MAKING ROOM FOR AFFECT: ZADIE SMITH, DAVID FOSTER WALLACE,

AND THE AUTHENTICATING HUMAN

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The project at hand takes as its object of study an affect-centered model of subjectivity

that emphasizes the role authentication plays in determining the intensity of the subject's

feelings, and thus, I argue, the degree to which the subject becomes different. This

model is derived from the fiction of Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace, who belong

to a generation of authors whose work has been frequently periodized as responding to

or "coming after" an academic construction of postmodern culture most popularized in

the West during the last decades of the 20th century. By elaborating on the nature and

implications of this model of subjectivity, this project seeks to understand the shift in

literary sensibilities that occurs at the turn of the millennium as, in part, an impulse to

"make room" for affect, not only in the character function of fiction, but also in Western

conceptions of human becoming.

DEDICATION

To my wife, Kathy and my son, Jack. To the human being, however it becomes.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Sally Robinson (advisor), Emily Johansen, and Mikko Tuhkanen of the Department of English; and Professor Tommy Curry of the Department of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The project at hand takes as its object of study an affect-centered model of subjectivity

derived from the fiction of Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace. Smith and Wallace, I

argue, belong to a generation of authors whose work has been frequently periodized as

coming after postmodernism. By elaborating on the nature and implications of this

model of subjectivity, this project seeks to understand the shift in literary sensibilities

that occurs at the turn of the millennium in the neoliberal West as, in part, an impulse to

"make room" for affect, not only in the character function of fiction, but also in Western

conceptions of human becoming.

In his article "Beginning with Postmodernism," Adam Kelly mentions Richard

Powers, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Colson Whitehead, and Wallace as exemplars

of this generation, and I would hasten to include Dave Eggers, Jeffrey Eugenides,

George Saunders, and Smith. According to Kelly, these authors belong to the post-baby-

boomer Generation X,[1] and they share postmodernism as a point of departure in three

respects: they publish their early work in the last two decades of the 20th century, placing

them in conversation with high-postmodern authors like Don DeLillo and Thomas

Pynchon; they witness the rise of the "information age" whose emergence is often

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[1] Kelly specifically places them as being born "roughly between the late 1950s and the
beginning of the 1970s" (392), though given the central role my analysis of Zadie
Smith's work plays in the project at hand, I would extend that latter date to the middle of
the 1970s. He also never explicitly uses Generation X as a descriptor for this generation.

speculatively dramatized by the literature of postmodernism; and they tend to have attained academic degrees in the humanities during the 1980s, "when theory was at its zenith of influence in the American academy" (392). With Kelly, I argue they therefore "begin with the academic construction of American literature and society specifically *as* 'postmodern'," and thus their work can be fruitfully read as a response to that "academic construction" of Western, neoliberal culture-as-postmodern (392-396).

As I use the term throughout my project, however, postmodernism only vaguely refers to the *tenets* of postmodern or poststructuralist theory, and it would be a mistake to characterize these authors as somehow transcending or rejecting incredulity toward metanarratives, the fact that signs only ever refer to other signs, the dispersed nature of the subject, or the fact that language of any kind is always political and value laden. Rather, my idiosyncratic use of the term more strongly indexes a discursive style, a rhetorical posture, a set of methodologies, or a way of thinking whose grain runs in the direction of suspicion and irony. Whether this style was popularized or merely echoed by the ascendency of theory in the academy, its cold, affectless cynicism signals sophistication in the context of the Western cultural milieu at the turn of the millennium. While this generation of authors rarely if ever find themselves interested in challenging postmodern ontological assumptions, they are distinguished from their forebears in that their posture toward the postmodern is no longer one of fascination—it has become the air they breathe.[2] As such, this project seeks to locate within a representational subset of

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[2] Jeffrey Nealon's observation is helpful here: "Think of Roland Barthe's 'Death of the Author' or Judith Butler's gender performativity: these are no longer concepts that you

their work a particular point of departure from the postmodern, and in so doing it is in conversation with scholarship by Stephen Burn,[3] Adam Kelly,[4] Nicoline Timmer,[5] and others.

