminating ideas on Smith's second novel and particularly Alex's role as protagonist in it in *Zadie Smith*, including on its "layout [on the page] as an artifact and also as a narrative" and on how, "In a manner that critiques the postmodern tendencies of late capitalism, however self-conscious Alex becomes, he cannot achieve any real self-awareness" (72, 84). In his contribution to Len Platt and Sara Upstone's *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Tew describes similarly how "Alex's malaise is offered as a postmodern symptom, with his avoidance of multiple realities, a radical disenchantment with meaning and traditional affiliations that is dysfunctional" (251). In her work in *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga discusses "the matrix of postmodern space" in Smith's second novel, as well as how it can be read as "a symptom of postmodern exhaustion" (61, 69).

dualistic view of the universe, and embracing complexity and hybridity – connecting" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 75).

But *NW* (2012), Smith's fourth novel, is arguably her most explicit engagement with cultural fragmentation and fracture as it implements these ideas formally and stylistically. In the essay "Notes on *NW*", Smith suggests that "My books don't seem to be *about* anything other than the people in them and the sentences used to construct them" (*Feel Free* 248). She writes that this "makes *NW* sound like an 'exercise in style', a phrase you generally hear people using as an insult of one kind of another. But to me, an 'exercise in style' is not a superficial matter – our lives are also an exercise in style", and that "when I was writing this novel what I really wanted to do was create people in language" (both *Feel Free* 248). Konstantinou categorises *The Autograph Man* and *NW* as Smith's "formally innovative novels", indicating that *NW* exemplifies "her advocacy for literary experimentalists […] the importance of the avant-garde, modernism, and postmodernism to her aesthetic commitments" ("Introduction" 3). David Marcus argues that "one might see *NW* as a consolidation of the exuberant sense of innovation in *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* with the ethical realism of *On Beauty*", while also suggesting that *NW* "satisfies, in many ways, this need for a more sociological and also more experimental realism" (n.p.). *NW* is Smith's most experimental novel to date and shifts between first and third-person, stream of consciousness, playscript, and other stylistic stunts while depicting the lives of four adults in and around northwest London: Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle. In his book on "ethics and excess", Ben Masters describes *NW* as "emblematic of a post-millennial literary ethics that is both contiguous with *and* divergent from the literary ethics of the earlier stylists of excess" (141). As Masters says, Smith's fourth novel is borrowing just as much from modernist styles of excess as postmodern", and these excesses (which is a less reductive or problematic term than James Wood's hysterics) become "even more apparent as the narrative progresses through its five parts, in which we encounter excessive styles as well as an excess of styles" (both 141). *NW*'s structure, then, can be viewed as an escalated version of *White Teeth*'s interests in the associative and organisational tendencies of post-postmodernism.

I would again agree with David Marcus, who observes how, "while set in the same neighborhood as *White Teeth*, *NW* is no longer concerned with the ambiguities of identity but with the clear, determined aspects of inequality" (n.p.). The urgency has increased in the twelve-year, three-novel gap between *White Teeth* and *NW*, but Smith's fourth novel remains in many ways a companion text to *White Teeth*. *NW* extends the page-fracturing devices of

Smith's debut novel, providing the reader with a comparable set of narrative moments where Smith's page visually represents things that her characters are seeing, things they are imagining, and things her narrator is imagining. Like in *White Teeth*, these moments of formal experimentation manifest in *NW* as lists, charts, and diagrams. Examples include "Apple tree, apple tree", the poem that opens part one, chapter seven of the novel; the encounter with the character Adina George, which shows how Adina's "mouth opens and closes" with the help of a diagram arrangement of her "gold" teeth, "chipped" teeth, fillings, gaps, and "TONGUE"; the stream of insults directed at Leah Hanwell over time, which are arranged chaotically all over the page; and the "*walking directions to Bartlett Avenue, London NW6, UK*", which like many of the page-fracturing devices in *White Teeth* applies Smith's structural mapping to the novel's typography (28, 31, 36, 38). *NW*'s devices reinforce the idea of breaking out of the rhizomatic structural pattern of growing continually horizontally, or on narrative terms: the accumulation of story threads and strands without straightforwardly moving towards unity or closure. The metaphor of the rhizome can also be understood here as an "impossibility of maintaining", to return to Paproth's phrasing. The proliferation of page-fracturing devices again gestures towards objectives of character catharsis and narrative conclusion that transcend the individual experiments with form. *White Teeth* offers FutureMouse as a structural liberation from the rhizome, and *NW* does something similar with the intertwined lives of its four main characters.

Character meetings hold more promise of convergence than the novel's aesthetics do, because as Masters explains Smith "uses modernist techniques of internal monologue, fragmentation, and polyphony to trace the difficulties of connection, whether between people, generations, genders, classes, communities, cultures, or even between different topographies" (147). It is a *break* from these techniques that moves *NW*'s characters closer to connecting. Meetings between them vary from fleeting to significant but, as a symbol, the meeting possesses an equally restorative, unifying power to FutureMouse. Narratively, this restorative promise can be seen in characters' passing encounters with one another.[66] Formally, there are scattered examples demonstrating this resetting and corrective potential in the way words meet one another on the page, such as Smith's ironic use of crossing out in the lines "Weren't

[66] Natalie seems to summarise this function of meetings in *NW* towards its end, when the narrator observes how "she could not tell whether she was trying to insert herself into somebody else's drama" (326). Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, the characters in Smith's novel are constantly inserting themselves into each other's "drama", and Natalie is no different.

that much. Been saving. Doing it up myself as a ~~gift for Grace~~ project for myself. A project car" (134). The irony here lies in the fact that transparently showing the drafting and editing process (or at least playing with this idea) undermines making the changes. It is a use of the concept of *sous rature*, first developed by Martin Heidegger and expanded upon by Derrida: the notion of strategically crossing out a word in a text but leaving the crossing out in. As a reader of *NW*, we receive the information that Felix was really fixing up a car as a "project for myself" rather than something for his girlfriend Grace, which devalues the gift and cancels out its expression of selflessness. In *NW* then, Smith's page-fracturing devices again work with her novel structure generally to progress towards cohesion and clarity, but the self-correcting forms that move the story closer to doing this only further illustrate the state of fracture the story and characters are trying to move away *from*.

This paradox of fracture and unity is fitting considering *NW*'s similar emphasis to *White Teeth* on the racial inequality and generational tensions of a diversely represented twenty-first century London, which Smith's fourth novel specifically navigates within the city's NW postcode. In his book *Reading London's Suburbs*, Ged Pope observes how in Smith's work the London suburb "is often treated as a species of post-modern space", while becoming "the location of a delirious new mix of multicultural and multigenerational connectivity […] the space of hybridity" (162, 168). Harmonious multiculturalism and "multigenerational connectivity" are the aspirations of *White Teeth*'s London, as they are in *NW* despite her later novel's comparatively bleak characterisation of the city, which is likely influenced by the national shift to conservative politics during the gap between publications. Smith's debut novel sets a challenge for itself as its narrative contends with the obstacles of judgement and discrimination that prevent London from achieving these things – realities of a neoliberal society that is given a license to access (and adopt) judgmental or discriminatory attitudes. By *NW*, Smith is treating London's "species of post-modern space" with even more reservation, as her later novel mines the city for its exhaustive postmodern energy, performativity, and trickery, but simultaneously strives to find affective potential within the geographical space. Like in *White Teeth*, these obstacles of *NW*'s London undermine the possibility that England's capital city, like contemporary culture generally, could be considered postcolonial. At the centre of this geographical emphasis, *NW*'s characters are somewhat less hopeful constructions than the redemptive, born again Archie Jones or his

trailblazing daughter Irie in *White Teeth*.[67] Conversely, and more like the difficulties and struggles of that novel's Iqbal family, *NW*'s Leah Hanwell is defined by her lack of ambition, her opportunism, and a relationship with Michel that is falling apart due to her not wanting to have children (and lying to him about no longer taking her birth control); Felix Cooper and Nathan Bogle are drug addicts; and Natalie Blake, the novel's most viable candidate for personal fulfilment, is a successful lawyer after graduating from a prestigious university, but is constantly held back by accusations that she is a "coconut" (black outside, white inside) and risks her career and marriage by leading a double-life arranging meetings with swinger couples on the internet. In her work on "attention", Alice Bennett suggests that "*NW* is a city novel named for a postcode and committed to the texture of local experience, but is also faithful in recording the paradoxes of contemporary connectedness and globalization" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 123). I would add that the novel primarily captures these "paradoxes" in its characters.

Earlier in her book, Bennett discusses how Smith's novel "experiments with imagining the construction of the self as hostage to the other", also claiming that "this inward attention back to the self is shown to be impossible to separate from an expansive outward attentiveness that is both caring and ethical" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 122, 115). It is through its negotiation between subject and environment (and self and other) that *NW* aspires for a collective social harmony that it knows is likely to be unattainable. Unlike *White Teeth*'s aspirations of this, *NW*'s even more obstructed aspirations do not have a clear narrative and structural destination of closure, of characters joining together at the end of the novel. In *NW*, meetings are smaller, appear earlier in the novel, and involve pairs of characters rather than all of the main four. There is ultimately not an equivalent to the restorative, unifying potential of FutureMouse, and *NW* instead charges towards a more difficult conclusion. This conclusion is forecast by the line "2012 would be the end of everything"– which, of course, takes us back to Nealon's *never-ending* end of everything – and comes after the novel sees tragedies along the way such as Felix's death in an armed

[67] As in the reference to a "buck-toothed girl called Irie" on page 34 of *Swing Time*, an "Irie" makes a cameo appearance in *NW* too, connected to the people Natalie Blake meets in her swinger encounters: "'But Irie was always going to be that kind of mother,' said Ameeta" (251). Strengthening *NW*'s connection to Smith's debut novel, there is also a brief reference to a "Mrs Iqbal" (247). Smith's fourth novel also returns to the symbol of teeth (a symbol of genealogy and trauma, as discussed earlier in this chapter): "Where Natalie's teeth were small and grey, Tonya's were huge, white, even, and presently on display in a giant smile" (243-244). Other examples of teeth in *NW* include the Adina George "MOUTH" diagram mentioned at the beginning of this section.

robbery and near-tragedies such as Nathan stopping Natalie from jumping off a bridge (165). As Bennett says, *NW* "begins to find problems with the idea that readerly empathy through attention relies on the reader coming to the text self-contained and fully formed" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 119). In its depiction of a fractured, far from postcolonial contemporary London, Smith's fourth novel justifies its lack of structural self-containment and complicates the idea of being aesthetically "fully formed." In Smith's work, compromised endings are a symbol of a broader cultural collapse as we race towards categorising, labelling, and strictly defining everything rather than striving for a more natural, cultural/social heterogeneity. Instead of being fully formed, structurally *NW* is divided into five parts similar to *White Teeth*'s four – titled "visitation", "guest", "host", "crossing", and "visitation" – but within this framework the novel is separated into fragments of text of varying, unpredictable lengths, separated by numbers in some cases (the first "visitation") and numbers with subtitles in others ("host"). Formally, it is Smith's use of further page-fracturing techniques that contribute to *NW*'s scattered, disconnected, segregated social milieu, which compares to the narrative atmosphere of *White Teeth* yet contains a more difficult conclusion to the events within this space. Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan's lives are connected and interdependent, but both their specific meetings and general social and geographical connections offer an unfulfilled potential for harmony. *NW* therefore offers an even less hopeful and more damning indictment of the state of race relations in contemporary culture than the prognosis of *White Teeth* twelve years earlier. *White Teeth*'s overview leaves room for improvement and only entertains the possibility of progress by foregrounding the problem of considering twenty-first century neoliberal society as postcolonial.

NW dismantles the idea of postcolonialism and allows this deconstructive energy to determine its prose style, which is defined by its effect of being broken up into pieces that only just hold together. In his chapter in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Tew claims that Smith's fourth novel is "where proximity and abutment become crucial to the lives (and to the death in one case) of the various characters – some interconnected formally, others not, but all linked by a contemporary, fragmented urban existence" (249). But where Tew applies this thematic fragmentation to postmodern stylistics, I would argue that the sheer layers to the novel and the lengths *NW* goes to in replicating fracture/fragmentation structurally and formally suggest that post-postmodernism is a more fitting categorisation. Like the premise of post-postmodernism, *NW* is a labyrinth of never-ending structural and formal possibilities. Tew discusses how, on the one hand, *NW* is "seemingly gesturing towards a postmodern style" while simultaneously acknowledging how "the elements of the novel are complex,

neo-modernist in ways that evoke both Joyce and Woolf in particular (perhaps as much part of a reinvention of modernist discourse as a distancing from postmodern postcolonialism)" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 260). [68] While I agree on the "distancing from" postcolonialism, Smith conflates the influence of modernism and postmodernism in her work rather than simply distancing herself from either, perhaps even more so in the stylistic testing ground of her slippery, often chaotic fourth novel than in *White Teeth*.

If we are to again find links between generations of modernist styles and the different generations of Smith's characters, we can compare the way Smith dramatises a discussion of modernist categorisation within her fiction in *White Teeth* to the way she does this in *NW*. There are various instances of the post-postmodernism debate being discernible on the levels of *NW*'s narrative and dialogue, including the "*144. Speed*" fragment within the novel's "host" section. From an unspecified narrator and an unclear perspective, we read the line "At some point we become aware of being 'modern', of changing fast. Of coming after just now" (256). During the "Willesden Lane to Kilburn High Road" segment of the novel's "crossing" section we read another commentary that fits the conversation surrounding modernism's shift to postmodernism and postmodernism's shift to post-postmodernism – the line "They'd reached the end of nostalgia", which is likely describing the outlook of *NW*'s characters (305). It is also notable that in *NW* the older Jamaican barrister Theodora tells the younger lawyer Natalie that "The first generation does what the second doesn't want to do. The third is free to do what it likes" (239). Theodora's claim may not perfectly match the post-postmodernism debate – it would be inaccurate to suggest that the modernists did what postmodernists would not "want to do" – but her claim does capture the notion of post-postmodernism stepping outside of the previous phases of modernism and being "free to do what it likes." This freedom complicates Smith's different "paths for the novel" (which, as I discussed, she herself contradicts), no matter how many paths she or we think there are. Tew suggests that Smith's novels "are left at risk of being subsumed into a set of overarching postmodern discourses" in particular (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 260); but any risks of being subsumed into these discourses or ones surrounding modernism do not lose sight of the topic of racial inequality. For Smith, this is always more urgent than her stylistic play and

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[68] The full quote from this section of Tew's chapter is as follows: "Formally, *NW* seems far more experimental than any of Smith's previous novels, at least topographically so, seemingly gesturing more towards a postmodern style. I think again issues of contestation and of parody are at the heart of the relation Smith has to postmodern aesthetics" (*Postmodern Literature and Race* 259).

aesthetic experiments. After all, the defining impulses in modernist categorisation are at the centre of the topic of racial inequality too: the reduction to self- and external definition, the propensity for cultural labelling, and the vicious circle of replacing projected social progresses with new but unchanged realities. These characteristics of categorisation trouble the term post-postmodernism as significantly as they problematise the term postcolonialism.

Race and the Academy

Smith is all too aware of the academy's complicity in perpetuating these issues of labeling and categorising – issues which are deepened by the scholarly impulses to periodise and historicise. These issues persist due to the consistently unchanged problems around race, despite the concretisation of whatever new term is coined or whichever -ism is theorised within academia (the home of literary postmodernism, critical race theory, and any other scholarly field relevant to this discussion). This stasis to academic discourse in the program era is a central interest of *On Beauty*: a novel which contains similar criticisms to *NW* and *White Teeth* of our social, political, and cultural mishandlings of racial inequality, but which pinpoints the setting of academia and zeroes in on the neoliberal university's responsibility in these mishandlings. The atmosphere of the fictitious Wellington College – which is the stage for the personal and professional rivalry of Howard Belsey (who works there) and Monty Kipps (who lives in Britain) – is comparable to the stifling, absurdist, often toxic academic environment of *Erasure*. Wellington College seems to be an amalgam of things Smith has said about Cambridge over the years (which I touched on earlier), which ironically anticipate the job she would take at NYU as a tenured Creative Writing professor in 2010 (in-between the publications of *On Beauty* and *NW*). *On Beauty* is likely also influenced by her experiences writing it as a fellow at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute – Smith writes that the novel is "a record of my preoccupations, although they are mapped on to strangers" (*Feel Free* 335). Within its academic setting and separated into three parts, the novel pursues Howard and Monty's rivalry as it escalates, Howard's marriage as it becomes more troubled, and Howard and Kiki's children's lives both with and separate from their parents.

In an interview with Smith about *On Beauty*, Jessica Murphy Moo described the novel as "a meditation on the ideal of the university and the potential perversion of it; the fragility and strength of relationships; and the ways in which society influences perceptions of beauty"

(n.p.). Konstantinou more specifically observes how *On Beauty* "meditates, in a barely allegorical fashion, on the question of who will inherit the estate of the liberal arts" *after* it has been perverted beyond recognition ("Introduction" 2).[69] As Konstantinou suggests, perversion and disillusion are attached to the "the fate of postmodernism", which in the narrative of Smith's third novel it is "difficult to extricate from the academic humanities and social sciences as well as the recent history of institutions of higher education more generally" ("Introduction" 4). Tew argues similarly, discussing how the novel's character rivalry represents bigger, more universal tensions between intellectualism and sincerity – tensions which are borne out Smith's use of the framework of the campus novel. Tew describes how *On Beauty*'s "critique and attack upon the sterile scholasticism" relates precisely to "deconstruction and the postmodern age" (*White Teeth* 108-109). Alexandra Kingston-Reese discusses the novel in relation to estrangement, suggesting that "Its characters' relationships tend to falter or come undone after failed or missed attempts at communication" (32). Kingston-Reese writes of *On Beauty*'s lyrical realism and use of ekphrasis, but also the "exhausted aesthetic state in which the rest of the novel operates" around Howard Belsey's relationship to art through academia (32). The widespread problem of "sterile scholasticism" (as Tew puts it), or reclaiming an "ethical approach to literary perspectivalism" (as Kingston-Reese describes), pertains to both the macro, cultural understanding of postmodernism during the neoliberal age and the micro, localised understanding of postmodern novel aesthetics (108-109; 45). Smith is not unique in drawing attention to these problems, as my analyses of Franzen and Everett's work have shown. This localised discussion of novel aesthetics is more central to *On Beauty* (whereas *The Corrections* centralises the economic market when critiquing postmodernism), and it is given a platform of self-reflexivity by the novel's academic setting. To have a conversation about (the issues of) institutionalised postmodern aesthetics and their disregard of race, *On Beauty* hypocritically (but knowingly) employs these aesthetics for its own writing style. This paradox is carried over from *White Teeth* but is perhaps intensified, as we can see from *On Beauty*'s opening line: "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father" (3). Rather than simply launching into these "emails" straight away, as *White Teeth* or *NW* might

[69] There is a line in *On Beauty* implying that if no one inherits them, the "liberal arts" might not be so free, unrestricted, and "liberal" (if they even are in the first place). Howard Belsey's son Jerome, in a conversation with his sister Zora, says "'The Ethics of the University – colon – Taking the 'Liberal' out of 'Liberal Arts'". How *perfect* is that?'" (*On Beauty* 239).

do with their equivalent page-fracturing devices, Smith's third novel instead warns us before fracturing its page.

There is increased transparency to Smith's self-reflexivity, which *On Beauty*'s narrator relies on even more than *White Teeth*'s does. But this transparency must counteract the illusion and performativity that can come with postmodernism and academia. The novel attributes these to Howard, which is exemplified by the way that he tells son Levi (brother of Jerome) that he is wearing a new hat as "an aesthetic thing. For looks only" (22). Howard's professorial conduct becomes posturing at home, with his family; the conversation about his hat is a domestic equivalent to moments in the narrative where he confuses Plath and Shakespeare and mispronounces Baudrillard (102, 394). These smaller instances of misinformed posturing or empty gesturing are side effects of Howard's bigger actions in the novel: his affair with an academic colleague (demonstrating his characteristically deceptive nature) and his *in*action when it comes to completing his long-gestating book on Rembrandt. Despite Howard's supposed scholarly expertise on Rembrandt, he frequently gets thing wrong about his subject area, such as in a scene where his attempts to cover up an error are described by Smith's narrator as "a daunting display of academic pyrotechnics" (117). The idea that Howard is intelligent yet unintelligent forms part of the novel's wider criticism of academia, which highlights how scholars are trained, how knowledge is gained and applied, and the impact this all has on individual abilities to switch off and function in the world outside the university. Supporting the last of these, it is notable how *On Beauty* characterises the hermetic, entrapping space of Wellington College. As Levi puts it towards the end of the novel: "He felt the despondency universities had long inspired in him. He had grown up in them; he had known their book stacks and storage cupboards and quads and spires and science blocks and tennis courts and plaques and statues. He felt sorry for the people who found themselves trapped in such arid surroundings" (407). As a possible corrective to his father's cautionary tale, Levi is aware enough to realise that, "In universities, people forgot how to live" (407). There is a section earlier describing the students sharing this space with the likes of Howard as "lined up against the wall like prisoners waiting to be shot" (141). Howard almost needs to take the advice of his author if he is to escape sterile scholasticism and, like Everett's Ted Street in *American Desert*, both redeem himself after an affair and learn to be affective and sincere despite the preventions of this by academia. In "Read Better", Smith suggests that "Maybe we have to get out of the academy and away from the newspapers and back into our reading chairs to regain access to this feeling" (n.p.). Howard poses a challenge to what Smith in "Read Better" calls "this deepest self" (n.p.). She deploys

him, and *On Beauty* as a whole, to dramatise the attempts to seek depth, turn towards affect, and hold onto feeling. These attempts can be viewed as components within a conscious movement from – but not *away* from – postmodernism and towards post-postmodern potential. *On Beauty* stages this shift more straightforwardly than *White Teeth*, and again does so internally, with story and character as often as it does through form and aesthetics.

On Beauty's dramatisation of this is arguably Smith's work at its most postcritical. As Howard's wife Kiki, the member of his family he alienates most, tells him: "'You know what's weird? Is that you can get someone who is a professor of one thing and then is just so *intensely stupid* about everything else?'" (15). Smith reignites this debate about the restrictive environment of the university in her 2020 essay collection *Intimations*, where she uses her own experience to talk about how "The part of the university in which I teach should properly be called the Controlling Experience Department" and later entertain the possibility that "The best we could hope for was that university might act as a superstructure" (5, 51). Kiki and Howard's conversation also directly echoes things said to Monk in *Erasure*. Like Everett's academic protagonists, Howard seems to be a human embodiment of the popular but flawed criticisms of postmodern stylistics that Smith debunks in "Read Better", but also "Fail Better" and "Two Paths for the Novel": experimentalism over meaning, style over affective substance, deceptive trickery over honest sincerity, playfulness over feeling. It is as if Howard is aware that he is in a fiction, and metafiction after all is an aesthetic playground for postmodernism; but as in Smith's other work, post-postmodern potential is the focus of *On Beauty*. Howard cannot switch off and thinks in books, at one point observing that an "accent was so pronounced Howard thought he hears the name of Zola's novel" (25). It is as if he is channeling the same associative logics that define both postmodernism and post-postmodernism. He represents the obstacle that can come with these logics – what Tew calls "emotional articulacy", which is "transcended partially only by his belated inner sense of an aesthetic imperative" (*White Teeth* 91). This "imperative" of *balancing* aesthetics and real living might solve Howard's existential crisis – which, "Through Kiki's view of Howard's empty posturing, Smith parodies and judges", because it is part of "postmodernism's separation from […] any concrete morality", as Tew says (*Zadie Smith* 105). Tew also claims that "Smith uses Howard's conceptual impasse to symbolize one of the central intellectual perversities of a postmodernism embraced both enthusiastically and willfully by many intellectuals" (*Zadie Smith* 108). So it is as if Howard is a puppet, an unelected representative for a bigger literary-cultural war between the dense, experimental, complex, academic and the sincere, truthful, honest, real.

