AN ALLEGORY OF VALUE: AMERICAN LITERATURE WITHIN NEOLIBERALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an allegorical reading of contemporary American literature's critical response to neoliberalism's reshaping of cultural and social value. Focusing on four literary recipients of the MacArthur Foundation fellowships, it argues that the institutional narrative guiding the "genius grant" program symptomatically expresses the dominant neoliberal sociology of knowledge. Specifically, this study focuses on the work of William Gaddis, Colson Whitehead, David Foster Wallace, and George Saunders. In the prose fiction herein discussed, each author dramatizes a constituent feature of the neoliberal sociology of knowledge to which the MacArthur Foundation subscribes, namely involuntary competition, human capital, and the price mechanism. These three features transmogrify the themes of capital, labour, and rent that underlie Marxist critiques of capitalism. The ordering principle for the study obeys the Foundation's rationale for the "genius grants": from the philanthropic bequest that established the program, through the interpellation of recipients as creative labourers and "string-free" subjects, to the monetary reward itself. The introductory chapter establishes the narrative logic of the fellowship and a theoretical framework for what follows. Chapter two treats Gaddis' *J R* (1975) as a tonic to the market propaganda that emerges in biographical accounts of John MacArthur and the Foundation's origins. Chapter three examines Whitehead's demystification of creativity and creative labour in *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006). Chapter four demonstrates that David Foster Wallace's celebrity and work exemplify the debts that govern in a toxic social environment, paying particular attention to the essays and fictions from his middle period. Chapter five explores the economic winners-and-losers template that animates George Saunders' first four short fiction collections. Saunders documents how the collective quality of the class struggle is delegitimized through the individualizing effects of entrepreneurship and consumer culture. The concluding chapter reflects on the value of allegory as a method and the significance of literature as a medium for exposing the commitments and consequences of neoliberal ideology.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> When we are confronted with a list, we have to ask what the purpose of the list is, for a list is a purposeful collection.
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> —William H. Gass, "I've Got a Little List" (1996)

> Rebecca was an academic star. Her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of these empty words—"friend" and "real" and "story" and "change"—words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks. Some, like "identity," "search," and "cloud," had clearly been drained of life by their Web usage. With others, the reasons were more complex; how had "American" become an ironic term? How had "democracy" come to be used in an arch, mocking way?
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> —Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010)

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation publicized the members of its 2014 fellowship class in mid-September. To acknowledge the event, *The New Republic* reposted an editorial by Michael Kinsley that ran on the day that the inaugural class of MacArthur fellows was announced (June 6th, 1981). In his piece, Kinsley reprimands the fellowship program for its empty aims, characterizing the entire undertaking as "an exercise in invidious distinction for its own sake" (n. pag.). He highlights the contradiction between the program's mandate to make so-called "risky" investments in individuals and the banality of the Foundation's selections, "the usual suspects" for cultural recognition (n. pag.).[1] Despite fanfare from the program's architects to the contrary, the selections are the rule rather than the exception. Kinsley bases this broader criticism on the concept of "credentialism," which he glosses as an appetite for distinction for distinction's sake (n. pag.). If the fellowships can be said to accomplish

[1] He singles out Robert Penn Warren, but also runs through the accolades of each winner. For example, in reference to Leslie Marmon Silko, he writes that "[e]ven the ones you may not have heard of are identified as having 'won honors for her [*sic*] poetry, film-making and plays" (n. pag.).

anything, according to Kinsley, it is to further secure the status of a cultural elite while simultaneously serving as an apologia for the wealth accumulation of an economic elite. "What's so great about excellence," to adapt Kinsley's titular question, when it essentially translates to a snake admiring its own tail?

Kinsley's question hovers over the MacArthur fellowships and other capitalist prestige mechanisms like the doctrine of original sin in Christian theology. To put it impiously, why do we seem to need this stuff? It is not a new question. In *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), James English identifies numerous precursors in the incredulous camp. For instance, there is Sir Walter Scott. English alludes to Scott's April 1821 letter to the Honorable Sir John Villiers that admonishes the proposed establishment of a Royal Society of Literature and an annual Gold Medal prize. "It would give rise supposing the whole association did not fall into general and silent contempt," Scott blusters, "to a sequence of ridiculous and contemptible feuds, the more despicable that those engaged in them were perhaps some of them men of genius" (402).[2] Sentiments such as these mark Scott's letter as "one of the great documents of prize bashing," in English's estimation (42). But neither moral outrage nor anxieties about the impact of prize discourse advances our knowledge of the organizing logic of enterprises like the MacArthur fellowship program. Moral outrage and condescension are part of the game.[3] Reposting

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[2] It is surely a historical irony that there is now a Royal Society of Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Prize.

[3] In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982), Pierre Bourdieu classifies such behaviour as "*strategies of condescension*" (68, emphasis in original). Bourdieu shows how commentators like Kinsley and Scott "deriv[e] *profit* from the objective relation of power between the languages that confront one another in practice […] in the very act of symbolically negating that relation" (68, emphasis in original). Throughout *The Economy of Prestige*, English deftly invokes Bourdieu to construct a sociology of prize culture. I have not followed suit. While the transformative impact on literary studies of Bourdieu's theorizations of social and cultural practices is undeniable, his approach is symptomatic of a neoliberal worldview premised on competition. Bourdieu "redescrib[es] all economic, aesthetic, and social values as markers in intersubjective competitions" (Clune 9). Craig Calhoun acknowledges as much, writing that according to Bourdieu "the motive force of social life is the pursuit of distinction, profit, power, wealth, and so on. Bourdieu's account of capital is an account of the resources that people use in such a pursuit. In this sense,

Kinsley's 1981 editorial in September 2014 suggests that basically the game remains the same, but it also specifically signifies that his critique has not been sufficiently developed nor reoriented. His riposte even filters into celebratory responses to the MacArthur announcements. On the day that *The New Republic* reposted his editorial, *The New York Times* ran a breakdown of the winners, which noted that "[a]s in the past, some of the winners are well known" (Lee n. pag.). The lead for the *Times* article goes further than the qualifier "some" in implicitly acknowledging—in order to negate—the sort of criticisms that Kinsley articulates. It introduces Brooklyn-based dancer and choreographer Kyle Abraham, "who recalled relying on food stamps just three years ago" (Lee n. pag.). MacArthur fellowship to the rescue! The hyperbole of the no-longer-needs-to-be-starving artist hides in plain sight a lingering embarrassment or discomfort with the value of the fellowships, beyond the obvious economic one.

By closely examining the work of four MacArthur-winning literary figures, *An Allegory of Value: American Literature within Neoliberalism* seeks to illuminate what Kinsley could not possibly have seen: the nascent hegemony of a neoliberal sociology of knowledge that animates the program. Whereas Kinsley stresses that the Foundation transgresses the principle of meritocracy, my aim is to illustrate that the MacArthur narrative adheres to basic tenets of this sociology. The question to consider, in other

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despite his disclaimers, Bourdieu does indeed share a good deal with Gary Becker and other rational choice theorists" (qtd. in Guillory 23). The overlap can be traced to a confusion between capital and wealth, as Jon Beasley-Murray argues. Bourdieu's innovative and influential account of capital (social, cultural, or symbolic) mistakenly "implies that capital always pre-exists appropriation (rather than being its product)" (Beasley-Murray 117, fn 7). For a thorough critique of Bourdieu's methodology, see "The Sociologist King" chapter of Jacques Rancière's *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983). I could succinctly justify my departure from Bourdieu in response to his assertion in *The Rules of Art* (1992) that "Art produces the effect of making the market disappear" (81). My argument is closer an understanding that Art produces the effect of making neoliberalism *appear*. I am not arguing for an unqualified return to the Frankfurt School approach to culture, but am asserting that Bourdieu's division of the social world into relatively discrete social "fields" obscures the unifying logic of capital accumulation.

words, is how does capitalism (*re*)*produce* prestige mechanisms like the MacArthur fellowships? The fellowships pose several challenges to critics of contemporary literary production who seek to answer this question. Most conspicuously, there is the challenge endemic to any list of its scale. To borrow William Gass' implied question, what is "the purpose of the list" (29)? What is the logic that informs a collection? The Foundation has compiled an impressive list since it began awarding its five-year fellowships, popularly known as "genius grants," in 1981. As of September 2014, 918 United States citizens or residents have received one.[4] Compounding the obvious challenge of scale is the fact that the recipients belong to an array of fields: the list includes artists, scientists, scholars, and members of various other professions. The scale and diversity could be critically disorienting; focusing on four recipients from the literary field—William Gaddis, Colson Whitehead, David Foster Wallace, and George Saunders—represents a bid for argumentative depth at the expense of topical breadth. The MacArthur Foundation functions as a *point de capiton* in the *oeuvres* of each author that I discuss, not to mention the close readings that I perform in my chapters. The "genius grant," which to date has merited only casual mention in analysis of their work, allows for new critical understandings: of each author's abiding themes and of the problematic of value that defines "American literature within neoliberalism." Although I cannot claim to be an expert on other MacArthur-winning writers, I am avowing that the literary occupies a special position of critical self-consciousness vis-à-vis genius and the economic. To begin establishing this position, my next section addresses the first possible clue that this

[4] To be eligible for a fellowship, recipients must either be citizens or permanent residents of the United States. The citizenship and residency clause explains the designation "American Literature" as one of my organizing terms.

aggregate constitutes "a purposeful collection" by identifying the quilting point that unifies recipients: the signifier of genius.

1.1 Genius as a *Point de Capiton*

The signifier of genius inhabits all coverage of the recipients and fellowship program in such corporate media entities as *The New York Times*, defines citations of the MacArthurs in mass culture,[5] and distinguishes the Foundation's brand in book blurbs and bios. If the Foundation embraced the *concept* of genius in the same way that the National Book Award or Man Booker Prize committees continue to embrace the idea of "the book of the year," the challenge could be faced head on (at least from a literary studies perspective). We might query their investment in the Romantic notion of a transcendental author-figure or, conversely, follow Pierre Macherey in deciding that "[a]ll considerations of genius […] are *on principle* uninteresting" (68, emphasis in original).[6] We could dismiss the association between the fellowship program and genius as a quirk or, more critically, use it as an opportunity to ask after our tendency to adopt a solipsistic paradigm for viewing creativity. We could even consider why it is that lately genius seems to ironize whatever enters its semiotic orbit. These possibilities are foreclosed by the fact that the Foundation publicly disavows the "genius grant" moniker, as is reflected in the quotes that envelop "genius grant" and the scare-quotes specifically

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[5] Examples include a MacArthur-winning rival for the Leonard character in *The Big Bang Theory*, a "genius grant" test administered to Peter on *The Family Guy*, and a conceit in Charlie Kaufman's eccentric 2008 film *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). I discuss *Synecdoche* in my concluding chapter.

[6] Imre Szeman disputes the relevance of discussions of creativity to cultural studies in "Neoliberals Dressed in Black; or, the Traffic in Creativity" (2010): "The redefinition of business as art via the concept of creativity might not seem to be an especially worrisome problem for the study of culture. Creativity was never really a feature of older conceptual vocabularies of cultural study (from Winckelmann to Kant to Lessing) and it is certainly not important in more recent ones […] [C]ontemporary literary criticism […] has never needed creativity, even if creativity has been tied to the activity of art, literature, and culture in the quotidian vocabulary of the social" (33).

reserved for "genius" in popular print discourse. It is tempting to rush in with readymade explanations for this disavowal, but I want to begin with how the Foundation addresses the issue in an FAQ forum on their website:

> Why does the program not use the term "genius" regarding its Fellows? Journalists and others sometimes use "genius grant" as a shorthand reference for the MacArthur Fellowship. We avoid using the term "genius" to describe MacArthur Fellows because it connotes a singular characteristic of intellectual prowess. The people we seek to support express many other important qualities: ability to transcend traditional boundaries, willingness to take risks, persistence in the face of personal and conceptual obstacles, capacity to synthesize disparate ideas and approaches. (*MacArthur* n. pag.)

This statement needs to be amended in light of the facts. First, we should substitute "predominantly" for "sometimes."[7] "Avoid using the term" puts the matter rather strongly, given the existence of the FAQ. But I want to linger with arguably the most problematic assertion. It is probably news to those who would claim to have come into contact with genius that "the term […] connotes a *singular* characteristic of intellectual prowess," since this designation effectively quantifies the unquantifiable, the sublime connotations of genius (emphasis added).[8] Notice how the attributes that the Foundation enlists to displace genius—interdisciplinarity, boldness, tenacity, and creativity—are

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[7] For a recent example of this predominance, the term is featured in the *headlines* for stories covering the 2014 announcement of MacArthur recipients in several of the major dailies in the United States (e.g./*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Sun-Times*).

[8] Gass denotes genius when describing a reader's experience of the language used in one of the works that I analyze in my dissertation, William Gaddis's *J R* (1955). For Gass, genius involves a "hallelujah" moment where one can feel "there is something good in this gosh awful god empty world" ("Introduction" x).

comparatively mundane. Some combination of them would be at home in the rationale statements of countless granting agencies.[9] In the context of the MacArthur Foundation, genius is thus a "quilting point" in the Lacanian sense. According to Lacan, a "quilting point" (*point de capiton*) is "the point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate" (III. 267). Superficially, genius "produces the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning," which helps to explain the durability of its association with the fellowship program, despite the Foundation's stated opposition to it (Evans 151). On a deeper level, genius has the potential to estrange the conventional granter-grantee relationship insofar as "a perfectly 'natural' and 'familiar' situation is denatured," as Slavoj Žižek describes the consequence of the *point de capiton* (*Awry* 88). It "becomes 'uncanny,'" Žižek continues, "loaded with horror and threatening possibilities, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that 'does not belong'" (*Awry* 88). Why does genius "not belong" with the fellowship program? What "horrifies" and "threatens" the Foundation vis-à-vis genius? I will address these two questions in order to heed Gass' call concerning lists, before I explicate my dissertation's methodology and structure.

The first question (of "belonging") is easier to answer than the second, as we can ground it in the feature that the MacArthur Foundation is fondest of touting—a feature so enticing that it frames nearly all the discourse on the "genius grants." They are string-free. Recipients owe the Foundation no formal accounting for their activity during the five years that they hold one. The fellowships section on the Foundation's website says

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[9] Two examples to support this generalization are the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize and SSHRC Insight Grants. The Gish Prize is one of the most lucrative arts prizes awarded in the United States, carrying a $300,000 remuneration. Justifying the selection of Spike Lee for the 2013 award, the committee stated: "We honor Spike Lee for his brilliance and unwavering courage in using film to challenge conventional thinking, and for the passion for justice that he feels deep in his soul" ("Director"). "Boldness" and "tenacity" resonate here. "Interdisciplinarity" and "creativity," meanwhile, are two of the criteria for Insight Grants.

that there are "no strings attached" because "highly motivated, self-directed, and talented people are in the best position to decide how to allocate their time and resources" (*MacArthur* n. pag.). Elsewhere, the Foundation identifies their aim as "freeing those awarded from the constraints of existing systems of tenure and publication or the demands of the commercial market" ("MacArthur Fellows"). The restrictive "strings" are thus associated with two holders, the academic community and the marketplace. "The tenure and publication" line acknowledges that some "genius grant" recipients inhabit the academic world (which explains why they are classified as grants in the first place, i.e., as a form of institutional currency; they are often bestowed upon individuals with university affiliation). They are also *prizes* in the sense that they bear a price (a monetary value) which is supposedly substantial enough to liberate recipients from having to command a price in "the commercial market."[10] As such, they promise autonomy, a concept that has historically been defined *against* market imperatives. Genius does "not belong" in the reduction of autonomy to monetary value, as its prestige is traditionally seen as possessing an exchange-value that is *not* indexed with price. In the case of the "genius grants," though, the price predominates. This fact is reflected in the foregrounding of the figure in articles about them. *The Wall Street Journal*, in its annual piece on the newest batch of MacArthur recipients, voices the prevailing view: "Each $625,000 award, spread out over five years, comes with no strings attached and is intended to offer ambitious

[10] As English points out, the word "'prize' has its etymological roots precisely in money and exchange. The word is traced to the Latin *pretium*: 'price,' 'money'; akin to the Sanskrit *prati*: 'against,' 'in return'" (*Economy* 6). Prizes are *not* entirely reducible to their monetary value because they are defined as an alternative form of currency and valuation. Nevertheless, the important thing to keep in mind with the "genius grants" is that price annuls genius as a translating term.

people a degree of financial freedom to elevate their work" (Porter n. pag.).[11] It is unsurprising to find *The Wall Street Journal* borrowing the language of a private foundation ("no strings attached") or characterizing $125,000 of tax-free money per year as merely "a *degree* of financial freedom" (emphasis added). Given that $125,000 would place a household between the fourth income quintile and the top 5%, this statement of "degree" is problematic, but the point I am making here is that *The Wall Street Journal*'s rendering is broadly representative.[12] Through the string-free framing, a host of commentators consistently decipher the "genius grants" using their price. Price is a Rosetta Stone of value for these commentators, whereas I argue that it needs to be read in relation to genius if one wants to make sense of the MacArthur narrative. This relationship has its roots in artistic autonomy, a history to which I now turn in order to clarify the stakes of the financial translation of the "genius grants."

1.2 Spectral Genius, or, A Brief History of Aesthetic Autonomy

It is easy to see why genius "does not belong" in the MacArthur narrative; as Kinsley's editorial stated, any supplement to its social recognition (read as synonymous with economic reward) is a "redundancy" (n. pag.). But why does genius "horrify" and "threaten" the MacArthur Foundation? This question is decidedly more difficult. Developing an answer requires me to expand upon my claims about aesthetic autonomy. Martha Woodmansee provides a superb overview of the emergence of the concept of genius (and its attendant promise of autonomy) in *The Author, Art, and the Market*

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[11] The Foundation increased the stipend to $625,000 in 2014. Between 2000 and 2013, the amount was $500,000 (*Poets* n. pag.). The outlay for the each member of the inaugural class (1981) was $120,000 (Hill n. pag.).

[12] Based on figures from the 2013 United States Census ("Income" n. pag.).

(1994). She follows the convention of tracing a European lineage of this concept, beginning in the transition from the Renaissance to the Romantic epoch. Renaissance authorship "was an unstable marriage of two distinct concepts," "craftsmanship" and (divine) "inspiration" (Woodmansee 36). Romantic aesthetics privileged the latter quality, transferring it to the terrain of the innate. "'Inspiration' came to be explicated in terms of *original genius*," Woodmansee avers, "with the consequence that the inspired work was made peculiarly and distinctively the product—and the property—of the writer" (37, emphasis in original). The language of property ownership signals the dialectical nature of this development: authors and aestheticians accept the terms of the market in an attempt to transcend its authority.[13] This bargain assumes a Faustian character due to the commodity form that defines cultural production and circulation in the capitalist marketplace. The devil is in the detail, from a Marxist point of view. Aesthetic autonomy is but an abstract universal; concrete autonomy belongs to those who own the means of production and control the distribution channels. The discourse surrounding aesthetic autonomy pays a disproportionate amount of attention to the comparatively limited property claim of artists, thus mystifying the concrete autonomy enjoyed by the owners of the means of production. To paraphrase Macheath's aphorism from Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928)—"What is the burgling of a bank to the founding of a bank?" (92). What is an author's aesthetic autonomy compared with the publishing house's command over the labour-power that actualizes this autonomy? Then again, any Marxist critique of this disparity must also account for aesthetic autonomy's

[13] The title of Woodmansee's chapter, "Genius and the Copyright," signifies the importance of this history for contemporary disputes over intellectual property, although this connection is not my interest here. For a further analysis of the historical development of intellectual property in the context of literary culture, see *The Copywrights* (2008) by Paul K. Saint-Amour.

severe individualization of the labour-power that brings the text (as commodity) into the world. Autonomy theoretically displaces the multitude of individuals who cooperate to produce a given text. Despite autonomy's inability to capture the social realities of material production, the concept usefully reminds us that its promise is betrayed at birth by market determination.

Since bourgeois ideology dims the contradictions illuminated in aesthetic history, it is difficult to imagine that autonomy "horrifies" or "threatens" the MacArthur Foundation. After all, this ideology ensures that the bourgeoisie embrace their role as cultural arbiters. They simultaneously embody the authority of market processes and correct for inefficiencies. Social reproduction requires the idea of aesthetic autonomy, but the capitalist market cannot allow for its absolute realization; therefore, the bourgeoisie need never be seriously "horrified" nor "threatened" by aesthetic autonomy. One testimonial to the ruling class' attitude of self-assurance towards art and artists comes from the desk of the MacArthur Foundation's chief benefactor, John MacArthur. He wrote one of the forewords to a volume affiliated with the newly established Charles MacArthur Center for the Development of American Theatre, entitled *The Stage Works of Charles MacArthur* (1974). As the surname announces, Charles is John's brother.[14] In addition to banal biographical background and family boasts, John's foreword supplies an

[14] Charles MacArthur first gained national recognition for co-authoring (with Ben Hecht) *The Front Page* (1928). The Wikipedia entry on the play details that it had an initial Broadway run of 278 performances. It has been restaged three times since, most recently in 1986-87. It has also been adapted to film four times, most famously as *His Girl Friday* (1940), and most recently as *Switching Channels* (1988). MacArthur and Hecht were no strangers to the newspaper industry that they satirized in the play. Both had worked as crime reporters at major Chicago dailies. Their familiarity bred a complicated kind of contempt. The play's title (*The Front Page*) and setting (the Chicago criminal courts building) symbolize the hegemonic pursuit of the fame secured on the front page, whether in byline or headline. Hecht and MacArthur's critical point is that this pursuit comes at the price of displacing the news media's traditional function in liberal democratic society, which is to act as a check on the arbitrary exercise of power. The media comes to mirror the debased political object of its reporting.

interesting anecdote. He recalls his initial unwillingness to subsidize a publication that his brother was overseeing, *Theatre Arts Magazine*:

> I had dinner with Charlie and attempted to convince him that it was a lost cause. Before the evening was over he extracted a promise that I would give the magazine artificial respiration. He made me publisher and I kept the magazine alive, at considerable expense, until Charlie's death. My only profit was enjoying the companionship of Charlie and his friends. (x)

Here John enthusiastically plays the part of insurance tycoon. The sentence celebrating immaterial value ("companionship") is haunted by the qualifier denoting material concerns ("considerable expense") in the previous sentence. The spectre of economic interest dwells in the word "profit." A further qualification comes across in the caption for an image of John and Charles which towers over the anecdote. The caption quotes a *TIME* article from January 3rd, 1949: "'We didn't want anything with the MacArthur name on it to fail,' explained John D. loyally. 'My group—just some unpicturesque businessmen who want to make money—has put up $500,000 to make it go'" (qtd. on x).[15] Following his frank declaration of family "loyalty," John momentarily adopts an artist's view, portraying the investors as "just some unpicturesque businessmen who want to make money." The self-deprecation is a feint, for the grimy profit motive is represented as a guiding light. John concludes his foreword by declaring that "[t]his collection of [Charles'] stage plays reminds me how I enjoyed sharing his theatrical world with him" (xi). The as-if equality ("sharing") obscures the power dynamics laid out

[15] Interestingly, John is the only foreword author not acknowledged in the list of thank yous that Richard Fallon provides in his preface. Whereas Helen Hayes and Nunnally Johnson (the other two foreword authors) are given kudos, John goes unthanked. A possible clue to this omission is that Fallon, then Chair of the Theatre School, was disappointed with the amount that John had pledged for a proposed Charles MacArthur Center for Development of American Theatre (see Kriplen). The building is now named the Richard Fallon Theatre and Museum of Fine Arts.

above. Autonomy is neither a "horror" nor a "threat" because as the bourgeois know all too well, they *control* the (art)world—a knowledge and a control that neoliberalism has further secured.[16]

1.3 The Systemic Effects of Neoliberalism

Zooming in from the wide angle art-commerce shot to a close-up on the particular forms foregrounded in the MacArthur narrative, language ("genius") and (string-free) money, reveals the "horror" and "threat" to be systemic. The scare-quotes housing "genius" register that money has displaced language. The previous sentence could be lifted from the work of the "academic star" cited in my second epigraph, Rebecca from Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (262). Rebecca's acclaimed research attends to "words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" (262). The hollowing corresponds to the techno-dystopia that Egan builds in her final chapter, "Pure Language." "Pure Language" depicts a young generation of Americans so beholden to marketing maxims that money represents the only access pass to their social media bubbles. An exchange between Rebecca's husband (Alex) and a member of this generation (Lulu) encapsulates the dystopian grammar:

> "So," he said. "You think there's nothing inherently wrong with believing in something—or saying you do—for *money*?"
>
> "'Inherently wrong,'" she said. "Gosh, that's a great example of calcified morality. I have to remember that for my old modern ethics teacher, Mr.

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[16] Since my primary argument relies on the idea that artists can retain a degree of critical independence from the economy, I should probably clarify that the *pure*, "string-free" autonomy promised by the MacArthur Foundation is a fable. *Relative* autonomy, i.e., an autonomy that retains its critical integrity despite art's commodity status, remains real and available.

> Bastie; he collects them. Look," she said, straightening her spine and flicking her rather grave (despite the friendly antics of her face) gray eyes at Alex, "if I believe, I believe. Who are you to judge my reasons?"
>
> "Because if your reasons are cash, that's not belief. It's bullshit."
>
> Lulu grimaced. Another thing about her generation: no one swore. Alex had actually heard teenagers say things like "shucks" and "golly," without apparent irony. "This is something we see a lot," Lulu mused, studying Alex. "Ethical ambivalence—we call it EA—in the face of a strong marketing action." (319-20, emphasis in original)

Lulu may be coy about her motivations, but her brand of cynical pragmatism reigns. Alex's earnest views are relics, idiosyncratic enough for Lulu to mislabel them as "ambivalent." His outburst locates the source of the "word casings" that Rebecca studies (262); the encased words cease to mean outside of the context of "marketing action." Jürgen Habermas diagnoses an analogous effect in his two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). According to Habermas, money surpasses language in its capacity to "coordinate action" (*Volume One* 342). This assertion is based on the lifeworld-system antinomy that animates Volume Two of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Immediately following the passage in which Habermas observes that "money […] *substitut*[es] *for language*," he declares:

> The contradiction arises between […] a rationalization of everyday communication that is tied to the intersubjectivity of the lifeworld, in which language counts as the genuine and irreplaceable medium of reaching understanding, and […] the growing complexity of purposive-

> rational action, in which actions are coordinated through steering media such as money and power. (*Volume One* 342, emphasis in original)

On these terms, Lulu is a spokesperson for the dominant system; Alex remains in the subordinate lifeworld. Habermas puts the matter succinctly in Volume Two, detailing how money and "steering media" are able to "replace mutual understanding in language as a mechanism of co-ordination in certain well-defined contexts" (262).[17] In these "well-defined contexts," market processes enframe social activity to the degree that individual intentions become irrelevant. Michael Clune credits Habermas with here offering "perhaps the most famous contemporary account of th[e] split ['between human decision and impersonal process'] when he describes what happens when language gets replaced by a different 'kind of symbol,' money" (101). Though Clune's reading is attuned to how Habermas totalizes the "replacement," Habermas settles for socio-institutional complexity as a prime mover. *The Theory of Communicative Action* never gives the assemblage that necessitates the opposition between language and money a name. He confesses that he "shall not discuss in any detail the *system-building* effect that the money medium can have" (*Volume Two* 266, emphasis in original).[18] Egan's advantage over

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[17] Value inevitably involves displacement, as Marx emphasizes in his critique of commodity fetishism. Richard Godden's "Labor, Language, Finance Capital" (2011) elaborates with reference to Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993): "value, which stands in for something else (be it linen, Bible, or the labor that went into their making and so, under capital, into their value), will always be shadowed, in the form of an 'impertinence,' by that which it nominally displaces" (419). The entrenchment of corporate personhood as a juridical fact in the United States (*Dartmouth*, *Citizens United*) confirms Habermas' verdict. Money is speech (see, also Robinson).

[18] Stephen Parsons underlines this conspicuous absence in a chapter on Habermas from *Money, Time and Rationality in Max Weber* (2003). Parsons accounts for this absence in a critique of Habermas' premise: "it is difficult to appreciate how the co-ordination of actions can occur in the absence of communication" (101). In other words, the "system-building effect" eludes Habermas because it is based on a conjecture concerning "the analytical distinction between communicative and economic action" (101). Whereas Parsons believes that this "distinction" "may be too sharply drawn," I will go on to argue that it is consistent with the neoliberal doctrine of the free market (101).

Habermas, then, is that she does explicitly sketch out the sort of world-system that arises out of the displacement of language by money.

To supply the real life assemblage missing from Habermas—the one that makes the "threat" and "horror" of genius intelligible—we need to enlist the work of one of Habermas' academic adversaries, Michel Foucault.[19] In his 1979 Collège de France lectures, published as *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004), Foucault testifies to the ascendance of an intellectual tradition that invents "the economic rationality that will make it possible to nullify the social irrationality of capitalism" (106). The lectures mark "Foucault's sole incursion into the field of contemporary history throughout his teaching at the Collège de France" (Senellart 329). Using post-World War II Germany and the United States as his primary case studies, he argues that the various Austrian, German and American architects[20] of this tradition establish a blueprint for governance based on market information. Market information assumes *sine qua non* status for the intellectuals constructing what Foucault first identifies as a "neo-liberal program" in his fourth lecture (78). "So, what is this neo-liberalism?" Foucault propounds (131). It constitutes the project "of taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, of projecting them on to a general art of government" (131).[21] With neoliberalism then, Foucault reveals the system that Habermas does not seek to name.

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[19] Habermas and Foucault are better described as "intellectuals," but my choice of the adjective "academic" is a nod to the community that incubated the debate between the two. See the sixth chapter of Amanda Anderson's *The Way We Argue Now* (2006), which addresses "the influential late stage of the Habermas-Foucault debate in both Britain and America, a debate that made itself particularly felt in the fields of literary and political theory" (11). Anderson proceeds to build a case against Foucault's caricature of Habermas' ideas.

[20] Foucault at one point refers to them as "agents of transmission" (161).

[21] Foucault supplies the aphorism that distinguishes classical liberalism from neoliberalism: within the latter, "[o]ne must govern for the market, rather than because of the market" (121).

1.4 Three Key Features of the Neoliberal Sociology of Knowledge

The archive of neoliberalism into which Foucault delves is heterogeneous and addresses economic debates and national histories that are beyond the scope of my dissertation. What I instead wish to gather from Foucault's celebrated lectures are three of the key features of the neoliberal sociology of knowledge that bear upon the "genius grants." The first feature is involuntary competition. Competition transforms from a constellation in the universe of discrete socioeconomic galaxies, such as business and politics, to the lodestar for all human action. The privileged place that neoliberalism accords to competition should not be reduced to the commonplace that capitalist society rewards market virtues; as Foucault emphasizes, the neoliberal view of competition is more comprehensive: "The society regulated by reference to the market that the neo-liberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of competition" (146-47). Accordingly, social policies prioritize competition. These policies "must not nullify the anti-social effects of competition; [they] must nullify the possible anti-competitive mechanisms of society" (160). The nomination process for the MacArthur fellowships obeys this axiom insofar as individuals cannot apply for one. Competition is thus constant, as the Foundation and its ever-changing anonymous roster of nominators guarantee. The Foundation and its functionaries operate as a market. Those competing for a "genius grant" need not know that they are doing so because the Foundation "respects" the "logic" of competition on their behalf (Foucault 120).[22] In the process, the unwitting

[22] In the early years of neoliberalism's ascendance to the status of hegemonic worldview, Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene* (1976), a work which defends the principle of involuntary competition. As Dawkins asserts in the Introduction to the 30th anniversary edition, "each gene is seen as pursuing its own self-interested agenda against the background of the other genes in the gene pool" (ix). Although his theory

contestants are interpellated as "*homo economicus*," which is a second feature of neoliberalism that Foucault discerns (147). Subjectivity is modeled on "enterprise" (147).[23] "[T]he true economic subject is not the man of exchange, the consumer or producer," Foucault proclaims, "but the enterprise" (175). Classical liberalism invented *homo economicus* as a subject position; neoliberalism theorizes it as rigorously independent. "[T]he stake in all neo-liberal analyses," Foucault ascertains, "is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself" (226). The MacArthur fellowships privilege the enterprise model by purporting to purchase "maximum freedom for the recipients to follow their creative vision" (*MacArthur* n. pag.). Freedom is synonymous with self-management—"creative vision" should be read as personal capital. The prudent, self-directed investments made by the recipients cultivate the value of personal capital. "Neoliberalism," as Daniel Stedman Jones puts it, "connect[s] human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor in the competitive marketplace" (2). The third feature germane to the MacArthur "genius grants" pertains to neoliberalism's valorization of the price system that reflects marketplace activity. For Friedrich Hayek, the first President of neoliberalism's original think tank (the Mont Pelerin Society), prices express true value. Foucault self-consciously refers to "the truth of prices, as we would say now" because thanks to Hayek the sea change that putatively gets underway in the eighteenth century is a *fait accompli* by the time Foucault is lecturing: "Th[e] site of truth is not in

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maintains Adam Smith's classical liberal idea of the invisible hand—insofar as the "selfish" behaviour of the genes has altruistic consequences—this statement posits evolutionary biology's equivalent of unintentional market competition.

[23] Human capital could also be considered a distortion of the concept of labour-power, in reference to the definition that Marx offers in Volume One of *Capital*: "The capitalist epoch is therefore characterized by the fact that labour-power, *in the eyes of the worker himself*, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property" (qtd. in McNally 15, emphasis added).

the heads of economists […] but is the market" (30). Indeed, Hayek's legacy, as John Cassidy notes, stems from his "suggestion that market prices are primarily a means of collating and conveying information" (41). To Hayek, prices exhibit all pertinent information. His representation of the market economy as "a system of telecommunications" was designed to surpass Adam Smith's classical liberal notion of the invisible hand.[24] Characterizing the market as a "system of telecommunications" is "more than a metaphor," according to Hayek's 1945 article "The Use of Knowledge," as the "price system […] enables individual producers to watch merely the movement of a few pointers […] in order to adjust their activities to changes of which they may never know more than is reflected in the price movement" (par. 22). Prices are akin to Saussurean signs: they are the command centre of the (market or linguistic) system. Although arbitrary and relative, prices—like signs—possess communicative integrity. This analogy between prices and signs would shrink from a Deconstructionist gaze, but it survives Lacan's rewriting of the signifier-signified relation. For if "the unconscious is structured like a language," then the psyche of the *homo economicus* is structured like a market (Lacan XX. 48). Market maxims bind the *homo economicus* to the "symbolic order," i.e., to the social world. Closer to my line of argument, Hayek's statement about the "price system" resonates with the "genius grants" since their knowledge value is indexed and ensured using the price affixed to them. For Hayek as for the Foundation, full use of human knowledge in society is only possible when it is priced.

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[24] Wendy Brown tersely traces neoliberalism's departure from the invisible hand metaphor in the closing pages of *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015): "Ceding all power to craft the future to markets, [neoliberalism] insists that markets 'know best,' even if, in the age of financialization, markets do not and must not know all, and the hidden hand has gone permanently missing" (221). My symptomatic readings of texts by "genius grant" recipients subscribe to Brown's broader argument that "neoliberal rationality" devastates democracy by "disseminat[ing] the *model of the market* to all domains and activities […] and configur[ing] human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*" (31, emphasis in original).

Before outlining my methodology and chapter divisions, I want to articulate why my invocation of Foucault's work restricts itself to the three features of neoliberalism that he identified, rather than pursuing his broader argument. It remains an open question as to whether Foucault achieves the requisite critical distance from his object of study. This question has oriented recent responses to the lectures in French intellectual circles, and informs a chapter of Philip Mirowski's masterful *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (2013). In *The Final Lesson of Michel Foucault* (2012), Geoffroy de Lagasnerie locates Foucault's overview of neoliberalism as part of a broader departure from what Foucault took to be the myopic political vision of the Left. According to this reading, Foucault tarries with neoliberal ideas because they provide a negative lesson: a how-not-to guide for a new Left. As Foucault states in the lectures, with reference to his previous work on "madness, disease, delinquency, and sexuality," he intends "to show […] how a particular regime of truth […] makes something that does not exist able to become something" (19). A symptomatic reading could translate this as an admonishment of the Left for failing to reckon with neoliberalism as "a particular regime of truth." Daniel Zamora is decidedly less sanguine about Foucault's aims. In an interview with the French journal *Ballast* (translated and reposted on *Jacobin*), Zamora says that he is "astonished by the indulgence Foucault showed toward neoliberalism" (n. pag.). Zamora detects this "indulgence" not only in the lectures, but also in Foucault's articles and interviews from the late 1970s and into the 1980s: "Foucault was highly attracted to economic liberalism: he saw in it the possibility of a form of governmentality that was much less normative and authoritarian than the socialist and communist left, which he saw as totally obsolete"

(n. pag.). Notwithstanding the allegations about the allure of neoliberalism for Foucault, Zamora gives him his due. He acknowledges that the "Birth of Biopolitics" lectures represent "an extremely novel and stimulating project" (n. pag.). Mirowski, an otherwise trenchant critic of Foucault, similarly credits him with "reconnoitering a development in its infancy, one that most people in his circles had up till then ignored, and which has since proven to be far more consequential than it was in his own lifetime" (*Never* 95). Mirowski quickly qualifies his praise by detailing how Foucault "shared quite a bit of common ground with [neoliberal] doctrines" (*Never* 97). Whatever the degree of critical identification or distance between Foucault and neoliberalism, he accurately catalogues its impersonal and personalizing processes.[25]

1.5 The Value of Allegory

Although the question of Foucault's complicity is provocative, I have made it tangential to my dissertation, by building on his insights (accentuated in the previous section) while dispensing with his method of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis coalesces with the TINA (There Is No Alternative to neoliberalism) worldview because it delegitimizes any truth claims that emanate outside of discursive practice—any claims,

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[25] Wendy Brown believes that critics such as Michael C. Behrent have "overstated the claims that Foucault's interest in neoliberalism was driven by its deep attraction to it" (*Undoing* 55). Behrent contextualizes Foucault's attraction to neoliberalism as follows: "Foucault found economic liberalism [neoliberalism] to be intellectually appealing for two crucial reasons. First, at a juncture when he, like a number of his contemporaries, was attempting to free French intellectual life from the headlock of revolutionary leftism (or *gauchisme*), economic liberalism proved to be a potent theoretical weapon for bludgeoning the left's authoritarian proclivities. Second, Foucault could endorse economic liberalism because, unlike its political counterpart, it did not require him to embrace philosophical humanism—the outlook that Foucault had, from the outset of his career, contested with all the energy that his intellectual skills could muster. The theoretical condition of possibility of Foucault's neoliberal moment was his insight that economic liberalism is, essentially, a liberalism without humanism" (546).

for example, to the historical contingency of neoliberalism's ideological hegemony.[26] Here I follow Fredric Jameson in finding discourse analysis weakened by its belief that language absorbs ideology, a precept which risks mistaking reality for (ideological) truth. At the opening of the "Postmodernism and the Market" chapter of *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991),[27] Jameson proposes a significant analogy between discourse analysis and anarchist politics (embodied in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon). He cites Marx's attack on the Proudhonist plan to circulate so-called "labour money." For Marx, these "receipt[s] for as much labour-time as his [the producer's] commodity contains" misidentify the source of capitalism's antagonisms (*Contribution* n. pag.). The Proudhonist plan does not grasp "that it is the very contradiction of the exchange system that is objectified and expressed in money proper and would continue to objectify and express itself in any of its simpler substitutes" (*Postmodernism* 260). Since "the exchange system" continues to be determined by the commodity form, the Proudhonist "solution" has no purchase on capitalist totality. Discourse analysis also evades the abstractions and alienations that are fundamental to capitalist totality, avers Jameson, echoing "the reveries of the Proudhonists […] [by] autonomizing the dimension of [a given] *concept* and calling it 'discourse'" (264, emphasis in original). Such a move, he continues, "suggests that this dimension is potentially unrelated to reality and can be left to float off on its own" (264). Casting his lot with ideology critique, Jameson concludes his analogy

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[26] This position is clear from Foucault's statement that "[T]ruth isn't outside power" (qtd. in Vighi and Feldner 144).

[27] I rarely deploy the term "postmodernism" in my dissertation. This omission is deliberate and follows from one of Jameson's major theoretical contributions, which is to have made the term "postmodernism" synonymous with "the cultural logic of late capitalism." In substituting "neoliberalism" for "postmodernism, or late capitalism" as a periodizing term, I am claiming that the concept of neoliberalism offers a more accurate "cognitive map"—to borrow from Jameson's lexicon—for navigating the reshaping of cultural and economic value over the past four decades.

with a plea: "we have to talk about the realities *fully* as much as the concepts" (264, emphasis added).[28]

When it comes to the politics of literature and interpretation, Marxism is necessary for overcoming the partial perspective of discourse analysis. Jameson famously mandates, in the Preface to *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), "Always historicize!" (9) This "slogan" immediately gives way to the first chapter's complex meditation on the "ideological double bind" that historicizing often entails: it either "respect[s] the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past" or "discloses the solidarity of its [the past's] polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (9, 18). Marxist hermeneutics allows us to break free from this "double bind." Aesthetic forms represent history and contemporary reality, but they do not straightforwardly reflect the universal narrative of class struggle, or "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (19); although aesthetic forms are implicated in this struggle, individual texts are replete with surprises and incongruities. Any act of interpretation that sublates these surprises and incongruities does so at its own peril. Conversely, only an *ersatz* politics of literature and interpretation refrains from conjoining capitalist

[28] Jameson's caricature of discourse analysis begs the critical response from its adherents that discourse analysis does not necessarily dispense with material contexts and contradictions. For example, Norman Fairclough mobilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to perform ideology critique. As Fairclough defines it, "CDA is analysis of the dialectical relationships between discourse (including language but also other forms of semiosis, e.g. body language or visual images) and other elements of social practices" (231). Despite its ability to locate the latent political decisions and class interests that manifest in discourse, discourse analysis is less useful for locating the basis upon which these decisions and interests shape "social practices." As Terry Eagleton forcefully phrases the problem, apropos of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), "[t]he category of discourse is inflated to the point where it imperializes the whole world, eliding the distinction between thought and material reality. The effect of this is to undercut the critique of ideology—for if ideas and material reality are given indissolubly together, there can be no question of asking where social ideas actually hail from. The new 'transcendental' hero is discourse itself, which is apparently prior to everything else" (219). For Eagleton, then, Fairclough's "dialectical relationship" between "ideas and material reality" comes too close to ultimately reducing—to return to Jameson's terminology—"realities" to "concepts."

unfreedoms to the social structures that generate them. For a critical bridging instrument, Jameson defends the method that I will pursue: Marxist allegorical interpretation.

My dissertation takes an allegorical approach to the intersection between the neoliberal sociology of knowledge and the "genius grant" narrative. I read the work of William Gaddis, Colson Whitehead, David Foster Wallace, and George Saunders dialectically, i.e., as expressing and resisting the neoliberal narrative. Each of my next three chapters focuses on a major category within political economy: capital (Gaddis), labour (Whitehead), and rent (Wallace), respectively. My fifth chapter moves from these micro-categories to the macro-component of class structure, which enables me to circle back to the "universal equivalent" at the core of "genius grant" valuation, money (Saunders). I conclude by reflecting on a filmic representation of the "genius grants" (*Synecdoche, New York*) in order to address the question of value and reaffirm the value of allegory—a reaffirmation that also serves as an invitation for future work. Although "[t]he neo-liberals practically never argue with Marx," as Foucault notes, I aim to show how Marxist literary criticism enables us to vigorously dispute their major propositions (220). There are at least two additional advantages to rooting an allegorical interpretation of neoliberalism in the traditional categories of political economy. First, it avoids the dangers of what Jameson labels as postmodernism's "autoreferential" impulse, "the frenzy whereby virtually anything in the present is appealed to for testimony as to the latter's uniqueness and radical difference from earlier moments of human time" (*Postmodernism* xii). Neoliberalism is not *sui genesis*, as the institutional history of the MacArthur Foundation in my next chapter elaborates. Second, my approach also exposes what *is* novel about neoliberalism, *pace* those whom Foucault chastises for "ultimately

mak[ing] neoliberalism out to be nothing at all, or anyway, nothing but always the same thing, and always the same thing but worse" (130). Neoliberalism may be a variation on the capital-labour-rent theme, but it is singular in several respects, as my study testifies.

Before I delineate the subsequent chapters of my dissertation in more detail, I want to take a moment and reconsider the putatively uneasy relationship between the Foundation and genius from Jameson's allegorical angle. Jameson has assiduously politicized allegory as an interpretive method. The forthcoming final volume of his planned six-volume *The Poetics of Social Forms* is entitled *Overtone: The Harmonics of Allegory*.[29] At the moment, perhaps the clearest programmatic defense of the method emerges in an essay, "From Metaphor to Allegory" (2000). After citing Northrop Frye's collapsing of allegory and interpretation—"all commentary is allegorical interpretation"—Jameson proceeds to lay out what is special and vital about allegorical interpretation (26). He contrasts allegory with interpretation based on "the ideal of the symbol, which seems to designate some impossible unity" (25). Jameson's overview of literary history associates the elevation of the symbol (and corresponding abandonment of allegory) with Romantic aesthetics. The narrative of the MacArthur Foundation disputes the "impossible unity" of Romanticism's genius by consistently housing the term in scare-quotes. Symbols then, much like metaphors, presume "a fullness of meaning" that is absent in genius (27). Genius miscodes the fellowship program. Allegory, by contrast, takes its cue from "the crisis of representation and of meaning" (27). The crisis in the case of the fellowships is not the anachronism of genius, but the invisibility of the neoliberal sociology of knowledge that informs the program. "If the

[29] The five volumes that have been published thus far are *Postmodernism*, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (2002), *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), *The Modernist Papers* (2007), and *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013).

allegorical is attractive for the present day and age," Jameson declares, "it is because it models a relationship of breaks, gaps, discontinuities, and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds" (25). These fissures figure prominently in the corpuses of Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, and Saunders. Their work is certainly multivalent, but I argue via allegory that their various creations make visible the contextual force of a neoliberal notion of cultural production.

The series of bridges that my analysis ventures back and forth across extends between a neoliberal notion of cultural production, the "genius grants," economic criticism, and close reading. Allegory is the legend on my argumentative map, marked with Jameson's sense that "[a]llegory consists in the withdrawal of its self-sufficiency of meaning from a given representation […] it takes the form of a small wedge or window alongside a representation" (*Brecht* 122). My route through the work of Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, and Saunders does not exclude other paths, but I have selected authors whose work exemplifies the contributions that an explicitly Marxist construction of "small wedges or windows" can make to the fight against neoliberalism. Accordingly, each chapter isolates and rallies around what Marx identifies as a key component of the capitalist process that determines the meaning and measure of value. Neoliberalism is a discrete strain of capitalism; hence, these components continue to interact in ways that ensure the predominance of capitalism's problematic of value. Wendy Brown is appropriately urgent when defining this dynamic: "Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity—not only with its machinery of compulsory commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by its form of valuation"

(*Undoing* 44). Neoliberalism's "form of valuation" is indeed as unique as Foucault illustrates, but it does not transcend the categories of capital, labour, and rent.

The chapter order follows from the plot of the MacArthur "genius grant" narrative. My next chapter focuses on the capital that created the Foundation. The Foundation's origins are implicated in market fascination, a phenomenon whose ideological effects Jameson charts. I argue that Gaddis (MacArthur class of 1982) assails market fascination in *J R* (1975), chiefly through his characterization of the eponymous eleven-year-old tycoon. Attending to J R's characterization as an undoing of market fascination, I read the novel in the shadow of three examples of life writing about John MacArthur. I illuminate the extent to which finance capital, steeped in an imperative of competition generalized under neoliberalism, transforms wealth accumulation into a game (fit for children, Gaddis adds). *J R* grants the verisimilitude that the biographical accounts of MacArthur largely lack, and thus serves to critique organized philanthropy and artistic entanglements with free-market logic: two structural features of the "genius grants."[30] Chapter three supplements my second chapter's emphasis on capital, exposing the main way in which "genius grant" winners, the most widely known recipients of this redistribution, are addressed in the narrative, i.e., as creative labourers. The chapter relocates the quotidian realities of artistic labour that Gaddis outlines in the context of human capital. I address how in two Colson Whitehead (MacArthur class of 2002) novels—*John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006)—the neoliberal recoding of "economic behavior" through human capital is invoked as a "grid of intelligibility" for understanding the exploitation of the protagonists in both novels

[30] The sections of this chapter theorizing organized philanthropy through life writing about John MacArthur will be published as part of a chapter, "Sui Generous: Examining the Object of Organized Philanthropy Through the MacArthur Foundation," in *Negative Cosmopolitanisms* (2016, McGill-Queen's UP).