Emerging from this scholarship is a consensus about a renewed focus on character that marks literature after postmodernism, a claim expounded upon by Burn: "In post-postmodern novels… we get a fuller sense of a character's personal history because these younger authors more freely interrupt time's passage through strategically deployed analepses" (*Jonathan* 24). Burn notes that while "each successive major literary movement in the past 100 years has routinely announced that it had a more tenacious grasp on character than its predecessor," one of the features that mark this latest shift toward characterization concerns "the influence of ideas drawn from neuroscientific research, which suggest that the neurophysiology of the brain underpins character motivation" (23, 25). Throughout my project, I place heavy emphasis on Burn's latter observation—I argue that, for the kind of subject assumed by Smith and Wallace (as evidenced by the characters I encounter in their fiction), *affect* is the seat of

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have to laboriously sell to freshmen. They already know this stuff; in fact, they live it. Postmodernism, performativity, and the death of the author are no longer 'emergent' phenomena, but they've become 'dominant' ones" (*Post-Postmodernism* 64).
[3] See his first chapter in *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* where Burn reads the work of Franzen, Powers, and Wallace as "post-postmodern."
[4] Aside from "Beginning with Postmodernism" which reads Egan's work as coming 'after postmodernism,' see his "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" which figures Wallace's use of sincerity as a response to postmodern culture.
[5] See her *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* where she provides post-postmodern readings of Wallace, Eggers, and Danielewski.

that subject's evaluative decision-making (agency), and given the way affect is often figured as a set of autonomic, neurological heuristics, the neurological very much takes center stage when accounting for the behavior of their characters.

I would add to Burn's analysis of the renewed concentration on character present in the fiction after postmodernism by arguing that it represents a shift in terms of "what matters" in contemporary fictional projects. In Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*, where he attempts to account for the shift in literary fiction from a predominantly modern to a predominantly postmodern sensibility, he notes that if modern fiction is largely concerned with the epistemological (the limits of knowing), then postmodern fiction concerns itself with chiefly ontological questions: "What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" (10). For authors like Don DeLillo, John Barth, and Paul Auster, each of whom writes fiction that explores the "postmodern condition" at a moment of literary fascination with critical theory, there is a tendency to allow these ontological concerns to become the driving forces that motivate their fictional characters to do things in the world. In Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," as Ambrose "wondered at the endless replication of his image in the mirrors," he loses himself "in the reflection that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible" (94). According to this recognizably postmodern diagetic strategy, the function of Ambrose-as-character is to wonder at and become lost in a challenging ontological problem, namely, that all perceptions of the world are subjective and value laden. As for how Ambrose *feels* about this realization, the reader must look to the closing paragraph of the story:

He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes

he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for

others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the

lovers for whom funhouses are designed. (97)

Ambrose's feelings of regret or ostensibly sadness are largely irrelevant when it comes

to explaining his actions. He is resigned to construct funhouses for others because while

he is still alive, he is unable to himself be a lover, a subject possessed by passion,

because his knowledge of the world has somehow placed him beyond the consequences

of his emotions.

A similar pattern is found in Auster's "City of Glass," where detective fiction

author Daniel Quinn takes on a real case as a private investigator, and is lead from clue

to clue, each of which prove to be merely signs that point to other signs, never serving to

"resolve" the mystery at hand. By the end of the novella, Quinn has made peace with the

intractability of reading and interpreting signs, a realization which forecloses 'detection'

altogether. He is content instead to write "about the stars, the earth, his hopes for

mankind" (*New York Trilogy* 133). For these authors, still fascinated with the tenets of

high theory, it is as though the protagonists are living out a kind of postmodern

bildungsroman, as if the trajectory of human education always terminates among the

shoppers in the supermarket at the end of DeLillo's *White Noise*, "where we wait

together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly

moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks" (310). The

postmodern bildungsroman, it would seem, prescribes as a final lesson for humanity at

the end of history a Baudrillardian surrender to images, a celebration of the foreclosure

of the epistemological struggle. In other words, in much of the literary fiction

immediately preceding the work of authors like Smith and Wallace, it is the acquisition

of esoteric knowledge rather than the experience of feeling that motors the subject along

their trajectory of becoming.