Unlike some of Everett's characters, Howard is not a writer himself, and the novel he is at the centre of is not interested in explicit, elaborate metafiction (a post-postmodern component that would signal stronger engagement with postmodernism, as we saw in *Erasure*). Instead, there is an intertext at the centre of *On Beauty*: Forster's *Howards End*, which gives Smith her protagonist's name and hangs over her novel generally as it reworks and modernises Forster's classic story about social codes of conduct in Edwardian England. Elaine Scarry's 1999 scholarly text *On Beauty and Being Just* is also an important intertext in Smith's novel, but does not specifically address the literary legacy component of post-postmodernism I am looking at here. Tew suggests that, "in Forsterian fashion, parallels, intersections, ironic juxtapositions and coincidences abound" in *On Beauty* (*Zadie Smith* 15). David James contends that "Smith rehearses Forster's gnomic use of narratorial intrusion to enunciate her own parable of ethical consequence" ("New Purism" 694).[70] Smith herself told Jessica Murphy Moo that the novel is "a kind of tying up" of her "interests" because she is "particularly fond of realism and social comedy and fiction that delves into ethics" (n.p.). As Smith tells Moo, "I wanted to prove to myself that an old-fashioned type of novel could be written that would be able to do things that were modern" (n.p.). Elsewhere, Smith writes of how "there is a sense in which Forster was something of a rare bird", even if "In the taxonomy of English writing, E. M. Forster is not an exotic creature" (*Changing My Mind* 14). In another piece for *The Guardian*, four years before "Fail Better" and "Read Better" and two before *On Beauty*, she claims how "Forster is of the first literary generation to inherit the idea that our very consciousnesses are, at root, faulty and fearful, uncertain and mysterious", and reveals that "Forster's *A Room with A View* was my first intimation of the possibilities of fiction: how wholly one might feel for it and through it, how much it could do to you" (both "Love, Actually" n.p.). *On Beauty*'s spiritual connection to Forster's work, then, is indisputable. In a moment of metafiction, Howard picks up a copy of this second Forster novel Smith has written about: "'*A Room with a View*. Forster.' Howard smiled sadly. 'Can't

[70] More recently, James expanded his discussion of Smith's third novel, suggesting that "Since the earnest, stylistically lush performance of novelistic ethics" in *On Beauty*, "Smith has become quite a different writer, seeking in recent years to ask more of her readers than compassionate generosity and moral vigilance alone" ("Style of Thinking" n.p.). James states that "she has become watchful of the self-gratifying process of claiming and cultivating empathic connections to those characters we accompany through social or personal trials we've never experienced ourselves" ("Style of Thinking" n.p.). I agree with this, because it seems that *NW* is less of a grapple between institutionalised postmodern mechanics and ethics and more defeated, deflated, and willing to give in to the mechanics (due to the less hopeful set of characters and situations).

stand Forster. Enjoying it?'" (298).

In *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, Tynan calls this "move" an "artificial insertion whose sole function is to introduce a note of dramatic irony […] Like Joyce's Bloom, who has no inkling of his Homeric embodiment, Howard is unwittingly attached to the author he professes to despise" (79). Tynan's essay then zooms out, acknowledging that literary works consciously leaning on "literary progenitors" generally operate with a "constant state of referral" (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 80). It seems as if Howard too operates in this way. If as Paproth puts it, and "the relationship between the past and the present is one facet of her [Smith's] postmodernist outlook", Howard can be read as a postmodern subject but also as a post-postmodern one (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 18). The semantic extension also extends the complexities of "the relationship between the past and the present", in the context of phases of modernist aesthetics but also in the context of race. An important fact of Howard's failing marriage (through *his* faults) – which is disrupted by his transposition of problems in academia to his domestic and family life – is that it is a mixed-race marriage. Paproth emphasises that the urgent subject of race in *On Beauty* is at the heart of its critique of academia, which is what separates it from *Howards End.* As Paproth says:

> Smith's treatment of *Howards End* is more like Joyce's use of *The Odyssey* in *Ulysses*, as it serves primarily as a structural model and a general inspiration for *On Beauty*. The epigraph "only connect", for example, that precedes *Howards End* is a *serious* matter in *On Beauty*, as the novel is populated with characters utterly incapable of the kind of connection that Forster values.
> (*Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* 23, emphasis added).

Perhaps "more" should precede "serious" in Paproth's assessment. There are serious undertones to the comedic events of Forster's novel too, even if they do not have the same contemporary urgency as the "serious matter[s]" in *On Beauty*, and perhaps did not even when *Howards End* was itself classifiable as contemporary, because racial inequality could have been a narrative focus a hundred years ago, it just was not in Forster's case. If we are to consider Forster's fingerprints on Smith's third novel as "a structural model" (to use Paproth's terms), this returns me to the use of rhizomatic structure in *White Teeth* as a means of developing a conversation between modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism, and staging this conversation within fictional narrative.

Smith's debut novel *does* allow its characters to "connect", ultimately, which as I have discussed is facilitated by the role of FutureMouse. The reason that *On Beauty* but also *NW*

are less hopeful about reaching resolution, structural convergence, or social harmony can be seen as a necessary tonal shift as the British and American political landscapes changed between 2000 and 2012. These changes are the emergence of a politics of austerity and the anticipation of a movement towards the far right, respectively. These political shifts influenced Smith's change in outlook because they brought the escalation of racial inequality despite the collective social opportunity (inside and outside the academy) to be more progressive as society moved forwards in time. This is the paradox of temporal simultaneity that Smith's work is consistently, restlessly fixated on, like Everett and Franzen's. Yet, Smith's fiction always leaves room (no matter how small) for a "refusal to give up on the desire for the future", as Fisher says – and "this refusal gives the melancholia a political dimension, because it amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism" (both 24). These "closed horizons" may to an extent be attributable to literary realism too, which is why Smith's distortions of reality in the form of post-postmodern experimental stylistics are productive. Fisher attributes a cultural collapse of temporal distinctions between the past, present, and future with the passing on and perpetuation of trauma, which is essential to *White Teeth*, *NW,* and *On Beauty*. Trauma can be understood as a by-product of a cross-generational history of mistreatment due to the fact of racial identity. Smith helps reinvigorate postmodern experimentalism's fusion with sincerity and social conscience by underlining racial trauma, in different ways but with similar priority to Everett.

4. *Infinite Jest*'s Endnotes

Published in 1996, *Infinite Jest* is positioned outside of the 2000-2001 literary moment of this thesis – a moment in which Everett's *Erasure*, Franzen's *The Corrections*, and Smith's *White Teeth* were published in close chronological proximity on both sides of the Atlantic. As I have demonstrated, each of these three authors' landmark novels can be read as dramatisations of the discernible shift from postmodernism to post-postmoderism in the first stages of the twenty-first century, a shift borne out of a wider crisis of definition and identity as the world responded to new social, cultural, political, and economic demands after the end of the twentieth century. In the different ways I have outlined, *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, and *White Teeth* externalise this transition between these later phases of modernism; their authors actively stage the aesthetic shift's ambivalence, hybridity, and complexity on the levels of theme, narrative, character, and even dialogue. Though they are heightened examples of the transition, generating interesting tensions within post-postmodern potential, these novels are not the first to entertain the possibility of a new moment after postwar postmodernism became somewhat less appealing due to its penchants for experiment, irony, and trickery. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* also entertains this possibility, from the late twentieth century. Burn positions Wallace at the centre of a literary moment around the turn of the century, calling him "representative of his generation's struggle to forge a new fiction in the wake of postmodernism" due to his "tendency to invoke *and* reject postmodernism" (*Cambridge History* 450, 455, emphasis added). Grouping Wallace with writers such as Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer specifically, who as he says offer a "perspective" wherein "postmodernism is regarded as a 'blind alley'", Allard den Dulk labels Wallace "the most important, pioneering member of this new group of writers" (*Existentialist Engagement* 5). David Hering discusses Wallace's use of "toxic postmodern spaces" ("Theorising David Foster Wallace's Toxic Postmodern Spaces"); this implies that something new is needed from Wallace's work to transform these "spaces" into more productive ones.

1996 is considered as the beginning of various trends in contemporary fiction. Alice Bennett notes that "we might take 1996 as the starting point" of a "new era of distraction-crisis-discourse", because "in the period from the late 1990s onwards, fiction itself has become a site for investigating the attention that reading invokes" (all *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 3-4). As Bennett says, this is linked to post-postmodernism: "the attentive demands of difficulty and the concerning non-demands of entertainment emblematize the

problems faced by twenty-first century writing as it plots a course through the wreckage of the middle brow, the experimental, and those aspects of the postmodern that are most in thrall to popular culture" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 21). This chapter argues that *Jest* establishes a post-postmodern framework that writers such as Everett, Franzen, and Smith built on after the century changed – in the, to use a line from *Jest*, "crazy post-millennial world" (384). By the time *Erasure* and *The Corrections* were published, Everett and Franzen had been publishing fiction since the late 1980s, but their earlier works are either more complicit with postmodern aesthetics (in Franzen's case) or less interested in interrogating the relationship between postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity and more focused on genre (in Everett's). *Erasure* and *The Corrections*, like Smith's *White Teeth*, are more aligned with the interests of *Jest*, even if Wallace's novel leaves room for completion of its post-postmodern project (which these other three works can be viewed as doing). Smith herself writes that "Wallace wanted to interrogate boredom as a deadly postmodern attitude"– and that, in Wallace's work, "we can clearly watch metafiction reclaiming him, almost eating him alive" (*Changing My Mind* 265, 289). Burn claims that Wallace's novel is "attempting a kind of meta-metafiction, as he did in short stories such as 'Westward' and 'Octet'" (*Jonathan Franzen* 21). Hering suggests that Wallace's 1989 collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (which contains "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way") "can usefully, if a little reductively, be read as Wallace's parroting of the register of several preceding and contemporary writers" (*Fiction and Form* 20). Thomas Winningham calls Wallace's use of metafiction a "post-metafictional paradox" ("'Author Here': David Foster Wallace and the Post-Metafictional Paradox"). As has been established in existing scholarship, Wallace's grapple with postmodernism (and by extension metafiction) is a deliberate, conscious, *staged* one, which takes a central position in *Jest* and impacts its formulation of post-postmodernism.

Channeling Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives", postmodernism often prioritises experimentalism over fixed literary traditions, which is ironic given that postmodernism itself proceeded to become one. Postmodernism also prioritises irony over the authenticity required for social realism – hence social realism becoming a more viable and dependable mode of fiction as the century was changing, running parallel to post-postmodernism and influencing its interests in affect and sincerity. This recalibration of literary fiction and affective (often realist) resurgence came particularly as technologies evolved, the internet exploded, and the license to be inauthentic or deceptive was granted wholesale to culture at large – in part due to subversive postmodern irony being successful,

becoming mainstream. *Jest* was written at a time of this hyperactive cultural acceleration, and its post-postmodernism reacts against the popularisation of postmodernism, in some ways. After this, sincerity would also maintain its value in fiction as the needs for trust, truth, and transparency dominated post-9/11 America, then society after the 2008 financial crash generally, and more recently Trump (and then Biden)'s America and post-Brexit Britain. I will look more closely at the state of post-postmodernism in the 2010s and 2020s with the conclusion that follows this chapter. In it, I identify how the mode of autofiction may be a possible alternative solution to post-postmodernism's problematic development of postmodernism; but first it is worth discussing how, through its use of endnotes, *Jest* establishes post-postmodernism's afterlife, which significantly influenced the Everett, Franzen, and Smith fiction that came next. Directly responding to Jameson's issue with postmodernism's debt to capitalism, Nealon describes post-postmodernism's updated relationship with the market as a dangerous potential of interminability, and I argue that *Jest* specifically points to how this infinite process – of capitalising cultural acceleration, of the constant motion of periodisation, of phases of modernist formal innovation being rendered new and then being replaced, repeatedly – *does* lead to something and leave us with something. This notion of overspill and leftovers forms an affective destination, and the afterthoughts that fill this space are evidenced by *Jest*'s ninety-seven pages of "NOTES AND ERRATA" (983). These endnotes can be read as a representation of postmodernism's transition to post-postmodernism in micro form, but also as an indication that, within this transition, postmodern irony is in the service of post-postmodern sincerity (and its affective potential).

As proclaimed in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace is not interested in "trying for classical, big-R Realism […] because the big R's form has now been absorbed and suborned by commercial entertainment" (138). This is similar to postmodernism's absorption into mainstream culture. Three years later and a month after *Jest*'s publication, Wallace told Laura Miller that "I've always thought of myself as a realist", elaborating on this by highlighting a need to resist "the intellectual difficulty of avant-garde literary stuff" (61). Wallace says in this interview that it is imperative that "The Reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses", yet realism is still qualified, appearing in the novel as a post-postmodern component rather than a disciplined use of the genre (61). As he tells Miller, "I wanted to do something *real* American, about what it's like to live in America around the millennium" (59, emphasis added). Realism mutates and Wallace transforms it into experimental fiction with sincerity, imbued with affective potential

– which shows where these mixed messages and this goalpost moving in his interviews have led to a middle ground of using both realism *and* experimentalism. Wallace is trying to move away from these either/or oppositions and instead fuse postmodern characteristics, components that predate postmodernism and even modernism (such as "classical" realism), and new post-postmodern opportunities. As he tells McCaffery, "to me the whole binary of realistic vs. unrealistic fiction is a canonical distinction set up by people with a vested interest in the big-R tradition" (139); this suggests that he leans further in the direction of postmodern influence than pure, traditional realism. But like his close friend Franzen's, this use of influence is not composed and untroubled, which is the case in Smith's work. Wallace conforms with Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence", because despite being such a supporter of postmodernism (unlike Franzen), Wallace is still uncertain of how to balance channeling influence with new, innovative fiction that is moving forwards. As Jeffrey Staiger says, "Wallace gives the anxiety of influence a meta-level, recursive twist, swerving away from it in just the manner that Bloom's theory predicts a strong artistic imagination must respond to another strong imagination" (85). A. O. Scott takes this "anxiety" further, writing in 2000 of "the fretful embrace and guilty recoil that typify Wallace's relationship with his literary antecedents" (n.p.). Scott suggests that "Wallace's own repeated attempts to cure himself of his interlocking addiction, to irony, metafiction, and the other cheap postmodern highs" are the result of how, "Like many other Americans who grew up in the wake of the 1960s, he feels haunted by a feeling of belatedness" (n.p.). While I would agree with Scott – that "Wallace has a bad case [of Bloom's anxiety of influence]: anxiety may not be a strong enough word; panic is more like it" – it is important to note that alongside this influence is a competing investment in a new, post-postmodern way of writing in his work (n.p.). Hering attributes Franzen and Wallace's novels' death of the father figure as "a dramatisation of the anxiety of influence" (*Fiction and Form* 25). I would add that there is an equal effort to dramatise post-postmodern newness in *Jest* (and more so than in *The Corrections*). This newness manifests as protagonist Hal Incandenza's attempt to reclaim sincerity, which runs parallel to the novel's complex engagement with post-postmodern aesthetics on the level of form.

Suggesting in his 1993 manifesto essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction" that "postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself", Wallace stresses (like Franzen) that postmodern experimentalism is in some ways no longer sustainable (147). He says that "The particular fictional subgenre I have in mind has been called by some editors "post-postmodernism"" ("E Unibus" 171). He entertains the possibility that this is a

solution to postmodernism's "end in itself." Wallace namedrops post-postmodernism in *Jest* too, discussing "the reactive moral ambiguity of 'post-' and 'post-post'-modern culture" in a section on TV protagonists and heroes (142). Unlike Franzen, in his essays and fiction Wallace does not attack the postmodern generation and claim that their work is inherently insufficient; instead, Wallace acknowledges how postmodern works and their "self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times" ("E Unibus" 146). Franzen's "Mr. Difficult" is a scathing critique of Gaddis in particular, though Franzen conforms to certain postmodern traditions he claims to be consciously side-stepping or even correcting with *The Corrections*; Wallace, meanwhile, confesses that "If I have a real enemy […] it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon […] their aesthetic's absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else" ("E Unibus" 146). But Wallace admits to channeling these enemies rather than completely rejecting their aesthetic principles. This diagnosis of literary fiction's direction ahead of the twenty-first century generates a post-postmodern afterlife defined by affective meaning and sincere feeling; for Wallace, formal innovation always serves this state rather than being served by it. *Jest* occupies this afterlife in a contradictory way to Everett's *Erasure*, but it is no less paradoxical. As I have suggested, Everett's novel (which is the latest in this 1996-2001 moment) invites a reading of post-postmodern expansion alongside Saidiya Hartman's afterlife of slavery; but for Wallace, the paradox can be understood differently, because race is a connected problem that his work does not prioritise a discussion of.

Jest is preoccupied by social consequence and individual responsibility and fills its liminal, post-postmodern space with these demands of its story and characters.[71] This responsibility is an ethical one, because post-postmodernism's irony-sincerity balance is ultimately one of morality. The scope of responsibility and terms of consequence are often unconditioned by race, though – despite Wallace and his work's awareness of problems surrounding racial inequality such as white guilt. Separate to Everett and Smith in this way, but also separate to Franzen, Wallace writes from a position of cultural overreach, but the

[71] This chapter is interested in textual (aesthetic and narrative) spaces, rather than geographical/ecological spaces. Heather Houser's work on the environment and "Disgust" unpacks how "detachment is not only a psychological and ethical problem in *Jest* but, crucially, also a spatial one" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 119). N. Katherine Hayles ascribes detachment to how *Jest* adds "virtual environments to the mix, far from offering an escape from contemporary ecological problems […] intensify[ing] the already existing paradoxes to the point of implosion" (678).

scope and scale of his novel is secondary to a retreat into selfhood – Hal's, which is a specifically white male subjectivity. The discussion of race's presence through absence in *Jest* can be considered as an additional set of endnotes (after his novel's own) to the critical conversation surrounding Wallace's work. Scholars such as Samuel Cohen, Clare Hayes-Brady, and Lucas Thompson have read into this treatment of race. As Cohen says, "Wallace's vexed relationship with postmodernism and the complicated ways that we think and talk about race in contemporary U.S. culture" ensure that "thinking about Wallace in terms of postmodernism and race is hard"; but an imperative in Wallace Studies is a "more sustained treatment of Wallace and whiteness" (all *Postmodern Literature and Race* 228). Hayes-Brady suggests that the scholarship should address rather than ignore how "issues of diversity are one of the major weaknesses of his writing" (168). Thompson notes that "though Wallace was highly self-aware about his own racial identity […] this self-awareness was not enough to prompt him to rethink the role of race in his work" (204); so this becomes the critic's responsibility. *Jest*'s endnotes magnify affective potential yet underdiscuss race, and this issue is what we are left with after critical conversations about Wallace's style and aesthetics have ended. These simultaneously fictional and scholarly endnotes, as I am therefore viewing them – which take us back to post-postmodernism's ties to postcritique – can also complete the post-postmodern framework of afterlife and endlessness within this thesis. *Jest*'s multi-layered, hyper-reflexive endnotes, as Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch revealed in an interview with Rick Moody, "were so clearly a big part of his [Wallace's] intent for the book […] an insistence that standard notions of plot missed the point, that so much more was going on in life at every moment that there was never a single resolution to anything" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 214). Through these notes *Jest* is indicative of post-postmodern potential at its most heightened, but contains a central absence/deferral that *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, and *White Teeth* do not have in the same way. Wallace's novel and its incomplete cultural sweep provided the scaffolding for particularly Everett and Smith's to begin filling gaps in due to the twenty-first century's new responsiveness to issues around diversity and equality.

This chapter argues that *Jest*'s fusion of realism and sincerity with experimentalism and irony paved the way for Everett, Franzen, and Smith to do this. As McLaughlin says, "Rather than ignoring discourse, the cynical, self-aware irony that he finds so destructive, he uses it, creating narrators and characters who are hyper aware of language, in an attempt to break through the irony" (*The Mourning After* 60). This aligns Wallace with these other writers. Like the other novels I have looked at, *Jest* dramatises its own relationship to

postmodernism and post-postmodernism through form and narrative – but what separates this novel from *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, and *White Teeth* is that it does this with a longer anticipation period of the twenty-first century's emerging crisis of self-definition and identity, both in the sphere of literary fiction but also in the broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts mentioned. Wallace's most celebrated novel is specifically about forecast, prediction, prolepsis; it foregrounds anxieties of established and emerging technological phenomena such as television and the internet. It expresses concern for the impact on affective experience, communication, and our ability to treat each other sincerely and equally that can come with these. As Burn suggests, "Wallace was obsessed with self-referring forms" (*Jonathan Franzen* 16); I would add that these "forms" are technological as well as textual or aesthetic. As Cohen and Konstantinou, in their introduction to *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, say: "Wallace both evokes an American literary tradition and also pays close attention to the new digital environments we find ourselves embedded within" (xvi). As Cohen and Konstantinou elaborate, "As our culture becomes more transnational and as technology dramatically reconfigures what we used to call our subjectivity, we might find ourselves looking to Wallace with increasing frequency, either for a sign of what we are becoming or for possible usable strategies to resist those powerful historical transformations" (xvii). Technology's influence on literature and the state of post-postmodernism is determined by the situation of "our culture" generally, but I am zeroing in here on the specific impact of technology on literary aesthetics, particularly the role of constructed sincerity. Further complicating the relationship between the past and the present in Everett, Franzen, and Smith's work, *Jest* is completely fixated on the future, which takes on a bigger role in the novel than in *Erasure, The Corrections,* and *White Teeth,* not least because it is set in a future twenty-first century society organised by "NORTH AMERICAN NATIONS' REVENUE-ENHANCING SUBSIDIZED TIME™" (*Jest* 223). Futurity and technology are tied to *Jest*'s treatment of race, which recalls Sylvia Wynter's ideas – specifically how, "to embody and actualize the example of the human, not now as fallen to the status of the ape, but rather as barely evolved from it […] it was now not only the peoples of the Black ex-slave Diaspora, but all the peoples of Black Africa who would be also compelled to confront the inescapable fact" (319). That is, Wallace's claim to affect and a textual embodiment of an affective turn is undermined by the exclusivity of his focus. Wallace's sincerity project neglects "the Black ex-slave Diaspora" and contributes to whiteness' cultural stagnancy, which has a paralysing effect on the already difficult paradox of past/present/future that post-postmodernism is ensnared in.

An analysis of the ways in which *Jest* lays the groundwork for early twenty-first century post-postmodernism is also the most logical endpoint for this thesis, due to Wallace's interest in futurity, which points towards treating one another better but does not explicitly outline the mobilisation of racial equality that is a central requirement within this. *Jest* contains many design and structural similarities to *The Corrections* and *White Teeth* in the way it uses temporality, and is driven by the kind of hyper self-consciousness needed to break out of a paradox comparable to *Erasure*. Wallace's novel is as inflected with a necessarily anti-capitalist response to the conditions of contemporary neoliberalism as all three novels, which is inseparable from whiteness' capability of empowerment while racialised capitalism limits the mobility of non-white communities. This landscape of socio-economic fracture influenced the racial exclusivity of the postmodern canon, which necessitates the politicisation of this influence when it is transformed into post-postmodern form. I have applied this component of sincerity to *White Teeth* and *Erasure*, but it generates a quite different conversation with *The Corrections* and *Jest*, which are both written by white authors and are concerned with primarily white sets of characters. The endnotes are therefore a useful point of analysis in *Jest*'s relationship to post-postmodernism, due to their negotiations between cohesion and fracture, synchronisation and disparity, fulfilment and deprivation, excess and essentiality. Like the centrality of Smith's contents page to my previous chapter, this analytical method of building my discussion out of the endnotes is what separates this study from other substantial critical accounts of Wallace and *Jest*'s relevance to post-postmodernism, accounts which I refer to while expanding the conversation of the endnotes' relationality within the wider novel. As Clare Hayes-Brady identifies, "it is misleading to oppose Wallace to Postmodernism completely"; he is ultimately "an inveterate interrogator of Postmodernism, engaging and dismissing it in equal measure" (50). This is just like Everett, Franzen, and Smith's ambivalent, difficult relationships with the term. It is through Wallace's approach to form and structure that *Jest* fits Nealon's claim of post-postmodern endlessness, but it is interesting to discuss what is projected but *not* reached by a never-ending end. Like *White Teeth*, Wallace's novel can be considered as an impeded rhizome, a demonstration through form of qualified, conditional interconnectivity, where the obstacles preventing congruence and convergence are a more urgent subject of discussion than the aspirations for interconnectivity in the first place.

In a book chapter on *Jest* and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, Jeffrey Karnicky suggests that, in the novel, "Each production of stasis works by its own logic; likewise, each moves off in its own direction. Some connect to others, while many are insular and self-

defeating. Broadly defined, one could say that three kinds of stasis predominate in *Infinite Jest*: cinematic, drugged, and tennis related" (97). Tennis' rhizomatic qualities, I argue, are a connective thread between Wallace's endnotes' and technological temporality. Despite the implication that they will do otherwise, *Jest*'s endnotes do not neatly tie up narrative loose ends or provide additional fictional detail in a straightforward manner, rather they more authentically complicate the messy affective experiences of characters and in doing so strive for sincerity. Due to this overarching novel structure, *Jest* is about constructional limitations. It concedes that its own aesthetic of meticulous organisation and obsessive patterning does not necessarily generate cultural harmony and heterogeny. Its primary storyline of Hal Incandenza's experiences as an outsider and an addict while at Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA – a semantic joke about temporality) foregrounds this cultural fracture and nonlinearity. Allard den Dulk suggests that, "In some ways, Hal is an extraordinary, abnormal character – a prodigy in both sport and academic study – but in many respects Hal is also utterly normal: his addiction, and accompanying hyperreflexivity and endless irony, are typical of the society portrayed in *Infinite Jest*" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 215). I would argue that Hal embodies the same tension between irony and sincerity (rather than being characterisable with one more than the other) that is being grappled with by the novel's form and structure. He is therefore conditioned by the same stasis of whiteness that the novel reduces this irony-sincerity tension to. In this way, *Jest* exemplifies "Being alone, loneliness, solitude, and its attendant solipsistic dangers", which as Andrew Bennett says "are major themes in David Foster Wallace's novels and short stories" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 69). The nature of Hal's isolation and solitude is directly influenced by the way his father's suicide irrevocably disrupts and divides the rest of his family, which is used as a template for a wider collective disunity, just as Alfred Lambert's dementia is by *The Corrections*.