(Foucault 252). Their exploitation is premised on the illusion of autonomy advanced by theorists of "immaterial labour." The "genius grants" help popularize this illusion, which overlooks the material harms that (creative) labourers suffer in cultural transactions and transmissions. These harms, as my fourth chapter goes on to explore, assume a specifically literary cast in the career and output of David Foster Wallace (1997). My chapter charts the sinister, celebritizing effects of the "genius grants" against the backdrop of the *rentier*-debtor dyad from which the MacArthur Foundation profits and to which recipients submit. Within neoliberalism, privatization increasingly plays out on the grounds of monopoly rent, whereby prices are determined by the space secured through intellectual property rights. After situating the Foundation as a *rentier*, I unpack the various debts that Wallace would diagnose, but could not circumvent. My penultimate chapter translates the general divestment of individual labour and particular debts that (de)limit literary production that my previous two chapters document into a critique of the class violence that accompanies neoliberalism's ideological redefinition of the ordinary American archetype. This redefinition has entailed depoliticizing the economy in order to naturalize the upwards redistribution of wealth that has intensified since 1973 (Ashton). The "genius grants" are symptomatic of this rising economic inequality, which George Saunders (2006) denaturalizes by deploying economic signifiers to depict bleak class realities. Exacerbating these realities, Saunders suggests, is a destructive myth of entrepreneurial agency based in personal responsibility for often foregone economic conclusions. The "genius grants" support the entrepreneurial fantasy of economic agency. Saunders' work invites a long, hard look back at the string-free feature of this narrative, which cannot conceal the duality of money: it both erases "every qualitative difference

between commodities" and "is itself a commodity, an external object capable of becoming the private property of any individual," according to Marx (*Volume One* 229-30). The final chapter will hold up a mirror to what precedes it, refracting the MacArthur Foundation's neoliberal notion of value through the film *Synecdoche, New York* and reflecting on potential avenues for further study. Although Kaufman stands out as the only non-"genius grant" recipient headlining a chapter of my dissertation, *Synecdoche* supplies something that is otherwise lacking in the literary works by Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, and Saunders that I investigate: a direct, intentional engagement with the effects of the "genius grant." I discuss the significance of this form of representation in light of my methodological investment in materialist allegory.

Limiting the scope of my study to four primary authors has been necessary for reducing the complexity of the neoliberal sociology of knowledge to which the "genius grants" subscribe and adding depth to the critical discussion of the fellowship narrative. My allegorical riposte to the attractions of the "genius grants" is emboldened by Marx's sense that "[a]ll science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (*Volume Three* 817). In search of "the essence" of the fellowships, I have found that restricting my critical perspective to the terms of the Foundation's narrative has been enabling. A conspicuous limitation in "the outward appearance" of my study is that the primary authors are all men. Given my interest in the points of contact between economic and literary criticism, the dialectics of class and identity deserve further comment, if only to respond to the implied accusation of hidden or flagrant bias that materialist approaches to culture can provoke. For the purposes of my study, the politics and ideological implications of choosing four male authors

ultimately depend on how essential one views the standpoint of ascriptive identities (including class) to be to making economic injustice apprehensible. There is no denying that women, non-whites, LGBTQX-ers, and members of the working-class are disproportionately subject to social and economic injustices. Yet calls for anti-discrimination and respect for difference tend to disarticulate the structural antagonisms that ensure economic inequality. And the notion of proper social recognition loses its radical potential the further it wanders from demands for economic equality. John Guillory concisely formulates the drawback of identity vis-à-vis class: "the affirmation of lower-class identity is hardly compatible with a program for the abolition of want" (qtd. in Clare, *Fictions* 11). More modestly, identity does not surface as a major topic in my critique of neoliberalism because my aim is not to extensively theorize about the negative experiences of prominent targets of injustice. My selection of four men may resonate with those negative experiences, but my analysis is opposed to their continuation.

Any work of fiction published between 1973 and 2015 can be interpreted as an allegory of neoliberal ideology. This statement shares Jameson's belief that "every interpretation of a text is always proto-allegorical, and always implies that the text is a kind of allegory" (*Brecht* 122). The MacArthur fellowship program is a rhetorical occasion, but it is also a critical lens that permits me to bring into focus the "kind of allegory" that the texts I discuss provides. If the "genius grants" amplify the surrounding neoliberal white noise in the process of being absorbed into it, the four authors that organize my study encourage a more deliberate act of listening. Their fiction overhears ideological orders amidst the noise of mass culture—orders that I arrange in terms of the Marxist themes (capital, labour, rent) that best measure the class violence that capitalism

perpetuates. In short, I add genuine content to the allegory of neoliberal value that every work of fiction published since 1973 could provide. I select 1973 as a point of origin in a nod to David Harvey's assessment that "neoliberalism emerged as a response to the crisis of the 1970s" (*Enigma* 11); he earlier tags "[t]he first full-scale global crisis of capitalism in the post-Second World War era […] in spring 1973, a full six months before the Arab oil embargo spiked oil prices" (Harvey, *Enigma* 8).[31] Every subsequent crisis contains a peculiar history, but the broad outcome affirms Thomas Piketty's overarching thesis in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014): wealth inequality has risen as the result of an unprecedented, accelerating divergence between capital accumulation and economic growth. The neoliberal era has many dubious distinctions, and the MacArthur "genius grants" are implicated in perhaps its most dubious one, as they augment the potency of capitalism's winners and losers formula.

[31] In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007), Harvey references 1973 when discussing the New York City fiscal crisis that ushered neoliberal policies into urban governance: "The New York investment banks had always been active internationally, but after 1973 they became even more so, though now far more focused on lending capital to foreign governments" (28). Another reason to begin with 1973 is that inflation-adjusted hourly wages and average income in the United States "peaked in 1973," as Michael Perelman outlines in "Some Economics of Class" (2007) (48).

CHAPTER TWO: A BAD DEAL ON BOTH SIDES: WILLIAM GADDIS' *J R* SPEAKS BACK TO ORGANIZED PHILANTHROPY AND FREE-MARKET PATRONAGE

> In these pages, he was assured that whatever his work, knowledge of it was infinitely less important than knowing how to "deal with people." This was what brought a price in the market place; and what else could anyone possibly want?
>
> —William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (1955)

> Don't be a hog. You can be a pig; pigs get fat. But hogs get slaughtered.
>
> —John MacArthur (n.d.)

In the fall of 1987, a rather unremarkable Congressional hearing concerning the Federal budget convened in Washington. The hearing featured testimony from J R Vansant, a Deputy Assistant to the Director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. Vansant spoke about the link between escalating inflation and rising unemployment, problems he proposed could be fixed with cuts to military spending. Vansant spoke through William Gaddis, whose mock transcript "Trickle Up Economics: J R Goes to Washington" (1987) was published in *The New York Times Book Review* less than a week after Black Monday, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost nearly a quarter of its value.[32] Perhaps readers at the time who were caught out by the tragicomic mania of Wall St. speculation appreciated the slightly subtle contradiction of the monetarist J R announcing a Keynesian policy goal of "full employment" at the outset of his testimony (n. pag.). Or maybe it was the obvious frankness—to say nothing of the prescience—of his concluding remark that "this neat idea of this here trickle down theory […] didn't work out so good" (n. pag.). "I mean," he continues, "it all like got stuck at

[32] The figure is 22.6%, which represents "the largest one-day crash in market history" (Colombo n. pag.).

the top where 15 years ago this richest 1 percent of the nation held 27 percent of the wealth now they've got almost 36 percent, I mean it mostly like trickled up" (n. pag.).[33] J R's critique is an about-face, as readers of Gaddis' National Book Award-winning 1975 novel *J R* would recognize. Throughout the novel, the eponymous 11 year-old self-made boy expresses the beliefs and attitudes of the "1 percent." *J R*, then, is its own brand of testimony—to the socially destructive outcome of free-market logic. Indeed, Steven Moore, Gaddis' most dedicated critic, glosses the novel as "like a transcript of real speech" (*Gaddis* 26). While Gaddis disperses the "speech" among an extensive *dramatis personae*, it is J R's voice[34] that best helps us sound out the commitments entailed in the pursuit of profit. *J R* echoes the boring processes of finance capital that increasingly underwrite spectacular wealth accumulation in the neoliberal age.

Finance capital lays the foundation for establishing the "genius grants" as a neoliberal narrative. Neoliberal policies have enabled the rapid expansion of the financial sector over the past three decades, with the overall deregulation of financial activity permitting the explosion of the derivatives market, to cite a notable example. In 2010, more than 20 percent of the (value-added[35]) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the United States could be attributed to finance—a figure that was only 10 percent in 1945 (Gordon n. pag.). John Cassidy cites data from the U.S. Commerce Department that shows that

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[33] That the upwards redistribution of wealth intensified in the past 30-plus years is common knowledge. "Common" in the sense of popular; after all, Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) was a runaway bestseller. Piketty's most relevant finding regarding the U.S. economy is summarized in Stephanie Flanders' review of his book: "60% of the increase in US national income in the 30 years after 1977 went to just the top 1% of earners. The only section of the US population that has done better than the top 1% is the top 10th of that 1%. The top 100th of the 1% have done best of all" (n. pag.). For a more critical review, which foregrounds Piketty's ahistoricism, see "The Theater of Inequality" (2014) by Thomas Jessen Adams.

[34] Frederick Karl labels it "a novel of voices" in his Introduction to the 1993 Penguin edition of *J R* (v).

[35] Here is a (mostly) jargon-free explanation: "value added is simply the difference between the cost of inputs to production and the price of output at any particular stage in the overall production process" (Beggs n. pag.).

"[b]etween 1980 and 2000, financial industry profits rose from $32.4 billion to $195.8 billion" (215). Such startling statistics justify David Harvey's assessment that "[o]ne of the basic pragmatic principles that emerged in the 1980s […] was that state power should protect financial institutions at all costs" (*Enigma* 10). For a nominal democracy like the United States, the "costs" of this regulatory capture have been severe. "Several decades of governmental accommodation to the structural power of finance, under the particular historical conditions of financialization," Jamie Peck posits, "have fostered a symbiotic relationship between the logics of Wall Street and Pennsylvania Avenue" (259). Foucault never specifically addresses finance capital; nevertheless, he indicates why neoliberal theory obliges its distension. He anticipates the "symbiotic relationship between the logics of Wall Street and Pennsylvania Avenue" when he summarizes the following neoliberal injunction:

> that the economy is basically a game, that it develops as a game between partners, that the whole of society must be permeated by this economic game, and that the essential role of the state is to define the economic rules of the game and to make sure that they are in fact applied. (201)

The rules, as Foucault elsewhere documents, are not dictated by social prerogatives, but by the imperative of "competition" (118). Circulation and exchange remain the twin engines of capital; according to neoliberal rules, competition displaces labour as the valuative fuel. Reining in activity on Wall St. would essentially end the game, which is premised on competition, i.e., on Wall St.'s reign in the world market. When Foucault ascribes to Hayek an appeal to "create [neo]liberal utopias," the decoupling of

competitive activity and social effect bears witness to their realization (219).[36] Finance capital's asociality, or "inverted social contract" in Foucault's more generous reading, hides in plain sight when it is juxtaposed with organized philanthropy (202). With that cue, allow me to reset the scene.

In the fall of 1970, billionaire John MacArthur finally acknowledged that he had a problem. He needed to revise his will before it was too late. Otherwise he was in danger of transferring the bulk of his assets to an entity he loathed: the government. In his lifetime, MacArthur went to great lengths to lower his taxes. Fond of referring to the IRS as "the infernal Internal Revenue Service," for example, MacArthur designated himself an annual salary of $20,000 in order to limit the amount he owed (Graymont 81, 82). The value of MacArthur's estate was substantial, as the 1976 Guinness Book of World Records would attest. It listed MacArthur as one of the United States' four living billionaires, along with John Paul Getty, Howard Hughes, and Daniel K. Ludwig (Kriplen 158). For years MacArthur had stubbornly resisted the pleas of his personal attorney, William Kirby, to amend his simple will, which divided his fortune in half between his wife (Catherine) and children (Roderick and Virginia). "Simple" meant eminently taxable. Kirby's seemingly righteous solution prevailed: a philanthropic foundation that would help significantly reduce the amount the billionaire potentially owed to the IRS.[37] The case for establishing a foundation was made when Kirby asked MacArthur, "most of

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[36] Volume Three of *Capital* provides an obviously more critical reading than Hayek of the M-M' circuit of "fictitious capital": "the money's body is now by love possessed. As soon as it is lent…interest accrue to it no matter whether it is asleep or awake, at home or abroad, by day and by night" (qtd. in McNally 153). I cite this passage in the context of utopia because David McNally classifies it as Marx's critique of "a fantastic bourgeois utopia where capital endlessly gives birth to itself without entering the mundane world of labour and material production" (153).

[37] Tax relief has remained part of the argument for establishing a foundation throughout the twentieth century. As Joel Fleishman notes in *The Foundation* (2007), "just as charitable gifts during the lifetime of a donor can diminish tax liability, gifts to establish a foundation upon death can significantly diminish or even eliminate estate tax liability" (39).

your money is going to the public, and who do you want to decide how its spent, the bureaucrats or people you trust?" (qtd. in Graymont 82-83). MacArthur sided with choosing his own "bureaucrats." Once the papers were signed, and some years had passed, he would be frank about the pragmatic origins of his Foundation, telling a *New York Daily News* reporter in 1976 that its formation was inspired more by "a desire to keep his business together than any charitable purpose" (qtd. in Kriplen 133). This "desire" is reflected in the uninspired wording of the Foundation's charter, which barely deviates from an IRS template (Kriplen 134).[38] MacArthur finally learned a lesson that he had hitherto avoided: "property has duties," as Oscar Wilde puts it in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) (230). Of course, Wilde was parodying this Church principle as a call for property ownership to be abolished, i.e., as a political argument for socialism. MacArthur experienced the "property has duties" lesson as an economic imperative.[39] To protect his empire of capital, he was legally obliged to endow a Foundation.

In this chapter I collapse the figures from my opening two paragraphs, J R and MacArthur, through an assertion that life writing about benevolent billionaires glamorizes the free market. The idea of organized philanthropy[40] that these individuals

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[38] The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is classified as a tax-exempt T20—a private grant-making foundation. The Foundation's charter is not publicly available, but my claim is based on Kriplen's statement that "[t]he language of the charter describing the purposes of the foundation was kept simple, with much of the wording taken straight from the IRS code: that the foundation would operate for 'charitable, religious, scientific, literary, and educational purposes. . .'" (134).

[39] I draw on Wilde's analysis to frame this chapter, as I believe it effectively bridges two major topics under discussion here: philanthropy and patronage.

[40] Throughout this chapter I use the term "organized philanthropy" to describe funding administered through private foundations. "Administered" is the operative word for distinguishing organized philanthropy from large-scale philanthropy under the guidance of figures like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. In the United States, philanthropy scholars mark the transition to organized philanthropy with the 1969 Tax Reform Act (TRA). Peter Frumkin identifies the TRA as the major catalyst for "foundations transform[ing] themselves from private institutions guided by the values of the donor into public institutions governed by grantmaking professionals" (70). Peter Hall invokes the TRA as evidence that "the transformation of philanthropy into a quasi-governmental domain was already well underway" (363). It is also worth noting here that my evidence concerning philanthropic practice will be U.S.-centric,

actualize is animated by a specious commonsense that the capitalist accumulation the market enables is a prerequisite for effective wealth redistribution. Philanthropy reinforces widespread fascination with the market, which Fredric Jameson describes as ideological in *Postmodernism*. For Jameson, "the most astonishing feature" of popular attitudes about the market following World War II is

> how the dreariness of business and private property, the dustiness of entrepreneurship, and the well-nigh Dickensian flavor of title and appropriation, coupon-clipping, mergers, investment banking, and other such transactions (after the close of the heroic, or robber-baron, stage of business) should in our time have proved to be so *sexy*. (274, emphasis in original)

Michael Clune cites this passage at the opening of *American Literature and the Free Market* (2010) to make the case for the importance of "understand[ing] the role of artworks in eliciting this fascination" (2). Contrary to Clune, who enlists *J R*, I claim that Gaddis' novel helps undo this fascination vis-à-vis financial life writing.[41] J R embodies the "dreariness of business and private property," not to mention the ruthlessness, which

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in the spirit of David Hammack and Helmut Anheier's assertion that "[a]mong all industrial societies, the United States has long granted the most scope to philanthropy. While foundations exist in many countries—most prominently in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, and Japan—the United States stands out: in no modern society are foundations more numerous, and nowhere have they become so prominent and visible" (4). Earlier in their 2010 volume, sponsored by the Brookings Institution, they observe that as of 2008, there were more than 112,000 grant-making foundations in the United States, with assets exceeding $627 billion (3).

[41] Here I should note that I do follow Clune in departing from the critical tendency to locate Gaddis as a so-called "systems novelist," in the tradition of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo. A recent collection of essays about Gaddis' work, *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System* (2007), testifies to the durability of this academic classification. "Gaddis has been known as a systems novelist since the mid-1980s," Joseph Tabbi observes in the Introduction to the collection (13). So taken for granted is this "systems" classification that Tim Conley easily contradicts himself—in a recent chapter on *J R*—casually referring to Gaddis' "novel-systems," while arguing that this framing ("the novel of cybernetic systems") overlooks the novel's affinities with Bildungsromans such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (141; 127). By broadly reading *J R* as a critical commentary on the social consequences of free market mediation, I do not accept Clune's claim that *J R* is a symptom of market fascination.

is disavowed in the philanthropic profile he ultimately establishes. I align J R's narrative rise with three biographical accounts of MacArthur: William Hoffman's *The Stockholder* (1969), Barbara Graymont's *The MacArthur Heritage: The Story of an American Family* (1993), and Nancy Kriplen's *The Eccentric Billionaire* (2008).[42] I argue that *J R* is the more accurate account of MacArthur's story, and then examine how its representation of artists subsumed under free-market logic is reflected in the "genius grant" program.[43] Overall, *J R* operates as an immanent critique of two of the MacArthur Foundation's constituent features: organized philanthropy and free-market patronage.

2.1 The Subject of Organized Philanthropy

Two of the main plotlines of *J R* are organized around estate taxes and corporate malfeasance, as should be the story of John MacArthur and his Foundation.[44] The novel opens with a lawyer discussing the confusing details of a potential inheritance with three members of the Bast family—Anne, Julia, and Edward. Anne and Julia's brother (the one-time husband of Edward's mother), Thomas, has died, and the fate of his General Roll Company has yet to be determined. Coen, the lawyer, explains to them that "since no buy-sell arrangement had been made with the decedent prior to his death [the legalese then continues]…the money will be required to pay the very substantial death taxes" (6).

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[42] There are other biographical accounts of MacArthur, but they are less directly tied to the symbolic (mis)management of his reputation. Two examples cited by Graymont are T.A. Wise's *Fortune* article, "The Incorrigible John MacArthur" (1958), and the "MacArthur, John D." entry in *Who's Who in America* (1956-57).

[43] My subjective emphasis—a critique of the MacArthur Foundation through accounts of its founder's life—is consistent with the logic of the "genius grants" themselves, and thus is methodologically more appealing to me than the broader institutional history approach often adopted in philanthropy studies.

[44] Moore identifies five major subplots in *William Gaddis* (66-69). I go on to address two of the additional subplots—one featuring J R and the other a coterie of artists—in this chapter. For a satisfactory reading of the remaining subplot, involving the (mis)education of J R and his peers, see Tim Conley's "This Little Prodigy Went to Market: The Education of J R" (2010).

Coen's close, and confounding, attention to such minutiae cannot ultimately resolve the dispute over the inheritance. It is instead the improprietal stock maneuverings of one of the claimants, Thomas' daughter Stella, that ultimately garner her controlling interest in the company. The discussion of "death taxes" recalls MacArthur's dilemma, which spawned his Foundation. Foundations figure heavily in the second main plotline, which also features competition over an inheritance. Typhon International[45] establishes two foundations to house the majority of its assets and reduce its taxes. Controlling interest of these foundations is in the hands of Amy Joubert and her son Francis. Typhon's CEO is Amy's great-uncle, John Cates. His health failing him, Cates must soon cede the conglomerate he has run at the behest of Amy's father, Monty Montcrieff. There is no shortage of claimants as Typhon owns a variety of companies, and thus has multiple stakeholders. The fact that Amy and Francis eventually win out illustrates how philanthropic foundations are useful vehicles for furthering wealth accumulation. For the market-driven world that Gaddis renders is beyond the righteous repair of philanthropic initiatives. It is a world where Typhon's business activities extend to instigating a Civil War in Gambia in order to ensure that the country continues to "run like a company," in Cates' words (698).

Born into this market-driven world, J R thrives on its terms. He is introduced reading a newspaper, which is not the innocuous activity it first appears to be. The reality that he is gleaning information that he can capitalize upon is expressed through his corresponding glance out the window to a "purse snapped open […] [and] snapped shut" (31). J R never loses sight of opportunities to profit. That the purse capturing his attention

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[45] The allusion to Typhon from Greek mythology provides a model for the novel—monstrous and multi-voiced. The Gaddis Annotations website that Moore oversees is an invaluable reading companion, as it helps to unravel Gaddis' vast web of allusions: http://www.williamgaddis.org.

at the outset is rendered as "old" with a "worn snap" is consistent with his method of wealth accumulation: both buying up surplus goods and trading in junk bonds (31). "It's mostly crap," as J R confesses to his classmate (Hyde) when they compare portfolios early on in the novel (77). J R's body registers the dullness of these market transactions. His teacher describes him as "that grubby boy" (246). And the same teacher (Amy) continues, "I have felt he doesn't bathe often" (246). The obvious explanation for his slovenly appearance pertains to the fact that he has an absentee father and a mother who might as well be;[46] however, his appearance assumes a symbolic valence via his role in a school production of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* (1876). J R is cast as Alberich, the dwarf. During rehearsal, he absconds with a bag of money, the Rhinegold prop that contains his classmates' cash.[47] This gesture literalizes his daily market activity. Such is the overlap between stealing and finance capital that J R later ceases to conceive of his Alberich outfit as a costume. Confronted by his Principal when he shows up to school in "tails and horns and […] reflectors," J R tells him that what he's wearing "ain' a costume […] it's my clothes" (228).

J R dons the garb of the villain (Alberich), but Gaddis downplays moralizing about the individuals who embody the capitalist drive. J R speaks through capital—so infused is his language with market vocabulary that it would be myopic to assign blame to bad parents or inadequate schooling. Systemic problems such as poverty and labour exploitation are never represented as anything other than structural requirements of the capitalist world market in the novel. As J R repeatedly poses the question, "what am I

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[46] "She's ugually [*sic*] asleep," J R informs his principal (228). We get another peek into J R's unenviable home life when he tells Bast that his mother (a nurse) "comes in [at] all different […] times" (134). It is implied that J R never knew his father.

[47] An additional noteworthy detail from this scene, which Moore highlights, is that the money has been pledged for stock purchases (*Gaddis* 89).

supposed to do?" (344). The answer lies in whatever the market requires. Gaddis makes this plain when J R protests, "[i]s it my fault if I do something first which if I don't do it somebody else is going to do it anyway?" (659). No, Gaddis correctly replies in an interview, as "[t]he only values he knows are the ones he sees around him, which are: get ahead, succeed, make money, and so on" (qtd. in *Gaddis* 12). Moralizing about the individuals who embody and express these values has little to no purchase on comprehending the system that produces both.

These narrow values are associated with John MacArthur throughout Hoffman's *The Stockholder*, whose moral overtones reverberate with market fascination. In the place of J R, "a sincere hypocrite" (as Gaddis has labeled him), is a Manichean portrait of MacArthur in the role of the selfish, stingy, vindictive, misogynist billionaire (Abádi-Nagy 68). Hoffman, a one-time employee at MacArthur's Bankers Life, blends critical biography and biographical fiction in a manner that puts the stress squarely on the "critical" and on "fiction." The publisher, Lyle Stuart, was no stranger to prepackaged scandalous books, as its catalogue included *The Anarchist's Cookbook* (1970) and *The Rich and the Super-Rich* (1968). *The Stockholder* belongs in this company, eschewing the nuances of characterization and realistic dialogue in favour of foregrounding MacArthur's dubious behaviour. Unlike in *J R*, we hear both sides of the telephone conversation that MacArthur has in Hoffman's opening chapter. "I need money, John," a financier tells MacArthur. "I need it bad. The tax collector means business this time" (10). MacArthur makes out like a bandit in the ensuing deal, having strategically positioned himself as an interest-gathering middleman, which is—rather ironically—how he views the government's role. Fascination emerges between the lines of Hoffman's

atrocious dialogue. For example, here is a snippet from a barroom courtship scene involving John and his future wife, Catherine (as interlocutor):

> "And what will you do with all that money when you get it?"
>
> "I won't throw it around, that's for sure. I guess I'll get busy making more. That, and live the way I please. I'll tell you, kid, they're lying when they say money doesn't buy you happiness."
>
> "You think it does?"
>
> "It buys you something just as good: freedom. Do what you want, live like you want, look anybody in the eye. That's what freedom is." (95)

How can Hoffman justify his sensationalized account if not through our implied interest in the reputed real life of a billionaire? Hoffman betrays what Gaddis once characterized in a speech as "the writer's perennially naïve notion that through calling attention to inequalities and abuses, hypocrisies and patent frauds, self deceiving attitudes and self defeating policies, these will be promptly corrected by a grateful public" ("State" 123). Exposing injustices does not automatically undo them; worse, moralizing may be a barrier to structural critique. It pathologizes problems that should be framed as necessary for the system to properly function. Soon after the passage that I quoted above, Hoffman has MacArthur articulating the substance of my argument in the first section of this chapter: "Rockefeller stole. He's a big hero now. Gives away dimes on the street. Horseshit. I never will. But it proves my point: people judge by how much money you have. They couldn't care less how you got it" (96). The fictitious MacArthur is wrong in forecasting his own future, but right on the mark about the pervasiveness of the sentiment

that market outcomes displace daily operations in the stories that circulate about wealth accumulation. *The Stockholder*'s aesthetic failings as a novel represent the political costs of moralizing when faced with the disavowal that philanthropy inspires. The fundamental antagonism supersedes the good guys/bad guys template: philanthropy's cause is an effect. Philanthropy ensures relative gains and insures against absolute change. Gaddis documents this phenomenon through a "stream of *societal* consciousness" that disrupts default anti-capitalism, immersing us in the daily life of the free market (Caponegro 382, emphasis in original).

The "stream of societal consciousness" comes across most effectively on a field trip that J R's sixth-grade class takes to Wall St. (instead of the Museum of Natural History).[48] On their visit, they learn from Typhon's p.r. emissary David Davidoff that the Diamond Cable mining company in which they are going to purchase stock is one of the "companies that provide jobs for millions of Americans" (81). Left out of Davidoff's euphemistic narrative is a whole history of labour exploitation. Jack Gibbs slips this history into a question posed during a lecture following the field trip when he characterizes Diamond Cable's robber baron as "Black Jack Cates," the man who "helped open the industrial frontiers [of America]…[using] a private army in the great Bitterroot strike in Montana where ninety-seven miners were killed" (182). Davidoff further errs by describing the stock market in utopian terms, telling the children that its purpose is "to bring together people who want to buy with people who want to sell" (84). The market enables people to buy and sell goods without requiring direct contact. The antagonistic and bewildering nature of this contact comes across in the background activity of the

[48] One of the students even complains, "[h]ey I thought we're going to the Museum of Natural History" (81).

stockbroker Crawley, embroiled in disputes with an interlocutor. As Davidoff tries to get his attention so that the children can "meet a real live stock broker," Crawley barks into the phone that if he "do[es]n't know what the hell's going on there nobody does" (83). The reader does not even know the antecedent of "there." Here, then, Crawley illustrates Marx's insight into how

> the credit system, which has its focal point in the allegedly national banks and the big money-lenders and usurers that surround them, is one enormous centralization and gives this class of parasites a fabulous power not only to decimate the industrial capitalists periodically but also to interfere in actual production in the most dangerous manner—and this crew know nothing of production and have nothing at all to do with it.[49] (*Volume Three* 648-49)

J R aspires to join this "class of parasites," procuring a pamphlet on "Capital Gains and Losses," as well as a "stock guide, and […] stock commission calculator" during his visit (88). He then relentlessly questions his teachers regarding details from the pamphlet. "[W]hat does it mean where it says at the top here options exercised," he asks Gibbs (114). J R quickly finds his footing, arranging his first big deal as a supplier of Navy surplus wooden forks to the Army (169).

Gaddis heaps on the financial details in the novel, knowledge of which he derived from his employment in the public relations department at Pfizer International in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s while freelancing as a corporate copywriter for IBM, Eastman Kodak, and the Ford Foundation (Alberts 245-246). He has said that "[a] lot of

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[49] Although Marx distinguishes the credit market from the stock exchange, as Doug Henwood underscores in his indispensable *Wall Street* (1997), the observation applies to the epistemology of contemporary stockbrokers like Crawley.

the complications of high finance and so forth in *J R*—I tried very hard to get them all right" (qtd. in *Gaddis* 5).[50] Gaddis' effort goes beyond the concrete detail that is the stock-and-trade of literary realism. Rendering these "complications" correctly serves a critical function that has been misidentified in scholarship on the novel. For declarations like Moore's concerning how "[t]he validity of his critique is largely dependent upon his specificity of detail" too often and too easily transform into an argument that Gaddis demands active participation from his readers (*Gaddis* 97). To see how readily the inundation of financial material gets glossed as being in the interest of reader construction, we can consult the opening article from a 1982 special issue of *Contemporary Fiction* devoted to Gaddis' work. In it, Carl D. Malmgren addresses the effect of *J R*'s radical form, i.e., the fact that the entire novel is composed of unattributed dialogue. Malmgren's assertion that the novel's insistent aurality, such that it is overheard as opposed to glimpsed through a narrator, "causes a series of problems for readers looking for coherence and a narrative line" (8). The attendant claim that "[readers'] attempts to solve these problems implicate them strongly in narrative management" has endured as a model for interpreting *J R*'s form (8). For example, Tim Conley observes how Gaddis' opus "effectively *teach*[es] the individual reader to discern connections, causalities, and responsibilities" (141, emphasis in original). Conley likely takes his cue not only from Malmgren et al., but also from Gaddis himself. In an interview with the *Paris Review* conducted in 1986, Gaddis expresses a similar sentiment when pressed to provide a theoretical underpinning for the "floated dialogue" he deploys: "the reader is brought in almost as a collaborator in creating the picture that emerges of the characters,

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[50] Included in Gaddis' research file for *J R* are "stock certificates, shareholders meeting notes, and profit reports" (Alberts 247).

of the situation, of what they look like, everything" (Abádi-Nagy 79). Gaddis offers a much different—and for the argument of my chapter, more compelling—compositional theory in possibly the first interview he ever granted (in 1980; it was not published until 2007). He tells Tom LeClair that his goal when depicting "the intricate corporate manipulation and the events of the plot" was unidirectional (24). He wanted to "get information across" (24). At first this "information" has a dizzying effect, not unlike the experience of consulting the fine print on your credit card statement. For instance, a character (Congressman Pecci) rambles the following over the phone: "twenty-five thousand paid for consultation, representation, and what? No, say legal services, rendered by Ganganelli during this legislative session in conjunction with…" (28). He trails off, but we want to follow, curious as to the identity of Ganganelli. As the novel progresses, however, we are invited to doze off during these information-laden passages, particularly as they are juxtaposed with the more compelling struggling artist narratives that I discuss in my next section. Gaddis bores us with details. It is worth wondering how actively we are actually expected to reconstruct passages such as the following:

> "hey I meant to tell you, you know he said I'd never see a nickel on this Alberta and Western debenture? Well right after they put out another one called series C I got this here interest payment on series B if he's so smart. And like he told you Ace was like toilet paper the price of it just doubled right after this progress report that said they expect to pay this dividend and got this whole bunch more, I mean I'd like to know how many stocks he's got which their price doubles that quick boy." (297)

J R supplies his assistant, Edward Bast, with the financial background for his takeover of Eagle Mills in Union Falls, which follows the leveraged buyout blueprint: load the debt used to purchase the company onto their balance sheet, fire workers and eliminate their benefits, and extract profit as well as exorbitant executive compensation from selling fixed assets, such as machinery, land, or the factory itself. The dramatic destruction of the company town is forecasted in mundane utterances about "debentures" and so on. Instead of aiming for readerly reconstruction, *per se*, passages like the above show Gaddis daring his readers to romanticize the market. Demystifying the processes of the free market may be boring, but boredom offers an opportunity to unlearn market fascination[51] and to inhabit "the real world on its own terms," as Don DeLillo says of the novel (391).

J R recognizes the ideological requirement to romanticize the outcome of his market activity, ultimately establishing a Foundation and accompanying founder profile. Given that we witness him ruthlessly wielding the social power that money vests him with over the preceding 600-plus pages, his compulsion to testify to a concern for public welfare seems comical. Of course, we are not the intended audience for this alternate account; it is a public composed of customers and investors who consume this fiction. Knowing he has little to gain from the blunt story of how he "use[s]" people, J R projects a salable image of the conscientious market actor (59).[52] The class trip to Wall St. shows

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[51] This unlearning would position us on the ground staked by H.L. Mencken in his essay "The Dismal Science" (1922). As Henwood highlights, Mencken bemoans the "traumatic experience" of poring over economic tracts, while simultaneously appreciating the importance of understanding the machinations of political economy, for these machinations are rendered in such specific detail precisely because they are essential for maintaining the power of those who own the economists (6). As Henwood quotes Mencken, the economy "hits the employers of the professors where they live. It deals, not with ideas that affect those employers only occasionally or only indirectly or only as ideas, but with ideas that have an imminent and continuous influence upon their personal welfare and security, and that affect profoundly the very foundations of that social and economic structure upon which their whole existence is based" (qtd. in Henwood 6).

[52] Lest Bast think that J R's bluntness is mere adolescent whimsy, the boy repeats this dictum to him on page 135.

J.R. that such images endure, despite direct evidence to the contrary. Davidoff introduces Typhon's CEO (Cates) as "one of your country's outstanding Americans" (91). This same "outstanding American" outlines complex collusion strategies and articulates a paranoid ethical maxim, "don't own them you can't trust them," in the background as the children watch a corporate propaganda film (98). Seeing through the propaganda, J R recognizes the value of humanizing the pursuit of profit, however superficially. He hires Davidoff to handle p.r. for his company. Whereas anonymity initially enables J R to broker deals over the telephone and via telegram—"that's how they do it nobody has to see anybody," he says—a conspicuous, if fictitious, founder profile is crucial for sustaining his enterprise (172).[53] Enter the image of the man with the "steel blue eyes bulldog jaw" that begins to make its rounds in organs of financial print culture, such as *Business Week* (629). The signifiers of rugged masculinity are supplemented with J R's concluding self-image as someone "always going around helping everybody out" (726).

To their credit, the biographies of J R's analogue, John MacArthur, by Graymont and Kriplen do not settle on such anodyne propositions. At the outset, each biographer anticipates MacArthur's flaws. Kriplen calls him a "complicated, controversial biographical subject" (1); Graymont promises to take an "uncompromised approach" to the MacArthur family (v). The danger of compromise is especially acute for Graymont, given that her book is a Foundation-authorized private publication, based on a series of interviews conducted by a colleague at Nyack College in upstate New York, John Taylor. Although she states that her "study is not intended to be an account of [the family's] business interests," she supplies several details about these "interests" (1). Graymont thus

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[53] Anonymity is the lynchpin of J R's success, as reflected in the style and structure of Gaddis' novel. As I am suggesting, the theme of financial life writing in *J R* complicates this anonymity.

provides Kriplen with much of the source material for her biography, published by the American Management Association. It is no stretch to surmise that the audiences for such personal histories and management biographies expect that any censuring of the biographical subject will be moderate. What I want to suggest in using them as source material in dialogue with *J R* is that their inevitable biases are a critical asset. These books are resources for diagnosing the tendency to treat the evils of capitalist accumulation as a prerequisite for effective wealth redistribution. In other words, they characterize these evils as eccentricities, obfuscating systemic coercions such as the sovereignty of shareholder value.[54] *J R* illustrates the tragic-comic consequences of these coercions when a machine for relaying stock prices (Quotron) threatens to compromise Cates' heart monitor. He complains to the nurse about having to "lie here not know[ing] the price of anything" (694). Unluckily his lawyer (Beaton) is present to provide the raw data he craves, which gradually agitates him to the point where he has a heart attack. His final words, unheeded, are "Hear me…!" (712). Cates' obsessiveness costs him his life.

Kriplen expresses MacArthur's eccentricities through various anecdotes related by him and his former employees. One of these anecdotes, from the early days of MacArthur's Marquette Life Insurance Company, is startling for its display of arrogance. The passage is worth quoting at length because it forms the empirical basis for the broader dynamic of disavowal that I am describing:

> In later years, John would talk rather proudly about the chicanery of his early days in insurance. For instance, after opening the mail each day he would put it into piles. Checks would be taken from the pile of premium

[54] The crown jewel in MacArthur's eventual empire, Bankers Life, converted from a policyholder-owned to a stockholder-owned company in the 1940s (Kriplen 67).

> payments. The other pile, the one with the claims, would be tossed into the wastebasket. Heck, if someone really had a claim, he figured he would hear from him again […] A similar story John liked to tell concerned an insurance investigator who walked in the door one day with a list of thirty or so complaints about claims that had not yet been paid, since there was no money in the till. O.K., I will get these checks in the mail right away, John promised. Oh no, you don't, said the inspector. I'll wait right here while you write the checks then mail the envelopes myself. John walked over to Catherine's desk with the list and told her to write the first check and address the envelope—but he carefully moved his finger down to the next address on the list so that Catherine, but not the inspector, could see that the checks would not be going to the proper address. And so on, down the list. The time it took for claimants to return the incorrect checks and get replacements gave John enough breathing room to accumulate money from premiums to pay off. Only one person went ahead and cashed the wrongly made-out first check—and John sued him. (60-61)

The flagrant self-interest behind MacArthur's tricks to stay afloat should not shock us, but they might. They follow the logic of an economic system that, forced to choose in crises like the Great Depression, services the bottom line before the bottomed-out populace—the survival of the business is put, quite literally, before the health of its clients and (if such practices are extended to other insurance providers) the public at large. "I broke all the rules," MacArthur brags (qtd. in Kriplen 65). Kriplen is careful to parenthetically counterbalance MacArthur's *post festum* boasts with the response of one

of MacArthur's future employees: "'I lived in terror that one of the claims on my desk would fall off into the trash basket,' she said. 'That would mean instant dismissal'" (60). The alleged ethical contradiction renders the moral of the story that the boss who stole made the position of the employee who cannot (accidentally appear to) possible. J R is equally uncompromising in crafting his self-portrait, partially inventing a "reputation both as a ruthless corporate manipulator with a shrewd […] eye for tax situations" (650). As with Cates, J R expresses an anxiety about ensuring that he is overheard ("You listening…?"), since the success of the message depends upon an audience willing to be titillated by the unseemly side of success narratives (726).

Graymont documents fewer of MacArthur's deplorable moments, although she does allude to his habit, when he was still going door-to-door, of embellishing the potential benefits of an insurance claim in order to sell a policy (45). This detail emerges in the course of her noting how his insurance executive older brother Alfred "objected to [John's] sales method of promising customers far more than the policies actually offered" (45). Alfred had ushered MacArthur into the insurance business. He was the general agent for the Chicago branch of National Life Insurance Company, where MacArthur's first industry job was as an office boy (Kriplen 38). This job was interrupted by wartime stints in the U.S. Navy and the British-Canadian air force (Graymont 45-46). After the war ended, MacArthur returned to the insurance industry, working as a salesman for National Life (Kriplen 45). His enviable sales record earned him his first management gig, in the San Francisco office of National Life (Graymont 48). Soon eager to escape his older brother's shadow, MacArthur transferred to the State Life Insurance Company, where he became vice president of sales (Kriplen 52). In a manner not unlike the 1980s

insider trader with a prime seat at the liar's poker table, MacArthur learned from his friend Leo Lehane of a Jerseyville, Illinois company that State Life was desperately trying to get off its books, Marquette Life (Graymont 54). He offered to buy it, provided State Life gave him the money as a severance package. MacArthur apparently leveraged his unpopularity with management to seal the deal (Kriplen 53). MacArthur's major acquisition, Bankers Life, was more of an accident (Graymont 57). A state insurance manager mentioned that the firm had just gone bankrupt, despite its solid portfolio, so MacArthur borrowed money from the aforementioned Lehane in order to purchase it (Graymont 57). What emerges, despite Graymont and Kriplen's attempts to the contrary, is not a portrait of the maverick capitalist, with equal parts daring and ingenuity, but something more ordinary: the white, financially secure man in early-twentieth-century America coasting on a network of well-placed family and business connections. This story is less romantic than the Horatio Alger-inflected robber baron stories and less immediately recognizable than the deadening bureaucracy painted in William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956). It is the story of the privilege granted to men like him, who are then able to exploit it further for their own substantial gain.

Graymont does not admit the obvious explanation, tracing MacArthur's success to his work ethic and business acumen. Before articulating MacArthur's selfish reasons for establishing the Foundation, she observes that he grew up "in a home where discipline, hard work, and dedication to a goal were valued" (80). She then paraphrases the analysis of one of the Foundation's primary incorporators, Paul Doolen, on how Bankers Life grew:

> First there was the innovative use of mail order, a sales technique that brought in clients with a smaller sales force than would have been necessary with traditional marketing. Then there was the favorable real estate market that greatly inflated the value of the company's holdings. (80)

MacArthur hardly needed to enlist the virtues that Graymont attributes to him. J R's profile has him "crediting his own success to a mysterious thing which is hard to identify, the vital creative force of the whole J R Family of Companies" (651).[55] In both cases, the artificial inflations of financial value do the heavy lifting. These inflations are complemented by the media covering over what it does not know, i.e., how the J R Family of Companies actually conducts its business. When J R immediately responds that he "never quite exactly said that" line about "vital creative force," it also shows the desire to believe such rhetorical inventions (651). While the rhetorical concision of blurb on the Foundation's website is faithful to the essential ordinariness of MacArthur's success (imagine the number of stories resembling MacArthur's), this outline also illustrates that what is more typical, but hardly trivial, downplays the improprieties entangled with these accomplishments (just *imagine* the number of stories *exactly like* MacArthur's!). I have made the evidence from books by Graymont and Kriplen central to my analysis because they testify to the fact that even generalist renderings of this man abound with sinister

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[55] Ralph Clare critiques J R's instrumentalization of this family image in "Family Incorporated: William Gaddis' *J R* and the Embodiment of Capitalism" (2013): "By adopting the discourse of the family and family relations, J R's business model effectively conflates the 'public' world of business with the 'private' world of the family. This intertwining of business and family is hardly new to capitalism—it is vital to it—yet young J R's crossing of the discourses between these two usually separate spheres indicates something remarkably novel in capitalism's ongoing expansion at the dawn of the neoliberal age. For through the discourse of the family, capitalism is given a metaphorical body in the figure of the multinational corporation, granted all legal rights pertaining to it, and subsequently adopted into a newly imagined global family" (102-103).

elements. Kriplen continually returns to MacArthur's specific transgressions. For example, in a single twenty-page segment, she makes three references to MacArthur's misdealings: Bankers Life's illegal practice of selling policies by mail (66), MacArthur's embezzling of money from the Employees' Welfare Account (76), and his foiled attempt to bribe an employee from an insurance rival which was threatening to file suit against Bankers Life (87). J R explains the more radical point that violations of the law pale in comparison to the transgressive spirit of the capitalist system itself: "I mean why should somebody go steal and break the law to get all they can when there's always some law where you can be legal and get it all anyway!" (660). MacArthur would learn this lesson as he grew older (and richer).

Kriplen neutralizes the critical potential of her narrative in two representative ways, which are not unlike the economic website blurb on MacArthur in their effect. First, as her title indicates, she frames MacArthur as a kind of gentle anti-hero. He is "the eccentric billionaire." His ethical violations may be unorthodox, but for Kriplen they define him as innocuously as do his strained relationship with his sister-in-law Helen Hayes or his insistence on flying coach (4; 162). My argument is just the opposite—these evils are hardly eccentricities; rather, what is normal is treating them as such or ignoring them altogether. What is normal is something akin to Catherine's sister's assessment of John and Catherine's partnership: "Together they amassed a great fortune, for the benefit of mankind" (qtd. in Graymont 58). Why should "the benefits" be measured retroactively? Because they imply that, while one has broken the rules along the way, he has obeyed the most important rule of capital: endless expansion. To Wilde's declaration that capitalism inspires us to "confus[e] a man with what he possesses," we need only

add—and then gives away (234). Secondly, Kriplen relies on the legacy of MacArthur's capital in order to justify its origins. The epigraph from her book describes the cultural dominant: "What counts in a penny is not its pedigree but its destiny" (n. pag.). Kriplen attributes these words to Professor Graham Taylor, and contextualizes them as being delivered "to critics who said [*sic*] Chicago Theological Seminary should not accept money from controversial John D. Rockefeller, Sr." (n. pag.). Kriplen implies that it does not especially matter whether the gains enabling the giving are ill-gotten or the philanthropist is "reluctant," as her subtitle characterizes MacArthur. As long as the endpoint is assured—as it is in the Foundation blurb highlighting MacArthur's gains in a medium organized around a philanthropic enterprise bearing his name—the journey can be as unseemly as is necessary to reach the destination.

Social responsibility is more straightforwardly represented as a tool of capitalist expansion in *J R*, such as when Bast voices reservations about "posing as benefactors to these Indians simply in order to take advantage of their rights to possible mineral or gas deposits on their lands" (522). Philanthropic activity is a front for securing control over valuable resources. Beneath the marketing of magnanimity lies the value that trumps all others: self-interest. J R cannot hear out Bast because the latter's considerations do not register in a game where "you might as well play to win but I mean even when you win you have to keep playing!" (647). J R emits the dominant ethos, whereby the winner takes all and keeps on taking.[56] That is, until a federal marshal materializes with "a fistful of subpoenas" on behalf of the Securities Exchange Commission (628). J R never has to

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[56] Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson outline the dimensions of this elitist game in *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—And Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (2010). Hacker and Pierson analyze the ascent of big business as an organized, unlimited, and conspicuous political force during the neoliberal era. "Winner-take-all has become the defining feature of American economic life," they assert (4). In turn, this economy has enabled and been enabled by a winner-take-all political praxis.

account to the SEC for his misconduct, as his company is in the process of folding by the novel's conclusion. We have already seen and heard more than enough to speculate that J R would explain that he was merely playing the game, i.e., doing what the free market and its minions dictate.[57] Organized philanthropy supplies an alibi for the scandal of wealth accumulation—a scandal in which a deep investment emerges through financial life writing.

2.2 A Portrait of the Artist, Framed by an Accountant

The MacArthur Foundation invested in Gaddis in the summer of 1982. During his *Paris Review* interview, Gaddis noted "the luxury of the MacArthur" (Abádi-Nagy 58). He invokes the "genius grant" in the context of the "fierce integrity" ideal of the Victorian novelist Samuel Butler, "who never wrote simply to publish or published everything he wrote" (58). For Gaddis, "the luxury of the MacArthur" is a freedom from financial pressures that threaten to compromise the integrity of his work. As such, the MacArthur is like the Rockefeller, NEA and Guggenheim fellowships/grants to which he also alludes, accolades that "came in difficult times and allowed and encouraged [him] to keep on with the second book [*J R*] and start the third [*Carpenter's Gothic*]" (58). Unlike these other prestigious fellowships and grants, the "genius grants" can arrive belatedly. James F. English makes a pointed criticism that is no doubt apparent to those in literary studies regarding recipients such as Susan Sontag, Harold Bloom, Henry Louis Gates Jr.,

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[57] Readers of Gaddis' "J R Goes to Washington" piece know that J R avoids jail time. His testimony is delivered in the context of a subgenre of financial life writing that is distinct from the benevolent billionaire brand I have critiqued in this section: J R's superior is locked up in "the Government facility at Allenwood writing his memoirs" (n. pag.). A contemporary work in the successfully imprisoned subgenre is Jordan Belfort's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2007), released a year after he was. Then again, for all we know, J R's boss could be working on a cookbook, à la Michael Milken.

and Cormac McCarthy. He notices that fellowships "often go to the very biggest stars of American academe, whose salaries dwarf the award and whose conditions of employment already afford the very opportunity the MacArthur claims to provide" (43). In other words, the "genius grants" suffer from a market inefficiency insofar as they can be allotted to those least in need of the advantages that the Foundation purports to offer.[58] Gaddis appreciated this market inefficiency immediately after garnering his "genius grant." Siri Hustvedt reports a private conversation with Gaddis that is much more ambivalent than the moment in the *Paris Review* interview. "I think it's great that you got it, you know," Hustvedt said to him, "and the money's terrific and everything, but I kind of wish that these prizes were given to people when they were young and really needed them"" (376). Gaddis' alleged response reveals his unease: "he just looked at me, and there was a big pause—he was kind of a comedian, he knew just what he was doing—and he said, 'Baby, you just dialed my number'" (377). Hustvedt reaches a Gaddis who is aware that behind the paeans to autonomy and meritocracy that the "genius grants" inspire lurks the arbitrary negations attending free-market prestige.