This tendency to marginalize feeling in the stylistics of postmodernism is

identified by Fredric Jameson as "the waning of affect," a condition brought about by the

"deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself" which stems from a rejection

of "some separation within the subject" along with the "whole metaphysics of inside and

outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often

cathartically, that 'emotion' is then projected out and externalized" (*Postmodernism* 11).

It is unfashionable, according to the postmodern aesthetic, for the subject to be portrayed

as harboring emotional content within some locatable 'inside':

> as for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in
>
> contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may
>
> also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from
>
> every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present
>
> to do the feeling" (15).

Interestingly, Jameson also describes a condition that very much resonates with that of

Auster's detective Daniel Quinn: "the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its

pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and

future into coherent experience" such that "it becomes difficult enough to see how the

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cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments'"

(*Postmodernism* 25). Given this fragmented state, the subject finds itself caught in a

"windless postmodern stasis," feeling paralyzed and finding it difficult to marshal the

scattered pieces of itself toward the pursuit of meaningful life projects (Kelly

"Beginning" 398). Whereas Jameson attributes the prevalence of the fragmented,

paralyzed postmodern subject to a rejection of "temporal organization in general,"

according to the model of subjectivity I offer here, there is very much a correlation

between the waning of affect and the attenuation of the subject's ability to strategically

suture enough fragments of its lived experience to establish a position in the language-

games it plays. Indeed, I argue that for the characters that populate the pages of Smith

and Wallace, *feelings* are the exclusive catalyst of becoming, and they play a vital role in

the work of *emplotment*,[6] or the subject's ability to teleologically configure the

associations that comprise a sense-of-self.

Another distinguishing feature of the literature after postmodernism is a tendency

to reframe "critique" as merely one stop on the road to a larger project. As I present

them here, these authors tacitly agree with Rita Felski's assessment of postmodernism's

dominant mode of thinking in *The Limits of Critique*: "its overriding concern with

questioning motives and exposing wrongdoing (the moral-political drama of detection)

results in a mind-set—vigilant, wary, mistrustful—that blocks receptivity and inhibits

generosity. We are shielded from the risks, but also the rewards, of aesthetic experience"

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[6] I borrow Paul Ricoeur's conception of emplotment as he uses it in *Oneself as Another* in considering the nature of narrative identity (141).

(188). In Felski's view, those rewards are more fully actualized within "another regime of interpretation: one that is willing to recognize the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than just to denounce mystifying illusions. The language of attachment, passion, and inspiration is no longer taboo" (187).

Felski's comments resonate with those made by Smith in her essay collection, *Changing My Mind*. Speaking of her time studying critics like Roland Barthes in her time at Cambridge, Smith confesses that

> I'm glad I'm not the reader I was in college anymore, and I'll tell you why: it made me feel lonely. Back then I wanted to tear down the icon of the author and abolish, too, the idea of a privileged reader—the text was to be a free, wild thing, open to everyone, belonging to no one, refusing an ultimate meaning. Which was a powerful feeling, but also rather isolating, because it jettisons the very idea of communication, of any possible genuine link between the person who writes and the person who reads. Nowadays I know the true reason I read is to feel less alone, to make a connection with a consciousness other than my own. (*Changing* 54)

Smith elaborates on the kind of "reader I was in college" in response to a question about her time at Cambridge after a reading of *On Beauty*, noting that she "had a tough time in [her] second year because it was about learning what you had to do to do well in a place like that," explaining that she had "to become quite masculine in the way you think and the way you argue and there's no time for what I would think as a more womanly way of