Wallace's expansive, epic novel is in many ways an extension of the postmodern emphasis on layers and dimensions, with similar temporal scope, accumulated competing narratives, and variety in voice and register to the work of Barth or Pynchon. As Dominik Steinhilber identifies, "like a Pynchon novel", *Jest* is "constructed so as to never allow its ambiguities to resolve completely" (59-60). But it differs from these authors' novels by using this framework to dramatise a competing struggle with postmodern irony in order to access post-postmodern sincerity, rather than upholding postmodern irony's control over narrative structure and highlighting the artifice that can come with this. This competing struggle is again influenced by the state of writing after postmodernism as a result of technology – as Paul Giles puts it, "Wallace's acute responsiveness to new digital environments, within

which liberal individualism has become a shadow of its former self, creates in his narratives an inherently ironic framework" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 4). Giles does not mention that despite "individualism" becoming "a shadow of its former self", there is *resistance* to collective irony, but these individual resistances are composite rather than a structured, communal individual*ism*. A major obstacle in the way of individualism is the conditionality of race. Demonstrating this attempt to realign individualism and collectivism, at *Jest*'s centre are Hal's time at ETA, Don Gately's as a recovering addict at Ennet House, the plot involving Rémy Marathe, Helen Steeply, and Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (the AFR), and the history of the Incandenza family, prior to Hal's father's death. These threads interdepend and collide, meeting at the quest to find out about and find "the unreleased cartridge entitled either *Infinite Jest* (V) or *Infinite Jest* (VI)": the mythical film directed by Hal's late filmmaker father, James Orin Incandenza, which is said to be literally, "lethally entertaining" (both *Jest* 789). *Jest*'s narrative "progresses chronologically and in terms of the unfolding plot and sense-making process in such a way that it encourages the expectation" that these threads "will fully converge and the various mysteries will be explained", as Samuel Cohen notes (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 62). Cohen does qualify this, emphasising how "They are not" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 62); but it is also worth discussing the further promise of convergence in the novel's postscript, where pages and pages of endnotes pursue loose ends and explain certain ideas and references in Wallace's fiction. But in these endnotes, not everything is accounted for and there is a degree of narrative complexity left tangled – entanglement which is partially extended by the trickery of certain notes. The trickery, again, can be considered distinct from postmodern performativity, because for *Jest* the way endnotes betray conclusive information is a more realistic, sincere assessment of social disunity. This disunity is inadvertently enhanced by Wallace's often problematic and sometimes nonexistent coverage of racial diversity. The fictional world of *Jest* is anchored by the Incandenza family, whose racial backgrounds are rarely discussed, whereas characters to whom race is a more central point of discussion are few and far between. This coverage oversight is surprising given the sheer length of Wallace's characters list. This interplay between the novel's social fracture and its whiteness is another point of entry for critical conversation to complete Wallace's incomplete, constrained, conditional post-postmodernism.

This consideration of oversight is a more productive approach than framing omissions and incompletions as critiques of what Wallace's novel *should* have in it, because he ultimately writes from experience as a white American man. Rather than being solely a

source of critique, as a thematic interest and narrative subject incompletion can be usefully applied to the relationship between *Jest*'s main prose and its endnotes. Ira Nadel discusses how "Wallace's fascination with the footnote [and endnote] may have started with his philosophical and mathematical studies", because "a seminar on Wittgenstein […] introduced him to the philosophical footnote or, more accurately, the footnote in philosophy" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 222). As critics such as Randy Ramal have done (in "Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing"), it is therefore tempting to read the endnotes alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein's work.[72] Perhaps centrally, this could be done by arguing that in *Jest* they function as a collection of elaborate "*language-games*", which Wittgenstein defines as "the *speaking* of language" as "part of an activity, or of a form of life" (8e, 15e). However, I instead contend that Wallace's endnotes offer a conflation of postcritical methods unpacked in this study thus far. The endnotes generate a post-postmodern afterlife that is affective but largely unaffected by conditions of race, which puts them into conversation with the layers of *Erasure*. They simultaneously communicate an anxiety surrounding capitalist modes of repetition and patterning and their threats to individual autonomy, so draw comparisons with *The Corrections*' approach to structure. But most relevant to theoretical and critical method, Wallace's endnotes offer a continuation of the impeded rhizome that I have claimed *White Teeth* (more so than these other novels) can be read as.

Jest employs endnotes in such a way that its temporality is being manipulated, due to the flipping back and forward that form part of the process of reading it. The technique is aligned with the novel's interests in tennis and technology, in this sense. I turn to this pair of interests after first looking at the relationship between Wallace's aesthetics and Hal's narrative experiences – and after both of these sections, I return to the subject of race in Wallace's novel. *Jest*'s temporal paradoxes create an aesthetic of strange simultaneity, to again use Fisher's terms. In her book, Hayes-Brady suggests that "Wallace's work is most unified by its resistance to closure, which pervades the structural, narrative, and stylistic elements of his writing" (22). This "resistance" can be viewed as a timeless effect of the *Jest*

[72] Another example is Allard den Dulk and Anthony Leaker's "'Hidden in Plain Sight': Language and the Importance of the Ordinary in Wallace, DeLillo, and Wittgenstein." Wallace himself established the Wittgenstein link with his debut novel/undergraduate honours thesis *The Broom of the System* (1987). As he touches on in the McCaffery interview, writing it first exposed him to the paradox of postmodern influence and desire to write beyond it: "When I was working on *The Broom of the System* I saw Wittgenstein as the real architect of the postmodern trap" (144).

reading process, as its endnotes complicate the relationship between the present, past, and future from our perspective as readers, but also from Wallace's and from his characters'.[73] This collapsed blur of tenses is the opposite of a fixed chronology or lineage, which fits post-postmodernism's slippery relationship with time. Hayes-Brady notes that *Jest* creates "a kind of temporal möbius strip, where past, present, and future infinitely overlap without discernible edges", and she points to how the novel "ends in a past-within-that-past" (both 57). But it seems that narrative chronology is disrupted by the postscript's endnotes as much as by the ending of the main text. This is because the ending of the main text is not the ending of the novel, as the endnotes come after it; but, paradoxically, these endnotes resist classification as *Jest*'s ending too, because if the reader is complicit in turning to them when instructed, they will have already been read by the time they are reached.

Wallace's "metanarratives" and Hal's Confinement

The long list of endnotes that accompany *Jest*'s narrative complexity (the ETA, Ennet House, and AFR plots, and many others) are comparable to the layers of *Erasure* and *White Teeth*, particularly Everett's use of *My Pafology* as an eighty-page mock intertext and Smith's emphasis on her elaborate contents page. Wallace's endnotes always expand the fictional world of *Jest*, but vary from long and meticulously detailed (such as number 24: "JAMES O. INCANDENZA: A FILMOGRAPHY") to short, ironic asides like 25: "More like July-October, actually" (985-993, 994). The notes offer an extra layer that can lead to further layers – see 64's instructions for further details on an InterLace "CD-ROM", the directions to return to a previous endnote in 87, or the endnotes within endnote 110 (997, 1000, 1004-1022). Béatrice Pire and Pierre-Louis Patoine claim that the notes are "proliferating facts, endless details that dilute the narrative and create an image of the information overload that marks the postmodern condition" ("Reading David Foster Wallace" 3); but I would suggest that they do the opposite of diluting, and reach past "the postmodern condition." The endnotes can also be said to represent "the ways in which we stitch together mediated fragments and jumbled thoughts into coherent stories of ourselves", as Ed Finn says, though I

[73] Steinhilber emphasises that the novel "consists of two consecutive read-throughs, an infinitely looping, postmodern reading and a redemptive, closure-providing reading" (42). Post-postmodernism's transition is being staged in *Jest*'s narrative, but through postcritique also determines the relationship between the reader and the published book – bringing, as Steinhilber says, an oscillation between "coexistent postmodernist and modernist readings" (42).

would challenge Finn's claim of a resulting "earnest narrative approach" (both *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 153). This earnestness is less persuasive than the idea that Wallace plays with multiple different narrative approaches, doing so to dramatise a conflict between post-postmodern earnestness/sincerity and postmodern irony. The role of the endnotes in this layered, multivalent novel is like their role throughout Wallace's oeuvre, which as Ira Nadel identifies is "as metanarratives […] for commentary, criticism, cultural history, autobiography, formulas, digressions, bibliographies, and humour" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 218). As Nadel outlines, *Jest*'s endnotes variously "fracture, intimidate, layer, expand, frustrate, revise, critique, and support the text" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 218). To an extent, the notes contradict postmodernism's reaction against modernism, as Lyotard conceives of it; they illustrate how post-postmodernism complicates its own movement away from a preceding phase, because as "metanarratives" (embracing rather than being incredulous of this idea), Nadel's use of "meta" can be extended to a commentary on postmodernism too. The endnotes step outside of postmodern and modernist legacy, just as they step outside of and comment on their own role as endnotes. In doing so, the technique reaches for something more affective, authentic, and sincere.

The notes function similarly to "Wallace's writing" generally, which "might be seen to operate allegorically as an attempt to make connections with a world outside […] a deliberate exploration in both psychological and theoretical terms of how an isolated self enters into dialogue in conversation with a wider community", as Giles argues (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 11). *Jest* stages this "attempt" as a look forward, beyond the 1990s, to see if when there America is less confusing, alienating, or fragmented. The narrative setting does this, just as Wallace was from his time of writing. Hal's discoveries at various points of the story suggest that American has not changed: early on, he narrates in the first-person, describing how "I am rolled over supine on the geometric tile. I am concentrating docilely on the question why U.S. restrooms always appear to us as infirmaries for public distress, the place to regain control" (*Jest* 13). At a later point in the novel, Hal again zooms out of his individual subjective experience; Wallace's third-person narrator outlines "Hal's brooding", which reflects how, "Like most North Americans of his generation, Hal tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he's devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves" (54). Hal's nihilism features often in *Jest*, and is likely a by-product of his drug addiction, but this insight in particular connects his

experiences as a character with what the novel is doing structurally.[74] The dialogue between main prose and endnotes – or narrative proper and additional fictional detail – is a demonstration of this disconnect between the motivations for "pursuits" and the destinations of pursuits. With the endnotes, destinations are often unexpected, anti-climactic, even non-existent in terms of the information being (un)successfully supplied to the reader, often after many diversions and digressions. The endnotes can be read, therefore, as a formal exercise representing post-postmodern aspirations of sincerity but also representing what Hal goes through in the novel. As Cynthia Zhang highlights, "Hal, Incandenza's youngest and brightest son, only grows more isolated and affectless after his father's suicide" (120). Hal's struggle to connect with those around him is accentuated by the way he thinks about his family – as the narrator describes, "Except for Mario, about whom Hal will talk your ear off, it's almost like some ponderous creaky machine has to get up and running for Hal even to think about members of his immediate family as standing in relation to himself" (218). The Incandenzas' shared inability to communicate is amplified after the death of their father, but is also the case when the novel jumps back chronologically to before he died.

This dysfunction can be traced on a semantic level, as shown in the way Hal and his brothers absurdly refer to their father as "Himself" and their mother as "the Moms", which is perhaps another Wittgenstein type language-game (*Jest* 101). Pluralising their mother underlines a reality of needing to do more than just her designated parental job, and calling their father "Himself" is indicative of what brings about the mother's nickname: him not being there enough for his children or wife, his self-concern at the expense of concern for his family. As Hal reveals towards the end of the novel, "it seemed terribly sad to me […] I'd never once had a conversation nearly that open or intimate with Himself" (956). The endnotes expand this collective character dysfunction and echo the function of footnotes in Wallace's nonfiction and short fiction. Concerning his nonfiction, memorable examples in Wallace's catalogue include the 1996 *Harper's* essay "Shipping Out: On the (nearly lethal) comforts of a luxury cruise" (republished as the eponymous piece in the 1997 collection *A*

[74] Jeffrey Karnicky links addiction to the novel's rhizomatic structure, claiming that its "detailed descriptions of stasis points create a kind of logic: breakdown, disappearance, resurgence" (103). An in depth look at addiction would require a separate study, so I do not cover it in detail – though the way Wallace "continually provides detailed descriptions of breakdowns and stasis, but then jumps to another plane […] Stasis becomes that which is open ended and resistant to unification" is similar to the endnotes' function (Karnicky 103). Equally, den Dulk looks at how "*Infinite Jest* connects addiction to self-reflection […] this constant self-reflection brings with it an attitude of permanent irony" (*Existentialist Engagement* 74-75). This recalls the structural feedback loop of the endnotes, which also threaten constancy and permanency.

Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again). Another example is "Authority and American Usage" (*Consider the Lobster*, 2005), which like *Jest* becomes deliberately convoluted and contains footnotes within footnotes. As for Wallace's short fiction, memorable examples of footnote usage include the short stories "Mister Squishy" and "Good Old Neon" in *Oblivion* (2004); there are also various examples in the stories of the 1999 collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. As Nadel elaborates, both the footnote and endnote devices "justified his fractured consciousness, offering a visual display of his multiple consciousnesses" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 218, emphasis added). Nadel also says that they are "organic [to Wallace's praxis] and an extension, as well as a critique, of the text beyond the documentation of an idea or fact" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 219). This can be understood as a symptom of postcritique. Wallace's "multiple consciousnesses" manifest as a career cast of competing characters that often (and in different ways) have traits of authorial figures. James Incandenza (the creative) and his son Hal (the outcast) are perhaps the most immediate examples of this, even if a character named Dave Wallace appears in Wallace's final, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), for example.[75] This authorial quality justifies the curatorial use of footnotes and endnotes throughout his fiction.

In Wallace's nonfiction, the multiplicity of his journalistic voice creates what David Lipsky, reflecting on his famous interview with Wallace for *Rolling Stone* in 1996, called "the Brain-voice of people his age and a little bit younger."[76] The license of this "Brain-voice" is to be hyper-conscious, alert to the threats of the surrounding environment – what Josh Roiland describes as "An imperative to be present", which "runs through all of Wallace's nonfiction", because "unconsciousness leads to groupthink, gluttony, and self-delusion" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 31). Returning to Lipsky, elsewhere he has claimed that "In a way, the difference between the fiction and the non-fiction reads as the difference between Wallace's social self and his private self" ("The Lost Years" n.p.). Despite the more "private self" to Wallace's fiction, *Jest* still actively stages the attempt for that privacy to turn into the "social", the public, the communal. This brings me back to Nadel's claim of "multiple consciousnesses", which other critics agree with, such as Blakey

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[75] Critics often draw on *The Pale King* when discussing Wallace and post-postmodernism. Ulfried Reichardt, for instance, looks at how the character of Chris Fogle specifically "symbolizes what Wallace satirizes as a postmodern attitude, as he constantly watches TV and shows a non-committal indifference towards everything" (52). Reichardt also looks at how "Fogle's reflections may be read as Wallace's assessment of postmodernism's stance of "anything goes"" (53).

[76] Lipsky suggests that, because of this, "I think he changed journalism. I felt like it was the first time I accurately heard" this "Brain-voice" ("Getting to Know" n.p.).

Vermeule who writes of "the view, expressed over and over again in Wallace's work, that human-style consciousness tortures the bearer of it" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 115). This role of the self-torturing artist can be applied to *Jest*'s characters but also to its narrative structure and form. The novel's endnotes frequently contradict and disagree with one another and create the effect of one authorial and authoritative voice being split into multiple, which are then vying for a space in Wallace's main text.

Roiland similarly describes the footnotes and endnotes as open (or full) containers for "an *excess* of consciousness" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 33, emphasis added). Giles posits that the "ironic retractions and self-subverting footnotes" represent sincerity's potential, becoming a micro form of how "Wallace's [macro] narratives suffer from a […] conundrum, whereby the combination of ethical interrogation and technical language tends to create a theoretical momentum that effectively deflects the social world into abstract terms" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 9-13). Post-postmodern sincerity provokes "ethical interrogation" whereas postmodern irony threatens "abstract terms"; but these characteristics of *Jest* and also its endnotes (and their postmodern-post-postmodern tensions in miniature) are desired effects. They are not an inadvertent "conundrum" *of* Wallace's work but a discursive subject *in* it. Pursuing the threat that the endnotes will devolve into "abstract terms" (by their own design), it can be said that this component of *Jest* is its most convincing license for metafiction, more so than a reading of James Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest* as Wallace's novel (which is a popular reading). Hayes-Brady, for instance, discusses how the film "ultimately functions as an empty referent (in the sense that we hear of it but we never see it; it is a semantic possibility but nothing more" (124). The novel is replicating this because the film only ever could be "a semantic possibility" of words on a page. Nicoline Timmer agrees that the film should be discussed on the terms of "failure", identifying that "James' films [generally] function in the novel as ultimate examples of the failure of postmodernist aesthetics to emotionally involve the audience (or readers)" (175). Wallace's interpolation of Incandenza's films (via information, as we cannot watch them) is a correction of this "failure of postmodernist aesthetics" and a turn towards post-postmodern affective and ethical opportunity. Konstantinou covers the role of metafiction in *Jest* at length, suggesting that Wallace "is engaging in yet another turn of metafiction's ironic dialectic, beginning to question the basis or ground of metafiction itself" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 90-91). I would argue that this interest of the novel – "to make fiction paradoxically self-conscious of its own self-consciousness" – is most explicit in the layered endnotes (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 90-91).

Konstantinou's term the "theoretical momentum" of *Jest*'s narrative is the result of the novel's self-reflexive, postcritical strategy of second-guessing its own critical response, position within the canon, and relevance to scholarly periodisation like in *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, and *White Teeth* (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 90-91). Steinhilber suggests that, "with respect to theory, Wallace outpostmodernizes postmodernism" in part due to the way his work "treats literary theory as an intertext" (69, 53). Judith Ryan notes how, more specifically, *Jest* "mentions theory only in passing" but is also "intricately structured by poststructuralist thought" (7). Ryan suggests that "Through the figure of Hal, Wallace builds on Deleuze and Guattari's view of catatonia as a direct result of capitalism's simultaneous creation and repression of desire […] his [Hal's] tennis career is a trap from which he cannot escape but to which he has also been encouraged to have affective connections" (194). Because they are an integral part of post-postmodernism, these postcritical "affective connections" may play out on the tennis court, but this narrative space is influenced by the form of the novel, which uses textual space experimentally but also to dramatise an affective turn towards sincerity.

Jest attempts to circumvent a restrictive, rigid, mapped structure of knowledge via post-postmodernism. This is an organisational task, as determined by the endnotes, which deliberately complicate the role of temporality in both the reading experience of *Jest* and its original creative process (a past that is constantly being communicated with from the present, resulting novel). Cohen identifies how this particular dialogue between tenses opens the door to a third: the future, which Wallace is also communicating with both from his novel's constant present and the past he wrote it in. As Cohen says, underlining how this split between tenses can bring further splits and pluralisations: "The particular way in which *Infinite Jest* looks at each of these pasts from its present, and how it wonders about each of these futures, helps explain not only the difficulties Wallace encountered in writing it but also why […] it will be read long into the future" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 61). Timelessness informs the novel's near-futuristic American setting, and is just as important to the conception of post-postmodernism. Note two is a useful example of temporal disruption, which explains how "Orin's never once darkened the door of any sort of therapy-professional, by the way, so his takes on dreams are always generally pretty surface-level" (*Jest* 983). The narrator's disclosure comes during the first detailed scene involving Orin, Hal's oldest brother. The endnote's narrator is in conversation with the narrator of the scene in question, clarifying Orin's relationship with therapy after the description of his dream in the main text, in which Orin is literally seeing through his mother's eyes: "[…] no matter

how frantically Orin tries to move his head or shake it side to side or twist up his face or roll his eyes he's still staring at, into, and somehow through his mother's face. As if the Mom's head was some sort of overtight helmet Orin can't wrestle his way out of" (46). The idea of perspective operates on multiple levels here. Narratorial position is just one of these levels – as Alice Bennett suggests, *Jest* is a novel with characters "who realise they may be in the process of having their minds read by a narrator" (*Afterlife and Narrative* 135). Bennett adds that Wallace "explores the threatening and problematic qualities of narration which has links to both the afterlife and to eavesdropping" (*Afterlife and Narrative* 136). Narration, like the endnotes, can be viewed as a conscious post-postmodern technique being inserted by Wallace into his text, suggesting that he was not content with only discussing the obligations of writing after postmodernism in essays and interviews. To this end, *Jest*'s narration is also inseparable from incompletion.[77] Bennett suggests that the novel "seems to refuse the complete omniscience of a monologic, authoritative, omniscient narrator" (*Afterlife and Narrative* 137); I would apply this reading to the post-postmodern values which give the endnotes, as well as the narrator, their layers and dimensions.

We are encouraged to consider the narrator of these different sections of the novel as the same, as is the case throughout *Jest*; but this one-way conversation can also be seen as symbolic of Wallace's as author during both the writing and editing processes, even if he resists turning *Jest* into metafiction by explicitly characterising himself.[78] The narrator's brief conversation (or interview) with themselves in this endnote serves to add bonus information for the reader – but of course, the original omission is performative, allowing the narrator's character to be developed alongside Orin's. Timmer argues that it is the novel's narrator "who *shares*" an "empathetic view *from inside* the experience worlds of individual characters" (178-179). The narrator's self-reflexive conversation supersedes this process of sharing, though. The colloquial tone of "by the way" and "always generally pretty" in this scene, bolstered by Wallace's affinity for both the comma and the long, multi-clause sentence

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[77] Zhang links incompletion directly to *Infinite Jest* the film, too: "As the fifth of its name, it carries out the hopes of its predecessors but in an altered, hopefully improved manner. At the same time, being the fifth 'Infinite Jest' film implies incompleteness and the possibility of future variants" (137). Technology is implicated in the connection between post-postmodernism and *Jest*'s endnotes, which is evident from Wallace's own ideas on it in his nonfiction.

[78] Wallace does do this in his final novel, *The Pale King* (as mentioned), but does this in his endnotes specifically in the short story "Octet." Collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace's story does not name its "fiction writer" as Wallace but outlines how "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not *contes philosophiques* and not vignettes or scenarios or allegories or fables, exactly, though neither are they really qualifiable as 'short stories'" (123).

in general, highlight how this use of the narrator remains an affective process. The motivations of Wallace and his narrator can be aligned, meeting at a point of sincerity – of conveying honesty, openness, and generosity in their dialogue with the reader (emphasised by sentence and paragraph lengths). This conversation with the reader is always *beneath* the narrator's performative, postmodern conversations with themselves, from the novel's two different positions of main text and postscript.[79] The function of this transparent, post-postmodern exposure is as playful with the notion of "surface-level" information as Orin's "takes on [his own] dreams" are. By being confessed as only surface level, Orin's "takes" become tactically less surface level, revealing layers to Orin's character that expand his affective potential. As with the narrator, the strategy of the endnotes is to make Orin reliably unreliable. These characteristics are shared by many of *Jest*'s major players, inside and outside the Incandenza family, and are constantly determined by the endnotes.