This Gaddis gets obscured in the scholarship because of the countervailing motif of neglect that plays out in discussions of his life and literary output. Louis Auchincloss detects the neglect motif in a 1987 *New York Times* compendium on Gaddis, "who is considered by some critics to be the nearest thing to Herman Melville that our century has produced" (n. pag.). Steven Moore pairs neglect with failure, and has been the most vociferous of the critics who characterize Gaddis as a kind of modern-day Melville. In *William Gaddis*, Moore avers that "[t]he theme of failure […] is a thematic common

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[58] I nuance this claim in the closing paragraph of this section since it is worth venturing that in the early years of the program, the Foundation was likely interested in nominating well-known figures for the purpose of raising the public's consciousness of the fellowship.

denominator for all of Gaddis's work" (10). More recently, in "The Nobility of Failure" (2010), Moore stresses the psychological impact of the long years between the publication of Gaddis' first novel and *J R*:

> *The Recognitions* appeared in 1955 to overwhelmingly negative reviews; deprived of the success he expected (and fully deserved), Gaddis spent the next decade working at a variety of jobs in industry, starting then abandoning a second novel, failing to find a backer for a play he had written, enduring a divorce in the mid-1960s, and living off a series of advances and part-time teaching jobs to resume and finish that second novel. (119)

For Moore and like-minded critics, Gaddis' "genius grant" is akin to the National Book Award that *J R* received, i.e., it represents the type of acknowledgment that was long overdue. Attention to the flawed free-market mechanisms of which Gaddis privately evinced awareness is displaced in the idea that he at last received the type of attention that he "fully deserved." Nevertheless, Moore proceeds to observe that in the aftermath of the NBA, "Gaddis was disappointed that he didn't get a huge paperback reprint sale as Pynchon did a few years earlier for *Gravity's Rainbow*" (119). Moore thus maintains the focus on perceived slights, measuring Gaddis' envy of Pynchon in market terms. As Moore notes, Gaddis and Pynchon had the same agent, Candia Donadio. Gaddis' gripe acquires some substance when we consult a 1976 correspondence with Donadio, in which he writes that "even though I've been as disappointed as anyone on the money side, I'd thought there was more to it than that" (qtd. in Maliszewski n. pag.). The "genius grant" did not fulfill Gaddis' yearning for something "more," as another letter—this one to the

English painter John Napper—illustrates. Addressing the five-year, $250,000 grant he had just been given, Gaddis writes:

> There is no equity. I wailed that for years & can repeat it now, albeit from a rather different vantage point. The Lord knows—less well perhaps than you & I—that having the money burden lifted for 5 years late along the way is an undisguised blessing: I say undisguised advisedly, since had I got such a 'prize' on the heels of publishing *The Recognitions* I'd really have been a good deal less surprised than now, would most likely have taken it as due under a logical system of just reward for fine work executed; but here it comes undisguised by such illusions of the world & the place of one's work in it, & serves rather to underline the capriciousness of both. No one cavils when some egregious effort brings $1 million in paperback sale [*sic*], $3 million from the movies, all disappeared tomorrow. Should one now? (*Letters* 381)

Gaddis is careful not to sound like an ungrateful winner; instead, he suggests that financial acknowledgment is not the product of "a logical system of just reward." Whereas neglect implies the possibility of meaningful affirmation, Gaddis is aware that this affirmation is a mirage, as art never becomes an end unto itself. Such is the "inconsistency that I've celebrated from the start," Gaddis continues in his letter to Napper, "for in the USA real money is the only proof against taking 'defeat from every brazen throat'" (382).

Gaddis' belief in the affirmative potential of "real money" cannot be reconciled with his depiction of the art-finance nexus in *J R*. Throughout the novel, free-market

patrons hinder, rather than facilitate, art-making. "Free-market patron" seems like an oxymoron until we reckon with the open secret that these patrons sponsor artists primarily out of economic self-interest. "[W]e could subsidize name art and get a tax break at the same [time]," Davidoff explains to Amy (195). Such narrow commercial considerations should be at best secondary to the aesthetic autonomy they are supposed to underwrite, however indirectly. Instead, in a narrative predominantly populated with members of the financial class and artists, the absolute autonomy of the former rules out even a relative degree of autonomy for the latter. A succinct rendering of this dynamic occurs when Bast complains (of his boss, J R), "problem is I try to talk to him about art and all he seems to talk about is money" (306). Bast had earlier identified this "problem" in an improvised lesson on Mozart, where he informs his students that "if we can't rise to his level no at least we can, we can drag him down to ours" (42). While he is specifically speaking of the "humaniz[ation]" of the great composer, it is easy to hear echoes of the material obstacles that threatened to thwart Mozart, which Bast foregrounds earlier in the lesson: "money, he wrote three of his greatest symphonies in barely two months while he was running around begging for loans" (42; 41). The moral of the Mozart tale seems to be that true art conquers all. Gaddis thinks as much, cautioning readers against interpreting *J R* as an anti-capitalist tirade: "careless or predisposed readers […] see these books [he includes *The Recognitions*] as chronicles of the dedicated artist crushed by commerce, which is, of course, to miss, or misread, or simply disregard all the evidence of *their own* appetite for destruction" (Abádi-Nagy 71, emphasis in original). Following Gaddis, we could say that Bast dwells on the "dragging down" impulse in order to avoid responsibility for failing to produce an enduring symphony of his own. Yet we can attend

to Bast's personal responsibility for his unproductivity without dismissing the possibility that eighteenth-century patronage relations appear somewhat quaint in light of the challenges faced by contemporary artists in the novel. For it would be difficult to countenance artistic integrity in the face of publishing practices that include "the arbitrary insertion of pages of advertising bearing no relation to the creative work of an author" (517). Books thus become a commodity like any other, which is the "[b]est thing [that] ever happened to [authors]," according to Davidoff, since it can lead to "a big advance on royalties" (517). It also leads authors like Gibbs and Thomas Eigen away from their work. They are absorbed into the clamour of market activity. At one point, endeavouring to draft his manuscript for "a social history of mechanization and the arts," Gibbs is continually interrupted by telephone calls concerning J R's business transactions (244). His absorption is communicated through the comedy of his in one breath deploring the interruption ("I'm working on something up here") and in the next participating in the deal ("get rid of that two and a half million cash outlay in carrying charges by dumping these four smaller studios well under book value") (572). The apartment, formerly an author's retreat for Gibbs and Eigen, has transformed into such an economic hub that they are both transformed into market subjects. Still, they could be said to fare better than Bast, whose home—another space for artistic production—is rezoned and replaced (rather ironically) by a "new Cultural Plaza" (664). Disruptions and distractions are so commonplace that the W.B. Yeats quotation that Gaddis cites in the aforementioned letter to Napper is universalized—"defeat" abounds.[59] The title of Yeats' poem, "To a Friend

[59] Gibbs parrots lines from the Yeats poem at various points. He (mis)quotes the "defeat from any [*sic*] brazen throat" line to Bast on page 131.

Whose Work Has Come to Nothing" (1914), is too particular for *J R*, in which the work of every artist "comes to nothing."

Having widely outlined the negative impact of money-capital on art-making, I want to focus on the character of Eigen because his life and employment history closely resembles Gaddis' prior to the publication of *J R*.[60] Indeed, one could go so far as to say that Eigen is a fictional substitute for Gaddis. His name, the German word for "own," signifies as much (*OED* n. pag.).[61] Gaddis has owned up to the biographical resonances, revealing that Eigen "is obviously based in part on my own experience with *The Recognitions*, that it was not a success when it was published and I was obliged to go and work in a pharmaceutical company" (Abadi-Nagy 71). Eigen writes corporate speeches for Typhon, as Gaddis had for Pfizer. Their motivations are identical: to provide for their families. "I had a family and had to make a living," as Gaddis matter-of-factly puts it (Abadi-Nagy 71). Eigen is less stoic about his economic role, as his wife reports to Gibbs: "he resents every bill he pays, the rent, nursery school he even resents that, paying David's nursery school and food" (270). She bitterly sources this sentiment to the ever-present gaze of "his friends and these editors asking about his next great book shaking

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[60] Eigen, an author, is one of five main artist figures in the novel. The others are Bast (composer), Gibbs (author), Schramm (author), and Schepperman (painter). I omit the latter two from the main body of my discussion, as the novel mainly deploys them as vessels for carrying the disappointments of the other three. For example, after Schramm's apparent suicide, Eigen reflects on his friend's unfinished autobiographical novel about fighting in World War II: "Christ look can't you see it wasn't any of that! it was, it was worse than that? It was whether what he was trying to do was worth doing even if he couldn't do it? whether anything was worth writing even if he couldn't write it? Hopping around with that God damned limp trying to turn it all into something more than one more stupid tank battle one more stupid God damned general, trying to redeem the whole God damned thing" (621). We also learn of Schepperman from Eigen. The painter is devastated by the fact that his patron (Zona Selk) has kept all his work hidden from the public, presumably to inflate their value: "he didn't give a damn for the money, just his statements [paintings] shut up where nobody could see them only God damn reason he'd painted them" (409). For a lengthier interpretation of the place and function of the artist in *J R*, see Christopher J. Knight's chapter "*J R* and the Question of That Which Is Worth Doing" in his *Hints and Guesses: William Gaddis's Fiction of Longing* (1997), particularly pages 134-45.

[61] The Gaddis Annotations website translates the word as "self, characteristic," stating that Eigen "was originally conceived by Gaddis as a self-portrait, but later took on additional, fictitious characteristics" (n. pag.).

their heads admiring how hard he works to support us […] but what a tragedy for American literature" (270). One of Gaddis' two children, Sarah, is more sympathetic when remembering how her father "was plagued with money worries" during the period that he was composing *J R* (Gaddis, "Afterword" 530). She intimates that as with Eigen, writing is a shadow eclipsing family life. "*J R* took my father twenty years to write: my childhood and my adolescence," she recalls (530). The indignities and boredom associated with their day jobs compound the domestic abjection of Gaddis and Eigen. In addition to arid speechwriting, Eigen captions the pictures included in Typhon's Annual Report. A deadline for this task pulls him away from a potentially enlightening conversation about playwriting with a young author named Gall. He laments to Gall that he "can't get a damn thing done here," by which he means a creative "thing" (418). Gaddis complains about his job in a 1961 reply to the author David Markson. "I am hung up with an operation of international piracy that deals in drugs," Gaddis caricatures his workday, "writing speeches on the balance of payments deficit but mostly staring out the window, serving the goal that Basil Valentine [a character in *The Recognitions*] damned in 'the people whose idea of necessity is paying the gas bill'" (*Letters* 236). Gaddis also alludes to the fact that he has "been working on a play, a presently overlong and overly complicated and really quite straight figment of the Civil War" (237). He never finished the play, although the theatrical mode certainly informed *J R*'s style. Eigen finishes his Civil War play, but makes the unwitting mistake of entrusting it to Gall, who sells it for stock. As a result, the play's run is restricted to three sold out shows, as Eigen relays to Gibbs, because "the backers suddenly stepped in and closed it without any explan[ation]" (723). The explanation is supplied in Eigen's recounting of how rights to the play

generate “a ninety-eight thousand five hundred dollar profit on their books,” a figure that allows the new proprietors to comfortably move on (723). Any lost future gains on ticket sales are a pittance compared to this figure. Financialization halts production.

Reducing the play to a balance sheet item—or, more precisely, a piece of paper to be exchanged and monetized by members of the financial class—carries forward the thematic paper chase that propels the plot from the outset. In an early scene, Coen seeks in vain for a piece of paper (Bast’s birth certificate) that could solve the mystery of Edward’s paternity, and thus help simplify the claims on the estate of Thomas Bast (66-67). These claims are registered in pieces of paper representing shares in General Roll, which Thomas owned. Just as Coen equates paper with control (over the inheritance narrative), Thomas’ daughter Stella tries to secure additional stock certificates in order to gain control of General Roll. At one point she asks after Gibbs’ five certificates, as this would furnish her with a majority of the company’s 45 shares. In response, Gibbs poses *the* question, “what the hell are they worth?” (350). Stella demurs, while Gibbs rifles through his shirt drawers with a dawning awareness that they might be “worth” a substantial amount. The exchange underscores that not only is financial value extrinsic, but the capacity to exploit it for personal gain is both arbitrary and restricted. Books too are mere assemblages of paper, a worthwhile investment for J R because they absorb the surplus from his paper mill. Davidoff articulates the company’s dim view of books, declaring that the “reason this publishing end's got top priority in the first place all this paper the Boss says we might as well print books on it, now he's heard it costs more to keep presses idle than to run them” (519). Other “costs” clearly communicate the company’s priorities: “the initial outlay is in the neighborhood of a third of a million, two

hundred sixty-six thousand on promotion sixty-six thousand in production and, yes and *six hundred sixty dollars* went in research writing and editorial costs" (693, emphasis added). They get what they pay for content-wise, as the book titles and copy in the company's catalogue testify. Take "Ten Echoes Rioting," which "Newsleak Magazine" blurbs as "a literary event, of sorts" (515). Lee Kostantinou reasonably queries "[h]ow can J R justify spending so little editing his books?" (n. pag.). Konstantinou locates the answer in the following passage:

> "Get into these mass paperbacks print an edition of five hundred thousand might as well ship three straight to the shredder one thing I hate it's waste, can't figure out costs to sales too many unknowns too damn much waste…"
>
> "Yes sir what they've done is reduce the significance of the cost factor, largely write off the waste element and outrage traditional publishing convention by using the entire list as a readymade advertising enterprise, they…"
>
> "Have to advertise the damn things how else they going to sell them."
>
> "No sir in the books I mean ads in the books themselves sir, textbooks and novels filled with columns of advertising the prime space goes to their own subsidiaries but most of them appear to be quite tastelessly solicited, what figures I've obtained from our sources indicate a startling amount of billings which no excuse me sir just my briefcase I, yes here are some of the figures, it's created a furor in publishing particularly the textbook area and drawn violent objections from some prominent writers who threat…"

> "Always objecting to something only damn reason they're writers, make their damn peace the country could get on with its business if this bunch hadn't done it somebody else would." (692-93)

J R cares about the content of the books in his company's catalogue insofar as it pertains to an opportunity to advertise between the covers.[62] Crucially, even if they did not take the vulgar utilitarian approach to publishing, "somebody else would." Because "[t]hat's what you do!" J R would add (659). "That's what you do" because making as much money as possible is *sine qua non*. The first line of the novel symbolizes money's superlative status. It reads, "'Money…?' in a voice that rustled" (3). The ellipses together with verb choice ("rustled") invoke capital's accretive forward movement. The uncertainty about the social consequences of this accretion that Gaddis' novel will go on to express gathers in the question mark, and is reinforced in the next line: "Paper, yes" (3). Such an affirmation materializes, and thus very briefly demythologizes, money. The real acquiescence to the dictates of money endures, as J R's treatment of books—and *J R*'s depiction of authors—repeatedly reminds us. Books are valued because they absorb a surplus, which is analogous to how "genius grant" recipients absorb the MacArthur Foundation's surplus capital, despite the organization's pieties to creative autonomy.

At the very least, the "genius grants" are more substantive than the literary awards invoked in *J R*. When Eigen's wife takes solace in the fact that his "book's being published again and […] you [will] get this award," he skeptically retorts, "how long

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[62] While this phenomenon may appear far-fetched in a novel that is otherwise quite prescient concerning the commodification of everyday life, Konstantinou proclaims that while "publishers don't yet place advertisements inside novels […] it's not hard to imagine how, in another version of reality, or in one of many possible futures, they might. E-reading devices like the Kindle are already incorporating ads into their design, and as these devices increasingly mine and analyze our reading habits, there's no doubt that publishers will be greatly tempted to take advantage of the insights such sophisticated datasets might yield" (Kostantinou n. pag.). Konstantinou's hypothesis resonates with "My Flamboyant Grandson," a George Saunders story that exemplifies "consumer realism," as I show in chapter five.

could we live on that?" (261). Literary awards in *J R* are akin to junk bonds, valuable to the extent that they allow authors to leverage prestige in the service of securing big advances. The "genius grants" likewise obey the logic of the neoliberal economy, which—in Melinda Cooper's precise phrasing—"installs speculation at the very core of production" (qtd. in Nealon 171). In the literary marketplace, readers' encounters with texts are increasingly shaped by authorial celebrity, prizes, book sale figures, and motion picture rights, which serve as securities for the initial investment that publishers and/or granting institutions make in an author. In the process, the market effectively disregards the desires of the individual author, who must satisfy its demands in order to succeed. For these structural reasons, the MacArthur Foundation can never grant the pure, "string-free" autonomy it touts.

2.3 How to Win Like a Pig

One of the richest scenes in *J R* is when the boy and his teacher, Amy, contemplate the moon. He is preoccupied with assigning a beneficiary to everything in his purview, pronouncing "this water fountain millionaire and this locker millionaire and […] this glass millionaire" (473-74). Directing his gaze skyward, Amy asks, "[d]oes there have to be a millionaire for everything?" (474). J R need not answer. More than halfway through the novel we are no longer certain that the notion of social value independent of price can exist in the free-market system. Long before he testified in Congress, J R was a boy who grasped Dale Carnegie's edict about the supremacy of "market price," glossed in the passage from *The Recognitions* that serves as my epigraph. Gaddis weaves allusions to Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937)

throughout *The Recognitions*. Those who prosper in the novel, principally the entrepreneurial art forgery dealer named Recktall Brown, embody Carnegie's pragmatic ideal. Brown "simply gives people what they want," as Dominick LaCapra puts it, correctly apprehending that buyers are content to purchase an impression of authenticity (181). Maintaining the illusion is a confidence game at which Brown excels. The market price for the forgeries resembles the going rate for originals, thus allowing Brown to profit due to his low acquisition costs. Carnegie would celebrate Brown's ability to exploit social knowledge for personal gain. Gaddis appreciated how Carnegie's tract anticipated the *zeitgeist* of mid-century mass culture, and featured it on the syllabus for the class he taught at Bard College in the late 1970s, "The Literature of Failure" (Alberts 249). An essay that emerged out of that class, "The Rush for Second Place" (1981), identifies Carnegie's failure in the wedding of "the worst of both possible worlds: pragmatism's 'cash value' of an idea and the inner loneliness of the Protestant ethic" (53). "The Protestant ethic" aspect is especially dated in relation to *J R*'s representation of economic activity. Where Carnegie attaches a "market price" to personality—a kind of *post hoc* justification of success—*J R* radically depersonalizes economic destiny. Neoliberal market operations are tedious and impersonal; accordingly, Gaddis' novel never romanticizes them. Instead, he highlights how market subjects like J R are produced and then reproduced as philanthropic agents.

The passage from the above-cited epigraph continues, alluding to a figure synonymous with the romanticization of wealth accumulation that philanthropic initiatives inspire: "Here was Andrew Carnegie, who had only four years in school but

garnered a million dollars for every day in the year" (499).[63] Fond of folksy aphorisms, John MacArthur would likely compliment Carnegie for being a "pig" as opposed to a "hog"; however, if "a good deal to be a good deal has to be a good deal on both sides"—as MacArthur also enjoyed saying—then organized philanthropy (such as Carnegie's) is a bad deal for all citizens of the world (market) (qtd. in Graymont 79, 80). It is obviously "a bad deal" for the global poor.[64] It is also ultimately "a bad deal" for the capitalists who organize their wealth in private foundations and for their more affluent recipients. For in making the world safer for capital, organized philanthropy helps to only permit "a certain very limited amount of Individualism," to return to Wilde's vital assessment (229). Real human freedom—what Wilde calls "Individualism"—is "limited" because everyone must confront the unsettled social needs that capitalism cannot adequately redress. It does not take a genius to recognize that the distinction between "pigs" and "hogs" begs to be deconstructed.

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[63] Slavoj Žižek has popularized the idea that philanthropy represents a lack of political imagination, as Wilde exposes via his socialist thesis. First in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008) and then in several of his public lectures, Žižek channels Wilde to castigate the "fake sense of urgency" that attends humanitarian interventions (6). "Fake" insofar as "[c]harity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation" (22). In Žižek's terms, organized philanthropy performs the "objective violence" of perpetuating capitalism (2). The free market that enables individuals to accumulate dynastic wealth presumes and preserves gross inequalities, no matter how much money these individuals give back. Žižek refers to them as "liberal communists" (16). Like Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates and George Soros "give away with one hand what they first took with the other" (21). Characteristically, Žižek relies on extreme examples, in this case two of the richest men in the world, to radicalize his thesis. He follows Wilde in arguing that philanthropy allows capitalism to flourish, but his examples imply that the "liberal communists" have a mixed motive: to do good *and* to protect the system that has empowered them to do so well. Their "intentions" are less innocent than Wilde's humanitarian bourgeoisie, who act with "admirable, though misdirected intention" (227). Where Wilde surpasses Žižek is in his emphasis on how capitalism ("the institution of private property") engenders an illusion of freedom (228). Philanthropic subjects *and* their objects are implicated in this illusion. Wilde considers figures like Lord Byron alongside *les misérables* because capitalism deprives both of the opportunity for real freedom. For Wilde, the difference in the degree of their unfreedom ultimately matters less than its identity in kind.

[64] In a 2010 talk at the London School of Economics, David Harvey calls for global poverty to be framed as a "problem of the accumulation of wealth" (n. pag.). He "def[ies]" anyone to "solve the global poverty problem without dealing with the accumulation of wealth problem" (n. pag.). This resonates with an Oxfam report released as the 2014 World Economic Forum was getting underway in Davos. The finding that made the most headlines was that the 85 richest people in the world control as much wealth as the poorest half of the world (Wearden).

CHAPTER THREE: WORKING THROUGH COLSON WHITEHEAD'S CRITIQUE OF HUMAN CAPITAL

A man nearly chokes to death on a piece of prime rib; another stubs his toe and eventually has to have it amputated. The protagonists of Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) experience their cultural production as trauma in these moments.[65] J. chokes at a benefit anticipating the commemoration of a John Henry postal stamp. He attends in his capacity as a junketeer, part of a "gangster army of hype" commandeered by a large p.r. firm (40). His choking symbolizes the transformation of historical meaning into meaningless commodity: the cost of consuming John Henry as a palatable myth, rather than as a potentially radical engagement with the racial and class-based antagonisms exploited by capital. *John Henry Days* structurally reinforces this unsettling juxtaposition of manual and mental labour by interspersing chapters focusing on J.'s cultural labour with fictional accounts of John Henry's work building railroads. The opening passage of *Apex Hides the Hurt* renders these two forms of labour as strictly analogous: "He came up with the names and like any good parent he knocked them around to teach them life lessons. He bent them to see if they'd break, he dragged them behind cars by heavy metal chains, he exposed them to high temperatures for extended periods of time" (3).

Yet the unnamed nomenclature consultant's fantasy of control over the names—of non-alienated labour (autonomy)—gives way to the reality of his own deep-seated

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[65] Jesse Cohn also links the two works when he observes that the namelessness of its protagonist is "strongly reminiscent of Whitehead's earlier work, *John Henry Days*" (15; see, also 19). More generally, Daniel Grassian claims that "all of Whitehead's protagonists [are] […] rather alienated hip-hop generation urbanite[s]" (77). I recognize the dangers of an implicit ethnographic realism or privileged confessional mode in paying close attention to the protagonists of these two works, but justify my focus in terms of Howard Rambsy's assertion that "the leading characters of Whitehead's fiction […] are extraordinarily self-actualized individuals" (223).

uncertainty when he is tasked with naming a town. As with the protagonist of *John Henry Days*, his job forces him to confront historical truths through "immaterial labour."[66] In the nomenclature consultant's case, he sorts through a series of names, along with their attendant baggage: the status quo candidate, "Winthrop," honours the town's wealthy white benefactor; the conscientious choice, "Freedom," restores the name chosen by the African-Americans who founded the town; finally, "New Prospera" is the brand favoured by a business maven and his minions, as well as by the nomenclature consultant's former boss and colleagues. He ultimately settles on "Struggle," a name originally overlooked in favour of "Freedom." That the selected name is nothing more than a bandage on an open political wound is signified by the novel's ambiguous ending. "As the weeks went on and he settled into his new life," the final line reads, "he had to admit that actually, his foot hurt more than ever" (212). He "settles in," but naming does not cure him. The pain in his foot is ironically enabled by the bandage that the consultant has helped brand, Apex. Apex, a politically correct commodity designed to match the skin tone of its bearer, "hides his hurt" by concealing an infection he contracted in his bandaged stubbed toe. The title of the novel suggests that names can neither hide nor resolve past injustices. "They were good times" echoes hollowly as a refrain in the first few pages (3, 5). His prized naming venture, Apex, becomes—like a later effort—"a name reduced to abstraction. To meaninglessness" (203). The "good times" cannot roll because consumer

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[66] I place the term in inverted commas at the outset (implied hereafter) in order to distance myself from the political argument of the post-Marxist autonomist school (Negri, Bifo, Lazzarato et al.), i.e., "intellectuals are the only proletariat" (Brennan, "Intellectual" 400). For an extension of this critique in response to the popularity of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), see Timothy Brennan's *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (2006). In a chapter titled "The Empire's New Clothes," he seizes upon Hardt and Negri's "willingness to adopt a more prophetic tone about an inviting future already contained in the present" (171). As my next chapter demonstrates, I find Lazzarato's argument about debt much more persuasive than his theorization of labour.

culture, as the consultant eventually realizes, continually celebrates "the right name" as opposed to "the true name" (182).

Searching for "the true name" amidst the detritus of this culture resonates with Marx's reading of the ideal. As Evald Ilyenkov avers, for Marx, "the real process, in the course of which the material life and activity of the social human being start to produce not only the material, but the ideal product; but having appeared, the ideal in its own turn becomes part and parcel of the material life of the social human being" (qtd. in Chukrov 107). When it comes to the ideal, all things must pass (back into the material). "Right" becomes more recognizably synonymous with new—like the consultant's "new life"—especially in an age where "New was new again […] New, new, new money, new media, new economy. New order. New Prospera" (52). While the adjectival "new" strips the affiliated nouns of their meaning in this passage, the "neo" in neoliberalism signals a substantive redefinition of labour in terms of human capital. Foucault explains how human capital displaces the labour theory of value under neoliberalism. Departing from Marx's critique of the transformation of labour into a commodity—wherein "the logic of capital reduces labor to labor power and time," as Foucault summarizes—Gary Becker and allied theorists of human capital view the individual as an assemblage of skills, comprising "an active economic subject" (221, 223). Yet the idealist kernel of this "conception of capital-ability" sprouts into a grimly atomistic social vision in light of "the real process" of production (225).

The theory of human capital funnels all social activity to a single end: capital enhancement. Capital enhancement requires a central contradiction within human capital. Individuals are elevated to the status of investors in themselves, constantly competing to

maximize their economic value. As such, they are personally responsible for their success or failure on the labour market; however, the theory of human capital elides the simple fact that the fate of a vast majority largely depends on the whims of an irrational, rationalizing market. Individuals appear free to pursue their own self-investment, but in reality they are subject to a capitalist market that prioritizes the capital enhancement of (financial) firms and corporations. Charitably, the "genius grants" could be treated as a critical response to this human capital contradiction. They promise to shelter recipients from the irrationality of market forces, albeit temporarily. The alibi and unfreedom that attend organized philanthropy, as my previous chapter explored, make me skeptical of this promise. Here, I will argue that this promise is ultimately indistinguishable from the model of labour advanced in neoliberal discourse on human capital. The radically self-sufficient nature of creativity and genius conflicts with a systemic profit myopia that reinforces rising precarity in the workforce, the standardization of non-living wages, explosive unemployment, and a rapidly enlarging underclass of exploited or excluded individuals. The Foundation's repeated denials of the "genius" moniker are thus not simply a branding effort—they articulate a deep commitment to a fundamentally unstable set of labour conditions. In sum, the Foundation's fetishization of creativity conceals the nature of human capital, which reinforces precarity and exploitation. The two novels by Whitehead that I focus upon in this chapter reveal the affinities between creativity, immaterial labour, and human capital. They are allegories of the instrumentalized creative labourer that catalogue the psychic and material costs of economizing the self. My close readings of the two novels will further strengthen the theoretical connections between human capital, creative labour, and the Foundation's fetishization of creativity.

3.1 Creative Humans/Human Capitals

The MacArthur Foundation satisfies the intentions of human capital. For the fellowship program presumes the commodification of creativity, in spite of the surface celebration of its use-value. "Human capital" is most often associated with an economist whom Foucault labels "the most radical of the American neoliberals," Gary Becker (269).[67] In his "Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis" (1962) article—subsequently expanded into a book, *Human Capital* (1964)—Becker argues "that factors other than physical resources play a larger role [in income growth] than formerly believed, thus focusing attention on less tangible resources, like the knowledge possessed" (9). One influential implication of this argument is that labourers are to be apprehended according to how they utilize their reputed economic agency. Becker's theory more generally qualifies as "radical" because it presumes "the generalization of the economic form of the market […] throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges" (Foucault 243). Foucault employs human capital to discuss education, sexual reproduction, marriage, and crime (243-45, 248-252). In each case, the "*economic* behavior" of so-called *homo economicus* "is the grid of intelligibility one will adopt [to

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[67] In the Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Human Capital* (2011), Alan Burton-Jones and J.C. Spender trace the concept back to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), citing the passage where Smith interprets "the acquisition of […] talents [as] a capital fixed and realized, as it were, in his person" (qtd. on 2). They go on to observe that "[r]elated notions surfaced occasionally in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first use of the term human capital, being credited to Arthur Pigou (1928). Human capital became prominent in the late 1950s and early 1960s as leading economists, notably [Jacob] Mincer (1958), [Theodore] Schultz (1961), and Becker (1964), proclaimed it as much a form of capital as physical and financial capital, and emphasized its importance to future economic growth" (2). Foucault also invokes Smith, reading the rationale for human capital alongside "the invisible hand," i.e., Smith's attempt to socialize the benefits of pursuing one's self-interest. "What is usually stressed in Smith's famous theory of the invisible hand is, if you like, the 'hand,'" Foucault avers (279). "But I think the other element, invisibility," he continues, "is at least as important" (279-80). Human capital views "invisibility" as essential insofar as "no economic agent should or can pursue the collective good" (280). As such, self-investment is paramount.

decipher] the behavior of a new individual" (252, emphasis added). The risks *homo economicus* takes and choices s/he makes are measured retroactively, from the vantage point of thoroughly personalized economic outcomes. Individuals are viewed as "machines" composed of "abilit[ies]" and skill[s]" (Foucault 224).

"Creativity" is the "ability" that the MacArthur Foundation and corporate media outlets repeatedly tout as a *raison d'etre* of the fellowship program. "The purpose of the MacArthur Fellows Program," as the Foundation's website advertises, "is to enable recipients to exercise their own creative instincts for the benefit of human society" (macfound.org). A headline in one of the earliest newspaper articles about the program reinforces the program's creativity paradigm: "No-Strings-Attached Prizes Are Changing Creative Lives." To gauge how durable this paradigm has proven, we can look to a June 2012 *New York Times* article covering the announcement of a new director for the fellowship program, Cecilia Conrad. Conrad is quoted as saying that the MacArthur "is a one-of-a-kind program […] It makes a real contribution to American society by encouraging and supporting creativity" (qtd. in Lee n. pag.).

Creativity's positive valence partially explains its appeal for the Foundation. "No word in English," Raymond Williams notes in *The Long Revolution* (1961), "carries a more consistently positive reference than 'creative'" (19). Yet it is the capaciousness of the term "creativity" that is most appealing for the Foundation. In his *Keywords* (1976) entry on "creativity," Williams writes that "the difficulty arises when a word once intended, and often still intended, to embody a high and serious claim, becomes so conventional, as a description of certain general kinds of activity, that it is applied to practices for which, in the absence of convention, nobody would think of making such

claims" (84). This "conventionalization" is not accidental, nor is Williams' phrase, "certain general kinds of activity." This formulation echoes Marx's idea—expressed in the "Fragment on Machines" section of the *Grundrisse* (1857-58)—that capital has begun extracting value from "the general productive forces of the social brain" (qtd. in Ross 186). The *Grundrisse* introduces the notion of the "general intellect," which has been foregrounded in the Marxist interventions of Italian autonomist thinkers, such as Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri, and Franco "Bifo" Berardi over the past four decades. "Creativity" is synonymous with "the general intellect"; the fellowship program thus positions the Foundation as utilizing the power of the general intellect, and socializing the value that it extracts from creative labourers, whom Berardi labels "the cognitariat".[68]

What Bifo understands as "the cognitariat," Richard Florida describes as the "creative class."[69] Florida interprets the presence of such individuals as a cornerstone of urban development. In other words, Florida connects creativity with economic prosperity. Like Marx, the MacArthur Foundation links creativity with a less concrete form of prosperity, chiefly social. However, as I discussed in my previous chapter, the Foundation's funding mechanism should raise our suspicion about its motives. Moreover, whereas Virno, Negri, and Berardi view the "general intellect" as, in Negri's words, "a subversive force,"[70] the MacArthur Foundation, not to mention Florida, align it with improvements to the overall quality of American life (Negri 302). Nevertheless, Florida and the autonomists agree in one respect, an agreement which can be extended to

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[68] For a more extensive definition of "the cogniariat," see Berardi's *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2009), pp. 103-105.
[69] Keti Chukrov recognizes the difference: "The cognitariat does not constitute a class" (103).
[70] For autonomists and those sympathetic to their interests, subtraction holds radical potential: "the hope emerges that if capitalism itself so quickly gave birth to technologies that allow for the socialization of industry and information, and the transformation of labor and economy into knowledge, then the opportunity will arise to 'subtract' this knowledge away from capital" (Chukrov 98).

encompass the fellowship program. As Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman point to in "The Limits of Liberalism" section of *After Globalization* (2011):

> Despite the different lessons drawn from the social and political implications of post-Fordist work, there is a surprisingly common view of what constitutes creativity and its links to art, culture, and the aesthetic. In recent social and political thought, creativity seems to have become nothing short of the defining element of human Being: we are no longer *Homo faber* but *Homo genero*. (98)

Although they do not couch their perspicuous observation in these terms, Cazdyn and Szeman imply that creativity is fetishized in contemporary thought and economic practice, which simultaneously recognize its productive capacity and deny its limits. This universalization of creativity raises the possibility that labourers can take ownership of the means of production insofar as their very being becomes just such a mode: from makers of objects to makers, full stop. But as J. and the nomenclature consultant do (and anyone who has won a "genius grant" can) attest, creative labour involves alienation because makers are made into objects in the process. Creativity is thus akin to the phenomena Marx critiques in the *Grundrisse*, where he writes that "in present bourgeois society as a whole, this positing of prices and their circulation etc., appears as the surface process, beneath which, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear" (247). On the surface, the scare-quotes that envelop "genius" seem to signal the Foundation's critical distance from theories of purely immaterial labour. However, the substitution of creativity for genius in Foundation discourse indicates an endorsement of a deeper set of "processes" that make

non-alienated labour ("*Homo genero*") impossible. Whitehead's novels address the costs of this purported evolution from "*Homo faber*" to "*Homo genero*," as they draw attention to the interests served in the instrumentalization of creativity, as well as the plight of those who labour in an economy that is time and time again represented as creative.

Alongside Richard Florida, John Howkins has been a leading voice in discussions of "the creative economy." He even wrote the book on it, *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money From Ideas* (2001). In his introduction, Howkins describes the transformation that Cazdyn and Szeman critique as follows: "Creativity is not new and neither is economics, but what is new is the nature and extent of the relationship between them, and how they combine to create extraordinary value and wealth" (viii). Like Thomas Friedman, Howkins structures his argument about this "relationship" by seeking to discover what he already knows through a series of anecdotes and interviews: creativity is everywhere, in all of us, and the "people [who] make money from ideas" are those who are able to capitalize on this boundless, innate resource. There is no denying that with Entertainment entrenched as an Empire, creativity is prized.[71] In *The Politics of Cultural Work* (2007), Mark Banks points out that "in the United States, Americans for the Arts estimated that the number of creative industries firms had grown 5.5% in the year 2004-2005 (compared with 3.8% for other non-creative firms) and that, now, the creative industries represented a 'formidable economic growth sector,' 'contributing

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[71] Eric M. Fattor establishes a direct link between mass media entertainment and U.S. imperialism in *American Empire and the Arsenal of Entertainment: Soft Power and Cultural Weaponization* (2014). Fattor argues that "the United States, taking cues from Great Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, has skillfully created a communications infrastructure that in the twenty-first century can now cast a net of seductive imagery and information over the entire planet. […] This combination of spectacle and technology […] constitutes an arsenal of entertainment, and is the real key to the success of the American Empire" (3). My far more modest claim here is that since contemporary mass media entertainment undeniably plays a large role in many people's daily lives, the valorization of creativity as a wellspring for this entertainment is not particularly striking.

significantly to the economy of every state in the nation'" (3). Since British and American citizens, as Howkins notes, "spend respectively about 17 per cent and 20 per cent of total consumer expenditure on pleasure, more than on housing or food," cultural producers and disseminators are bound to be valued (xv-xvi).[72] This creative population is expanding to meet consumer demand. David Harvey claims that "the number of workers engaged in cultural activities and production has increased considerably over the past few decades (from some 150,000 artists registered in the New York metropolitan region in the early 1980s to likely more than double that by now), and continues to rise" (*Rebel Cities* 89).

Howkins and Florida use the growth in entertainment expenditures and entertainers to justify their analysis of the new labour paradigm. Howkins does so bluntly on the first page of his book, which supports the broad assertion that "toward the end of the twentieth century, the nature of work changed" with attendance figures from a Swiss telecommunications fair, as well as a series of British and American IP (Intellectual Property) examples, such as rising copyright royalties and patent expenditures (vii). Again, despite their oppositional reading of the potential political consequences of this "change," Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri echo Howkins in *Multitude* (2004): "Immaterial labor constitutes a minority of global labor, and it is concentrated in some of the dominant regions of the globe. Our claim, rather, is that immaterial labor has become *hegemonic in qualitative terms* and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself. Immaterial labor, in other words, is today in the same position that

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[72] Howkins only loosely defines "pleasure," equating it with "leisure activities" (xvi). This definition begs the question of whether Howkins would classify, for example, installing a hot tub or dining out as "housing or food." I am more interested in critiquing what animates Howkins' interpretation of the putative transformation, i.e., human capital.

industrial labor was 150 years ago" (109, emphasis in original). In Howkins' words, "the nature of work [has] changed."

The notion of human capital helps account for the perceived change. Foucault notes how neoliberals view labour as "a blank sheet on which the economists have written nothing" (219). The neoliberals blame classical political economy for advancing what they see as a specious claim—that labour is "abstract[ed]" under capitalist processes of production (221). The new script is not interested in the "abstractions" that attend generating a surplus; human capital commands that "the starting point and general frame of reference for economic analysis should be the way in which individuals allocate […] scarce means to alternative ends" (Foucault 222). As according to the model of the creative economy, labourers are seen as agents whose activities can be understood as forms of self-actualization. Human capital adds further evidence "that creative-economy discourse dovetails importantly with neoliberalism," to borrow the succinct formulation of Sarah Brouillette's *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014) (2). The MacArthur fellowship program is in harmony with this development. While the Foundation's stated aim is to enable individual recipients, it prioritizes impersonal capital appreciation. As my next section argues, the consequences of this prioritization for labour (precarity and exploitation) align the "genius grants" with "the List" in *John Henry Days*.

3.2 Two Lists, One Equation

The fellowship program occupies this intersection between the creative economy and neoliberalism because it does not explicitly reward recipients for a particular product (a novel, a scientific formula, a social program); instead, the Foundation insists that it

invests in creative *individuals*, as opposed to their creations. It is their labouring ("instincts") which distinguishes them. And this is where the fellowships at first appear to depart from Howkins' narrative. He bases his definition of "the creative economy" on a product-centric "equation," which "states that the creative economy (CE) is equivalent to the value of creative products (CP) multiplied by the number of transactions (T); that is, CE=CP x T" (xiv). The fellowship program's calculations are much narrower. It gives $625,000 to a select subset of Howkins' "*homo creator*" (xiv). Of course, Howkins' unstated premise is that those who "make money from ideas" are *homo economicus*. They compose a "permanent and multiple enterprise" (Foucault 241). Although Howkins avoids using the more accurate term, *homo economicus*, his equation presupposes human capital, as embodied in *homo creator*.

In another sense, the creative individuals singled out in the fellowship program *are* defined by their products, just as the nomenclature consultant is in *Apex*. Namely, they are the products. As the nomenclature consultant's boss abruptly informs him, "wise up—you *are* the product" (146, emphasis in original). It is significant that the boss (Roger Tipple) then "pause[s] to let this apparently obvious concept settle in" (146). This concept would not be "apparently obvious" to Hardt and Negri, who argue that "one distinctive feature of the work of head and heart […] is that paradoxically the *object* of production is really a *subject*, defined, for example, by a social relationship or a form of life" (*Commonwealth* 133, emphasis in original). Hardt and Negri highlight the biopolitical aspects of contemporary capitalist production in order to ground their assertion that "cognitive labor and affective labor generally produce cooperation autonomously from capitalist command" (140); however, this labour is certainly not

"autonomous" from *capital's* "command," which continues to play the dominant, structuring role. What "defines" creative labourers is the same thing that defines all labourers in a capitalist system: their objectification. After all, Tipple is the consultant's *boss*—the one who helps shape and define his working conditions. The consultant certainly enjoys a degree of autonomy from capitalist agents like boss and coworker, as he comes out of retirement apparently on his own terms, and at a remove from his workplace.[73] The trappings of his former office life,[74] though, are close at hand. Tipple frequently calls to check up on him, with a less-than-subtle recruiting interest. "*Prospera*," the consultant thinks, "could have come from anybody on [his former work] team" (52, emphasis in original). Moreover, the notion of a work "team" appears to reinforce Hardt and Negri's notion that cognitive labour is "cooperat[ive]," but the consultant's perception is of a much different working reality. For example, he characterizes the "whiz kid" who devised the multicultural bandage campaign for Apex as "another of his kind, a lonesome operative doing the same work, believing and disbelieving the same half-assed philosophies" (87). They are isolated, relatively anonymous cogs in the company's marketing machine. The fact that the consultant expresses both "belief" *and* "disbelief" intimates that he is complicit in his subordination, while also being estranged through it. 'Teamwork' is "half-assed," but it is also a "philosophy," one that distracts the workers from the real problem, even if they only half-recognize it as such: "Teamwork" is, as the consultant later notes, a "productivity-boosting notion" (147-48).

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[73] Isolation is inscribed into the environment of the creative workplace, with their "free soda machines and foosball tables" conforming to a productivity blueprint that is indifferent to anything but the most superficial forms of *esprit de corps* (*Apex* 163).

[74] "Office life" is an expression that reveals a lot about white-collar working conditions.

"Productivity" is still predicated on the dictates of the owners and managers of the means of production, despite the proliferation of worker-based creative platitudes. In the landscape of the United States media, production is dominated by the so-called "Big Six" (GE, Disney, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom, and Liberty Media), which according to one well-known estimate, control more than 90% of the entertainment and information disseminated in the country (White n. pag.).[75] These six conglomerates ensure "a constant reproduction of the same thing," shaping the public perception of reality in the ways that Horkheimer and Adorno document in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) (134). Daniel Grassian channels this nightmarish notion when he contextualizes *John Henry Days* "in the pre-9/11 contemporary age, in which trivial matters often dominated the news and in which the differences between the news and entertainment had been mostly effaced" (74). Time Warner is behind the promotional apparatus constructed for the stamp, as a representative from the website to which J. will deliver his story informs him. "Story" is actually a misnomer, given that J. is told that the website is "looking for content" (21). Whereas a "story" would leave room for J.'s agency in the narrative act, "content" is narrowly defined by its ends. The goal of "content" is to "pull in […] advertisers" (in this case, "local" ones) (192). While J. may be losing a handle on the purpose of his work, he is familiar with the purveyor, as "Time Warner is a mainstay of the List" (21).

"The List" is designed to ensure that content is continually refreshed. It is a mysterious electronic document that contains the names of an inner circle of junketeers, including J., who are regularly dispatched to cover a given product-promoting event for a variety of news and entertainment ventures. J. personifies "the List" in order to

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[75] Andrew Ross characterizes them as "U.S.-based media goliaths […] whose conglomerate operations and properties dominate almost every sector of cultural expression in the United States" (36).

understand its efficacy and appeal: "The List wants key Americans. And the junketeers are quintessential Americans, J. thinks. They want and want now and someone else is picking up the check" (137). Adopting J.'s view, we can see that "the List" has the same grounds, intended function, and mystique as the fellowship program. Here, it is interesting that what J. finds "quintessentially American" about the junketeers is the blind urgency and ultimate irresponsibility of their demand. "They want and want now," but what exactly do they want? The answer, like the "content" of their work, is vacuous. "Puff is puff; it is puff," J. reflects, in an attempt to form an opinion of his role at the postal event (73). Likewise, their wants are wants; they are wants. The junketeers want for the sake of wanting, which contributes to the bathetic character of J.'s earlier comparison of the junketeers to "soldiers" waging "a covert war against the literate of America" (47). The war is "covert," but the individual illiteracy campaigns are decidedly not designed by the junketeers. Instead, the plotters are the patrons of this "war," whom J. makes central to the comical, soldierly "ideals" that he identifies: "the holy inviolability of the receipt, two dollars a word, travel expenses" (47). While the MacArthur fellowships are also designed to pick up the tab for creativity, those responsible for finalizing the list each year are kept a secret. By contrast, the controllers of "the List" in *John Henry Days* are identified as two members of Lucien Joyce Associates, which is "one of the most influential publicity firms in the country" (40). Lawrence Flittings, Lucien's assistant, is responsible for daily operations, such as coordinating events and managing journalist-client relations. Lucien is none other than the architect of "the List."

When Lucien appears at the midway point of the novel, his delusions of pop grandeur further mystify the genesis and ingenuity of "the List." As Lawrence and Lucien

approach the site of the festival (Talcott, West Virginia), Lucien looks out the window and recalls his "patchwork idea of the town stitched by pop culture" (192).[76] This recollection soon spirals into a vision of the inverse: "making the thing into the idea" (193). For Lucien, pop ("the idea") is a positive force. He soon tells Talcott's mayor that he plans to "establish the brand superiority of Talcott for all things Talcott-related" (195). The festival offers an occasion to advance the town's most notable "brand," John Henry and his legend. "The List" is the device for delivering on this promise.[77] Lucien is like J.'s agent, invested in a prefabricated narrative. The agent encourages J. to expand his article on a gangsta rap group he is covering into a book about "the violent subculture of men who lived like outlaws" (136). Whether this conforms to the group's biography or not is irrelevant. Like the music industry itself, J. is "too old to pretend that there is anything but publicity" (136). Indeed, the group is quite aware that they "need their friends in the media" because without media attention, they would effectively cease to exist (135). As Michael New reads this section, "even the music is a form of advertising for the product" (255).

The much less promising reality for the labourers on "the List" is underscored during another one of Lucien's flights of fancy, which concludes with his perception of the justness of a system in which the junketeers "were fed, through them the public fed, and they filed pieces that paid the rent and subsidized their habits. Everybody won and

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[76] Lucien "has never done a town before" (193); the nomenclature consultant in *Apex* has, though. He was once contracted to rebrand a line of interlocking toy blocks, undoubtedly modeled on Lego, known as Ehko Village. Rather than acquiescing to Ehko International's stated sense that "an update was in order," the consultant keeps the name the same (119). He explains to the company, "Ehko Village said values were constant, that times had changed but an idea of ourselves still remained" (123). As with Lucien, the outcome trumps the procedure: "He didn't believe that crap, but that wasn't important. He knew it would strike a chord" (123). And so it did.

