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Alive and Human: Situating Wallace, Lethem, and Russell in Contemporary Fiction

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ALIVE AND HUMAN: SITUATING WALLACE, LETHEM,

AND RUSSELL IN CONTEMPORARY

FICTION

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This project will attempt to provide an outline of some of the most salient constructions of present-day literary fiction, where those constructions might overlap or conflict, and how various contemporary authors and their works might usefully fit within those constructions. This project will argue that fiction-writers following postmodernism are presented with a unique problem of how to write fiction in a way that acknowledges the problems of using language as a primary meaning-making structure without falling down a linguistic rabbit hole where a text ceases to be about anything other than itself. Beginning with David Foster Wallace, this project will focus on the ways that fiction writers Jonathan Lethem and Karen Russell are still aware of this problem and struggling to work through it, with Wallace's work serving as a kind of bridge between the postmodern and the contemporary. It will argue that post-postmodernism marks a shift in emphasis from the construction of texts and worlds to what it means to be human within those worlds, which are often unstable, commercialized, and alienating, and that all three authors write about human connections as points of redemption or escape from unstable realities.

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I would like to thank my committee members, Robert McLaughlin and Jane Carman, for all their help throughout this process. This project wouldn't have happened without you. I would also like to thank my parents, for everything.

<div align="right">C.K.</div>

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POST-POSTMODERNISM AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN:

CONSTRUCTING A THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

FOR CONTEMPORARY FICTION

As Brian McHale notes in *Postmodernist Fiction*, "There is no postmodernism 'out there' in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or romanticism 'out there'" (4). Our understandings of postmodernism, like any period of literature, are merely constructions. Some constructions are more useful or inclusive than others. Jeremy Green characterizes these constructions as forming "a discursive field, a terrain of competing positions, rather than a coherent concept" (1). If postmodernism as a movement was hard to characterize, this was only one of the reasons. Perhaps more than any other period of literature, postmodernism foregrounded its constructedness, resulting in an upsurge of metatexts and language games that were expert at pointing to meaning-making as a discursive process. It's not surprising that writers and critics are still having trouble identifying the thing we refer to as "postmodernism," which is well known for its resistance to limits and its deconstructive techniques. Green suggests that postmodernism is "a stylistic trend in art, architecture, and literature, typified by allusiveness, play, loose or arbitrary structures, fragmentation, willful superficiality, and the collision or commingling of high and low registers," even as he acknowledges that not all of these characteristics were new to the movement, nor does that description lead to anything like a "coherent model" (2).

Many of these problems have shifted onto post-millennium literature without having ever been fully resolved regarding postmodernism. There's very little consensus in the field about what is currently happening in fiction, how or whether it differs from postmodernism, and what ends fiction should be working toward. This project will attempt to provide an outline of some of the most salient constructions of present-day literary fiction, where those constructions might overlap or conflict, and how various contemporary authors and their works might usefully fit within those constructions. This project will argue that fiction-writers following postmodernism are presented with a unique problem of how to write fiction in a way that acknowledges the problems of using language as a primary meaning-making structure without falling down a linguistic rabbit hole of signs and signifiers, where a text ceases to be about anything other than itself. Beginning with David Foster Wallace, this project will focus on the ways that fiction writers Jonathan Lethem and Karen Russell are still aware of this problem and struggling to work through it, with Wallace's work serving as a kind of bridge between the postmodern movement and whatever is happening in contemporary fiction.

Postmodernism and the Linguistic Turn

I do not wish to oversimplify the complexity of postmodern literature, but there is not space in this project to examine its works in any depth. I will attempt to acknowledge as carefully as I can the many nuances of the period as I examine its influences on present-day fiction, knowing that this analysis is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, I will identify and explain features that are particularly frequent or influential, but they are by no means the only features of postmodernism, nor does every work of postmodern

fiction make use of them. One of the most widely recognized features, and one of the most problematic for contemporary fiction writers, is what Christopher Breu refers to as the "linguistic turn." He writes:

> What began by returning a politically powerful understanding language, subjectivity, and culture to the center of academic inquiry in the humanities and social sciences has itself become naturalized into a new kind of essentialism: one that presents culture, language, or rhetoric (or some combination thereof) as autonomous and, as Louis Althusser put it in a different context, "in the last instance" determining the privileged medium by which we can comprehend the social. (Breu 6)

Where theorizing language as a construct was useful in breaking down the grand narratives of much modernist thinking, it is now "as constraining" as it once was "liberating" (Breu 6). Breu theorizes that because we can no longer recognize the limits of culture and language, they have become exactly the kinds of "essentializing" features that postmodernism sought to work against. Green suggests a similar manifestation. He writes, "The introduction of post-structuralist ideas into the Anglophone academy has produced a certain orthodoxy in ways of thinking about history, language, desire, and difference that might be described as an ideology of postmodernism" (Green 2). Linda Hutcheon notes this as well when she writes that postmodernism has generalized into "a kind of generic counter-discourse, but paradoxically one well on its way to becoming a discourse, a *doxa*" ("Gone Forever" 16). In a way, postmodernism did its job too well. Lance Olsen suggests that the moment postmodernism became accepted into popular culture, it "effectively died, suffocated by the flabby weight of its own trendiness. To

bring the new avant-garde into the establishment, no matter in what mangled form, is to begin to traditionalize the avant-garde, to stabilize a way of thinking whose essence was supposed to be destabilization" ("The Next Generation"). Ultimately, postmodernism's success may be one of the things that contributed to its decline.

McHale approaches what I want to argue are two facets of the same problem from an ontological direction. He argues that the principal questions of the modernist period were epistemological: How can I understand the world and my place in it? How can we know things and what does it mean to be certain of something? (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 9). Alternatively, the postmodern questions tended to be ontological: "What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10). As McHale acknowledges, these are simplifications; epistemological and ontological questions about ourselves and the world will necessarily overlap. However, in part because of its linguistic theorizing, postmodernism had a tendency to deconstruct and undermine the foundations for those ontological questions. McHale writes, "We suspect, with Nelson Goodman (1978), that, while there may well be somewhere a 'world' underlying all our disparate versions of it, that world is finally inaccessible, and all we have are the versions . . . Lacking foundations, how are we to proceed?" (*Constructing Postmodernism* 5). The "world" is merely a construct, and since constructs are chiefly discursive, the constructedness of the world is inescapably a linguistic problem. Language cannot pin down reality if both are constructions and unstable ones at that. By foregrounding this constructedness, postmodernism undermined the ability of language to point outside itself. Fredric Jameson writes that "reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the

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signified—is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism" (96). While this may be an oversimplification of postmodern literature and its agenda, it does have serious implications for fiction. If postmodernists were preoccupied with ontological questions and the constructedness of the world, writers after postmodernism, like Wallace, have shifted their attention to what it means to be human in this kind of constructed world. Lethem's and Russell's fictional worlds reflect this kind of ersatz quality, but their writing is less about the construction itself than its implications for their characters.

One of the side effects of the linguistic turn is a tendency toward metatexts. Fiction that self-consciously draws attention to itself as a work of fiction is useful in demonstrating the ontological instability of the world (and language). Another side effect of the linguistic turn is what McHale refers to as "double-coding," a term which lends itself to a variety of interpretations, but we can take here to mean a technique that embodies multiple meanings at once (*Constructing Postmodernism* 9). For example, double-coded language might be both a statement about the world and a comment on the language itself. One clear manifestation of this kind of double-coding in postmodern literature is the use of irony, or language that says one thing and means another. However, irony feeds back into the problem of ontological instability; its function is inherently deconstructive. Hutcheon writes, "It can be hard to achieve activist ends (with firm moral values) in a postmodern world where such values are not permitted to be grounded, where no utopian possibility is left unironized" ("Gone Forever" 17). She refers to this elsewhere as a "crisis in legitimation" (Hutcheon, "Beginning" 249).

These two features led to singular problems for contemporary fiction writers. David Foster Wallace addresses some of these in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." He argues that, "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (Wallace, "E Unibus" 171). If postmodernism has become the new "*doxa*," Wallace suggests that it is largely due to mass media. Irony, he claims, has been absorbed by popular culture, especially television, to the point where it is no longer as effective at deconstruction as it is at perpetuating loneliness. In a sense, irony and metafiction, which used to serve as techniques for breaking down grand narratives, have become the new grand narrative, or one aspect of the "ideology of postmodernism" that Green refers to. Subsequently, metatexts have lost credibility the way grand narratives once did for postmodernists. For Wallace, irony is the chief culprit in the problems with the linguistic turn because it suggests that it's "impossible to mean what you say," or worse, that it's "banal" to try to mean anything (Wallace, "E Unibus" 184). "Irony," he writes, "Entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (Wallace, "E Unibus" 183). This runs a parallel with Breu's charge that language and culture refuse to acknowledge their limits; irony, in effect, is without limits, which makes it just as imprisoning as the grand narratives it used to tear down. The following sections of this chapter will examine the ways various critics and fiction writers are reacting to this and other problems and their proposed solutions for the future of literature.

Return to Realism

Writers and critics like Jonathan Franzen advocate an abandonment of the postmodern agenda in favor of a return to realism. Franzen writes, "When the times get really, really awful, you retrench; you reexamine the old content in new contexts; you try to preserve; you seem obsolete . . . The day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative" ("I'll Be Doing" 38). If postmodernism's irony and metatexts have ceased to be useful or, as Franzen suggests, the novel has ceased to be relevant in the face of mass popular culture, he suggests a "retrenching" to literary fiction as a "vessel for preserving" "humane values" ("I'll Be Doing" 37). This is similar to Wallace's claims at the end of "E Unibus Pluram," where he writes that "the next real literary 'rebels'" might eschew irony in favor of sincerity and "have the childish gall to actually endorse single-entendre values" (192). However, there is a subtle difference in these agendas that is made apparent by each authors' attempts to carry them out in their fiction. Franzen's *Freedom* enacts a realistic social novel of the white, middle-class, post-millennial American family. However, Robert L. McLaughlin argues that Franzen's strategy does not "sufficiently account for the extent to which the pop media . . . have co-opted the narrative form to which he wants to return" ("After the Revolution" 286). Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, while it does attempt to back away from irony, does not make any attempt to pretend that irony never happened. Rather, Wallace's agenda seems to push more for the working through of postmodern problems than the outright "retrenching" to realism. As McLaughlin notes, "Neither America nor the fiction that seeks to represent it can return to a state of pre-postmodern innocence regarding language and the process of representation" ("Post-Postmodern Discontent" 114). To

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return to a time when irony wasn't pervasive and the constructedness of both reality and language wasn't foregrounded, if it is even possible, isn't particular helpful since it doesn't provide any solutions for being human in such a world. However, Franzen's approach is not without support since, as McLaughlin notes, conventional realism is the primary form of literature both inside the classroom and out ("Post-Postmodern Discontent" 111). Lethem and Russell seem to be working with this instability of language in different ways. There are fewer direct comments on irony's pervasiveness and more of an implicit recognition that language is unstable, but it's also the only meaning-making structure we can access. While their texts have things in common with Franzen's realism, such as chronological narrative that is generally limited to the perspective of one main character, they find other ways to draw attention to the instability of the worlds within their texts and, by extension, the world outside the text.

Late Postmodernism

There are also critics who disagree about whether something different from postmodernism is happening in present-day fiction. Jeremy Green's study *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* theorizes fiction of the nineties as a twilight stage of postmodernism that, while it has distinctive features, is not entirely separate. Like Franzen, he notes the "widespread dismay over the current conditions and future prospects of the novel" in the face of mass media, particularly television (Green 5). Green suggests that novelists as a whole are now working from the margins of a culture fused with technology, a "technoculture" that "embodies the superficiality, passivity, and information overload that undermine the reflective capacities of the citizen-subject (8).

While Wallace also writes extensively on the ubiquity of television and its potential

dangers, Green's study takes a somewhat more alarmist approach. He writes, "The

postmodern novel enters the new century amidst a portentous clatter of death notices—

for postmodernism, for the reading public, and for the printed book" (Green 17).

McLaughlin also notes the decline of publishing and Franzen the "death" of the social

novel, although the two differ widely in their opinions on the potential future of texts;

McLaughlin sees this less as a "clatter of death notices" than a shift in perspective in the

literary field. In light of these anxieties about the future of fiction, Green theorizes

writing as an act of solipsism, citing the work of authors like Richard Powers, Kathryn

Davis, and David Markson. He writes that "writing becomes a supremely isolated

activity, the product of a mind cut off from other minds . . . As such, writing confirms

solipsism, and despairs of communication, not to mention cultural influence" (Green 11).

This is contrasted with the views of Wallace, Lethem, and Russell, all of whom

seem to view writing as a communal or even a redemptive act. In their interviews,

Lethem and Russell are optimistic about the great authors currently in the field, and

Wallace, in particular, is vocal about writing as a means of connection, not solipsism,

where readers and writers enter into a relationship with one another. Wallace remarks that

the best fiction is one where, "I feel unalone—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I

feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another

consciousness" (Miller 62). Technology also plays a role in their fiction, particularly in

the worlds of Wallace and Lethem. While these fictional technologies often have

extremely dark underpinnings—in *Infinite Jest*: the destructive annulation that has taken

over a portion of the United States or the video cartridge that kills anyone who watches it;

in *Chronic City*: the Chinese mines that trap a team of astronauts in space or the mechanical tiger that destroys the unwanted buildings of Manhattan—these novels are not so much a criticism of technology as an examination of how people live in that kind of world. Both authors find ways to incorporate technology into fiction the way it is in contemporary life (or an exaggerated version that sheds insight onto the technology of real life). They represent what it might be like to live in a world of screens and buttons and how that influences the possibility of human connection in an increasingly virtual world.

Working through Postmodernism

The possible return to realism aside, most of the conversations about contemporary fiction agree that something different from postmodernism is happening. Whether or not that thing is entirely separate and distinct is less important than attempting to identify some of the features of present-day fiction, its possible agenda, and what influences the linguistic turn may have had on it. Many critics and fiction writers, like Wallace and McLaughlin, see fiction as an opportunity to work through the linguistic problems that postmodernism raised. Breu writes that his study of materiality, biopolitics, and contemporary fiction "does not take the inability of language to fully account for its object as a reason to turn away from the attempt at such an account" (1). Rather, it is an opportunity to find new spaces in the field for theory and fiction. Various terms abound for contemporary fiction, including late postmodernism (Jeremy Green), neorealism (Lance Olsen), Avant-Pop (Larry McCaffery), crackpot realism (Richard Powers), new materialism (Chrstopher Breu), cosmodernism (Christian Moraru), new humanism (Mary

K. Holland), and post-postmodernism (Stephen J. Burn, Robert L. McLaughlin), to name only some. The remainder of this chapter will look at each of these theories to see what features or possible agenda they lay out for contemporary fiction, where they might intersect, and which might best account for what is happening in the fiction of Wallace, Lethem, and Russell.

In his article "The Next Generation in Fiction," Lance Olsen acknowledges the current reaction against postmodern experimentation as a natural progression of a new generation of authors. He writes, "The urge of the young is always to create their own unique space in language and experience, and this is just what many of the new generation of fiction writers have done by turning away from what they sense are wornout 'experimental' techniques" (Olsen, "The Next Generation"). He notes a trend similar to Franzen's return to realism in what he refers to as "neorealism," which he characterizes not as a "retrenching" but a reaction against postmodernism and a "longing" for a time when it didn't exist. Citing the work of Bret Easton Ellis, Raymond Carver, and Ann Beattie, he describes a fiction that "returned us to the world and to the notion of character with a vengeance," "where content is privileged over form, where language is transparent," and that "is usually cynical and ironic," focused on a middle-class that is preoccupied with appearances (Olsen, "The Next Generation"). It is a fiction that seeks meaning often aggressively and "has moved through the furnace of postmodernity and come out the other side never able to be quite the same again" (Olsen, "The Next Generation"). Like Breu and Green, Olsen describes fiction that seeks the limits that postmodernism was keen to deconstruct and that cannot quite return to realism as though the movement never happened. In part, Olsen credits this revolution to the rising number

of MFA programs in fiction, which tend to "reproduce genre fiction and social realism" and play to a publishing industry that, with ever-dwindling numbers of readers, is unwilling to take many risks (Olsen, "Introduction"). More than anything, he argues for an extremely pluralistic vision of contemporary fiction that, in spite of the decline of publishing, offers various niches from graphic fiction to gay and lesbian fiction, where "continual metamorphosis is the dominant metaphor" (Olsen, "Introduction"). This kind of pluralistic view may be best for describing the fiction of any period, since no theory can fully account for the nuances of an entire field. Even the creation of categories like these suggests limitations that are not always helpful. However, its broadness leaves something to be desired.