Similarly, temporality is being used to achieve sincerity in endnote 269, which uses an "I" that plays with the idea of alignment with Wallace (rather than just aligning). Wallace, of course, is the author facilitating the entertainment of post-postmodern possibilities and is pulling the strings determining how this appears in his novel. Endnote 269 spans over five pages and contains footnotes; it contains a long report of the Incandenza family, with particular reference to Orin, conducted by Helen Steeply and enclosed within a letter. Steeply provides enough information to fill these five pages, information that Wallace is self-conscious enough of the length of to leave out of the main novel. This could be for the purpose of ironic play, genuine belief that it does not need to be read within the main body of the text, or both – a distinction Wallace blurs the lines of. Steeply's information is comprehensive and thorough until the end of the endnote, where she partially undermines the reliability of everything she has just said, admitting that "I have nothing concrete to back this up" after suggesting that the Incandenzas' mother (Avril) "was badly abused as a child" (1052). Wallace establishes that Steeply possesses the "I" here, nonetheless having fun with the reality that he is her ventriloquist, as he always is for all of his characters. Wallace's ironic insertion of his own perspective and voice into his fiction is symptomatic of the exact

[79] Another critical avenue worth mentioning is viewing *Jest* along the lines of "attention", and Alice Bennett's work on this trend in late twentieth/early twenty-first century fiction in particular. As Bennett says, "the challenge for Wallace's fiction […] was to find a way for allowing for the value of two readerly responses at once: the childish closeness of absorption and rapt attention, and the chilly distance of analytical skepticism" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 30). Attention is yet another useful meeting point for postmodern irony, post-postmodern sincerity, Wallace, and his reader.

turn towards affect and authenticity of post-postmodernism. This self-insertion draws on existing postmodern frameworks of irony and temporal complexity – as seen in the structural chaos of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) or the jarring insertion of the long middle section in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985).[80] Influenced by but unlike these forebears, Wallace uses experimentalism to make a sincere, honest, self-deprecatory joke about the lengths he is making his reader go to in following each endnote, then following additional footnotes or endnotes within these. Andrew Bennett talks about how the writer-reader relationship is implicated in Wallace's interest in loneliness, which becomes our experience reading such a long, rabbit hole novel. As Bennett says, "making us seem less alone is not the same as making us not alone, and in Wallace the desire not to be alone is generated precisely by the fact that we are" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 70). Wallace builds this anticipated response to reading *Jest* into its conceit, somewhat doing the work of the critic himself, in line with Felski's theorisation of postcritique.

As shown in just this endnote with Steeply, *Jest* adopts a method of ascendance – of consciously, explicitly moving beyond and above its main prose through its obsession with endnotes – but the novel constantly qualifies this, just like post-postmodernism does when gesturing to move beyond postmodernism. The main text, when discussing Hal's experiences of anhedonia, describes "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment" (694). Counteractively, this "transcendence" is of feeling and in embrace of irony, whereas I am interested in the transcendence of/ascendance above irony, which Hal more often seeks. This more frequent transcendence is bigger than specific conversations at ETA, in which Hal adopts defence mechanisms conditioned by his social anxiety. This transcendence mirrors the endnotes, which in fact transcend/ascend only to circularly move the reader closer to the original main prose. The notes divert from being an elevated, rhetorical, ironic device that hangs above *Jest*'s main narrative and return to the affective detail that the main text first establishes, only expanding it and saying more about how these characters function in their world. In this way, the endnotes' tension between irony and sincerity can almost be summarised by Steeply's playful, self-defeating confession in endnote 269 – that "I have nothing concrete to back this

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[80] Ed Finn has written in detail about the links between *Jest* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, discussing how "these two books seem to have everything in common" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 159-160). Finn argues that Wallace's novel can be considered an effective footnote to postmodern works such as Pynchon's: "the pointedly difficult style of massive, occasionally antagonistic tomes like *Gravity's Rainbow* is magnified, footnoted, and distilled into Wallace's own particular blend of militant cultural critique" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 153).

up." Steeply's reliable unreliability – or honest dishonesty, or sincere irony – is comparable to other endnotes constructed around this paradox. In a section on Don Gately's time at AA meetings, for instance, there is a discussion of "manipulative pseudo-sincerity" (369). In an essay published in *The New Yorker* three years after his death, Franzen wrote of Wallace's "cataloguing of despair about his own authentic goodness", which as Franzen says "is *received* as a gift of authentic goodness" ("Farther Away" n.p., emphasis added). The paradox Gately draws attention to in *Jest*, it seems, links to this desire for "authentic goodness." It is what Wallace's work must seek before sincerity is reached. This paradox features in short notes, such as the ironic correction "More like July-October, actually" (mentioned earlier) in endnote 25, which supplements the information given in the main text about James Incandenza's marriage to Hal's mother, Avril: "The tall, ungainly, socially challenged and hard-drinking Dr. Incandenza's May-December marriage to one of the few bona fide bombshell-type females in North American academia" (64). The new timeframe of "July-October" threatens to render "May-December" obsolete and cast the reliability of *Jest*'s narrator into doubt. But this new set of dates only supplements the original rather than replacing it, because Wallace leaves the edit in as a transparent correction, recalling the engagement with Heidegger's concept of *sous rature* in Smith's *NW* (as discussed last chapter). This highlights how it is a mock-edit rather than an actual one, which draws attention to the fact that this is a piece of writing rather than allowing the reader to forget this fact and become lost in the fiction. The manoeuvre recalls postmodernism's interest in metafiction, but the metanarrative of the endnote simultaneously steps outside of this legacy. The reworked version of this postmodern device uses transparency to deepen the characters and make them more rounded, honest, and open.

The endnotes represent belatedness, which is the status of affect and sincerity as they are being, in some ways, retrospectively applied to postmodernism through post-postmodernism. Fisher illustrates how this echo across temporal spaces – that are fluidly, repeatedly replaced and interchanged, creating one unifying tense in the present – recalls Jameson's ideas on nostalgia and timelessness, which takes me back to what Fisher himself describes as "a refusal to give up on the desire for the future." Like the responsibilities of futurity for the contents page but also FutureMouse in *White Teeth*, or the future potential for structural harmony assigned to the Lambert family Christmas in *The Corrections*, the responsibility of the endnotes bleeds out into the rest of Wallace's novel, influencing the smaller, individual grapples with affect, sincerity, authenticity, and feeling in specific scenes and involving particular characters. If we are to consider Hal the novel's main protagonist –

which I think it is most productive to – his isolation at ETA is the specific narrative condition setting up a challenge for futurity, just like Monk's struggle to progress his writing/academic career, or the Lambert family's struggle to reconnect with each other and escape the market, or Archie and Samad's struggle to prepare their children for the uncompromising, punishing late twentieth century British society these children will become adults in. Hal's trajectory of resisting confinement is anticipated by *Jest*'s opening scene, with him being "seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies", owner of the paralysing realisation that "I am in here" and unable to escape the fact (3). Hal's separation of the "heads" from the "bodies" around him is another productive symbol, as the detachment mirrors the role of the endnotes. Like the severance of additional notes from main text, Hal's detachment of heads from bodies in the "cold room in University Administration" of Wallace's opening scene strengthens a comparison between Wallace and Hal (3). As curator of and starting point for various points of disconnection in the narrative, Hal possesses what Hayes-Brady calls the novel's "simultaneous rupture and reinforcement of the boundaried self" (38). The two forms of detachment Hal is at the centre of (physical disembodiment and textual separation) identify two affective struggles: Wallace's to write beyond postmodernism despite being obsessed by it, and Hal's to reclaim his sincerity and sense of purpose as a character, person, son, brother, student, and tennis player.

Tennis and Technology

Endnote 216 rehearses this struggle with sincerity too, with Wallace's narrator mock-honestly confessing "No clue" as to something Hal's teacher Dr. Dolores Rusk "probe[s] him on": "the 'Coatlicue Complex'" (1036, 516). We are again invited to read the voice behind the endnotes as the same voice in control of the novel's almost exclusively third-person main narrative. The transparent play of the narrator (and by extension Wallace) in the endnotes is developed further in note 117, which adds information after initially describing Hal's older brother "Mario's oversized face" (315). Adding "… overshot the place to mention that Mario's head – in perverse contradistinction to the arm-trouble – is *hyper*auxetic", Wallace's narrator reliably concedes that they have "overshot" something (1022). As de facto editor of the main prose, and therefore an author surrogate, the narrator has made a mistake, claiming to have forgotten to mention something. Wallace could have bypassed any chance that this did in fact happen with *him* by simply adding the information into the main text, but the

particular decision to not do this offers an inviting extension to the otherwise ironic endnotes. This emphasis on editing and drafting within his fiction takes on particular significance considering what we do know about Wallace as a writer. As Cohen notes, "he was by no account a writer who took his work lightly; rather, he sweated through draft after draft, wrestling not only with manuscripts but with what kind of writer he wanted to be and what he wanted his writing to do" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 60-61).[81] Wallace's narrator, protagonist, and Wallace himself seem to be locked in a three-way conversation, ultimately.

The original information supplied is often undermined by changes to *Jest* offered in its endnotes. This process of playful manipulation as a method of reaching character sincerity underlines Wallace's use of postmodern means for post-postmodern ends. *Jest*'s endnotes operate specifically within this middle ground, even if moments within the postscript initially suggest that they will move further back to postmodern irony. A moment that threatens this is endnote 110, which I touched on earlier. After a seventeen-page digression (including a letter exchange) within this note, Wallace then provides endnotes within the endnote, which include jokes such as "a. Don't ask" and then "b. Ibid" (both 1021). Others such as note 145 are an introduction to Wallace's fictional interest in one-way question and answer exchanges – one-way inasmuch as he will only provide the answers, after a blank "Q" – which the short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a continuation of. In her essay on Wallace, which focuses primarily on this collection, Zadie Smith observes how "the questions in those interviews (represented by the letter Q) are not only formally 'missing' from the conversations, *their respondents have internalized them*" (*Changing My Mind* 270).[82] Something similar happens with *Jest*'s "SELECTED TRANSCRIPTS OF THE RESIDENT-INTERFACE-DROP-IN-HOURS OF MS. PATRICIA MONTESIAN" (176). By using the same Q&A echo chamber as these moments, endnote 110 threatens to conform to one long postmodern language game between author and reader. But Wallace's novel prioritises hybridity, balance, and negotiation, reminding us that the notes are a productive template for post-postmodernism. Responsible for *Jest*'s connection to it are Wallace's author surrogates: James Incandenza and his son Hal.

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[81] I am not analysing the presence of Wallace himself in his fiction too deeply, though it could be done. Other studies discuss *Jest*'s autobiographical quality in detail – Andrew Bennett, for example, writes of how "There is, indubitably, an element of self-reference here, of autobiography, a genre with which Wallace's fiction constantly, playfully, guardedly engages" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 71).

[82] Smith carries on, specifying how the "brief interviews" allude to a specifically masculine (and toxic) inability to engage a second party in what should be a two-way conversation: "These men anticipate all questions and also their own expected answers and also the responses they have already concluded these answers will receive" (*Changing My Mind* 270).

Reading Hal's character arc as a post-postmodern, affective turn draws attention to his restriction to a solitary subjective experience. This pervades the tennis academy founded by his father, and is not exclusively Hal's experience: "We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of individual. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common here, this aloneness" (*Jest* 112).[83] Tennis generally acts as a metaphor for individual consciousness within a communal space – it is a game with "infinite potential", which "must have an end in real time, in human terms", as Thomas Tracey puts it, observing how "Wallace's well-known passion for tennis is particularly indicative as a sport of choice" (both *Gesturing Toward Reality* 166). Similar to Hal, Wallace was a regionally ranked junior tennis player. Tennis has featured often in Wallace's writing career, perhaps most famously appearing in his nonfiction, such as the essays "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*) and "Federer, Both Flesh and Not" (*Both Flesh and Not*, 2012). The sport appears throughout *Jest*, and is at one point described as "locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play" (82). This section of the novel goes on, enthusing about how it the sport is "not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern", but rather an

> infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of self. (82).

If tennis can be read as a facilitating space for tensions between individual and communal consciousness, it is fitting that this too cannot be contained within the confines of Wallace's main text, requiring endnotes to fully explain itself.

The endnotes, like tennis, invite a movement towards the affective, meaningful potential of "infinities of choice and execution." Steinhilber identifies how, "As the reader is forced to continuously page back and forth between texts and endnotes, the novel mimics a game of tennis" (*Laboring Bodies* 117). They are also specifically like a video line call in tennis, as they can be replayed and reread and are inseparable from a process of judgement

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[83] Following this is the line "'*E Unibus Pluram*,' Ingersoll muses" (*Jest* 112). The line is a reference to Wallace's 1993 essay, which is a frequent reference point for *Jest*, both explicitly and implicitly.

within their own suspended temporality. This discussion of "infinities" is the narrator discussing Gerhardt Schtitt – the 70-year-old head coach and athletic director at ETA – and his understanding of James Incandenza's theory of tennis, on "the paradoxical terms of what's now called 'Extra-Linear Dynamics'" (*Jest* 82). Schtitt continues to teach the students this theory after Incandenza's death. Wallace's narrator requires an endnote to elaborate on "'E.L.D.,' that still-green shoot off the pure branch of math that deals with systems and phenomena" (994). As the endnote reads, "Incandenza, whose frustrated interest in grand-scale failure was unflagging through four different careers, would have been all over Extra-Linear Dynamics like white on rice, had he survived" (994). The use of this note is threefold: to provide a textual space for affective detail that further develops the character of Incandenza; to also expand the idea of tennis, which specifically relies on rhizomatic lines of flight to map out a movement towards affective potential; and to trouble the temporality of two relationships – between Incandenza's death and afterlife at ETA, and between Wallace's main text and his endnotes – which both echo post-postmodernism's nonlinearity.

Tennis' rhizomatic qualities reappear later – where a dream "which every now and then still recurs" is outlined. The dream involves "standing publicly at the baseline of a gargantuan tennis court […] the court's complex. The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string […] going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems" (*Jest* 67). Like Wallace's endnotes (and *White Teeth*'s contents page), the tennis court is a paradox of free movement and eventual confinement, of meeting points that "form relationships" or fulfil affective potential and lines that "run oblique" or never reach those meeting points. Karnicky suggests that "For the students at Enfield Tennis Academy, tennis becomes a way of life, a movement toward a static, infinite world circumscribed by the lines of the tennis court" (117). As Roiland puts it, "successful tennis pros possess an ability to suspend consciousness. He [Wallace] is fascinated by the fact that top athletes bypass their heads and simply act" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 33). This suspension is reversed with Hal's playing, which makes him static and fundamentally incapable of using the space of the court with freedom and abandon. This containment and unfulfilled liberation is symbolised by the mapping of the court's "lines that bound and define play", its claustrophobic "systems inside systems." This is a rhizomatic qualification – effectively, the confused state of constantly growing, but growing sideways rather than upwards – and it determines how the tennis player uses the space of the court. It is unsurprising that Hal's engagement with the sport does not solve his isolation, addiction, and solipsistic struggles

while at ETA. The legend of Eric Clipperton that is circulated around the school halls is a cautionary tale for Hal, in this way. Clipperton, who spent time at ETA when nowhere else would take him, was a sixteen-year-old phenomenon who played "competitive tennis with a Glock at his temple" (409). Clipperton's introduction requires endnotes 159 and 160 to extend the information Wallace's narrative gives us about him. As the narrator explains: "And, the legend's story goes, Eric Clipperton never henceforth loses. No one is willing to beat him and risk going through life with the sight of the Glock going off on his conscience" (409). Clipperton is the antithesis of Hal's intention of *overcoming* the obstacles in the way of his sincerity and existential purpose. Conversely, Clipperton uses the tennis court as a means of putting on a defeatist performance, a show that is far removed from his authentic personality and any kind of affective agency or clarity.

Cohen suggests that "Reading Wallace's novel as a portrait of the artist as a young man requires reading the story of the main character's tennis as a figure for writing" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 65).[84] This indicates that Hal's struggles off the court (despite the affective potential of the court) extend to creative isolation, because like his father Hal fulfills the role of sensitive outsider, unable to match his external experiences with his internal thoughts and feelings. This reading is bolstered by the possibility that Hal acts as a Wallace surrogate, who as mentioned was also a very promising tennis player. As Maria Bustillos writes, "the character "closest" to Wallace in the novel is the tennis-playing intellectual prodigy Hal Incandenza" (*Gesturing Toward Reality* 128-129). Pursuing this connection, we can by extension read Hal's experiences of loneliness as drawing on Wallace's own, which as a writer are tied to an admiration for postmodern experimentalism while wanting something more out of contemporary fiction. In the Larry McCaffery interview, Wallace expresses this as "the problem" that "what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, a suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness" (147). Wallace cautioned in 1993 that "Postmodern irony's become our environment", so his work uses postcritique and

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[84] Enhancing this reading, Cohen describes Wallace's novel "not simply as a Bildungsroman but as a kind of Künstlerroman" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 65). He carries this into an understanding of the novel's chronological ending – the opening "I am in here" scene – exploring how "where we see Hal at the end of his story, struggling to find a new way to speak again, could be seen as analogous to the place where Wallace found himself in 1989 as a writer [when working on *Jest*]" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 67). Using the term "Künstlerroman" again in his article "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace", Cohen suggests that reading the novel as this "allows us to see the gestures towards an un or post-postmodern sincerity […] not as contradictions but as evidence of Wallace's vexed relationship with the postmodern" (229).

becomes a way to challenge this "environment" and help create a new one (148). Konstantinou suggests that as a result, "Taken as a whole, Wallace's oeuvre might be seen as a single long survey of the different forms individual human suffering can take in a postindustrial or postmodern society" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 104). It seems that, within this, *Jest* specifically can be seen as a thorough, individual survey of the suffering (athletically, creatively, aesthetically) involved in trying to move beyond postmodern irony and performativity. Fundamentally, the incarceration *Jest* tries to break free from is within a specific narrative setting and experienced by a specific central character, but the novel also strives to be liberated from a larger "metafictional, postmodern narrative practice", as Timmer puts it, which Wallace stages in the relationship between his endnotes and narrative instances such as tennis games in the main text. In this way, Hal's story works in tandem with the novel's form. As Timmer elucidates, "the subjects or selves in [Wallace's] stories are *locked* in this empty position" of a "postmodern narrative practice" (both 115-116, emphasis added). *Jest* becomes a demonstration of conflict, with the tennis net being in the way of a more affective, authentic, sincere way of writing, tennis playing, and being.

At the intersection of these modes of experience is Wallace's moment of writing, which anticipates, is anxious of, but also sees promise in the turn of the twenty-first century. Technological innovation is the momentous social development responsible for these different feelings. It is inextricably attached to the consensus in late twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction that postmodernism is somewhat outdated – that it needs updating, or needs a new, replacement set of values and principles to more accurately represent this changing society. Both the new society and the new fiction require more honesty and truth, to compete with the new screens and platforms providing the ability to be inauthentic, deceptive, or manipulative. Or to use his own framing metaphor of tennis: the process of new technologies and new phases of modernism replacing each other can be compared to the positional reset and serve in to start the point, which comes every few minutes in a tennis match. Like the ability to be lost in the tennis court's unproductive lines and angles – for selfhood and subjectivity to be lost here too, leading to anxiety and isolation – technology may promise to move beyond individuality and to reconnect communities, but may also exacerbate the problem of loneliness. Like tennis, technology is the demand to respond and return, which must be attempted even if it cannot always be done, which is the root cause of ETA students' anxiety but also responsible for the characters' alienation from technology, despite its boundless potential. In the Lipsky interview, Wallace discusses *Jest*'s awareness of both this responsibility of engaging with newness and the threat that comes with

it, saying how "Today's person spends way more time in front of screens. In fluorescent-lit rooms, in cubicles, being on one end or the other of an electronic data transfer." Wallace questions "what is it to be alive and exercise your humanity in that kind of exchange?" (both *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 115). In scholarship, Adam Kelly provocatively labels Wallace "the first major writer to live and die in the internet age", saying that "No other writer can be said to be the internet's own in quite the same way" ("The Death of the Author" 48). Writing in 2011, Franzen describes how "the mode of resistance in that novel [*Jest*] – annotation, digression, nonlinearity, hyperlinkage – anticipated the even more virulent and even more radically individualistic invader that is now displacing the novel and its offspring", which he confirms as "the Internet" ("Farther Away" n.p.). Bringing Franzen and Wallace's novels together, Burn aligns "the space between eras" of postmodernism and post-postmodernism with an anxiety "about the end of books in an era of electronic entertainment." Their mutual "fascination" with this "space" comes with a competing "desperate need for closure", as Burn suggests (both *Jonathan Franzen* 90).

Wallace claims to have written *Jest* with new technologies on his mind: "one of the reasons why the book is structured strangely is it's least an *attempt* to be mimetic, structurally, to a kind of inner experience", as he tells Lipsky (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 114). In this interview, Wallace may be alluding to his novel's structural nonlinearity and its quality of accumulation (of sections, subplots, timelines, and characters), but I would argue that this claim is most applicable to its endnotes. Wallace says as much in a television interview with Charlie Rose in 1997: "reality is fractured right now – at least the reality that I live in […] I am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture the text that aren't totally disorienting" (n.p.).[85] The relationships between both main text and postscript and narrator and reader are bound together by the structural function of the endnotes, and tennis and technology extend their logics of connection and futurity. The notes are directly responsible for a "data transfer" between speaker (the narrator, ventriloquised by Wallace) and listener (the reader), but their tangle of communication and information prevents this from being a smooth, straightforward transfer. Like technology, the notes must first distort and refract experience before arriving at something sincere and affective. Grouping them under the term "late postmodernism", which I think is less useful than post-postmodernism,

[85] Wallace carries on, saying that "there's got to be some interplay between how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is – for the reader to want to do it. The endnotes were, for me, a useful compromise" (n.p.).

Green argues that Wallace, Franzen, and others' work "makes of altered conditions new kinds of fiction, writing in such a way as to grasp the contradictions and involutions of the new media environment" (18). Technology's manipulative agency can be compared to postmodern irony/experimentation, so *Jest* stages the attempt to resist both, to withstand both sets of anti-affective risks. For this reason, it is productive to return to "E Unibus Pluram." As Cohen notes, the manifesto essay "has been taken as the culmination of Wallace's working through his struggle with influence, with how to write in his moment in literary history" (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* 71-72). It is as useful to situate this essay alongside Wallace's post-postmodernism as it was to discuss the other essays I looked at alongside Everett, Franzen, and Smith's post-postmodernism. In his, Wallace aligns "the high-cultural postmodern genre" of metafiction with technology, suggesting that it "was deeply informed by the emergence of television. And American fiction remains informed by TV… especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious zenith was less a "response to" televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV" ("E Unibus" 161).

Taking the analogy further, in this essay Wallace identifies moments in DeLillo and Pynchon's work that conform to postmodernism's "strategic deployment of pop-cultural references – brand names, celebrities, television programs – in even its loftiest high-art projects" ("E Unibus" 166). Wallace writes that "the seminal novels of Pynchon and DeLillo revolve metaphorically off the concept of interference" (166).[86] As he outlines, the 1990s explosion of corporatised technology points to the same rhetoric, irony, and trickery that literary postmodernism historically uses. Irony gives a manipulated angle to what Wallace elsewhere calls "a kind of Total Noise", and this unsettles him. In "Deciderization 2007 – A special report" – which was published as the introduction to *The Best American Essays* in 2007 – Wallace goes on to define "Total Noise" as "the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I'm not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make any sense of or organize into any kind of triage of saliency or value" (1-2). Over a decade earlier, Wallace seems to be anxious of this "Noise" as it is emerging. "E Unibus Pluram" arrives at a conclusion concerning how this Total Noise is responded to – that "The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels," born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching […] These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started.

[86] Cynthia Zhang looks at Wallace's response to DeLillo and Pynchon's depictions of technology in detail, saying that, fundamentally, he "defines himself *against* them" (121, emphasis added).

Too sincere" (192-193).

"E Unibus Pluram" completes its full circle trajectory, after beginning with the problem that it is "hard to get any kind of univocal handle" on "a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years" (151). Notably, this essay formally and stylistically reproduces the exact issues its content proposes as an issue that needs changing. Including stylised subheadings along the way such as "I Do Have a Thesis", "E Unibus Pluram" ends, in true Wallace fashion, with an extensive list of endnotes, introduced as "NOTES FOR EDITOR, WHICH EDITOR, FOR REASONS KNOWN ONLY TO HIM, WANTS TO RUN W/ESSAY" (193). To explain the need for postmodernism to transition into post-postmodernism – a transition determined by and dependent on the emergence of television and other technologies – Wallace uses the same postmodern, anti-affective strategies that post-postmodernism must, he says, move away from. He highlights a need to be an "anti-rebel" because postmodernism's initial rebellion has become complicit, has become corporatised. The problem of these next steps is linked to technology's – so in this essay, Wallace describes how literature looks to formal innovation the way that society generally does to technological advancement. In the 1990s he claims that we were "look[ing] relentlessly to technology for solutions to the very problems technology seems to cause" (176). This is a paradox that has been carried into the twenty-first century. Equally, post-postmodernism (as it was emerging then, but also now) cannot exist without a certain level of dependence on postmodernism, and this struggle of needing irony to achieve sincerity, of reaching affective meaning via challenging anti-affective obstacles, is explicitly communicated in the endnotes. This perpetual serving in, returning the ball, concluding the point, and resetting for the next one is the case in "E Unibus Pluram" as much as it is in *Jest*.