[77] Grassian defines the bottom line in identitarian terms: "the mostly white town […] seeks to capitalize upon the Henry legend through their festival; their purpose is purely economical" (75).

the List flourished" (298). He conceives of himself as a modern Moses for having rescued the junketeers from a "migrant worker"-like existence, wherein they would flock to an event for the freebies, but not necessarily report on it, nor get paid (297). Of course, Lucien conveniently downplays the precarity of their condition in the present system.[78] "Everybody" does not "win" because "rent" and "habits" recur on a routine basis. The junketeers are stuck in a cycle of dependence, exemplified in J.'s attempt to break Bobby Figgis' record for consecutive junkets. His fellow junketeers, as well as Lucien, view J.'s attempt as "madness," remembering how Bobby Figgis was "devoured by pop" (111); however, "much madness is divinest sense," to enlist Emily Dickinson's memorable line (1). He is simply following the logic of "the List" to its extreme in order to expose the illusion of autonomy perpetuated by "the List." In critically transforming his "habit" into the job itself, J. shows that work is a kind of compulsion.

Andrew Ross' argument about working conditions in the global capitalist order uniting labourers across a broad spectrum according to their experience of precariousness applies to J.'s quest for the record (212).[79] Secure employment is represented as irregular; the truly extreme fact about J.'s quest is that it is the nearest a precarious junketeer can come to job security. What makes this precarity even more insidious is the accompanying neoliberal notion that, in Ross' words, "individuals have power over their economic

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[78] Lucien's relationship to members of "the List" reflects Mark Banks' notion that "one unique and distinctive feature of cultural work is the necessity (at least for capital) of *maintaining* (rather than eliminating) the tension between autonomous impulses of creative workers and the demands of managers for standardized, predictable production" (6-7, emphasis in original).

[79] Looking away from the popular, celebratory, and shallow, structural metaphors of Friedman ("the world is flat") and Florida ("the world is spiky"), Ross highlights historical and contemporary examples of this shared precarity in a variety of fields, such as academia and Hollywood. For Ross, these examples illustrate "that policies pursued in the name of both Friedman and Florida have generally led to more sharply uneven development, magnifying inequalities in all locations rather than mitigating them in some" (208). He proceeds to argue that the key to renovating the global labour movement lies in granting "the most precarious […] moral, and ultimately organizational, leadership within cross-class coalitions" (9).

destinies" (6). While neoclassical definitions of *homo economicus* may have acknowledged this apparent "power," they did so on relational grounds. As Foucault summarizes, "*homo economicus* as he appears in the eighteenth century […] is someone who pursues his own interest, and whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others" (270). Conversely, human capital theory views economic actors atomistically. "*Homo economicus* is someone who accepts reality," Foucault quips (269). "Accepting reality" means being "sensitive to modifications in the variables of the environment," he continues (269). Job insecurity is hence able to assume a suspiciously positive valence insofar as it bestows upon the precariat incentives to be flexible and take risks in response to environmental signals. Failure to be appropriately responsive is one's personal responsibility. *Apex* articulates this human capital redefinition of self-interest through Lucien's sense that his "subjects" are "desperate"—an idea that is credible only insofar as their "desperation" is recognized as an aspect of their exploitation, rather than as a part of their personalities (297).

Despite its lofty intentions, "the List" is particularly problematic for the junketeers' job security because it is aligned with other technologies that have rendered labourers obsolete. The two primary examples are the steam-powered hammer that John Henry allegedly defeated in the race that led to his death, and "the Tool" that replaces Pamela—the daughter of a John Henry memorabilia collector—and many of her coworkers at the "content-driven interactive information provider" for which she briefly temped (287). As with "the List," secrecy drives the machine. Everyone at the office whispers about the imminent arrival of "The Tool" and its effect on their work. Given that the firm, like the junketeers, is devoted to providing "content," it is not too much of a

stretch to envision a day when the latter become redundant because of advances in automated reporting.[80] Notwithstanding this imminent threat, their fear of technological change disavows the change in their status as labourers in a neoliberal economy. "The Tool" has already arrived, at least metaphorically. Management subscribes to a human capital handbook that conceives of each precarious labourer as "a machine that produces an earnings stream" (Foucault 224). Technological unemployment is its own justification, provided labourers are seen as machines, subject to obsolescence.

Pamela's job is modeled on the one Whitehead had when he began to develop his plan for "a modern update of the John Henry story" ("I Worked" n. pag.). The tongue-in-cheek title of his online essay about the origins of his novel humourously represents the relationship between his job and literary labours, "I Worked At An Ill-Conceived Internet Start-Up and All I Got Was This Lousy Idea For A Novel." Whitehead describes how he moved from New York to San Francisco at "the start of the web gold rush" because he "needed some cash" (n. pag.).[81] At the Internet company that hires him, he spends most of his time "web-surfing," as "there was only about an hour of work to do everyday" (n. pag.). This "work" is the same as that of Pamela and the junketeers. He provided "content" in the form of "forty word blurbs [*sic*] for upcoming web-chats, TV Guide-style" (n. pag.). He can afford to be dismissive because, as the second half of his title

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[80] Grassian also aligns Pamela, her coworkers, and the junketeers as "iterant workers who feel little or no allegiance to their jobs" (80).

[81] In this context, William Ramsey's interpretation of the meaning of J.'s surname is interesting: "J. Sutter's last name implies falseness. Together with the Millhouse Inn, it alludes to Sutter's Mill, site of the California gold rush, suggesting that the gold Sutter makes as a media hack is false currency. The American Dream, Whitehead seems to imply, has abandoned content of character for contemporary seductions of style. Thus, both J. Sutter and John Henry are postmodern characterizations, each an external surface lacking essence and depth" (782). Dale Peck adds a layer of nuance to this allusion: "John Sutter was the man on whose land gold was so famously discovered by James Marshall in California in 1848. What is perhaps less well-known is that neither Sutter nor Marshall profited from this discovery: hordes of prospectors swarmed Sutter's land, killing his cattle, destroying his crops, and plundering the riches they found; and both Sutter and Marshall died paupers" (101).

outlines, he was also performing what readers of an online journal distributed by Random House would see as the more serious task of working on a novel, albeit one based on a supposedly "lousy idea." His self-deprecation seems ironic, given that he must be aware that his readers are probably inclined to disagree with such an assessment. If "lousy" connotes "infested," however, then the characterization is more apt. Whitehead's essay argues that the novel's genesis is infested with his experience at the start-up. For instance, his initial research for the novel is indebted to other content providers, namely the website for the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and a page containing a National Public Radio documentary on John Henry. To a certain extent, he relies on the same hype machine that he satirizes in the novel and essay. This reliance is no hypocrisy, as the targets of the satire are consistent: "puff" and precarity. Whitehead notes that his early stage research methods would be untenable nowadays, when a Google search for "John Henry" and attendant keywords would result in "almost six thousand hits" (n. pag.). "The web gold rush" yielded plenty of pyrite. And Whitehead is careful to distinguish the "signposts" offered on the web from the "real research" he performed at the library and in Talcott (n. pag.). Moreover, like most of the "original stuff [he] found" on the web, the start-up did not survive, as it was "bought for a lot of money by a larger media concern […] [and] finally shut down" (n. pag.). Ownership concentration and job lay-offs go hand in hand, putting workers in a vulnerable position. Whitehead's phrasing ("finally") implies that this fate was fitting. The perspective of an employee at the time of the cuts might be different. After all, Whitehead quits the job after six months, his "debts paid" (n. pag.). His negation of his former co-workers, however unintentional, satisfies the intentions of human capital to absolutely personalize labour and naturalize precarity.

3.3 Free Labour, Unfree "Geniuses"

Whitehead is far more sensitive to, not to mention critical of, the neoliberal repurposing of labour in his two novels than he is in the above-cited interview. Curiously, the topic of labour has been largely missing from discussions of his work. Critics have thus far racially coded each of Whitehead's preferred modes, allegory[82] and satire.[83] These race-cognizant readings have produced some insightful analyses of his work, which are perhaps more nuanced than I have suggested.[84] Labour is nevertheless a critical

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[82] Walter Kirn wrote in *TIME* that Whitehead's debut novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), was "the freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" (n. pag.). A more recent example of an allegorical approach to Whitehead's work is Jesse Cohn's 2009 article on *Apex*, "Old Afflictions: Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* and the 'Post-Soul Condition.'" Cohn posits that the unnamed nomenclature consultant embodies Sophocles' Oedipus, arguing that "the strongest thematic connection between Whitehead's narrative and that of Oedipus […] is in the sense of *guilt* common to both" (18, emphasis in original). The consultant's patricide is in the form of his rebranding assignment. More precisely, the patricide is a *fait accompli*, in which he views himself to be an accomplice, insofar as the name(s) designated by the African-American founders of the town, Field and Goode, have been buried. Like Oedipus, the consultant "becomes ever more aware of his own complicity with historical amnesia, his role as an agent of repression" (Cohn 19). However, the consultant does not blind himself in response to this "complicity," or so Cohn's concluding remarks on the racial coding of the contemporary Oedipus allegory suggest. Rather, Whitehead shares the consultant's Oedipal struggle vis-à-vis Mark Anthony Neal's notion of "the post-soul condition" (qtd. in Cohn 20). According to Neal, this "condition" defines the critical consciousness of African-American authors born after the "soul aesthetic" moment of the 1960s (qtd. in Cohn 20). These authors negotiate the commodification of "soul" products of a cultural autonomy agenda, evincing—as Cohn reads Whitehead—"a sense of anxiety over the source of cultural value, of guilty indebtedness to the past" (Cohn 21).

[83] His novels, notably *Sag Harbor* (2009) and *John Henry Days*, have been interpreted as satires through Trey Ellis' theory of "the New Black Aesthetic" (the NBA). *Sag Harbor* documents a summer in 1985 that the narrator, Benji, and his brother Reggie, both African-American teenagers, spend in the titular region, an enclave of upper middle-class professionals and their families. "According to the world," the narrator declares, "we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses" (57). The novel satirizes racial essentialisms that endure amidst the seemingly more fluid categories of capitalist belonging. Benji embodies this fluidity by choosing "contradiction" over "paradox" as his matrix of self-identification. He is what Ellis would call "a cultural mulatto" because he "embrace[s] the contradiction […] what you call paradox, I call *myself*" (235; 58, emphasis in original). Black nationalism is included in the rubric of NBA satire, and is parodied throughout Whitehead's novel. Ellis celebrates the fact that "NBA artists aren't afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line" (236). Ellis' assessment jibes with Whitehead's representation of the protagonist of his other NBA satire, *John Henry Days*. Howard Rambsy characterizes J. as a "black geek" (228). Through the geek lens(es), one of the targets in *John Henry Days* is the inadequacy of viewing contemporary African-American labour as an incarnation of slavery. The novel's geeking of J. has the NBA effect of "expand[ing] the realm of possibility for how black people are represented in literary fiction" (Rambsy 228).

[84] For example, Rambsy writes that "Whitehead's characters are not overburdened by race matters, such as struggles with overt racism or journeys to come to terms with their cultural heritage" (226). Grassian describes J. as "unconcerned with African American history and folklore" (77).

omission. I have accentuated the theme of labour in Whitehead's two novels, which allegorize an exploitative model of labour based on the theory of human capital. I will conclude this chapter with what has heretofore been missing—specific commentary on Whitehead's "genius grant," which opens up into a theorization of branding that completes the critical portrait of how the "genius grants" transmogrify labour.

Whitehead received his "genius grant" the year after *John Henry Days* was published. When asked how the "genius grant" has "changed [his] life" in a 2008 interview, he called it "an enormous validation"—one which "gave [him] a lot of freedom to work on [his] books without having to make compromises over money" ("Interview" n. pag.). One such "compromise" was the start-up job, since he notes at the outset of his earlier cited essay that he "had just finished writing *The Intuitionist*" ("I Worked" n. pag.). The MacArthur Foundation is an ideal substitute for his former employer, as it does not "crack down on misuse of company supplies," nor apparently expect anything in return ("I Worked"). Whitehead is careful to qualify that the "freedom" proffered is strictly financial. While writing *The Intuitionist*, "the debts had piled up" ("I Worked"). A "genius grant" is undoubtedly "validating," but the deceptively simple framing of the fellowship as a form of debt-relief is indirectly contested in his second novel.[85] Recall how J. articulates the national appeal of the feeling that "someone else is picking up the check" (137). The illusive quality of this debt sovereignty is communicated at the opening of "Part One" of the novel. As J. waits for his plane to board, he sees a "stray receipt" resting on a passenger walkway (10). He covets it for the "found-receipt fraud" it will allow him to perpetrate. Its modest value ($3.95) is nevertheless real for J. on the "expense form" he conjures (11). An important question

[85] A debt-free promise that my next chapter, on David Foster Wallace, more extensively contests.

lingers, one generated when he first notices the receipt "taunt[ing] him, [and] vibrat[ing] furiously": "What does it record?" (9). J. intends his question to be direct, i.e., what purchase does it document? However, more broadly it "records" the fantasy of consumption without cost stretched to the point of compensation without consumption. J. is comforted by the notion that this compensation is assured, or in his words, that "there's always an entity at the top who pays for things" (39). This payment is not guaranteed, though, nor is the source ("someone," "an entity") as anonymous as J. makes it seem. When he checks his messages at one point, his machine delivers a cacophony of accountant and editorial voices, "*Herb in Accounts Payable at Saturn Publishing*," "*Margaret at Legend*," and "*Jane Almond at Hotshot Media*" (233, 234, emphasis in original). The "someones" and the "entities" are clearly announced, as are their demands and dictates. Among these is that J. redress a "*red flag*" on his expense form from one of his trips to Los Angeles, which included items such as a "*three margarita*" lunch (234, emphasis in original). His simple conversion of the wayward receipt into monetary value in the airport is complicated by the appearance of this corporate employee who helps govern expenditures. He is quick to pass the buck, saying "*if it was up to me, but they're really cracking down on that sort of thing here since we got bought, so*" (234, emphasis in original). The caller, *"Mark*," distances himself from his affiliate by withholding its name, and inserting the fabulous ownership clause ("if it was up to me"), but he privileges the bottom line with the imperative, "so," sign-off (234, emphasis in original). J. can fill in the blanks more accurately than he completed his expense form: "so" he has to pay them back. What if J. had followed the new protocol? He would be properly reimbursed, right? Even this straightforward rejoinder to a critique of the compensatory

mechanisms for J.'s creative labour is complicated by an ensuing message, where "*Evelyn*" (again, she significantly does not proclaim any corporate affiliation) informs him of her company's new "*kill fee*" policy, which reduces J.'s pay for the unpublished piece (234, emphasis in original). His expense form chicanery is outweighed by a pay structure constructed with cold calculation and corporate caprice.

The interchangeability of these messages is reinforced by a second, nearly identical message from "*Jane from Hotshot*," who "*can't remember if* [*she*] *called him back*" already (235, emphasis in original). Perhaps one of the merits of the MacArthur fellowship program is that there is no such follow-up, whether impersonal or not. Whitehead will never receive a call from "*x* at the MacArthur Foundation" checking in on the progress of his work or the state of his finances. Of course, these functions are still performed, though more indirectly. The most notable example is *The New York Times*, which since 1980 has published nearly 900 articles that make at least some mention of the "genius grants." The paper has seen "fit to print" several evaluations of the MacArthur's impact. In 1986, Kathleen Teltsch published a retrospective on the inaugural 1981 class, "Years of No-Strings Creativity Ending For First 'Genius' Group." She quotes Derek Walcott's statement that the prospect of his funding expiring has him "feel[ing] like the condemned man in the cell being asked what he wants for his last meal" (n. pag.). Walcott quickly qualifies his hyperbole by adding that "another five years probably would spoil [him]" (n. pag.). Teltsch nevertheless endorses Walcott's prison analogy, pardoning him in the process by characterizing "Mr. Wolcott [*sic*] [a]s one of 21 men and women in the first group selected by the foundation five years ago…now facing readjustment to the real world" (n. pag.). This "real world" is defined

by "the need to earn a living, many of them by teaching"—a need which "the grants liberated them from" (n. pag.). Teltsch predictably recognizes only financial parameters for "a living" here. Moreover, whereas the headline had framed the grants in productive terms ("creativity"), albeit with financial undertones ("*no-strings* creativity"), the focus shifts to a false form of "liberation." While writers like Walcott may also "teach," this job is attractive precisely because it enables them to create *as a living*. "Genius grants" are intended to facilitate such embodiments of cultural production. "Liberation" is thus off the mark. As a member of the 1984 class, performance artist Bill Irwin, articulates it, a "genius grant" has only "increased, not lessened [his] work because the money says, in effect, that you should be at the service of art" (Shepard n. pag.). Although "the money" delivers a symbolic message to Irwin and others, these articles do not hesitate from accounting for how it has been or will be spent. No doubt in direct response to the journalist's question, mathematician Terence Tao (a 2006 MacArthur recipient) told the *New York Times* that "he did not know how he would spend the MacArthur money, though he mentioned the mortgage on the house that he and his wife…bought last year" (Chang n. pag.). Another example of the invocation of the MacArthur's non-discretionary spending policy occurs in Gardiner Harris' 2005 profile of Sidney Wolfe, who was granted his MacArthur in 1990. Near the end of the article, Harris mentions that Wolfe "is an avid piano player. When he won a $350,000 MacArthur 'genius' award in 1990, he spent the money on a piano and 'paying off debts'" (n. pag.). The grantees are never censured for how they allocate their funding, not that such a gesture would accomplish much. What these passages do attempt to accomplish is to humanize the recipients as

people with newfound money to spend on houses and hobbies, like lottery winners (but more deserving).

My "lottery" comparison is not meant to imply that MacArthur's apprizing of immaterial labourers is random.[86] Some recipients are inclined to invoke luck when discussing the moment they first heard news of their grant. Scientist John Henry Holland got his MacArthur call while in the shower, which seemed appropriate to him given that he had "always had good luck in the shower" (Blakeslee n. pag.).[87] Journalists have even taken this luck angle when introducing the fellowship. For example, Claudia Dreifus describes photojournalist Susan Meiselas' "genius grant" as "a fantastic bit of luck [that] came her way" (n. pag.). The Foundation's more conscious aim with the fellowships is captured in Meiselas' own words on winning, which to her "meant she didn't have to be preoccupied with money" (qtd. in Dreifus n. pag.). Such "preoccupations" were clearly obstacles for Meiselas as she goes on to say that "[she] could not have finished this project without the MacArthur Fellowship" (qtd. in Dreifus n. pag.). Meiselas' statement supports the program's pragmatic mission. A 2008 article by Alex Altman in *TIME* magazine does much the same, noting that the Foundation's "formula seems to be working":

> Nearly 800 fellows as young as 18 and as old as 82 have been christened since 1981. Among their feats: slowing the speed of light (optical physicist Lene Hau, 2001), mapping the human genome (geneticist Eric Lander, 1987), penning acclaimed novels (Cormac McCarthy, 1981; the recently deceased David Foster Wallace, 1997), scheming to save our threatened

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[86] Strictly speaking, the lottery is not random either: only those who buy a ticket are eligible to win.
[87] Holland's statement thankfully did not inspire a follow-up question seeking additional evidence.

> fisheries (lobsterman Ted Ames, 2005) and solving Fermat's Last Theorem (mathematician Andrew Wiles, 1997). (n. pag.)

At first glance, given their medium, McCarthy and Wallace can be seen as the outliers on Altman's list. What makes McCarthy and Wallace stand out is precisely the unifying rationale of the list—a justification of the solutions-oriented principle of the program. Yet they fit, alongside Meiselas, Whitehead, and countless other members of the Foundation's "Arts" recipients, when the "problems" are understood to be economic pressures. For Whitehead and Meiselas, the "solution" equals a reprieve from these pressures, which were interfering with their ability to complete their work.

The spectre of financial constraints activates a starving artist cliché that justifies the fellowships as merely a benign form of debt relief. In the last line of Whitehead's essay on his days working for the start-up company, he explains that he quits his job and begins writing the novel only *after* his "debts [are] paid" ("I Worked" n. pag.).[88] Whitehead comically announces the essay's lacuna earlier on—*how* he then went on to actualize his "lousy idea"—with the metaphor of an incomplete cooking recipe: "Now I really had my ingredients together. Except for characters, plot, and sentences, but who cares about that?" (n. pag.). He leaves out the difficult task of discovering these "ingredients," and combining them into a novel, implying that creative labour is akin to free labour. For Marx, it would come as no surprise that creative labour resembles charity in certain structural facets. He understands all capitalist manifestations of labour as examples of credit, as "everywhere the worker allows credit to the capitalist" (*Volume One* 278). Workers credit the capitalist their labour in return for the promise of wages. The "genius grants" appear to invert this dynamic insofar as the Foundation advances the

[88] Sidney Wolfe also aligns creativity ("a piano") and debt in an above-cited statement.

capital, and does not explicitly demand anything in return. As Bill Irwin testifies above, however, the "genius grants" pigeonhole creative labourers into a more permanent position. The anecdote about the Steinway purchase is less innocent if the recipient has pulled a Salinger and ceased publishing. It is thus partial to follow the MacArthur's narrative and focus critical attention on the fact that no creative labour is required in return because it overlooks the more significant category of labour-*power*, a commodity possessed by all of the recipients. What makes labour-power unique, as a commodity, is nicely summed up in Friedrich Engels' 1891 introduction to Marx's *Wage-Labor and Capital*: it is "a value-creating force, the source of value, and, moreover, when properly treated, the source of more value than it possesses itself" (12). Creativity pretends to stand in for labour-power in the MacArthur and creative economy discourse because this valorizing capacity can appear mutually beneficial and independent of exchange. In other words, creativity can easily masquerade in these narratives purely as a use-value for the labourer. There just is an intangible benefit to being creative, so the story goes.

John Henry Days undermines the notion that the creative process itself benefits the labourer through J.'s struggle and necessary failure to grasp what, exactly, he is valorizing (i.e., what he is creating). Use-value cannot be isolated from a system of exchange predicated on a contradiction between the valuation of content and the devaluation of the majority of the creative workforce. The fellowships are an exception to this rule because they invest in a select subset of this workforce while seeming to require nothing material in exchange; however, they fetishize creativity by viewing it as a thing, as capital. As a result, they are symptomatic of the creative/labour valorization contradiction because they assign a material value ($625,000) to creative individuals.

Like (m)any of us, J. would welcome such an advance, without recognizing that it is capital's status as the organizing principle for all social activity which is the source of J.'s alienation.[89] Creative labour becomes more and more removed from the realm of any identifiable necessity, a "change" which the junketeers conceive of as "tactile and insistent. They found themselves in abstract rooms at events of no obvious purpose" (73). When Bernard Bell declares that "Whitehead, disappointingly, neglects to examine adequately either the economic or political impact of industrialization on the lives of ordinary African Americans," he underestimates the impact of the transformation to an information economy which exploits creative labourers (qtd. in Rambsy 227).[90] Such a change makes J. "ordinary" insofar as his exploitation is likewise an effect of the neoliberal transformation of the labourer qua human capital.

Scholarship on *John Henry* has persuasively aligned this "change" with John Henry's man-versus-machine modernity tale. In his 2011 article, Daniel Grausam discusses Whitehead and Philip Roth as "post-postal" authors whose sense of the decline of "historical consciousness" is tied to "a particularly postal vision of print culture that they see as threatened" (626). Grausam's reading of *John Henry Days* presents this threat as identical to the one posed to the industrial labourer by the advent of the mechanized railroad drill. John Henry's victory over the drill is pyrrhic, as he dies after the race. For Grausam, "the novel's implicit argument is that the exact same thing is happening

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[89] For another example of material relations between people, J.'s romantic interactions with Monica the publicist are defined in terms of their work: "life under pop had forced them to find solace wherever they could" (225). Grassian writes that their relationship "mirrors" J.'s job (78); more precisely, it is an *extension* of it—the rhythms of their affair are determined by the p.r. event calendar.

[90] Bell also overlooks the connection between J. and another one of his precursors, the bluesman Moses who is likewise alienated from the product of his labour through the objectifying practices of the record company executive, Goodman (who is anything but). For a rich discussion of the J.-Moses parallels, see Michael New's "'Nothing But a Man': Racial Identity and Musical Production in *John Henry Days*" (2008), pp. 245-52.

again—John Henry, immortalized on a stamp, is immortalized at the very moment when the death knell of postal delivery is already being sounded" (635). Sounding this "death knell" is the emergence and hegemony of the immaterial informational economy in which J. labours. John C. Inscoe makes a similar claim as Grausam in his 2004 article, "Race and Remembrance in West Virginia: John Henry For a Post-Modern Age": "If John Henry was consumed by—indeed a martyr to—the Industrial Revolution, then Sutter can be seen as a casualty of the Digital Age, where he is a mere pawn whose vapid writings only add to the vast stockpile of information doled out to cyberspace consumers who have been swindled into believing it has some worth" (92). Inscoe's interpretation of the novel as a postmodern jeremiad centers on J.'s identification with John Henry, which provides a "linkage between the dilemma of the doomed steel-driver and his own fate" (91). This "parallel dilemma" is of the "man versus machine" variety (92). J. is more agent than "pawn" insofar as his attempt to outpace "the List" through his run of consecutive junkets, whether consciously or unconsciously, reenacts John Henry's fabled race. William Ramsey locates the parallel elsewhere: "A parody of John Henry's heroic manual labour skills, J.'s actions substitute false *receipts* of experiences for original pleasures he never had" (782, emphasis in original). As the turn from mimetic reproduction to empty simulation indicates, Ramsey's article—"An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead" (2007)—draws on the work of Jean Baudrillard.[91] Invoking the theories of Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama, Ramsey equates the "end of history" with the end of stable representations of

[91] It is somewhat perplexing that Ramsey invokes Baudrillard, yet never mentions his theory of advertising and co-option. A passage such as the following seems tailor-made for a Baudrillardian reading of *John Henry Days*: "All original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed in advertising because it has no depths, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 87).

the past. He suggests that what triumphs in this destabilized discursive arrangement is a "bland, indistinguishable" everyplace that "absorbs" the South as well as "the rest of the US" (783). According to Ramsey, John Henry is not immune from this absorption; like J., he is a "postmodern characterization, […] an external surface lacking essence and depth" (782). Ramsey's position differs from Grausam and Inscoe's because he argues that J. is actually a repetition *without* an original; nevertheless, his avowal that Whitehead depicts "all history [a]s narrative" (784) relies on the existence of a precedent. In other words, Ramsey requires "an actual America" as much as an actual John Henry in order to establish the critical claim that "the end of history" is an effect of mass (re)production (782).[92]

What these three historicist accounts of the novel take for granted is the nature of the conflict between man and machine. Read through J.'s working life, the race between John Henry and the drill assumes its proper dimensions—not as a contest that either side can win, but as a moment subjoined to the machine of capital. "It is not individuals who are set free by free competition," writes Marx in the *Grundrisse*; "it is, rather, capital which is set free" (650). The "lists" upon which each character depends to subsist symbolize the disciplinary function of this "freed" capital. J.'s junkets are determined by the electronic "List," while the wages of John Henry and his coworkers are fixed on a ledger, a "list determined by the mind of the assistant paymaster" (145). The link between J. and John Henry's labour can thus be generalized: material and immaterial labour alike are subject to a process that breeds indifference to the human costs of technological progress. John Henry pays with his life, J., his time. The latter's waking hours are entirely

[92] Dale Peck also argues for a parallel between J. and John Henry in his reading of the ending. He relates the ambiguity of the ending "to the fact that the existence of an actual John Henry remains unproven; thus the fate of J., our latter-day John Henry, must be similarly shrouded" (100).

occupied by work. With the labour process objectified in the virtual realm of thought itself, there is no such thing as free time. He reads about how John Henry's labour was harnessed while listening to messages from those who harness his own. Both are rendered indistinct from their labour. The narrative troubles any absolute connection between J. and John Henry by ultimately withholding J.'s given name. When he tells it to Pamela in the concluding chapter, this detail is not shared with the reader. Something eludes the critical desire to represent the material and immaterial labourer as identical. The concluding chapter is no less cryptic concerning J.'s future plans. He deliberates about whether he will attend the John Henry Days event and continue his record chase or take an earlier flight to New York with Pamela. Regarding the record, he reflects that "he has been at it a long time, he has put a lot of labor into advancing the unbroken line of events. Each day he makes progress and goes deeper in and the line is advanced" (388). "The line" is not a limit, but a measure of his labour. Even if he is "no longer […] the man going for the record," this labour will not fundamentally change (388). The ambiguity accelerates as "he stands there with the sun on his face deciding, as if choices are possible" (389). Does J. have *no* choice? Or, is the right decision so apparent as to negate the need to choose? Perhaps it is that J.'s only choice is *not* to choose; subtracting whatever knowledge he has gained of John Henry from a representational economy shaped by content imperatives is a way of resisting market logic, just as the novel resists the Hollywood ending.[93]

The nomenclature consultant in *Apex* operates on the surface of market logic. His names are as arbitrary as they are permanent. Although he can appreciate this quality

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[93] In suggesting that J. learns something about John Henry, I am disputing Grassian's claim that J. "is unconcerned with African American history and folklore" (77).

about them, he is initially less self-conscious than J. about his work as a cultural producer. Indeed, he sees his job as a social necessity, even while he increasingly questions the grammar of the business culture in which his work is tied up. One example of this contradiction happens when the consultant recalls his experience at a corporate retreat in the woods. He discusses "Nomenclature 101," which dictates that "*Nature* is a strong brand name" (153, emphasis in original). "*Natural*" is a selling point, not a state of being (153, emphasis in original). The consultant continues, "natural selection was market forces. In business, in the woods: what is necessary to the world will last" (153). Whitehead juxtaposes this moment of market evangelism with the consultant's conscious alienation from the "natural" business environment. On a shuttle bus back from a corporate event designed to win his assent for the most popular town name, *New Prospera*, he characterizes the vocabulary of the event's speaker as "strange, odd souvenirs, tiny fragments that had been chipped off an alien business meteorite. This was language from outer space" (154). He cannot see the forest for the trees (the shower for the meteor), as he believes his labour of naming to be irreducible to the "new economy" clatter. The next astrological allusion confirms this belief, as he imagines names "imprisoned as *products*…There were too many stars in the sky to name them all. They were bright and keen, but had to make do with letters and numbers…until they earned their names" (182-83). Notice how he implies that brand names, associated as they are with "products," cannot be "earned." There is something unnatural about such appellations. In his mysticism, is the consultant any more intelligible than the business discourse from which he wants his work to be distinct? What is in a name? The answer may be multiple.

The MacArthur "genius grants" affirm that names cannot so easily be liberated, once imprisoned. Though magazine and newspaper articles occasionally mention the Foundation's well-known disavowal of the nickname, they more often than not attribute the association to an indefinite addresser with phrases such as "so-called," "commonly known as," and "frequently referred to as." "Genius grant" is thus doubly a brand—a permanent identifying mark made *on* the Foundation and a product delivered using the magic of name-association. To locate the fellowship in publication and popular print circles, critics analyze the "genius grant" as a genius *prize*. These critics of the "genius grant," and on prize culture more generally, adopt a similarly conflicted attitude towards their object of study as the consultant does towards the subject of his labour, names. This attitude is encapsulated by something that Gore Vidal reportedly wrote: "In America, there are more literary prizes than there are writers" (qtd. in English, "Winning" 109). Vidal's sneering sentiment acts as if his sophisticated charge, not to mention his authority, is apart from the literary business from which he obtains, through immersion in and derision of, a significant part of his prestige. With critical investigations of awards culture, the stress is squarely on the critical. Vidal's remark could be taken as the motto of the ironic posture adopted in academic appraisals of literary awards, and usually incorporated in their media coverage, where significant attention is devoted to their excesses and essential emptiness, with accompanying outcries about unjust winners or stances of indifference. Although they pretend to undermine the spectacle, these conflicting, often paradoxical, attitudes about literary awards only enlarge it. Critics of literary awards play at being above and beyond the stakes of a game in which they have a starring role, investing the requisite interest to transform just another happening into an

Event, worthy of the popular gaze.[94] Genius is the aspect of the fellowships that encourages and reinforces reading them as literary prizes. A tantalizing concept, genius possesses an abundance of the "journalistic capital" that James F. English describes as a defining element of prizes today ("Winning" 115). Journalistic capital, comprised of "visibility, celebrity, scandal," legitimates, while often enhancing, the combined symbolic, cultural, and economic capital of the prize ("Winning" 123). Their connection with genius ensures the fellowships' visibility in Hollywood films, headlines, and other popular media because the connection transforms them from a rather banal bureaucratic instance, the grant, into an engine for driving popular interest, discussion, and debate. The story goes something like this: scandals sell as objects of "indignant commentary," wherein commentators accrue cultural capital by rewarding the habitual skepticism of their readers, condescending to the very thing that affirms their authority as commentators and (re)producing their beliefs; meanwhile, the MacArthur is symbolically accredited as an object worthy of the investment of journalistic capital, which is quickly converted into cultural capital, as well as legitimated as an allocation of economic capital. The capital gains made in treating the MacArthur as a literary prize are multiple. For commentators like Vidal and academics like myself, as Pierre Bourdieu recognized long ago, "the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly […] of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers; […] it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products" ("The Field of Cultural Production" 42).

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[94] As I mentioned near the beginning of my introductory chapter, English has characterized this as a game where everyone loses. English delivers his tonic message to literary critics like himself whom he warns "cannot get very far toward understanding what prizes are and how they work, let alone toward challenging the material and symbolic bases of their efficacy, simply by joining with the long-dominant tendency to abuse them." The cynical temptation of Vidal's dismissal must be resisted in favour of thinking through the commodification process highlighted by, but not limited to, literary awards—a process in which literary critics and cultural consumers alike are involved.

The fellowships model and manufacture disbelief in their connection with genius as a means of securing belief in its institutional canon and the overly ambitious conception of creativity which this canon is implied to represent.

Fittingly, an awards ceremony begins to reveal to the consultant his delusion of holding names separate from their consumerist bearers. For his work on the Apex account, the consultant garners two "Identity Awards" nominations, for "Best ReImagining and Best Name" (138). He also attributes "his hard work on numerous company accounts" to a third nomination, "Best Identity Firm" for the company (138). His personal satisfaction is immediately monetized, as he views the potential accolades in terms of the "two subclauses in his contract [which] had just kicked in" (138). This gratification, though, is quickly deferred: "come bonus time he'd be a happy man," he thinks (138). In the meantime, he stubs his toe and his elation gives way to a vague but persistent feeling that he is not himself, "fundamentally—*off*" (161, emphasis in original). At the ceremony, he feels alienated from his coworkers, rivals, and Bridget, his date. His gift of conjuring names for products becomes more isolating when he sees pithy words adjudging each attendee's character, such as "CRIMINAL," "VICTIM," and "PEDERAST" (171). He thinks that "if everyone everywhere wore their true names for everyone to see" the world would be radically transformed; however, he draws no real conclusions from the ubiquity of lying, and flees the ceremony to the imagined sound of his name, "FUGITIVE" (171). His problem is that he views things dichotomously, *either* "everywhere" the brutal truth about "everyone" *or* people are taught "how to lie with their very first breath" (170). The excluded middle is the terrain on which he performs as a nomenclature consultant, cloaking lies in trusted names. His apparent autonomy in this

naming process is inadequate compensation; despite being among the best and brightest in his field, he is still a "*wage* earn[er]" (58, emphasis added). In other words, he is still positioned precariously.[95] This positioning leaves him especially vulnerable because, as Daniel Grassian asserts, "what the protagonist does not consider is that he is himself a tool of major corporations, and the names he comes up with ultimately serve them and them only in selling merchandise and making them rich in the process" (83). The truth of the marketing industry is ultimately concealed in the myth of competition.

Lev Grossman opens his otherwise dismissive review of *Apex* with the remark that "Colson Whitehead is, along with Jhumpa Lahiri, almost certainly the most critically adored American novelist under 40" (n. pag.). Grossman's gloss on Whitehead illustrates that this truth/myth dialectic applies to his literary prestige as well. While Pascale Casanova characterizes the literary world as driven by competition, Whitehead's ascendance has been at least partially attributed to a stacked deck.[96] *Apex*'s publication was instantly greeted by "more than thirty newspaper and magazine […] reviews" (Rambsy 235). Certainly Whitehead's agent, Nicole Aragi, is an influential figure in the New York literary scene.[97] As Rambsy points out, "the appearance of so many reviews at the time of the novel's publication revealed that Whitehead's publisher was actively involved in orchestrating the reception of his fourth book by distributing advance-copies

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[95] As Marx figuratively renders the vicious circle of wage labour: "If the silk-worm's object in spinning were to prolong its existence as caterpillar, it would be a perfect example of a wage-worker" (*Wage-Labor and Capital* 19).

[96] In her *The World Republic of Letters* (1999), Casanova argues that antagonism was part of world literature from the outset: "Its history is one of incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself—an endless succession of literary manifestos, movements, assaults, and revolutions. These rivalries are what have created world literature" (12). This conflict has an international dimension since literatures "are constituted through literary rivalries, which are always denied, and struggles, which are always international" (36).

[97] Aragi was included on *New York Magazine*'s 2006 catalogue of "influentials" (qtd. in Rambsy 238, fn 9). She is also the agent of 2012 MacArthur recipient Junot Díaz.

and arranging publicity materials" (235). Such efforts on the part of agents and publishers might be the norm in today's crowded literary marketplace. And it would be an egg-before-the-chicken argument to credit Aragi too generously for Whitehead's success. If anything, her interest in his work is another sign of its merit. She does not function the same as the shadowy networks of power that the nomenclature consultant must negotiate in his attempt to name the town. However, I agree with Grossman's assessment that *Apex* has some serious flaws. It is neither as structurally rich nor ambitious as his first two novels.[98] Grossman's headline attributes this comparative paucity to "the third-novel curse." He takes issue with the banality of *Apex*'s postmodern pose:

> The strong, antiseptic, anesthetic odor of postmodernism clings to *Apex Hides the Hurt*, a sense that you're watching the shadow play of symbols of things and not the things themselves. There are things around that hurt—vacant late-capitalist follies, personal disillusionment, buried historical crimes. But Whitehead is unable or unwilling to reveal them. (n. pag.)

The novel *is* perhaps too clever for its own good, content to revel in a nomenclature "premise" that Grossman aptly describes as "slim" (n. pag.).[99]

Grossman's evaluative criticism misses the mark, however, insofar as it downplays the novel's insights into how the economy functions from the perspective of creative labour. It is not that the novel is "unable or unwilling to reveal" its critique, but

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[98] *Apex* is far more synchronic than *The Intuitionist* or *John Henry Days*, limiting itself to flashbacks that are centered entirely on the protagonist.

[99] Interestingly, Grossman came to regret his assessment of *Apex*: "'Writing a nasty review is enjoyable, but only in a nasty way,' said Lev Grossman, a senior writer and book critic for *Time Magazine*. 'Afterward, you dislike yourself.' After writing that Colson Whitehead's "Apex Hides the Hurt" was 'light, by turns over and underwritten' in 2006, Mr. Grossman bumped into Mr. Whitehead. 'I said, 'I'm sorry about that review,' Mr. Grossman said. 'He seemed grateful for my apology'" (Shapiro n. pag.).

rather that it does so subtly. The *economy* of Whitehead's style "reveals" the lack of linguistic distance between the nomenclature assistant and the market-driven world that inhabits his psyche. Such an approach avoids the epistemological trap set by the popularity of a work like Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000), wherein exposing immanent injustice forecloses systematic alternatives. Klein is attentive to this danger, observing that "the question of how best to 'market' an antimarketing movement is a uniquely thorny dilemma" (296). *Apex* illustrates that less overt expositions have the anti-capitalist effect of challenging the permanence of the problems invoked. One example of its modest denotation/immodest connotation is the interaction between the consultant and the female housekeeper at his hotel. Throughout the novel they engage in a juvenile standoff, as she grows increasingly agitated at his refusal to let her make up his room. Their conflict is rooted in labour: the housekeeper is compelled to fulfill her tasks, while the consultant wants his room to be entirely his own. In spite of the transience that comes with his job, "he had re-created the chaos of his rooms back home" (191). He is a renter who desires ownership. The housekeeper eventually prevails, against his will, which has the effect of "reset[ting]" this "chaos" to an impersonal order (191). The consultant is conscious of the fact that their disagreement is a protector, if not a product, of an even larger order:

> The housekeeper was turning out to be a convenient lightning rod, drawing off excess hostility and resentment. He couldn't take it out on his clients; that would be unprofessional. Masterstroke here was to use her as she was using him: as scapegoat and punching bag for unruly stuff best undirected, for now, at the true targets. (102)

The consultant adheres to an image of professionalism that contradicts the common ground he establishes with the housekeeper. It is not their professionalism that unites them, but rather the shared "targets"—the elites who utilize the affective impermanence and dutifulness of their labour force so as to divide them against one another. This division might be as temporary as the consultant's misrecognition here, or so the "for now" signifies. But for now, the novel shows, these labourers seek security in the homogenized consumer experiences offered by companies like Admiral Java and Outfit Outlet (read: Starbucks and The Gap).

An Outfit Outlet is opening up in Winthrop, a manifestation of Lucky Aberdeen's mantra of "prosperity." When the consultant encounters an Outfit Outlet employee named (Not) Skip, he encounters an embodiment of the "American Middle Class," replete with "a life of few prospects, and fewer misgivings about the lack of said prospects" (91). The (Not) Skip name that the consultant attributes to him announces a strictly superficial denial of the employee's uniformity. This status (quo) is reinforced in *John Henry Days* through phenomenon like the "new media," whose function as, in J.'s words, "welfare for the middle class" is analogous to that of the Outfit Outlet or Aberdeen Software (19). They are sources of comfort, as well as income, for individuals like (Not) Skip, J., and the consultant, for whom upward mobility is as plausible as human flight. The consultant's trip to Admiral Java grounds the potentially alienating otherness of Winthrop in a "familiar" corporate "face" (37). As he walks through the shop's front door, he admits that "it was not the first time he had been saved by the recognizable logo of an international food franchise, its emanations and intimacies" (37). The "rapacious philosophy of the multinational" bubbles below the surface of this consumerist haven

(39). No Communist Manifesto need apply, as the consultant "thanked God for the minimum wage"; for, "who knew what kind of havoc the restless servants of Admiral Java might unleash upon the world if they cast off their yokes" (37-38). The consultant's awareness of which faction is most severely disciplined by the profit imperative (the employees) is no match for his momentary bottom line—a good cup of joe. Still, the juxtaposition of a labour uprising and his caffeine fix makes the latter all the more ludicrous, especially when the structuring third term—the "rapacious philosophy of the multinational"—irrupts in the subsequent passage.

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The two novels that I have analyzed in this chapter presage broader irruptions to the creative economy. Whitehead's aesthetic interventions are significant because at first glance the narrative of this economy as adopted by the MacArthur Foundation looks innocent enough. Recipients are handsomely remunerated for their cognitive labour, and the value extracted by the Foundation is pure p.r. However, the abuses for which the terms "creativity" and "genius" stand in are legion. Labour is never free under capitalism; nor is the labourer, whether "creative" or otherwise. My next chapter on debt more closely examines the costs of this model for David Foster Wallace—an author absorbed into a commercial delivery system whose celebritizing mechanisms he could brilliantly satirize, but not circumvent. The costs have been more widely dispersed in this chapter, encompassing creative labourers who are not necessarily artists, although their productivity mandates and industry's magnates might have them identify as such. With creative capacity democratized, and recognition occasionally taking the form of lucrative

iterations like the "genius grants," the darker truth about capitalist totality is concealed. Warren Buffett arrogantly announces this truth when he states, "sure there is class war, and it is my class, the rich, who are making it and we are winning" (qtd. in Harvey 53). The idea of human capital has been a malignant weapon, helping to ensure that the majority of people have less and less time when they are not preoccupied with work.[100]

[100] If one of the main "cultural contradictions of capitalism" for Daniel Bell was that "on the one hand, the business corporation wants an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification—to be, in the crude sense, an organization man" while simultaneously "promot[ing] pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go," today the distinction is obsolete (70-71). Work is leisure; in leisure lurks work.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOXIC CELEBRITY, OR, OBLIGING DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S GENIUS

> Huge amounts of money and fame deform artists, deform art—we have all seen this happen many times, to many different musicians and actors who "hit it big"—and the fact that there is no real money or fame in serious culture here helps keep these vocations purer, cleaner. At least that's one way to see the situation. In another respect, of course, it's sad and scary.
>
> —David Foster Wallace (2005)

Of all the books that once belonged to David Foster Wallace and are now housed in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, one of the most heavily annotated is Linda Schierse Leonard's *Witness to the Fire: Creativity and the Veil of Addiction* (1989). Wallace claimed ownership by writing "D. Wallace, Pop-Buyer" on one of the front pages (qtd. in Schwartzburg 254). The book earns Wallace's confessional self-image, the "pop-buyer," from the outset. It documents Leonard's creative process and struggle with addiction with New Age-inflected gravitas. "The most painful years of my life," she writes, "were also the most creative years" (xiii). One need not revisit the painful topic of Wallace's suicide and the readymade tortured artist narrative that has inflected popular discussions of his work ever since in order to contest such a blunt link between depression and productivity. Wallace did not get the chance at a retrospective; nor did he publish another novel during his lifetime after *Infinite Jest* (1996).[101] In the ensuing paragraph of her "Preface," Leonard locates "the turning point of [her] addiction" very

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[101] *The Pale King* (2011), unfinished, enters a canon of recently published posthumous texts whose merits are overshadowed by debates about the rights of literary executors. Vladimir Nabokov's *The Original of Laura* (2009) and Ralph Ellison's *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010) were also released around this time. For a sense of how these debates are framed in the corporate media, see "Ghost Writers" by Alexandra Alter (2009).

precisely and predictably "in a detox ward" (xiii). As someone who also went through rehab for drug and alcohol addiction, Wallace is deliberate in his choice of toxicity as a favourite trope for describing the experience of celebrity. He often employs the term in interviews around the time of *Infinite Jest*'s publication in order to adopt the perspective of the unwilling participant, perhaps even "witness" in Leonard's terms, to the hype surrounding the novel. A representative example is from a 1996 article in the *Boston Phoenix*, "David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion That His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense." He tells the journalist, Anne Marie Donahue, that "the less I'm being watched the more I can watch, and the better it is for me and for my work […] If people really want to know what I ate for lunch, I guess that's okay. But it's kind of toxic" (70). Wallace is more forceful about the destructive impact of media attention when he includes others in the frame. As he comments to David Lipsky,

> I think *Time* and *Newsweek* are fairly inescapable. So I think [my students] kinda know. I'm sort of so nasty when they start talking about that stuff in class that I think I've scared them into just leaving it alone. *Why*? [asks Lipsky] Because it's toxic to them and it's toxic to me. (*Although* 3, emphasis in original)

Wallace is acutely aware that novelists have to play along and that attention can have positive implications for their literary production(s). Indeed, toxicity is the extreme of a continuum of "expectations for myself" which he lays out for Lipsky (also a novelist) towards the end of their conversation: "Up to a certain point, the[se expectations] can be motivating, and inspiring, and can be kind of a flame thrower held to our ass, get us

moving. And past that point they're toxic and paralyzing" (*Although* 299). In this chapter, I show how and why his MacArthur "genius grant" helped push Wallace "past the point."

I focus on Wallace's essays and fictions from his middle period that appear before and after his "genius grant," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), *Infinite Jest* (1996), and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Reading these works alongside biographical material, I argue that the "genius grants" constitute a debt. This debt drives celebrity and becomes conspicuous through it. My previous chapter, on the co-implication of dematerialized labour and the "genius grants," exposed the driving contradiction between the relative individual autonomy conceded through the theory of human capital and the impersonal priorities of capital appreciation. Whitehead's two novels engage with the big lie that organizes the creative economy, i.e., that fulfilling, non-exploitative work is possible under capitalism. Here I address another major effect of the fiction of human capital: the mutation of debt from a byproduct of economic exchange to a toxic environment that structures every social activity and relationship. Debt is a response to the threat of individual autonomy embedded in the theory of human capital, notwithstanding how disingenuous this promise of autonomy is in actual practice.[102] The phenomenon of celebrity that I investigate in this chapter may seem like strange terrain on which to ground my theoretical conclusion that debt describes a toxic environment that has been reshaped to meet the needs of neoliberal governance; after all, celebrities and "genius grant" recipients embody the privilege of a social mobility

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[102] From a Marxist perspective, the expansion of personal debt within neoliberalism is seen as a response to the systemic wage repression that is supposed to stem the falling rate of profit. As David Harvey elaborates in *The Enigma of Capital* (2010), "[t]he gap between what labour was earning and what it could spend was covered by the rise of the credit card industry and increasing indebtedness. In the US in 1980 the average household owed around $40,000 (in constant dollars) but now it's about $130,000 for every household, including mortgages. Household debt sky-rocketed, but this required that financial institutions both support and promote the debts of working people whose earnings were not increasing" (17).

premised on a recognition that seems far removed from the topic of economic debt. Nevertheless, since my argument is that debt constitutes an environment in which neoliberal governance operates, celebrities and "genius grant" recipients can be considered conspicuous examples of subjects governed by toxic debt. By examining the intersection between Wallace's stated concerns about the negative consequences of contemporary literary celebrity and the fall-out from his "genius grant," I develop a critical reading of the MacArthur Foundation as a *rentier*, assessing debts.