Avant-Pop situates the major problem that contemporary writers are working through as a product of mass media as much as a product of postmodernism. Larry McCaffery's collection, *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology* includes authors as diverse as Mark Leynor, David Foster Wallace, and Bret Easton Ellis as well as postmodern giants like Don DeLillo and Robert Coover. Leading the Avant-Pop charge, Larry McCaffery incorporates many of the same anxieties Wallace does about the "*hyperreality* of television lands, media 'jungles,' and information 'highways'. . . peopled by media figures whose lives and stories seem at once more vivid, more familiar, and *more real* than anything the artist might create" (*After Yesterday's Crash* xiv). McCaffery, too, notes the difficulty this places on the fiction writer, particularly after postmodernism when "serious art died but so had a lot of other things—including meaning, truth, originality, the author (and authority, generally), realism, even reality itself" (*After Yesterday's Crash* xv). While this may be slightly overstating, it does target

some of the residual concerns for writers following postmodernism. In the face of these concerns, McCaffery and Avant-Pop propose a fiction that "coexists" with the cultural presence of mass media and finds new ways to represent that reality. He describes this agenda as less about postmodernism's "skepticism regarding language's ability to render 'meaning' and 'truth' about the world" and more about creating an "accurate sense of the way people conceive of themselves and the world they live in than that supplied by traditional realism" (McCaffery, *After Yesterday's Crash* xxi). Like Wallace, McCaffery cannot imagine a world without television, and if fiction is going to have any chance at representing reality as we experience it, fiction will have to find a way to incorporate television and its effects, which is ultimately a more "realistic" representation (*After Yesterday's Crash* xxiv). Avant-Pop seeks to represent plots and characters that exist in an "info-overloaded, remote-control culture capable of accessing innumerable realities with just a casual flick of the joystick" (McCaffery, *After Yesterday's Crash* xxvii). McLaughlin also suggests that it attempts to "connect the reader in her loneliness to a larger social world but to do so with an awareness that the reader's loneliness is to a great extent the result of her immersion in the digital-media entertainment culture" ("After the Revolution" 287). This prescription for present-day fiction is, on the whole, more optimistic than Green's, Franzen's, and perhaps even Wallace's, and some of the Lethem's early novels seem to have Avant-Pop-type undertones. Avant-Pop seems to find the problems facing writers less as a cause for despair than an opportunity to create something new. Although it was published two years after "E Unibus Pluram," McCaffery does not seem to share Wallace's concern about the pervasiveness of irony in contemporary culture. In some ways, this may liken Avant-Pop's agenda to the "Image-

Fiction" that Wallace critiques; fiction that too closely resembles televisual culture may become indistinguishable from it, not a cure but a perpetuation.

Crackpot realism, a term originally coined by Richard Powers, seems to share Avant-Pop's optimism regarding the future of fiction. Melvin Jules Bukiet provides an overview of the genre and its features in his essay "Crackpot Realism: Fiction for the Forthcoming Millennium." He includes writers such as Powers, Thomas Pynchon, and Jonathan Franzen in his description. Like Wallace, McCaffery, and many other contemporary critics, Bukiet notes the "siege" of "talk radio, computer games, and especially television" on present-day culture which, he writes, "like it or not (and the feeling here is NOT), changes the very forms of all communication" (13). Crackpot realism, by Buckiet's assessment, is sort of a hybrid of the absurd, the real, and the magical real. "Beyond the welter of random, inchoate experience," he explains, "they [the crackpot realists] find pattern and meaning" (Buckiet 14). Although the characters in this kind of fiction "deviate from the standards of normal behavior," they "are not necessarily lunatics" (Buckiet 16). Rather, like Avant-Pop, crackpot realism seeks to represent a strange, hyperreal, and often alienating world as it really is. Crackpot realism also seems to carry a renewed faith in language to represent that world. Buckiet writes that the metafictionists "seem more interested in the playfulness of words and ideas for their own sake than in the plots their ideas engender" while a crackpot realist "believes that ideas create his reality" (18). "Words are never 'merely' speech," he writes, "They take on a physical existence as real as their speakers," and beneath all the chaos of contemporary life, the crackpot realist expects there lingers meanings, patterns, or answers—if only one can find them (Buckiet 18). There is ultimately something redemptive about this kind of

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fiction. Buckiet concludes, "The crazed, wishful-thinking crackpot realist has faith in a nature that keeps procreating, renewing itself into further generations of lunacy and murder, trying again and again to get it right" (22). All three authors have things in common with the crackpot realist agenda, but Wallace, Lethem, and Russell also seem to find ways to complicate their relationships to this overflow of patterns and information and the possibility of reaching answers underneath it.

Other theories of contemporary fiction have a decidedly more political agenda. Christopher Breu's theory of biopolitics examines how language (and subsequently, fiction) exists in tension with the material world, both culturally and politically. Like many of the others, he acknowledges that fiction writers and critics face unique problems from the fallout of the linguistic turn, the "image culture and what Guy Debord presciently terms *the society of the spectacle*," and the lingering effects of a postmodern past that is simultaneously "distant" and still "haunts the cultural imagination" (Breu 18-24). However, Breu does not see language's inability to account for reality as an obstacle; rather, it opens up space in the current cultural landscape to look at "various forms of materiality in contemporary social existence—the materiality of the body, the object world of late-capitalist life, the material elements of political-economic production, the various forms of materiality we group under the signifier 'nature'" (Breu 1). He argues, "I don't so much want to abandon the important work done by the linguistic and cultural turns as theorize the limits of this work and begin to account for (while recognizing the impossibility of fully doing so) that which they are not able to discuss: the forms of materiality that resist, exceed, and exist in tension with the cultural and linguistic" (Breu 3). His account, looking at the work of authors like Thomas Pynchon, J. G. Ballard, and

Dodie Bellamy, strives to see how these elements interact with and influence each other as well as how they might limit or resist one another in a late-capitalist environment. Like McCaffery and Buckiet, Breu seems optimistic about the novel's prospects. He writes, "Novels can embrace or challenge dominant aesthetic practices; similarly, they can cast back or point forward to social and economic developments that move in a different temporality to those that are dominant in any given moment" (Breu 29).

Like biopolitics, Christian Moraru's account of cosmodernism seems to find fault with the former emphasis on language structures. It further highlights postmodernism's failure to accomplish everything it set out to do, particularly regarding other voices and cultures. While postmodern texts, as Linda Hutcheon pointed out, sought to "decenter" and bring marginalized voices to the forefront ("Beginning" 252), Christian Moraru is critical of its success in resisting a late capitalist agenda. He writes, "Much as certain varieties of postmodernism do enable a 'critique' of late globalization, this critique is undercut by postmodernism's historical 'hubris'—by postmodernism's globalizing thrust" (Moraru 307). Like Breu, Moraru notes that postmodernism, where it relates to language and politics, has become so widespread that it is now its own version of essentialism. Moraru goes so far as to suggest that "it has itself become a universal ideology that kills everything that gives meaning and depth to the lives of non-western individuals and societies" (310). He advocates instead for a fiction and "culture of relatedness," citing the work of authors like Nicole Mones, Suki Kim, and Karen Tei Yamashita. Cosmodernism stresses a "being-in-relation" and that fiction, if it is to be relevant and effective in the contemporary world, must recognize otherness as separate from "us" without denying or subsuming it. (Moraru 2). He writes, "Apparently opposite

to the dehumanization of the other ('they are not human like us') is the 'universalization' of this other in the name and under the rubric of 'our common humanity,'" both of which pose serious problems to contemporary fiction and culture (Moraru 28). Although he approaches it from a different direction, Moraru's conclusion about the effects of this kind of ideology is, like Franzen's, that it's ultimately alienating. "Overtly or covertly solipsistic," Moraru writes, "this ontology is excessively self-centered. Hostage to its own gaze and apprehensive of the actual or perceived 'outside' to the point of racism and xenophobia, it can be defined as an *allergy* of being" (30). Wallace is especially concerned about a culture of solipsism, and Wallace, Lethem, and Russell deal in various ways with the effects of alienation on their characters.

The inability of language to fully account for reality in the wake of the linguistic turn is one of the problems Mary K. Holland takes up in *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. Holland identifies a dissatisfaction in contemporary literature with the "disaffected irony and language games" of postmodernism and seeks to find ways that language (and fiction) can still be meaningful. Like Breu, McCaffery, and many of the others, she notes that many fiction writers are responding to and working through the problems of language rather than persisting in metafictional games or simply abandoning the struggle altogether in favor of more conservative realism. She writes that twenty-first century American fiction "looks, reads, and feels profoundly different from twentieth-century postmodern literature because it conceives of what language is and what it can do very differently. It displays a new faith in language and certainty about the novel's ability to engage in humanist pursuits. . ." (Holland 1). Like Breu, McCaffery, and Buckiet, Holland appears more

optimistic about the novel's future than either Green or Franzen. She identifies texts that make use of metafictional tricks, such as those by David Foster Wallace, Mark Z. Danielewski, and Steve Tomasula, not only to foreground language as a mediating structure, but also to establish a more meaningful connection with the reader. She refers to this approach as new humanism, or "a nontotalizing, nonessentializing humanism that admits human fallibility, limitations in understanding, and difference" (Holland 6). Again, there is the inclination that Breu identifies to reassert the limitations of language and culture, and also a drive similar to Moraru's to acknowledge an "other" without absorbing and, subsequently, discounting it. She suggests that "literature today remains postmodern in its assumptions about the culture and world from which it arises, and remains poststructural in its assumptions about the arbitrariness and problems of language, and yet still uses this postmodernism and poststructuralism to humanist ends of generating empathy, communal bonds, ethical and political questions, and, most basically, communicable meaning" (Holland 17).

Stephen J. Burn also begins with the notion that something different from postmodernism is happening in current fiction, a movement that he is not the first to refer to as post-postmodernism. In his chapter "A Map of the Territory: American Fiction at the Millennium," he examines the work of contemporary authors David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, and Jonathan Franzen in the wake of postmodernism. Like many other critics, Burn notes a dissatisfaction with the self-consciousness of texts following the linguistic turn, and he attempts to map out some of the characteristics of post-postmodern literature. He suggests that this tendency of postmodern texts to be self-aware as well as encyclopedic are two of the features that contemporary fiction is now attempting to work

against. Burn cites this awareness of its postmodern roots as one of the distinguishing features of post-postmodernism, calling it a "family resemblance" ("A Map of the Territory" 19). He writes, "Post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within postmodernism. As such it is a development from, rather than an explicit rejection of, the preceding movement" (Burn, "A Map of the Territory" 19). Burn suggests that post-postmodern texts also employ fewer metafictional techniques and show a greater attention both to the political-social world and to characters' history as an influence that shapes them in the present. While these features are fairly broad, they're helpful in pinpointing ways in which post-postmodernism is both reacting to and influenced by the literature that came before it.

Robert L. McLaughlin also takes up the term in his article "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," which examines ways that contemporary fiction writers react to the problems of dwindling readership and postmodern metafiction. He writes, "Postmodernism made the process of representation problematic; it foregrounded literature pointing to itself trying to point to the world, but it did not give up the attempt to point to the world" (McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent" 115). Simply because a text is self-referential does not make it non-referential. He suggests that what has happened in contemporary fiction is not an outright change so much as a shift in emphasis on self-awareness to awareness of the world. Contemporary fiction often contains fewer metafictional tricks, but it recognizes the problem, perhaps even the impossibility, of representing a world that is not mediated by language. McLaughlin also presents a more optimistic landscape for present-day fiction. He suggests that "literature has been and continues to be valuable as a way of critiquing

our social world, finding ways to be human in it, and truly connecting with others. This is a good way to think about the agenda of post-postmodernism, but only if we understand that all of these things are mediated through language" (McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent" 116).

Constructing Connections

What all of these theories have in common is the recognition that there are very serious, and perhaps even unique, problems facing contemporary writers, whether those are located in television and mass media, the alienation perpetuated by such a highly mediated society, postmodernism's linguistic turn, the decline of readership, or some combination of those. Critics and authors, not surprisingly, vary in their reactions to these problems, whether it's a "retrenching" to realism, finding a way to work through language difficulties and hyperreality, or a tentative embracing of televisual culture. Rather than view this as a problem, it is perhaps one of the strengths of the current literary field. Breu writes that "it is through the convergence of disparate critical accounts around a singular (if sometimes vaguely defined) object that real change often happens in culture, academic or otherwise" (24). One does not need, necessarily, to separate postmodern fiction from whatever is happening now, as Green declines to do, but most, if not all the theories agree that contemporary fiction has some distinguishing features, many of which are as much a reaction to or an incorporation of postmodernism's characteristics than an outright rejection of them.

There is some degree of crossover between Wallace theorists Stephen J. Burn, Robert L. McLaughlin, and Mary K. Holland, which will help to focus the theoretical

discussion for the purposes of this project. What all three of these critics, among others in the conversation, seem to have identified in contemporary fiction—whether it's called post-postmodernism, new humanism, or something else entirely—is the same goal that fiction, even postmodern fiction, has always had: to establish a relationship with the reader that says something about what it means to be alive in a contemporary world. As Wallace said in his oft-quoted interview with Larry McCaffery, "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 26). What much contemporary fiction takes into account is that it must acknowledge the difficulties of language and signification—without getting lost in them—in order to represent those human struggles, which in contemporary culture are more mediated than they've ever been. Many of the authors Holland examines do this through highly experimental literature like Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, but as McLaughlin points out, much of contemporary literature is still straightforwardly realistic. He writes, "It seems to me that most readers' expectations—inside and outside English department classrooms—are still mostly informed by the conventions of realism: linear plots, psychologically individuated characters, transparent representation" (McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent" 111). These features are evident in Jonathan Lethem and Karen Russell's fiction. The narrative is relatively straightforward; there are no footnotes, no disruptive spacing or arrangement of text on the page. Yet I hope to argue that these authors are still fully aware of the problems of postmodernism and that they find other ways to complicate the characters' relationships with reality and language and, by extension, the readers'.

Examination of Terms

One place where the lack of consensus in what is happening in present-day fiction is evident is in the various terms abounding for it, each with its own agenda or prescription attached. Thus far, I have been using the terms *contemporary fiction* and *present-day fiction* interchangeably to refer to the nebulous something that is occurring in the wake of postmodernism (or perhaps as a part of it). More specifically, what I'm referring to with these terms is literary fiction from the mid-90s and early 2000s to the present, which spans roughly from Wallace's master work, *Infinite Jest* (1996), to Karen Russell's most recent story collection, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* (2014). In particular, this project will look at literary authors who tend to be taken up by a mainstream as well as an academic audience. This is not an attempt to privilege some kinds of fiction over others; it's merely a reflection of McLaughlin's observation that "the post-postmodernists have tended to deemphasize the self-referentiality in their fiction, at times . . . appearing to return to the conventions of realism, yet still insisting on the indeterminacy of reality ("After the Revolution" 289). However, I think there is the possibility that more accessible authors like Lethem or Russell might lead readers to more stylistically challenging authors like Wallace.

Additionally, this project will take up the term *post-postmodernism* as the over-arching definition of contemporary literary fiction. It's by no means the most elegant, but it also seems least prescriptive of the terms addressed above. More clearly, post-postmodernism attempts to provide a description of what is currently happening in fiction without the decidedly political or social agenda that terms like new humanism, biopolitics, or Avant-Pop seem to carry. In a way, post-postmodernism might function as

a kind of umbrella term for these various theories; its broadness is useful in talking about an extremely varied and shifting field, but it by no means accounts for all the nuances and prescriptions of various critiques.

Further, there may be a way to make the inherent clunkiness of a term like *post-postmodernism* more agreeable. Postmodernism had a similar problem in being faced with a term that suggests its dependence on modernism. McHale writes, "Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism; it does not come *after the present* (a solecism), but after the *modernist movement*. Thus the term 'postmodernism,' if we take it literally enough, *à la lettre*, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 5). He suggests that the 'post' in postmodernism is merely a reference to the literature's historicity, which is inescapable in all literary periods; "every literary-historical moment is post some other moment" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 5). In a movement that foregrounds its self-awareness, postmodernism may well be the best term available, and post-postmodernism is no less aware of its predecessors. Burn suggests that this is one of the central features of post-postmodernism; it is, explicitly, a progression from, rather than an outright rejection of, postmodernism (19). The fiction of post-postmodernism embraces, reacts against, or is in some way influenced by postmodernism and the linguistic turn, and its name foregrounds that awareness.

Conclusion

This research is significant because critics and fiction-writers are not in agreement about whether something different from postmodernism is happening in contemporary fiction or about what that "something" might be. This project will attempt to locate three authors in the unsettled field of present fiction and examine how their work functions in the spectrum of postmodernism and the contemporary. David Foster Wallace's work provides a foundation for this possible change, and his novel, *Infinite Jest*, is a cornerstone of contemporary literature. His work has inspired a great deal of criticism that will serve as an important and valuable basis for conducting research in the field. Jonathan Lethem's work seems, at times, to draw directly from Wallace's influence and to be making significant attempts at working through the language and reality problems of postmodernism. There is significantly less criticism about his work, which leaves plenty of room for building on the existing research. Finally, Karen Russell is a somewhat more mainstream-accessible author who is less preoccupied with metafictional games than empathetic storytelling, and she is perhaps located on the furthest end of the spectrum without quite crossing back into realism. There is almost no scholarly research about her work, but she has (along with Wallace and Lethem) received a MacArthur Fellowship, which suggests a lot of promise in her writing. One of the common charges against postmodern fiction is that it is written primarily by (and for) white males, so Russell's work adds a female voice to the study. The examinations of post-postmodernism, or contemporary fiction in general, have tended to focus on a similar set of authors, such as Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, and Mark Z. Danielewski. This study will attempt to broaden that list by looking at others, like

Jonathan Lethem and Karen Russell, who might be struggling with a similar set of problems in different ways. Lethem and Russell both seem to be handling the problems of the linguistic turn in ways that are different from Wallace's approach, although they still demonstrate an awareness of the need to work through rather than retreat to older forms. The inclusion of these authors can serve both to strengthen the credibility of post-postmodernism as a theory by finding it at work in a broader span of fiction and, if something different is happening, to add to an already complex theoretical discussion about the current state of fiction. In examining these authors, I hope to come to conclusions about where and how contemporary fiction is different from or reacting to postmodern fiction (if it is), and to work out some sort of understanding about contemporary fiction's agenda, methodology, and overall success in making real, human connections.

CHAPTER II

"NOT ANOTHER WORD": CHOICE AND

CONNECTION IN *INFINITE JEST*

AND *THE PALE KING*

Situating Wallace

In his nonfiction, David Foster Wallace sets up an agenda for contemporary

fiction that situates him as both a fiction writer and a critic. In his most noted nonfiction

essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and his oft-quoted interview with

Larry McCaffery, he outlines the state of contemporary fiction in the wake of

postmodernism. Numerous critics including Lance Olsen, Christopher Breu, and Stephen

J. Burn note a dissatisfaction with postmodern forms, and Wallace's claim that fiction is

"about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" speaks to the discontent of post-

postmodern authors with the language games of their predecessors (McCaffery, "An

Expanded Interview" 26). One can easily see Wallace's desire to transcend language and

make a real connection with his reader, both in his nonfiction essays and through his

characters' attempts to make connections in his fiction. Yet his work also makes it clear

how challenging it is to escape these problems. Wallace himself has difficulty resisting

the impulse to undercut each moment of sincerity with irony. In the McCaffery interview

alone, Mary K. Holland notes, "He mocks his own sincere investment in writing with

love—calling for an accompaniment of woodwinds, apologizing for being 'sappy'—and

worries about the unhipness of his 'art's heart's purpose'" (58). This is just one of many places where Wallace struggles to overcome the culture of irony that he identifies in "E Unibus Pluram," and it underscores the difficulty of this problem for contemporary fiction writers.