Redirecting "a postmodern emphasis on transgression and play toward racial stereotypes"

Jest's endnotes compete with tennis, technology, and crucially postmodernism's limitations on the ability to turn towards affect. These rhizomatic, temporally complex restrictions impact Hal, Wallace's narrator, and Wallace himself. Despite this set of struggles, the additional textual space of the endnotes does develop and deepen the characters within the Incandenza family and their experiences. But when it expands this reach beyond the Incandenzas it rarely develops and deepens its non-white characters. Consequently, the

affective potential of this textual space rarely diversifies the subject of race, which if we are reading the postscript as a post-postmodern technique neglects the new phase of modernism's opportunity to challenge canonical postmodernism's whiteness, or at least work towards improving the complexity and coverage of race, as Everett and Smith do. This counteracts the embodiment of technological data transfers – which, as I have suggested, is one of the two framing metaphors Wallace gives his endnotes (the other being tennis). This quality is something Sylvia Wynter has discussed in her work on race and technology for decades. Lucas Thompson stresses how this shortcoming becomes more problematic due to the way "Wallace redirects a postmodern emphasis on transgression and play toward racial stereotypes, in the attempt to craft an irreverent form of comedy" (214). When *Jest* does move beyond its white characters, it does so for comedic purposes, usually at the expense of its characters of colour. The "transgression" within this comedy reinforces postmodern irony, so is turning back towards it and away from affect, counterproductively. Even if Wallace's novel is laughing with them rather than at them, the consistent approach to non-white characters, their bodies, and their stories betrays the affectively nuanced, sensitive, and empathetic treatment of white characters, particularly the Incandenzas.

Hal is at the centre of this, but one of the few aspects of his character that is not treated with nuance is his race and ethnicity. In a rare point where it is, Wallace writes that "The name handed down paternally from an Umbrian five generations past and now much diluted by N.E. Yankee, a great-grandmother with Pima-tribe Indian S.W. blood, and Canadian cross-breeding, Hal is the only extant Incandenza that looks in any way ethnic […] Hal is sleek, sort of radiantly dark, almost otterish" (*Jest* 101). It is interesting that this long section supplies no endnotes, despite various pieces of information being given for the first time which are not touched on later in the main text of the novel. The absence of endnotes consolidates the indirectness of the information around Hal's racial background given in the main prose. The colloquialisms "sort of" and "almost" undermine the conviction, clarity, and urgency, while "only" and "in any way" are literally decreasing the size of race in Hal's character profile. The presence of vague adjectives like "otterish" in place of specific designations for Hal's race shows how he considers himself as a white American, and how the "five generations past" and "great" prefix reduce any nuanced extensions of his racial identity to ancestry. What prevails is Hal's chronic anxiety, which often does lead to affective fulfilment in the novel, which manifests in this scene in how he "worries secretly that he looks half-feminine" on account of "His sleekness" being not "oily so much as moist, milky" (101). The discussion of race in this scene is secondary, in terms of which detail and

information fulfils affective potential.

As for more peripheral characters in *Jest*, characters who have clearer and more embraced non-white racial identities: they are frequently trivialised, and often problematised by the way Wallace's narrator describes them and by extension the way Wallace writes them. Like other critics, Thompson notes that "The Wardine section" in particular is "a disconcerting portrayal of identity"; but there are many "other more explicitly racialized portrayals throughout the novel, including the characterizations of Clenette Henderson, Alfonso Parias-Carbo, Audern Tallat-Kelpsa, Ruth Van Cleve, and Yolanda Willis" (both 204). As Thompson goes on to say, the irony and comedy applied to these characters conform with "a playfully postmodern logic of caricature" and "risk perpetuating pejorative stereotypes and cross-cultural understanding" (214). This is where postmodernism's trickery, experimental play, and anti-affective obstacles become harmful – unapologetically highlighting the issue, Thompson argues that "*Infinite Jest* has little interest in portraying people of colour in any real depth" (205). Set in the "YEAR OF THE TRIAL-SIZE DOVE BAR", Wardine's introduction comes via Clenette, her half-sister. Adopting African American vernacular English in the first-person, Clenette describes how Wardine's mother beats Wardine and her mother's boyfriend molests her. The section begins "Wardine say her momma aint treat her right. Reginald he comes round to my blacktop at my building where me and Delores Epps jump double dutch and he say, Clenette, Wardine be down at my crib cry say her momma aint treat her right" (*Jest* 37). Clenette appears at Ennet House later in the novel, but this is Wardine's only scene. In it, once again, endnotes are not used. Even thinner on detail, empathy, and sensitivity than the episode about Hal's racial background, this section (which lasts two pages) does not actually specify or confirm that Wallace is writing characters of colour. The oversight conforms with the kind of presumptive, stereotypical, racially coded approach that Monk Ellison farcically adopts for his novel-within-the-novel *My Pafology*, which is deployed by Everett as a distancing and ironic intertextual device that offers a cautionary tale for himself and his reader.[87] Conversely, *Jest*'s story of Wardine's similarly violent, abusive background is not given the ironic layers that would both step outside of/move beyond postmodern play and self-reflexively address the idea of problematic

[87] Notably, Sapphire's *Push* – the novel *Erasure* seems to be parodying – was published in 1996, the same year as *Jest*. Wallace's novel was released four months prior to Sapphire's controversial debut novel, so Wallace could not possibly be *directly* engaging with *Push* in the way that *Erasure* is able to five years later; but his troubling treatment of race in the late twentieth century can be compared to Sapphire's, though Wallace's is doubly problematic due to him being white.

depictions of race (as Everett's do). Both gestures would draw on affective potential, which *Jest* does elsewhere through its endnotes, so it is important to note that this is another moment of Wallace's text where the structural technique is not used, just like the discussion of Hal's background seventy pages later.

These exclusions are the opposite of the inclusion of notes to explain, provide nuance for, and then develop Hal's character through "the hip empty mask, anhedonia", for instance (695). The word is initially used three pages earlier in *Jest* and supplemented with an endnote describing how "*Anhedonia* was apparently coined by Ribot, a Continental Frenchman" (1053). When the narrative shifts its focus back to Hal, an additional note elaborates on how anhedonia

> had been one of Hal's deepest and most pregnant abstractions, one he'd come up with once while getting secretly high in the Pump Room. That we're all lonely for something we don't know we're lonely for. How else to explain the curious feeling that he goes around feeling, like he misses somebody he's never even met? Without the universalizing abstraction, the feeling would make no sense.
> (1053).

In just one endnote, the reader gets three tenses, two pronouns (the second of which increases this textual space significantly, to include the reader), and one question. We learn a lot about Hal's character with a little – including that he self-reflexively thinks about the way he is feeling rather than just feeling – which aligns his character and its dependence on the expansive, affective potential of the endnotes with post-postmodernism. This cannot be said for the novel's non-white characters, who do not receive the opportunity to be expanded, deepened, or developed further in terms of affect and sincerity via endnotes. Instead, race is only discussed in the notes when it comes to white characters, where it is approached far more problematically. As Wynter suggests, "the issue of race, as the issue of the Colonial Question, the Nonwhite/Native Question, the Negro Question, yet as one that has hitherto had no name, was and is fundamentally the issue of the genre of the human" (288). Wallace's novel does not commit to the "genre of the human" in this way. It does not diversify affective potential like *Erasure* does (despite its paradoxes), or *White Teeth* does (which sees post-postmodernism as a means of expanding the reach of sincerity). This shortcoming of *Jest* could be considered a side-effect of post-postmodernism's nascent state in 1996, whereas it had evolved significantly even by 2000/2001. The new phase of modernism is very much under development in Wallace's novel, therefore the embodiment of it in his narrative is

closed, confined, static, and in some ways even more paradoxical than in the later works I have looked at.

This impacts the endnotes. In note 141, the narrator uses a racial slur to describe Don Gately's "private term for blacks", which "is unfortunately still all he knows" (1026). Similarly, Joelle Van Dyne, another Ennet House resident who was also the star of Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest*, uses a slur in both endnotes 293 and 294. In these notes, the narrator reveals that Joelle "was acculturated in a part of the U.S.A. where verbal attitudes toward black people are dated and unconsciously derisive, and is doing pretty much the best she can" (1054). The detail of the note here does not draw on affective potential nor generate character sincerity; instead, the additional information exposes how Joelle's shortcoming is specifically that her "attitudes" are superficial and unacceptably simple, which contradicts the license for complexity and depth of the endnotes. The narrator's complicity in ignoring the opportunity to talk sincerely about race is evident in their agreement that she "is doing pretty much the best she can" – which, like the excuse of "all he [Don] knows", are the narrator's words (and not the characters') and invite scrutiny. Even if this is the narrator focalising Joelle, or Joelle ventriloquising the narrator, the note upholds Joelle's "unconsciously derisive" views because the narrator only undermines her by being conscious of the way she uses a slur, yet does nothing productive with their self-consciousness. This is similar to the self-aware disclaimer regarding Don's *lack* of self-awareness in endnote 141. Contradicting the novel's use of the endnotes to go beyond, to transcend, and to expand affective possibility elsewhere, when it comes to race *Jest* somewhat goes against its own practice.

Edward Jackson and Joel Roberts argue that "Wallace's New Sincerity offers a way out of affectless knowingness" (7). Despite this, in the context of race *Jest* more often turns away from affect and does not maintain its otherwise consistent use of endnotes to formally exercise an aspiration for sincerity. Jackson and suggest that "the premise of a universal affectlessness in need of curing – the premise from which New Sincerity proceeds – is in fact coded as white and male" (11).[88] I would agree with this, particularly on how this

[88] Jackson and Roberts specify how "AA is geared specifically towards alleviating an ailment Wallace codes as white and male", though Joelle's presence at Ennet House alongside Don complicates this claim about gender (14). It does, however, support their suggestion of the whiteness of AA in the novel (and of subsequent endnotes that develop the information we receive about AA). A more rigorous discussion of masculinity and gender in Wallace's work is Hayes-Brady's chapter "'Personally I'm neutral on the menstruation point': Gender, Difference, and the Body." In it, she discusses tensions between "the reaction of a masculine subject that feels itself under threat from the feminine" and "the terror of a narcissistic subject who feels his primacy challenged by the very existence of a subjective other" (177).

prioritisation of whiteness "denigrate[s] the experiences of the novel's black and female characters", as seen in the Wardine scene most prominently (Jackson and Roberts, 2-3). Jackson and Roberts also touch on how, when reading Wallace, "the reader must make a decision to trust the sincerity of Wallace's characters and narrators" (5). This "trust" becomes more difficult when we unpack the depictions of race that the novel includes yet excludes from its project of sincerity. Jackson and Roberts' article turned my attention to McGurl's suggestion that Wallace's reading audience likely consists of "largely young, educated, middle-class white people" ("The Institution of Nothing" 43). This perhaps makes it easier to "trust the sincerity" because it comes from a point of relation and identification, but there is a critical responsibility to point to where this trust is conditional and problematic. This fundamental obstacle in Wallace's iteration of post-postmodernism foregrounds an incompleteness to it. Jackson and Roberts say that this makes *Jest* readable as "an effort to revivify the privileged status of the white masculinity it purports to transcend" (3). Lucas Thompson highlights a similar flaw on Wallace's part, but approaches from a different critical angle: "Since so much of Wallace's work dramatizes the limitations of self-awareness, this particular failure might be viewed an unintentional vindication of his own principle" (204). As Thompson accentuates (and Jackson and Roberts are equally unable to move away from), this renders "the claim that Wallace had serious blind spots and failings when addressing matters of race" as "a critical commonplace" (204). Wallace's whiteness is a position of anxiety, though, as he was (and his work is) actively concerned over the exact kind of universalising capacity that has been applied to his work since it was published, and particularly since he passed away. The whiteness of Wallace's work is a problem, but one that he did worry might materialise, hence his frequent concerns that he or his work would be perceived as omniscient and arrogant. The honest communication of this worry, paradoxically, began the conversation and first drew critical attention to his "blind spots and failings." It also underlines how post-postmodernism, in Wallace's hands, is appropriately contingent, incomplete, subject to interrogation, and open to correction.

After all, these defining characteristics are inseparable from how we can conceive of post-postmodernism, so it comes as no surprise that a discussion of race alongside Wallace's attempts to move beyond postmodernism returns us to them. Just as post-postmodernism takes different forms despite points of similarity/crossover/overlap in the work of Everett, Franzen, Smith, and now Wallace, applying race to the transition between postmodernism and post-postmodernism sees different results in these authors' texts, which necessitate different tones for the critical conversation. With this understanding, it is useful to discuss

critically rather than to simply criticise *Jest*. As Thompson observes, Wallace's "Shipping Out" cruise essay (published in the same year as *Jest*) acknowledges the failings of his discussion of race in the piece, which "might not be enough to render Wallace a paragon of racial sensitivity, but it does speak to a broader sense of personal integrity, of attempting to lay bare one's own cognitive processes in an honest exchange with the reader" (207). In the essay, Wallace confesses that "I'm always suddenly conscious of being white every time I'm around a lot of non-white people […] whatever I do I cannot escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americanness" ("Shipping Out" 50). Hayes-Brady scopes out from just this essay, noticing how "Wallace was explicitly, exhaustingly conscious of writing from an American perspective, and repeatedly articulated his struggles with taking a perspective outside of his own" (48). Wallace *does* take these perspectives though, so "his struggles" in being able to do so are perhaps responsible for the missteps taken when it comes to formulating the perspectives in his work. But in "Shipping Out", what is absent in *Jest*'s often informative/clarifying or honestly dishonest (and affectively expansive) fictional endnotes is present in Wallace's nonfiction. Published in the same year, it shows how Wallace's oeuvre of fiction and essays is an interdependent one, which offers extensions and completions to one text via the new space of a different one. This incompletion to *Jest* can be extended when considering how "his writing often shifts the interpretative demands relating to its issues of race onto the reader", as Thompson puts it (206). Thompson stresses that "reading Wallace is a fundamentally collaborative and transactional exchange, and not simply a one-way form of communication" (209). This identifies how his texts rely on one another but also always rely on their readers. Hayes-Brady suggests similarly, that Wallace's work is "making the reader a co-producer of the text, in response to the text's copious narrative blanks" (139). In the McCaffery interview, Wallace himself claims that his novel is "using a lot of flash-cuts between scenes so that some of the narrative arrangement has got to be done by the reader, or interrupting flow with digressions and interpolations that the reader has to do the work of connecting to each other and to the narrative" (137). This necessity of the reader and the critic actively "do[ing] the work" is a negotiation established by the novel's structure, but is one that becomes bigger than structure and is responsible for the reader's ability to be moved by the work, to feel for it, to be emotionally impacted by it.

Thompson's "transactional exchange" with the reader also extends to Wallace's awareness of his place within wider literary culture. Post-postmodernism's origins of periodising and grouping writers in a literary generation, coterie, movement, or moment allows us to read *Jest* as a text that ultimately relies on other texts. Its structural non-linearity

and complexity offer a set of endnotes that dramatise modes of grouping, relying, and completing; but ironically, these endnotes themselves need something else to come after and to complete them. This can be said of Wallace's novel in general, which is why it is productive to position it last in an examination of multiple works that, while different, do generate comparisons, similarities, and co-dependencies. As can be seen in its use of endnotes, in 1996 *Jest* opened up the conversation around writing after postmodernism and how we can conceptualise this but also aestheticise it, and dramatised this conversation within the fiction. But as I have illustrated, Wallace's postcritical approach is impeded, and his novel requires an additional set of scholarly endnotes that widen the debate surrounding what *Jest*'s post-postmodernism leaves out or leaves space for. Everett's *Erasure*, Franzen's *The Corrections*, and Smith's *White Teeth* can be said to expand, complete, or rectify certain aspects of Wallace's attempt to use affective potential to write post-postmodernism. These three novels do not, however, *close* the conversation, but only open it up further. This was the case in the early stages of the twenty-first century, so it is only natural, as I write this, for the two decades of fiction and scholarship since to have continued this process of opening up how we think about post-postmodernism.

Coda: Autofiction in the 2010s

As outlined before I looked at Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's four examples of post-postmodernism, there are various alternative ways to think about writing after postmodernism. There are equivalent, adjacent, or quite different terms to post-postmodernism that can be applied to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century literary landscape. By looking at three novels published from 2000-2001, and then turning to one from 1996, I have observed post-postmodernism specifically at different stages of its development. Yet, as the 2000s became the 2010s, a different mode of contemporary fiction saw a surge in popularity: autofiction. The word was coined as far back as 1977, by Serge Doubrovsky, whose novel *Fils* included a blurb on the back cover that said the following:

> Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music.
> (n.p.).

Like attempts to define post-postmodernism, understanding autofiction relies on negotiation, qualification, and a balance of opposing states or qualities: "before" and "after", but also the "real" and "the adventure of language." The second of these, as Doubrovsky suggests, is ironically accessed by *playing* with reality, concrete facts, and fixed events. So reality is being balanced with anti-reality, which manifests as fictional events in terms of narrative detail but as experimentalism in terms of novel form. Another way of formulating this is that the "adventurous" lyricism of the everyday is fusing the grounded/realist and the stylised/hyperreal. These balances therefore directly challenge the perceived elevation and elitism of autobiography, which Doubrovsky calls "a privilege." The project of autofiction seems to be a process of dismantling class hierarchies of reading demographics, because it negotiates a position between accessible novel writing about real issues and the formally ambitious or stylistically innovative, which can be understood as a legacy of modernism passed down to post-postmodernism. This extension of modernist phases of development implicates a similar class problem to the exclusivity of academic postmodernism and the

"difficult" text. Diluting and reworking both of these modes (realism and experimentalism) and then balancing them lessens this problem of elitism, which concerns the author and possible readers. Autofiction's balances or welcomed distinctions open the door to several others that could be written beneath the headings of realist and experimental: authenticity and inauthenticity, truth and manipulation, sincerity and irony. To follow on from my discussion of technology's impact on *Infinite Jest*, autofiction responds to our collective acclimitisation when it comes to new media and the internet. The real and the anti- or *un*real are an even murkier opposition than in the 1990s and 2000s, because identities exist simultaneously as these two states, thanks to augmented realities and networked consciousnesses.

Autofiction is a negotiatory term that can be compared to post-postmodernism because hybridity is built into its aesthetics, but also due to the specificity of the characteristics being hybridised. While its 1977 origins would approximately align it with the heyday of postwar postmodernism – the high style of a generation including Barth, DeLillo, Gaddis, Pynchon, more – I would argue that autofiction has actually been co-opted into post-postmodernism's complicated state of understanding where to go next in channeling postmodern influence, while also turning towards affect and sincerity. Autofiction experiences an aesthetic shift or stylistic transition at a new juncture: the 2010s replacing the 2000s. Reading autofiction alongside post-postmodernism requires chronological separation, as autofiction's pivotal moment in moving beyond postmodernism (the second, after post-postmodernism) can be traced in fiction published in the early stages of the 2010s. After writers such as Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace struggled with post-postmodern potential in their major novels, a new wave of contemporary fiction writers a decade later have shown more interest in autofiction, which has not generated such a struggle. This term shares similarities with post-postmodernism but offers an evolved or adapted set of balances, negotiations, points of tension, or middle grounds – which all circle back to an intention of fusing similarity with singularity, the old with the new. The resulting, new set of interests and priorities occupies a separate space to phases of modernist development because the conditions of autobiography are allowed to take centre stage, though the attachments to modernist, postmodern, and post-postmodern legacy remain visible. Due to its renewed dependence on autobiography, autofiction could not possibly be referred to as "post-post-postmodernism", but it also does not conveniently fit under the category of post-postmodernism. It has moved far beyond postmodern metafiction (where it is not uncommon for authors to characterise themselves, with different results), but it also certainly does not suit the classification of memoir or life writing.

Writing in 2018, Christian Lorentzen describes how "The term *autofiction* has been in vogue for the past decade to describe a wave of very good American novels by the likes of Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, Jenny Offill, and Tao Lin, among others, as well as the multivolume epic *My Struggle* by the Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgaard" ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'", n.p.). Heti is Canadian, so rather than considering her work as American due to that country's responsibility in her finding an audience, it is productive to use her different nationality to accentuate how, like post-postmodernism, autofiction is evident in countries separate to America but with connections to it. Heti's position as an outlier in a new set of four authors that I will briefly discuss can be compared to Zadie Smith's, as I position Heti too alongside three American writers by birth (Smith, however, does of course live there). Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin are the four I am interested in, because their work specifically generates links between post-postmodernism and autofiction, thus inviting analysis of the balance of similarity and difference I have mentioned, rather than demonstrating autofiction's independence or implying its severance from other modes of contemporary fiction.

These authors' most celebrated works – *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), *Open City* (2011), and *Taipei* (2013), respectively – emphasise a literary moment of shared aesthetic interests and parallel novelistic priorities. As with 1996-2001, 2010-2013 is a pivotal juncture for post-postmodernism's projected future, which is of particular relevance given that, as we have seen, it is a concept with foundations rooted in temporal complexity. As Lorentzen says, these and other works that can be classified as autofiction "invite readers to imagine they might be reading something like a diary, where the transit from real life to the page has been more or less direct. But that effect, whatever the truth of it, is an illusion" ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'", n.p.). This new phase, at first glance, highlights a continuation of the stasis of post-postmodernism at the turn of the century, because autofiction upholds a similar paradox of relying on both "real life" *and* "illusion." As Lorentzen adds, these authors' works "don't lack artifice – they are novels, however their readers receive them – but the artifice is in service of creating the sensation that there's no artifice, which is the whole point" ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'", n.p.). This can be understood as a method of transparently pointing to the inauthentic construction of the trick, which ironically leads to authenticity. This is a development from the reliable unreliability or honest dishonesty I looked at in Everett and Smith's work, which in their case was an aesthetic component rather than "the whole point." Moving further away from postmodern irony's layers of formal play than post-postmodern sincerity, autofiction is a mode of writing deeply embedded in questions of status, convention, and etiquette. What has

ostensibly changed then, from 2001-2010 and since critical interest in post-postmodernism has had to compete with critical interest in autofiction, is a restructuring of writing after postmodernism's principles. A decade earlier, post-postmodern fiction self-reflexively dramatised an unresolvable tension between postmodern irony and renewed sincerity, whereas autofiction offers a more composed, less fraught dialogue between these two central ideas. I argue that these four novels by Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin are less concerned with mobilising this unresolvable tension and turning disunity itself into an aesthetic and a theme; instead, their shared approach to hybridity underlines a *harmony* between its different sides or components, to use a musical term in line with Doubrovsky's strategy of defining autofiction. Burn writes that "second-generation postmodernism is characterized by the search for hybrid solutions to the previous generation's asymmetries" (*Cambridge History* 461). Progressing further than post-postmodernism was able to, autofiction can be understood as successfully *finding* these "hybrid solutions." Read together, this additional collection of four novels expresses clarity in balancing irony and sincerity and staging this for the readers, while also communicating satisfaction with the stakes of this balance and its new status of being left unresolved rather than interrogated for a lack of resolution.

Contemporary literary scholarship brings some but rarely all of these four authors together, usually discussing *How Should a Person Be?*, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, *Open City*, and *Taipei* and contributing to the consensus that these are their landmark works to date. This concluding chapter, therefore, builds on existing work while directly addressing a gap in scholarship – a gap for these authors to be discussed as a four, explicitly on the subject of post-postmodernism's transition to autofiction. For instance, Alice Bennett (whose work I talked about in my chapters on Smith and Wallace) discusses Lerner and Lin. Bennett unpacks Lerner's fiction in the context of attention and absorption, paying particular attention to his use of ekphrasis – as she says, "Lerner's work repeatedly stages encounters involving different attentive responses to works of art, and he uses the novel as a form of testing ground for these responses" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 24). Bennett also describes Lin's *Taipei* as a novel that "sets out a mass of overlapping attentions and gets the reader to pick through them, as one character pays attention to another's attention and to his own attention, opening a space for readers to do the same" (*Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 9). Autofiction's role in facilitating author and reader co-dependence, and the argument that it offers an aesthetic "testing ground", recall post-postmodernism's affective renewal and its responsibility of sincerity (of the author to their reader), but also its emphasis on rehearsal and transition. Bennett's book also looks at Smith and Wallace's work, which is comparable

to Alexandra Kingston-Reese's *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life*, which brings together Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Smith. Kingston-Reese groups these and other authors under a contemporary "state of aesthetic boredom", wherein post-2010 novels are defined by a "mood that encompasses a restless aesthetic and formal ambition, fueled by the drive for authentic experience" (xiv).[89] In earlier chapters, I examined how post-postmodernism's difficulties concerning self-definition and identity constitute a restlessness, resulting in both looking back to postmodernism for clarity while also surging forwards to whatever new moment in contemporary fiction awaited in the early twenty-first century. This restlessness has been transformed into a more crystalline, composed aesthetic in autofiction – something less hyperactive and containing different social anxieties. Focusing on Heti's use of transcription and Lerner's use of temporal suspension, Kingston-Reese offers "*against* as the unifying structure of contemporary aesthetic experience", which indicates a continuation of post-postmodernism, which also has an "anxious tone of postmillennial artistic production" (7, 18). Kingston-Reese describes *How Should a Person Be?*'s "personal forms such as diary entries and letters" as being not "simply transcribed; they are imbued with agency by transcribing affective experiences" (112-113). She discusses transcription in Heti's work as "a strategy for playing out the failure of things to become real – art forms that fail to realize and ways of being and loving that fail to realize" (113). Lerner's suspension, meanwhile, relates to his work's "formal project of fragmentation" (140). This critical framework set out by Bennett and Kingston-Reese resonates with the connection between post-postmodernism and autofiction, so it is useful to use it in an explicit discussion of these connected terms.