4.1 Infinite Debts

Contemporary literary production does not necessarily have to be conceived of as a debt. When assessing the asymmetries built into the "genius grants," the popular alternative is to map them as gifts. For Wallace, the idea that artistic exchange operates in a gift economy was powerful. He offered an extravagant blurb to the 25th anniversary edition of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (2007), commending its ability to answer "questions of what real art does and doesn't have to do with money, spirituality, ego, love, ugliness, sales, politics, morality, marketing, and whatever you call 'value'" (n. pag.). In his "Afterword" to that edition, Hyde classifies his book as "a 'prophetic essay," whose purpose was to investigate "the disconnect between the practice of art and common forms of earning a living" (369). He acknowledges that art circulates in a "market economy," but argues that while "a work of art can survive without market, […] where there is no gift there is no art" (xvi). Tracing the theory of artistic labour *qua* gift-giving to Marcel Mauss' "Essai sur le don" (1924), Hyde individualizes the "disconnect" between culture and commerce. Neither Hyde nor

Mauss believe that the disjunction between the fact and the price of a work of art means that gifts are unfettered. However, whereas Mauss posits that "it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other," Hyde simplifies the social field (5). Mauss' system of "exchange and contract" gives way to "an economy of the creative spirit" that emphasizes "the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture" (Hyde xxii). For both theorists, reciprocity is paramount in the movement of cultural commodities. Wallace would be sympathetic to the audience-oriented nature of gift exchange, particularly in light of the goal he outlines to Larry McCaffery about "mak[ing] the writing more generous and less ego-driven" (51).

What happens to this exchange, though, if the initial offering is not only unbidden, but also cannot be recompensed? The result is debt, which functions differently than its positive cognate, the gift. Debt is the consequence of any gift exchange, but in the case of the "genius grants," debt becomes the prime mover. Although Wallace generates the gifts that garner the grant, the fellowship attaches to him, thus locating his past, present, and future cultural transactions in a debt economy. More ominously, the debt can never be redeemed. When Wallace was struggling to advance with *The Pale King* at the close of 2001, Mark Costello, a close friend and fellow author, contacted him. In response to Wallace's complaints about his writing progress, Costello told him, "'Dave, you're a genius.' 'Meaning people aren't going to forget about you. You're not going to end up in a Wendy's.' He said, 'All that makes me think is that I've fooled you'" (qtd. in Lipsky, "Lost Years" 177). Setting aside Wallace's self-deprecation, by interpellating

Wallace as a "genius," Costello (privately) and the MacArthur Foundation (publicly) ensure a default on this overloaded term.

The state of indebtedness is not peculiar to Wallace. Every "genius grant" recipient is (at least partially) subsidized by the Foundation. The conditions of the debt, like the selection process that initiates it, are mysterious enough that they cannot be challenged. An explicit reference to the operation of economic debt demonstrates this point. Richard Dienst declares that "the functioning of any financial debt is grounded in its claim on some other source of value" (58). The "value" of "genius" (or even "creativity," the Foundation's preferred designation) is sufficiently broad so as to encapsulate the recipient's entire output. Since the Foundation claims to require nothing in return, the debt is "effectively *infinite*—an impossible demand that continues to control people without any prospect of release" (Dienst 58, emphasis in original). Maurizio Lazzarato's *The Making of the Indebted Man* (2011) makes the more extreme claim that debt is a *universal* (in)equivalent. "Everyone is a 'debtor,' he announces, "accountable to and guilty before capital" (7). More modestly, the pieties about "responsible debt" that accompany the latest flare-up of the Eurozone fiscal crisis or the vitriol about the role of "low-income borrowers" in creating the 2007 U.S. Housing Bubble illustrate that debt dominates the agenda when political and financial elites "account" for crises and deny their "guilt" about the structural causes from which they otherwise benefit. So Christian Marazzi does not exaggerate in his "Afterword" to *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (2011), when he writes:

> By now, finance permeates from the beginning to the end the circulation of capital. Every productive act and every act of consumption is directly or

> indirectly tied to finance. Debt-credit relationships define the production and exchange of goods according to a *speculative logic*, transforming, that is, the use value of goods (theoretically all produced or to-be-produced goods) in veritable potential financial assets that generate surplus value. (107, emphasis in original)

How does the expansion of the debt economy affect cultural producers? It means that even supposedly "string-free" awards like the "genius grants" bestow a debt on their bearers.

The MacArthur Foundation can dispense this debt because of its status as a *rentier*, which Bruce Robbins characterizes as "part of the possessing class [that] […] can and, almost without knowing it, does make other people work for [it]" (908). The structure is more insidious than Hyde's portrait of modern-day patronage can capture. Expressing nostalgia for direct, one-to-one encounters between artists and their audience, Hyde insulates authors from the financial economy in his discussion of artist-patron dynamics. "[I]t is the patron who has entered the market and converted its wealth to gifts," Hyde claims. Given the layers of cultural mediation that literally cover many texts,[103] Hyde's sense that a "patron turns [the] wealth [accumulated in a market economy] into a gift to feed the gifted" is remarkably quaint (360). Moreover, as David Harvey demonstrates in "The Art of Rent" (2001), the "special" nature of cultural products such as the "genius grants" are inseparable from the capitalist dynamic of monopoly rents (394). The price of the rent is determined by the space they secure and/or

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[103] For example, my copy of *Brief Interviews* notes on the cover that it is "Now a Major Motion Picture." Among the many disappointments of John Krasinski's adaptation of *Brief Interviews* (2009) is its (misogynistic) insinuation that the female interviewer pursues her research in response to the personal trauma of (as the tired formula dictates) a break-up of her own.

"the uniqueness" of the product they peddle (395). The value of the "genius grants" is in their purported singularity, as indexed by price ($625,000). Keti Chukrov credits Žižek with recognizing that "the wealth of monopolies like Microsoft or Nasdaq derives not so much from their sales profits, but mainly from the fact that they are acting in the name of a universal, nearly Enlightenment-style standard of 'general intellect'" (96). The MacArthur Foundation can be added to this list—as a monopoly power, it "rents" its affiliation out on a massive scale.

The Foundation's control is metaphoric, given the immaterial quality of the debts, but no less real. If the *rentier*-debtor relationship appears to be too restricted to capture the Foundation's activity, it is due to the alleged neoliberal "pro[of] that the multiplication of profits will ultimately be brought about through the spontaneous synthesis of egoisms over the whole surface of the globe" (Foucault 301). Whether the Foundation "knows it" creates debtors or not seems quaint and irrelevant when juxtaposed with the "spontaneous synthesis of egoisms" that the market apparently activates. Yet this notion fetishizes the bonds that form on the market, decontextualizing their nature. Avowing a belief in "the truth of prices," neoliberalism overlooks what these "prices" often conceal (Foucault 30). "Over the whole surface of the globe," to borrow Foucault's paraphrase, debt proliferates. Debt has become such a ubiquitous financial instrument that "we [have] […] enter[ed] the domain of obscenity: when a credit is accorded, the debtor is not even expected to return it—debt is directly treated as a means of control and domination" (Žižek, *Trouble* 45). Žižek credits this conclusion to Lazzarato's arguments about "indebted man," defined as one "who will never finish

paying his debts" (77).[104] Wallace can be read in these terms, based on the MacArthur Foundation's status as *rentier*. The view attributed to him in my epigraph, "the fact that there is no real money or fame in serious culture […] helps keep these vocations purer, cleaner," discounts the "deformations" inherent in the *rentier*-debtor arrangement of the "genius grants" (Jacob 153). The Foundation enjoys a steady, lucrative income from the investments made with John MacArthur's initial bequest.[105] As a *rentier*, it "does not depend on income from work that [it] actually performs" (Robbins 907). It depends, rather, on the work of its debtors, like Wallace.[106] Although the "genius grants" purport to be a gift, their celebritizing impact creates debtors.

4.2 Supposing Celebrity

When Wallace received his fellowship in 1997, *Infinite Jest* had not even gone to paperback yet. The shoe seemed to fit. Not only was he tailor-made for the "tortured genius" branding because of his battles with substance abuse and depression, but the novel was touted as "the biggest literary event of [1996]" in Little, Brown's advanced marketing campaign (qtd. in Max 211). This campaign involved mailing out rounds of postcards to reviewers and other members of the publishing world which included enthusiastic blurbs about Wallace and his two previous publications (*The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair)*. Its genius lay in reinforcing the 1,079-page novel as

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[104] Mark Fisher makes a similar claim in *Capitalist Realism* (2009): "If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict" (25).
[105] For the financial year ending 2013, "MacArthur's assets totaled $6.3 billion. The Foundation's investment portfolio had a return of 10.77 percent in 2013 net of investment management costs" (*MacArthur* n. pag.).
[106] In the second edition of his *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (2012), Stephen J. Burn notes a "trend" of "locat[ing] autobiographical [*sic*] traces in [Wallace's] fiction" (106, fn 7). I do not limit myself to these "traces," but develop from them a more outer-oriented critique of debt, latent in Wallace's aesthetic.

a challenge. In the words of Wallace biographer D.T. Max, "Little, Brown realized that the obstacle could be made the point. To read *Infinite Jest* was to accept a dare" (211). As Max describes it, Wallace was anxious about the prepackaging of himself and his novel as specimens of difficult genius. He wrote a pleading letter to his editor, Michael Pietsch. "'Masterpiece'? I'm 33 years old; I don't have a 'masterpiece,'" Wallace protests. "'The literary event of '96?' *What if it isn't? What if nobody buys it?*" (qtd. in Max 211-212, emphasis in original). Wallace's doubts proved to be ill-founded. The fervor of reviewers reached its pitch when Walter Kirn declared that *Infinite Jest* signaled, "next year's book awards have been decided […] It's as though Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL or Wittgenstein had gone on 'Jeopardy!'" (54). But Bunyan would be cut in training camp and Wittgenstein was no match for the returning champion, as *Infinite Jest* was not even nominated for the National Book Award, let alone the Pulitzer.[107] Although the "genius grant" is the closest thing to a literary prize that Wallace received for his most famous novel,[108] his status as a generational icon was nevertheless secure. Celebrity was further conferred when his photograph appeared in *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, and *TIME*, with the latter including *Infinite Jest* on a list of "The Best Books of 1996" ("The Best" n. pag.).[109] Wallace was a guest on *The Charlie Rose Show* in March 1997, where the conversation largely focused on his burgeoning career as an essayist. On the strength of a piece that he published in *Harper's* weeks before *Infinite Jest*, "Shipping Out," Wallace released a

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[107] *Pale King* was also in the conversation for a Pulitzer, but the committee controversially decided not to award one in 2012. For more on the decision, see Michael Cunningham's two-part piece in *The New Yorker*, "Letter From the Pulitzer Fiction Jury: What Really Happened This Year" and "Letter From the Pulitzer Fiction Jury, Part II: How to Define Greatness?" (2012).

[108] Wallace won two conventional literary prizes: the Whiting Writers' Award (1987) and the Aga Khan Prize for Fiction. Zadie Smith is thus mistaken when she claims that the sixth "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" installment "won Wallace his sole literary prize: the Aga Khan Prize for Fiction from *The Paris Review*" (548, fn 27).

[109] In 2005, *TIME* critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo would anoint *Infinite Jest* one of the 100 best English-language novels published since the magazine's founding in 1923 (Grossman, "All" n. pag.).

volume of essays the following year, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997). "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," the revised title of his *Harper's* contribution, offers a satirical first-person account of Wallace's week on a cruise ship. If *Infinite Jest* made a name for Wallace, the cruise ship essay provided human depth. Wallace was a natural at participatory journalism: enough the aw-shucks Midwestern everyman to establish common ground with his audience, and brilliantly attuned to the odd grammar and rhythms of everyday life. I bring up his non-fiction persona because it illustrates that he was more active in the celebritization process than he let on in interviews. During the final official one he ever gave, he refers to the *Infinite Jest* marketing campaign as "the Buzz plan" (Farley 160). To a degree, Wallace was an agent in the "plan." And it worked.[110]

Wallace's authorial celebrity is hardly novel, as anyone possessing a passing familiarity with Romantic literature can attest. When anonymous publication ceased to be the default mode, the names and personality traits of individual authors assumed exchange-value. David Marshall cites a conference paper by Tom Mole, which tables two

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[110] Wallace has been the subject of increasing academic attention; the wave of memorials in the aftermath of his suicide has given way to a glut of scholarship on Wallace. Since 2010, there have been three essay collections published on Wallace's work (*Consider David Foster Wallace* [SSMG, 2010], *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* [U of Iowa P, 2012], and *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* [Salem UP, 2015]) complementing a host of Wallace panels at conferences in the United States and Europe. For fans, there is The Howling Fantods site—founded in March of 1997 and curated by Nick Maniatis—an active community of Wallace readers and ever-growing amalgam of online material. Such is the current level of critical saturation about an author who, after all, only published three novels, three short story collections, and three essay volumes, that one cannot help but evince a Wallacian self-consciousness about what can be added to the conversation. Kelly does not abate this self-consciousness when he identifies a habitual starting point for discussions of Wallace's work as "the essay-interview nexus" ("Death" n. pag.). In particular, critics favour two 1993 texts from this "nexus," Wallace's essay on the relationship between television and postmodern style ("E Unibus Pluram") as well as Wallace's long interview with McCaffery in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. These have been fantastic resources for defining Wallace's signature metafiction, whose moral compass is bounded by poles of earnestness and irony. The rapid ascension of Wallace's work to academic object of study prompted Samuel Cohen, co-editor (with Lee Konstantinou) of *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012), to confess to being "a bit tired of David Foster Wallace" during a conference presentation that I attended in 2013 (n. pag.). For an excellent summary of the developments in Wallace scholarship, see Kelly's "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline" (2010).

motivations for the nascent promotional apparatus: First, "[t]he most effective way to ensure the distinctiveness of a publisher's list was to invest in making the authors more visible and in many senses more real to the audience"; second, "[t]he personal connection brought the material to life more by providing the massive reading public with the author's background" ("Intimately" 318).[111] The exchange-value of authorial celebrity has become even more bound up in the speculative logic of debt within neoliberalism. Today's authors rarely compete with Hollywood actors, professional athletes, or pop musicians in the celebrity arena, as Wallace attests in the statement from my epigraph; however, "compete" is a misnomer. Instead, as Joe Moran argues, "[t]he increasing importance of book publicity in promoting authors as 'personalities' is […] a symptom of the continuing integration of literary production into the entertainment industry, making authors and books part of the cultural pervasiveness of celebrity as a market mechanism of monopoly capitalism" (329). The name of the game, as Moran (quoting Joseph Turow) identifies, is "*synergy*, which denotes 'the coordination of parts of a company so that the whole actually turns out to be worth more than the sum of its parts acting alone'" (327, emphasis in original). Personality, constructed through media appearances that often reflect the representational aims of agents and publicists, is the lynchpin of the "coordinated" cultural production of celebrity. Winning a "genius grant," addressing the media's questions about its significance in a personal register, and simultaneously

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[111] The emergence of celebrity authorship is more complex than such materialist readings can capture, with links to the European Renaissance's valorization of individuality. This valorization was democratized during the development of industrial capitalism, with expanding literacy rates and its emphasis on property rights, as is well-established in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). Acknowledging an individual's creative agency became tantamount to celebritizing her/him, according to a performative social paradigm. Richard Sennett outlines this paradigm in *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (1976), which traces the origins of "the image" of "[p]ublic man as an actor" to the eighteenth century (21).

promoting a new book whose biographical blurb will also allude to the grant follows the rule of "synergy."

Synergy may not mitigate differences in degree of distinction, but it does hedge the bets that publishers' make on individual books. One need hardly point out that the value of J.K. Rowling's bestselling *Harry Potter* book series is augmented by its box office success. Synergy also downplays the significance of distinctions between cultural fields. There will always be a gap between the Q Scores of award-winning authors and A-list actors; notwithstanding, whether Brooke Shields writes a memoir or Stephen King makes a cameo on *Sons of Anarchy*, their presence is refracted through the prism of celebrity. Daniel Boorstin's 1961 definition of celebrity remains foundational for current studies of celebrity culture. Drawing an unfavorable comparison of celebrities to heroes,[112] Boorstin states that "[*t*]*he celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness*" (79, emphasis in original). For authors, this "well-knownness" can translate to larger advances from publishers, who use an author's public profile to forecast sales. Wallace was never comfortable with the idea of advanced payment. Ed Finn highlights the fact that Wallace "brought up the subject of publishers' advance payments five times during his interview with David Lipsky (2, 14-5, 28, 110, 240-2)" (Finn 174, fn 7). Finn fails to cite the moment that anticipates the first extended discussion of advances, when Wallace recalls "this time in my twenties of feeling, feeling a pressure and expectation *far* in excess of anything the real world could place on you" (13, emphasis in original). Wallace complicates the bright-lights-big-payday cliché when he adds that "[t]aking

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[112] For Boorstin, celebrities, unlike heroes, are "morally neutral" (79). They are not autonomous, but are "pseudo-events," or figments of the popular imagination (79).

money for something up front brings that pressure back. And I don't want it" (13). The "genius grant" can be conceived of as the biggest advance Wallace ever received.

Wallace was wary of advances because they abdicated choice in a way that was too distressing for him. Choosing not to take an advance meant keeping his options open; in his words, it meant not "buying myself a pack of trouble. That I just—and that pain, that pain, I fear that pain more than I want the money. And that's why I'm not gonna take an advance" (*Although* 14). This stance might be idiosyncratic, but it anticipates how the "genius grant" ultimately legitimated Wallace's anxieties about the effect of fame on his productivity. According to one of Wallace's closest friends, Jonathan Franzen, the MacArthur was detrimental. "It conferred the mantle of 'genius' on him, which he had of course craved and sought and thought was his due," Franzen says, "But I think he felt, 'Now I have to be even smarter'" (qtd. in Lipsky, "Lost Years" 177). Franzen touches on the fact that genius is simultaneously an ambition and a burden. Given Wallace's writing practice—he proudly identifies himself as a "Five Draft man"—the heightened expectations may have lead to more discards (Schmeidel n. pag.).

By contrast, celebrity has generative role in Wallace's journalism. Like Norman Mailer, Wallace often filters his journalism through an on-the-scene narrating "I," whose persona becomes the story. They thus assume a semblance of control in the celebritizing process. New Journalism, including the "gonzo" variety embodied in Hunter S. Thompson, opens up an authorial avenue for remediating celebrity. Authors were no longer necessarily the subjects of celebrity profiles, nor were they *sensu stricto* journalists covering an event—they were integral to/as the event being narrated. Wallace is unique in the author-as-journalist/persona canon because, like Geraldo Rivera, his

journalism and celebrity coincide. Lipsky recalls the impact of Wallace's "Shipping Out": "it cleared the landscape, cut the runway for his novel. People photocopied it, faxed it, read it out loud over the phone. He'd done a thing that was casual and gigantic; he'd captured everybody's brain voice" (*Although* xxviii). Interestingly, Wallace's journalism adopts the confessional template of celebrity profiles, which frequently feature "something that is anecdotal but is revealing of the star's true nature" (Marshall, "Intimately" 320). For example, in "Shipping Out" he admits to being "a kind of semi-agoraphobe" (296). The double qualifier ("kind of" and "semi") suggests another celebrity journalism device that Wallace employs: a liberty with facts. His first major non-fiction article, "Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All" (1993), invented or exaggerated a host of details in its treatment of the twinned mundanity and mania of the Illinois State Fair. He replaced the girlfriend who accompanied him to the Fair (Kymberley Harris) with a "Native Companion" character from his teenage years, a woman who "worked detasseling summer corn with me in high school" (qtd. in Max 185). Max also relays a comical dispute between Wallace and an editor at *Harper*'s, Colin Harrison:

> Harrison, an experienced editor, was aware that Wallace sometimes embellished. At one point, he asked Wallace if a vial of crack that Wallace reported had fallen out of the pocket of a young man on the Zipper [ride] had really "direct-hit a state trooper alertly eating a Lemon Push-Up on the midway below." Wallace was coy. "I'm going to give you this one," Harrison remembers saying. (186)

Despite having a different agenda than the disgraced *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair, Wallace was likewise "pushed […] towards fabrication of [his] stories" (Marshall, "Intimately" 322).

Off the page, Wallace was not in the habit of making "advertisements for himself," as it were. Whereas Mailer was self-aggrandizing to a fault, Wallace practically apologizes at one moment during his 1997 interview on Charlie Rose for the autobiographical bent of the pieces in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*. "Unfortunately," he tells Rose, "a lot of these, I think, end up being about me" ("An Interview" n. pag.). Wallace recognizes his "unfortunate" contribution to the celebritizing process insofar as the amount of information he shares about himself is directly proportionate to his audience's curiosity about the life informing the writing.[113] This curiosity can go too far, such as the infamous incident of *New York Times* reporter Frank Bruni detailing the contents of Wallace's medicine cabinet in a 1996 profile, "The Grunge American Novel." The reference to "grunge" helps align Wallace with Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain, another notorious anti-celebrity celebrity. Wallace's life-writing is a strategy for shifting the prurient gaze of the media gaze onto his publications. A.O. Scott rightly observes that "Wallace was hardly one to conceal himself within his work; on the contrary, his personality is stamped on every page—so much so that the life and the work can seem not just connected but continuous" (n. pag.). The "continuity" surrounds Wallace's journalism with a magnetic field of irony—it can deflect questions about his life onto his

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[113] As J.D. Salinger could attest, reclusiveness can also fuel the publicity engine. Boorstin makes this point in his examination of Charles Lindbergh's rise and fall. When Lindbergh tried to avoid the public eye, "[u]ndaunted newsmen, thwarted in efforts to secure interviews and lacking solid facts, now made columns of copy from Lindbergh's efforts to keep out of the news!" (86). Moran moves things onto the terrain of genius, when he writes that figures like Salinger and Pynchon "represent a kind of routinization, for the purposes of the celebrity industry, of the high-culture ideal of the artist as authentic, individual genius" (340).

writing. Put differently, divulging and inventing biographical detail through participatory journalism, Wallace places the interview or profile in the domain of situational irony. The interview or profile strives to probe deeper into the life of the creator, but Wallace's journalism has the ground covered in advance. The interview or profile can thus seem especially superficial and uninformative; his journalism offers more interesting answers. Irony also allows Wallace to pursue a critique of consumer capitalism in his essays; however, as my next section explores, this ironization is a weak antidote for the celebrity and debt that accrues in the toxic social environment of neoliberalism. From the vantage point of totality that I invoke, irony expresses belief in the capitalist system.

4.3 Totalizing Irony

The idea that irony ideologically supports capitalism can be demonstrated with reference to the ironization of "genius" in the MacArthur narrative. Scare-quotes envelop "genius grant" in press coverage of the fellowships, respecting the Foundation's publicized opposition to the moniker. The Foundation's stated refusal of the genius label channels critical energy at the term's superficial deployment, and away from the Foundation's ideological commitment to neoliberalism. Given that the dominant genre of self-assessment for foundations is the success narrative, on some level it comes as no surprise that the Foundation officially disowns the "genius grant" moniker. For this moniker implies that the recipient's success was more organic than co-constructed, and thus denies the role of the Foundation as catalyst; however, the Foundation's repeated denial of the nickname is decidedly more complicated. This denial is not only a marketing technique, duplicated in media representations of the program, but also a way

to maintain the gap between more narrow critiques[114] of the program itself and the broader ones concerning philanthropic practice that I outlined in my second chapter. Fredric Jameson's theory, first articulated in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), that any interpretation of a text is "always-already" governed by "strategies of containment," envisions the contours of this gap (9, 10). According to Jameson, American literary and cultural analysis involves "the 'local' ways in which [critics] construct their objects of study and the 'strategies of containment' whereby they are able to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (10). Jameson's exposition of the political stakes of every hermeneutic act can be applied to the relationship between genius and the MacArthur fellowships. The invocation of genius deterministically "constructs" most public discourse on the fellowships. Genius grabs a lot of the attention popularly devoted to the fellowship program. As such, the Foundation is insulated from larger structural charges. In Jameson's terms, genius functions for the MacArthur as both a "framing mechanism" and a "basic masking device," determining ("framing") popular mappings of the MacArthur and obstructing ("masking") critical exploration beyond these narrow coordinates (269).

Wallace's deployment of irony as a tool to critique consumer capitalism may be more intentional and less convenient than the ironization of genius in the MacArthur narrative, but the outcome is identical: both sustain the "no alternative" momentum of capitalist totality. Before Wallace would seek to ironize his celebrity, his middle-period essays would frequently strive to locate and implicate himself in this totality. The first

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[114] For instance, Barry D. Karl, a former professor of philanthropy and public policy at Harvard, claimed that the program was "basically a misuse of philanthropic funds" (qtd. in Scott, "MacArthur" n. pag.).

essay in *Supposedly*, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,"[115] revisits his amateur tennis career, making forays into physics and the effect of weather patterns on how the sport is played in the Midwest (where Wallace grew up). Interestingly, Wallace attributes his tennis acumen to the following: "I knew my limitations and the limitations of what I stood inside" (4). This epistemology glimpses at transcendence insofar as appreciating his subjective and objective "limitations" offers him the possibility of overcoming his deficiencies as a player. Moreover, it can be read as a motto for Wallace's desire for a modicum of image control. He "knows" that he "stands inside" a culture of compulsory celebrity, and knowing this allows him to anticipate and redirect the inevitable questions about his life to the writing itself in the hopes of downsizing his public image. As in tennis, where he positions himself is crucial. On the opening page of the next essay, "E Unibus Pluram," which many critics regard as Wallace's *ars poetica*, he locates himself at a remove from the camp (he cites Mailer and Jay McInerney as members) "who like attention" (21). While Wallace prefers observing to being observed, he renders the two states dialectically, eventually calling into question the "limitations" of mediation; in so doing, he undermines his attempt to circumvent these limitations. The mobilizing term in the observe/d dialectic is self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is Wallace's greatest resource as a writer and Achilles heel as a public figure. "There's good self-consciousness," Wallace tells Lipsky (*Although* 19). "Good self-consciousness" is what Wallace draws on when he dramatizes how the putative judgments of the people that surround an individual can shape or determine social action. He might as well be writing about his own hyperactive self-consciousness when he claims that the medium of

[115] In "The First Draft Version of *Infinite Jest*" (2008) Steven Moore reports that "Wallace began working on his second novel in the fall of 1991—the outgrowth of an essay he wrote that season called "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley"—and by the fall of 1993 had completed a working draft" (n. pag.).

television functions as a "kind of window on nervous American self-perception" ("E Unibus" 22). "Good self-consciousness" enables him to create a poignant vignette of a protagonist, frozen on the high diving board because he is unable to fully embrace "a rhythm that excludes thinking," represented in the pool below (*Brief* 12). He is trapped, "Forever Overhead" as the title indicates, accused by the second-person narrative perspective ("you") and those who watch him from the pool deck. "Nervous self-perception" is an accurate description of the story's overall mood. Wallace opposes "good self-consciousness" to "toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness" (*Although* 19). The basis for Wallace's separation of "good self-consciousness" and "toxic self-consciousness" is dialogic. "Good self-consciousness" does not ultimately allow "nervous self-perception" to entirely script the perception. It positions the perceiver—in Wallace's case, the contemporary American author—in conversation with public perceptions. "Toxic self-consciousness," by contrast, effectively silences the perceiver by pre-scripting or precluding a response.

The hyperbole and diction of the "Bedouin" analogy is duplicated in the essay when he laments that the apparent unselfconsciousness of television actors leads viewers to conclude, "these persons behind the glass […] are also people who are oblivious to the fact that they are watched" (*Supposedly* 26). For Wallace, "this illusion is toxic. It's toxic for lonely people because it sets up an alienating cycle […] and it's toxic for writers because it leads us to confuse actual fiction-research with a weird kind of fiction-*consumption*" (26, emphasis in original). Wallace develops this critique through a discussion of how television consistently outflanks postmodern and post-postmodern fiction in the "self-conscious irony" department. "Image-Fiction," despite its aesthetic

merits and "genuine socio-artistic agenda," is a symptom of what it purports to pan (50, 51). A feedback loop emerges in the Image Fictionist's incessant "reminding [of] the reader that the author is smart and funny," when the basis for such acknowledgment is a cynicism so commonplace that it takes the edge off (79). Mediation is limitless, causing Wallace—who situates himself outside the attention-seeking crowd on the opening page—to conclude within that space. He admits that it is

> entirely possible that my plangent cries against the impossibility of rebelling against an aura that promotes and attenuates all rebellion says more about my residency inside that aura, my own lack of vision, than it does about any exhaustion of U.S. fiction's possibilities. (81)

The triple negative, "against the impossibility of rebelling against," combines with the trebled root word ("possible"-"impossibility"-"possibilities") in order to qualify any of the subsequent optimism about the future of fiction with the shadow of reversals and re-reversals. Moreover, Wallace juxtaposes his "residency inside that aura" with his "own lack of vision," suggesting that the being "inside," watched and watching, results in myopia. He still "knows" where he "stands," but only in the most general terms. The idea that this "residency" might be permanent is challenged in the next sentence, when Wallace looks beyond the impasse of self-conscious irony, towards a cohort of writers "who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (81). Two rhetorical cues again imply that Wallace is not exactly assured in his prediction. Firstly, he characterizes the group as "anti-rebels" using scare-quotes. The scare-quotes place them in a preexisting discourse where they are not only legible as "anti-rebels," but where their status is ironized. Secondly, when measuring the potential

cultural impact of this group, he repeats the "dead on the page" judgment that he had delivered on Mark Leyner's fiction in the previous paragraph.[116] For someone who chooses his words as carefully as Wallace, the repetition is significant. It underscores how so-called "rebels" (like Leyner) and their "too sincere" opposition reinforce one another. As such, Wallace reveals a totality of mediation, whereby neoliberal capitalism accommodates what is only apparently absent. Irony is not interpreted sincerely; however, sincerity is read through a prism of irony.

Associating Wallace with the "anti-rebels" endorses a superficial view of totality. In short, totality should not be confused with totalitarianism. It is not simply that sincerity can be feigned, but also that mass culture includes ironic rebels and sincere anti-rebels in an antagonistic space such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the two. Neither ironic distance nor straightforward expression represents a path beyond the prevailing ideology of neoliberal capitalism. As Slavoj Žižek has suggested, "[t]o locate a phenomenon in its totality does not mean to see the hidden harmony of the whole, but to include into a system its symptoms, antagonisms, inconsistencies, as its necessary, integral parts" ("Situation" n. pag.).[117]

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[116] The "dead on the page" phrase is not in the original essay, published in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993). In both versions, Wallace labels Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990) "the ultimate union of U.S. television and fiction" (*Supposedly* 81). For him, its "sole aim is, finally, to *wow*, to ensure that the reader is pleased and continues to read. The book does this by (1) flattering the reader with appeals to his erudite postmodern weltschmerz and (2) relentlessly reminding the reader that the author is smart and funny" (79, emphasis in original). Unsurprisingly, Leyner was displeased with Wallace's assessment. Even less unsurprisingly, Leyner's "smart and funny" response to Wallace's critique came in a parody of him. His story "Geraldo, Eat Your Avant-Pop Heart Out" (1997) includes the following passage: "*Dissolve back to studio. In the audience, JENNY JONES extends the microphone to a man in his mid-20's with a scruffy beard and a bandana around his head*. MAN WITH BANDANA: I'd like to say that this 'Alex' is the single worst example of pointless irony in American literature, and this whole heartfelt renunciation of postmodernism is a ploy—it's just more irony" (qtd. in Burn, *Franzen* 15, emphasis in original).

[117] Žižek first articulates this argument in *Looking Awry* (1991) when he describes "the familiar paradox of the 'catastrophic but not yet serious situation'" (27).

Wallace implicates himself in the totality of neoliberal capitalism throughout the essay for which he became well-known, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." His audience is not the sort of people who would find "a 7-Night Caribbean (7NC) Cruise" anything but ridiculous, as Wallace renders it (259). To underscore his preaching to the likewise averted mass of *Harper's* readers, Wallace repeats the adjective "upscale" twice on the first two pages when characterizing the cruise's patrons (256, 257). Most *Harper's* readers could certainly be included in this grouping; more importantly, Wallace does not exempt himself. The moments where he stands apart from the crowd are played for laughs, such as how "painfully absurd" he appears as the only one at the "Formal supper" without "Formalwear" (347, fn 131).[118] The lesson of the *sans*-tuxedo gaffe is to "*bring Formalwear*" (347, fn 131). In the process of implicating himself in the cruise's social grammar, Wallace lays bare inconsistencies about consumerist desire that are no joke. Specifically, the theme of the piece is the illusive pursuit of "death-and-dread transcendence" that consumption can "supposedly" confer (265). The *Nadir*, as Wallace rebrands the ship "owned by Celebrity Cruises Inc.," is an engine of this desire (259). To Wallace, "the lie at the dark heart of Celebrity's brochure" is "the promise to sate the part of me that always and only wants" (316). It is a "lie" that advertising trades in; nevertheless, Wallace continues, "the thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all" (316). Whether the ship's patrons (can) accept this narrative or decide to question it is ultimately beside the point. It remains the myth that structures their every experience on the cruise. This myth

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[118] The joke was (again) on Wallace when his article was published, and he experienced pangs of conscience at how he had represented his tablemates. As he tells one interviewer, "[t]hat was a very, very bad scene, because they were really nice to me on the cruise and actually sent me a couple cards and were looking forward to the thing coming out, and then it came out, and I never heard from them again" (Scocca 85).

contravenes the power to purchase "transcendence" because it augurs a regression whose endpoint is shadowed in the very "death-and-dread" it purports to evade. Quoting the brochure, Wallace reads the promise of doing "*Absolutely Nothing*" as a promise to be *in utero* (268, emphasis in original). This offer of return has an ominous corollary in a teenage suicide that happened on a cruise prior to Wallace's adventure. "The news version was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad, etc.," Wallace writes (261). He endeavours to supplement the story with that "part of it [which] was something else, something there's no way a real news story could cover" (261). As Josh Roiland emphasizes, here Wallace is framing what follows as accessing the "deeper meaning" of the suicide in ways that "traditional methods of reporting and writing" cannot (39, 40).

Roiland makes a compelling case for pathologizing what he classifies as Wallace's "literary journalism," drawing on Nietzsche's definition of "oblivion" in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) to theorize that Wallace "suffered from an absence of [it]" (28). He posits that Wallace could not "escape" his consciousness, which is why the word "sad" recurs so frequently in his writing (29). Roiland cites numerous examples, including Wallace's observation that "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad" (qtd. in Roiland 29). For Roiland, Wallace's "excess of consciousness" has stylistic and affective consequences; namely, Roiland interprets Wallace's footnotes as a mental clearinghouse and suggests that his confessions show "a strong fidelity to the reader" (33, 37). Related to the latter point, Roiland claims that Wallace "cast[s] himself as complicit in culture" (37). By tethering himself to a subjectivist pole, Roiland does not address what Wallace says *about* this "culture."

Roiland thus discounts the anti-capitalist strain in Wallace's writing. Wallace's perspective on the "too common American phenomenon" of "supplanting everyday reality with fantasy" repeats a "sad" conclusion, without settling for it; rather, he recognizes the fundamental obstacle to this dispossession (29). Nowhere is this obstacle clearer than when Wallace describes his fellow passengers disembarking for a day trip. Their relation to the "poverty-stricken ports" that they enter is necessarily commercial (310). The gap between the "high-income herd" of passengers and the "everyday reality" of those they encounter on land is severe enough that Wallace views the passengers as "inescapably bovine" (310). He uses identical language to depict gatherings in "Getting Away," marking "the bovine and herdlike quality of the crowd" (103-104). Both groups earn their bovine chops from consumerism. The fairgoers "jostle and press toward our respective attractions," while the ship's tourists have "a certain greedy placidity about them. Us, rather" (104; 310). Wallace joins the crowd(s), but—*pace* Roiland—it is not his entanglement that precludes a strict censuring of them. They *cannot* "get away" from being "bovine" because their agency ("greedy") is the "fantasy."

When Wallace connects the consumptive myth to the national one, for the former makes him "newly and unpleasantly conscious of being an American," he articulates the substitution of consumer for citizen. "America," then, stands in for the colonizing force of capital, and Wallace's uneasy relation to the capitalist process he finds himself bound within is prefigured as he introduces his assignment. "I voluntarily and for pay," Wallace writes, "underwent a 7-Night Caribbean (7NC) Cruise" (259). The balance between agency ("voluntarily") and passivity ("for pay") is disturbed by the third verb phrase,

"underwent" (259).[119] If casual readers overlook the idea that the cruise is something that Wallace is subjected to—like cross-examination or shock therapy—he repeats himself two pages later when he locates the teenage suicide "some weeks before I underwent my own Luxury Cruise" (261). Wallace's narrative link to the teen is revisited in the aforementioned tuxedo footnote "about the absurd informality of my Formal-supper dress" (347, fn 131). This gaffe, Wallace admits, "pushed me right to the very edge of ship-jumping" (347, fn 131). Hyperbole notwithstanding, passivity ("pushed") and agency ("ship-jumping") coexist, but again the latter is disturbed. Although the absent cause of the teenager's death never arrives, Wallace hints that desperate agency is the only form available.

The verb "undergo" itself contains an element of agency insofar as it can mean "to investigate"; however, Wallace makes it clear that he is partially compromised in his role as an investigative journalist, given "this new feeling of pressure" that accompanies an assignment with a budget more than a hundred times larger than the State Fair essay (256). This pressure not only activates the anxiety about advances that I discussed in the previous section, but it also resonates with sentiments he shares with the graduating class of Kenyon College in 2005, later published as *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (2009). Telling his audience that choices define humans on a metaphysical—as opposed to strictly consumptive—level, Wallace advocates "being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed" (55). Some form of the word "choose" appears three times in two

[119] To me, "for pay" signifies passivity because Wallace is positioned as a recipient.

sentences, stressing the importance of making difficult decisions. It also indirectly emphasizes the challenge of choosing, particularly when consumer culture is so adept at disguising passivity as agency. More precisely, as Ilan Kapoor avers, "the problem […] is not the denial of agency but the (neoliberal) limitation of agency to consumerism" (73). People can choose anything but the extent of their choices. Actual freedom eludes the cruise participants, whose enjoyment is repeatedly referred to by Wallace as "Managed Fun" (352). He does not focus so much on what is consumed on the cruise, i.e., he does not list brand names in the style of, say, Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho* (1991), but rather how it is consumed. Therefore, the circumscribed form of choice overshadows the seemingly limitless content. Wallace represents a totality that precludes more meaningful, metaphysical choosing.

Wallace could not choose whether to be a celebrity, and his aversion to fame becomes a key component of his celebrity. Anti-fame statements by celebrities are nothing new. Framing his analysis of Frank Sinatra, Chris Rojek declares that "[a]chieved celebrities frequently testify to the emptiness of honorific rituals of celebrity status and materialism" (610). In fact, "[t]his point of view abounds in the literature of celebrity with such profusion that it has become a cliché" (610). Clichés are capable of communicating important truths, as Wallace was able to appreciate.[120] The contrast between Wallace and Sinatra is instructive. Sinatra pursued a self-authenticating vision, publicly enforcing masculinist codes when members strayed from his "pack."[121] Wallace would come to see that self-conscious distance from celebrity and consumerism only

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[120] "[C]lichés earned their status as clichés because they were so obviously true," as a character in *Infinite Jest* reports (1040, fn 234).

[121] Rojek documents Sinatra's freeze-outs of Sammy Davis Jr. The second major one was over "Davis Jr.'s addiction to cocaine, which Sinatra abhorred as unmanly" (616).

supported the operation of the ideological forces that drove these cultures. As "the public representation of individuality in contemporary culture," to borrow Marshall's definition of celebrity, Wallace's ironizing of celebrity reinforced the reign of irony (*Celebrity* 242). So he eventually gave up "the hard labor of the persona" (Sternberg 426).

For someone who squirms at attention, it may seem odd that Wallace wrote so much about himself. Assessing the effects of the mirrors in the ship's exercise room, Wallace inadvertently describes a dynamic that recurs throughout the piece: "displays of public self-scrutiny that are as excruciating as they are irresistible" (339). His self-consciousness animates these essays, but he recognizes "a schtick emerging," particularly in the travel pieces (Scocca 86). The bit features "the somewhat neurotic, hyperconscious guy showing you how weird this thing is that not everyone thinks is weird" (Scocca 86). As he admits to Lipsky, "there's a certain persona created, that's a little stupider and schmuckier than I am" (qtd. in Roiland 47, fn 13).

The fraught conceptual integrity of choice within neoliberalism is coded in the trope of toxicity throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*. In "Supposedly," for example, Wallace admits to "a fascination" with this "VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM" (305, fn 72). His curiosity causes him to ask the hotel manager, to whom Wallace refers as "Mr. Dermatitis," about how it works (259). The decision is one Wallace regrets, having already had his access to the crew's quarters restricted because of the manager's "impression [that] I was an investigative journalist" (259, fn 2). His inquiries about the sewage system could only confirm this impression given that "there'd been, just a few months before [Wallace's cruise], a tremendous scandal in which the […] *QE2* Megaship had been discovered dumping waste over the side in mid-voyage" (305, fn 72). By

"dumping" this incident into a footnote, Wallace separates himself from the company of those journalists who made their "fascination" with waste a headline.[122] The true scandal cannot be encapsulated in an anecdote about contamination. The toxic and toxifying environment of capitalist totality ensures that individual choice is not an antidote to the debts that consumerism tries to mask because debt is the prime chooser. Irony is a false choice, as I have suggested in this section, since it also implies an illusory distance. Leaving aside its non-intentional forms, irony relies on an audience acknowledging a distance between ironist and ironized. This distance is real from a strictly aesthetic standpoint, but politically speaking the space for transforming social reality that irony can open up vanishes when it is situated within capitalist totality. As Žižek argues in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), "in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that [*sic*] cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally" (28). "One can know (or know better) but still remain *within* ideology," as Kapoor glosses Žižek's critique of irony (11, emphasis in original). Moreover, irony cannot translate disenchantment with the neoliberal environment into ideological divestment because irony derives its critical energy from the notion that power is primarily interpersonal. A superior understanding of power as a set of impersonal processes emerges in the thematic link between celebrity and toxicity in *Infinite Jest*. By bracketing the question of choice and conjoining the production of waste and fame, the novel opens up a symbolic space for divestment. In my next section, I analyze how the political economy represented in *Infinite Jest* foregrounds

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[122] Iannis Goerlandt cites a similar observation in "'This Is Not Wholly True': Notes on Annotation in David Foster Wallace's Shorter Fiction (and Non-Fiction)" (2010). Goerlandt translates selections from a conference paper by Magnus Wieland, which argues that "the notes are employed to keep the 'main' text 'clean' of excess information" (157). Wieland draws attention to the similarities between the footnotes and the ship's waste disposal network, which are located beneath the main structure(s).

toxicity in order to highlight the structural problem of debt in which the "genius grants" are implicated.

4.4 *Infinite* Ecology

Infinite Jest charts the effects of literary fame before Wallace became famous himself. The novel registers pressures of celebrity on an affective, autobiographical level via the toxic political economy that infects the teenage tennis phenom characters. While the novel does not explicitly thematize debt, the pressures experienced by these characters metaphorically represents the pressures experience by neoliberal debtor-subjects. The first flashback sequence that occurs in *Infinite Jest* establishes the trope of toxicity that lends narrative coherence and critical substance to the political economy represented in the novel. It involves one of its two main characters, Hal Incandenza, eating a piece of potentially toxic mold he found in the basement of his home. Hal was "around five" at the time, and the incident is filtered through his older brother Orin's memory (10). Orin recalls "the patch itself" as "darkly green, glossy, vaguely hirsute, speckled with parasitic fungal points of yellow, orange, red" (10). The most disgusting aspect of Orin's memory is their mother Avril's response, which is Orin's "first real sight of adult hysteria" (11). Rather than comforting Hal after he matter-of-factly informs her, "I ate this," she sprints around the yard, screaming "God! Help! My son ate this! Help!" over and over again (11). Abjection comes with the parental territory, but Avril "feared and loathed more than anything spoilage and filth" (11). As such, her reaction is textbook selfishness, putting her own needs ahead of those of her son. For Hal, the (borrowed) memory allows him a momentary escape from a stressful admissions interview at the

University of Arizona with "three Deans—of Admissions, Academic Affairs, Athletic Affairs," "the University's Director of Composition," and "its varsity tennis coach" (3). Hal is accompanied by his uncle, Charles Tavis, the headmaster at the elite tennis academy he attends (the Enfield Tennis Academy, or E.T.A., in Enfield, MA), as well as Aubrey deLint, the "Academy prorector" (3). For several pages, Hal's first-person inner monologue (including the memory), with dialogic interruptions from the others in the room who talk about Hal, presides. Single quotation marks are employed throughout the novel to indicate when a character speaks, which Greg Carlisle postulates "may imply that the entire novel is spoken (is in double quotation marks)" (25). Hal is spoken for during the interview, until his E.T.A. guardians are shown the door. The Dean of Admissions directly confronts him about the admixture of elite tennis ability, lackluster standardized test scores, "over-academic essays," and "incredible grades" (10). The first words out of Hal's mouth are "I am not just a jock" (10). He proves himself to be exceptional as the narrative unfolds, but as a result of what he put *into* his mouth, he cannot communicate with the Dean(s). "Call it something I ate," he offers in defense of his seeming incomprehensibility (10). This attribution connects to the childhood memory, and also links toxicity to a failure to perform under pressure. His silence symbolizes the destructive impact of infinite debt. More specifically, the "something" to which Hal alludes could be the drug DMZ. Hal's best friend and classmate Michael Pemulis procures the pills whose effect is to "radically […] alter" its user's "relation to the ordinary flow of time" (170). Whether Hal, Pemulis, and their co-conspirators (Trevor Axford and Jim Struck) ever ingest the drug is unclear. When Hal tells the Dean that he "consume[s] libraries" it hints that he has taken DMZ, as his "one condition" for doing so

was "that somebody tech-literate actually take the truck down to B.U. or M.I.T.'s medical library and physically verify that the compound is both organic and nonaddictive" (216).[123] "Consuming" the drug is inseparable from consuming information. The bit of information that is worth mentioning, in terms of the flashback, is that "the incredibly potent DMZ is synthesized from a derivative of fitviavi, an obscure mold that grows only on other molds" (170). Hal's (possible) return to mold eating garners the same reaction. Like his mother, the administrators cannot comprehend the meaning of Hal's words. They too call out in desperation, "*God!*" and "*Help!*" (12, emphasis in original). Hal is hauled off to the hospital at the end of this opening chapter, chronologically the final event in the novel.

Stephen Burn dates Hal's mold flashback to "March or early April" of 1997 (*Guide* [1st Ed.] 83).[124] The chronology of *Infinite Jest* is complicated by its frequent jump cuts, as well as the fact that time is subject to corporate sponsorship. So the novel opens in "Year of Glad," which Burn uses a series of textual clues to identify as 2010 (*Guide* [1st Ed.] 3). Since Hal is 18 at the time of the interview, Burn's dating seems plausible. And "March or early April" of 1997 is exactly when Wallace would have received news about his genius grant. He was able to predict many things in his novel, for example the anomie induced in digitized societies, but prescience is not foreknowledge. So it is obviously only a coincidence that the MacArthur could be made parallel to mold in its silencing effects. Nevertheless, this coincidence anticipates the arc of the argument in this section—fame, as Wallace was fond of saying in interviews, is toxic.

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[123] Carlisle favours interpretation that Hal's silence is a withdrawal symptom from marijuana (140, 481).
[124] Orin claims it is "early March" (1041, fn 234).