It's a little ironic that an author who foregrounded the problem of connecting with a reader (or anyone) through language would be able to do just that across an immense and varied fanbase. "Wallace's ability to create this sense of intense intimacy in his writing is what has garnered him a legion of devoted, obsessed fans," Greg Carlisle remarks in the introduction to *Consider David Foster Wallace* (15). "His work is both self-conscious and other-oriented, so detailed and so clearly like a conversation he's initiating with the reader—an invitation to collaboration—that when you read his fiction, you identify with the characters so much that often it seems like you're an actor playing the roles that you're reading" (Carlisle 15). Wallace's work is both intense and intimate, funny and serious, incredibly complex and at the same time conversational. A recurring thought I had when I was first encountering his work was that his writing sounded like the voice in my head, the one I thought was specific to me and turns out to be the voice of many. Wallace targets that aloneness, that sense of loneliness and solipsism that is ubiquitous in contemporary American life. In spite of the inherent constructedness of narrative, of all language, or perhaps because he foregrounds that very problem, Wallace manages to reach through the jumble of text and language, of shifting perspectives and chronology, to really connect with his readers. This is contrasted with the views of critics like Jeremy Green, who view writing as solipsistic, and it may in part account for the widespread popularity of Wallace's work.

Infinite Jest is a pivotal text for grounding the transition between postmodern and contemporary fiction. Stylistically, it has much in common with its postmodern predecessors. The novel makes use of excessive endnotes and a near-constant flux among time, place, and character. Wallace's distrust of straightforward realism is well-documented. He remarks in the McCaffery interview that "the classical Realist form is soothing, familiar, and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation" (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 34). As Wallace points out, this is what made metafiction so valuable, since "it helps reveal fiction as a mediated experience" (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 40). Infinite Jest presents itself as an obviously mediated experience. Editor Michael Pietsch refers to it as "a piece of glass that had been dropped from a great height" (Silverblatt, Interview with David Foster Wallace). In the same interview with Michael Silverblatt, Wallace describes the way the novel's structure mimics real life experience. He remarks, "It seems to me that so much of pre-millenial life in America consists of enormous amounts of what seem like discrete bits of information coming and that the real kind of intellectual adventure is finding ways to relate them to each other and to find larger patterns and meanings" (Silverblatt, Interview with David Foster Wallace). Infinite Jest echoes this kind of mentality with its overload of information about characters and their surroundings, copious endnotes, and seemingly random (although not actually random) organization. In this way, Wallace seems to have trouble moving away from some of the postmodern techniques of encyclopedic texts and works of fiction calling attention to themselves as works of fiction. In 981 pages plus another hundred or so more of detailed, small-print endnotes, the reader can hardly forget that the information she's receiving is mediated through a text. Kiki Benzon suggests that

the endnotes, "variously offering elaboration, clarification, crucial information, redundant digressions and, sometimes, entire scenes several pages long—produce yet another dimension of circuitry and narrative turbulence in the novel" (107). But this "narrative turbulence" is not merely for the sake of itself. If fiction is meant to reflect what it's actually like to live in such a highly mediated culture, then *Infinite Jest* is just "meta" enough to imitate that experience. The act of moving back and forth through the text, along with the sheer size and weight of a thousand-page novel, reminds the reader that what she's experiencing is constructed, an idea that is reinforced by the necessary piecing together of fragments of the plot.

The problem Wallace identifies in fiction occurs when it ceases to be about anything other than itself. That is, fiction and television that are merely self-referential are supposedly hip and entertaining, but they're also meaningless; they no longer point to anything in the world. Many critics situate this as a problem with postmodernism; Wallace himself, along with critic Robert L. McLaughlin, acknowledges how valuable irony and metafiction were—at first. McLaughlin suggests that postmodern fiction at its best, while it did self-consciously point to itself, was also trying to point toward the world (McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent" 107). Wallace situates the problem onto what he calls "the crank-turners," or those writers who came after postmodernism, who absorbed its techniques (such as the tendency to ironize), and ultimately made them meaningless (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 30). It wasn't until postmodern irony was absorbed into mass popular culture and became part of the everyday landscape that it ceased to be effective as a rhetorical tool, and now fiction that relies on meta-techniques manages to be entertaining and deconstructive rather than meaningful. Wallace and many

of the fiction writers of his time recognize the impossibility of returning to a time when language was innocent, and his work makes this struggle to transcend language apparent. While he comments on the exhaustion of meta-techniques in his nonfiction, he seems to be working out ways that metafiction can still be useful in texts like *Infinite Jest*. One of those ways is by making the text complex enough to force the reader to "put in her share of the linguistic work" rather than passively absorb information without making it so difficult that it's essentially "unreadable" (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 34). It is in places like this where Wallace seems acutely aware of the impossibility of a return to realism—or a time when language was innocent—and instead must find ways to write through language's irony and instability. David Hering describes the structure of *Infinite Jest*, with its similarity to a Sierpinski gasket, as purposefully leaving things out. He writes, "We can begin to understand the process by which Wallace's narrative schema operates, as an initially complete structure within which details are then methodically absented to prompt the reader into a process of inference" (Hering 91). It's possible that this share of "linguistic work" is part of Wallace's widespread appeal. Perhaps readers, like many of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, want to be held accountable for their end of the linguistic relationship.

Burn's analysis of the fiction that comes after postmodernism, which he refers to as post-postmodernism, is helpful in examining *Infinite Jest*. In "A Map of the Territory: American Fiction at the Millennium," Burn identifies several broad differences between the two movements (if, in fact, they are two separate things). Burn writes that while postmodern fiction's characters are "psychologically credible . . . they do, however, seem to have emerged more or less out of nowhere" ("A Map of the Territory" 24). He notes

that in the fiction following postmodernism, "We get a fuller sense of a character's personal history" as an influence that shapes characters in the present (Burn, "A Map of the Territory" 24-25). Indeed, a good portion of *Infinite Jest* is focused on various members of the Incandenza family: relaying family anecdotes that are often mediated through other family members, such as Orin's memory of Hal eating mold as a child, or complicating familial relationships, such as the implication that Orin's sexual exploits with the mothers of young children is somehow connected to unresolved issues with his own mother, Avril. "Rather than portraying characters as systems—through hyperbolic historiography, parody or allegory," Benzon writes, "Wallace positions characters within systems, evincing at once the rigidity of established patterns and codes, as well as points of potential rupture *within* these established codes" (102). *Infinite Jest* also has disproportionate amounts of narrative on the histories of various, seemingly minor, characters. This kind of attention is consistent from the beginning of the novel when Wallace introduces a series of seemingly unconnected characters, many of whom end up at Ennet House or resurface, however fleetingly, in other narratives. In the last chapter, when the reader is almost desperate for some kind of closure to the main plots, the narrative deviates yet again into the history of an until-then minor character, the Head Trainer at Enfield Tennis Academy, or ETA, Barry Loach.

There is a reluctance here to easily identify the main character, and this is consistent with a kind of personal worldview that Wallace refers to in his Kenyon College Commencement Speech, "This Is Water." In the speech, Wallace stresses the importance of resisting our certainties that we are at the center of everything. He remarks, "Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the

absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence"
(Wallace, "This Is Water"). In effect, we are the main characters in our own stories, and
most forms of contemporary narrative, from mainstream fiction to television, support this
belief. This is contrasted with the actual daily experience of being bombarded with
different perspectives for at least ten hours out of every day. In its style, *Infinite Jest*
resists this solipsistic thinking by showing not only the ways that everything is connected,
but also what a double-edged sword that might be. Trying to piece together all the
connections leads to sensory overload, leads to inaction. We can see an example of this in
the second chapter when Erdedy is paralyzed by indecision:

> He moved first toward the television console, then over toward his intercom
> module, then convulsively back toward the sounding phone, and then tried
> somehow to move toward both at once, finally, so that he stood splay-legged,
> arms wildly out as if something's been flung, splayed, entombed between the two
> sounds, without a thought in his head. (*Infinite Jest* 27)

Under the influence of too many stimuli, he becomes frozen, unable to act. Bombarded
by images for hours out of the day—from television, the Internet, advertisements, and
cell phones, just to name a few—contemporary culture is constantly under stimuli.
Paying attention to everything is impossible.

Crackpot realism seeks to find meanings within the chaos of contemporary
culture, but *Infinite Jest* paints a less than optimistic picture about the possibility of
finding answers. Even if we managed to escape the constructions of reality and language,
even if we managed to make all the connections in a complicated web of symbols and
interactions, it's not clear that we would come to any meaningful conclusions. The novel

presents itself as a series of missed connections that even a diligent reader struggles to

make sense of, and the last chapter leads us inevitably back to the first in an effort to

realize those connections. However, even re-reading the near-infinite text may not be

significantly more revealing; the scenes missing from the plot will never be written in,

and any attempts at an exhaustive understanding must be unsuccessful. Hal Incandenza's

obsession with memorizing the Oxford English Dictionary neatly symbolizes this

problem: even a character who knows all the words in the dictionary cannot necessarily

make meaning out of them. In the first chapter, the chronological end of the novel, Hal is

trapped inside himself, his extensive vocabulary useless, unable to communicate. If there

is, in fact, meaning buried at the bottom of encyclopedic information, the novel suggests

that we may never be able to access it.

Human Connection

At its heart, *Infinite Jest* is about the problems of people desperately trying to

escape solipsism and make real connections with other humans in spite of the instability

of language and the inherent risks of those connections. It's unclear whether or not these

efforts are successful. Holland argues that "even earnest attempts to escape only lead

back to new manifestations of the solipsistic loop," and it is true that the novel does not

lend itself to optimistic interpretations (77). The ending leaves the reader in a state of

limbo, unsure what has happened to Hal so that he can no longer communicate

effectively or whether Don Gately will survive his injuries and emerge from the hospital.

But uncertainty may well be the point, particularly in fiction that attempts to mirror the

world. Real life lacks closure, and real connection isn't meant to be easy. Wallace forces

the reader to undertake the "linguistic work" of reading a text that is not only challenging but lacks traditional narrative or thematic closure in part because real human connections are a struggle, a risk, and often, unfortunately, a failure (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 34).

It might be helpful to reexamine what we consider redemptive in a novel: characters who actually manage to make connections, or characters who make sincere efforts to make those connections, whether they actually succeed or not. Holland argues about the portrayal of AA meetings that "when the program asks its members to 'Identify' with each other, what it really dictates they do is empathize with this standard story each member tells, with their own story, with themselves" which only leads them back into the narcissistic loop (77). While this may be true, asking members to find similarities in their own stories is an attempt to decenter them from the kind of selfish thinking that alienates them from others. It is another effort to resist the belief that we are "at the absolute center of the universe" (Wallace, "This Is Water"). By forcing the AA members to acknowledge that there is nothing special or particular about their stories and addictions, the program is aiming to help them connect with something outside themselves. As Hering points out, the motif of the circle that recurs throughout *Infinite Jest* (e.g., annular fusion, addiction, narcissism, and the structure of the novel itself) can refer to the circular paths of self-destruction that both addicts and athletes in the novel subscribe to, but a circle can also indicate connection. Hering suggests that the novel, "employ(s) circular motifs in a manner that acts against solipsism rather than perpetuating it" (94). Indeed, the circle acts a connecting force between characters, in AA in particular, by creating, "awareness of the possibility of another kind of circle, one

outside of his or her own personalized 'route' that leads to their escape from the determined path of addiction" (Hering 94). That they must do this through a filter of their own experiences may be narcissistic, but it's also realistic. If empathizing is to feel how someone else is feeling, it can never be unmediated through the self; there may be something inherently narcissistic about *every* experience we have. Wallace recognizes that we don't have a single experience that isn't mediated through our own self-awareness. It's the choice, as Marathe points out in his conversations with Steeply, to focus our attention on "something bigger than the self" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 107).

That's only one of the complications inherent in trying to meaningfully connect with another person; one has the sense, through his characters, that Wallace doubts such a thing is even possible. Yet we see characters actively trying, in spite of that difficulty. "I'm Identifying every step of the way with you, Ramy. Oh *God*, what did I *say*," Kate Gompert remarks in her conversation with Remy Marathe (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 777). Like Wallace, Kate can't help but acknowledge the banality of empathizing (and he may be subtly pointing it out himself, as she is so tipsy she gets Marathe's name wrong), but less than a page later, she reiterates, "I am so totally Identifying it's not even *funny*" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 777). These ironic parodies of attempts to Identify are contrasted with Gately's earnest efforts at AA meetings. He reflects:

> The residents' House counselors suggest that they sit right up at the front of the
> hall where they can see the pores in the speaker's nose and try to Identify instead
> of Compare. Again, *Identify* means empathize. Identifying, unless you've got a
> stake in Comparing, isn't very hard to do, here. Because if you sit up front and

listen hard, all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically

alike, and like your own. (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 345)

The attention here is not on how all the stories are alike, which reduces empathy to

simple narcissism, but on the genuine effort it takes to first, really listen to someone, and

second, not see oneself as the single protagonist in some big, sad tragedy. This is hardly

the norm, as many of the newer AA speakers fall prey to various mistakes, such as

"performing" their narratives. Gately reflects on the place as an "irony-free zone. Same

with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is

something these tough ravaged people know and fear" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 369). Irony

keeps the speakers from connecting, both with other addicts and with the real sources of

their addictions.

Joelle's progress echoes Gately's, although comparatively, she's clean for much

less time in the novel. In her earliest days at Ennet house, she reports feeling "pretty

much cynical and repelled" by the meetings and their appeals to clichés, Higher Powers,

and Identification (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 361). She's a prime example of the kind of

addict who has the hardest time recovering in the novel because of her tendency to

intellectualize, which isn't how the program works. Like ironizing, intellectualizing AA

is actually detrimental to recovery, since it gets in the way of the ability to truly

empathize. Wallace writes that, "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to

thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own

thinking" and that, "99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves" (*Infinite

Jest* 203). Later in the novel, Joelle realizes that she's managed to stop overthinking

everything at meetings. Listening to a speaker relate his addiction story, she reflects, "His

story's full of colored idioms and those annoying little colored hand-motions and gestures, but to Joelle it doesn't seem like she cares that much anymore. She can Identify. The truth has some kind of irresistible unconscious attraction at meetings, no matter what the color or fellowship" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 708). This moment is not without mediation, however. Even as she claims to be empathizing, Joelle can't help noticing and characterizing his ticks as "colored," which, much like Kate Gompert's misuse of Marathe's name, may serve to undermine the whole moment, at least from a reader's perspective. Like his calling for "woodwinds" in the McCaffery interview, Wallace cannot quite escape the pull to be ironic in the midst of an attempt to say something real. Joelle's effort seems sincere, but even sincere efforts are problematized. She's no less ironic by the end of the novel, but there are moments when she's able to suspend that reductive approach and make an effort to connect.

Most of the attempts at connection between characters in the novel turn out to be a combination of extreme effort and something more that isn't quite definable. The effort is not so much intellectual as it is conscious; that is, it doesn't make logical, argumentative sense, but the thinker must also be aware of it because awareness is an important part of attention. Identifying with another human being is an active struggle since, as Wallace notes in his commencement speech, self-centeredness is our "default setting" ("This Is Water"). Again, this is where intellectualizing can actually hinder connection, since it is so self-focused that it prevents us from paying attention to anything outside ourselves. Attention is important, but it has be the *right* kind of attention, an other-directed attention rather than an inward-directed attention.

The other component is difficult to describe, and Wallace never seems to mention it directly. It may not be talked about so much as talked around. One might liken it to Zeno's Paradox, which implies that for every distance, one can cover half the distance from X to Y, then cover half of the remaining distance, and half of that, and so on. Since one will always have half of some infinitesimal amount of distance left, one can, intellectually, never reach the destination. Of course, we know this is impossible, because we cover distances all the time—inexplicably, but somehow, it happens. We can compare this to the over-analyzing of AA. Intellectually, most of the characters find AA's advice rather "whiny and insipid," but if they can cease intellectualizing about it, it often actually works (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 203). Gately notes, "The shocking discovery that the thing actually does seem to work. Does keep you Substance-free. It's improbable and shocking" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 349). No one quite knows how or why, but going to AA meetings and following the bland clichés has some inexplicable power to keep addicts clean. Gately's sponsors encourage him to think of AA's advice like the directions on a box of cake:

> . . . all Gately had to do was for fuck's sake give himself a break and relax and for once shut up and just follow the directions on the side of the fucking box. It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately like *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the like fucking baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result . . . basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result. (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 467)

Sobriety involves extreme amounts of effort, and at the same time, no one can quite explain how it happens.

We can draw a similar parallel to the characters' connections. Somehow, Gately and Joelle manage to connect in the novel, even though the when and how is never quite documented. It's tentative but unacknowledged during the climactic scene where Gately is shot and suddenly recognizes her as Madame Psychosis, and later in the hospital when he's intubated and conscious of making "barnyard sounds" at her and embarrassing himself (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 855). More obviously, Joelle reflects briefly on their relationship during the scene where she first realizes she is able to Identify with an AA speaker without being critical. She muses that "it's the first time she's felt sure she wants to keep straight no matter what it means facing. No matter if Don Gately takes Demerol or goes to jail or rejects her if she can't show him the face. It's the first time in a long time—tonight, 11/14—Joelle's even considered possibly showing somebody the face" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 710). This is a major development for her, since Joelle wears a U.H.I.D. veil specifically to hide her deformity. This connection doesn't "save" or reward either character; in fact, there is in inherent risk in forming relationships with newly recovered addicts because of the tendency to displace responsibility. Gately reflects on his fantasy of escaping the hospital with Joelle as "wanting somebody else to take care of his mess, somebody else to keep him out of his various cages. It's the same delusion as the basic addictive-Substance delusion, basically" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 864). Relationships are never without risks, but there is something redemptive about Joelle's and Gately's attempts to empathize and connect with something outside themselves, and that empathy is perhaps the one thing that has the power to keep them off their Substances.