Bennett and Kingston-Reese's works in 2018 and 2019 demonstrate the growing relevance of these four authors, as well as the critical significance of issues they look at which are adjacent to the terms post-postmodernism and autofiction. Another, more recent work that brings together some of the authors in my previous chapters or in this one is the 2022 essay collection *Contemporary American Fiction in the Embrace of the Digital Age*, edited by Béatrice, Pire, Arnaud Regnauld, and Pierre-Louis Patoine. This collection includes essays on Franzen, Wallace, and Lin (alongside other contributions on Kraus, Jennifer Egan,

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[89] Kingston-Reese's book explores different critical avenues to autofiction, labelling this constellation of works (which also includes titles by Siri Husvedt, Chris Kraus, and Rachel Kushner) as "art novels" that centralise the author's adaptability as essayistic/critic (1). This links them in another way to Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's work.

Richard Powers, more) and finds connections between them through their shared interest in simultaneously technological and literary "innovations." As the essays collectively illustrate, and Pire, Regnauld, and Patoine outline in their introduction, twenty-first century literature's relationship to both us and "machines" warrants questioning over the transformation of "languages and literatures" in the digital age (all 1). I looked at postmodern irony's relationship to technology as a problem to Wallace, whereas these essays look at him and later authors while emphasising technology's restorative potential and alignment with sincerity, which can be read as a post-postmodern symptom being recalibrated by autofiction. The "auto" in autofiction takes on an additional meaning to autobiography, in this sense: "The novel in the embrace of new technologies will be the novel that [automatically] writes itself" (Pire, Regnauld, and Patoine, 1). Zeroing in on this aspect of autofiction, Sophie Chapuis' contribution to the collection on Lin specifies how digital space generates a murky distinction between "the virtual and the real selves" (78). Chapuis discusses the absence of futurity in *Taipei*, claiming that "Lin's autobiographical fiction does not look back nor look forward but Lin's protagonist and stand-in seems to be acutely aware of the precariousness of his digital self" (85), though I would specify that perspectival precarity is performed rather than unplanned in Lin's autofiction (which is also the case in Heti, Lerner, and Cole's). This performance signposts a development from post-postmodernism's looking backwards/forwards and its less controlled relationship between fracture and cohesion, confusion and clarity, and dependence (on postmodernism) and singularity. My concluding chapter centralises this, jumping forward by a decade to focus on the new evidence of post-postmodernism in contemporary fiction as it is fused with autofiction. In it, I build on some of the claims in *Contemporary American Fiction in the Embrace of the Digital Age*, as well as those in Bennett and Kingston-Reese's studies. However, I centralise autofiction's reconsideration of post-postmodern sincerity when looking at Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin – who feature across these three important critical works but not as a full four, and who are discussed within the related contexts of attention, affect and aesthetics, and technology rather than explicitly in terms of autofiction.

Heti and Lerner

Autofiction is classifiable as a legacy of post-postmodernism, as autobiographical play can be read more implicitly in Wallace's authorial and creative surrogates in *Infinite Jest*, Smith's

use of the real London she grew up in (before moving to New York) in *White Teeth*, Franzen's interpolation of his personally discussed issues with postmodernism in *The Corrections*' story of the Lambert family, and in the clear parallels and similarities between Everett and *Erasure*'s Monk Ellison. But autofiction in the 2010s escalates the role of autobiography and makes the attached themes of truth, honesty, and accuracy even more central. These themes do take precedence over experimentalism (rather than being balanced equally with it) and anchor narratives which dramatise a more harmonious relationship between irony and sincerity than post-postmodern fiction a decade earlier does. This is the case of *How Should a Person Be*?, which uses multiple strategies of making ironic in-jokes about the creative process that lead to a more affective, sincere artistic self. These strategies each occupy the middle ground between plot device and formal experiment, the second of which offers a continuation of Smith's page-fracturing devices and comparable typographical stylistic techniques from Everett (the intertext *My Pafology*), Franzen (the Corecktall Process), and Wallace (the endnotes). Heti's strategies include "the Ugly Painting Competition" that protagonist Sheila and best friend Margaux hold with their friendship group (and which runs in the background of the whole novel); Sheila and Margaux's tape recorded conversations, which Heti's novel presents as a playscript; and Sheila's individual struggle to finish her "true work of art, a real play", which the tape recorded conversations are usually research for (*How Should a Person Be?* 12, 58, 40). Each creative process is frustrated and thrown off course as it attempts to reach a finalised creative product; each mirrors the novel's own trajectory, as it self-consciously formulates itself and moves towards completion but also clarity in its purpose and intentions as the pages pass. Yet with the Ugly Painting Competition, the creative process supersedes both the end product and the original motivations behind the process – as Sheila's narration asks, then answers/confesses: "who came up with the idea for the Ugly Painting Competition? I don't remember, but once I got enthusiastic, suddenly we all were" (12). In his tape recording with Sheila, her friend Sholem suggests that Margaux (who they credit as the competition's main instigator) "must be going through a painting crisis" linked to "some mistrust of painting" (146). The competition is eventually resolved through a "squash game" after Sheila, Sholem, and Margaux cannot settle on the criteria for winning the competition: "Was the winner of an Ugly Painting Competition the person who made the uglier painting, as Sholem had, or was it the person who, though trying just as hard, made a painting that was inadvertently beautiful?" (both 304). Equally definable as a vexed creative venture, the tape recordings are described by Margaux as "my words floating separate from my body" (286). They are initially deployed as

a method of Sheila overcoming writer's block, specifically via separating self and thoughts. Ultimately, Sheila concedes that "I'm not using the recordings or anything like that. I gave up the play" and Margaux realises that "Great! So it was all meaningless" (247). The play itself becomes a separate creative process to the tape recordings, and this too leads to nothing: "I want to cancel the play not because it's *dangerous*, but because life doesn't feel like it's in my stupid play, or with me sitting in a room *typing*" (82).

These three creative failures in *How Should a Person Be?* put pressure on Heti's novel itself to achieve a sincere capture of "life" and feeling and become a finalised creative product – a *satisfied* state of incompletion. This of course is the case, because as readers we notice this reshuffle of creative potential while holding Heti's published novel in our hands, confirming that her own creative struggle was to an extent finalised. Unpublished drafts of the novel undoubtedly exist and different published editions of it certainly do, and Heti's efforts in post-publication interviews also extend the paratextual life of her novel by gesturing towards what is not in *How Should a Person Be?*, but the fact of satisfaction that comes with a published product remains. Heti enacts what Lerner describes in an interview with Gayle Rogers as the work supplying "its own critical supplement" as it "already comments on its procedures or investments" (both 237). Paratextual extensions such as interviews deepen this "supplement", I think, particularly when those interviews meta-comment on being a critical supplement (like Lerner's). In Kingston-Reese's terms, "in the [Heti's novel's] struggle to find form, it seems, form emerges" (113). This can be compared to Lerner's approach to struggle and completion, which in an interview with Lin in 2013 he discussed as a process of writing "what *doesn't happen*." As Lerner says, "Part of what impoverishes discussions about fact and fiction is that they tend to forget the degree to which what *doesn't* happen is also caught up in our experience – is the negative element of experience. I think you can write autobiographically from experiences you didn't have" ("You're a poet" n.p.). In the same interview, Lin tells Lerner that he reads his oeuvre as "a single work that is already completed and is being released in parts", which links the completion process to paratextual dependence.[90] Echoing this, by transparently displaying the failed creative processes of the painting competition, the tape recordings, and Sheila's play,

[90] This idea of an interconnected oeuvre/metatextual relationship between different published works is as much the case with Heti (considering the novels published either side of *How Should a Person Be?*: 2005's *Ticknor* and 2016's *Motherhood*) as it is with Lerner (his three poetry collections and the 2014 novel *10:04*). It can also be said about Lin's two novels, one novella, and two story collections before *Taipei*, or Cole's 2007 novella *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

Heti's novel becomes a unifying creative success that is able to reach a point of clarity and purpose, even if this can never be definitively complete. It unifies the written and the suggested but unwritten, the experienced and the imagined – and real life, true friendship, and honest creative difficulty form the clarity and purpose at the end of this unification process.[91]

These things are the solutions to Sheila's underpinning reason for trying to make art in *How Should a Person Be?* in the first place: leaving her husband and figuring out how to live a new life. To return to Lorentzen, this upward curve of realising a purpose aligns Heti's novel with the conventions of the künstlerroman – as he says, the point of crossover between this and autofiction is the way that "the narrator's or protagonist's or authorial alter ego's status as a writer or artist and that the book's creation is inscribed in the book itself" ("How 'Auto' is Autofiction?" n.p.). In Heti's novel, the "book's creation is inscribed" through these three failed creative ventures, which the protagonist Sheila is the gravitational pull for. Only the book itself can overcome failure, but the reverse engineering of this self-conscious acknowledgement that we are reading a book is not reducible to a metafictional trick. Rather than wrestle with the desire to use this postmodern legacy simultaneous to an affective reaction against it, *How Should a Person Be?* simply uses experimentalism, highlighting how it is a productive building block in moving beyond irony for irony's sake, when specifically used to reach sincerity. It takes Sheila the duration of the novel to correct the fact that, in reference to the marriage she leaves, "It was a copy, a possession […] That bride inhabited me at the exact moment I should have been most present […] it was not me" (23). Sheila's control over her own body has always been conditioned by men: "I once thought the same of mine – that mine must be for all the men who wanted me" (121). She reclaims her own, real body and frees herself of the "copy", but does this by living as well as writing – because her self-described "embarrassing, impossible play" alone does not provide a sufficient answer to the "question about how a person should be", and only generates more questions (262).[92] *How Should a Person Be?* stages the untangling of these tensions between living and writing and irony and sincerity; it pits postmodern and post-postmodern values against each other,

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[91] The intrinsic honesty (rather than shame) of creative struggle is something Heti has touched on in interviews. She framed this as a process of "wondering" in a 2019 interview with Kelley Deane McKinney: "I'm wondering about how to make something: my life, a book […] I'm wondering what the present is asking of me. I'm wondering if there is something the future needs that I must put into place in the present. I'm worrying about whether there is something I'm supposed to be doing, for the sake of the future, that I'm not" (n.p.).

[92] Heti's novel often playfully questions the reductivity of writing books. At one point, Sheila, Margaux, and their friend Ben discuss "narcissism" and how "*all* art is like that" (166). At another, the novel directly engages with metafiction and appears to address the reader: "I don't know why all of you are reading books" (121).

then, but with productivity rather than (given this distinction's conceptual rabbit hole) justified confusion. Heti's aesthetics support this narrative outcome of clarity and justification, with typographical insertions like Sheila's tape recordings as playscript not posing a distraction in the novel's move towards harmonious, co-existing irony and sincerity. The novel exemplifies how the former can serve the latter rather than these states being balanced equally, as they are in post-postmodern fiction such as Smith's *White Teeth*, where page-fracturing devices are as much an ironic stunt as they are a plea to consider the characters at their centre as real people – the scene with Samad's nametag and Smith's typographical replication of it being the clearest example of this. *How Should a Person Be?*, on the other hand, outlines the different roles of irony and sincerity and makes it clear that the second of these is its priority, while not taking away the first because of what it has to offer the aesthetics of autofiction.

A similar dramatisation of this relationship between irony and sincerity, which again sets autofiction slightly apart from post-postmodernism, is at the heart of Lerner's debut novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Heti and Lerner are often compared – Lorentzen does this within the context of autofiction, Kingston-Reese does so alongside affect and aesthetics, and in 2021 Dena Fehrenbacher looked at them together in relation to what she calls "punchline aesthetics." Fehrenbacher's concept can perhaps be considered as an extension of Sianne Ngai's "theory of the gimmick" (which I looked at when discussing Everett), which Ngai defines as "a distancing judgement, a way to apotropaically ward off, by publicly disclaiming ourselves unconvinced" and "impervious." Applying what seems to be an extension of gimmick (to punchline) to the subject of failure, Fehrenbacher writes that, "in a manner parallel to their narrators, these novelists frame their own failures to live up to social, artistic, and generic expectations as a means of also fulfilling them" (n.p.). This framing generates a balance between failure within specific narrative episodes (which are often mimetic, representing Heti and Lerner's "own failures") and success in terms of the completion (and sales and awards) of the real authors' novels. The punchline, it seems, is that both authors do the thing that their protagonists, throughout their novels, make fun of the impossibility of doing. Like Heti, Lerner uses "craft" as "a meta-technique that aids a provocative resolution to the self-conscious dilemmas" of his "aesthetic projects" (Fehrenbacher, n.p.). This dramatisation of writing within writing and use of "meta-technique" recalls postmodern metafiction – Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) or Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, for instance – but Heti and Lerner's work are not content with either just this or with solely

the form of autobiography/memoir.[93] In the 2013 interview with Lin, Lerner himself said that *Atocha Station* being thought of as "memoir dressed up as fiction", if it were to happen (or has happened), "would seem pretty weird to me" ("You're a poet" n.p.). In a second interview together, a year later, Lerner discusses his conscious decoupling from "metafiction", telling Lin that "most of us start from that position of irony […] what I wanted to do – really felt like I had to do […] was move towards something like sincerity" ("An Interview with Ben Lerner" n.p.). Like Heti, Lerner draws on both postmodern influence and his own life, infused with an "overdetermined call for sincerity" that takes from post-postmodern fiction at the turn of the century (Fehrenbacher n.p.).

This mix of the three components of postmodernism, autobiography, and post-postmodernism justifies a fourth category of autofiction, which steps outside the three while clearly being influenced by them.[94] Fehrenbacher describes Heti and Lerner's "evidence of an increased awareness of the risks their styles run", which may relate to experimental fiction's possible detachment/alienation from its reader (n.p.). I would argue that neither completely eliminates these "risks" because they enjoy embracing them and using them in the service of something else. Yet Heti and Lerner lessen these risks by communicating an acceptance of the double responsibility of entertainment (through high style and inward-facing experimentalism) and ethics (by using details from their own lives sincerely, even if not entirely authentically nor accurately). Autofiction's conceptual, formal, and thematic hybridity can be simplified by something Lerner said in the first interview with Lin: "it's different to collapse the distinction between art and life within art, and to collapse the distinction between art and life in life" ("You're a poet" n.p.). This is what separates autofiction from autobiography/memoir – and Lerner makes it clear that "I'm much more interested in the former" of the two distinctions he outlines – but I also think it separates autofiction from post-postmodernism ("You're a poet" n.p.). A further binary can be introduced inside "within art" which develops the constructed, artificial textual environment. In another essay, Lorentzen discusses how Lerner's work "has arrived at a truce between irony and sincerity" and how his novels "are a collage of the autobiographical and the

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[93] Zadie Smith is guilty of suggesting this, in fact – she calls Heti and Lerner "memoir novelists" in the essay "The I Who Is Not Me" (*Feel Free* 344).

[94] Fehrenbacher acknowledges that other literary forms unite Heti and Lerner's work, leading to "competing ideas" amongst critics about how to define them. She lists them as follows: "are their novels *künstlerroman*, chronicling an artist's development? Or "novels of commission", novels about "wanting-to-write"? Self-help or how-to-narratives? The fictional essay or essayistic fiction? A renewed sincerity (or "New Sincerity") in fiction?" Considering their work as autofiction factors in some of these other modes, such as künstlerroman, as is evident in *How Should a Person Be*?

invented" ("Homo Trumpiens" 780, 781). Autofiction's sincerity is determined by a qualified engagement with autobiography (where the transformation of life into art is left transparent), whereas post-postmodern sincerity is only given the context of fiction in Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's work (where real-life components are irrevocably changed and renamed and *made* fictional). Even if the life-art dichotomy invites blurring or merging, autofiction and post-postmodernism do still fall on the same side and categorise themselves as fiction.

Lerner's use of events from his own life is therefore conditional, like Heti's, and again relates to the subject of creative struggle within a real novel that has itself overcome it. As he tells Lin their second interview, "I'll use my life as material for art (I don't know how not to do this)" ("An Interview with Ben Lerner" n.p.). *Atocha Station* specifically focuses on the idea of fraudulence, which paralyses Lerner's protagonist Adam Gordon, who is an American in Spain participating in a poetry fellowship and writing an epic poem on the Spanish Civil War. Adam is in many ways a Lerner surrogate, with Lerner at the time of writing being at a career crossroads of moving away from poetry and turning to fiction, even if Adam jokes that "I would never write a novel" (65).[95] Poetry is to Adam what playwrighting is to Sheila, offering a stand-in for fiction writing but also a platform for a broader commentary on creative living. As Lerner tells Lin, "I'm fascinated by poems within novels […] I like how a novel can do that: how it can build the world in which a poem is read or misread" – and he imbues Adam's character with this fascination and its contingency, its quality of the "read *or* misread" ("An Interview with Ben Lerner", emphasis added). Poetry is a stand-in in *Atocha Station* but also, as Kingston-Reese says, a "practice of embedding", recalling Smith's page-fracturing devices. Kingston-Reese observes how Lerner, using his own, real poetry, "outline[s] no less than six accounts of collage, while the novel itself possesses seven photographs and two poems" (both 141). Adam's anxiety over misreading life, not poetry, is determined by a constant tendency of turning it into art, and this is evident early on in Lerner's novel: "I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art" (*Atocha Station* 8).

Atocha Station is predicated on this incapability, but also of having "a profound

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[95] The idea of autobiography being mixed around but existing somewhere within the novel can be extended when considering Lerner's long 2016 essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, which it almost seems that Adam has lifted lines from. As Lerner writes in this essay, "Poetry and the hatred of poetry are for me – and maybe for you – inextricable", and "the poet is a tragic figure. The poem is always a record of failure" (6, 8). Lerner's piece highlights that "the heat of that hatred" is "internal to the art" (*Hatred* 38).

experience" of life, because Adam crosses these wires throughout, at first glance suggesting that Lerner is staging a difficult irony-sincerity hybrid more in line with post-postmodernism than with Heti's autofiction, because his protagonist must work harder than hers to successfully synchronise creativity and living. Lerner's dramatisation of a less clearly resolvable artistic and personal struggle plays out with more authorial distance, as indicated by the creation of Adam Gordon – this is his protagonist's "incomplete statement on aesthetic materialization", as Gayle Rogers says (221). In this way, as Alice Bennett notes, the novel is "framed through a dynamic between absorption and a slightly sneering, but frustrated, critical distance." As she says, "From this description, Adam might sound a lot like one of David Foster Wallace's characters" (both *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* 145). Lerner's decision to name his protagonist Adam rather than Ben also separates *Atocha Station* from *How Should a Person Be?* What may seem like an uncomplex creative decision highlights how Adam's struggle to be sincere with himself – as he says: "I *claimed* to be a poet"– is ultimately Adam's struggle and not Lerner's, who categorically is a poet and is not a character who is one (8, emphasis added). The parallels with Lerner, who also received a prestigious writing fellowship and began his career as a poet, justify the designation autofiction rather than post-postmodernism, but the initially tricky relinquishment of irony in favour of sincerity (compared to Sheila's cleaner, more immediate embrace of sincerity) recalls the work of the other writers I have looked at. Autofiction signals a closing down of empathetic engagement with the external other and renewed emphasis on the internal self, and there is a degree of caution to this, despite autofiction's quality of oversharing. This seems to be because the surrounding environment has already actively harmed or damaged the sincerity and authenticity of that self. This is particularly the case with Everett, hence *Erasure* comes the closest to being classifiable as autofiction, yet the turf war between internal and external space is exacerbated over the course of the novel, arguably arriving in a worse place than it began in. Monk is condemned to a life of irony and its feedback loop of self-reflexivity, which is of his own making but significantly influenced by traditions of representation. This is emphasised by the way *My Pafology* becomes an inadvertent hit and Monk creates an entire persona around his pseudonym, culminating in the unresolved paradox of needing to judge a book award as Monk that his novel under the name Stagg R. Leigh is nominated for. Somewhere between being deeply locked in this type of internal-external struggle and being offered a clear route out of it (like Sheila), Adam reaches a point of cathartic self-realisation of what *should* be done even if Lerner's novel ends with Adam not yet doing it, which differs from *How Should a Person Be?* As Adam says, switching to

refer to himself in the second-person, "None of this matters. Not Teresa or the panel or Spain or Spanish literature or literature in general [...] You are ready to quit smoking, to clean up, to return to friends and family. You have outgrown poetry. You will be a legitimate scholar or lawyer" (*Atocha Station* 178). Adam's solution to his novel-length grapple with his own craft, artistic responsibility, and personal integrity is to "quit" rather than simply stop resisting, be true to himself, and enjoy writing.

Adam's recentralisation of these principles and another – "to return to friends and family" – show how legitimacy and credibility are accessible via connections with other people, he just now needs to begin doing this work. This implied turn away from writing separates his epiphany from Sheila's, which sees a balance of real relationships with people and her own writing career as more possible. Both characters project futures for themselves beyond their novel's pages that accentuate the achievement of sincerity, unlike *Erasure*, *The Corrections*, *White Teeth*, and *Infinite Jest*'s necessary continuations of their struggles. Heti and Lerner's novels discuss their use of postmodern and post-postmodern principles simultaneous to using them, which does align their work with Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's – but those four novels do not straightforwardly find solutions, neither giving their protagonist the knowledge of what to do next (which is the case with Lerner and Adam) nor going further and allowing them to act on it before the pages run out (as with Heti and Sheila). Within this, the additional difference between Heti and Lerner's approaches to resolution is the result of stronger ties to postmodernism and post-postmodernism in Lerner's work compared to Heti's more liberated sense of its own aesthetics. Even if Lerner must still be separated from these earlier modes of contemporary fiction, there are remnants of connections, as Kingston-Reese notes: "Resisting the inward turn of postmodern literary contraption, Lerner's constellatory poetics envisions a literary mode unconcerned with borders of time and space that comprehends its own struggle while redefining the parameters for its reconciliation within the poetics of experience" (150). That is, active resistance to postmodernism is not the same as comfortable decoupling from it. Adam knows what he must do, but runs out of time within the space of his novel to do so, whereas Sheila has stopped resisting and is already free from "the inward turn of postmodern literary contraption" by the end of Heti's novel. If post-postmodernism is positioned somewhere between postmodernism and autofiction, it is useful to add more detail to this spectrum by then situating Lerner's novel closer to post-postmodernism and Heti's slightly further away from it. As Adam narrates early in *Atocha Station*, "I imagined the passengers could see me, imagined I was a passenger that could see me looking up at myself looking down" (21). At a

later point, Adam confesses to his "affect [being] a flat spectrum", to having a "sudden inability to feel" which he sources as "compatible with my anhedonia" (103-104). This of course recalls Hal Incandenza's struggle with anhedonia and subsequent ironic, "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment"; this strengthens the possibility, as Bennett observes, that Adam would fit into a Wallace novel. Adam is caught pivoting between postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity for large parts of the novel, consciously stepping over self-reflexive traps which are constantly telegraphed by the external surroundings. He must move beyond conditioned post-postmodern sincerity but can only do so by completely moving away from postmodern irony, and both are feasible by committing to himself and his authenticity. This is a commitment to autobiography's "auto" in autofiction, to continue my reading of the novel's own rehearsal of its movement between modernist phases of development. Adam must do this, however, by framing autobiography as a two-way dialogue with the people around him, and not slipping back into narcissism or vanity. As he says, "I told myself that no matter what I did, no matter what any poet did, the poems would constitute screens on which readers could project their own desperate belief in the possibility of poetic experience" (38).