Fame is toxic for the precise reason that the social bonds that form within neoliberalism proliferate in a debt-centric environment. Interpretations of *Infinite Jest* often address these bonds via the parallels between the experience of ETA's tennis prodigies and those enrolled in the AA program down-the-hill at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (*sic*).[125] For example, N. Katherine Hayles argues that the two most palatable alternatives to narcissism offered in the novel are "tennis and Alcoholics Anonymous […] [which] are presented not primarily as sports or organizations, but as technologies of the self" (693). She quotes the realization of AA member Don Gately that "[y]ou have to Starve the Spider; you have to surrender your will" (qtd. on 693). "*The Spider*" is the name Gately gives to his addiction (357, emphasis in original). A similar "surrender" happens at E.T.A., where tennis coach Gerhardt Schtitt justifies his intense training regimen using "the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship […] about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team" (82). The pervading ethos in both institutions is submission. This ethos has a different relationship to the *raison d'être* of each—at E.T.A., the goal is to inculcate and productively harness an addiction; at Ennet House, recovery necessitates following the conventions that keep an addiction at a narrated distance. In both contexts, for the effects to take hold, submission is required. Burn provides a less optimistic reading than Hayles, asserting that the novel's ultimate shift in narrative perspective (from first- to third-person) "charts the progressive

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[125] One of the best examples in this school is Brooks Daverman's, "The Limits of the Infinite: The Use of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest* as a Narrative Solution After Postmodernism" (2001). In this brilliant Senior Honours Thesis, Daverman offers an ambitious and compelling argument for the novel's autoimmunity, its "criticisms […]of the narrative systems it includes" (n. pag.).

erasure of identity by the pressures of family and academy" (*Guide* [1st Ed.] 50). Rather than justify either Burn's or Hayles' position or distinguish institutional values of discipline from the dynamic of debt, I discuss E.T.A. as an inversion of AA. That is, in principle, AA is a detoxifying site; in practice, E.T.A. is a toxic one. Celebrity is the byproduct of the hypermediation that E.T.A. tries, but cannot, forestall.

A third of the way through the novel, this strict separation of detoxifying from toxifying is complicated by an in-depth lesson on the conjoined political and environmental histories of *Infinite Jest*'s North America in the subsidized and unsubsidized years surrounding the second millennium. This—the longest exposition of the novel's political economy—takes the form of a puppet show filmed by a teenager, Mario Incandenza (Hal's other[ed][126] older brother). Screening the film is "part of the gala but rather ironic annual celebration of I[nterdependence] Day" at E.T.A. (380). Mario's "first finished entertainment" is "a kid's adaptation of *The ONANtiad*," his father's epic-length "political parody" (380-81). The puppet show depicts the rise of Johnny Gentle, a performer who is more Paul Anka than he is Sinatra, to one of the unlikeliest designations in U.S. politics: a third-party President. Fashioning itself after its germaphobic frontman, Gentle's Clean U.S. Party (C.U.S.P.) is elected with a mandate to "rid [the country] of the toxic effluvia choking our highways and littering our byways and grungeing up our sunsets and cruddying those harbors," along with the typical crap about actualizing bureaucratic efficiency and American Exceptionalism (383). The waste is the remainder of consumerism, a toxic leftover from the systemic imperative to buy

[126] In their self-published *Reader's Companion to* Infinite Jest (2005), William Dowling and Robert Bell quote the novel's description of Mario as "somewhere between elf and jockey' (313), with 'hideously arachnodactylic fingers' (216)" (133).

products.[127] Gentle's plan begins to take shape when he unifies Canada, the United States, and Mexico in an "entertainment-dissemination 'Grid,'" known as the Organization of North American Nations (1021). The power dynamics are reflected in the fact that Canada's Prime Minister and Mexico's President are given lesser titles as "Secretaries" (384). The acronym for this merger—O.N.A.N.—comically signals its onanistic features: the self-abusive in-home entertainment viewing practices of its citizenry, and its political self-interest in temporarily averting ecological eschaton by sending its waste to a "designated disposal area" that stretches across four States, New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine (405). Gentle's main politico, Rodney Tine, acts as a forerunner to today's Emergency Manager. He forces Canada to accept this "Concavity" as part of its territory (1018, fn 110). Residents of Québec, which shares the longest border with this region, suffer the worst effects engendered via proximity to the giant dump(s). Hence why the "celebration" is "ironic," as E.T.A.'s "founder had married a Canadian," Avril (380). E.T.A.'s top-ranked player and Avril's paramour, John Wayne, is also Canadian. His experience of the film is shared among the "handful of other Canadian students" with whom he sits (385). Suffice to say, they are not impressed. The "American penchant for absolution via irony is foreign to them" (385).

The reference to "irony" foregrounds the fact that the political primer is heavily mediated. In addition to being an adapted version of his father's "political parody," Mario's film "unfolds in little diffracted bits of real news and fake news and privately-conceived dialogue between the architects and hard-choice makers of a new millennial era" (381, 385). The focus on how the material is constructed and delivered frames

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[127] Heather Houser makes a similar point: "As Americans distance themselves from the filthy detritus of consumption, they also jettison the ethical implications of experialism and ecological gerrymandering" (127).

E.T.A. as a toxic site, with a direct parallel between the film's audience (excepting the aforementioned Canadian contingent) and American citizens, pre-O.N.A.N. While the film was originally intended to educate "woefully historically underinformed children," it now entertains "E.T.A.'s adults and adolescents" (380). They can "sit back and enjoy the show," like Gentle reportedly "asked" the citizenry to do, ceding the "tough choices" about environmental responsibility to C.U.S.P (383). The cruel nature of this "enjoyment" is reminiscent of those gathered in the movie theatre at the close of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), waiting for the world to end. Their conductor was likewise a presidential figure, Richard Nixon as "Richard M. Zhlubb, night manager of the Orpheus Theatre on Melrose," urging "Now everybody—" in the novel's final line (769, 776). In both cases, audience members and citizens—*Infinite Jest* renders the line between the two imaginary—are encouraged to distract themselves from impending destruction. The ironic distance between the viewers and their fate closes Pynchon's magnum opus and is foreclosed in Wallace's by the subterranean network of polluted tunnels that contaminate E.T.A.'s foundation.

A more metaphoric link between toxicity and celebrity is anticipated in Johnny Gentle's presidential meme—not Nixon, but Ronald Reagan. For Gentle shares the same number of letters in his first and last name as well as a political platform with fanciful plans for the galaxy (381). Reagan had the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) aka "Star Wars"; Gentle initially proposes "rocketing people's waste into the forgiving chill of infinite space" (418). Neither program advanced beyond the planning stages. Gentle also

has Reaganesque celebrity status, with his "B-movie mainstay" past (381).[128] While waste accumulates, Gentle's celebrity aura hastens the transformation of "American renewal [into] an essentially aesthetic affair" (383). He can afford the disingenuous wager that his radical acts might make him "possibly sometimes unpopular" because his "fifteen minutes" have secured a positive reputation (383).

The equally toxic underside of such celebrity is revealed in the section that interrupts the narrative of Mario's film. LaMont Chu, the top-ranked male player in the 14A division, has a weight room conversation with Lyle about the anxieties attending fame. Lyle mentors many E.T.A. charges. He is introduced as "[a]n oiled guru" who is permanently perched atop "the towel dispenser just above the shoulder-pull station" (127). In exchange for his counsel, players "let him lick [their] arms and forehead" (128). Sweat is his sustenance, which is why the narrator glosses the behavior as not "like a faggy or sexual thing" (128). LaMont approaches Lyle and "confesses to an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame" (388). That LaMont also feels "ashamed of his secret hunger for hype in an academy that regards hype and the seduction of hype as the great Mephistophelan pitfall and hazard of talent" only raises the psychic toll of this "obsession" (388). Between the lines of LaMont's lament is the devilish bargain of liberal capitalist orthodoxy—taking the bad with the good is better than the alternative (the worst). The alternative is allegedly totalitarianism, symbolized in Schtitt and Tavis' practice of preventing the media from setting foot on E.T.A.'s property. This is a shift in policy from when Hal's father, James O. Incandenza, founded E.T.A. sometime during "the last couple years of solar, Unsubsidized Time" (407). As one of the prorectors,

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[128] Another notable similarity: Gentle cuts his teeth as an "entertainment-union bigwig," and Reagan started on the same side of the line, as two-time president of the Screen Actors Guild (381). I give a more detailed account of Reagan and his policies in my next chapter.

Aubrey deLint, later tells a reporter from *Moment* magazine, "[w]e've never had a kid here interviewed. The Founder let you guys on the grounds, versus Tavis this is an exception your [*sic*] even getting in" (659). The "exception" is only apparent, as the reporter is O.U.S. agent Hugh Steeply in drag. *Moment* is precisely the type of magazine that LaMont longs to be featured in, "a national magazine," Steeply pantomimes, "for and about exceptional people" (660). Lyle acknowledges "the gratified surge" that accompanies "[t]he first photograph, the first magazine" (389). No one complains the day that the letter or phone call from the MacArthur Foundation arrives. Schtitt and Tavis are playing a longer game, but their extreme stance seems naïve. Although censoring outside attention is designed to "inculcate [the players'] sense that it's never about being seen," several pages later it states that "[a]ll the E.T.A. players loved the Show Courts 6-9 because they loved to be watched" (661; 654). Recognition of the hard work congealed in talent is too intuitive for the players to give up. Wallace would agree, saying that "it's just a big thrill to have a publishing company be willing to publish one of your books" (Scocca 84). Lyle and Wallace are also realists, appreciative of the duality of fame. "After the first photograph has been in a magazine," Lyle tells LaMont, "the famous men do not *enjoy* their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in magazines. They are trapped" (389). Wallace falls into the "trap" of hedging his bets by pontificating that "[y]ou can burn out by struggling in privation and neglect for many years, but you can also burn out if you're given a little bit of attention" (Kennedy and Polk 20). He illuminates the limits of subjectivism in discussions of celebrity. "Fame or tortured envy of fame," in LaMont's words, is a zero-sum game from the individual's perspective (389).

Lyle's way out of the "cage," as he calls it, is to preach "awareness of the fact of the cage" (389). The novel revisits this advice through a parable that Wallace would include in his Kenyon address. In the novel, AA member Bob Death shares with Gately the story of the old fish asking the young ones, "how's the water?" (445). Their dismissive response, "[w]hat the fuck is water?" is intended to communicate a surface with-age-comes-wisdom message (445). The lesson is repeated in the long and clumsy mountaintop debate between Steeply and Rémy Marathe. Marathe belongs to *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (the A.F.R.), a group of "Wheelchair Assassins, [which is] pretty much Québec's most dreaded and rapacious anti-O.N.A.N. terrorist cell" (994, fn 39a). Marathe critiques Steeply's celebration of the American principle of freedom-from limitations. He supports his position through "the story of the rich man" who permits his child to consume "only candy" (320). Marathe wonders, "How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?" (320). Awareness of delimitation, like awareness of the "cage" of fame, is presented as an ideal; however, the question of the young fish lingers, "[w]hat the fuck is water?" The young fish are already absorbed in a system that they do not see. As such, the parable is ambivalent; the assumption is that the old fish's recognition is substantively different than the ignorance of the young fish. Yet neither side is free from the water. Since neither side *can* be, the gap between recognition and ignorance superficially closes. Both "swim away" (445). Unlike the young fish, LaMont does not err in his understanding. His reply to Lyle's beads of wisdom is pragmatic, "[w]ould I sound ungrateful if I said this doesn't make me feel very much better at all?" (389). In the terms of the fish parable, LaMont is asking, what am I supposed to *do* with my appreciation of the simultaneous seduction and

emptiness of fame? Wallace arrived at this cul-de-sac when *Infinite Jest* was packaged as a must-read. He says that he was initially indifferent about its status as a cultural event, since "[m]uch of the attention was hype attention rather than literary attention, and so it didn't get to me all that much" (Arden 97). "The book is partly about hype and sort of the spiritual consequences of hype," he continues, "and then the book itself became an object of hype. For a while I was amused by the irony, and then it just kind of made me feel empty" (Arden 97). Wallace could not ignore the commercial delivery system nor feel comforted in his awareness of its pre-corporating tendencies. "Hype" is the rule.

The major exception to this rule in *Infinite Jest* appears to be John Wayne, except that his background is symptomatic of the toxic political economy. His name is ironic, given that he is an anti-celebrity. Gregory Phipps argues that Wayne permits "no access to a conventional American tale of athletic hardship" (80). As a result, "alternative narrative threads cluster around the reticent Wayne" (80). He is an empty signified, with a famous signifier. He thus embodies E.T.A.'s agenda insofar as an apparent absence of self-consciousness translates to superlative athletic success. Throughout the novel, Phipps comments, "different interpretations of [Wayne's] rather blank public identity gather around him" (81). Steeply chooses not to join the interpretive community. Although deLint urges him to focus the *Moment* profile on Wayne, as opposed to Orin, Steeply is all too aware that Wayne's is "[a] more dramatic story [of] geopolitics, privation, exile, drama" (662). For concealed beneath Wayne's machine-like exterior are the interior machinations of O.N.A.N.'s toxic politics.[129] Wayne hails from the region of Québec that suffers the most from C.U.S.P.'s waste management oversights. This detail emerges in the "very basic schoolboy history" that Hal shares with an inquiring Orin (1014, fn 110).

[129] For more on the associations between Wayne and machines, see Phipps (77).

Filtered through E.T.A.'s curriculum, this "history" lesson further affiliates the institution with toxicity. Hal notes how

> It's eastern Québec that gets green sunsets and indigo rivers and grotesquely asymmetrical snow-crystals and front lawns they have to beat back with a machete to get to their driveways. They get the feral-hamster incursions and the Infant-depredations and the corrosive fogs. (1017, fn 110)

Eastern Québec is unsurprisingly the home of the A.F.R. Phipps states that Steeply "would be well aware of the potential firestorm […] a comprehensive profile of Wayne could release" (80).[130] Wayne himself "releases" a public invective against his peers at E.T.A. as the novel draws to a close. He roasts them on E.T.A.'s radio station (WETA). For instance, he says Hal is "by all appearances addicted to everything that is not tied down, cannot outrun him, and is fittable in the mouth" (1074, fn 332). Ironically, the source of Wayne's sudden and bitter openness is the drug "Tenuate," which he takes accidently (983, fn 5a).[131] Phipps makes the point that "[t]his abrupt externalization of Wayne's private thoughts and feelings supplants the narratives that others have constructed on his behalf," but fails to account for a discursive continuity (87). E.T.A.'s player manual "invites [players] to see [them]selves as in utero and hype as thalidomide" (1012, fn 110). Wayne has been infected by the toxic, invasive hype all along. His tirade displaces his homeland as the predominant toxic site. E.T.A. sullies its inhabitants, as

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[130] Phipps reminds us that "Wayne is related in some undefined way to Bernard Wayne, the most reviled player in the history of the bizarre and deadly *le Jeu du Prochain Train*," a game that serves as a major recruiting tool for the A.F.R. (83).

[131] "Pemulis has discovered that his 'pilfered Tenuates in [Troeltsch's] Seldane bottle' are the reason Wayne 'lost his mind'" (Carlisle 398). Jim Troeltsch, Pemulis' roommate and Wayne's interviewee, is an aspiring sports broadcaster (doing his best Jim Gray impersonation in this exchange). Gray is best known for his 1999 interview with Pete Rose, in which he took an aggressive line with the disgraced all-time hits leader.

Wayne announces. The dressing down also serves the competitive function of preventing his peers from occupying his "ideal" position in the process of effectively undermining this very illusion.

Another number-one player entangled in polluted fame and O.N.A.N.'s toxic politics is Eric Clipperton, the Glock-wielding *enfant terrible* of the junior tennis circuit. Returning to Mario's film, the depiction of C.U.S.P.'s feint of mutually assured waste destruction "is actually a puppet-a-clef-type allusion to the dark legend of one Eric Clipperton and the Clipperton Brigade " (407). Clipperton attains notoriety for always bringing a gun on the court, with the stated intention of killing himself if defeated. This signature move is an iteration of Gentle's "threat to bomb his own nation and toxify neighbors in an insane pout over Canada's reluctance to take redemised title over O.N.A.N.'s very own vast dump" (407). "The Clipperton Brigade" are the opponents who collectively refuse to call Clipperton's bluff. Facing Clipperton is actually a kind of relief from the pressures to win because "the guys in the U.S.T.A. computer center [had] caught on to the Clipperton strategic M.O." (408). Winning or losing to him had no effect on national rankings. Clipperton represents a radical commitment to winning-at-all costs, although ironically his victories are easily won. O.N.A.N. unification disturbs the ritual of Clipperton's statistically irrelevant winning streak. The administrator of the newly founded "O.N.A.N.T.A. computer and ranking center […] didn't know enough not to treat Clipperton's string of six major junior-tournament championships that spring as sanctioned and real" (431). Clipperton resembles modern professional athletes like Lance Armstrong and Barry Bonds, except whereas their transgressions retrospectively taint or even disqualify their achievements, his retroactively garner him a top ranking. Before the

next tournament, he shows up at E.T.A. and ultimately "blows his legitimated brains out for real and all time" after a private meeting with Mario and James (433). The narrative does not provide an identifiable motive for this act, nor is it clear whether Clipperton's goal had been to secure the #1 ranking in the first place. Schtitt crudely converts the room where Clipperton ended his life into "the Clipperton Suite," a place "to maybe meditate on some of the other ways to succeed besides votaried self-transcendence and gut-sucking-in and hard daily slogging toward a distant goal you can then maybe, if you get there, live with" (434). The novel refuses such a straightforward moral for it is equally possible that Clipperton was nervous that a rankings-driven opponent might suddenly be willing to beat him. He does not allow the decision to be taken away from him. One thing is clear: unification produces Clipperton's endgame.

O.N.A.N. also produces a lot of waste. While I have mainly paid attention to the toxic sites of production, I have said little about the process beyond the aborted space plan and the existence of the Concavity. What happens to the waste? James O. Incandenza develops a homeopathic procedure, whereby "high-waste annulating fusion [is accomplished] by bombarding highly toxic radioactive particles with massive doses of stuff even more toxic than the radioactive particles" (572). Toxic waste is routinely sent to the Concavity in order to "keep fueling a process that constantly demands more toxic waste and grows progressively harder to control," as Hayles explains (688). If the regular infusion of toxins is cut off or curtailed, the Concavity would engulf the surrounding territory. James' most famous invention, *Infinite Jest (V?)* aka "The Entertainment," can be viewed through this ecological entropy. Spectators of this film are allegedly condemned to a horrifyingly infinite stasis: forever emptied of affect, they suffer a life

sentence. In a culture of mass distraction, where individuals watch their on-demand selections on teleputers for hours on end, "The Entertainment" is the excess that removes the viewer's sense that anything is being distracted *from*. The film utterly monopolizes the viewer's spectatorial desire. While "Wallace understands television not as being responsible for the decline of western culture but instead as a symptom of the damage wrought by that culture," "The Entertainment" represents a lethal opportunity to destroy "western culture" (Fitzpatrick 183). The terroristic A.F.R. therefore want to locate the film and deploy it as a tool for securing Québec's independence from O.N.A.N. To realize this goal, they plan to "acquire and replace" a team of "tennis children of Québec," enter E.T.A. grounds, and abduct "members of the immediate family of [James]" (845). The collision of the A.F.R. and E.T.A. narratives portends the annihilation of the players' celebrity futures. Orin is the only one in the Incandenza clan whom the A.F.R. definitely reaches. Two operatives imprison him in "a bathroom-type tumbler" and interrogate him about the whereabouts of the deadly cartridge (971). That this tumbler is described as "the size of a cage" recalls Lyle's idea that fame is a "cage" (971). Here the most famous athlete in the Incandenza family is literally trapped inside one. His attempts to escape disable the source of his success, the leg with which he punts footballs. The torturers extract information from him *1984*-style, releasing "sewer roaches" into the tumbler; faced with his "special conscious horror" (roaches) Orin steals Winston Smith's line (45). "Do it to her! *Do it to her!*'" he cries out, betraying an anonymous female (972, emphasis in original). Whether the A.F.R. ever get to Hal is as unclear as the pronoun in Orin's declarative scream. Hal's disastrous performance at the Arizona entrance interview might imply as much. With no single cause attributed, the

A.F.R. and DMZ drug coalesce, making manifest what is latent in the novel's toxic political economy: celebrity is produced, and ultimately governed by debt. The toxic political economy represented in the novel aligns the production of waste with the production of fame in order to elucidate the endless debts that organize social life within neoliberalism.

4.5 *Hideous* Double Binds

The poisonous impositions of celebrity underscore that no one is entirely exempt from debt's governing mechanisms. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is populated with far more anonymous characters than the fame-bound tennis phenoms of *Infinite Jest*. *Brief Interviews* nevertheless offers a critical allegory for the *rentier*-debtor dyad that animates the "genius grants." Wallace allegorizes the control granted to monopoly powers through the extractions of rent as a double-bind structure. The "hideous men" in *Brief Interviews* are interspersed throughout the collection, which dispenses its eponymous story in four sections. As in *Infinite Jest*, the questions are unknown; however, so too is the identity of the interviewer and interviewee(s). In *Infinite Jest*, Steeply interviews Orin and Bain, albeit in disguise as "Helen Steeply." The namelessness in *Brief Interviews* simulates the judgment-free zone of professional therapy. Moreover, it marks the exchanges as even more radically one-sided than a typical interview, since—unlike therapists—readers only have access to the content contributed by the interviewee. Marshall Boswell argues that the Q.-effect "puts the reader 'inside' the story as a character, making her a participant in the narrative's construction" (188). However, this "participatory" aesthetic is undone by the narrative

framing. The adjective "hideous" structures readerly contact with the men. They owe an explanation to the questioner, not to mention the text, which imposes the discursive constraints. Just as the "hideous men" live up to their billing through their misogyny, narcissism, sadism, and so on, "genius grant" recipients are expected to live up to their reputation. Despite the scare-quotes that deform it, "genius" subsequently informs how the work of the recipients is read. Denise Shekerjian reflects Boswell's notion of co-"construction" when she describes the allure of the fellowship program as "fairy-tale freedom" (xi). Her *Uncommon Genius: How Great Ideas Are Born* (1990) interviews 40 MacArthur winners in order to understand the nature of their creative activity. Like Boswell, she suggests that the imposition is actually enabling. While she intends "fairy-tale" to be a positive verdict, at least one of her interviewees gestures to the unreality of this "freedom." Journalist Tina Rosenberg says that the initial celebration that attends news of a MacArthur is followed by a sobering realization. "[T]rying to get any work done is a lot like typing on the top of a fresh piece of paper: 'This is the next brilliant article by the newest recipient of the MacArthur Award," Rosenberg attests, "What do you think will follow? Nothing" (162-63). Rosenberg limits the phenomenon to the day after, yet every winner is indefinitely indebted to the Foundation.

Wallace addresses the debt narrative into which his "genius grant" absorbs him through his critical representations of literary figures in *Brief Interviews*. "Death Is Not the End," the second story in the collection, depicts a poolside poet-protagonist, lying back on his laurels, which include being "among the first ten Americans to receive a 'Genius Grant' from the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation" (1). The "genius grant" is one of ten prizes and grants listed at the outset in association

with the poet, a list that includes "the coveted Nobel Prize for literature" (1, fn 1). As the best-known examples on the list, the Nobel and the MacArthur are the only two awards to merit adjectives ("coveted" and "prestigious"). Notably, the adjective in the case of the MacArthur is applied to the Foundation rather than the grant. Shifting the accent from the "genius grant" to the proper name of the Foundation symbolizes how the grant affixes itself to individuals. Wallace is probably also being cheeky, since readers of his biography at the back of the book will be aware that "[h]e was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and numerous other awards" (n. pag.). The "numerous awards" of the poet prevent the narrative from progressing, effectively reducing him to the sum of his accolades. His interiority is restricted to a footnote detailing his bitterness about not receiving a Guggenheim. The footnote indicates that he has been "thrice rejected" in his attempts to secure one, and refused to "go through the tiresome contemptible farce of 'objective' consideration ever again" (2, fn 2). These sore loser sentiments seem especially petty in the context of the luxurious setting, for instance "the deck's expensive Spanish ceramic tile" (2). Sizing up the potent cocktail of affluence and resentment, Zadie Smith articulates the following moral for the story: "God help the man who has chosen to worship himself! Whose self really *is* no more than the awards he has won, the prestige he has earned, the wealth he has amassed" (544, emphasis in original). Smith simply assumes that the narrative perspective is that of the poet, but as the final footnote puts it, "[t]hat is not wholly true" (4, fn 3). True, the poet may be an unsympathetic character; however, the story's satiric target is the genre of celebrity obituaries that the narrative parodies. It exaggerates the conventions of this genre in stretching two sentences over four pages and dwelling on mundane details, like the "middling quality

and expense" of the poet's watch (2). In so doing, it highlights the inflated rhetoric and vacuous content of such accounts.

"Death is not the end" for the poet; he will live on through a superficial history of the prizes he has won. The story makes no mention of his poetry. It does significantly allude to a *Newsweek* article "about USAir's tragic Flight 427" (Morthagnu et al. n. pag.). The story's concluding footnote ("that is not wholly true") modifies a sentence from the original article ("That is essentially true"), which supported the statement made by USAir's CEO, Seth Schofield, concerning the "dissimilar[ities]" between the five crashes involving USAir planes in five years (4 fn 3; Morthagnu et al. n. pag.). What Wallace's alteration suggests is that Schofield's defensive distinction "is not wholly true" because in each case, people died. The poet's prefabricated *postmortem* intersects with that of the sensationalized narrative afterlife of the crash victims,[132] whom the article's opening paragraph represents as "bits and pieces of 182 human beings scattered through the shattered trees and all around the flaming crater where the plane had fallen" (n. pag.). Wallace explicitly distinguishes his character from these real-life victims, mentioning that there are "no jets overhead" and concluding with a description of the surrounding "trees and shrubbery" as "silent living enclosing flora" (4). Nevertheless, the poet's death closes in. The first fact provided about him is his age ("fifty-six") (1). This fact is repeated, "an eminent American poet now four months short of his fifty-seventh birthday," after the allusion to the mortality-themed cross-section of *Newsweek* articles he reads (3). In addition to the Flight 427 piece, he comes across an article "about American health-care reform" and "a summary and favorable review of the popular nonfiction volumes *Hot Zone* and *The Coming Plague*" (2).

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[132] The article includes a transcript of the harrowing exchange between the pilots and air traffic control.

Although he is still living, the poet embodies the life-in-death of the indebted man. He suffers from what Wallace, surveying the cultural landscape of early-1990s America, describes to McCaffery as "death-by-acceptance" (McCaffery 31). "We love things to death, now," Wallace goes on, "[t]hen we retire to the Hamptons" (31). Wallace could not escape the conclusion that superficial responses to the avant-garde ("prescient art"), stemming from the insistent celebritization ("love") of authors, might inhibit (or cause the "death" of) their literary production(s) (31). The "death" of the poet's productions is implicit in the story's effacement of them. Left to lounge by the pool, which is an objective correlative for his adriftness in the narrative of Nobels, MacArthurs, and other plaudits (excepting the Guggenheim, of course), the poet is static.[133] The trebled root words "lay" and "recline" on the first page signal his passivity (1). He is not Lewis Hyde's animated gift-giver. It is not a coincidence that the character is a poet, since Wallace would have been aware of Hyde's reflection that "it was in the poetry world that I could see most clearly the disconnect between art and the common forms of earning a living" (xii). Wallace wants to follow Hyde, to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" in his own words, but simultaneously recognizes that as the debts structuring cultural production accrue, "earning a living" immobilizes artists (McCaffery 41). They are not special.

The genius branding reinforced precisely the type of turgid expectations of which Wallace was critical in his representations of the fate of tennis prodigies in *Infinite Jest*. In the marginalia from one of the accounting classes he audited while working on *The Pale King*, he writes: "I am a MacArthur Fellow. Boy am I scared. I feel like throwing

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[133] The collection is full of intertextual links and cross-references, in the fashion of a cycle; therefore, the representation of a subsequent character as "poetry in stasis" recalls the poet character from "Death" (245).

up. Why? String-free award—nothing but an avowal of their belief that I am a 'Genius.' I don't feel like a Genius" (Walls n. pag.). Wallace's denial is not a clever tax dodge. It speaks to the double bind that the "genius grants" present. Individual acknowledgments of genius are one thing. When Dave Eggers remarks that "[i]f we think it's our duty to read [*Infinite Jest*], it's because we're interested in genius," he counterbalances it with the claim that Wallace is "normal, and regular, and ordinary" (xiv, xvi). To stamp the individual artist as genius is quite another thing, especially in the absence of mutual recognition ("I don't feel like a Genius").

Wallace's hesitations and the contours of the double bind clearly manifest themselves in the most metafictive story in *Brief Interviews*, "Octet." Boswell characterizes the story "as the descriptive core of the book" (187). It is organized into a series of "pop quizzes," whose hypotheticals the reader is supposed to answer. Unlike the "Qs" in the "Brief Interviews" sequences, the questions are made explicit. For example, "Pop Quiz 4" presents "[t]wo late-stage terminal drug addicts" huddled together against the New England winter, and asks "[which] one lived" (131). Boswell identifies the story's debt to John Updike's "Problems" (1979). Wallace was no great admirer of Updike's literary agenda,[134] so it is somewhat predictable that he will problematize the original concept, as he does in "Pop Quiz 9." "Pop Quiz 9" is post-"Octet" numerically

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[134] "The first fictional clicks I encountered were in Donald Barthelme's 'The Balloon,'" Wallace tells McCaffery, "and in parts of the first story I ever wrote, which has been in my trunk since I finished it. I don't know whether I have that much natural talent going for me fiction wise, but I know I can hear the click, when there is a click. In Don DeLillo's stuff, for example, almost line by line I can hear the click. It's maybe the only way to describe writers I love. I hear the click in most Nabokov. In Donne, Hopkins, Larkin. In Puig and Cortázar. Puig clicks like a fucking Geiger counter. And none of these people write prose as pretty as Updike, and yet I don't hear the click in Updike" (35).

and post-postmodern[135] in its style. "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer," it begins (145). The reader-writer proceeds to deconstruct the premise, assessing its (failed) attempt to communicate "an urgency that you, the fiction writer, feel very . . . well, urgently, and want the reader to feel too" (147). What distinguishes Wallace's gambit from John Barth's rhetorical hall of metafictive mirrors is the destabilized author-subject (a reader *and* a writer). The "feeling" is mutual, but the double bind of self-conscious prose is an obstacle to its expression. Decisions thus assume a contingent status. On the one hand, the anti-Realist "Pop Quiz 9" updates Updike's formalist intention to "require [readers] to 'decide'"; on the other hand, it is "for [the author] to decide" whether reinforcing the reader's sense that "metacommentary is now lame and old news" allows for a genuine connection to be made (151, 159, fn 17). The fragility of choice, as well as the countervailing debts and double binds that the reader-writer experiences, explode in the ambivalent final line: "So decide" (160). So the story, like Wallace's post-"genius grant" *oeuvre*, borrows from the future it cannot fulfill, haunted by a decision already made on its behalf.

4.6 When Debt Does Its Part

The "genius grant" was on Wallace's radar as early as 1993, after he had finished a draft of *Infinite Jest*. "At three o'clock in the morning, when it's just me," Wallace admitted, "I have the fantasies of ticker tape parades and Poet Laureate of the Western World and MacArthur Grants and Nobel Prizes, […] you know, that type of stuff"

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[135] Jeffrey T. Nealon defines post-postmodernism as "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism [:] […] it's not a difference in *kind* as much as it is a difference in *intensity*" (ix-x, emphasis in original). Burn provides a longer history and his own definition of this term in the first chapter of *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008). See, especially (17, 19-24, and 132, fn 18).

(Kennedy and Polk 16). When the MacArthur dream came true, Wallace used the money to buy a Volvo and furnish part of a down payment on a house for a woman with whom he had just broken up (Max 268, 252).[136] He also attended a reunion for MacArthur Fellows in Chicago (Max 252). There were no parades, only a new and noteworthy chapter in Wallace's struggle with the meaning of immaterial accreditation. Had Wallace simply complained about the costs of fame, people would have little cause to listen or refrain from rolling their eyes. After all, few things are more obnoxious than the ungrateful winner. He consistently acknowledged his good fortune, for instance saying to Lipsky, "I'm *extraordinarily* lucky to be able to do this kind of work" (*Although* 196, emphasis in original). But in the next breath, as so often with Wallace, lurked the language of debt: "along with that luck comes a tremendous obligation to do the best, to do the very best I can" (*Although* 196). "Genius" proved to be an uneven obligation. He could resolve his doubts about the value of speaking to Lipsky and *Rolling Ston*e more generally by posing a question that implied volition, "why climb into the arena with this bull?" (*Although* 20). "It's good for Little, Brown [his publisher]," he answers, "I owe Little, Brown something, so" (*Although* 20). Wallace trails off, but his self-conscious statement unconsciously touches on the new mode of governance that Gilles Deleuze outlines in his "Postscript on Control Societies" (1990): "*Man is no longer the enclosed man, but the indebted man"* (179, emphasis in original). Debt surpasses more direct forms of coercion in "control societies" such as the contemporary United States. As Mark Fisher summarizes, "Deleuze distinguishes between the disciplinary societies described by Foucault, which were organized around […] enclosed spaces […] and the new control

[136] It immediately transformed into a toxic asset, as Max reports, "when [her] new boyfriend quickly moved in" (252).

societies, in which all institutions are embedded in a dispersed corporation" (22).[137] Wallace is not so much subjectified by the MacArthur (as an "institution") in a Foucauldian sense, as he is required to repay what he apparently does not owe. They cannot consign him to a particular "arena" of pop cultural celebrity; nevertheless, ironizing and thus imposing "genius" causes the term to take on a negative valence when it inevitably circulates beyond strictly literary systems of value.

Wallace recognized the fraught nature of the distinction he articulated between literature and other popular forms of entertainment, or systems of value. It would be "sad and scary" to maintain this distinction (Jacob 153). Fredric Jameson definitively collapses this distinction, theorizing that postmodernism(s) "efface […] the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (*Postmodernism* 2). Although he told McCaffery "I don't know much about Jameson," Wallace was an avid "pop-buyer" and pop purveyor (48). His journalism and fiction are comfortably part of what Jameson identifies as "the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern" (*Postmodernism* 2). Yet Wallace was equally cognizant in his middle-period essays and fiction of the myriad ways that fame contaminated the "purity" and "cleanliness" of "serious culture" (Jacob 153). Speaking of "serious culture," the title of *Infinite Jest* plainly alludes to the Prince of Denmark's meditations on Yorick in *Hamlet*'s (1604) final act. Yorick's jests were "infinite" because no matter how bad things were in Elsinore, he could always deliver the

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[137] Fisher is clearly referring to the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), as "enclosed spaces" are decidedly *not* the focus of *The Order of Things* (1966), for example. *The Order of Things* is not site specific. Foucault argues that all disciplines of thought are controlled by their own assumptions to the extent that disinterested knowledge is impossible.

comedic goods. In this light, his death is especially unsettling: a condemnation of the worst that had come. It is tempting to read Wallace's work—just as it is facile to interpret his suicide—along these lines. To read Wallace as this generation's "poor Yorick," with a talent for making people laugh at their consumptive desires. On the topic of fame, he was infinitely more earnest. And though he could not speak for everyone, his case exemplifies the fact that when the MacArthur affixes itself to the future of its recipients, however benign the goal and mutually beneficial the possible outcomes appear to be, the new set of expectations can be an exaction. The symbolic capital Wallace accrued through his "genius grant" became a toxic debt.

CHAPTER FIVE: "WE NEED THE MONEY": GEORGE SAUNDERS AND ORDINARY AMERICANS

> "Well, I don't want a brain award," said Robert.
> "Me too," said Gilbert. "I don't want a brain award either."
> "Unless they give money with it," said Robert.
> "Do they give money with it?" said Gilbert. "In that case maybe I'll take it"
>
> —George Saunders, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (2000)

1984 was a rough Christmas for George Saunders. So rough, in fact, that he published two accounts about working as a roofer during the holiday season. His 2003 *New Yorker* essay "Chicago Christmas, 1984" is virtually identical to the fictionalized version, a story called "Christmas" collected in 2006's *In Persuasion Nation*.[138] In 1984, he was "beyond broke, back in my home town, living in my aunt and uncle's basement," according to the opening paragraphs of both accounts ("Chicago" n. pag.; *Persuasion* 89).[139] The pieces are vintage Saunders—they are funny and compassionate, to channel book-blurb speak. They also demonstrate his interest in America's working class, although "working class" is not an identifier that critics or reviewers often use in connection with his writing.[140] The significance of this elision, along with the nature of Saunders' interest, is the starting point for my argument in this chapter. In the essay/story, John, a co-worker of the Saunders-narrator, embodies the abject poverty that frequently accompanies minimum-wage labour. There is no denying that the Saunders-narrator is also down and out, but—like George Orwell—his condition is relatively

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[138] I cite both versions in my opening paragraph to increase the impact of a significant amendment that Saunders makes to the ending of the narrative after he received his "genius grant."
[139] The reference to the uncle is removed from the story version.
[140] I use the term throughout this chapter in a Marxist sense to describe those maximally alienated from the means of production. Following Daniel Zamora, I also consider the unemployed to be members of the working class. For more on the rationale behind this decision, see Zamora (2013).

temporary.[141] "Christmas" foretells that his season on the brink will give way to something better (such as publication in a high-profile magazine like *The New Yorker*). By contrast, John's Christmas is rough because its central drama suggests the permanence of his poverty. A father of fourteen, John gambles away his entire month's pay plus holiday bonus at the company Christmas party. The Saunders-narrator understands his actions as a thwarted redemption narrative. John makes a failed attempt to simultaneously inhabit the roles of the ultimately benevolent Ebenezer Scrooge *and* his aid recipients, Bob Cratchit's clan;[142] however, John's desire for redemption is read as primarily driven by the personal resentments he has accrued. His antagonists are his supervisor (Vic/Rick) and the owner's brother (Gary/Terry) who taunt him mercilessly. They dismiss his claims to past roofing exploits and mock his current work ethic. They even tease him for the fact that he "'[h]as fourteen kids and lets the welfare pay,'" in order to encourage him to earn their respect and their money by gambling (*Persuasion* 91). Respect and money are often synonymous under capitalism, and the narrator realizes that just as John would never have their respect, he would never win their money. John's emotions prevent him from sharing this realization, as according to the Saunders-narrator: "John burned. They were going to see. They were going to see that the long years of wrongs done him had created a tremendous backlog of owed good luck, which was going to surge forward now, holy and personal" (*Persuasion* 95). John is the Saunders-narrator's apostle. Capitalism is a rigged game. The managerial class triumphs at the expense of the workers; the house always wins. Gambling takes on a purely symbolic

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[141] This is a nod to the title of Orwell's memoir about his experience of poverty, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).
[142] There is an allusion to a former boss' "Fezziwiggian presence" in the story (90). Mr. Fezziwigg is Scrooge's foil.

function in the essay/story, as the game itself is never identified. The point is that John is bound to lose. One possible structural (i.e., non-subjective) clue that John's defeat is not a choice is the Saunders-narrator's view of the city as "medieval, beautiful" (*Persuasion* 92). The hint at feudal era wealth distribution seems to be extinguished by the word "beautiful," but the Saunders-narrator subsequently dismisses such "poems that fizzled under the weight of their own bloat" (*Persuasion* 93). In other words, whereas "medieval" is realistic, "beautiful" is doggerel. A second structural clue is John's race. He is African-American and therefore disproportionately represented below the poverty line.[143] What really seems to separate John from the Saunders-narrator is perspective. The Saunders-narrator gleans two, rather pathetic, epiphanies from John's tribulations: 1. "in terms of money, I got it: money forestalled disgrace" and 2. "[a] light went on in my head and has stayed on ever since: It was all about capital" (*Persuasion* 94, 95). John's downturn inflects the Saunders-narrator's rise, following the zero-sum rule of neoliberal capitalism that thematizes throughout his work. The moral of the story lies in the Saunders-narrator's "decid[ing] to stop losing," which is repeated like a lullaby in the denouement (*Persuasion* 98). The "decision" here is empty as "[t]he losing goes on and on" regardless; still, the implications for John's fate are clear (*Persuasion* 98). He had an apparent choice, as he could have stopped gambling. The Saunders-narrator soon stops roofing. "I went somewhere else and started over, pulled head out of ass, made a better life," he proclaims (*Persuasion* 99). The narrator joins the ranks of the petite bourgeoisie.

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[143] According to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, "[b]lacks and Hispanics have poverty rates that greatly exceed the average. The poverty rate for all blacks and Hispanics remained near 30 percent during the 1980s and mid-1990s. Thereafter it began to fall. In 2000, the rate for blacks dropped to 22.1 percent and for Hispanics to 21.2 percent—the lowest rate for both groups since the United States began measuring poverty. By 2010, however, the poverty rate for both groups had risen to around 27 percent" ("Who is poor?" n. pag.).

"Basically, I've got stores," he tells us (*Persuasion* 99). Saunders becomes a celebrated author.

I begin with the "Christmas" essay/story because that is where Saunders claims his writing career began in earnest. Saunders was admitted to Syracuse's graduate creative writing program the year after his roofing sojourn (Lovell 27). Upon graduating in 1988, he took a job as a technical writer for an engineering firm in Rochester, Radian Corporation (Lovell 27). Memories of his winter roofing were never far behind him: "Having felt that abyss, I basically said, 'O.K., capitalism, I have seen your gaping maw, and I want no trouble with you'" (Lovell 27).[144] In a 2013 *New York Times Magazine* article hyping his fourth collection of short stories, *Tenth of December* (2013), Saunders tells Joel Lovell that he realized he needed a steady job in order to support his family. "You could see the way that wealth was begetting wealth, wealth was begetting comfort," he says, before echoing the first epiphany from his "Christmas" essay/story, "and that the cumulative effect of an absence of wealth was the erosion of grace" (Lovell 27). By the 1990s, despite having published a critically acclaimed short story collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), Saunders remained preoccupied with money concerns. He informs *Publishers Weekly* that "[e]ven two years ago […] I sat at this kitchen table reviewing my bills, going 'fuck, we literally can't make this come out'" (Bahr 323). If advanced publication in *The New Yorker* of the eponymous story from *Pastoralia* (2000) bailed his family out in that instance, Saunders' 2006 "genius grant" provided a more abiding measure of financial security. "Christmas" came out the same

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[144] It is also probably worth noting that Saunders hails "from a working-class background" (Bahr 322). Sarah Pogell, who has a forthcoming monograph on Saunders, connects this "background" to Saunders' job at Radian International: "His own upbringing in a working-class family certainly gave him plenty of firsthand experience of doing without in a society obsessed with consumption and power, and his first white collar job in corporate America exposed him to near-toxic doses of corporate jargon" (473).

year that Saunders got the grant, and its only substantive editorial amendment from the essay is in the final line. The memory that he "was once a joke of a roofer who worked with jerks, jerks who didn't like me, and who cheated a nice man out of his Christmas" transforms into one of "a joke of a roofer so beat down he once stood by watching as a nice man got cheated out of his Christmas" ("Chicago" n. pag.; *Persuasion* 99). Gone is the emphasis on the managerial class' active role. The "jerks […] who cheated a nice man out of his Christmas" give way to the narrator's being implicated, as he stands "by watching as a nice man g[e]t[s] cheated." Of course, John and the narrator are aligned as "beat down." But "beat down" by what, exactly? Capital is surely too broad a target, although fellow MacArthur recipient Junot Diaz insists that "no one […] has a better eye for the absurd and dehumanizing parameters of our current culture of capital" (qtd. in Lovell 25). Diaz's rendering of Saunders' vision comes on the heels of Lovell's large claim that "George Saunders is the writer for our time" (24). Lovell renders this time as

> a historical moment in which the country we live in is dropping bombs on people about whose lives we have the most abstracted and unnuanced ideas, and who have the most distorted notions of ours; or a time in which some of us are desperate simply for a job that would lead to the ability to purchase a few things that would make our kids happy and result in an uptick in self- and family esteem; or even just a time when a portion of the population occasionally feels scared out of its wits for reasons that are hard to name, or overcome with emotion when we see our children asleep, or happy when we risk revealing ourselves to someone and they respond with kindness. (24)

Lovell problematically limits his "we" to the middle class, which is after all the implied audience of any *New York Times Magazine* article. While Saunders' audience may be the similarly classed, his fiction illustrates the fallacy of thinking that "the ability to purchase a few things" carries any real meaning. He does not seem to share Lovell's belief that the source of 'our' fears are "reasons that are hard to name." He names the source as economic throughout his fiction: the plight of the poor and working class in neoliberal America—a precarity that has begun to trickle up.

In this chapter, I make no claim for the representativeness of Saunders' work; rather, I investigate how his fiction inhabits this America and inhibits defenses of the status quo. "This America" is represented in the outsized monetary reward attached to the "genius grants," which is symptomatic of the widening gap between the rich and the poor. I argue that Saunders glimpses the class violence that is abetted by the program's valorization of the entrepreneurial spirit. His characters are often failed entrepreneurs, whose essential passivity is the product of a system that more closely resembles a lottery than a meritocracy. "Genius grant" recipients are not entrepreneurs *per se*, but the lucrative and atomistic confirmation of their work advances an entrepreneurial fantasy of economic agency inaugurated during Ronald Reagan's presidential reign. The fantasy is exemplified in Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy, wherein merit is reducible to money. In Rand's world, rewarding the industrious entrepreneur requires stigmatizing the working class as covetous. Saunders writes against Rand and the MacArthur's neoliberal narrative throughout his fiction. *CivilWarlLand in Bad Decline* constructs the archetypal Saunders' character, the loser whose submissiveness is a comic inversion of Rand's ascription of economic agency to entrepreneurs—an ascription that ignores the rigidity of

the neoliberal class structure. *Pastoralia* follows through on this anti-Objectivism, assailing the entrepreneurial myth of class mobility. Laughing at the immobile losers would problematically reinforce classism, which is why *In Persuasion Nation*'s take down of consumerism is essential, as it depicts consumer goods as hollow compensations for the political inertness of the poor and working class. Saunders' "consumer realism" helps reveal that the "genius grants" meet the commodity mandate of keeping class considerations under erasure.

5.1 The Ordinary and Extraordinary Class Structure in "Our Time"

Credible surveys of the contemporary American political landscape do not downplay the importance of class. For example, Kim Moody joins David Harvey in tracing a history of neoliberal class differentiation back to

> New York City in the mid-1970s [which] was a sort of rehearsal for the larger neoliberal reorganization of national priorities that would take place in the United States under Ronald Reagan and in the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher. Restraint on social spending, privatization, deregulation, and *most importantly*, the reassertion of class power. (18, emphasis added)

This "reassertion" demands a corresponding change to our intellectual priorities, according to Slavoj Žižek. Žižek declares that "[t]he old narrative of postmodern politics was: from class essentialism to the multitude of struggles for identity" (*Iraq* 98).

"Today," he continues, "the trend is finally reversed" (*Iraq* 98).[145] The task is then to think through class struggle rather than simply pointing to its persistence. Yet Žižek is aware of the obstacles to restoring class-consciousness in academic discourse and the political sphere. Elsewhere, he approvingly quotes Wendy Brown's critical question from *States of Injury* (1995):

> to what extent do identity politics require a standard internal to existing society against which to pitch their claims, a standard that not only preserves capitalism from critique, but sustains the invisibility and inarticulateness of class—not incidentally, but endemically? (qtd. in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 96)

The antidote to "the invisibility and inarticulateness of class" is to continue to critically theorize about capitalism—to reckon with the social reproduction of inequality that capitalism requires.[146] This reckoning begins with the free-market universalism that seeks to conceal the class structure. My chapter springs from the conviction that literary critics have the responsibility to make class violence prominent in their readings, particularly

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[145] For a further salvo in this polemic, see the "Theoretical state apparatuses" (225-29) section of Žižek's *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001). He claims that the American version of English Cultural Studies maintains "the same themes, notions, and so on, [but] the socio-ideological functioning is completely different: we shift from an engagement with real working-class culture to academic radical chic" (226).

[146] Identity politics and structural critique are not mutually exclusive. In the story and essay with which I began this chapter, John's experience of poverty is exacerbated by his racial identity. Nevertheless, I think that critical discussion of the class struggle should never limit itself to the race, gender, sexuality of the oppressed because, borrowing from Wendy Brown, this "sustains the invisibility" of the capitalist class structure (qtd. in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 96). John is undoubtedly the victim of racism. Capitalist social relations enable many forms of oppression: racism, sexism, and homophobia are primary examples; highlighting these forms is important, but should not be confused with structural critique. The point is to understand how and why capitalism as a system is able to exploit antagonisms between the exploited. For evidence of a disinclination to structural understandings, consider Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's remark in the preface to the English edition of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) regarding the "[a]bandonment of any reference to capitalism in the 1980s" (xii). Such "invisibility" is a hallmark of neoliberalism and a source of strength for the capitalist system.

when its consequences—as in the case of Saunders—so conspicuously inform the aesthetic.