The risks of those relationships are foregrounded as much as the possible benefits, and it's a theme that Wallace continually returns to in his work. There is some implication that Kate Gompert doesn't survive her encounter with Marathe, who offers her, "more good feeling and pleasure than ever before for you: you would never again feel sorrow or pity or the pain of the chains and cage of never choosing" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 782). Kate mistakenly thinks he's coming onto her, when in fact, he's offering to show her the cartridge, *Infinite Jest*, that is so compelling its viewers lose all motivation to do anything but keep watching. Increasingly ominous is the fact that it is Kate's last scene in the novel, and she's referenced as missing curfew at Ennet House later that night. This is an extreme example of the risks of human connection, but there are others in the novel. Gately, who is not without a complicated history, is arguably the book's unlikely hero: more than any other character, he makes an effort to stay clean, mentor the new residents, and treat the difficult ones "as valuable teachers of patience, tolerance, self-discipline, restraint" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 271). This is a complex position, because it's also apparent that Gately accidentally kills a man earlier in the novel in a botched robbery-turned-murder. While protecting Lenz from a group of Canadians who want to lynch him for murdering their dog, Gately is then shot and hospitalized, where he has to resist much-needed painkillers (which happen to be his drug of choice when he's using) in order to stay clean. Holland suggests that even those characters who are trying to escape the narcissistic loop are punished for their efforts. She writes, "Indeed, every character in *Infinite Jest* who struggles against a culture of narcissism—also the sweat-licking gym guru Lyle, and Gately in his final fight against the relief of medical drugs—suffers both emotionally and physically" (Holland 74). Jim

Incandenza's desire to create a film that is, "so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" is an attempt to reach Hal that turns out to cause the very thing Jim is trying to prevent (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 839). Characters who watch the *Infinite Jest* cartridge become the ultimate solipsists, incapable of anything except the desire to watch more. Relationships are redemptive, but they are not a cure-all for the deep-rooted problems of irony, narcissism, and alienation in contemporary culture. In a similar fashion, the mediated style of the book constantly keeps readers from "falling into spectation." Every connection in the shifting and fragmented narrative is a struggle; trying to piece it together is frustrating and often intellectually painful, and the lack of narrative closure only exacerbates this. In spite of all that, readers still emerge from it feeling as though they've encountered something real and powerful.

In the novel, failure to connect is equally perilous. Jim seems to have predicted Hal's retreat into himself early on, from his insistence that Hal has stopped talking to him to his creation of the deadly cartridge that is meant to save him. None of the other characters, like Orin or Avril, confirm Hal's speechlessness, making it easy to dismiss Jim's judgment as drunken raving. Yet Hal's symptoms begin well before his decision to quit smoking marijuana or any reasonable time he might have taken DMZ. Toward the end of the Eschaton game, "for a brief moment that Hal will later regard as completely and uncomfortably bizarre, Hal feels at his own face to see whether he is wincing" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 342). This is only the first in a series of symptoms that increase in intensity, up until the last chapter when Hal loses control of his expression completely. His classmates at ETA misread his expression as either absurdly happy or extremely sad.

In the first chapter (which is the chronological end of the novel), Hal is no longer able to communicate at all except in "flailings" and "*sub*animalistic noises and sounds" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 14). Whether due to substances or something else entirely, Jim's prediction about Hal's retreat into himself seems to have come true. He becomes incapable of connection, "an infantophile" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 16). Hal's failure to connect with others leads to a physical inability to communicate; he's punished just as much, if not more, than the characters who attempt to reach something outside themselves. As Burn writes, Hal is left, "isolated in the loneliness of his own talent" (*David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest 25).

The most empathetic character in the novel is one we cannot hope to emulate. Mario Incandenza, described in detail as bradykinetic and homodontic, also has an innate naïveté that makes him easy to connect with. All at ETA (except perhaps Orin) "treat Mario M. Incandenza with the casual gentility of somebody who doesn't pity you or admire you so much as just vaguely prefer it when you're around" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 316). He's described as a "born listener" and the only person at ETA that Coach Schtitt seeks out or confides in (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 79-80). There is occasional documentation about Orin's mistreatment of Mario when they were younger, but Mario's relationship with Hal is arguably one of the most important in the novel. Each brother protects, and in some ways, even reveres the other. Wallace writes that "his younger and way more externally impressive brother Hal almost idealizes Mario, secretly. God-type issues aside, Mario is a (semi-) walking miracle, Hal believes" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 316). It's Mario who gives Hal his first copy of the O.E.D., and it's Hal who chases the U.H.I.D. representative off the academy's driveway with a tennis racket (Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

317). One of Mario's greatest talents is the ability to treat others as though they're actually human. In the short anecdote about Clipperton, the suicidal tennis player, Mario is the only one who befriends him, and when Clipperton ultimately shoots himself, it's Mario who insists on cleaning the room afterward, a gesture that "took the bradykinetic Mario all night and two bottles of Ajax Plus to clean the room with his tiny contracted arms and square feet" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 433). Subsequently, it is also Mario who rescues the bum-in-disguise Barry Loach from the Boston Commons merely by being the only person to reach out and shake his hand and "extend some basic human warmth and contact" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 969). Mario also appears immune to irony. He's confused about the fact that, "there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 592). Wallace points out early on that one of the reasons ETA residents are so comfortable talking to him is a side effect of his disability. He writes, "One of the positives to being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you're there, even when they're interfacing with you" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 80). Mario's talent for real empathy seems innate rather than learned; i.e., it is not presented as a solution to solipsism or irony because there's no way to take it up. Wallace seems to be imagining a place where irony and loneliness are defeated, but such a place is inaccessible to most; in fact, the character who is most able to be empathetic is portrayed as, somehow, not quite human. For Mario, empathy is not a choice; it's his default setting.

While Mario is easily the character most capable of empathy within the novel, there is some doubt about whether that counts as real connection. Like the interactions with television that Wallace describes in "E Unibus Pluram," relationships with Mario

seem curiously lopsided; he is capable of giving without receiving. He asks so little from those around him that it's much like a relationship without the risks. At one point, after admitting to hiding his marijuana habit from Mario, who reports being "zero percent hurt" by the secret, a frustrated Hal asks him to "be a fucking human *being* for once, Boo . . . Jesus it's like talking to a big poster of some smiley-faced guy" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 784). The smiley face is a sinister recurrence throughout the novel, etched onto copies of the fatal film cartridge and worn by members of the wheelchair assassins, and its association with Mario isn't clear. There is nothing sinister about Mario, but there is something curiously blank about him. He's incapable of being embarrassed or offended, which only adds to the sort of unreal quality of his character. A conversation with Avril where Mario attempts to discern how he can tell, in general, if someone is sad is only one example of failed communications that occur throughout the novel, and it helps to demonstrate how, for all his empathy, there seems to be something missing from his interactions. He and his mother talk around the subject for a while; Avril repeatedly corrects his grammar, and she gives him some rather textbook examples for recognizing sadness. Several times, she attempts to pin down the subject of Mario's questions by asking him whether he thinks Hal or Charles Tavis is sad, and she finally comes to the conclusion that it's Mario himself who, in a roundabout way, has been trying to tell her that he's sad, which is false; Mario has been sensing this sadness in Hal the whole time. The misunderstanding goes both ways; Avril fails to identify what Mario is talking about, and Mario cannot articulate it. This is as much a failure of Avril's, whose mothering strategy is to be overwhelmingly open and hands off, as it is Mario's. She comments, "I determined years ago that my position needs to be that I trust my children, and I'd never

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traffic in third-party hearsay when the lines of the communication with my children are as open and judgment-free as I'm fortunate they are" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 763). Yet their conversation suggests that communication between them is not as open as Avril would like to think, and this is reaffirmed earlier in her conversation with Hal, which also includes a lot of dancing around subjects, discussion of grammar or vocabulary, and what Orin and Hal refer to as "Politeness Roulette," where Avril insists on being so polite and unselfish toward her children that they feel obligated to accept whatever act of kindness she's offering. There is some indication in the conversation between Hal and Mario that Hal wants to be held responsible for his secret-keeping, but Mario, like Avril with her hands-off, no-blame parenting style, simply cannot provide that. The characters, like Wallace's readers, want to be held accountable for something. The very structure of the novel exhibits what Wallace refers to as "free play within an ordered and disciplined structure" and it demands the reader put in her share of work (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 52). Absolute freedom is "deadening" and, in the novel, is often an agent of destruction. Relationships with Mario and Avril, which are equally free and without limits, may be just as destructive. We might connect this to Wallace's comment in the McCaffery interview where he wishes the "parents would come back and restore some fucking order" (McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview" 52). Perhaps the smiley face mask is associated with Mario because he represents another dead end. Despite his capability for empathy, connection with him, like with the deadly entertainment cartridge, is not a way out. Empathy alone is not enough to escape a deeply flawed and narcissistic culture.

Complicating Connections

There are inherent difficulties in writing about Wallace's final, unfinished novel because it is just that. Since it is incomplete as a novel, it may be more helpful to think of it as a series of interconnected short stories in the style of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. There is crossover in theme, character, and plot, but there is little of the overall coherence of a finished novel like *Infinite Jest*. One can imagine that had it been finished, it may have rivaled the size and scope of the encyclopedic earlier novel. Editor Michael Pietsch notes, "It became apparent as I read that David planned for the novel to have a structure akin to that of *Infinite Jest*, with large portions of apparently unconnected information presented to the reader before a main story line begins to make sense" (xii). With that in mind, it's difficult to say whether *The Pale King* would have continued in the vein of Wallace's earlier works, but it is possible to examine the existing text as functional, if discrete, pieces. Again, Wallace shows his talent for placing ordinary-seeming people within complex systems as he follows the lives of various characters who work for the Internal Revenue Service. Stylistically, the novel resembles its predecessor in its considerable length, exhaustive detail, and manipulation of such structural devices as footnotes and an Author's Foreword, which comes some seventy pages into the text. Like *Jest*, *The Pale King* addresses some of the major themes of Wallace's career: human connection and loneliness in a highly mediated, yet alienating world, in addition to themes about attention and choice.

Much as the physical style and presence of *Jest* imitates what it's like to live a highly mediated existence, *The Pale King* has occasional metafictional overtones. There are several parallels among the character Claude Sylvanshine, the minutiae of being an

IRS agent, and the actual written style of the novel. Sylvanshine is what Wallace refers to as a "fact psychic." He is constantly inundated with random bits of information about the characters around him, so much so that he has trouble separating pertinent information from the flood of irrelevant facts. An IRS worker, we learn, has to sort through page upon page of tax information and learn how to pick out only the important parts. "Your job, in a sense," they are told, "with each file is to separate the valuable, pertinent information from the pointless information" (Wallace, *Pale King* 342). Similarly, the style of the novel mimics this onslaught of information. The reader is forced to experience firsthand what it must be like to sift through pages, trying to separate the important from the unimportant. "Bearing in mind the work carried out by Wallace's accountants and the overall thematic focus on attention, the term that I would suggest best characterizes *The Pale King*'s treatment of time is *concentration*," Burn writes ("Paradigm" 385). In a sense, life is an exercise in learning to tell the important from the unimportant. It simply isn't possible to process or pay attention to everything. *The Pale King* takes this mediation and mimicry of contemporary culture down to the level of the crushingly mundane, which is often where the realest, most important experiences take place. In "This Is Water," it is the daily mundane experiences of driving and shopping that Wallace targets. That is where the "default settings" are located and where there is the most opportunity for changing the way we think and react to other people.

Yet the characters in *The Pale King* have just as little, if not less, luck reaching outside themselves as the addicts and athletes in *Infinite Jest*. Much of this problem has to do with attention and what they choose to give their attention to. David Cusk notices the power of attention in relation to his sweating problem. Wallace writes, "As Cusk

discovered the year his grades had jumped in high school, his chances of an attack could be minimized if he paid very close and sustained attention to whatever was going on outside him" (Wallace, *Pale King* 320). That is, if he paid attention to something other than the possibility of an attack, he might be able to avoid having one. Attention, or when we choose to give our attention to something, is powerful, and this attention is so often focused inward rather than outward. "One thing you learn in Rote Exams," Wallace writes, "is how disorganized and inattentive most people are and how little they pay attention to what's going on outside of their sphere" (Wallace, *Pale King* 160). Jonathan Franzen refers to this as "atomized privacy" ("Why Bother?" 70). "Such privacy is exactly what the American Century has tended toward," he writes. "First there was mass suburbanization, then the perfection of at-home entertainment, and finally the creation of virtual communities whose most striking feature is that interaction within them is entirely optional—terminable the instant the experience ceases to gratify the user" (Franzen, "Why Bother?" 70). Wallace's characters would suggest that contemporary American culture has actually internalized Franzen's atomized privacy to the point where our interactions with other people are equally "terminable." We can disengage from them any time we wish, if we ever choose to engage at all. In one such example, Wallace describes Toni Ware as, "creepy because, even though she wasn't shy or evasive and would maintain eye contact, she seemed to be staring *at* your eyes rather than *into* them" (*Pale King* 443). This represents a problem that many of the characters struggle with. Due to the burgeoning distractions of their own private universes, they're incapable of more than a superficial understanding of another person. In a sense, they only look at other people, not into them.

Many of the characters experience difficulty connecting with others because they are so preoccupied with themselves and how other people perceive them. David Cusk sweats a lot, but it isn't until he notices that he sweats more than other people that it really begins to bother him. Merely thinking about it can bring on an attack, so that it's as much a psychosomatic affliction as a purely physical one. Above everything, it is, "the fear that everyone would be noticing him and looking at him" (Wallace, *Pale King* 99). At the IRS orientation, he's so concerned about whether the woman sitting behind him will notice his sweating and think it's disgusting that he fails to ever really think about her as a person. The power of her imagined attention on him makes the attack worse; the more he thinks she might notice, the more he sweats. It isn't until the end of the presentation that he finally realizes that "the hot spotlight he felt on him did not exist. The woman behind him was a person, had her own troubles, and wasn't paying close attention to him—that was an illusion. The only thing that mattered about his head was that it was in her way" (Wallace, *Pale King* 336). Both Cusk's point of view and the woman's read like a criticism of the inability to pay attention to anything outside the self.

Meredith Rand describes a similar problem when, toward the end of the novel, she explains to Shane Drinion what it was like to be one of the prettiest girls in high school, or "one of the foxes" (Wallace, *Pale King* 484). She describes how she can't really be close to people because she can't trust them to ever see any part of her except her beauty. "She is so angry and suspicious that she couldn't even accept real, true, no-agenda caring even if it's offered to her, because deep down inside *she*, the subject *herself*, can't believe anything except prettiness or sex appeal as a motive for anybody's caring," Meredith explains (Wallace, *Pale King* 495). Like with Cusk, it's a self-

reinforcing cycle. They are never able to think past themselves and their own hang-ups to connect with another person. Their own personal neuroses make connection impossible. This self-consciousness is intense to a debilitating degree; it keeps them from being conscious of anyone *else*, except in how it relates to them personally. Meredith goes on to describe that sort of self-reinforcing loneliness. She explains how her husband described it to her as, "really unattractive—nobody wants to get close to somebody who's in the middle of this constant tantrum. Who'd want that? . . . So, he said, I'd actually set it up so that the only reason anybody would be attracted to me as a person was that I was pretty, which was exactly the thing that made me so angry and lonely and sad" (Wallace, *Pale King* 501-02). Wallace outlines a similar cycle in "E Unibus Pluram." People are drawn to television because it gives the illusion of social interaction without any of the risks. However, the more people indulge in the social simulacrum of television, the less time they spend actually being social, and the lonelier they become (Wallace, "E Unibus" 151-55). It is this sort of solipsistic cycle that keeps the characters isolated in their own atomized privacy. In a sense, the distraction of themselves is what perpetuates their loneliness.

Characters who manage to make connections fare little better than those in *Infinite Jest*. Although *The Pale King* does not seem to foreground any relationship, risky or not, so much as a series of missed and confused connections (e.g., the author-as-character David Wallace being mistaken for another David Wallace), those connections that do happen are embedded with Wallace's concern for what it means to be in a genuinely unselfish relationship (if such a thing is even possible). The first time we are introduced to Lane Dean's relationship with his pregnant girlfriend, it is predicated on manipulation

and irony. Dean tells her how sorry he is and that they can continue to wait and pray on it, when in fact, he wants her to have an abortion (Wallace, *Pale King* 41). Wallace writes, "He pretended to himself he did not know what it was that was required. He pretended it had no name. He pretended that not saying aloud what he knew to be right and true was for her sake, was for the sake of her needs and feelings" (Wallace, *Pale King* 40). As with Cusk and Meredith, Dean is more concerned about how his actions *look* to her than how they affect her as a person. There is the pose of honesty and mutual decision-making in order to manipulate her into not keeping the baby. Toward the end of the section, Dean imagines (perhaps correctly) that Sheri is going to do something similar. As she's turning toward him, he guesses that she is going to keep the baby and absolve him of any responsibility toward it, a solution they both know is impossible. Sheri appears to be acting selflessly by saying that it's her choice and that he doesn't have to take any part in it, but it's also a form of manipulation. "She is gambling that he is good" and that he'll make the right choice in staying with her (Wallace, *Pale King* 44). Perhaps because it is from Dean's point of view, or perhaps because that's what really happens, there is again the illusion of selflessness for selfish reasons.