The reader is reminded of this task's scale in instances that contradict this authentic two-way dialogue, like Adam's lie that his "Mom was dead" (84). While Adam actively invites creative frustration and never wants "to actually be one of those poets who was constantly subject to fits of inspiration" – an "idea" that "repelled" him – his ability to be sincere and honest to people around him relies on his ability to feel this way about his poetry (all 57). After all, he is introduced in the early stages of *Atocha Station* as a character who only "*claimed* to be a poet" despite his clear success as one, with publications and a fellowship under his belt (8, emphasis added). The root of Adam's creative anxiety is the pressure of originality – as Lerner writes, in Adam's voice: "there was nothing particularly original about my original poems, comprised as they were of mistranslations intermixed with repurposed fragments from deleted emails" (*Atocha Station* 40-41). As Kingston-Reese puts it, Lerner's "novels aim for a fiction that questions its own authenticity; not necessarily in counterpoint to reality, but in order to amplify a texture of the "real" literary experience" (142). Adam's double process of reaching satisfaction with his own life/literary production is an invitation to draw comparisons with Lerner's own process. For both, but acknowledged through Adam's control over the novel's first-person narration, this appreciation is of "the real living […] on the page" (*Atocha Station* 104). Lerner's sincere autofiction relies on Adam's sincere life as a poet, which must move beyond creative instability, inauthenticity, or self-deception. At one point in *Atocha Station*, these obstacles manifest as unreliable

narration (or at least the entertainment of this possibility): “I left the hotel and walked into the sun. Or was it cloudy?” (117). Lies pervade Lerner’s novel, from Adam’s own (in conversation with Teresa, he “worried that I would not be able to lie to her”) to ones spoken by those around him (a page earlier, Teresa “might have been lying about having told me” (140, 139). Deceit is the entire narrative setting, as seen when Adam is walking down the Spanish streets: “We left the apartment, walked a few blocks, and before we saw the crowd, we heard it, chanting about truth and lies and fascism” (130). In an interview with Ted Hodgkinson, Lerner confessed to “constructing a fiction about someone constructing fictions” (n.p.). This atmosphere influences Adam’s subjectivity, hindering his ability to be open and honest rather than insincere or ironic – such as, feeling “like a character in *The Passenger*, a movie I had never seen” (*Atocha Station* 155). Adam must “become the poet I pretended to be and realize my project”, which he soon elaborates on, wondering “could my fraudulence be a project and not merely a pathology” (both 164). Recognising that “maybe only my fraudulence was fraudulent” – which is echoed in the line that Adam “was so ruthlessly honest about his dishonesty it verged on a kind of authenticity” from the second Lin interview – Lerner’s protagonist learns to understand a life “without irony” (*Atocha Station* 168; “An Interview with Ben Lerner” n.p.). In other terms, this can be considered as a conscious step away from both post-postmodern sincerity and postmodern irony, which mirrors what Lerner’s novel is doing. It becomes clear then, that in a different way to the post-postmodern novels I have looked at, Lerner is describing what his work is doing as often as doing it. Heti does this too, as do Cole and Lin – however these other two authors centralise the subject of race, producing an additional set of developments from post-postmodernism.

Cole and Lin

Cole’s *Open City* recycles many of the anxieties of sincerity at the heart of *How Should a Person Be?* and *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Yet, protagonist Julius is rarely named and this confirmation first comes as an interruption of his first-person narration – as dialogue in a conversation with another character. At different points in *Open City*, Julius understands himself through self-analysis, describing a process “[in] which I flitted in and out of myself” and later discussing how “we are [only] able to articulate ourselves to ourselves” (74, 243).

These seem to be organising principles for *Open City*'s minimalist narrative. Julius' grapple with his subjective, self-assigned duty to be sincere plays out in a specific geographical setting (like *Atocha Station*'s Spain), where external spatial dimensions and the ability to map self onto environment are the primary means to resolve this struggle. This makes Julius' task a slightly different one to Sheila and Adam's, which are carried out via a blend of their individual textual spaces (playwrighting and poetry) and social, conversational spaces within their friendship groups (often interiors rather than exteriors). Julius has fleeting encounters with a variety of characters, which usually emphasise separation rather than connection and distance rather than proximity. These encounters include an ex-teacher, an ex-girlfriend, his patients (on his psychiatry fellowship), people he meets in coffee shops or parks; but Julius is primarily in the company of New York's expansive cityscape and the endless opportunity it gives him to retreat into his own thoughts, transforming that company into himself. This reverse process of Sheila and Adam's movements outward, beyond their own subjectivity, distinguishes *Open City* from Heti and Lerner's novels. New York is a site for visual association in the novel, provoking memories and insights and moments of self-understanding that deepen Julius' character and expand his affect as the novel progresses. Physical, tangible, geographical space is a license for this – as Julius ruminates "in bed", he "rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which" (6). In Cole's novel, internal growth and progressive control over irony/cynicism are determined by external space and the collective other, rather than a list of specific people that transcend their locations (which is a central part of the criteria for achieving sincerity in Heti and Lerner's novels).

Another fundamental difference between Julius and these other central characters is the fact that the terms of autofiction are not structured around Cole writing a writer. Unlike Sheila and Adam, Julius is not even professionally creative – he is a doctor-in-training in "the final year of my psychiatry fellowship" (3). A quite different strategy of self-improvement is encoded in what he spends most of his time doing. Like the process of creating that comes with the building blocks of the city around him, his medical practice is an alternative method of realigning sincerity with storytelling. The creative lens through which he views his work as a doctor is an antidote to the "mood in the society" he notices, of a "general inability to assess evidence" (28). For Julius, finding "evidence" is a creative process. Like autofiction generally, *Open City* accepts the balance between irony and sincerity that comes with finding evidence, rather than painstakingly questioning the stakes of this balance. Cole's novel

renegotiates even the manageable tensions it carries over from *How Should a Person Be?* and *Atocha Station*, using the symbol of the city to even more immediately and straighforwardly map out the kind of problem-solving process that Sheila and particularly Adam have to work more vigorously to overcome. The city of New York opens up to Julius, which triggers his ability to open up to himself, as shown in a scene in which he "stood there in the whipping wind and rain" and "wondered if indeed it was that simple" – if it was that simple to point to things and visually trace the obstacles that "come to stand in the place of an ethical life" (all 144-145). Engaging with physical space does the work that, for Julius, "read[ing] aloud with myself as my audience" and giving "voice to another's words" from a book cannot (5-6). This is developed further in a conversation with his ex-teacher Professor Saito, who he reconnects with early in the novel and maintains a relationship with throughout, as other connections and people slip through his fingers. As Julius tells him, as well as "medical journals" he is reading "many other interesting things that I begin and am somehow unable to finish. No sooner do I buy a new book than it reproaches me for leaving it unread" (13).[96] These "other" books are themselves an attempt to challenge "the scholarly apparatus" and "emotional distance typical of an academic study" (27). These things become more than studies and control lives in Everett's *Erasure* and *American Desert* and Smith's *On Beauty*. Julius must dissemble this "apparatus" and mode of finding evidence, but look to real, physical space for a productively inward (and creative) turn rather than trying to access this via novels.

His trajectory as a figure of autofiction also requires sidestepping the wrong kind of real-life storytelling interactions, away from novel writing or reading: "I told the story to Nadège [his ex-girlfriend] on our way back into Manhattan that day. Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story […] I had fallen in love with that idea myself" (70). Science and fiction alone or together are inadequate, so New York must present Julius with the chance to understand himself – which he does, learning that this is "to be both original and reflection", harmonising his thinking/speaking self with the figurative "double of mine" he meets in parks and on the subway (both 192). This personal solution is itself a mirror to the novel's, because despite the absence of the novelist profession in *Open City*, its

[96] Julius' inability to read has a negative knock-on effect with his relationship with the city (and vice-versa), as suggested when he says that "The days went by slowly, and my sense of being entirely alone in the city intensified. Most days I stayed indoors, reading, but I read without pleasure" (108). These thoughts come during the middle section of the novel though, when Julius spends time in Brussels rather than New York.

self-issued challenge concerns the motivations of autofiction more broadly, which is perhaps why scholarship often associates the novel with this term. Julius summarises these as being able to "tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began" (192). Julius' epiphany unlocks Cole's mission statement with autofiction, but this allows Julius himself to realise, by running into her again after many years, that a past encounter with a friend called Moji is the source of the unexplained guilt and shame he must constantly compete with in the novel. As he says towards the end of *Open City*, "When she was fifteen and I was a year younger" – and which he only now realises, just before it is too late – "I had forced myself on her" (244). Moji interrogates him, "the psychiatrist, the know-it-all", for not realising sooner that he ruined an extended period of her life (245). This realisation of how to treat people better comes simultaneous to Julius' understanding that, as an American African, though it is so difficult to, he must forgive past generations' mistreatment of his community and focus on his and others' treatment of *him*. This is required for Julius to become his sincere self, which is a destination forecast by the premise of autofiction. Julius' ability to see clearly and beyond racialised trauma is literal, with episodes such as him walking through "the brisk trade of sidewalk salesmen" in "the Harlem night, [where] there were no whites" establishing the exact observations (and wrong use of city space) that he must move away from (18). In this scene, Julius' sincerity is clouded by justified anger at his ancestors' treatment, as we can see when he instantly notices how "one table displayed enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans" (18). This idea is made even more literal in a later scene, when he imagines seeing, "in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree" in place of what is actually "dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind" (75). Sustaining a reading of autofiction as another mode of contemporary fiction that comments on its own process within its constructed fictional narratives, Julius' movement away from this conditioning by the past links to autofiction's own movement away from the legacies of modernism to which it owes a debt. Unlike Everett's *Erasure* and Smith's *White Teeth* then, *Open City* successfully puts distance between itself and racialised trauma, demonstrating how autofiction applies the subject of race to its overriding interests in resolution and hope.

Open City's discussion of race is framed by autofiction's aesthetic principles, which connects it to Lin's *Taipei*, which was published two years later and which is more often aligned with Heti and Lerner's work. Critics such as Bennett have done this, but Lin himself has also established these dialogues, by interviewing Lerner on more than one occasion and through his friendship with Heti. I would argue that *Taipei* is as (if not more) comparable to

Open City than it is to *How Should a Person Be?* and *Atocha Station*. Lin's novel focuses on Paul, who navigates Manhattan's art and literary scenes between return trips to Taipei, where his parents still live. In a separate essay to her one on Heti and Lerner, Zadie Smith describes the novel as "committed to the blow-by-blow re-creation of everyday existence" (*Feel Free* 378-379). This is influenced by the geographical displacement that comes with Paul living in New York, where as an Asian American he is restricted to living on the margins – which compares to Julius' experience of New York, not to conflate their communities nor suggest that their distinct racialised mistreatments are interchangeable. Paul's "everyday existence" is one of parties, drugs, friendships, and romance, and the novel's immersion in this small social circle and emphasis on the links between Paul's life and his author's are responsible for "a narrative claustrophobia [which] is at work, with no distance permitted between reader and protagonist", as Smith puts it (*Feel Free* 379). That is, claustrophobia is created by the novel crowding its author, protagonist, and reader into the same small textual space. Sophie Chapuis argues that "*Taipei* often reads like an impressionistic account of a few months in the life of a protagonist whose narrative fails to provide the reader with consistent time markers" (*Embrace of the Digital Age* 80). As Chapuis says, "Paul remains locked out from his own self, and unable as he is to appropriate his own subjectivity, his narrative must be mediated by a third-person narrator" (86). But both the novel's impressionism and isolation (in small, crowded space) are not simply performative, nor a formal exercise solely there to highlight the fragmentation and fracture that can come with blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Conforming with autofiction's emphasis on using this aesthetic framework to access sincerity and purpose (thus *connecting* the fragments), Paul's collapsed, elliptical, episodic experiences as a writer in New York are a means for *Taipei* to talk meaningfully about race.

Chapuis claims that "the postracial sensibility of Tao Lin's narrative seems to derive from an attempt at constructing a self, stripped from any cultural specificities" (*Embrace of the Digital Age* 84). So as with Heti, Lerner, and Cole's novels, we are invited to interpret *Taipei* as a narrative of hope, because "postracial" resonates differently here than in the context of *Erasure*'s post-postmodernism. To be "stripped from any cultural specificities" is to be content with one's identity (and not reducible to it), but is also, in Paul's case, to have a productive relationship with his own status as a character in an autofiction. Lin's novel differs from *Open City* in terms of its arrangement of hope, replacing Cole's maps and symmetries and clear articulation of how/where to access sincerity with a necessarily messy (and more claustrophobic) affective layout. But like it, *Taipei* uses this material to reach

sincerity, allowing its protagonist to (like Sheila and Adam too) accept and live with his own function as a textual stand-in for his author. Paul's position in relation to Lin generates a self-reflexive discussion of the practice of autofiction, which the novel enacts, accentuating autofiction's restorative potential, its cleaner break from postmodern irony than post-postmodernism's separation anxiety. *Taipei* expresses this by making jokes from a distance about fiction that does not have such a clean break, even namedropping Wallace and *Infinite Jest* (120, 159). The scope of this critique of irony-dependent fiction is wider in other moments, such as Paul "imagining being heard by thousands of readers of a future book, or book-like experience, in which Erin's name had an asterix by it, indicating the option of stopping the narrative to learn about Erin, in the form of a living footnote" (190). By having Paul talk about this technique, Lin's novel avoids doing it, and can only imagine an outward, "living" version of it. The endnotes of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, maximise affective potential but concede that they can only do so after beginning with irony and experimentation.

The distance Paul successfully puts between himself and ironic, postmodern traps is shown by *Taipei*'s narrator giving him the license of using scare quotes – a narrator who, despite the third-person, is likely Paul narrating himself. This reading of the narrator's identity is encouraged by the moment when Paul "looked at his hands, and felt his mouth and throat, doing what he was thinking, and felt vaguely confused. Was he instructing his brain? Or was he narrating what he saw and felt?" (48). We see the use of scare quotes when, in a conversation with his girlfriend Erin, "Paul asked what she meant by "okay" and visualized "it seemed" darkening and "okay" brightening colorfully" (173).[97] Reading this scene as a dramatised, literal overcoming of postmodern irony, we can extend the idea and observe Paul and Lin's final, irrevocable acceptance of irony (required to move on from it) in the way "He mock studied "okay," which suddenly enlarged and disappeared by "flying" through him, it seemed" (173). Postmodern irony is consumed by Paul, who is acting on behalf of his author, who as I have argued can be placed alongside Heti, Lerner, and Cole as someone whose work transparently deconstructs its own process of writing autofiction within its autofiction. This transparency both recalls post-postmodernism and separates autofiction from it, because

[97] The scare quotes are implemented from the opening lines: "It began raining a little from a hazy, cloudless-seeming sky as Paul, 26, and Michelle, 21, walked toward Chelsea to attend a magazine-release party in an art gallery […] he was "moving through the universe" [rather] than "walking on a sidewalk"" (3). At another point, the novel even puts the word ironically in scare quotes: "Paul said he wouldn't pretend he liked something, or make fun of liking something, or like something "ironically" (63).

autofiction's second deconstruction process is one of clarity rather than confusion, one that moves forward into new territory for contemporary literature without looking over its shoulder so much, which is not the case with post-postmodernism's fraught, complex transition away from postmodernism. Autofiction's forwards trajectory can almost be summarised by what Paul, early on in *Taipei*, describes as the universe's "message, to itself, to not feel bad" (12). It is a simple plea, but one that Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin's novels all believe in – to ultimately not let their protagonists "feel bad", not let their authors feel this *about* these protagonists, and not let their authors feel it about the balance of irony and sincerity centralised by the novels. Post-postmodernism's feeling bad, unsure, and uncertain is determined by being held back by postmodernism; it desperately tries to wrestle free and feel better about balancing irony and sincerity, but it cannot.

Autofiction and Post-postmodernism in the 2020s

Post-postmodernism is not a directly specified target of correction for autofiction. Autofiction's central authors may use additional space to extend the fiction they write – such as interviews and nonfiction – but they have not published comprehensive manifesto essays that set out this corrective intention. Conversely, post-postmodern authors make their own development or correction (of postmodernism) explicit, either in the fiction itself (Everett and Wallace, for instance, often namedrop postmodernism) or with the help of supplementary pieces of nonfiction. This separates Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin from Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace. I have argued that autofiction's development of post-postmodernism's struggle with irony and sincerity, its process of reaching an *accepted* balance between these modes, is therefore implicit rather than explicit in these four authors' major works. The tone of acceptance, furthermore, is the reason autofiction's relationship with post-postmodernism is neither explicit nor the subject of a manifesto. This takes me back to the question of appropriate terminology, a question which defines the ambivalent label of post-postmodernism and generates a new set of problems in autofiction. That is, what exactly does the "auto" in autofiction mean? Christian Lorentzen asks a different question, wondering "What's more important, the *auto* or the *fiction*? And I think the answer is: the *fiction*" ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'" n.p.). I would disagree and argue that auto is as important, despite its lack of a fixed meaning. Lorentzen's piece is primarily concerned with how

automatic autofiction is – which, explicit or implicit, would be impulsive rather than forced – and this opens a debate surrounding its self-consciousness or autonomy alongside the debate about autofiction's dependence on autobiography (another auto). Lorentzen unpacks the second of these by distinguishing between autofiction, autobiographical fiction, and autobiographical metafiction.[98] Considering the first definition of auto, it may seem that no is the safe answer to the question of whether autofiction is automatic or impulsive, because autofiction does not exist without self-reflexivity. But it is also possible that this need to more organically balance irony and sincerity in fiction justifies how implementing self is a *natural* manoeuvre. It is a natural, impulsive reaction to post-postmodernism's trickier balance, which did not have a clear place for self-consciousness. 2010s autofiction writers write themselves because it is what they know best, and they are helped because this decision felt needed for the contemporary novel at the beginning of that decade. This natural reaction is why autofiction does not feel the need to namedrop post-postmodernism or even explain itself too much, instead letting its narratives of hope simply show what autofiction is at the same time as being it.

Contemporary fiction interested in both the experimental and the real needed to arrive at this point of impulse, acceptance, and clarity. The end of the Second World War prompted a turn towards the subversive, the stylistically audacious; the 1990s-2000s brought an affective turn towards sincerity, despite a continuation of high style (with the millennium as its pivot); and the 2010s saw a shift to fusing style and sincerity with autobiography, which generated a more harmonious relationship with influence, newness, distinctions, and split interests. In an essay on music, also collected in *Feel Free*, Smith talked of how "Sometimes it is when we stop trying to understand or interrogate apparently 'absurd' phenomena – like the category of the 'new' in art – that we become more open to them" (112). Or as Heti notes in her interview with McKinney, "balance" is the possible "answer to every question" (n.p.). Autofiction's approach to newness and balance, after all, is what makes it different to postmodernism and post-postmodernism, despite a clear genealogical connection to these past phases of modernism. For autofiction, balance is in the service of something more rounded and layered than autobiography or realism: work that understands how experimentalism does not have to be considered so far removed from reality, when reality is

[98] The different etymological possibilities in the word autofiction, ultimately, are secondary to "The way the term is used tends to be unstable, which makes sense for a genre that blends fiction and what may appear to be fact into an unstable compound", as Lorentzen says ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'" n.p.).

itself so fragmented, erratic, and unpredictable. The experimental *and* the autobiographical or realist are needed for the more substantial resulting product. As Lorentzen says, "Beyond an index of what's "real" and what isn't, there are other, deeper things at stake in autofiction's status as fiction" ("How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'" n.p.). This principle is outlined by Lerner in his first interview with Lin: "the self-referentiality of my novel is a way of exploring how fiction functions in our real lives – for good and for ill – not a way of mocking fiction's inability to make contact with anything outside of itself" ("An Interview with Ben Lerner" n.p.). The successful ability "to make contact" is fundamental to autofiction. The awareness of (and ambition for attaining) this additional depth of meaning is present in post-postmodernism too, but it was required for contemporary fiction to move through post-postmodernism to reach autofiction, where this projected meaning could be applied to mobilised hope. Everett, Franzen, Smith, and Wallace's novels did the work and put the pieces in place for Heti, Lerner, Cole, and Lin's to reach this hope – a destination which relies on a degree of movement away from struggle, rather than being trapped in a position where struggle is still in progress.

These different states of struggle and resulting, distinguishable modes of post-postmodernism and autofiction were at the forefront of contemporary fiction ten years apart. An additional decade later, which is my time of writing, it is worth once again stepping back and noticing both how contemporary fiction has developed and the new form the irony-sincerity/experimentalism-realism balance has taken in it. As for these four autofiction writers, around the turn of the 2020s: Cole has moved away from the novel, instead publishing books of photography; and Lin published his follow-up novel to *Taipei – Leave Society* (2021) – which is an autofiction that replaces Paul with Li, but continues themes of authenticity, novel writing, and meaning-making. Heti published *Pure Color* (2022), an elusive work that takes her real experience of losing a father and provides it with an abstract, dreamlike framework; and Lerner published what is generally considered to be the final part of an autofiction trilogy about problematic masculinity, which began with *Atocha Station – The Topeka School* (2019). Lorentzen calls it Lerner's "Man-Child Trilogy", and *The Topeka School* "an endpoint in Lerner's autobiographical project" ("Homo Trumpiens" 780, 791). As for the three of four main authors I have looked at who are living: Franzen began a multi-generational family saga trilogy set in the past, with the novel *Crossroads* (2021); Smith published a 2019 short story collection – *Grand Union* – which brings together a variety of styles and narrative interests, with stories that broadly speaking fall somewhere between postmodern experimentalism and post-postmodern sincerity; and Everett has continued to

publish prolifically, with *Telephone* and *The Trees* (as my earlier chapter looked at) applying difficult balances between irony and sincerity/style and social issue to different storytelling frameworks. A third 2020s Everett novel in three years – *Dr. No* (2022) – reverts back to postmodern pastiche by subverting Ian Fleming's James Bond, while again looking at the subject of race in contemporary academia.

It can be said that both post-postmodernism and autofiction have continued their trajectories, then. While autofiction can be read as a logical solution to many of the confusions and paradoxes of post-postmodernism, work that seems to be more easily categorised as post-postmodern continues to be interested in contradiction and stasis (even if the work itself is not contradictory or static). Equally, works of autofiction lead to further works of autofiction – so, ultimately, Nealon's "never-ending end of everything" is not an exclusive state for post-postmodernism. This exposes an additional solution that is integral to autofiction, alongside its evidence of a more resolved balance to the aesthetics, themes, subjects, and interests of post-postmodernism (which are so often built on paradoxes and oppositions). This additional solution is semantic, because as a term autofiction removes the possibility of replacement, a possibility which stems from our scholarly tendency to periodise and historicise, often for the sake of periodisation and historicisation but not much else. As highlighted by the absence of a prefix or hyphen or word that denotes substitution such as "post", autofiction *invites* discussion alongside post-postmodernism but does not demand it, whereas post-postmodernism demands a conversation about the replacement of postmodernism, even if this is only a factor in understanding what post-postmodernism actually means. In line with post-postmodernism's characteristics of hypocrisy and contradiction, and at the risk of undermining what academic studies often set out to do, the only conclusive understanding we can therefore have of literary post-postmodernism is that it does not have to mean anything. Perhaps, as with autofiction, it is easier to avoid these categorisations, definitions, or labels. In her interview with Heti, Kelley Deane McKinney notes that autofiction is "a category Heti has said she finds superficial" (n.p.). Similarly, in a 2022 interview with the novelist Jordan Castro, when asked if he is "done with autofiction", Lin responds "I don't know" (n.p.). Post-postmodernism is typically not such a forthcoming subject of discussion (reducible to Q&A format) in interviews with the post-postmodern authors I have looked at. Perhaps most memorably, Everett's fiction shrugs off the association with postmodernism, a discomfort which could be read as extendable to post-postmodern categorisation. In his 2013 metafictional novel *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, when the protagonist named Percival Everett visits his dying father in a nursing home, this

character asks his father (who is a writer): "What was the thing in your career that irked you most?" Aware that his son Percival intends to write their conversations into his own book, this father responds with "Funny you should have me have you ask me that question. Strange. Son, it was being called a postmodernist. I don't even know what the fuck that is!" (both 96). If the question was put to him, Everett's playful interview persona would likely swat post-postmodernism away by also saying that he doesn't "know what the fuck that is." But after meeting the eight novels I have looked at in detail on their own terms, the contexts of post-postmodernism and autofiction – and what these two terms *might* mean rather than what they definitively *do* mean – are too inviting for the critic to not entertain possibilities, apply with caution, and use conditionally.

It would of course be reductive to say that all fiction writers today fit into these two adjacent camps, but my two four-novel samples demonstrate how post-postmodernism and autofiction do have evidence across multiple works by different authors. There are not many authors whose work conveniently merges post-postmodernism and autofiction's interests and values, their appeals and problems. Brandon Taylor, however, could be viewed as one, not least because his work also centralises problems surrounding race, which as this thesis has shown is at the intersection of post-postmodernism and autofiction's aspirations for sincerity and obstacles of irony. Taylor's 2020 novel *Real Life*, as touched on in my chapter on Everett, draws on its author's real experiences of a Biochemistry graduate programme, of a traumatic childhood, and of being a queer person of colour in twenty-first century America. Yet the novel simultaneously employs a tension between irony and sincerity, which triggers its protagonist Wallace's struggle to externalise his feelings – as his internal space welcomes and facilitates manipulation, the safety of rhetoric, and the impulse of self-deception. *Real Life* can therefore be considered as a work that balances postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity, but goes further than Everett's *Erasure*, Franzen's *The Corrections*, Smith's *White Teeth*, or Wallace's *Infinite Jest* because it balances these two things with autofiction. *Real Life* does so, I would argue, with more equal weighting of these three components than Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*, Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Cole's *Open City*, and Lin's *Taipei* – which are indebted to post-postmodernism but are ultimately more concerned with the separate possibilities of autofiction.