At its root, neoliberalism's naturalization of the free market depends upon a decentralizing dialectic. Neoliberals strive to discredit central planning. Foucault identifies a major pretext for the development of neoliberal ideology in the failure of socialist economies to manage market outcomes (78-95). He paraphrases Friedrich Hayek's position, which "rules out the existence of any universal subject of economic knowledge who could have, as it were, a bird's eye view of all the economic processes [and] define their ends" (173). As my chapter on Colson Whitehead's critique of human capital conveyed, power is invested in the atomistic economic agent, i.e., *homo economicus*. As Foucault puts it, "[*h*]*omo economicus* strips the sovereign of power inasmuch as he reveals an essential, fundamental, and major incapacity of the sovereign, that is to say, an inability to master the totality of the economic field" (292). Faith in the authority of the market system is defended in the name of individual agency, which the sovereignty of the market allegedly grants. However, the class structure that market valorization attempts to conceal negates the agency of the working class.

Commodity relations are a major obstacle to recognizing this negation, especially given the dual role of money. All instances of commodity exchange contribute to the *de*-totalization of "the economic field." What sets money apart is that it divides society into oppositional classes while simultaneously serving as a means of equivalence. Marx highlights the contradictory nature of money, which "is the true agent of separation and the true cementing power" (qtd. in McNally 151). The "string-free" metaphor favoured by the MacArthur Foundation in the context of the "genius grants" capitalizes on the

contradiction. It fetishizes this freedom as divisive, "separating" the recipients from the non-recipients, while relying on its "cementing" effect, an equalization of their appeal. More mundanely, money bears the string-free promise in its very form insofar as acts of commodity exchange seem to temporarily liberate spenders from their class positions. Money thus appears to flatten social life, in the spirit of Georg Lukács' definition of reification:

> The distinction between a worker faced with a particular machine, the entrepreneur faced with a given type of mechanical development, the technologist faced with the state of science and the profitability of its application to technology, is purely quantitative; it does not directly entail *any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness*. (98, emphasis in original)

Reification unifies distinct capitalist labourers (worker, entrepreneur, technologist) in a fragmented "structure of consciousness". The division of labour operates within a totality that positions different forms of knowledge. It is a chain of interrelated dependences and imperatives, which masks the fact that it is contingent, "ruled by chance" (Lukács 102). Like commodity relations revolving around money, the atomistic field of social action appears orderly and ordinary. Money and the commodity relations it fortifies suppress each individual's ability to grasp the totality of the class structure.

The ideological redeployment of the ordinary American, an archetypal figure featured in many of Saunders' stories, testifies to neoliberalism's desire to eliminate economic position as a critical frame of reference. The figure of the ordinary American predates neoliberalism, and can be traced back to Crèvecoeur's Farmer James in the

American literary tradition.[147] Whereas Crèvecoeur references relative income equality, ordinary Americans are no longer delimited in terms of their economic position. Instead, the ordinary American has become an affective category. The ideological reinterpretation of this literary archetype in contemporary American political discourse can be understood through Raymond Williams' polemic in *Culture and Society* (1958): "There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (300). The "ways of seeing" today's ordinary Americans are predominantly non-economic. Stuart Hall anticipates this myopia when he describes the electoral appeal of Reagan and Thatcher with the phrase "'authoritarian populism'" (127). Hall highlights how purportedly populist values, such as the nuclear family and personal safety, were enlisted to support authoritarian policies like those associated with Reagan's War on Drugs. Reference to class effectively disappears in the discussion of these populist values. Take the Tea Party, whose anti-tax agenda aligns with the ruling class' desire to keep the economy depoliticized. Tea Partiers and their ordinary American brethren care more about the budget than the Gini coefficient[148] because their beliefs are more closely tied to their cultural identity than

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[147] For all its contradictions, *The American Farmer* (1782) plants the seeds of the ordinary American as archetype, "animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained because each person works for himself" as Letter III ("What Is an American?") asserts (n. pag.). He is "ordinary" because his identity is not conferred upon him—his industriousness (re)produces it. Notably, Farmer James frames the image of the self-reliant American after concluding the previous passage with the claim that "[t]he rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe" (n. pag.). Hard work alone is not enough—a more level economic ground allows the ordinary American to till and thrive.

[148] As defined on the website of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "The Gini [coefficient] measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution […] A Gini [coefficient] of zero represents perfect equality and 100, perfect inequality" ("Gini" n. pag.).

their economic position.[149] This identity is rooted in mistrust of the government and faith in the free market.[150] Thomas Frank reveals this line of thinking by citing the assessment of a so-called ordinary American, Blake Hurst, president of the Missouri Farm Bureau Federation. Writing in the right-wing *American Enterprise* journal, Hurst approvingly notes that for ordinary Americans, "'[c]lass-consciousness isn't a problem'" as they are "'perfectly happy to be slightly overweight [and] a little underpaid'" (*Kansas* 26). Put differently, legitimate class *ressentiment* is sacrificed to interpellation in post-political discourse as what Frank earlier identifies as "the *real* America" (*Kansas* 18, emphasis in original). The only classes that Hurst and his ilk recognize are "'ordinary people' and 'intellectuals'" (*Pity the Billionaire* 90). The negative valence of "intellectual" might come across in the scare-quotes that often house genius in popular discussions of the topic. More to the point, the "genius grants" are consistent with the big winners-invisible losers[151] formula of neoliberal capitalism.

The notion that poor people should shut up and work harder has been dispelled through the findings of Emmanuel Saez, Thomas Piketty, and Anthony Atkinson. Their research into income distribution and inequality illustrates that the financial crisis did nothing to diminish the political capital of the ruling class. For example, a report co-

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[149] Žižek sees this as evidence of "a masterful ideological manipulation: the Tea Party agenda is fundamentally irrational in that it wants to protect the interests of hardworking ordinary people by privileging the 'exploitative rich,' thus literally countering their own interests" ("Who is responsible" n. pag.). The Tea Party is bankrolled by Charles and David Koch, two of the seven richest people in the world.

[150] Racist notions of white supremacy are often a further unifying element, obscuring intra-class and inter-racial exploitation. Kimberlè Crenshaw might be describing a typical Tea Party member when she writes that "race consciousness makes it difficult—at least for whites—to imagine the world differently. It also creates the desire for identification with privileged elites. By focusing on a distinct, subordinate 'other,' whites include themselves in the dominant circle—an arena in which most hold no real power, but only their privileged racial identity" (qtd. in Bell, *Faces* 8). For a study of the role of whiteness and white racism in Tea Party propaganda, see Darrel Enck-Wanzer's "Barack Obama, The Tea Party, and the Threat of Race: On Racial Neoliberalism and Born Again Racism" (2011).

[151] The nominees for the award are not publicized; therefore, the identity of the "losers" is unknown and can be generalized.

authored by Saez and Piketty entitled "Striking it Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States" (2012) suggests that the political capital of the ruling class is actually on the rise. In a *Washington Post* blog, Dylan Matthews reproduces one of Saez and Piketty's tables that highlights the key findings of the report. Notably, people in the top 1% of the income distribution realized 95% of the income gains between 2009 and 2012 (Matthews n. pag.). Matthews observes that 2008 to the present thus marks "a big change from past recessions and recoveries" (Matthews n. pag.). It marks a ruling class hegemony that is unprecedented in modern American history. The report confirms Atkinson's assessment in *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (2015) that an "inequality turn" started in the early 1980s (3). Timothy Noah dubs this "turn" "the great divergence," a thirty-plus year period in which "the difference in America between being rich and being middle class became much more pronounced" (1).[152]

5.2 An Entrepreneurial Foundation

"The great divergence" is concealed in the celebration of entrepreneurialism, which supposedly enables individuals to transcend the inequitable distributive logic of the class structure. The MacArthur Foundation endorses the notion that entrepreneurialism is an economic virtue. MacArthur's son, Roderick, and William Kirby (the lawyer who had encouraged MacArthur to endow the Foundation) devised the idea for the program in 1978. They were inspired by a letter they had received from Dr.

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[152] Jennifer Ashton's recent research supports the findings of Atkinson, Saez, and Piketty: "Between 1973 and 2011 productivity grew 80%, enough, as a 2012 report by the Economic Policy Institute puts it, 'to generate large advances in living standards and wages if productivity gains were shared.' The gains, however, were only narrowly shared: '[T]he annual earnings of the top 1% grew 156% [and] the remainder of the top 10% had earnings grow by 45%,' while the median hourly compensation during the same four decades grew only 10%" (n. pag.).

George Burch, Kirby's doctor and then a dean at Tulane University. Burch's letter posited that "impressing review committees and dealing with pressure to publish [are] a waste of time" (qtd. in Freund 54). Kirby was impressed, and brought to the attention of the Foundation's board of directors a 1976 editorial in the *American Heart Journal* by Burch. Burch's editorial, "Of venture research," discusses the strong correlation between unfettered thought and knowledge production. He questions the integrity of the existing funding structure undergirding (especially) scientific research. Observing that grant applications do not necessarily lead to "high quality research," Burch champions "venture research," which he defines as "research in the search of knowledge for the sake of knowledge" (681). So as not to be confused with an advocate of navel-gazing, or non-instrumental knowledge, Burch makes it clear that the "'gamble[s]'" of venture research will yield some significant returns (682). He lists the Curies and Alexander Fleming as exemplars of the kind of work that venture research can inspire. The fellowship program would follow Burch not only in unifying its diverse array of recipients according to the capacious concept of "creative thinking," but also in its nationalism (682). For both the program and Burch, in the latter's words, "the strength of America resides in the minds of Americans" (682). Roderick was not overly creative in explaining the program to *Newsweek* in 1979, as he lifts an example straight from Burch: "Albert Einstein could not have written a grant application saying he was going to discover the theory of relativity. He needed to be free," said Roderick (qtd. in Kriplen 175).[153] The fellowship program's association with genius was cemented when Roderick went on to say that "our aim is to

[153] "What committee could have reviewed Einstein's thoughts in advance of their creation?" asks Burch (682). How about the Rockefeller Foundation? As a former Rockefeller employee, Elizabeth McCormick relays, "in responding to a letter from Albert Einstein requesting $500, John D. Rockefeller Sr. instructed Frederick T. Gates: 'Let's give him $1,000. He may be on to something'" (Fleishman 178).

support individual genius and to free those people from the bureaucratic pettiness of academia" (qtd. in Garber 71). As consistently as it has denied the association with genius since Roderick made these remarks, the Foundation has invoked a venture capitalist model that conflates money and merit in order to justify the larger, libertarian goal he articulates. For many years, the Foundation purported to provide "venture capital for intellectual, social and artistic endeavors" through the fellowship program (qtd. in Scott, "MacArthur" n. pag.).[154] Although it expects no direct fiscal return on its investment in individuals who carry out such "endeavors," the Foundation adds value to its investees in the manner of the venture capitalist via the "genius grant" imprimatur. It is perhaps no coincidence that for many years the amount of the fellowships ($500,000) corresponded to the textbook amount of "Seed Round funding" in venture capitalist arrangements (Freeman 154).[155] It is certainly no coincidence that the venture capitalist paradigm adopted by the fellowship program upon its founding in 1981 corresponds to the most explosive period of growth in American venture capitalism.

Given the entrepreneur-worship central to discussions of American knowledge production in the decades up to and including the establishment of the fellowship program, it becomes easier to see how it was more than the Roderick's statement in *Newsweek* that connected the undertaking with genius. An entire ideology aligning creative work, autonomy-oriented funding, and American progress had emerged. This ideology is exemplified in Ronald Reagan's first inaugural address. In it, Reagan laid out his vision for an independent (less government) and initiative-driven (more

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[154] As I note in a forthcoming chapter of a collection of essays on *Negative Cosmopolitanisms*: "The Foundation appears to have dropped the term 'venture capital' from its official rhetoric sometime around 2006. The venture capital model prevails despite this change. Perhaps the term 'venture capital' carried too explicit an association with risk, which would have taken on an especially negative valence in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis" (see footnote 30).

[155] $500,000 was the amount between 2000 and 2013 (*Poets*).

entrepreneurs) economy.[156] As he spoke from the west portico of Capitol Hill, shaded by the memorials of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, Reagan constructed his own pillars for rediscovering and sustaining America's reputed exceptionalism: military hegemony abroad and economic recovery at home. The 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) is anticipated several times during the Inaugural.[157] Reagan's first signature piece of legislation reduced income tax rates by 25% over three years, and lowered corporate rates by 12% (Berman 3).[158] This reduction was intended to foster a favourable environment for the sort of risky investments that are the lifeblood of venture capitalism. After thanking Jimmy Carter for his service—one is tempted to observe, since Reagan makes mention of "one of the worst sustained inflations in our national history" directly after this gambit, that the sincerity of his gratitude is akin to that of an arrestee thanking a police officer for protecting his head from hitting the top of the squad car—Reagan

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[156] I justify my extended treatment of Reagan not only due to the simultaneity of reign and the founding of the fellowship program, but also along similar lines to Larry Berman in "Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency" (1990): "no president since Franklin D. Roosevelt had a greater impact on the American political system than did Ronald Reagan" (3). For instance, George H.W. Bush campaigned on the promise of "'no new taxes,'" and no lip-reading is required to discern the massive tax cuts in the highest income brackets during George W. Bush's two terms (quoted in McClure 167). Paul Krugman summarizes the trend in taxes on wealthy individuals (corporations included) from Reagan to Bush II as follows: "Between 1979 and 2006 the top tax rate on earned income was cut in half; the tax rate on capital gains was cut almost as much; the tax rate on corporate profits fell by more than a quarter" (257). Elsewhere he writes that "the 2001 Bush tax cuts included a phaseout of the estate tax, with rates going down and exemptions going up, concluding with a total elimination of the tax in 2010. In other words today's Republican party is willing to go further than the Republican party of the 1920s, the last, golden years of the Long Gilded Age, in cutting taxes on the wealthy" (162). Returning to my opening, without estate taxes, the MacArthur Foundation might never have existed.

[157] The other three supposedly sea-changing pieces of legislation often cited are the 1978 Revenue Act, the Small Business Investment Incentive Act (1980), and ERISA's 'Safe Harbor' Regulation (1980). See, Bygrave and Timmons (25).

[158] M. Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine M. McDonnell state that "reducing marginal tax rates was the cornerstone of Reagan's economic ideology" (141). See, also Charles E. McClure's claim that "the most obvious feature of Ronald Reagan's tax policy can be summarized in three words: lower marginal rates" (156). "In many ways," McLure writes, "the administration of Ronald Reagan is likely to be seen as a watershed in the history of tax policy in the United States" (169). Perhaps a dilapidated levee is a more fitting image, although McClure might be a little biased, having worked in the Treasury Department under Reagan. Weatherford and McDonnell also observe that "Reagan's is not a purposely selfish philosophy, but its twin pillars—suspiciousness of government and faith in individual acquisitiveness—define its significance" (151).

makes it immediately about the economy, stupid ("Ronald" par. 3). "The business of our nation goes forward," he claims (par. 3). "These United States are confronted with an economic affliction of great proportions" (par. 3). The cure for this "affliction," soon emerges in Reagan's speech: "Those who do work are denied a fair return for their labor by a tax system which penalizes successful achievement and keeps us from maintaining full productivity" (par. 4). Taxes, those neoliberal vampires, drain American ingenuity, as they act as a disincentive for private enterprise. The ERTA was intended to suture the wound and diminish vampirical activity.[159] So the cost of this alleged bloodsucking is not lost, Reagan stakes national progress on an unfettered market that had historically allowed America to "unleash the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before" (par. 16). Productivity supposedly increases as tax rates decrease. In his "inventory" of those "who dream heroic dreams" implicitly impossible in centrally administered societies like the United States' Cold War rival, entrepreneurs are the only ones identified via their vocation: "There are entrepreneurs with faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth and opportunity" (par. 18). These are the "heroes" upon whose initiative the MacArthur Foundation, not to mention America, invests its hope for a better future.[160] Reagan's supply-side dogma was rationalized as a means for keeping these entrepreneurs competitive in a global marketplace where the policies of competing nations were believed to put Americans at a

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[159] As Reagan would say during his first month in office, "'the taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change'" (quoted in McClure 157). In other words, government is a business like any other.

[160] At a considerable cost, I must observe, to the non-Elect: "A 1985 Brookings Institution study found that only for the most affluent fifth of the nation did the portion of family income going to federal income tax between 1980 and 1985 shrink. For middle- and lower-income taxpayers it increased" (Berman 11). Berman later brings up a telling statement made by David Stockman, former director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) under Reagan as evidence that the 1981 tax cuts constituted "a Trojan Horse to help the rich: 'None of us really understand what's going on with these numbers'" (10).

disadvantage. While exempt from Reagan's explicit political calculus, Michael Porter echoes his bald nationalism in *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990). "'Invention and entrepreneurship are at the heart of national advantage,'" writes Porter (125). Those Americans disadvantaged by Reagan's policies do not factor into Porter's equation.

The other pillar of Reagan's national rebuilding project, the military "heroes" who are to disperse and defend American prosperity abroad, is linked to economic reform through that favourite American catch-all: freedom. According to Reagan, freedom is both the military's most "formidable" weapon,[161] and the wealth-spring of domestic, entrepreneurial renewal (par. 29). Reagan's invocation of "freedom" recalls Roderick's rendering of the utopian purpose of the fellowship program: individual autonomy as a mode of delivering social good. The speech also follows through on an agenda that Reagan famously articulated during his California gubernatorial campaign in 1966. The so-called Californian Ideology (CI) sought to establish a "Creative Society" that could compensate for the flawed promises of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. It differed from the small government stance that would define his Presidential rhetoric more so than his actual policies,[162] as the "Creative Society" would be fostered by boosts in federal spending;[163] however, the recipients targeted, principally Hollywood and Silicon Valley, were like the entrepreneurs touted in the Inaugural: affiliated with dream factories more

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[161] Reagan says that "above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women" (par. 29).

[162] Noam Chomsky is fond of reminding Republicans of the gap between Reagan's rhetoric and his policies. In this section, I am discussing continuities between the two; nevertheless, evidence for Chomsky's claim abounds. For instance, "under the Reagan watch, the size of the federal deficit soared, the civilian work force increased, and government spending rose to over a trillion dollars (an increase of $321 billion)" (Berman 7).

[163] Despite this fairly obvious distinction between Reagan's state and national spending agendas, Weatherford and McDonnell can still claim that "when [Reagan] ran for governor of California, his ideas on major economic policy issues were fully formed and remained essentially constant thereafter" (125). Perhaps entrepreneurs are akin to those "deserving poor" (aka not African-Americans), whom Reagan's funding strategies were designed to assist.

than actual ones, technical wizards more than conventional workers.[164] There have been various manifestations of the CI since Reagan's policy forecasts. Nevertheless, the fundamental ambiguity that I align above with market liberalism funded by government intervention has persisted.[165] The persistence of this ambiguity derives from its rootedness in the contradictory Jeffersonian ideals of individualism and property, the two principles that Reagan would later couch his dismantling of redistributive programs in. Indeed, Reagan's major influence in laying out the CI, not to mention in crafting his first Inaugural, was Thomas Jefferson.[166] Jefferson's model of the self-sufficient individual, which speciously contains no acknowledgment of a cooperative social reality, is duplicated in the entrepreneurial virtue at the core of the CI. Like Jefferson, these lauded entrepreneurs "often have an inflated sense of their own resourcefulness in developing new ideas and give little recognition to the contributions made by the state, their own labour force, or the wider community" (Barbrook and Cameron 55). Such elitist notions make the ambiguity of the CI possible, just as they explain, but will never justify, Jefferson's myopia—beating the drum of self-sufficiency on the one hand, while enslaving the African-American individuals who laboured on his Virginia plantation on the other. The market discipline that rewards the self-sufficient individual is never absolute; there are an abundance of (il)legitimate means for securing it. In other words,

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[164] Anyone who has read Nathaniel West's savage takedown of Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), could not plausibly argue that the myth of Hollywood's ethereality is anything more than a myth. Moreover, one should not be unaware of the global atrocities of wage slavery that drive the production of Silicon Valley products. For instance, as Jason Haslam has brought to my attention, an Apple factory in Shenzhen, China addressed the issue of on-site worker suicides by affixing nets to prevent workers from leaping to their deaths. The term "sweatshop" is hardly capable of capturing the sheer abjection of those who labour in one. My point here is not to reinforce the "Creative Society's" logic, but just to point out the assumptions that have guided it.

[165] For a sustained critique of this ambiguity, see Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's "The Californian Ideology" (1995).

[166] For more on the rhetorical parallels between the first inaugurals of Reagan and Jefferson, see Gregg Phifer's "Two Inaugurals: A Second Look" (1983) and Bert E. Bradley's "Jefferson and Reagan: The Rhetoric of Two Inaugurals" (1983).

both the CI and the celebrated freedom of the entrepreneur are incoherent without some form of dependence, whether on venture capital or government funding.

5.3 Economic Losers

Material dependencies and the exploitative logic of capitalism are clearer when the class structure is kept in view. Saunders renders the exploited, non-winners visible throughout his fiction. Like Raymond Carver before him, Saunders represents those on the wrong side of the divergent tract that I described above in reference to the work of Atkinson, Saez, Piketty, and Noah.[167] But Saunders uses economic signifiers—job titles, wage rates, personal debt, corporate governance, and so on—far more explicitly and consistently than Carver in his representations of ordinary Americans.[168] Although both writers reject the class negation of neoliberal political discourse as diagnosed by Thomas Frank, Saunders stretches his minimalism to the length of the absurd. His realism, then, departs from Carver because it is estranging.

Reviewers and critics are more fond of locating Saunders in the speculative tradition, praising him for providing glimpses of another world.[169] His world-building insistently exaggerates economic allusions—insisting, that is, on the fact that the lives of ordinary Americans can only be made real with such referents. Saunders couples their ordinariness with economic powerlessness, which distinguishes him from "his postmodern precursors," according to Sarah Pogell (473). "[F]or people whose material

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[167] Saunders acknowledges the influence of Carver in the author's note accompanying the second edition of *CivilWarLand*: "Sometimes I did Hemingway, if Hemingway had lived in Syracuse, which, to me, sounded like Carver" (qtd. in Lovell 27). Indeed, Saunders followed in Carver's footsteps as a teacher in (as well as a product of) Syracuse's Creative Writing department.
[168] Steve Finbrow also describes Saunders' characters as "ordinary" in a review essay (493).
[169] See, for example, Cheney (2003), Finbrow (2006), and Pogell (2011).

'reality' is a struggle," observes Pogell, "their problems are real" (473). Sean Bernard thus misses the mark when he identifies the passivity of *CivilWarLand*'s protagonists and narrators as an aesthetic problem. He lambastes the collection's Manichean formula: "take one reality where cruel people are in charge and can do whatever they want to the weak, put a weak protagonist in an impossible situation, torture him, and end with a moment of illumination" (53). While Bernard acknowledges that the stories are entertaining, he takes issue with the praise lavished on the book because Saunders supposedly offers no more than "cruel visions of worlds that do not exist, visions that elicit inexpensive laughs by creating absurd distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' people and our own expectations of how these concepts should operate. Bad wins, good loses. Har har har" (57). Bernard fails to see the critical purpose of this trope, claiming that "one reason that the collection is so celebrated is that it *doesn't* read like social commentary" (55, emphasis in original). Another unsympathetic reviewer, Ron Tanner, does not consider whether the world which Saunders evokes *does* exist. He avers that "Saunders' primary strength is his invention," after following Bernard in derisively glossing the stories' shared plot outline (96). By the end of *CivilWarLand*, he claims "that we're left wondering why this writer plays only a single, simple melody" (96). The "melody" that Saunders "plays" should be recognized as "social commentary," given the class dimensions of the structuring conflicts. *Capital* wins; *Labour* loses.

The opening paragraph of the *CivilWarLand*'s title story quickly clues us in to the economic themes that drive Saunders. In it, the narrator is tasked with leading "a potential big investor," Mr. Haberstrom, on a "tour" of the Civil War theme park (3). The narrator's subservient position is a microcosm for the park's dependence on such

investors, as the park has "no budget to correct" the various manifestations of its "decline" (3). Most damaging among these manifestations are the gangs that rove the park, defacing company property and terrorizing customers. The title is misleading insofar as the narrative focus is not on the park's owner, the "self-made man" Mr. Alsuga, whose prized commodity is collapsing (4); rather, we follow a narrator whose precarious employment as "a lowly Versimilitude Inspector" necessitates ethically uncompromising behaviour (4). To wit, Mr. Alsuga asks him to address the gang problem by striking up a vigilante unit capable of "fight[ing] fire with fire" (5). This request is framed with mention of the detail that "staff is going to be let go in droves" should the bottom line not improve (5). Unsurprisingly, Ned Quinn, the employee originally chosen to lead this unit, is "dirt-poor with six kids" (7). This fact recommends him, as the owner notes how they "need someone between a rock and a hard place" (7). The narrator finds himself in the same position when Quinn and his outfit are bested by one of the gangs, and the owner selects an employee named Sam as Quinn's replacement. Arming Sam is a dubious proposition since he was allegedly dishonorably discharged from the Vietnam War "for participating in a bloodbath" (14). The owner rebuffs the narrator's concerns with disconcerting economics: "Revenues have hit rock bottom and his investors are frothing at the mouth. There's talk of outright closure and liquidation of assets" (15). This suffices for an argument and Sam is commissioned. Sam's subsequent killing spree is abetted by a corporate cover-up that the narrator helps perpetrate. Mr. Alsuga makes it clear that it is only this silence that saves the narrator from joining "the droves of unemployed huddled in front of Personnel every morning" (18). The narrative economy of the story permits a gesture to these "droves" as an explanatory key for the narrator's

submissiveness, but no further representation of them. The narrative economy thus symbolizes economic norms under neoliberalism, whereby unemployment serves as a structural necessity for limiting wages and increasing profits.

Job insecurity is invoked in nearly every story in the collection as a device for securing the passivity of the central characters. In "The Wavemaker Falters," the narrator's boss "wants to terminate [him]" after a transgression; however, the narrator's wife (also a park employee) "has a serious chat with [the boss] about [their] mortgage" (42). This results in a demotion, not to mention the escalation of an affair between the wife and their boss, which the narrator feels understandably helpless to confront. "The 400-Pound CEO" features Tim, a "ruthless CEO" who announces his authority by wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan "I HOLD YOUR PURSE STRINGS IN MY HOT LITTLE HAND" (45, 47). Tim violently asserts this power by assaulting insubordinate employees before firing them, and absconding with a female employee into "a torture chamber" that he has built "in the corporate basement" (54). When the narrator accidentally kills Tim and assumes his job title, his humane alternative to Tim's reign is short-lived. His crime uncovered, the corporate utopia goes under. This ending suggests that the former CEO's psychotic behaviour reflects less on Tim as an individual and more on the mandate of his position. The narrator is not the man for the job because he is not "ruthless" enough. The elderly protagonist in "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror" is ruthless enough to anticipate her wrongful dismissal from her maintenance job at a museum by secretly poisoning her supervisor's "main career asset," see-through cows (79). If she cannot be characterized as passive in this regard, her pending unemployment at most allows her a momentary agency. The story concludes with her

rationalizing suicide after her dismissal. “Oh heavens, why prolong it, I’ve no income now,” she reasons (87). This interior monologue precedes an ambiguous final sequence in which she “step[s] off the pier” only to seemingly be rescued “by nine or ten of the Navy boys, who want to save [her], and do, and will not stop saving [her] although [she] beg[s] and beg[s] and beg[s]” (87). Even her desperate act of suicide, the only form of agency that appears to be available to her, results in a permanent passivity. The ensuing dance of the men, who were legible to her via a marker of employment (“*Navy* boys”), is an enduring symbol of the labour market’s indifference to her plight.

The symbolic indifference of the labour market is not solely reserved for the wage earners that dominate the landscape of *CivilWarLand*. The narrator in “Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz” is not a wage earner, deriving income from his stake in a business franchise where customers interact with holographs. Unlike CivilWarLand’s owner, he is a franchisee. He thus faces an analogous threat to the working-class characters in the above-mentioned stories. His flagging revenues have attracted the attention of “Corporate,” who dispense an agent with a “Franchise Agreement Cancellation” form (67, 69). He narrowly avoids bankruptcy when he happens upon a method for converting—or “offloading”—personal memories into holographs. These “modules” become especially popular with a teacher from “the Lyndon Baines Johnson School for Precocious Youth” (74, 72). She proposes to pay the narrator “three thousand a decade,” which prompts him to offload all four decades of his memory (76). To keep his business afloat, he becomes a cipher. Commodification is here a kind of suicide, aligning radical immediacy with self-alienation.

The family unit provides no protection from market alienation and exploitation. The narrator's other motivation for "offloading" his memories is to cope with his wife's death. He chooses a *tabula rasa* strategy to grieve for a past relationship. Economic considerations are connected to this extreme self-help approach in the Saunders story, since his business represents "every cent Elizabeth [his dead wife] left him" (69). Families are not sentimental devices in *CivilWarLand*. They are either absent, as in the case of "Offloading," "Downtrodden Mary," and "The 400-Pound CEO," or associated with financial motivations, for example when "CivilWarLand's" narrator thinks, "I've got me and mine to think of" or when the former wavemaker continues to work where his wife is carrying on an affair (8-9). The absence of empathy is crucial because it depersonalizes the type of conflicts that the class structure produces and requires. Empathy is emptied of its meaning in the moment that the judge sentencing the 400-pound CEO tells the defendant that he "empathizes completely" with him, and then puts him away for 50 years (63). An explicit barrier to readerly empathy is the mock epiphanies that close many of the stories. For instance, the narrator of "Isabelle" adopts a physically challenged girl and supports her by "selling the hell out of Buicks at night" (33). He describes the effect of their relationship as follows: "the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been" (33). The elevated language raises a red flag, with the recourse to financial language ("sum total") recalling the tilted ledger that relegated his working-class family to the most dangerous and dilapidated neighborhood in the city.

The most sensational manifestation of the financial family occurs in "Bounty," the novella that concludes *CivilWarLand*. Set in a dystopia where the population is

segregated according to their physical attributes, it is an obvious allegory for nineteenth-century race relations insofar as racism is entwined with labour relations. Owing to their deformities, "Flaweds" are enslaved by "Normals." The noxious race-as-deformity equation brands "Bounty" as an "aggressive fiction," to borrow Kathryn Hume's recent classification (Hume x). That is, it "tramples reader sensibilities, offends and upsets willfully and deliberately" (Hume 8). Hume defines this genre with reference to Chuck Palahniuk, among others. The future imperfect world of "Bounty" certainly resembles that of Palahniuk's *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* (2007), where imposed curfews divide urban populations into two groups—Daytimers and Nighttimers—in order to eliminate traffic congestion and prevent the spread of rabies. Whereas *Rant* assembles the testimony of multiple characters, "Bounty" is told from the perspective of Cole, a "Flawed" who sets out to rescue his sister Connie. She has been sold into marriage to a customer at BountyLand, the theme park that employs them. Although they present this transaction as a *fait accompli*, Cole's bosses make him sign a contract authorizing it. The contract scene not only provides another example of the tyranny of management—a key theme in Saunders' stories—but also draws attention to Cole's quest to realize a non-financial relationship with his sister, a quest that animates the story. It is impeded from the outset because Connie's relationships are necessarily financial, as she is employed as a sex worker at the park. Cole's first encounter with her in the narrative occurs when he interrupts an exchange between her and a client, Connie's soon-to-be husband Mr. Corbett. Cole acquiesces to Connie's commodity relations, reasoning that "[i]f she insists on having sex with rich guys for pay she can at least do it where I don't have to watch" (91). This thought testifies to Cole's desire to uncover a personal terrain upon which they

can interact. Connie recognizes no such separate grounds, pleading "'[i]f you love me, mind your own business'" (91). Her understanding of "love" is premised on them not having a relationship, on Cole preoccupying himself with other "business" besides that of being her brother. In a departing letter to him, she puts these atomistic terms even more plainly. Her expressed wish for them to reunite is undercut by her concluding advice: "'[k]nuckle down and get something for yourself like I did. Don't be a dopey space cadet like Dad!" (105). He clings to the hope that he *can* be his father, who Cole believes "save[d] [his two children] from death" by donating them to BountyLand (137). To his father BountyLand is a safe haven from the rapidly decaying world outside its gates; Connie's advice to Cole is closer to the reality of the park, which declares itself to be a place "WHERE MERIT IS KING—AND SO ARE YOU!" (136). Her question of this meritocratic promise in the letter to Cole is purely rhetorical: "'[C]an you believe all my hard work finally paid off?" (105). Critically, she attributes her marriage less to love than to industriousness. A rumour about Corbett selling off his past wives keeps Cole from believing his sister until he sees it with his own eyes on the final pages of the story. When he arrives at Corbett's ranch, Cole finds his sister happy and "big as a house. Pregnant" (178). Connie remains a commodity, symbolically indistinguishable from Corbett's large estate. Nevertheless, Connie and Cole reminisce in a way that suggests that they finally enjoy a non-financial relationship. But Cole remains restless. "What am I doing here?" he wonders before deciding to leave Corbett's ranch in order to volunteer for the anti-Normal cause (179). This decision serves as a reminder that the sentimental sowing up of the sibling tale is meaningless if the problems of the Normal-Flawed political economy persist. The "genius grants" perform a similarly symbolic sowing up. They are a minimal

corrective for an intensifying upwards redistribution of wealth, but also a symptom of this phenomenon insofar as they adopt a big winners-invisible losers formula. In light of the structural requirements of the capitalist system to which the "genius grants" adhere and to which *CivilWarLand* refers, economic losers are bound to proliferate. My next two sections add an important critical dimension to these losses by identifying Ayn Rand's antagonistic role in Saunders' early fiction.

5.4 Anti-Objectivism

As my second chapter, on John MacArthur and Gaddis' *J R*, attested, entrepreneurial virtues are often extended to the ruling class, which is partially an attempt to mask their class interests. Rand's Objectivism attempts to dig a gulch nearer to the bottom of the class structure, between the class power of entrepreneurs and the working classes. In so doing, she disavows their comparable class power. This disavowal is reproduced in the "genius grant" narrative through its Randian consecration of economic agency that is akin to entrepreneurialism. In posing larger question about the political economy of the United States through an anti-Objectivist anti-entrepreneurialism, Saunders thus also deconstructs the MacArthur's big winners-invisible losers template.

CivilWarLand poses these larger questions with the device of the theme park, a setting for four of its seven stories. Pogell points out that theme parks "constitute the quotidian reality of the workers, many of whom are obliged to live in the parks themselves" (473). Moreover, the parks are connected to the nature of the work itself. Six out of the seven stories feature characters employed in the service industry. These stories reflect the ascendance of this industry in the United States, which climbed from "38.4

percent to 68.7 percent" of total employment between 1913 and 1984 (Jones 330). The theme park supplants the factory as the locus of exploitation. Pogell emphasizes the extraordinary example of workers living on-site, but Saunders' stories illustrate the more common detail that such service jobs "tend not to be unionized, offer fewer benefits, and often pa[y] barely minimum wage" (Jones 330). Saunders glosses these conditions in an essay on an actually existing theme-park nation, Dubai. "The New Mecca" characterizes Dubai as "capitalism on steroids" (*Braindead* 31). He backs up this statement on materialist grounds: "a small insanely wealthy group of capital-controlling Haves supported by a huge group of overworked and underpaid Have-Nots, with […] the gap between Haves and Have-Nots so wide as to indicate different species" (31). He notes that "the workers surrender their passports to their employer," "there are no labor unions," and "these low-level foreign workers [are] working two or three jobs, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day" (31, 32, 33). While he does not reference wage rates, as he watches an employee clean the hotel steps by hand, Saunders admits that he will "mak[e] more for writing about it than [the employee will] make in many, many years doing it" (54). Such observations of privilege are made secondary to "The Great Dubai Quandary" (31). The obvious exploitation of Dubai's working classes unnerves Saunders, but he excuses it comparatively. "Relative to their brethren back home (working for next to nothing or not working at all)," Saunders avers, "Dubai's South Asian workers have it great; likewise, relative to their brethren working in nearby Saudi Arabia" (31). Rather than consider whether the *global* economy entrenches *absolute* inequality—i.e., whether Dubai is exemplary as opposed to exceptional—Saunders privatizes the "quandary." He

focuses on the effect that knowing about Dubai's underside has on his experience of the country, not the specific suffering experienced by members of its labour force.

Saunders concedes that he is not out to expose the structure that produces their suffering as an investigative journalist might. He is a travel essayist, whose allusion to "the Wobblies" and "Fight the power!" flourishes are predominantly comic (33, 41). Doing his best David Foster Wallace impression, Saunders represents himself as implicated in and bewildered by his surroundings. The oft-quoted final passage of the piece converts his guilt and doubt into a hopeful mantra: "Fuck concepts. Don't be afraid to be confused. Anything is possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen" (55). This conversion problematically emphasizes the virtue of "confusion" instead of a more active engagement with what is undeniably clear: the exploitative foundation of Dubai, a place where masses of immigrant workers live and labour in conditions of quasi-slavery. Ironized privilege is no substitute for authentic class-consciousness. Since he definitely cannot claim that this "choice" is a luxury afforded to the working classes of Dubai, he qualifies his "counsel" as "grandiose" (55). This qualifier only adds another coat of ironic sheen—an overly *self*-conscious reminder of his consumptive complicity (55). A more genuine insight emerges from his earlier stated desire to believe in the "stoic noble determination" of Dubai's working class (33). For this belief had already been disavowed through the invocation of a figure who Saunders ironizes throughout his fiction: Ayn Rand. Saunders suggests that the positive attitudes of the working-class members with whom he interacts "makes the Ayn Rand in you think, Good, good for you, sir, best of luck in your professional endeavours!" (33). The suggestion is doubly disingenuous.

Their "professional endeavours" require them to manifest this positive attitude; to do otherwise would put their service industry employment on the line. Moreover, Saunders had already lost all faith in Ayn Rand.

In another essay collected in *The Braindead Megaphone* (2008), "Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra," Saunders confesses to having been a "young, Ayn Randish Republican" (79). Critics have yet to acknowledge the extent to which this (mis)education furnishes his fiction with its satiric antecedents. Saunders hardly hesitates in making such a move. In "I Was Ayn Rand's Lover" (2012), he literalizes his formative flirtation with Rand as a hilarious conceit to justify his vote for Barack Obama in the 2012 Presidential election. Saunders jokingly alleges that he and Rand had an affair in 1974, when the future author was 17.[170] Their "wonderful times" together come to an abrupt end when Mitt Romney's eventual running mate, Paul Ryan, replaces Saunders as Rand's paramour (n. pag.). Saunders selects the then-Vice Presidential candidate, no doubt aware of Ryan's remark that "the reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand" (qtd. in Weiss 19). Ryan wields his loyalty to Rand as a weapon against Obama's economic platform, which resembles "something right out of an Ayn Rand novel" (qtd. in Weiss 19). Appealing to a Tea Party base that follows Rand in viewing government as an impediment to individual liberty, Ryan equates Obama's policies with the dreaded Collectivism that drives the capitalists to retreat to Galt's Gulch in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Alan Clardy could be describing the Tea Party's agenda when he states that in Rand's economy, "the only role of government is to protect the rights of people to their lives (from the force and violence of others) and,

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[170] Saunders is playing on Rand's real-life affair with one of her disciples, Nathaniel Branden. Branden is a key player in the popularization of Objectivism.

most importantly, to their property, which is the basis of all other rights" (244). Saunders parodies this perspective at the outset of his piece, clarifying that he supports Obama not "because I believe in his radical socialist agenda of being fair to everyone, even the poor," i.e., even those with very little property to protect (n. pag.). "I could actually care less about the poor," he continues (n. pag.). "We have some living near us, and pee-yew. They are always coming and going to their three or four jobs at all hours of the day and night. Annoying!" (n. pag.). Here Saunders hyperbolizes Rand's distaste for altruism, which is predicated on the notion of an underclass that takes advantage of the sympathies of successful individuals. Fiction is her preferred vehicle for driving home the message that the poor are undeserving. Thomas Mallon outlines Rand's self-image as a "right-wing Steinbeck," who adhered to "an intentional imperative" aesthetic (n. pag.). Her didacticism inheres in the signature monologues that recur in *Atlas*. Saunders deliberately commits the intentional fallacy, mentioning that before he and Rand could consummate their relationship, "first there'd be a long speech. Usually by her" (n. pag.). The long speeches in *Atlas* passionately defend the selfishness that capitalism engenders, arousing Cold War suspicions about collectivist incursions. With its many preceptive yet unperceptive narrator-protagonists, *CivilWarLand* parodies the prevalence of instructional moments in Rand's major work. Citing F.K. Stanzel's narrative theory, Richard Lee refers to these narrator-protagonists as "teller-characters" (144). They are blunt about their motives. For example, the narrator-protagonist of "CivilWarLand" volunteers,

> Is this the life I envisioned for myself? My God no. I wanted to be a high jumper. But I have two of the sweetest children ever born. I go in at night

> and look at them in their fairly expensive sleepers and think: There are a couple of kids who don't need to worry about freezing to death or being cast out to the wolves. You should see their little eyes light up when I bring home a treat. They may not know the value of a dollar, but it's my intention to see that they never need to. (9)

The narrator expresses an economic understanding of the world, which he will do whatever it takes to ensure that his children do not someday have to share.[171] His hope of a secure future for his offspring is an escape from the precarious reality of his low-level job.[172]

After escaping to Galt's Gulch, Rand's capitalist hero-victims also work at service industry jobs. The first oath they swear is "'not to give to the world the benefit of [their] mind[s]'" (747). Accordingly, the inhabitants of Galt's Gulch go undercover in the type of jobs that Saunders' characters work. Whereas Saunders' narrator-protagonists are never presented with any viable alternatives to these jobs, the Elect in *Atlas* choose menial employment as a protest against the existing order. They "prefer not to" contribute to a society of "looters" and "moochers." The Bartleby comparison is unavoidable, but there is a crucial difference. Bartleby's refusal represents a critique of the capitalist system that Rand and her mouthpieces are keen to uphold.[173] The retreat to Galt's Gulch is a retreat from creeping socialism. For Bartleby and Saunders' narrator-protagonists,

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[171] The focus on paternal insecurities in *CivilWarLand* also iterates Rand's foundational dispossesion. Jennifer Burns begins her biography of Rand with the Red Guard seizing the pharmacy of Zinovy Rosenbaum (Ayn's father), describing this as "a lesson she would never forget" (9).

[172] In this context, it is important to recall that "the *word* proletariat initially designated a Roman citizen whose only wealth was his children (*proles*). Exceedingly poor, the proletariat constituted the least respected class in Roman society, having only its labor power—and those of its children—as potential source of income. So it is worth underscoring that "proletariat" was not a synonym for 'wage-earning worker' (*travailleur salarié*) but for something like 'dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market'" (Zamora n. pag., emphasis in original).

[173] This critique anticipates the subtraction thesis offered by Italian autonomist thinkers (see footnote 70).

passivity comments critically on the master narrative of capital in which they are trapped. They do so in the language of this narrative. Bartleby's "preference" echoes consumer choice and the impulses of Saunders' narrator-protagonists are articulated as an overarching desire to protect the family form, which is a veil for the pure self-interest required of neoliberal subjects. The access to the inner doubts and self-recriminations of Saunders' characters sets them apart from Melville's Bartleby. Moreover, the dynamic thoughts that attend the resigned actions of the narrator-protagonists symbolically challenge Rand's stigmatization of the working class and poor as idle.

5.5 Entrepreneurial Winners?

The flip side of the stigmatization of the working class is Rand's valorization of the entrepreneur. Saunders' next collection, *Pastoralia*, further departs from Rand's neoliberal utopia of effectual, autonomous individuals. For Rand as for neoliberals, the exemplary individual is the entrepreneur. Robert Bartley and Amity Shlaes deploy the figure of the entrepreneur to render the road from the Keynesian planned economy to the neoliberal free market as a yellow brick one:

> The Keynesians' hero was a single smart man at a command post in a national capital managing the macroeconomy—an image like that of the Wizard frantically pulling levers behind his curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*. The supply-siders' hero, by contrast, was an anonymous simple entrepreneur, operating alone—in the cornfields, perhaps, or in a small town shop—far from Emerald City. (n. pag.)

Neoliberals side with the entrepreneur over the central planner because they view the latter as deluded. Central planners are destined to fail in their efforts to manage the economy because the "site of truth," to quote Foucault, "is not in the heads of economists […] but in the market" (30). Entrepreneurs succeed on the market's terms, submitting to the shifting judgments passed down by "the truth of prices" (30). Like the "supply-siders," Rand equates heroism with self-interest. As she declares in the appendix to *Atlas Shrugged*, "[m]y philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute" (qtd. in Thomas n. pag.). This philosophy is assailed throughout *Pastoralia*. For example, "Winky," the second story in the collection, satirizes Neil Yaniky's attempt to make "his own happiness […] the moral purpose of his life." Neil attends a self-help seminar where a business guru named Tom Rodgers informs the crowd that "[i]f you're losing, somebody's doing it to you" (74). There are several parallels between Rodgers' speech and John Galt's notorious 60-plus page monologue in *Atlas Shrugged*.[174] Both share a rhetoric of victimization. Galt opens his speech by identifying himself as "the man who has deprived you of victims and thus has destroyed your world" (1009). By "victims," Galt refers to the most affluent and—obeying Rand's logic—productive members of society, the inventors, investors, and artists, i.e., entrepreneurs who have retreated to Galt's Gulch. Their retreat represents a refusal to sacrifice self-interest at the altar of a collective one. And although they become

[174] Galt and Rand are virtually interchangeable. She concludes her foreword to *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* with a reminder to "bear in mind the full statement" about the fact that "Existence exists" before quoting this passage from Galt's monologue (3).

a kind of collective, the appeal of Galt's Gulch is couched in individualist terms.[175] Rodgers makes an identical appeal to his audience, mobilizing a personal narrative of victimhood and sacrifice. He testifies that his success arrived only after he stopped allowing his two siblings to "crap in his oatmeal" (72). He is speaking figuratively, as the oatmeal is a metaphor for "your soul in its pure state" (71). Just as Galt imagines himself "speaking to those who desire to live and to recapture the honor of their soul," Rodgers enjoins each audience member to recover "[y]our soul on the day you were born" (1066; 71). Echoing Galt, the path to recovery for people like Neil is to cease "sacrific[ing] happiness to duty" (1010). This path is lined with threes. Galt's "supreme and ruling values" of "Reason-Purpose-Self-Esteem" find expression in Rodgers' "Three Essential Steps: Identification, Screening, Confrontation" (1018; 74). "Reason" helps Neil accurately "identify" his oatmeal-crapper—his live-in sister Winky—with the "Purpose" of "Screening" his soul by telling her to move out. The process requires a level of "Self-Esteem" to "Confront" Winky that Neil does not ultimately possess. Despite a confidence-boosting pre-enactment of the eviction scene, when Neil gets home he realizes that "the speech he'd practiced on the way home seemed now to have nothing to do with the girl who stood wet-eyed in the doorway" (88).

What causes the seminar's entrepreneurial elixir to dry up so quickly? Granted, its potency was limited from the outset, as implied in the bathetic doling out of Galt's romantic message into bowl of "crap"-proof "oatmeal." But is Neil's failure to evict Winky and concluding self-recrimination not an argument in favour of Galt's position? If

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[175] Prominent Tea Party supporters, such as the Koch brothers, are likewise comfortable with the contradiction between the anti-organizational rhetoric of Rand (whom they revere) and their administering of funding through organizations, namely Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks.

so, Neil is left "calling her terrible names under his breath" because he obeys slave morality, choosing pity over self-making (88). His rage is permanent because he does not apply the entrepreneurial solution; however, the story invites a counter-reading. The solution is shown to be deceptively simple in light of Neil's class. As we learn at one point, he works "solder[ing] little triangular things in his basement, for forty-seven cents a little triangular thing, for CompuParts" (74). Significantly, it is his dissatisfaction with *this* aspect of his life which motivates him to attend the seminar; "he ha[s] high hopes for something better" (74). Of course, these "high hopes" do not include a living wage or a union card. Instead, they are reoriented via negative embodiment in one person, Winky. The brief shift in narrative perspective from Neil to Winky denies her objectification on a formal level. Moreover, we get a glimpse into the major flaw in entrepreneurialism's atomistic design when Neil remembers his father. While Neil adopts the language of the seminar in order to criticize his father for not being "a seeker," we find a poverty that forecloses the privilege to seek (84). "[L]ife had beaten Dad," Neil claims (84). More specifically, unemployment had beaten Dad. Neil's recollection of his father's evenings spent idling on the couch contains the telling sub-clause, "recently fired again" (85). Neil's menial job may be less precarious than his father's work, but the son's search is curtailed by the spectre of unemployment that haunted his childhood. Like the majority born into a low-income family, Neil will likely not advance very far up the income ladder. John Marsh observes that in America, "42 percent of children born to parents in the bottom income fifth […] remain in the quintile they were born in" (52). The majority of the remaining 58 per cent "only travel to the next lowest [income bracket]" (50). Marsh is thus right to conclude that "[t]he American people are not locked into a class

hierarchy, but neither do they move around enough to mitigate that hierarchy" (50). On the whole, this reality resists the simple charms of entrepreneurialism. For the individual, though, the story is more complex. Entrepreneurialism offers a (fairy) tale that obscures the relative permanence of marginalization. The dubiousness of this offer gets communicated when Neil summons his father, impressed with the image of his son "[w]alking home in a suit from a seminar at the freaking Hyatt!" (84). Neil *seems* successful, which is enough for him. His vision of a Winky-free life is equally unreal, featuring "[g]olden statues of geese, classy vases, big porcelain frogs, whatever" (84). Class mobility is entrepreneurialism's empty promise.