We see this sort of false sincerity in the "Author's Foreword" of *The Pale King* as well. The section doesn't come until roughly seventy pages into the text, where Wallace explains how he, "the real author, the living human holding the pencil," rather than the character, David Wallace, who appears in the text, wrote this as a work of fiction to avoid legal issues (*Pale King* 68). The book is actually nonfiction; it's all true. He goes on to describe the, "unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader" (Wallace, *Pale King* 75). Wallace is effectively playing on our reader expectations for what an author's

foreword looks like. For one thing, we expect it to come at the beginning of the text, and for another, we expect it to be true, neither of which is the case. For example, Wallace never worked for the IRS the way the foreword claims. He reiterates how honest he's being, in the midst of being deceptive. "What I'm trying to do right here, within the protective range of the copyright page's disclaimer," he writes, "is to override the unspoken codes and to be 100 percent overt and forthright about the present contract's terms" (Wallace, *Pale King* 75). Wallace essentially sets up a caricature of himself even in this supposedly "true" section. He does exactly what he accuses writers of doing, which is to try to show off their talent and sincerity, while their purpose is to manipulate the reader into liking them. Like the Lane Dean section, the manipulation here is foregrounded. We cannot trust the established relationship between writer and reader; there is some suggestion that, even in other works, we should be skeptical of these attempts. This is contrasted with the sincere-seeming way he reaches out to readers in pieces like "Octet." Wallace complicates even the writer-reader relationship and suggests that it, too, isn't free of agenda or selfishness.

Like *Jest*, there is one character in *The Pale King* who transcends the problems that are foregrounded in the rest of the characters. Drinion is presented with an almost superhuman ability to pay attention, which is contrasted with the immense difficulty of that level of attention for most people. Cusk compares it to "hoisting something heavy with a pulley and rope—you could do it, but it took effort, and you got tired, and the minute you slipped you were back paying attention to the last thing you wanted to" (Wallace, *Pale King* 320). Wallace describes the way working actually goes for most people, which is, "in jagged little fits and starts" (*Pale King* 293). We are constantly

doing other things while we are "working," such as checking the time, checking our e-mail, taking phone calls, or finding excuses to get up and walk around. "The upshot," he notes, "is that nearly everyone I knew had distracting little rituals like this, of which rituals the whole point, deep down, was that they were distracting" (Wallace, *Pale King* 293). Paying attention to any one thing for an extended length of time is difficult. More than that, Wallace associates it with a kind of "psychic pain" (*Pale King* 87). "Without distractions, or even the possibility of distraction," he notes, "certain types of people feel dread—and it's this dread, not so much the test itself, that people feel anxious about" (Wallace, *Pale King* 295). Paying attention causes us real discomfort. It's simply easier to be distracted. "Maybe dullness," Wallace writes, "is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there" (*Pale King* 87). He suggests that we've internalized this need for distractions because it masks something else. The real thing that we don't want to pay attention to is not in tedious deskwork; it's inside of us. There is some indication that this thing is loneliness or the lack of legitimate human contact. "There is this existential loneliness in the real world," Wallace once explained in an interview. "I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you, and you don't know what it's like inside me" (Miller 62). Unfortunately, distraction (at least of the inward-directed kind) is one of the things that makes connection so difficult. "*The Pale King* reminds us that it takes work to pay attention, to recognize responsibilities that go beyond the immediate self," Ralph Clare observes (444).

Drinion, on the other hand, is comparable to Mario Incandenza with his innate ability to focus on anything without the kind of psychic pain that most people experience.

He explains that "almost anything you pay close, direct attention to becomes interesting" (Wallace, *Pale King* 458). Toward the end of the novel in his conversation with Meredith Rand, Drinion "is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed" (Wallace, *Pale King* 487). However, Drinion's ability to pay attention is just as removed from the rest of the characters as Mario's ability to empathize. Because it's his default setting rather than a conscious choice, we have no hope of emulating it. Further, it's not clear that Drinion and Meredith are, in fact, connecting in spite of his superhuman ability. Even though Drinion is paying attention, there's no sense of empathy from him. Although distance in Zeno's Paradox is somehow crossed, we can just as easily miss that connection; it's like grasping the syntax of a sentence but not the meaning. Again, Wallace seems to be searching for places where the problems of being a human are transcended, but they aren't without complications and they're not, in fact, viable solutions.

If anything, *The Pale King*, at least in its existing text, is even less optimistic about the possibilities for human connection and escape from loneliness than *Infinite Jest*. Chris Fogle stumbles across something that can pull him out of his "wastoid" lifestyle when he joins the IRS. He thinks he's found redemption in committing himself to what is almost like a higher power. For Lane Dean, the IRS is more hellish than redemptive. Like the addicts and athletes in *Infinite Jest*, the characters in *The Pale King* search for something great enough to commit to and often come up short. Even if they find that thing, it often isolates them from each other, and very few characters manage to find a way out of themselves.

Conclusion

One of the things that makes David Foster Wallace such an ideal candidate for studying fiction after postmodernism is that his work is caught in a middle ground of both reacting to and incorporating postmodern techniques. On the one hand, he's resistant to irony; on the other, he cannot quite escape it. While works like *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* often echo their postmodern predecessors in style and encyclopedic breadth, Wallace also places emphasis on characters, their relationships, and the inherent problems of trying to make human connections in a contemporary world that greatly resembles the structure of those texts, with its shifting perspectives and overwhelming amounts of information. While the form has connections to metatexts in that it serves the function of reminding the reader that she is, in fact, reading a text, these distractions also emulate the distractions, both internal and external, of contemporary American culture. In "This Is Water," Wallace gave us the key to understanding one of the principal themes in two of his major works. His texts are a reminder of how difficult it is to find moments of truth and clarity amid all the noise and how it is a conscious decision, as well as a terrific struggle, to shut it all out and focus on what is important. It is a decision, ultimately, to choose to alter our default thinking settings and make them less self-centered.

I want to close with a discussion of a moment that I think best exemplifies what *Infinite Jest* is striving for and what *The Pale King*, in its existing text, only alludes to. It is, as I hope to argue, one of few proposed solutions to the problems of attention, language, and human connection in Wallace's fiction. In the short story "Good Old Neon," Wallace demonstrates his skill as a storyteller as he weaves an intricate mental monologue from the specter of a recent suicide. In its final paragraphs, the narrative

circles back to the author-as-character, David Foster Wallace sitting at his desk, remembering a high school acquaintance who recently committed suicide, and trying to imagine what might have driven him to such an act. Again, we can see the impulse to over-analyze as Wallace-as-character starts to mentally berate himself over the impossibility of ever knowing what it's like to be another human being (and the absolute narcissism of thinking that we can). In what is perhaps one of the most redemptive moments in any of Wallace's fiction, he suddenly stops himself, writing, "The realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that the other part be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, 'Not another word'" (Wallace, *Oblivion* 181). It is a moment, however fleeting, where Wallace manages to escape the intellectual, solipsistic cycle and make, out of what seems like sheer willpower, a real connection with the reader. Iannis Goerlandt suggests that "Good Old Neon" "does not lose itself in this hyper-consciousness, and also tries to offer closure, a way out of the nightmare—in expressly and tragically dramatizing '**THE END**' of hyper-conscious thought" (171). Wallace-as-character makes a conscious choice to turn off the part of his brain that intellectualizes to the point of paralysis. When Joelle is Identifying with a speaker at the meeting, she "chooses consciously to believe it isn't affected, the story's emotive drama" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 710). Unfortunately, few characters in *The Pale King* seem able to make this choice, nor do most of them appear aware that it's even a choice. It is unbelievably difficult, it often fails, and as Wallace points out, "some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to" ("This Is Water"). His texts and characters suggest that these attempts will always be mediated and problematic; there will always be the lurking threat of selflessness for selfish reasons. That is the problem

that postmodernism presented us. However, the choice *not* to try is even more fraught with peril. How Wallace chooses to work through that problem is the possible redemption of post-postmodernism. He acknowledges the intellectual impossibility and makes the attempt anyway, and like Zeno's paradox, somehow the distance is covered, the connection is made. Wallace is still able to convey through language something real about what it means to be human. The fact that it is mediated or merely a construction doesn't make it less moving or even less real.

CHAPTER III

ERSATZ AND ACTUAL: THE EMPHASIS

OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

IN *CHRONIC CITY*

Jonathan Lethem's work provides an interesting intermediary between David

Foster Wallace and Karen Russell. While he has not received quite as much renown and

critical attention as Wallace, a small amount of academic criticism does exist. Wallace's

influence on Lethem is at times unmistakable. As Stephen J. Burn points out, *Chronic

City* (2009) "establishes a series of running parallels to Wallace's work, particularly in a

cluster of allusions split between the dealer Foster Watt and the avant-garde writer Ralph

Warden Meeker, author of the 'tubby paperback' *Obstinate Dust*" (*David Foster

Wallace's* 4). In an interview with Ronnie Scott, Lethem comments on the strangeness of

this reference, given that Wallace died while he was finishing the novel. "I'd already put

the reference in and then it felt disturbing to me, but it didn't seem right to take it out," he

says, "It was as though I'd be erasing him in some way. So what I ended up doing was

strengthening that reference. I put it in again at the end of the book to make it mean a

little more, and then I felt that it would be okay" (Scott 173). Lethem appears to be

moving further from the postmodern techniques of encyclopedic novels and attention to

structure; his novels tend to be stable and narratively straightforward, but he finds other

ways to complicate the characters' relationships with reality and each other. As in

Wallace, there is evidence in novels like *Chronic City* that empathy and human

connection are possible solutions to the instability of language and reality that we face in contemporary culture.

Early Work

In his early work, Jonathan Lethem established himself as a science fiction writer, particularly in novels like *Amnesia Moon* (1995), *As She Climbed across the Table* (1997), and *Girl in Landscape* (1998), with forays into detective fiction in *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) and *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999). Particularly in *Amnesia Moon* and *As She Climbed across the Table*, it's possible to see Lethem working with some of the ideas that will later resurface in *Chronic City* with the development of the Internet. In fact, these early novels, although written well after postmodernism's heyday, fit well into Brian McHale's description of what he considers the primary questions of much postmodern fiction, i.e., questions of ontology: "What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10). The worlds in these two novels are extremely unstable, and Lethem often seems to be playing the idea of what happens when worlds connect or overlap. In *Amnesia Moon*, the physical landscape changes based on the dominant "dreamer" in the area; that is, reality is literally shaped by consciousness and is subject to change with each new dream. In *As She Climbed across the Table*, a group of physicists at a university work to create a tangential universe and instead create a kind of doorway into a universe that bases its landscape on the preferences of the mind with which it first comes into contact. In an interview with Lorin Stein, Lethem describes it as a pastiche between Don DeLillo and John Barth (Stein 54). One can see the Jack Gladney of DeLillo's *White*

Noise in the main character, Philip, a professor of anthropology and one corner of the love triangle between his physicist girlfriend, Alice, and the nearly undetectable tangent universe she created called Lack. In the love triangle whose third corner basically amounts to a non-entity, Lethem credits Barth's *The End of the Road*.

Even in these early novels, Lethem seems to sense the problems that fiction writers of the nineties are beginning to grapple with in the wake of postmodernism. Kellogg, who is initially the main villain of *Amnesia Moon* but turns out to be a rather minor character, renames everything in his city until, having received no resistance, no one can remember what anything was originally called. Isolated examples like this hint at a dissatisfaction with language as the primary tool of meaning-making when it is so easily manipulated or used up. In *As She Climbed across the Table*, Philip is able to dissolve a student-led protest by pointing out its very banality, and he describes the way he "let a weariness creep into [his] voice, a tone [he] knew was infectious" as he explains to the crowd that this is nothing new and "to protest it like this, in isolation . . . well, it's an act of enormous irrelevance" (Lethem, *As She Climbed* 59). This scene, in some ways a nod to the Jack Gladney of *White Noise*, also seems to function as a comment on the tiredness of irony as a deconstructive technique. World-weary cynicism can only break down; it can never build. Critiques of language like these, while they're relatively fleeting in his early work, will resurface with greater significance in *Chronic City*.

Lethem also seems concerned with the problems that alternate universes place on the people who live in them and their chances of connecting with one another in such alienating landscapes. In *Amnesia Moon*, the final city that Chaos and his friends find themselves in is one where each family moves to a different house at noon every day to

discourage the forming of relationships. The "realest" people in their city are the televised celebrities who are also the town's politicians; incidentally, they're also the most attractive and powerful. Robot televangelists go around with programed memories, believing that they're actual people. These kinds of popular culture references (even the names, like Kellogg) hint at Avant-Pop leanings in Lethem's early work, but it's absent of Avant-Pop's optimism about such a culture. When Chaos points out that the robot televangelist's memories are "fake" or "software," the robot is incapable of understanding (Lethem, *Amnesia Moon* 172). There is no quality that distinguishes a simulation from the real. Ultimately, Chaos must face the software of his dead wife, a simulation so real that it believes in itself. The characters are trapped in realities that resist stability and are constantly altering both the landscapes and the characters themselves. It might be quite a grim tale if not for the ending, where Chaos's friends assure him that they won't allow him to get lost inside the worlds or his mind; in a sense, they tether him to reality:

> "You'll never create some monster world, or seal yourself off in some fantasy. Because we're here. Like the way you dreamed yourself back to that place, the movie theater, but Melinda came and found you. She *remembers* it, Chaos. It was really her."
>
> "So?"
>
> "So we're in there with you. Inside your dreams. You let people in." (Lethem, *Amnesia Moon* 247)

The ending of *As She Climbed across the Table* is not so optimistic, but it too depends on relationships. Alice's love affair is solipsistic at its core. Lack bases his preferences on

Alice's consciousness, so Alice is essentially in love with herself. These preferences aren't enough to construct a world, however, as Philip crawls through Lack into an ersatz universe constructed out of ducks, pomegranates, and peach-colored cats—in other words, all the things that Alice loves, including Philip himself. It's easy to love Lack because it's a one-way relationship with none of the risks of loving a real and complicated human. While the worlds of these novels are constructed and at times even recognized by their characters as constructed, the problems with simulations and solipsism that the characters face are genuinely relevant to a culture that is, itself, increasingly isolated and dreamlike.

Situating Lethem

Attempting to situate Jonathan Lethem within the field of contemporary fiction is especially difficult since, in spite of his early leanings towards science or detective fiction, he's never been rigidly assigned to any category. His work is often labeled "genre-bending," or, "taking the conventions of hard-boiled detective novels, westerns and science fiction and stitching them together" (Cardwell). It wasn't until *Motherless Brooklyn* that he started to receive critical attention, and it was *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) that really marked the transition from his early work to a more culturally conscious fiction. Lethem's fiction is not overtly political like biopolitics or cosmodernism, but it often carries the underpinnings of political leanings, which is likely a product of his parents, who were both political activists. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, he remarks, "I was a protester by birthright. I put in my time before I could conceive that the world wasn't being transformed by the people around me, my parents'

generation. When you're in the center of demonstrations, you believe. My life *was* a

demonstration" (Stein 48). The politics in a novel like *Chronic City* are not overt as they

are in the later *Dissident Gardens* (2013), but they are implicit in the problems that infuse

Lethem's fictional Manhattan. More than much of his earlier work, *Chronic City* also

incorporates many of the popular culture references that Avant-Pop celebrates. While the

frequent references to Marlon Brando, the Gnuppets (a play on the Muppets), and the

singer Russ Grinspoon (who shares a suspicious likeness to Art Garfunkel) may

contribute to what is ultimately a more "realistic" representation of Manhattan, they're

also a part of the distractions that serve to destabilize the city and keep its characters in a

permanent fog of missed connections and forgotten realizations. *Chronic City* also has

similarities to Powers's crackpot realism with its pervading sense of paranoia and

conspiracy and its blend of real, absurd, and magical real landscapes. The characters have

odd, often Pynchonesque names that suggest some greater meaning, if only we could

figure out what it was. The city itself has all the elements of a "bad dream," as one

character insists, from the tiger that is loose on the streets of Manhattan to the curious

chocolate smell that permeates the city (Lethem, *Chronic* City 152). However, where

crackpot realism sees redemption in the quest to find answers at the bottom of its

conspiracies, *Chronic City* paints a grimmer picture about the prospect of finding a way

out. Lethem comments, "That condition, that contextlessness, not knowing how to put the

pieces together or even where the pieces came from, has become a part of American

culture so that rather than conspiracy theory, we now have creepy facts or coups that lead

to no consistent theory" (Silverblatt, "An Interview with Jonathan Lethem" 178). Like

Wallace's work, its redemption may lie in the human connections that inhabit its pages

rather than the success of escaping the hyperreal. James Peacock suggests that the

unstable reality of *Chronic City* is located within "an exaggerated Baudrillardian

postmodernity" from which "there emerge glimmers of hope and reality, or rather, a

reinvigorated sense of a complex reality" (161). This emphasis on character and the

moving forward from postmodern ideas speaks to a more post-postmodern or new

humanist approach.

Chronic City

The text of *Chronic City*, like the majority of Lethem's novels, is relatively stable.

The narrative is linear, chronological, and told mainly from the point of view of a first-

person narrator, Chase Insteadman, with occasional disruptions into the points of view of

other characters, such as Perkus Tooth or Richard Abneg, which are signified by a switch

to third person. There are also the occasional disruptions in the form of letters from

Chase's astronaut lover, Janice Trumbull, who is stranded in space by Chinese mines.