In an interview I conducted with him, despite my pressing on the term post-postmodernism, Taylor confessed that "I haven't heard that phrase in so long" ("The convergent death of culture" n.p.). Taylor talked about "when I was studying Chemistry but all my friends were lit majors", when "They started using the phrases 'post-postmodernism'

and ‘New Sincerity.’ I wanted to be cool and be like, yeah, I’m a post-postmodernist, even though I had no idea what modernism or postmodernism were” (“The convergent death of culture” n.p.). Taylor’s words recall Andrew Hoberek’s ideas on perhaps feeling “compelled to say that either fiction was never postmodern – the nominalist position – or it remains postmodern”, but also on how postmodernism “constitutes just one, no longer particularly privileged stylistic opposition among many” (236, 234). This echoes Bruno Latour’s proclamation in 1993 of “never” being “modern” (*We Have Never Been Modern*), but it also has a knock-on effect with post-postmodernism. But despite having “no idea” about post-postmodernism, or the possibility of postmodernism never existing in the first place, Taylor says that “I’ve lived with it in the background for many years”, which underlines the conflicted interest the academy and literary culture more broadly has in this transition between phases of modernism (“The convergent death of culture” n.p.). By extension, autofiction is interested in post-postmodernism, even if this later mode gestures towards separation from it. As *Leaving the Atocha Station* playfully suggests, “A “post” was being formed, and the air was less alive with the excitement of a period than with the excitement of periodization” (140). Autofiction underlines this “excitement” in the posts that came before it. Despite fluctuations and changes from 1996-2022 in how this collective literary interest and excitement is expressed and analysed, post-postmodernism remains the proverbial car crash that we cannot look away from, because it centralises problems and not necessarily solutions, and asks more questions than we can answer. If, as Jeffrey Nealon warns, post-postmodernism signals a never-ending end of everything, perhaps a constant cycle of not being able to look away from the crash is what the years to come have to offer us – as authors, scholars, and readers.

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Appendix 1: "The convergent death of culture": An Interview with Brandon Taylor

Contemporary fiction has been circling the debate about what comes after postmodernism since (and arguably before) the turn of the twenty-first century. The only certainty around the designation 'post-postmodernism' is uncertainty: a split priority of both relying on postmodern experimental aesthetics and wanting to move beyond them, an interest in both irony and sincerity, compliance with scholarly periodisation while simultaneously undermining it by opening the door to infinite additions of the prefix "post."
As a term, post-postmodernism has appeal but also problems, particularly surrounding the treatment of racial minority and the pervasive whiteness of canonicity. Ultimately, despite a renewal of affect and sincerity, writing after postmodernism further problematises race. Other terms have subsequently emerged alongside post-postmodernism, including the 'New Sincerity' (coined by Adam Kelly) and the 'Affective Turn' (which Rachel Greenwald Smith helped to first popularize in literary studies).

This conversation with the novelist Brandon Taylor begun with the prompt of post-postmodernism. We spoke about the connection between writing after postmodernism and academia in his work: the novel Real Life *(2020) and short story collection* Filthy Animals*(2021), which both draw on Brandon's experiences as a graduate student in Biochemistry before his writing career. Brandon and I also discussed how his interests in affect and institutions are carried into his forthcoming second novel,* The Late Americans. *We also talked about a writer that can be usefully positioned at the centre of discussions around post-postmodernism: Percival Everett, who Brandon recently wrote the introduction for the 20th anniversary edition of* Erasure*(2001) for, and who he interviewed for* Gagosian Quarterly.

We had to compete with the technological obstacles so many of us are used to by now: webcam picture and sound quality, the interruptions of city traffic and sirens, and the strict time limit of the Zoom basic package. We circumvented the last of these by spreading the conversation over more than one video call.

—George Kowalik

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George Kowalik (GK): In the context of literary aesthetics and style, does the term post-postmodernism have any kind of use, interest, meaning, or value to you? Or is it as ridiculous as it sounds?

Brandon Taylor (BT): I haven't heard that phrase in so long. I remember being an undergrad, when I was studying Chemistry but all my friends were lit majors. They started using the phrases 'post-postmodernism' and 'New Sincerity'. I wanted to be cool and be like, yeah, I'm a post-postmodernist, even though I had no idea what modernism or postmodernism were. So, I've lived with it in the background for many years.

This move away from irony and from using technique as an evasive manoeuvre to get around sentiment and feeling, this direct confrontation with the matter at hand… as a mode, it perhaps *is* the most dominant mode right now. After the demise of historical realism, everybody pivoted to this mode, but they didn't use it to trouble notions of historicity, but to just talk about being sad in their major global centres. There's a sort of unnamed force behind the thrones in contemporary fiction, so to speak.

GK: I'm taking up the quite reductive position of entertaining the possibilities of this term while talking about how futile it is to try and name this moment after postmodernism. This 21st century wave of fiction that, like you say, turns towards sincerity and feeling but (and Everett's a great example of this) still has a lot of fun with the high style and experimental acrobatics of postmodernism. There is a tricky relationship between writers of your generation, the generation just before, and the critic. There's an impulse to tack individual writers today onto this wave or term or definition of a broader moment in fiction. But it's not just one thing, there's not just one example of it, not just one way to be post-postmodern or write after postmodernism, as it were.

BT: I also think that perhaps what has changed most is a dissolution of some centralised authoritative body that can name moments. I do feel that the way modernism and even postmodernism got their names was from authoritative figures in both academia and literary criticism. They had the authority to name things and we were all just vibing with it. But with the death of so-called monoculture and it not being as alive or active, we're all doing weird, strange variations on so called post-postmodernism. But maybe nobody really has the authority to name anything anymore and we're all just drifting in the stream.

GK: I think this reductive impulse can be framed by a broader cultural crisis of definition and labeling—of pointing at something and needing to understand it, rather than just letting it be. We seem to be hindered by the fact that the very nature of defining social categories and types of identity and ways of being is in crisis mode. These things are essential but are

becoming increasingly institutional rather than individual. *Real Life* but also 'Potluck', 'Proctoring', and some of the other stories in *Filthy Animals* seem to take an interest in an institutionalised mode of classification. A need to define, specifically staged in the university, which birthed these terms in the first place—postmodernism, but also going back further. So often in *Real Life*, the protagonist Wallace is trying to break out of these restrictions posed by the academic environment, these reductions of living to data storage, to a box-ticking depository of qualifications, publications, but also experiences and relationships. The novel seems to show where institutionalised classification becomes a problem, and where that problem bleeds into real life, real relationships and people, and in Wallace's case real trauma. What were your motivations behind setting *Real Life* in an academic institution?

BT: The most obvious and least interesting answer to that question is that I picked academia because I really love reading about academia. I was in academia myself at the time of writing; I was studying biochemistry and it was the world that I knew the most about. So, when I set out to write that novel, I asked myself what do I know enough about to fill several hundred pages that I wouldn't find too difficult to invent? It was academia; it was being a graduate student. I was trying to dramatise what happens when, as you know, we confront this academic world of categories that you try to fit yourself into. If you can't, you just keep sawing away at parts of yourself until you do fit into them. And that is such a strange way to live one's life—these increasingly shrinking categories of ever-increasing specificity in which one has to funnel one's entire sense of self-worth and self-actualisation and self-conception.

I also noticed that you try to fit yourself into a mold of a "scholar" or "academic." But then I started noticing how it was bleeding into people's lives, so if you behaved in a way that was not consistent with their existing rubric for how a person should behave, the academic environment had no understanding of how to deal with it, you know? During my Biochemistry degree, my tutors were like, what do you mean you read novels? There's this idea that scientists behave in certain ways and that it isn't just a job you do, but it's something you live and take home. It became very monastic, in a way. So, I was trying to dramatise how sometimes there's the comedy of facing up to a human situation and feeling unable to deal with it because it doesn't fit your scientific rubric. A lot of the drama of *Real Life* comes from people realising the tension between the way that academia trains you to behave and the fact that you have to exist as a human in the world.

GK: Some of the characters around Wallace seem to be less aware that they're restricted to that mechanical way of being, that malfunctioning. Wallace at least seems to be trying to

combat it, trying to break out of those restrictions, those rhythms. There is a similar anti-affective threat within the humanities, I think. If not data collection, there continues to be an insistence on evidence. You can't just say something without acknowledging who else has said variations of what you are saying. This second-guessing of a position within the field, carving out an intervention…

BT: Oh, yes. We were all about "the field." "Previous studies" was another great phrase. "As previous studies have shown…" It felt like a very nineties idea of what the future would be: everyone is a robot or an automaton in a factory. It felt antihuman sometimes, and I found it really challenging but also funny, because I felt like I could see the scripts running all the time. Sometimes when you're talking to another person in academia, you can anticipate what they're going to say, because that's what you say in a situation like this, because we all have these scripts. It can be exhausting. And also funny in a David Lynch sort of way. But also really troubling when you realise that it's not just how people are in academia. It's rippling out into the world. Ever increasingly we live in these predetermined roots. It's all kind of harrowing, I think.

GK: Like you say, there is a perceived wider cultural problem of not living sincerely. In academia, there is an externally imposed expectation to mold intellectual enthusiasm to a marketable, career-ready kind of thing… where stock phrases, buzz words, as you say (and as I think *Real Life* so successfully captures), leads to these rhythms and ways of being that are consciously put on, are performative, aren't genuine or unique.

I wonder what you make of the publishing industry's position alongside academia. Mark McGurl's "Program Era", about the influx and escalation of creative writing programmes in America but also globally, established the relationship between the two over a decade ago. There was a boom of creative writing programmes particularly as the nineties moved into the noughties and today they're everywhere. So many writers have connections to an institution, have connections to a teaching programme. You have experience of the Iowa Writer's workshop, of course, so what kind of relationship does the creative writing programme have to your work?

BT: I'm aware of the Program Era discourse. How could one not be—literary Twitter is always fighting about the MFA being a psyop by the CIA. I would have a writing life without institutions, but don't know that I would have a writing career without institutions. I was always a writer, even when I was studying science. Even when I was a little kid, I was writing for myself, and that was sufficient to my writerly ambitions. But as I got older and acquired grand ambitions, it became clear to me that I couldn't really make a go of it without

institutional support. I'm from a working-class background. I grew up poor on a farm in Alabama. It was always really clear to me that my path out of poverty was going to be through institutions and through higher education.

The whole reason I was able to write books—and the way I wrote *Real Life* and *Filthy Animals* while I was getting my biochem PhD—was because that programme gave me a stipend. It gave me a place to live. It gave me a job and gave me health insurance. I was able to use those resources to do the scientific work that I had been brought there to do, but also to carve out a little space for myself creatively.

When I got to the Iowa Writer's Workshop… you know, a lot of people think that you get there and you get an agent and you get a book deal, because that's where everyone goes. I went there but I already had a book. Well, I already had two books, and I had an agent and we were going to sell those books regardless of whether I stayed in science or went to Iowa. But going to Iowa did give me time and space to write *more*books and to figure out who I was as a writer. That discovery was not necessarily in the classroom. In a strange twist of fate, in some ways the closest I ever came to quitting writing was at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, because people were so hostile to what it was that I was doing. But the material reality of it was having a stipend. I had no teaching obligations for two years, so I was able to dedicate myself fully to writing.

I think that for a lot of people, whether it's a teaching job or whether it's getting an MFA or whether it's something else, having the resources to be able to dedicate time, space, energy to your craft is invaluable. I think that, for me and for several of my writer friends who also did the MFA route, it wasn't even about this romantic idea of doing an MFA programme and finding a teacher who changes your life and shapes your writing. Increasingly, the people who are going into these programmes already know how to write, and a lot of them are already quite professionalised. What they're going to an MFA for is not necessarily to be shaped by teachers, but to just have health insurance while they write a book. I don't think it's always been that way, but it certainly feels that that is the way it is now. And it is getting more that way as we go on.

In the Program Era, and on creative writing programmes across the world, we're seeing writers who have been squeezed out of the capitalist economy go into the academy, not necessarily to get an institution's *imprimatur* on their career, but literally just to be able to feed themselves and to be able to work on a book. How do you write a book in a late capitalist ecosystem, if you have to work five jobs? With the contraction of venues where one can pursue a full-time writing career and get paid for it… it's just impossible. So what do

writers do? They do what they've done since the very beginning, which is to turn to a patron or a sponsor, and in this case it's MFA programmes.

: :

GK: I'd love to talk about Percival Everett. As you know, I recently wrote a journal article on academia and affect in *Real Life* and Everett's *Telephone*. I read your *Gagosian Quarterly Review* interview together recently and it was great to hear you two nerding out about science but also talking about things like writing craft and the myth of the American West. You had this great line about fiction "getting its arms around the times" while speaking about the role of history in literary narrative. What is it that attracts you to Everett's work?

BT: For a long time, I knew Everett as a writer my white-friends-who-get-advanced-degrees-and-do-Faulkner-seminars really liked. I was like, well, that sounds too POMO for me. A book within a book? No way. Not for me. I'm a very austere realist over here. And then I read *Erasure* and I thought: oh, so all the stuff that I've been trying to do and trying to articulate and trying to wrap my head around, he's already done. He has already written this fiery, incredibly sophisticated. funny novel about the particular strangeness of trying to be a black writer. He taps into the way that you're just trying to mind your own business and write a novel and this world keeps reaching in and calling you black and reminding you that you're black in ways that are less interesting than your lived experience.

Reading *Erasure* was kind of mind-blowing, because before that I had been so polite in my writing. I had been so afraid and so tenuous with trying to approach the subject of race because I didn't know how to approach it in fiction without boring myself, without writing the kind of novel that I would make fun of. I love that *Erasure* is both very interested in race and not at all interested in race and that it captures a black subjectivity in motion. I have no idea how he did it; it's a magic trick of a novel. His other work, as well… he's just a master of so many subjects and forms and he feels like a real virtuoso. He can change his voice to inhabit so many different registers and then can weave them together. You have these books that should not work, but do, because of the singular strangeness of his mind and the confidence of his writing. Unlike a lot of experimental novels, his are first and foremost about people, right? They always come back to these really earthy human concerns and the experimentation doesn't feel beside the point. It doesn't feel too form-forward. It just feels like a natural extension of the story he's trying to tell about the strangeness of living in the world as he's trying to capture it. I love his work.

GK: Everett has such good examples in his oeuvre where he nails the balance between the experimental and the raw, the honest, the affecting. He's also got examples where he pushes the experimentalism way further—something like that wacky epistolary book *A History of the African-American People (Proposed) By Strom Thurmond, As Told to Percival Everett & James Kincaid (A Novel)*. It's all a series of exchanges between Everett and Kincaid (his real-life academic colleague) playing fictionalised versions of themselves, as well as letters with Thurmond's representative, Thurmond himself, potential publishers, more. It's so much fun. Then Everett's got completely stripped back, barebones, realist novels, perhaps more in line with what you've published so far. They're more accessible than his more pyrotechnic, high-style works.

I think for all *Erasure*'s aesthetic experimentation and the complicity of Monk Ellison (its writer/professor protagonist) in living the kind of self-deprecating, ironic life that necessitates the novel being written like that… like you, I was just blindsided by how moving it is, how fundamentally important and urgent the idea at the heart of it is: this reckoning with the label of "black writer." Just reading over my list of questions with all kinds of notes coming off them, with notes coming off *them*, it almost looks like the typography of an Everett novel…

BT: I love that.

GK: It seems to me that the characters of *Real Life* and so many of Everett's characters (but also the characters in your collection *Filthy Animals*) are confronting a universal, fundamental obstacle preventing them from living sincerely. The idea of trying to move past the ironic life in rhetoric and aspiring for truth. A challenge to some kind of anti-affective force, tied not just to the university but the institution with a capital "I." To me, your novel and stories centralise this struggle. Would that be an accurate reading, particularly of *Real Life*?

BT: I think so, even if I don't know that I would've articulated it to myself as such while I was working on it. But yes, now you say it, I think that what that book is interested in—and I think this is also true of *Erasure*and Everett's work—is that there is the level at which we live on the surface, where we're all just acting out the scripts that have been handed down to us. Then there's what happens when you realise that you're all play acting and you try to get at what is underneath all of that—the real, human, warm side to life—and what happens when you disrupt the script.

I've always felt that I don't know how people do and say things in social settings. It's as if I was raised by wolves. So, going into polite society, I've always been struck by the fact that people just know how to do patter. They just know how to banter and chat and they know

which fork to use. They know that you don't clap at the end of the piece of music, you wait for the next piece to begin. They know all of these things, and I was always struck by that. I was like, how do they know what to do?

When I was in graduate school, it occurred to me that they know what to do because that is how class works. That's how society replicates its hierarchies. There are some people who have access to this knowledge and there are some people who do not. And this mode of living that I was being thrust into by virtue of upward mobility was not a life that I had been prepared for, because all the mores I had absorbed growing up on a farm in Alabama were totally useless in a middle-class bourgeois existence. So, when I write, I'm trying to capture some of the strangeness of a person being within an institution but not by right of birth or heritage. They've got to figure out the rules of the game that everybody else seems to know. They've got to carve out their own subjective route through that institution and past the barriers that are raised to prevent the ability to do so.

Another question or set of concerns that has been animating my work recently is the threat posed to individual subjectivity within a cultural moment governed by algorithmic refinement. To me, these questions are all the same. There is the way that your milieu or institution refines itself by forcing everyone to behave in these concerted, organised ways. Then there's the individual subjective experience, which I think is a threat to the institution. It's no different from messianic narratives, no different to everything from *Star Wars* to *The Lord of the Rings*. All of these stories are about preserving individual subjective experience against the totalitarian regime of algorithmic refinement. My project has in some ways become clearer to me and more simple: I'm trying to figure out how a person preserves their own wonky route through the universe when that universe is marching towards not necessarily homogenisation, but convergence in a cultural sense… the cultural death of convergence, or the convergent death of culture, you could say.

GK: There's the tagline of your next novel.

BT: I mean, it is kind of true. My next novel is sort of about that, I guess.

GK: *The Late Americans*?

BT: That's right.

GK: I'd love to talk about that in a moment. But first: the metaphor of theatricality, of life-as-theater, the script that particularly those of us within some kind of institution are made to play to… that's a good way of putting it. *Real Life* also nails a sense of interiority. As novels are so invitingly able to do, it offers a portal into Wallace's head. But you position that consciousness within a story space of science labs, or (elsewhere in the novel) public spaces.

As a phrase and refrain within the book, “real life” seems to be a useful indicator of the precarious relationship between self and environment—between Wallace’s interiority and the world he’s pushed into and expected to function and operate within. In terms of the balance of lots of dialogue with internal monologue, what were you going for stylistically with *Real Life*?

BT: That’s a good question. It’s interesting that you say that I use a lot of dialogue, which wasn’t my intention writing it. At Iowa, people kept making fun of my dialogue and saying that it was not very good. I used to write these really Saul Bellow, hyper-lexic sentences that were bombastic and loud. For a long time, I worshipped Updike and Bellow and these writers of almost baroque sentences. But then I started to move away from that and towards writing in a plain spoken, direct way. I’ve been on this course from my mid-twenties to now of moving towards more spare, restricted sentences. I’ve had these two phases in my writing life: the Bellovian and now I’m deep in Knausgaard land, where’s there barely a polysyllabic word to be found. In terms of style, I think that’s where I am.

I’m trying to inhabit this space between the everyday idiom, where I think you can access beauty through language by trying to portray things like the feeling you get when you walk outside and it’s a perfect day. What does that feel like? I’m trying to recreate it for the reader, a sensation of aesthetic lift, in a way. As for the balance between the interior and the exterior, one thing that I’m always so afraid of is that I’m going to write a story or novel which is just in a character’s head. There are people who can do that, like Thomas Bernhard or Garth Greenwell or Bryan Washington. But that’s not really where my strength is as a writer; my strength is in dramatic enactment. It’s in the scene work, it’s in using the body to orient the reader and tell a story through living space. But it’s challenging because a novel *does* need interiority. That’s why it’s a novel—otherwise it would be a movie or a stage play.

I’m always trying to marry those two things: foregrounding in the body and the physicality of narrative, and the sense that what makes a novel work is access to the interior. I’m always trying to wed the two and find places where they can be joined in interesting ways. Dialogue is one of those ways. Dialogue is a rare thing in narrative where a character is externalising the internal, right? They are literally exteriorising their thoughts. Dialogues between characters are often some of the most important moments in a story, because characters can actually speak to each other and engage directly. It tells the reader a lot about who they are, if they’re direct or if they’re evasive and lie, deceive, or cheat their way through conversation. As a writer, I try to be somewhere between Ibsen and Chekhov when it comes to dramatic enactment and finding ways for the interior to work itself to the surface while paying very

close attention to the feelings and impulses and physicality of my characters. That deeply matters to me.

GK: An Ibsen-Chekhov middle ground sounds pretty perfect, right? That's exactly where you'd want to be.

BT: When in doubt, I turn to Ibsen and Chekhov. They have very seldom led me astray.

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GK: On that note, I have to ask about the upcoming film adaptation of *Real Life* for which you've written the screenplay. I love your "sweater weather" newsletters too—as I've told you before—where you talk a lot about drama, particularly cinema. You wrote something recently on *The Nest*. You also talked about *Bergman Island*, a film which I really enjoyed. Your answers to my questions about *Real Life* the novel seem to imply as much, but is there a theatrical interest to your writing? Could you see yourself writing a play one day? And how's the screenplay going?

BT: That's funny. My friend Jeremy, who is a brilliant playwright, turned to me at dinner two weeks ago and said, are you writing a play? I feel like you're writing a play. Are you writing a play? And I was like: no, Jeremy, I am not writing a play. But he said, you're writing a play. You better not be writing a play.

It's also funny because I am going back to working on the revision of the screenplay for *Real Life* after this Zoom call. I wrote the first draft of it last fall, and it was quite a strange undertaking because screenplays are so different from novels. And I had never written one before, so I had to teach myself the form, which I did by reading Chekhov and Ibsen after I went out and bought collected works of their plays. I sat down and went through my favourites line by line and tried to figure out how drama is put together. I have studied their plays before to figure out how to write a novel, so it only felt appropriate that I would also do it to figure out how to write a screenplay.

The screenplay process was really difficult at first. Then it became a lot of fun. Like most things, once you figure out the format it's just playing around with dialogue, which is one of my favorite things to write. It's about getting characters into a room and letting them chatter. At the start of the year, I got notes back on the script and the producers were just wonderful. They're really excited about the draft and their notes were really pushing me to exteriorise certain parts of the story. Some of the leaps I was making in that draft were because I had not thought about a reader or viewer coming to the story fresh, who didn't have the benefit of the

novel in their head. It's been a process of fully grounding the version of the story that is the screenplay in its visual medium, and letting the visual medium do the thinking.

The story has changed quite a lot. *Real Life* as a novel and *Real Life* as a movie are quite different. One of the main differences is that Wallace can be sad and recessive in the novel, and that may make a good novel, but it does not make a good movie. And so there are all these ways where I'm making Wallace come forward and be the centre of the film differently to his centrality in the novel, where I had the convenience of letting him narrate everything. When he's looking at other people it's still embedded in his consciousness—but in a movie, when the camera's looking at another character, they're the centre of that scene. It's about finding ways to make both him and other characters active participants without betraying the sensibility of the story. So that's where I am right now: I'm trying to figure out how to strike that balance, by writing in more scenes to build the storyworld and stuff like that.

GK: A reason for me to not keep you too long then. I'm also excited for the forthcoming novel we touched on. What can you tell me about *The Late Americans*?

BT: *The Late Americans* will at first glance bear some resemblance to *Filthy Animals* and *Real Life*. It's about a group of youngish people in Iowa City and it opens with a poet at a poetry seminar that is part of the Iowa Writer's Workshop. The poet is causing a lot of trouble in class.

From there, it becomes this relay as the narrative is handed off to a chorus of characters. There are people who work in meat packing plants, there are people who work in hospice kitchens, there are people who are dancers, there are people who are sculptors. It is a novel very much about the wages of trying to live a creative life and a life of self-expression in a late capitalist hellscape. But it's also about my usual subjects: how is it possible to know another person? How is it possible to love and be loved? How is it possible to survive the unruly urgencies of life in a way that leaves you available to the possibility of intimacy and care? It's an ensemble novel set in the Midwest, and I feel like it's a nice middle ground between my first two books. I'm taking on quite a range of characters and unlike *Real Life* it spans longer than a weekend. Unlike *Filthy Animals,* all the stories are *connected* pieces. It's really a novel about a year in Iowa City and what that can be like for different people in a social hierarchy.