The deromanticization of the entrepreneur-subject continues in the ensuing story, "Sea Oak." The first-person narrator is a server at an aviation-themed restaurant called Joysticks, where an all-male staff "Pilot[s]" tables (92). As they only make "five an hour in salary," the men rely on tips that vary according to the server's attractiveness (92).[176] It resembles the majority of service industry jobs, except for two twists. One, each server's attractiveness is quantified through a "Cute Rating" established by the customers (92). Like student evaluations for Contract Academic Faculty in today's corporate university, these ratings matter since "[t]he minute your Cute Rating drops you're a goner," the narrator confides (92). The second twist is more salacious. Extra tips can be had by servers willing to kiss, flash, and/or fondle customers, despite this behaviour being strictly prohibited. The restaurant's most popular server, Sonny Vance, regularly indulges in this behaviour. Sonny somehow eludes detection from the omnipresent Board of

[176] "Five an hour" is a rough approximation of the federal minimum wage at the time the story was published. According to data from United States Department of Labor, the federal minimum wage was raised to $5.15 an hour in September of 1997 (n. pag.). Then again, the narrator is paid well relative to the minimum wage for tip-dependent employees. The 1997 amendments "revised the tip credit provisions to allow employers to pay qualifying tipped employees no less than $2.13 per hour if they received the remainder of the statutory minimum wage in tips" (n. pag.).

Health representative, Ed Anders. Anders' steady surveillance sanctions such activity insofar as its soft illegality ensures hard cash. The titular Sea Oak offers no respite from what the narrator rightfully characterizes as a "stressful workplace" (92). It is a low-income housing complex which he shares with his Aunt Bernie, a cousin named Jade, and his sister Min. The dramatis personae befit the setting. Jade and Min are single mothers preparing for their GEDs, and Bernie is a sixty year-old matriarch, working full-time for minimum wage. They are grounded in a dangerous neighborhood, where shootings are routine and the laundry room features "an ad hoc crackhouse" (97). Beset with worries about the safety of his kin, the narrator is "sorry [he isn't] rich enough to move [them] somewhere safe" (100). His worst fear is realized when Aunt Bernie dies during a break-in. Freddie, the live-in boyfriend of the narrator's mother, uses the occasion of the post-funeral lunch to lecture the narrator, Jade, and Min on the virtues of money. He comically reiterates the narrator's link between money and security, holding the truths of American possibility to be self-evident:

> "You kids make squat. And therefore you live in a dangerous craphole. And what happens in a dangerous craphole? Bad tragic shit. It's the freaking American way—you start out in a dangerous craphole and work hard so you can someday move up to a somewhat less dangerous craphole. And finally maybe you get a mansion." (106)

Freddie is on the Benjamin Franklin-made fast track to collapsing industriousness and entrepreneurialism. The premise is that entrepreneurial success retroactively confirms hard work. But the narrator is "working hard"; the problem is that he "makes squat." Freddie cannot recognize this as a problem because he is thinking like Franklin, i.e.,

tautologically: they are poorer than him; they must not be working as hard as him.[177] His notion of "the American way" thus points to an unstated assumption that the type of work matters more than the degree. The way to "get a mansion" is not to depend on others. As Francisco d'Anconia intones in *Atlas Shrugged*, "Americans were the first to understand that wealth has to be created" (414). Rand romanticizes entrepreneurs by foregrounding them as wealth creators. "In a time when leading intellectuals assumed that large corporations would continue to dominate economic life," Burns writes, "Rand clung to the vision of the independent entrepreneur" (3). She reveres entrepreneurs because they at least appear not to rely on what she saw as the redistributive whims of governments and corporations.

Freddie's Randian reading of the family's tragedy as an unwillingness to follow the entrepreneurial lines in the American wealth creation script is weakened when Aunt Bernie returns, *Night of the Living Dead*-style. She is not after brains, but does advise the narrator to put his to better use. Her plan is for him to start exposing himself at work so that he can save up enough money to take a pre-law course at the local community college. Although this seems to be a far cry from Freddie's admonishment, Bernie quickly becomes "a sort of invisible fist punching [him] in the back" (116). As such, she is a violent consequence of the shortcomings of the market's invisible hand; more precisely, she exposes the indifference of its imperative to pursue self-interest.[178] Her increasingly urgent pleas for him to expose himself despite his misgivings presume an entrepreneurial ethic of self-capitalization: "You got a trust fund? You a genius? Show

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[177] Freddie's survey job pays $10/survey (97).

[178] The less conspicuous Gothic trope at play in Bernie's return from the dead is her invisible-hand inflected advice. I am thinking here of Stefan Andriopoulos' argument in "The Invisible Hand: Supernatural Agency in Political Economy and the Gothic Novel" (1999). He provides a "literal reading" of Smith's metaphor, "linking it to the contemporary literary genre of the gothic novel" (739).

your cock. It's what you got" (122). Bernie's allusion to an absent trust fund recalls the absent inheritance to which the narrator alludes when he introduces their predicament: "Dad's dead and left us nada" (97). Instead, they ultimately inherit Bernie (in zombie form). Her pleas are especially pathetic and insufficient when juxtaposed with this foundational "nada"—a denied wealth inheritance which could make realizing an income from labour less impelling. Her "show your cock" entrepreneurial refrain is replaced by another repeated question in the end: "Why do some people get everything and I got nothing?" (123). The narrator has no answers, and the story concludes on a negative note: "Every time I say I don't know. And I don't" (125). Why does Bernie keep asking? Perhaps the potential answers to her question are either missing or misleading. We are left with one thing that the narrator knows just a little too well, "we need the money" (110).

The "we need the money" sentiment is not exclusive to the working classes in *Pastoralia*, since the title story mobilizes it to rationalize corporate profiteering. This profit motive makes the entrepreneurial subject incidental to the bottom line. The story is set in a prehistoric theme park, where visitors view employees in Neanderthal-face re-enacting cave life. The setting of the cave recalls Sarah Pogell's foregrounding of simulacral capitalism in the settings for Saunders' early fiction. It might also be a nod to "primitive accumulation," the term Marx uses to account for the passage from feudalism to capitalism beginning in the sixteenth century (*Volume One* 895). The forces of capital "usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation" (*Volume One* 885). At most, "primitive accumulation" functions as an ironic counterpoint in the story given that, like CivilWarLand, Pastoralia is in financial straits. Desperate to get back in

black, corporate headquarters adjusts on the fly. Their panic is detectable in the memos delivered to the cave that the narrator cohabitates with a fellow employee, Janet. These notes tout the presence or explain the absence of goat rations, which no longer appear on a daily basis. Corporate discourse increasingly displaces material provisions, culminating in a policy of outright "austerity" (48). Austerity brings not only fewer goats, but also a round of euphemistic "Staff Remixing" (translation: mass layoffs) and cuts to the performance bonuses that had been supplementing the employees' meager wages (16). Headquarters invokes the model of the corporation as family to preclude resistance and refigure coercion as voluntarism: "let's remember that we are a family and you are the children, not that we're saying you're immature, only that you do most of the chores while we do all the thinking, and also that we, in our own way, love you" (48). Their "love" is blind to the uncivilized labour conditions they have enforced, or at least short-sighted enough to eventually require the remaining employees to say nice things to their friends "who are thinking of buying stock" (62).

The alternatives to the corporate family and discourse are located in the cave. The narrator and Janet receive regular messages from their families, documenting a series of familiar working-class hardships, such as escalating credit card bills and exorbitant medical expenses (17, 34). These hardships supersede the petty corporate memos, and the cave dwellers do not resort to elliptical phrasing when they communicate with one another about them. They do, however, resort to mistaking the social conflict between capital and labour that unites them with the divisive topic of individual work ethic. Janet is too distracted by her son's legal troubles to care about doing her job well. Her indifference has attracted the attention of a middle manager named Greg Nordstrom.

Nordstrom implores the narrator to inform on Janet in the "Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form" that the narrator has been disingenuously filling out (5). The narrator's desire to protect his co-worker, despite her insufficiencies, represents an altruistic alternative to the corporation's self-serving desire to protect itself from a lawsuit for termination without cause. Nordstrom and his superiors need the narrator to inform on her, and he is able to resist their demands up to a point.

This point arrives as class conflict. Janet tells off a customer who is coddling his child, to which the man responds: "Parenting advice from the cavelady […] For this I paid eighty bucks?" (57). His entrance fee has bought him a reduction of Janet to her job as "cavelady." Disney World patrons do not expect Goofy or Mickey Mouse to comment on their fanny packs; nevertheless, when Janet responds that her "kid is as good as anybody's kid," the term reveals a class dimension that was latent in the man's remarks about her being "badly dressed" (57). He is talking about her costume *and* her class position, as demonstrated by the satisfaction he takes in imagining the direct consequence of his filing a formal complaint: Janet gets fired. Her powerlessness is taken for granted. This social conflict becomes sentimentalized when the narrator joins the man in blowing the whistle on Janet after considering the risks to his own family posed by concocting a version that justifies her actions. His decision to protect himself and his kin represents the cave's infiltration by corporate logic, which dictates that the customer is always right; in other words, labour is always disciplined by capital. Janet is immediately replaced by an avatar of this logic, Linda. Linda is so singularly devoted to her job that the narrator starts to consider that "she could have a problem with the way [he's] pretending to catch and eat small bugs" (66). "No one pokes their head," as the story concludes, but this fact is

irrelevant. Capital has subordinated labour to such an extreme that even customers are superfluous. Pogell sees Linda "as a frightening admonition to potential job seekers who in trying to survive in corporate America, might be tempted to forfeit their humanity" (472). Describing Linda's "forfeit" as an "admonition" suggests that these "job seekers" have some measure of choice; however, Saunders' story represents this "forfeit" as a basic condition of employment for the working classes.

Entrepreneurialism is a screen for this bleak working-class reality, as the fate of Marty—the manager of the "Employees Only shop"—makes clear (11). While Marty's actual status as an entrepreneur is ambiguous due to insufficient information about how much control he exerts over the day-to-day management of the shop, he occupies a position—shopkeeper—that meets the minimal definition of the entrepreneur as one who runs a business at a risk. Saunders' story is not a neoliberal narrative; therefore, the entrepreneur (Marty) is a minor character. Nevertheless, his eventual banishment from the park symbolizes the economic marginalization of the entrepreneur. Marty's storyline shows that entrepreneurs are akin to wage labourers. Like the narrator and Janet, he is beholden to the paternal corporation. This figurative unity means that it is important to include him in the interpretive frame, a gesture which is not made in two anthology glosses on "Pastoralia." The first, from *Extreme Fiction: Fabulists and Formalists* (2004), describes the story as the drama of "a caveman, living and working in a cave with his difficult partner, a cavewoman who is fed up with playing a cavewoman" (Hemley and Martone 61). In *Labor Days: An Anthology of Fiction About Work* (2004), David Gates sets the scene as "faux cave-people […] work[ing] in an atmosphere of claustrophobic, unfriendly intimacy" (xvi). Gates goes a step further, in line with the first

anthology's categorization of Saunders as a fabulist, when he praises Saunders and another writer for "mak[ing] convincing workplaces that exist nowhere but in their imaginations" (xv). This workplace correlates to the real world though, especially when we consider Marty as emblematic of the entrepreneur's "faux" autonomy. His brief appearances in the story focus on his son Eddie's experiences at boarding school. The boarding school detail distinguishes Marty from the narrator and Janet, who could never afford to send their kids to one. Marty's hysterical advice, however, is an obvious attempt to make sense of his subsumption under the park's profit imperative, which aligns him with the narrator and Janet. For example, he channels Dale Carnegie in a dictated letter to Eddie. Marty advises him to "do what they ['the big-wigs'] ask […] In your own private mind, think what you like, only do what they ask, so they like you. And in this way, you will succeed" (12). Eddie's ability to win friends and influence people is compromised by a class distinction that Marty obsessively notes: they are "rich kids" (37). The Carnegie-infused be-nice-and-prosper sentiment is inadequate in light of this distinction, which Eddie validates with tales of his classmates' virtue. Both son and father are on the F. Scott Fitzgerald side of his alleged exchange with Ernest Hemingway.[179] "The rich are different from you and me," they attest (qtd. in Winship n. pag.). Hemingway's response wins out in the story. "Yes, they have more money," which means that their children can stay in boarding school (qtd. in Winship n. pag.). Eddie cannot. The family's money runs out, and Eddie returns to public school, where previously "[h]e had a little trouble with

[179] The reputed exchange is based on Hemingway's reply to the opening line of Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy" (1926): "They [the very rich] are different from you and me" (qtd. in Tate 186). "He remembered poor Scott Fitzgerald," Hemingway writes in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), "and his romantic awe of [the rich] and how he had started a story once that began, 'The very rich are different from you and me.' And how someone had said to Scott, Yes they have more money" (qtd. in Tate 186). Mary Jo Tate notes that the "someone" is "widely reported" to be Hemingway, despite subsequent evidence from Hemingway and Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, to the contrary (186).

mean kids" (51). Bullied by his classmates and "different from" the rich in the way that matters most, Eddie experiences a double displacement. As an entrepreneur, Marty is likewise doubly displaced. He simultaneously goes out of business and is fired. His explanatory note to his fellow employees bitterly declares that "[t]o some people, fifteen years of good loyal service means squat" (50). The addressee is unidentified, leaving open the question of to whom the criticism of the absolute power possessed by these anonymous corporate "people" is directed. Marty's note answers the rhetorical question posed in the title to this section ("Entrepreneurial Winners?") with a resounding "no," underscoring the ideological mystification that needs to accompany any adoration of the entrepreneur.

5.6 Consumer Realism

Saunders' comic mode and preferred genre offer a distance from the entrepreneurial ethos, constructing a space that bolsters the anti-entrepreneurial critique. The negative engagement with consumer culture that is demanded in this space resists the entrepreneurial erasure of class violence. Saunders articulates this demand using his preternatural comedic gift. He is not Ayn Rand, whose major novel is as humourless as its pro-capitalist message, nor Upton Sinclair, whose writing is often as serious as its anti-capitalist one. Unlike such (anti-)proletarian fictions, Saunders relies on humour to captivate his readers and critique capitalism. In the "Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra" essay from which I quoted earlier, Saunders states that "[h]umour is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to" (*Braindead* 80). To appreciate the nature of this "truth," we should situate Saunders as a practitioner of

"consumer realism." My colleague Brad Congdon and I have adopted the term from Michael Schudson's coinage of "capitalist realism" in *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (1984).[180] Schudson locates "capitalist realism" on a "plane of reality" that "glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice in defense of the virtues of private life and material ambitions" (214, 218). It is no less programmatic than the "socialist realism" upon which Schudson bases his definition, as "both forms subordinate everything to a message that romanticizes the present or the potential of the present" (218). He distinguishes "capitalist realism" from Erving Goffman's notion of "commercial realism," which highlights the formal properties of advertisements without considering the medium's political effects. "Capitalist realism" has been a resource for like-minded critics of advertising, such as Roland Marchand, who cites Schudson's term to set up his argument that "the illustrations in American advertising portrayed the ideals and aspirations of the system more accurately than its reality" in *Advertising the American Dream* (1985) (xviii).[181] Projecting a positive image of a near-perfect world is obviously well-suited to advertising, whose "central function is to create desires—to bring into being wants that previously did not exist," in John Kenneth Galbraith's

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[180] The term emerged in a conversation we had in reference to a chapter (on Raymond Carver) of his dissertation, *"How To Be A Man": American Masculinities, 1960-1989.* He had initially deployed the term "capitalist realism" in his chapter, and I was also in the midst of confronting its limitations as a descriptor (see below).

[181] "Capitalist realism" is also the subject of a recent volume of essays that moves beyond the domain of advertising in order to address the broader implications of the concept for narrative form, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (U of Iowa P, 2014). In their Introduction to the volume, Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Clare La Berge note that their aim is to "further elaborat[e]" the organizing term, which "has been used to describe the contemporary condition in which all social and political possibility is seemingly bound up in the economic status quo" (2). "Understood in this sense," as Caren Irr writes in her contribution to the volume, "capitalist realism might prove an especially unsustainable literary project, since so many American writers habitually present themselves as offering an insight deeper or more critical than that of the reigning ideology" (177). I confine my definition to the literary, which is why I go on to cite Godden's book. And in an effort to both avoid terminological confusion with the theoretical meaning that Shonkwiler and La Berge articulate and to distinguish Saunders' project from the "habitual" anti-capitalism that Irr outlines, I deploy the term "consumer realism" to describe what is potentially "deeper or more critical" about the mode of *In Persuasion Nation*, i.e., its conspicuous intentionality.

memorable phrasing (129). The concept comes to literature via Richard Godden, who discusses how Ernest Hemingway evinces "a style of writing unknowingly saturated in the logic of consumerism" (*Fictions* 10). Godden places his "preoccupation with perception and the perceived object in […] its true context—the context of consumption" (*Fictions* 45). After Horkheimer and Adorno, it is hard to argue that realism-*cum*-capitalism is particular to Hemingway. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* notes the universal transformation of works of art into art commodities. In the mass marketplace, "[n]o object has an inherent value; it is valuable only to the extent that it can be exchanged" (158). Exchange-value no longer presumes use-value. "Consumption" necessarily is "the context" in Hemingway and realism more generally. As Adorno asserts elsewhere, "aesthetic distance" from the reader evaporates, subsumed under capitalism in these works, which "capitulat[e] […] to the superior power of reality" ("Position" 36). Restoring any oppositional potential of "capitalist realism" requires new nomenclature that acknowledges the shift from an unconscious to a hyper-conscious representation of consumerism's marketing ethos. While capitalist realism collapses the distinction between author and character insofar as both relate to the world as consumers, "consumer realism" expresses the same relation, but does so *intentionally*, i.e., it critiques this mode of relating to the world.[182]

In Persuasion Nation attacks the marketing ethos by documenting the absurd life of the commodity, writing from and against the position of a consumer. The cover shot on both the Penguin hardcover and softcover editions of *In Persuasion Nation* shows a

[182] I am sympathetic to Walter Benn Michaels' complaint that "[a]s long as the best thing to do with consumer culture is to renounce it, literary criticism will be happy" (*Gold* 15, fn 20). In other words, I am less interested in Saunders' putative attitudes about consumption, and more interested in how he diagnoses and assesses the consequences of popular attitudes about consumption.

man on all fours smelling a flower. With a military haircut, sleeveless shirt, and a butt crack we can infer is exposed, he looks like your stereotypical "ordinary American." In fact, this image, a photograph by Michael Schmelling, refers to *In Persuasion Nation*'s third story, "Jon." This is Jon's first foray into the natural world, having been raised in a compound where he tests new products like "Diet Ginger-Coke" and "KFC Haitian MiniBreasts" (27, 42). At the end of the story, he seems to escape to a new life with his lover, also a former inmate, and their child. "Maybe we can come to be normal," he thinks, before conjuring a vision of their new life that negates their materialist programming (60). "Normal" means that they "will not think of" their experience as advertisements, like the one "where this stork flies through some crying stars who are crying due to the baby who is getting born is the future Mountain Dew Guy" (60). The promise of a *tabula rasa*, however, is undone in the story's final sentence: "When I think of what we will think of, I draw this like total blank and get scared, so scared my Peripheral Area flares up green...but tell the truth I am curious, I think I am ready to try" (61). His willingness is beside the point because the allusion to his "Peripheral Area" indicates that he remains confined in "Persuasion Nation," Saunders' not-so-fictitious near-future America where products reign and people suffer through what they are enjoined to enjoy.

In Persuasion Nation is organized in four sections, each of which contains an epigraph in the form of excerpts from a fictitious document, *Textbook for the New Nation* by Bernard "Ed" Alton. Saunders may draw his inspiration from Rand's *Textbook of Americanism* (1946). Like Rand's pamphlet, Alton's work is defensive, addressing those who would dare oppose the democracy-free market capitalism dyad. Alton's first line

opines that "[o]ur enemies will first assail the health of our commerce, throwing up this objection and that to innovative methods and approaches designed to expand our prosperity, and thus our freedom" (1). Rand's *Textbook* similarly equates "commerce," "prosperity," and "freedom." Under the interrogative heading, "Can A Society Exist Without A Moral Principle?," Rand assures her reader that the main bulwark against anarchy is "*the moral principle of your individual right of life and property*" (9, emphasis in original). The indefinite ("a moral principle") becomes definite in the context of democratic capitalism, which secures existence as vigorously as it protects ownership. The relations of exchange that define democratic capitalism, Rand implies, act as a guarantor of morality; morality and the ontology of the commodity form are inextricable.[183] Taking a page from Rand's *ad hominem* argumentation about "looters" and "moochers," Alton labels opponents of democratic capitalism "outcasts, chronic complainers, individuals incapable of thriving within a perfectly viable, truly generous system, a system vastly superior to all other known ways of organizing effort and providing value" (107). This supposed "superiority" to what Rand's pamphlet would identify as "Collectivism" is subverted in the story that immediately follows the Alton quotation (3). "93990" is set in a laboratory during "[a] ten-day acute toxicity study […] using twenty male cynomolgus monkeys" (109). The dispassionate prose befits the clinical setting, but Saunders still manages to insert a heavy dose of pathos. One of the monkeys, the eponymous 93990, is mysteriously impervious to the poison that fells his cohort. While his "handlers [cannot] […] refrain from laughing" at the way 93990

[183] Rand thus explicitly weds the social relations engendered by her ideal, capitalism, with its mode of production; the same cannot be said of Marx vis-à-vis communism, according to Louis Althusser. Marx "never manages to relinquish this mythical idea of communism as a mode of production *without relations of production*" ("Marx" 37, emphasis in original).

persists and "at times seem[s] to implore," one cannot refrain from rooting for him (115). His stubborn survival transforms a banal lab report into the narrative of an exceptional individual. This seeming celebration of individualism reinforces the beliefs of Alton and Rand, in theory; in practice, the sudden and arbitrary killing of 93990 at the story's end exposes the selectivity of the "system's" "generosity." Moreover, the aim of the toxicity study is less ambiguous in light of the surrounding stories, which draw attention to the problems with the commercial premises of this system. Like a Revlon rabbit or any animal subjected to product testing, 93990 is "sacrificed" on the altar of consumerism (117).[184]

Those targeted to benefit from the spoils of such inhuman "sacrifices" fare no better "in persuasion nation," as "My Flamboyant Grandson" and "Brad Carrigan, American" illustrate. Both stories intensify existing commercial phenomena. "My Flamboyant Grandson" has advertising infiltrate the landscape of everyday experience so completely that New York City has become Big Brother's corporate fiefdom. Parodying the integration of online ads and content that defines Internet data flows, Leonard and his grandson (Teddy) are impeded by a bombardment of "screens" selling them things (15). Before they can advance to the theatre, Leonard and Teddy must indicate a variety of "Personal Preferences" (15). As Todd Cesaratto puts it, these "'Personal preferences' are corporate imperatives" (80). Based on the available information, the ads tailor their message to the potential customer's life. "'Golly, Leonard,'" one exclaims, "'remember your childhood on the farm in Oneonta? Why not reclaim those roots with a Starbucks

[184] The parallel between this story and Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon" (1959) furthers the dominant reading of Saunders as belonging to the speculative tradition, provided one is willing to isolate it from the collection as a whole. In my view, Saunders' allusion to Rand's *Textbook* strikes a more powerful thematic chord.

Country Roast?' in a celebrity-rural voice" (15). The irony is that the inundation of these ads threatens to keep Teddy from doing the one thing that the grandfather *knows* his grandson will like, seeing "*Babar Sings!*" at "the Eisner Theater" (13, 14). The star of "Brad Carrigan, American" is similarly incapacitated. He lives on TV, one part grotesque family sitcom, one part surreality show. The set often transforms suddenly; for instance, at one point, the Carrigans come home "to find hundreds of ears of corn growing out of the furniture, floors, and ceiling" (129). A subsequent story about a toxic waste explosion in the Philippines that "kill[s] dozens of children digging in the dump for food" inspires Brad to propose that the family "'pick[s] th[e] corn and send it to that village in the Philippines where the kids have to eat garbage to live'" (130). No one is receptive to this idea; his wife calls him "'such a downer'" and Chief Wayne, a sort of live-in Kramer from *Seinfeld*, rationalizes that "'there are plenty of houses with lots more indoor corn than this'" (131). The only change that they want to make is to the channel. As the imperfect rhyme of "Brad Carrigan" and "American" suggests, to "care" is un-American. Compassion is boring, and Brad's mistake is to view systemic problems like the garbage dump incident as anything other than entertainment. He is ultimately written off the show into "the bland gray space," where he reflects on a different type of detritus (153). Determined to no longer "waste his life on accumulation, trivia, self-protection, and vanity," Brad is exiled to the ether of a "persuasion nation" that cannot abide such self-remaking (154). Brad, like the grandfather and 93990, are exceptions that prove the rule of free-market rationality.

The most agency in the collection is allocated to the commodities themselves. "In Persuasion Nation" tells of a rebellion of these commodities against the advertising skits

that they are doomed to repeat. Plotting commodity fetishism, the story introduces their antagonist as an "oblong green triangular symbol" that chastises them for daring "'to quarrel with the Power that granted [them] life'" (170). This "power" is money, as the "oblong green triangular symbol" implies a distorted version of the pyramid on the U.S. one-dollar bill. Material prosperity cannot stanch the recognition by the rebel leader that "[t]he truth is, this stupid system causes suffering wherever you look" (176). His compatriots come to see this as "heretical subversive nonsense," and the story concludes with them acting out a Skittles ad (179).

The capitulation of the commodities was anticipated in the supplicating cover pose, which resonates with the ultra-consumerist territory outlined in the stories. Behavior is unavoidably defined by purchasing. The opening story is formatted as a customer service letter from a "Product Service Representative" at KidLuv Inc. named Rick Sminks (11). KidLuv manufactures the I CAN SPEAK!, a mask-like device that parents affix to their babies which ventriloquizes set phrases and approximates facial expressions. Sminks' attempt to appease the customer is stamped with desperation. The addressee, Ruth Faniglia, has been disappointed with the articulations and appearance of the product. Ironically, given how terrifyingly invasive the I CAN SPEAK! technology sounds to us, Faniglia demands that it do *more*. Sminks thus offers her a "complimentary […] upgrade" to a model based on a mould of her son's face and recordings of his voice (5). Dispensing with the you-emphasis mandated in corporate correspondence, Sminks discloses an overabundance of personal information. It emerges that he is writing the letter while "on lunch," that prior to his employment at KidLuv he had "been in a few scrapes and even rehab situations," and that he has "refunded commissions" to his boss,

"especially lately" (3, 10). The crucial difference from the opening stories of the previous two collections is that the narrator is a member of the salariat. His situation is played for laughs, without a touch of empathy. The occasion for the letter provides the biggest laugh and merits the most critical attention. Why does the I CAN SPEAK! exist and who would want it? If the commodity could speak, it would declare the emptiness of the comforts that affluence affords.

Here the political implications of "consumer realism" arrive. Whereas Rand rightly assumes that consumption is how ordinary Americans perceive political rupture, Saunders shows the nightmarish consequences of the corresponding conversion of citizens into consumers. Neoliberalism hastens this conversion, as Wendy Brown demonstrates in "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization" (2006). She notes that "the open compatibility between individual choice and political domination" is nothing new (705).[185] What is new, though, is how openly neoliberal politicians present consumptive capacity as compensation for civil divestment. For example, George W. Bush encouraged Americans to "[g]et down to Disney World in Florida," in the aftermath of 9/11 (qtd. in Bacevich n. pag.). Rather than deliberating about the decision to invade Iraq, citizens should "enjoy life, the way we want it be enjoyed," i.e., by consuming (qtd. in Bacevich n. pag.). Žižek's pithy definition

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[185] Indeed, Jean Baudrillard theorizes about this compatibility in his doctoral dissertation, subsequently republished as *The System of Objects* (1968). *System* is a Marxist account of how symbolic energy cathects onto objects in consumer culture. Freedom becomes synonymous with "free[dom] to project one's desires onto produced goods" (13). And unlike "the freedom of existence that pits the individual against society," Baudrillard argues, "the freedom to possess is harmless" (13). Rather than defining ourselves in opposition to the dominant mode of production, as a Marxist political program makes imperative, we commodify and thus contain our dissent, following the logic of what Baudrillard identifies as "the code" (19). "The code" is "a system of signification" under which "the personality," "social relations," and "social statuses" are organized (19). If the list seems selective or incomplete, this might be because Baudrillard "fails to define his major terms," as Mark Poster points out (7). Notwithstanding this oversight, Baudrillard further develops these arguments in *Consumer Society* (1970) and thereafter departs from Marxism altogether.

of neoliberalism obtains here: "You are free to do anything as long as it involves shopping" (qtd. in Mirowski, "Postface" 421). On the one hand, "consumer realism" represents commodities as inadequate severance pay for civil divestment. On the other hand, the oppositional potential of "consumer realism" is restricted by its ideological effect. People already often believe that commodities are ridiculous, but continue to buy them as if they confer meaning on their lives. What other choice do they have?

5.7 The Persistence of Class

One choice is to demand the merely possible, to say, along with the narrator of Saunders' "Sea Oak," "we need the money" (110). It is at once a radical and reactionary plea, sounding like a socialist anthem or a Tea Party slogan. More to the point, the moral of Saunders' children's story from which I took this chapter's epigraph, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, revolves around an absence of money. The story establishes its materialist message at the beginning:

> Ever had a burr in your sock? A gapper's like that, only bigger, about the size of a baseball, bright orange, with multiple eyes like the eyes on a potato. And gappers love goats. When a gapper gets near a goat it gives off a continual high-pitched happy shriek of pleasure that makes it impossible for the goat to sleep, and the goats get skinny and stop giving milk. And in towns that survive by selling goat milk, if there's no goat milk, *there's no money*, and if *there's no money*, there's no food or housing or clothing, and so, in gapper-infested towns, since nobody likes

> the idea of starving naked outdoors, it is necessary at all costs to keep the gappers off the goats. Such a town was Frip. (2, emphasis added)

This parable about the perils of selfishness shows its characters forgetting about money only after they have learned to work together; that is, only after they have learned how commodity relations can be destructive and isolating.

"We need the money" reverberates in many stories from Saunders' National Book Award finalist offering, *Tenth of December*. The misrecognitions that such a demand can enable find their zenith in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the longest story in the collection. It takes the form and clipped tone of a diary addressed "to all future generations," penned by a father of three (110). In a telling entry, he reveals that his middle-class family is "stretched a bit thin" due to credit card debt (125). He explains that credit "[i]s nice for when you do not actually have money to do thing you want to do […] You may say, safe in your future time: Wouldn't it be better to simply not do thing you can't afford to do?" (126). When he wins $10,000 on a scratch ticket, he can defer the accusatory question because he is finally able to do something that makes him happy: commodify his love for his children. He and his wife host an extravagant birthday party for their eldest daughter, Lilly, punctuated with the installation of four "semplica girls." These yard ornaments are common in the family's middle-to-upper-middle class neighborhood: "of approx 50 houses, 39 had," the father notes (141). The semplica girls are women from poor families in the Global South who have allegedly volunteered for the opportunity to spend their lives suspended several feet above the ground on a "microline through [their] brain[s] that does no damage, causes no pain" (143). They symbolize what money buys the middle-class characters the luxury of ignoring: the fundamentally unequalizing tendency

of the world market. Some parents fret about their children hanging out with peers whose families conspicuously consume with ease, embodied in the family of Lilly's wealthy friend, Leslie Torrini; some parents produce children who hang up in yards as part of a desperate attempt to alleviate their hardship, as revealed in the harrowing "Personal Statements" that the narrator peruses at one point (135). The sole ethical character in the story is Eva, the family's youngest daughter. She is the only one who openly questions the semplica girl phenomenon, and she eventually sets them free. She does not provide a motive, nor does she need to. As one of the only characters with no money of her own,[186] Eva has yet to internalize the perverse logic of a system that elevates her particular family obligations above universal ones. Her deed returns her family to a state of serious indebtedness, as they are on the hook for charges far in excess of—though akin to—the ones that accrue when you lose a library book. Eva therefore reveals that money is a temporary remedy for a structural disease.

The father's commitment to the monetary remedy emerges in a passage following the one about credit card debt. He wants to provide his children with a sense of adventure, for fear that otherwise the world will "chew them up and spit [them] out" (126). Accordingly, he "[w]ould like to buy large box, decorate like buried treasure, bury, make map, hide map, lead them to map without appearing to" (126). The "excellent lesson" emerges for him in their subsequently "sticking to it" despite his feigned skepticism (126). Practical obstacles quickly derail this vision: "Where to get such a box? What to put in box that doesn't cost too much? How to dig such a big hole, and when?" (127). The answers would arrive, he thinks, "[i]f had more money" because then he

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[186] The other is her brother Thomas, who reports that the "semplica girls" are missing (151). The detail that Lilly "has ridden down on bike to buy w/own money at FasMart" a "poop-scoop" for the dog is thus not incidental (136).

"could hire maid, hire garden guy, freeing me up to find box, fill box, bury box" (127). The allusion to a "box" here cannot help but conjure a coffin, an ominous reminder of the limitations of money.

Saunders' MacArthur grant has "free[d] him up" to continue writing about those in the class position of "maids," "garden guys," as well as those like the narrator, new to their precarity. The "genius grants," though, belie the topic of class. Although the Foundation appears to provide an alternative to purely free market-based valuation, it is steeped in, not to mention enabled by, the same logic. Money and discomfort with the term "genius" dominate discussion of the fellowships because the free market, which recognizes the former as the sole criterion and cannot make the latter figure intelligible, is presented by the ruling class and their neoliberal intellectual apologists as the final judge of value. The centering of the market and rewarding of a relatively select few artists is commensurate with Ayn Rand's vision of an ideal society, one where—as my epigraph from *Frip* illustrates—"a brain award" only has merit so long as "they give money with it" (18-19). This commonsense idea reflects Rand's status as a "traditional intellectual" in Antonio Gramsci's sense: she runs interference for those in power, rationalizing and humanizing free-market capitalism.

Saunders writes against Rand and the MacArthur's neoliberal narrative throughout his fiction, particularly the popularization of entrepreneurial subjectivity and the conversion of citizens into consumers, as I have argued in this chapter. His gratitude for the grant renders his class critique as immanent. For someone whose exposure to "Stuart Dybek's stories about Chicago's working class" inspired a belief that "the literary life [w]as a viable vocation," financial security is an understandable, albeit contradictory,

goal (Bahr 322). "Contradictory" because money decontextualizes the structural causes of class divisions. The Tea Party's tax- and deficit-reduction version of "we need the money" views systemic problems, such as wage stagnation and the financialization of essential social services, as necessary for a robust economy. Rand's redistributive anxieties likewise manifest themselves in individualist dollar worship; to her money alone can acknowledge independence. As one of her characters, Francisco d'Anconia, boasts, "[t]he words 'to make money' hold the essence of human morality" (414). The money focus will continue to give Saunders something to satirize and he deserves to be praised for re-economizing the ordinary American. To be sure, Saunders does not write to revive the class-consciousness of the contemporary American literary scene. While the notion of class power is indispensable for describing the effects of the neoliberal political economy, works of literature should do more than chart these effects. In fact, one paradoxical consequence of my argument about Saunders' "ordinary" aesthetic is that it leads me to propound the desirability of fewer financial fictions. The surplus of these fictions reinforces the market fascination that Jameson warned against, as cited in my second chapter. The issue of class is unsexy, provoking the unlearning of this fascination. Saunders says something similar when he tells an interviewer that "[y]ou can talk about your sex life before you can talk about money in this country" (Bahr 323). It is time to start "talking about" class in conjunction with money, which also means reckoning with Monica Prasad's observation of "a problem that arises at the heart of the meeting of democracy and late capitalism: how to protect the interests of the poor when the majority is not poor, and the majority rules" (39). In short, there is still a lot of work left to be

done prioritizing those currently in need of protection from the daily indignities and insecurities that accompany life under neoliberal capitalism.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

A relatively recent addition to the pantheon of American mass culture: one day in March 2009 a letter shows up at the home of New York playwright Caden Cotard informing him that he has been awarded a MacArthur fellowship. The Foundation's financial aid offers hope to the despairing Cotard, who is suffering from escalating health problems and the dissolution of his marriage. "A MacArthur is called the genius grant," he tells his therapist, "and I want to earn it" (*Synecdoche*). To do so, he devotes all of his time to a theatre project that involves hundreds of actors living out their lives on an elaborate city-set, located in a series of giant warehouses in Manhattan. Cotard's unnamed project literalizes to the point of absurdity his expressed desire to "finally put my real self into something" (*Synecdoche*). Cotard becomes so consumed by the undertaking that art stops imitating life and replaces it. There is never an audience during the 50-plus years of production. There is, however, a fourth wall. Cotard is a Charlie Kaufman creation, the protagonist of his directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). Kaufman is a bit of a Cotard figure in his own right, known for his unconventional and hyper-intellectualized storylines (for instance, *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*).[187] *Synecdoche* is no exception. Along these lines, Hollywood could be seen as analogous to the MacArthur that supports Cotard (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman), granting Kaufman the creative license to project the workings

[187] Kaufman won an Oscar for Best Screenplay in 2005 (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*); he had previously been nominated for the award in 2000 (*Being John Malkovich*) and 2003 (*Adaptation*), The symbolic capital accompanying an Oscar was surely a factor in Kaufman securing the opportunity to direct his own project. *Synecdoche* began filming in May 2007.

of his bizarre imagination onto the big screen.[188] It is tempting to pursue this biographical reading, but my concluding chapter has a different task—to meditate on a synecdoche signalled by the film: how the representation of creative value is part of a whole mass-culture complex that profits from its individualization (exploiting a multitude of labourers in the process), and how this whole plays out in the part of the "genius grants." In short, I see *Synecdoche*'s narrative as an occasion to revisit and repurpose my allegorical critique of the fellowship program's neoliberal narrative.

The central irony of *Synecdoche* appears to be that while Cotard's "genius grant" frees him from financial constraints, it only heightens his awareness of larger limitations, be they creative, existential, or both. Cotard's MacArthur fellowship, bestowed "in perpetuity," is very much a life sentence (*Synecdoche*). He stops noticing the passage of time and gets entirely absorbed in his production. In the penultimate scene, he hears riots erupting outside of his adopted tenement, which has become overrun with graffiti and rats. When he awakens the next morning to the sound of gunshots and returns to his city-set, it has collapsed. His actors lie dead on the ground; the blown-out buildings and ubiquitous garbage offer the barest clues as to what has transpired. The message is that the only event that can halt Cotard's project is for his obsession with death to become dramatically actualized for his entire cast, not to mention for those inhabiting the world beyond the nebulous boundary of his city-set.

Synecdoche is more than merely a sensitive portrait of the contemporary bourgeois artist as a suffering, insufferable, megalomaniac. The film certainly supports

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[188] According to the box office metrics that shape popular understandings of a film's success, *Synecdoche* was not a good investment. It cost an estimated $21 million to make, and grossed a little more than $3 million in the United States (figures from imdb.com). It also received no Oscar nominations. The film did acquire a modicum of prestige in 2012 when Richard Corliss of *TIME* magazine listed it as the seventh "greatest movie of the millennium (thus far)" (Corliss, "Greatest" n. pag.). In 2008, he had listed it second (to *WALL-E*) on a list of the "Top Ten Movies of 2008" (Corliss, "Top" n. pag.).

this reading, with its repeated close-ups on Cotard and extended journeys into his various neuroses. All but two scenes in the movie feature him in some capacity. The "in perpetuity" liberty that *Synecdoche* takes with the actual parameters of the fellowship further sharpens the individualist lens, up to a point. This clause is buried in a portion of the letter Cotard receives from the Foundation that is not voiced over, but is, in an important sense, part of the MacArthur's narrative. Although the financial aid accompanying the fellowships lasts five years, the cases of Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, and Saunders demonstrate, to varying degrees, that the fellowships confer a lifetime of symbolic capital in the form of "MacArthur 'genius grant' recipient" citations. Strictly speaking, the film fictionalizes the terms of the fellowship; nevertheless, the "in perpetuity" clause is true to its enduring presence in the (professional) life of an individual recipient. Truer still, however, is the atomistic effect of Cotard's garnering the grant. The superficial, ironic contrast between his financial autonomy and crippling awareness of his creative and/or existential limitations gives way to something even more destructive: a hideous egoism that exposes the empty promise of autonomy as defined in monetary terms.

Halfway through the movie, one of the actors asks Cotard when they can expect an audience. "It's been 17 years," he exclaims (*Synecdoche*). The cast's commitment to his project would be bizarre had the actor not added, "it's getting bad out here." They take refuge from the city outside the set's doors. We get brief glimpses of this other New York in the film: soldiers herd women and children onto buses, Humvees roam the street, people wear gas masks, and a large blimp with searchlights patrols the city at night, while sirens blare and gun shots ring out. Although he duplicates relentlessly, hiring actors to

play himself and the members of his inner circle, building signature brownstones and street corner newsstands, Cotard leaves the sinister details out. Reproducing the apocalyptic events would cede his monopoly, making the two New Yorks indistinguishable. Cotard derives his fixed income from his "genius grant;" the symbolic rent he obtains from his cast comes across in the actor's complaint that "it's been 17 years." He denies his cast any validation except for what he provides. Everyday he gives them scraps of paper that delimit their activity on set. The final lines of the film find Cotard still struggling to articulate his vision for the project: "I know how to do this play now. I have an idea. If every…" (*Synecdoche*). The ensuing fade to black announces his death; moreover, it announces that money does not buy him creative autonomy.

The film intentionally mystifies the "genius grant" in the service of a grander demystification of the concept of autonomy; a stranger suddenly appears at Cotard's door to deliver his acceptance letter, and there is no further mention of the fellowship after the ensuing scene with his therapist. Thereafter the film respects the cloak of invisibility that so often shrouds the fellowship, causing many commentators to mistake them for a benign constant in the creative life of recipients, notwithstanding the exceptions and occasional flare-ups of unwanted attention. It nevertheless poignantly captures the spirit of the MacArthur and capitalist cultural institutions more generally: Cotard's unfreedom is no irony. Freedom is not reducible to wealth, despite what the Foundation's euphemistic rhetoric about "no strings attached" might suggest.

To assail the "no strings attached" myth, I have identified the thematic intersections between the broader MacArthur narrative, the features of the neoliberal sociology of knowledge, and the work of Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, and Saunders.

Their work reflects the Marxist themes of capital, labour, and rent that transform within neoliberalism into a commitment to involuntary competition, human capital, and the price mechanism, as Foucault first catalogued. My four primary authors extensively thematize the main elements of this commitment, which taken together compose the neoliberal sociology of knowledge within and against which I have situated their work. Such intermingling of cultural and economic value resonates with Jameson's statement from the opening chapter of *Postmodernism* that "every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (3). Jameson's claim can be mapped onto the dynamic of the literary within neoliberalism, as my study has amplified. Every position on the literary in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of neoliberalism today.[189] The hermeneutic implications of this rendering of literary and economic value are profound. As Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins summarize in their Introduction to a 2013 special issue on *Genres of Neoliberalism*, "movement into and through the so-called neoliberal era suggested [to Jameson] a reduced role for art as a form of resistance and an increased role for the critic as the one able to drive a wedge between instantiations of and critiques of the present" (8). Although they connect their interpretation to Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, here Elliott and Harkins echo Jameson's definition of how

[189] The recent work of Walter Benn Michaels supports this idea. In a 2009 piece published in *BookForum*, Michaels channels the argument he made in his polemic 2007 book *The Trouble With Diversity*, and defines "the neoliberal novel" as a work which follows the political logic of neoliberalism by substituting cultural differences for economic inequality (n. pag.). Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl accord less importance to theme and content than Michaels (or myself, for that matter), when they declare that "the neoliberal novel is as much (*if not more*) about methods and priorities of reading as it is about mimesis, thematics, or content" (207, emphasis added). My concluding paragraphs nevertheless take their cue from Johansen and Karl's verdict concerning "methods and priorities."

allegory operates.[190] Allegory identifies the symptom, clarifying the latent politics of literature.

The tethering of "political stance" to method becomes clear in the recent competition between symptomatic and postsymptomatic approaches to reading, which Elliott and Harkins highlight. I have adopted the symptomatic approach throughout my study, whereas the postsymptomatic camp[191] advances "a form of reading that does not seek to uncover the unspoken of the text" (Elliott and Harkins 9). Accentuating the manifest content of a given text, a postsymptomatic reading of a work of fiction by Gaddis, Whitehead, Wallace, or Saunders would have to leave aside the "genius grants" because the texts do not mention them.[192] The postsymptomatic approach thus limits literary transactions to the terms of an exchange between author and reader (as critic). On the surface, this limitation seems to adopt a "political stance" that opposes the neoliberal extension of the speculative logic of endless profit to all domains of social activity. Postsymptomatic readings dispense with speculation to the extent that they tend to limit the symbolic profit that an individual critic can amass to the manifest content of the text; however, since the dominant neoliberal sociology of knowledge succeeds by concealing what or even that neoliberalism *is*, postsymptomatic readings reinforce this agenda when they leave out what a text can often appear to leave out, i.e., the structural antagonism between capital and labour that determines social activity. With the rise in economic inequality that I outlined in my previous chapter, it is an especially inopportune time for

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[190] My Introduction cited Jameson's definition from *Brecht and Method*: "[a]llegory consists in the withdrawal of its self-sufficiency of meaning from a given representation […] *it takes the form of a small wedge or window alongside a representation*" (122, emphasis added).

[191] Elliott and Harkins assign Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (2003) the role of postsymptomatic camp leader.

[192] The single exception is Wallace's short story "Death Is Not the End," which I discuss in chapter four.

critics to look for this antagonism in texts only where they find it. While a postsymptomatic reading of *Synecdoche* would admit the "genius grants," it would not desire to connect them with Kaufman's film and the 2008 global financial crisis, for instance. When *Synecdoche* was still in the post-production stages, the 2008 meltdown happened. Initial viewers of the film likely could not help but read Cotard's fate as an indictment of exorbitant Wall St. bonuses, especially given the film's Manhattan setting. To think symptomatically about the financial class that ultimately benefitted from the crisis together with a "genius grant" recipient is promising, since doing so begins to dispatch with a self-exempting moralism. Cotard and Wall St. traders are identical as subjects of value in a neoliberal economy—to resist collapsing their identities in the wake of the collapse is to court a self-estrangement that approaches structural causes.

A symptomatic reading of Kaufman's film also exposes a value chain that foregrounds several key actors navigating the crisis of the humanities that neoliberalism has ushered in.[193] This chain locates the critic as an academic labourer within the neoliberal sociology of knowledge, and thus to me seems like an appropriately self-reflexive note to sound in a concluding paragraph. Allegorically, value makes Cotard legible as various labourers within the university employment structure. He is the university president. Whether lauded for his personal attributes or denounced for his moral failings, his disconnection from the institution he oversees—in Cotard's case, a creative project—emerges in a conflict of value. With Cotard, the conflict is between the demands of his ego and the basic social needs of his cast; with the university president, the conflict is between the systemic need for capital appreciation and any non-economic

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[193] See, especially, Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works* (2009) and Cary Nelson's *No University Is an Island* (2010).

imperatives of education. Cotard is the tenured professor, whose job security invites intellectual pursuits that at a remove from immediate market pressures, but who intermittently confronts the exploitative logic that overlay these pursuits. Above all, Cotard is a Contract Academic Faculty member and graduate student. He depends on a windfall as a release from precarity, yet his fate remains symbolic of precarity because it is so radically individualized. This allegorical exercise illustrates that the structure of the "genius grants" reveals the limitations of capitalist structures, whether it is the public university or the private foundation. I pose these analogies as an increasing cohort of people trained to be cultural critics join the ranks of the precarious and underemployed. To whatever ends my critical labour is directed in the future, this study has helped me to formulate at least two unavoidable questions that I will carry with me. Pushing past the boundary of American literature, what effect do "flexible" labour markets have on the substance of criticism? What are the appropriate priorities as exploitation intensifies?

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