Chase as a narrator is problematic on more than one level. He's inoffensive to the point

that it's often easy to forget that events are being narrated through his perspective. When

a waitress mistakes his name for Chase Unperson, Perkus cannot help a jeering

agreement. "You actor, you utter *unperson,*" he later accuses (Lethem, *Chronic City*

185). A former child actor who now lives on residuals and an endless Manhattan party

circuit, Chase admits early on that he is "by deepest instinct a mimic" who either

misunderstands or forgets much of what he sees (Lethem, *Chronic City* 15). "'How do

you survive,'" Perkus asks him, "not unkindly. 'How do you even get along in the world,

not understanding what goes on around you?'" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 17). Chase as a

narrator serves two important functions. On the one hand, his often invisible perspective contributes to the narrative stability of the text; on the other, since Chase's perspective is inherently unreliable, his narration undermines the stability of the *world* within the text. Except for those rare switches to Perkus's or Richard's perspectives, what seems like a straightforward narrative is, in fact, only what Chase sees and understands, which turns out to be very little. If there is the sense sometimes that other characters, like Perkus or Oona Laszlo, know more than Chase, it is because they do, but for the most part, we're limited to what he knows. The only obvious stylization of text occurs well toward the end of the novel when Perkus, afflicted by chronic hiccups, attempts to communicate:

> "They   laugh   because they   know."
>
> "Know what?" said Richard warily, sensing the trap.
>
> "What's   outside   the   limit,   maybe fallout-strewn
>
> wasteland   or   Chinese slave dictatorship, people   in cages
>
> too   small   for dogs." (Lethem, *Chronic City* 417)

These gaps in the text, signifying Perkus's frequent hiccups, may also represent the gaps in characters', particularly Chase's, understandings about their world.

If the text of the novel is relatively stable, the world depicted within it is not. A sense of unreality permeates the Manhattan of *Chronic City*. Lethem comments, "I wanted to write about the weirdness of dwelling simultaneously in a real and an unreal place" (Pevere). It exists as a sort of hyperreality of images layered on top of images that make up the parody of New York life. Slavoj Žižek writes, "The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a

fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in the real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show" (232). This is the sort of paranoia that hangs over the pages of the novel like the persistent gray fog that settles inexplicably over the lower part of the island. From the pervasive chocolate smell that engulfs the entire city to the tiger that stalks the streets with the power to destroy entire buildings, their world is just enough like ours to be startling when it isn't. Astronauts hang suspended in orbit, stranded there by a field of Chinese mines, and the entire city follows the drama from the newspaper. Characters go chasing after artifacts that turn out to exist only in the virtual world whose name, Yet Another World, seems to suggest that the world they're living in might also be virtual. "In the book, Manhattan isn't just a place, it's a state of mind," Geoff Pevere writes. "That the minds who dwell in it are often addled by booze and dope only makes the city that much more unreal." In a way, the novel might have more metafictional overtones than it originally lets on. The occasional disruptions in the narrative, from the shift to third person, to the letters from Janice or the stylization of Perkus's hiccups, mimic the disruptions of the city: the fog, the tiger, the chocolate smell, or even Chase himself.

Nobody is able to explain the odd events happening in the city, and few of the characters are particularly troubled by the fact that they can't. Most of them can't remember when the events started, let alone how they happened. At most, they congregate long enough to sensationalize them, such as with the "Tiger Watch" web site that springs up to track the tiger's progress through the city, or the wildly popular letters from the stranded astronaut, Janice Trumbull, to her earthbound fiancé, Chase. How there actually came to be a tiger on the street, how it is able to destroy entire buildings, and

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whether it actually even *exists* is never fully addressed. The "War Free" version of the newspaper is symbolic of this phenomenon: characters can choose which parts of reality they wish to ignore. "To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave . . ." Chase reflects, "We only pretend to live on something as orderly as a grid" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 8). It is with the fabulously wealthy that this is most painfully obvious. Characters like Mayor Arnheim and the Danzigs, with their seemingly unlimited money and power, can construct any reality they wish. Rossmoor Danzig can wear pajamas every day, eat breakfast for every meal, and never have to dine in a restaurant with other people in it if he doesn't want to; he is wealthy enough to essentially create his own "world" and to only interact with those chosen few he allows into it, which contributes both to the surreal feeling of the city and the alienation inherent in those solipsistic worlds.

As always, language is complicit in this agenda. It's difficult to write about language in a novel after postmodernism without the sense that something metafictional is going on, but Lethem manages to work in the occasional doubt about language's power through his characters. Chapter 7 is given over to a brief description of the view from Chase's window. He reports a desire "to get this description right," but that whenever he tries, "language dies" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 124). There is the sense here that language isn't adequate to explain this view or the feelings it stirs up in him. He describes the way words like "Greek Orthodox" and "flying buttress" clutter his mind in the attempt to describe it, and it's not clear whether it's the words or Chase himself that lack the ability to make meaning (Lethem, *Chronic City* 125). "Often all language seems this way," he

reflects, "A monstrous compendium of embedded histories I'm helpless to understand. I employ it the way a dog drives a car, without grasping how the car came to exist or what makes a combustion engine possible. That is, of course, if dogs drove cars. They don't. Yet I go around forming sentences" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 125). Chase is as naïve to language's power as he is to the rest of the absurd distractions that permeate the city; he's only able to intuit that there is a problem, a "wrongness" that he can't fully articulate (Lethem, *Chronic City* 66). "Not everything was in quote marks, or wearing some mystical halo of representation. I suffered Perkus's disease by proxy. I should focus on the real," Chase reminds himself (Lethem, *Chronic* City 111). He muses openly about a language that exists in "quote marks," a nod to irony that makes it difficult both to say something meaningful and to discern meaning. Oona Laszlo, as a ghostwriter, is more expertly able to wield language. Her ghostwritten letters from the astronaut, Janice Trumbull, are able to construct an entire world that many in the city, including Chase, believe is real: a world of astronauts stranded up in space, plagued by foot cancer and Chinese mines. Yet, Oona's mastery of language leaves her just as stranded as the Janice she invented. She uses irony to keep at bay Chase's questions and affection. He muses, "The key would be to forge a language so direct, so irony-immune, that it cut off Oona's typical avenues of escape" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 253). No such language exists though, or if it does, they are never able to find it. Ultimately, it is language through the form of Janice's ghostwritten letters that drives him away when he finds out that Oona has been playing Janice all along, and Chase has essentially been playing himself in a city-wide drama he forgot he was acting in.

Ironically, it is Perkus with the lazy eye who is best able to see through these skewed representations, and he's obsessed with finding meaning behind the layers of images that construct the city. He fixates on chaldrons and Marlon Brando, which seem to him to be doorways that lead to something more real than the city he finds himself in. He calls the state where he can see things as they really are "ellipsistic" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 3). "Ellipsis is like a window opening," he explains to Chase, and Perkus is convinced that the ellipses allow him access to "worlds inside the world" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 26). Chase also reflects that Perkus is *his* ellipsis, or the conduit through which he too can perceive the instability of his world. However, Perkus's rants, like his insistence that Marlon Brando is still alive, often border on conspiracy theories, and not all of the characters take them as seriously as Chase does. He likens the dissatisfaction of watching a film in letterbox to the suspicion that there is something fundamentally unreal about the world:

> "Cable channels go on offering scan-and-pan versions to keep people from having
>
> to consider that frame's edge, which reminds them of all they're not seeing…
>
> When your gaze slips beyond the edge of a book or magazine, you notice the
>
> ostensible texture of everyday reality . . . But the reason it's so terrifying is
>
> because it begs the question of whether they're *the same thing*." (Lethem, *Chronic*
>
> *City* 87-88)

In other words, not only do people not want to be reminded of the "real" world, they also don't want to think about what, if anything, distinguishes real from not. Perkus begins to suspect that they're living in a simulation. "Your city's a fake, *a bad dream*," he insists (Lethem, *Chronic* City 152).

Although Perkus's obsessions border on the paranoid, he's not the only character to sense this instability. Chase, in his solipsistic bubble, cannot pinpoint why except to muse inwardly, "I detect a wrongness everywhere" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 66). His persistent gazing out the window at the distant church spire can be read as a symbolic attempt to locate reality, to ground it in something as solid and permanent as a building. "*Buildings do persist,*" he reminds himself, "*Manhattan does exist, things are relentlessly what they seem*" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 124). The fact that characters must refer to the Internet and Marlon Brando's Wikipedia page to confirm whether or not the actor is living suggests a disturbing dependence on image to validate the real. Although at first he enlists Richard's help to cure Perkus of his chaldron obsession, all three of them, along with Richard's exotic conquest, Georgina Hawkmanaji, get caught up in the Internet quest for the ethereal, glowing vases. Perkus perceives the chaldrons as a kind of doorway to something more real than the constructed reality of the city, and the way his obsession with obtaining one spreads swiftly from character to character suggests that all of them sense this lack; they all share an underlying paranoia that something is missing. As it turns out, the chaldrons are even less real than their tenuous Manhattan. When Perkus finally locates a chaldron in the mayor's house and contrives to steal it, it's only for Claire Carter to unplug it and show it for what it is: a hologram. She explains that chaldrons are a commodity of Yet Another World that have begun trading for money in real-time. Ironically, what Perkus thought of as a "doorway" to something more real turns out to be completely virtual. Perkus, for all his conspiracies and suspicions, is no more adept at locating the real than anyone else. He reflects, "Claire Carter wanted Perkus

Tooth to consider the extent to which *he lived as much in a construction as Chase Insteadman*" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 340).

Foregrounding the constructedness of Yet Another World emphasizes the constructedess of the Manhattan the characters live in (and, in a Baudrillardian sense, the real Manhattan of our world). The characters openly reflect on whether or not their world might not be real. Oona presents a hypothetical situation in which the world they live in might simply be a simulation set up by another world:

> "Simulated worlds theory," she explains, "Says that computing power is inevitably going to rise to a level where it's possible to create a simulation of an entire universe, in every detail, and populated with little simulated beings, something like Biller's avatars, who sincerely believe they're truly alive. If you were in one of these simulated universes you'd never know it. Every sensory detail would be as complete as the world around us, the world as we find it."
>
> (Lethem, *Chronic City* 228)

The problem, as Jean Baudrillard points out in "The Precession of the Simulacra," is that it's impossible to tell a simulation from the real; there is no criteria for reality that a simulation does not satisfy. Even Chase's counter that it *feels* like the real thing, Oona dismisses. Every simulation, by nature, would feel like the real thing. "Simulation," Baudrillard writes, "Threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (344). Because a simulation is indistinguishable from real, it undermines the certainty that there is any "real" at all. Chase muses that, "Declaring whether Yet Another World was or wasn't a game might be as difficult as declaring whether life was" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 225). There is a dreamlike, simulated quality to

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both, and the surreal existence of things like the tiger or the persistent chocolate smell only add to the effect.

Attempting to find a way out of the layers of images turns out to be a lethal pursuit. Perkus's "investment in matters of authenticity" leads to his bizarre death by chronic hiccups (Lethem, *Chronic City* 273). Richard and Chase appear convinced that it's part of a larger intrigue to kill the city's enemies, but with the sense of paranoia and conspiracy that permeates the novel, it's impossible to tell whether Perkus was murdered or simply died after weeks of neglecting his health. In either case, like the debunking of the chaldrons, it's not a very optimistic outcome. The thing the characters perceive as the most real in their world turns out to be entirely virtual; the character most occupied by the quest for truth ends up dead. Chase confronts Claire to ask her whether or not the tiger was being used to destroy the city's enemies: "'The tiger is a distraction,' said Claire Carter firmly, as if placing it in a bureaucratic category beyond further consideration. I recalled Perkus's commandment, *no conspiracies but of distraction*" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 447). The city is made up of distractions, from the tiger to Chase himself. Like Chase, the people who know the truth about the distractions, such as Richard Abneg, can be counted on to forget what they know. If crackpot realism suggests that "we can beat these guys if only we can figure out who they are," then *Chronic City* suggests that we will never figure it out (Buckiet 20). It is the grim conclusion that many of the postmodernists reached: that there is no way out of the layered images of hyperreality, no real beyond the linguistic structure, or at least none that we can access. McLaughlin writes that in this and other novels like Rick Moody's *The Four Fingers of Death* or Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, "characters long to work their way through the illusions

and indeterminacies promulgated as 'official' by various government and corporate entities and find some stable, non-governmentally and non-commercially constructed version of reality, a solid ground on which to light" ("After the Revolution" 290). Many of these novels are not optimistic about the possibility of finding a way out, and Chase comes to the conclusion that it's hopeless, even dangerous, to try:

> The world was ersatz and actual, forged and faked, by ourselves and unseen others. Daring to attempt to absolutely sort *fake* from *real* was a folly that would call down tigers or hiccups to cure us of our recklessness. The effort was doomed, for it too much pointed past the intimate boundaries of our necessary fictions.
>
> (Lethem, *Chronic City* 449)

Since Chase himself is a distraction, there is no way for him to escape a world of images and relocate in something more real, if such a thing even exists. Anything he might do is appropriated by the city and used to perpetuate its illusions. The novel forces us to contemplate what would happen if there were no red pill to take us outside the Matrix because the Matrix is *all there is*, how Neo and the others would fight the system if there were no "desert of the real" to return to, no "outside" the system that we could access (*The Matrix*).

Chronic City seems less preoccupied with postmodern concerns about pointing out what is real and what is constructed, which proves to be hopeless and even fatal at times, than what that might mean for the characters who have to live in that "ersatz and actual" world. It is very much a character-driven novel, and although Perkus's death is a grim outcome, the loss is not without shockwaves. It is his friend's death that allows Chase to finally see the truth about Oona and Janice. He reflects early on in the novel that

"my emotions were bogus as long as they were being performed in a setting like this one. I might love Janice, yes, but what I showed these people was a simulacrum, a portrayal of myself" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 35). In fact, all of Chase's emotions for Janice are a simulacrum. His relationship with her isn't real; he forgot that he was a paid actor in a citywide soap opera, playing the role of Janice's earthbound lover. The reason he can't remember her is because it never happened. He reasons that the astronauts were likely killed immediately after the mines were released, rather than the months-long vigil that was perpetuated by the newspapers as another distraction. This also leads him to confront Oona, his actual lover, who penned the letters the so-called Janice wrote from space.

If there is redemption in the novel, it may well be in the relationships that take place within its pages. Lethem comments, "The characters are bereft of large historical, theoretical devices by the end. But they're turning just at the end to extremely intimate operations of empathy and connection. Which isn't to say they renounce those theories that helped crack the façade open. It's just that once it's been cracked open, it's not replaced with a new regime" (Silverblatt, "An Interview with Jonathan Lethem" 180). Chase recognizes early in the novel that Perkus is his version of the "ellipsis," or the thing that helps him see past the distractions of the city. He doesn't quite know what to do with himself when they fight, and Chase spends much of the intervening time in a self-imposed isolation in his apartment. Toward the end of the novel, Perkus also connects with his dog, Ava, and their relationship is founded on the relatively simple activities of going for walks, dancing to the Rolling Stones, and sleeping in the same bed. For Perkus, whose former life consisted mainly of stacks and stacks of books and music and the quest for meaning, this is a significant change of lifestyle. He is convinced that

Ava is the way to locate the real beneath the simulacrum of the city. It doesn't matter

that, from a dog's perspective, the world is reconstructed every time she enters it; what

matters is that it's a *real* construction every time. If a dog can't understand it, then it's

part of the distraction. When Claire Carter has debunked the chaldron myth, Perkus still

clings to that truth that "Chase Insteadman is my friend . . . That much is real" (Lethem,

Chronic City 334). As he's deliriously wandering the city afterward, he has the sense that

"if he could see all his friends again, the apartment or chaldrons wouldn't matter"

(Lethem, *Chronic City* 338). They're the final piece of reality that he clings to, but as in

Infinite Jest, relationships are not enough to save him. Still, his friends are genuinely

affected by his death. Richard assaults a police officer, and he and Chase commemorate

Perkus in jail by telling each other the truth about themselves. There is the sense of real

human connection that is emphasized afterward with Richard's marriage to Hawkmanaji

and their coming baby. Chase notes that "the three seemed bound in some human energy

field impossible to deny, as if glimpsed in the core of a flame" (Lethem, *Chronic City*

466). Chase, too, seems to truly want to be changed by the loss. He eschews the habits of

his old life and, instead, walks Perkus's dog, shuns cabs, and conspires with Biller to

steal Claire's virtual cache of chaldrons. Though he is unable to find a way out of the

city's multi-layered images, having experienced the "realness" of his friendship with

Perkus, he is less naïve about its distractions.

Like Wallace though, Lethem seems to resist such easy conclusions, and

relationships in the novel aren't without their risks. Chase's relationship with Janice and,

by association Oona, turns out to be completely false, a simulacrum, a dramatic soap

opera put on for the entire city to watch. That Oona turns out to have written Janice's

letters to Chase adds another layer to the deception. When Oona begs him to stay with her, Chase counters, "I wasn't ever really with you" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 443). Part of the risk of entering a relationship is that one might lose that person, either to death, like Perkus, or to deception, like Oona. Chase recognizes that neither of them were real, himself included. The story they told may have been more real than anything. Perkus's relationship with Ava, however real it seems to him, may well be another simulation. "Virtual Reality," Slavoj Žižek writes, "Simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real" (231). Perkus's relationship with Ava is essentially the one that Wallace describes people having with their televisions or that Alice conceives of with Lack: a relationship absent of any of the risks of associating with other people, essential human contact devoid of any of the "human."

At the end of the novel, Chase turns to the "tubby paperback" *Obstinate Dust*, an obvious nod to Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, as though he suspects it holds answers that the tenuous reality of his city does not. Although he'd formerly thrown Perkus's copy into a chasm-turned-art exhibit on a trip with Oona, he finds a new copy and attempts to work through the dense, all-italicized pages. He narrates, "Though it's hardly easy going, I'm doing my best to push through to the finish line, in Perkus's memory . . . Once in a while on the underground trains I look up and see another rider with a copy of Meeker's bulky masterpiece in their hands, and we share a sly collegial smile, like fellow members of some terrorist cell" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 465). Lethem comments, "Obviously that book, along with Noteless's sculptures, are attempts to startle people into awakeness, to do something that would actually break through" (Scott 173). There seems to be

something of a redemption of the novel here, as though Chase hopes to find some answers in it (or we, as readers, like to think that novels still hold answers). If not a way out, *Obstinate Dust* does give Chase a sense of community and solidarity with other readers; it is human connection, however small.

Conclusion

Like Wallace, Lethem seems aware of the perhaps desperate need for literature to still be meaningful and the impossibility of erasing our ties to literary history, but his struggle to work through postmodern language games is apparent less in the structure of the novel than in its overall themes. The text itself is relatively stable; it reads much like a straightforward narrative with reality filtered through the perspective of one main character. The reality portrayed in the novel, however, is far from stable. The New York of *Chronic City* is permeated by a sense of the surreal, and this instability is emphasized through the characters' discussions of alternate realities. We can see Lethem working with these ideas of alternate worlds in his earlier novels *Amnesia Moon* and *As She Climbed across the Table*, but they reach a new level of relevance and sophistication in *Chronic City* with the prevalence of the Internet. In the conclusion to his book-length study of Lethem's novels, James Peacock writes, "For all their cartoonish flights of fancy and their fabulistic qualities, Lethem's novels and short stories are dedicated quite straightforwardly to simple and timeless themes: the search for, or lack of community" and the desire for connection (158). With this careful balancing of stable text and unstable reality, Lethem traverses a careful path between the tenuousness of language and reality and the possibility of meaningful connections within that reality. In a sense, he has

taken the next step in Wallace's proposed agenda for fiction. The realest, most meaningful moments in the text are perhaps the relationships between characters like Chase and Perkus, although relationships like Chase's with the ghostwriter, Oona Laszlo, show that those connections are not without risks, a theme that appears in much of Wallace's fiction as well.

Peacock, too, makes a case for the post-postmodernity of Lethem's work, with its "reduction in metafictional strategies, references to the world beyond the text, the revivifying of plot and character" (163). If Lethem's early work was more preoccupied with McHale's ontological questions, *Chronic City* is more post-postmodern in its attempt to discern what multiple or inherently unstable worlds might mean for the characters who are caught in them. Lethem remarks, "You've made the cartoon of reality into a cartoon and then it can be shrugged off again. I was trying not to shrug it off. I was trying to inhabit it with these characters. It's the fact that we all live in a situation that is patently absurd in many ways, and yet we have no opportunity to take it lightly. We're living real lives" (Silverblatt, "An Interview with Jonathan Lethem" 181). What seems to have taken place is what McLaughlin qualifies as a shift in emphasis from the foregrounding of a system, whether that system is language or the questionable reality of an entire city, perhaps an entire world, to what it means for the humans who are forced to live within that system. While *Chronic City* is not optimistic about the prospect of escape, it emphasizes instead the potential realness of human relationships inside a world that is somehow both "ersatz and actual" (Lethem, *Chronic City* 449).

CHAPTER IV

LOST IN THE SWAMP: ALIENATION AND HUMAN

CONNECTION IN THE WORK

OF KAREN RUSSELL

Although Karen Russell's work has yet to receive a lot of critical attention, she is

in some ways representative of the generation of writers to come shortly after David

Foster Wallace and Jonathan Lethem and how those younger writers are reacting to the

culture of irony, commercialism, and linguistic instability and the pre-existing reactions

to those problems. Of the three authors' work discussed in this project, hers is perhaps the

most accessible to mainstream readers since it, for the most part, eschews any kind of

metafictional techniques, nor does it resemble the complex, encyclopedic novels of

Wallace and much high postmodernism. Yet I want to argue that Russell is still working

through the difficulties of the linguistic turn in ways that are different from and perhaps

less obvious than the other authors discussed in this project. While her stories have things

in common with the retrenching to realism that Jonathan Franzen prescribes, her

landscapes, characters, and themes have more in common with the other post-postmodern

writers discussed here and elsewhere. One of the recurring themes is the desire to be

really *seen* by others, the recognition of the other as a grounding force in a confusing and

unstable reality. A sense of loneliness permeates all three of Russell's major works. The

characters in them long to make connections or belong to something, but relationships in

these stories are just as fraught with risk and consequences as those in Wallace's and

Lethem's work. Like those two authors, she seems to sense that the answers to the instability of language and reality lie in connections with other people, and her work is more character-centric than structure-centric.

Situating Russell

Russell's stories, like Lethem's, tend to be narratively straightforward: they're chronological and generally told from the perspective of one main character. However, her fictional landscapes have more in common with the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez or the crackpot realists than the realism of Jonathan Franzen. The settings are strange and sometimes creepy, populated by empathetic, realistic characters who often take for granted the surreal or magical things happening around them. Russell credits her growing up in South Florida for the mythic swampland of her first novel and short story collection and describes these landscapes as "mash-ups where fantastical occurrences were happening simultaneously with more banal Tuesday grocery-store reality" (Naimon 138). The alienation and loneliness that Russell's child narrators are steeped in is emphasized by these surreal landscapes, which are often devoid of adult presences. In "Haunting Olivia," Timothy reflects that his younger sister "used to suffer these intense bouts of homesickness in her own bedroom. When she was very small, she would wake up tearing at her bedspread and shrieking, 'I wanna go home! I wanna go home!' Which was distressing to all of us, of course, because she was home" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 35). This is the sort of atmosphere that pervades many of Russell's stories, a surreal sense of at once home and not-like-home that is more unsettling for its familiarity. Russell comments, "I felt like I was born with a deep and queasy suspicion that

something is awry. I think the hard part is that most kids have this sense that they have to

set this 'something' right, despite a poor match between the world's problems and their

puny kid-resources" ("An Interview"). Like Lethem's Manhattan, Russell's worlds are

just enough like ours to be startling when they're not. This defamiliarization goes down

to the level of language, where she invents her own playful phrases ("wondercould,"

"scitterclatter") that essentially jolt the reader out of complacency and keep her from ever

feeling too comfortable inside these fictional worlds (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 142, 157).

In some ways, Russell's magical realist overtones complicate her connections to

post-postmodern fiction, which largely attempts a re-emphasis on the contemporary

world. Her stories displace that world into a more workable fictional landscape that can

both shed light on the world we live in and alienate us from it. In another sense, this is

not all that different from what Wallace or Lethem is doing. All fictional worlds are

inherently constructions, and some constructions are simply more obvious than others.

Wallace reminds us that the world on the page is fictional by forcing us to work to piece

together a text like *Infinite Jest*, while Russell reminds us by making that fictional world

ever so slightly unreal. Lethem and Russell both provide a stable text and a less stable

reality within that text to complicate the relationships to language and reality. In Russell's

case, this magical realist tactic is something of a retrenching to older forms. These

magical realist forms also have connections to a more contemporary crackpot realism, but

there is much less of a sense of conspiracy and paranoia in Russell's work, and there are

very rarely answers to be found by connecting all the pieces.

This lack of narrative closure adds to the defamilarizing effect. Although the

stories are often fairytale-like, there is very rarely a clear-cut moral message, and most of

the stories taper off without the traditional wrapping up or solving of problems. This plays on reader expectations for a didactic overtone or a neat conclusion, which also serves as a defamiliarizing technique. The ambiguous endings leave the reader to imagine her own conclusions, and there is some indication that things will not always get better. While *Swamplandia!* ends with the Bigtree family reunited, few of the stories in *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* or *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* are so optimistic. In many instances, such as the title story of *St. Lucy's* or the somewhat sinister "Proving Up" from *Vampires*, it is more likely that things are going to get worse for the characters. One characteristic of much postmodern fiction is to engage genre forms without following through with them; there is resistance to such easy explanations. A mystery might lack the Sherlock Holmesian explanation at the end, and in Russell's case, her fairytales lack a straightforward morality. Russell comments about writing in magical worlds that she tries to "really take that premise seriously as a 'what if' and see what a human personality . . . what would happen to them if that were the case" (Naimon 145). There is a shift in emphasis from playing with form to what happens to the people within that world when something is dramatically shifted. This lack of narrative closure is where Russell's stories might diverge from crackpot realism as well; as in Lethem's *Chronic City*, there are no answers at the bottom, or at least none that are accessible to the tragically human characters who might search for them.

St. *Lucy*'s is populated with stories that are filtered through the perspectives of children or feature main characters who are children. The only exception, "Out to Sea," is told from the extreme opposite end of the age spectrum, where a grandfather in a retirement home falls in love with the young delinquent who visits him as part of a

community service sentence. Ultimately, the very old narrator serves much the same function as the extremely young: both are alienated in an adult world they can't quite understand or access. At the same time, the children especially live in and create worlds of their own that are shaped by adult presences in their lives, even as those adults are often not actually present. Stories such as "Haunting Olivia," "The Star-Gazer's Log of Summer-Time Crime," and "Lady Yeti and the Palace of Artificial Snows," along with the Bigtrees of *Swamplandia!*, feature dead or more often absent or clueless parents whose own struggles with the world leave them in poor condition for helping their children navigate complex realities. Unable to cope with their daughter's death, the parents of "Haunting Olivia" leave their two remaining sons with a senile grandmother for months at a time. The parents of "Lady Yeti" disappear in the evenings to attend an obscene and somewhat dangerous "blizzard" inside an ice-skating rink, while the ones in "The Star-Gazer's Log" can usually be found in the cocktail lounge or "draped across some jowly older individual, and it's never the same one twice" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 93). Floundering in the lack of adult guidance, the children in "Haunting Olivia" and *Swamplandia!* search for the ghosts of their dead family members, while those in "Lady Yeti" struggle to make sense of a strange and vaguely sinister adult world, and the adolescents in "The Star-Gazer's Log" accumulate a series of petty vandalisms that Ollie notices are "getting a lot less comical, and a lot more criminal" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 94). The sense of loneliness is pervasive, and the ensuing struggle to understand or find a place safe from their unstable realities often ends in even greater consequences. Big Red in "The City of Shells" puts this most succinctly when she reflects that Houdini wasn't "driven by his longing to shuck off this mortal coil. She knows that he was all the time

just searching for a box that could hold him" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 170). The adolescent characters are, in the same sense, just looking for a grounding force to tether them to reality, and they're most often searching for this in their relationships with others.

Russell's work is largely absent of the frequent and at times overwhelming popular culture references that Avant-Pop and much other contemporary fiction incorporate. While she includes the occasional passing reference to Judy Garland or the haunting melody of Don McLean's "American Pie" that underscores the danger of Ava's drifting through the swamp, the invention of her own popular culture is far more prevalent. Within the worlds of her stories, Russell creates her own commercialized culture that serves the dual function of further displacing the reader from any sense of recognizable reality and, at the same time, providing an uneasiness about how much these worlds of products and commercialism resemble our own. In some ways, her settings are reminiscent of earlier, less commercialized times—times that many of her stories indicate are on their way out. When Kiwi Bigtree abandons his family's failing alligator-wrestling theme park, Swamplandia!, he finds himself working at the more commercially successful adventure park called The World of Darkness. His experiences there are detailed throughout the chapters alternating with Ava's descent into the "underworld" of the swamp to find her sister, and there is the sense that both characters are descending further and further into darkness. Kiwi's, in particular, is the despair of debt, lower class, and dehumanizing service jobs. The workers there, who are primarily teenagers, shorten the park's name to "*the World*," with a poignancy that isn't lost on Kiwi. He reflects that, "the abbreviation felt dangerous; there was something insidious about it, the way it crept into your speech and replaced the older, vaster meanings" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 79).

He works nine hour shifts at the World, vacuuming, cleaning toilets, or completing other

mundane tasks that he gages by their difficulty, boredom, or likelihood of humiliation,

and then retires to the submarine-like staff dormitory beneath the park (Russell,

Swamplandia! 82). There is a kind of implicit distrust of language here that Kiwi, as an

outsider to life on the mainland, is best able to recognize. Language can be used both to

reveal and to conceal; in commercial culture, it hides a variety of evils. The melancholy

of both working and living at a demanding, often demeaning job that barely pays enough

to get by and offers few chances for advancement further reinforces the World's

nickname; the World does, in many respects, become Kiwi's temporary world while he is

cut off from his family.

Relationship to Language

Russell sets up a complicated relationship with language within her stories. On

the one hand, her storytelling often demonstrates a renewed faith in language's ability to

convey meaning. In "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," Clyde is a vampire who struggles

to overcome the popular mythology about vampires: his undead "life" is thrown off-kilter

when he realizes that he doesn't have to sleep in a coffin, shun the daylight, or drink

blood to survive. "*You small mortals don't realize the power of your stories*," he thinks to

himself, facing for the first time a group of children dressed as vampire hunters on

Halloween (Russell, *Vampires* 13). It is a reminder, however fleeting, that language can

still hold power, and its effects on Clyde are substantial. The structures of Russell's

stories do not often comment on themselves the way the metatexts of postmodernism

were known to do, but like Lethem, Russell finds ways to work in an ambivalence about

language's power. Clyde reflects later, "Magreb likes to say she freed me, disabused me of the old stories, but I gave up more than I intended: I can't shudder myself out of this old man's body. I can't fly anymore" (Russell, *Vampires* 14). This suggests that language's power is double-edged; it frees Clyde from the vampire mythology, but when he loses the power of the stories, he loses all of it, not just the parts he wanted. Language has the power both to free Clyde and to bind him. There is a similar theme in "The City of Shells" where Big Red is at first "pretending to be trapped" inside one of the trailer-sized shells, and "it isn't until she tries to get out of the Giant Conch that she realizes she really is stuck" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 164). The stories we tell ourselves have the power to become real, but reaffirming language's power comes at a price, as that reality is often dangerous. Toward the end of "Vampires," when Clyde allows his bloodlust to overcome him, he is finally able to change forms again. By reaffirming one power, he is able to regain the others.

Another example of the tenuousness of language is the way Chief Bigtree of *Swamplandia!* puts an asterisk next to things that aren't entirely true. Ava narrates, "When the Chief put an asterisk next to something, it meant that he was only telling you the best part of the truth. He wasn't being dishonest, he explained . . . The asterisk, the Chief taught us, was the special punctuation that God gave us for neutralizing lies. One recent example would be 'Your mother's cancer is getting better.*'" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 36). Again, the slipperiness of language, its ability to hide as well as illuminate, is foregrounded. Ava thinks of words as "just a container for a feeling, or a little matchstick that you strike against yourself" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 223). She's not perturbed by language's instability so much as aware of its limitations. She reflects that

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using the word "God" has mixed results to summon feelings of warmth and protectiveness that she associates with her mother and thinks "probably I could have said anything, called any name, who knows?" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 223). Ava's uses of "God" or her mother's name are less about the words used to summon than the feelings and belief behind them that serve to comfort her. This is similar to Clyde's belief in the language of vampire stories having the power both to limit and enable him. Words have only as much power as we give them, but they often have unpredictable consequences.

The Chief's use of the asterisk is the same kind of ironic undercutting that Wallace is so suspicious of yet can't quite escape. The consequences of the linguistic turn are often more implicit than explicit in Russell's work. More than that, she writes in a context where irony and constructedness are not so much foregrounded as taken for granted. They are so deeply enmeshed within the culture that they're often not even noticed or commented upon, although their destabilizing effects are still visible. Russell connects her Florida childhood, where weather can wipe out entire landscapes, for this understanding, remarking, "I'm aware that nothing is stable. Structures aren't stable. Personalities aren't stable" (Naimon 141). Because the constructedness of language and reality are so well understood, characters in her stories are able to communicate around and through it in spite of that inherent instability. Where Wallace often sees ironic distance as the inhibitor to real connection, Russell's stories do not establish quite the same binary between irony and sincerity. Irony is the one of the things that keeps Wallace's addicts from recovery or from Identifying with one another, but in Russell's worlds, true things can still be said with ironic undercutting so long as both parties understand the cultural subtext at work. Within the language of their familial culture, the

Bigtrees all understand what's being said as well as what's not being said, and meaning is still, somehow, conveyed. In this context, the asterisk indicates something more like, "I *wish* your mother's cancer was getting better—but of course, I can't say that." It provides the necessary distance for the Chief to communicate about his dying wife and to save face in front of his children about the emotional wreckage it's created. Irony's function is still ultimately deconstructive; that is, it keeps us from saying what we really mean, but in a culture where irony is almost universally understood, it allows us to say what we really mean when it's undesirable or maybe impossible to actually say it. Both authors are working in a culture where irony is the dominant ideology, but it's a shift in emphasis from working through irony to working with it. Rather than always sabotaging connections, irony in Russell's stories can at times aid in communication.

There are times in Russell's stories where language is suspect or fails altogether. In "The New Veterans," Beverly comments on the magnitude of Sgt. Zeiger's memorial to his fallen comrade, inked forever on his back. She remarks that he's given his lost friend his own "portion of eternity" and then mentally berates herself for the comment: "Portion of eternity, Christ, where did she get that one? A Hallmark mug? The Bible? Possibly she's plagiarizing the chalkboard Hoho's menu, some unbelievable deal: the bottomless soup bowl. Until doomsday, free refills on your coffee" (Russell, *Vampires* 166). There is the sense here that language cannot accommodate real empathy without slipping into cliché. Language is also foregrounded during what is perhaps the most tense and tragic scene in *Swamplandia!*, where the Birdman rapes thirteen-year-old Ava. Immediately after, she vows silently not to tell anybody about *it*. "'It' was this bloat," she muses inwardly, "Already the thing had somehow grown so big and slippery inside me

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that I didn't see how I could get it to adhere to any story" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 331). It is the kind of experience that resists language and interpretation; there is no linguistic structure that can contain an experience like that or make it understandable, either to herself or to other people.

In "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," fourteen-year-old Nal struggles to make sense out of the various discarded or pilfered items the seagulls have stolen from the future: wedding invitations and passports, keys and buttons, and a penny with a date from one year in the future. He reflects, "His guesswork was beginning to feel stupid. Pens and keys and train tickets, so what? Now what? Sheila was right. How was he supposed to make anything out of this sack of crap?" (Russell, *Vampires* 75). There is the longing to somehow make meaning out of the collection of objects, but no matter how often he checks the nest or how he reassembles its contents, no answers are forthcoming. Although Russell's stories often carry a renewed confidence in the power of language, there are moments like these that suggest an awareness of the problems inherent in language as a meaning-making structure, or any meaning-making structure. Ultimately, there is no meaning to the collection of objects other than what Nal brings to it, no meaning to language other than what we assign it ourselves. If there are some divine forces or seagull prophets from the future, we will never be able to decode their messages. "The Seagull Army" suggests that it's not as important to find the answers as it is to find ways to be human in that kind of world. Nal eventually forgoes the search for meaning and, instead, finds a way to connect with another character.

Some of Russell's stories also indicate the distrust of history and historical accounts that preoccupied many postmodern writers. History is always a version of

events, and that version can be reconstructed on a whim. The Bigtrees of *Swamplandia!*

have a family museum next to the gift shop, where photographs and objects from their

lives are put on display with typed explanatory cards for the tourists. Ava reflects,

"Certain artifacts appeared or vanished, dates changed and old events appeared in fresh

blue ink on new cards beneath the dusty exhibits, and you couldn't say one word about

these changes in the morning. You had to pretend like the Bigtree story had always read

that way" (Russell, *Swamplandia!* 32). By changing the displays, the Chief is essentially

able to re-write the Bigtree history the way his father did when he moved his wife from

Ohio and changed their names. The falseness of this history suggests a family that is

unmoored from either the past or the present, and their slowly diminishing numbers

leaves Osceola and Ava cut adrift, forced to latch onto ghosts or birdmen for meaning. In

"Accident Brief," Tek remembers his father as "basically a good person," but finds that

story rewritten by his mother and his stepfather. He muses, "Mr. Omaru has taught me

that loss isn't just limited to the present; it can happen in any direction. Even what's done

and vanished can be taken from you" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 204). Language has the power

to reshape history, and even memories are subject to it.

This theme resurfaces in "The New Veterans" when a massage therapist discovers

she can alter Sergeant Derek Zeiger's memories of his traumatic past and the loss of a

fellow soldier by physically manipulating the memorial death scene tattooed on his back.

Each time he tells the story of his friend's death, Beverly's hands alter the image

imprinted on his skin. When she suppresses the appearance of a red wire in the picture,

the wire Sgt. Zeiger suspects that he saw and failed to announce before they tripped the

explosion, that erasure from the tattoo then wipes it from his mind. The next time he tells

the story, there is no mention of the red wire; it no longer happened that way in his

memory. Unnervingly, the altering of the image effectively alters the reality, at least the

way that Zeiger experiences it. Beverly discovers later, to her shock, that history that

relies on memory is always subject to this flaw; she and her sister have a vicious

disagreement about their mother's death, who was around to take care of her, and when.

Russell writes, "Beverly doesn't know how to make sense of who she is today without

those facts in place. With a chill she realizes there are no witnesses left besides herself

and Janet" (*Vampires* 188). In a sense, her identity depends upon this history, which is

fundamentally unstable, making Beverly's own idea of selfhood as unstable and

constructed as her past.

The Search for Connections

In the absence of adult guidance, Russell's adolescent characters search for

meaning and connection with others around them. The desire to be noticed and accepted

is a recurring theme. Wrestling with the death of her mother and her physically or

spiritually absent father and siblings, Ava is vulnerable to the attentions of the Birdman, a

sinister drifter who convinces her that he can guide her through the "underworld" to find

her sister when she elopes with the ghost of a dead crew member on an abandoned

dredge. Upon first meeting him, Ava notes that he "looks me to pieces," reflecting, "I

realize now that I have been glimpsed and corner-of-the-eyed before, by the Chief and

my sister and the yawning tourists. But I have never actually been *looked* at. Not like

this" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 11). Ava is not the only character to recognize the power of

attention. In "The Star-Gazer's Log," Marta comments on "that cobwebby feeling when

grown-up men look at you . . . like you've just walked into something sticky and invisible" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 89). More often though, the characters feel invisible to the world around them. In "The New Veterans," Beverly struggles with middle age and staying "visible to waitstaff, taxi drivers, cashiers" (Russell, *Vampires* 157). Sawtooth Bigtree in the floating retirement home and the various adolescents absent of their parents suffer similar feelings. Although this trend is intensified with the very young or aging characters, it's more suggestive of a culture that dehumanizes and forces people into the background.

More often than not, Russell's stories are preoccupied with the dangers of these correlating desires to be seen by others and to make sense of surreal and alienating surroundings, both of which frequently come at unbearable prices. What she calls some of the "central questions" of *Swamplandia!* are: "How can we find one another, how can we truly 'see' one another, when so much of our lives are spent straining after phantoms?" ("An Interview"). In "Accident Brief," Tek and Rangi share a moment of mutual connection. Tek notes that "some secret life flames in Rangi's eyes and for an instant I feel an identical ache quivering between us" (Russell, St. Lucy's 208). They both long for something they've lost, a family member or a best friend, but this moment of connection triggers an outburst from Rangi that leaves them both stranded on a snowy mountainside with little hope for rescue. In the title story of *St. Lucy's*, a group of girls are schooled in the ways of humans after being raised by wolves in the woods. They grapple with fitting into this strange new world, and Claudette muses, "This wasn't like the woods, where you had to be your fastest and your strongest and your bravest self. Different sorts of calculations were required to survive at the home" (Russell, *St. Lucy's*

232). Ultimately, the group's fitting into the human world is at the cost of their youngest

sister, who is least able to shed her wolf ways and adopt a human lifestyle. Russell's

stories often feature outcasts, such as Ollie in "The Star-Gazer's Log," who is willing to

sacrifice his relationship with his sister and his own sense of morality in order to fit in

with a group of "comical and ironical" criminals, also known as his friends (Russell, *St.*

Lucy's 79). In "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," another group of vandals encounters a

city scarecrow that looks increasingly like the outcast they formerly abused. The narrator,

Larry, and Eric become improbable friends after sharing a secret about the thing Eric

loves most: the pet rabbit he found and failed to return to its owner. Larry notes that "for

a minute or two, catching our breath, we got to be human together" (Russell, *Vampires*

238). Although they seek it out, many of the characters fail to realize how terrifying that

connection might be. Afterward, Larry hurts Eric more than their taunts or punches ever

did by calling the rabbit's owner, and Eric eventually disappears from the city. Haunted

by guilt and the scarecrow who looks spookily like the vanished outcast, Larry tries too

late to atone for the betrayal. In "Out to Sea," rather than allow the young criminal who

visits to steal from him, Grandpa Sawtooth purposely leaves out money or trinkets for her

to take on the sly. Loneliness has the power to warp our decision-making, and he turns

the act of taking advantage into an act of generosity, the only way he knows how to

connect with her. Russell writes about "the extreme difficulty of seeing real people –

seeing yourself, seeing anybody clearly. Finding the clean lines of another person, in

spite of the warped glass of need and desire and terror and projection/fantasy" ("An

Interview"). Similar to the relationships set up in Wallace's fiction, there is a persistent

tension in Russell's stories between loneliness and connection. She suggests that the

"monsters" in her stories stem from "whatever loneliness comes from denying some essential impulse so you can be accepted by others" (Naimon 144). It's never as simple as one or the other, and the characters often give up something more important in order to belong.

Much like Mario and Drinion in Wallace's novels, the characters in Russell's stories who show the greatest capacity for empathy are often the least human. She describes Eric in "The Graveless Doll" as "incapable of shame. Mutant floated among us, hideous, yet blank as a balloon—his calm was unrelenting. He was ugly, most definitely, but we might have forgiven him for that. It was his serenity that made the kid monstrous to us. His baffling lack of contrition—all that oblivion rolling in his blue eyes" (Russell, *Vampires* 212). Eric is impervious to their threats and beatings, never anything but kind and self-effacing, and he shows the most capacity for love in his care for his pet rabbit, Saturday. Eric portrays the kind of naïveté that, once lost, can never be recovered. The characters who witness this and can never hope to emulate him are not as forgiving as those in *Infinite Jest*. The most empathetic character in the story is also the one who suffers the most, which reinforces the ambivalence of human connection as a solution.

In Russell's surreal worlds, that lack of humanity is often literal rather than figurative. In "Children's Reminiscences of the Westward Migration," Jacob describes his father, the Minotaur, as "the strongest teamster, the least mortal, the most generous" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 110). When a woman goes missing from their caravan, it is the Minotaur who argues most fiercely for searching for her, while the humans insist that it's hopeless and commence dividing up her possessions. The least human among them is also the most compassionate, the humans somehow more monstrous than the "monster."

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This theme resurfaces again in "St. Lucy's" when the youngest wolf sister, Mirabella, who shows the least progress in her lessons on how to be human, is also the only one to come to Claudette's aid when she forgets the dance steps and risks embarrassing herself in front of everyone. While Claudette pleads silently for one of her sisters to help her, Mirabella is the only one still wolf enough to show her compassion. Although Claudette comments inwardly, "I have never loved someone so much, before or since, as I loved my littlest sister at that moment," it is only for her to turn on Mirabella and blame her for ruining the dance (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 244). It is the same kind of betrayal that Larry commits against Eric, a uniquely human way of turning on someone who has showed them only kindness. Later, when Claudette has completed her training and returns to visit her wolf family and show off her acquired skills, she tells her family her "first human lie" (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 246). As she noticed earlier, the human world takes "different calculations," and fitting in as often at the price of other things like honesty or compassion (Russell, *St. Lucy's* 232).

Russell's stories take on a more advanced moral complexity in *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. In "The New Veterans," Russell teases out the idea of what true empathy might look like when Beverly attempts to, literally, take Sgt. Zeiger's painful memories of his dead friend. As Beverly massages out the mental distress tattooed into his skin, she absorbs his memories while Zeiger forgets them. By the end of the story, he is convinced that no one died that day; the tattoo is a memorial of the exquisite luck that saved their lives, while Beverly, who wasn't even there, remembers every excruciating detail. The memories begin to cause her to lose sleep, pick up smoking, and miss work, but "so long as only she can see it, and Derek's amnesia holds, and Derek continues to improve, she

knows she can withstand infinite explosions, she can stand inside her mind and trip the red wire of April 14 forever" (Russell, *Vampires* 183). We learn through a conversation with her sister that Beverly is no stranger to self-sacrifice, as she gave up most of her own life to care for her cancer-stricken mother years before. The story asks a complicated question about whether, if it were possible to physically take someone's pain, we *should*. True empathy, truly experiencing the sergeant's memories, has devastating consequences for Beverly, and she doubts in the end whether she helped him at all. If Beverly could truly "live the boy's worst day for him," the story is ambiguous about whether or not she ought to (Russell, *Vampires* 186).

Conclusion

In some sense, Russell's stories are very much the return to realism that Franzen advocated with their linear narratives and renewed faith in language to convey meaning. However, her ambivalence about language and her skepticism toward history suggest that she is aware of her authorial ancestors and the problems they faced. As part of a newer generation of writers than Wallace and Lethem, she often works less explicitly with these problems. As Breu points out, they have become part of the cultural landscape that we inhabit. Russell's work indicates that language as a structure has, indeed, become an essentializing feature of contemporary life. Its instability is reflected in her strange landscapes, her child narrators who are often isolated from the adult worlds around them, and even her wordplay, all of which serve to defamiliarize the reader and draw attention to the way their own worlds might be similarly constructed. Though her characters suffer no less despair than Wallace's over the possibility of making connections in such a

world, they also think less explicitly about the contructedness of language and reality as the source of this despair. For them, it is as natural as the occasional giant conch shell or elusive swamp ghost. Occasionally, characters will pause long enough to comment on the inadequacy of a language that can't hope to say everything that is inside a person, showing that Russell, at least, is aware of these problems, but as is the case with the Chief's use of the asterisk, they sometimes see irony as less of an inhibitor than simply another tool in the construction of meaning. Russell's work shows exactly what Wallace seemed to fear: what happens when irony and language constructions have become so much a part of the landscape that they rarely even need to be commented on anymore. If irony as the social context is implicitly understood by all who try to communicate within it, connections can be made even with irony instead of just in spite of it. Rather than search for a "way out" of language and the constructions of meanings, Russell accepts them and focuses instead on what happens to characters who live in such a world, how it affects the way they communicate with one another, and how they might manage to make connections in spite of those constructions. Her stories demonstrate the kind of new humanist approach that Holland celebrates, where themes of loneliness and alienation are set alongside connection and empathy as potential solutions. However, like Wallace and Lethem, Russell resists such easy conclusions. The characters in her stories are flawed and destructive in their search for relationships; they long for connection and are simultaneous threatened by it, and they're not above betraying the people they've made those connections with. Relationships are fraught, but like language, they're the only structures that we have for making meaning in a world that's lonely, alienating, and at times, unreal.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Post-postmodernism marks a shift in emphasis from the construction of texts and worlds to what it means to be human in those worlds, which are often unstable, commercialized, and alienating. This new focus on character and relationships is foregrounded in fiction by David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, and Karen Russell. All three authors seem to view human connections as points of redemption or escape from their ersatz realities, but they also complicate those connections by including relationships that are fraught or in some way hazardous. In part, this seems like a consequence of the linguistic turn, which so destabilized language and reality that nothing, not even human relationships, are free of doubt. Their inclusion in the post-postmodernist agenda both strengthens the theory and opens it up to new examinations.

More than the other authors discussed in this project, Wallace struggled openly with how to move past a postmodern fiction that he sensed had become too preoccupied with irony and language games to say anything meaningful about what it's like to be human in a contemporary world. Like the postmodernists before him in their distrust of grand narratives, Wallace targeted the feeling that metafiction had become self-reinforcing and "used-up." He proposes a new agenda for fiction in pieces like "E Unibus Pluram," his interview with Larry McCaffery, and his Kenyon College Commencement Speech "This Is Water." It's worth looking at some of Wallace's major works through the

lens of this proposed agenda to see where and how his fiction might reflect it. It's helpful to think of *Infinite Jest* and, in some ways, the incomplete *Pale King*, as a kind of bridge between high postmodernism and American literature after the millennium. Both incorporate some of the techniques characteristic of postmodernism in its heyday, such as encyclopedic data, jumbled perspective and chronology, and profuse foot- or endnotes that foreground the act of reading. However, there is also a shift in emphasis from calling attention to the text itself (although both novels also do that) to the characters within that text and how they struggle with a culture that is often chaotic and alienating. *Infinite Jest*, in particular, targets relationships and the attempt to truly identify with another person as moments of possible redemption within that culture, but both texts complicate the argument by examining the dangers and failures of such connections. Wallace's use of postmodern techniques in his fiction and his tendency to undercut moments of sincerity with irony highlight his difficulty in moving past those postmodern forms and his uncertainty about whether it's useful, or even possible, to pretend that the linguistic turn never happened. Wallace's fiction marks a turning point in contemporary literature that both acknowledges the problems with language and attempts to work through them.

If it's helpful to think of the fiction discussed in this work as a series of steps leading away from postmodernism, then Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* represents the next step from Wallace's proposed agenda. Like Wallace, Lethem is aware of the difficulty of making meaning in the wake of the linguistic turn, but his work shows even more distance from postmodern structures than Wallace's. Lethem's novels are narratively stable and absent of the kinds of language games that foreground reading as an act of reading, but the worlds within his texts are often dreamlike, unstable, and

subject to doubt about their very reality. There is the occasional reminder that language is just as unstable as the tenuous Manhattan of the text, but it is not the structure that is foregrounded so much as what it means to be a human within that structure. *Chronic City* also demonstrates the shift in emphasis from language or reality constructions to the characters caught within them, and Lethem, too, targets human relationships as a point of reality within chaos. While these connections are in no way a "way out" of worlds that are both ersatz and actual, they provide moments of redemption and clarity for the characters who manage to make them.

Finally, Karen Russell's fiction moves even further from postmodern structures to the kind of realism that Jonathan Franzen suggests, but her stories are far more fantastical than realistic. Russell uses her surreal landscapes and child narrators to defamiliarize and draw connections to a real world that is, itself, often strange and estranging. While Wallace and Lethem are at times explicitly aware of the problems of irony and language, Russell appears to be working from within a culture where irony and instability are implicit, so much so that they're often as taken for granted as the magical occurrences happening around her characters. Russell's work demonstrates what it's like to live inside a culture where irony is ubiquitous, and rather than rebel against it, her characters often find ways to communicate and make connections through those structures rather than in spite of them. Like Wallace's and Lethem's characters, her characters long for human relationships, but Russell, too, resists such easy answers. Her stories are critical of what characters are willing to sacrifice in order to make those connections, but like language, they may well be the only structures we have for creating meaning.

The research done in this project is significant because there are many competing theories about the state of contemporary fiction, how or whether it differs from postmodernism, and what it ought to accomplish. Aside from Wallace, on whom there is already much existing criticism, this work attempts to analyze some authors who aren't as frequently included in the conversations about contemporary literature but who are still reacting to the fallout of the linguistic turn in interesting and important ways. Jonathan Lethem and Karen Russell both take up post-postmodernism's premise about working through the problems of language in different ways, but they both work through relatively stable texts, unstable or unreal worlds within those texts, and the possibility of human relationships within the structures of language and reality. This project also serves to emphasize the shift in post-postmodern texts from a focus on the instability or unreality of worlds to what it means to be human within those worlds both by finding it at work in a broader range of authors and by examining it in all its complexity in the work of Wallace, Lethem, and Russell. This project analyzes Wallace's proposed agenda for contemporary fiction, how he and the others may react to or carry out that agenda, and how they may usefully fit within or expand upon some of the leading theories of contemporary fiction. It might be helpful in future studies to examine further authors of Russell's generation to see whether irony and the instability of language have also been absorbed into the context. More than Lethem, this marks a shift away from postmodernism that is much less of a "retrenching" to realism than the kind of culture that Wallace describes where irony is so pervasive that there's no need to even comment on it anymore. What's interesting in Russell's work, and perhaps in the work of other authors, is how humans react to this culture and find ways to communicate and make

connections in spite of the dominant ideologies of irony and instability. Like Zeno's

Paradox, meaning somehow still gets through.

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