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thinking," a mode of thought she describes as being "more generous, more open" (*Thalia*). In order to be a good reader of poststructuralist theory, she had to become, in her words, "incredibly fierce." These sentiments are echoed throughout *On Beauty* itself, perhaps most distilled in a conflict between the married couple Kiki and Howard Belsey: "It's like after 9/11 when you sent that ridiculous e-mail round to everybody about Baudry, Bodra—" (394). Howard interrupts: "Baudrillard. He's a philosopher. His name is Baudrillard." Kiki continues: "About simulated wars or whatever the fuck that was… And I was thinking: *What is wrong with this man?* I was *ashamed* of you. […] We're really here—this is really happening. Suffering is *real*." For Smith, postmodernism's "way of thinking" is too masculine, too fierce, too alienating from others to allow for genuine connection.

This impulse to transcend the limits of critique can also be found in scholarship surrounding Wallace's work. Kelly claims that "the most striking feature of Wallace studies" is "the agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both 'diagnosis and cure,' that it should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention" ("Critical Reception" 49). Roughly two-thirds of this project is dedicated to showing, through close readings of their work, that Wallace and Smith's overriding ethical prescriptions for the Western neoliberal subject at the turn of the millennium are to "be sincere" and "only connect," respectively. The rest of my project consists in deriving an affect-centered model of subjectivity for which those prescriptions could ostensibly hold curative value, while also exploring the implications of that model. In so doing, this project provides

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compelling readings of two iconic Western literary authors writing at the turn of the

millennium, furthers the discourse (and literary jurisdiction) of affect theory, and

provides a methodological litmus test for a larger project, such as an investigation of the

work of *all* of the aforementioned authors belonging to the same literary generation as

Wallace and Smith, specifically in terms of whether they assume the same kind of

subject. If such a project were already successfully carried out, I would feel fewer

trepidations about my project's boldest conceit, which is to henceforth refer to the

generation of authors under consideration here as the affect realists after postmodernism.

Before proceeding to more fully survey the various components of this project,

however, I should clarify some of the terms I'll be using throughout, and also provide an

explanation for why I selectively focus on Wallace and Smith. First off, what do I mean

by the "neoliberal West?" In one sense, I mean the nations whose economic systems are

compatible with and therefore complicit in the language-games of global capitalism as

they exist at the turn of the millennium.[7] I am using the term "neoliberal" as opposed to

merely "capitalist" to refer to the global economic system in order to mark the crossing

of a threshold—a crossing that occurred during the final decades of the past millennium

due to the ascendance of an economic arch-philosophy that sanctifies, above all else, the

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[7] I am largely drawing from David Harvey, who argues that "a cardinal feature of
neoliberal thinking" is "the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by
freedom of the market and of trade" (7). He provides an example via the U.S. occupation
of Iraq: "What the US evidently sought to impose by main force on Iraq was a state
apparatus whose fundamental mission was to facilitate conditions for profitable capital
accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital. I call this kind of state
apparatus a *neoliberal state*. The freedoms it embodies reflect the interests of private
property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital."

wiles of the free market; and to the exponential growth of information technology for the

production and near instantaneous dissemination of media (and increasingly other

goods)—a phenomenon that has seen to the commodification (and therefore the

destabilization) of ever increasing territories of lived Western experience. Given the

transnational nature of this network of dissemination, I find it restrictive to narrow the

scope of this investigation, as Kelly does, to literature produced within the United States,

and for this reason find it necessary to broaden my scope to at least include Smith's

work. As Jeffrey Nealon argues in *Post-Postmodernism*, the term "neoliberal" also

marks the integration of the emancipatory ethos of postmodernism into the logic of

capitalism itself:

> The ethos of liberation that surrounds cultural postmodernism (the
>
> transgressions of hybridity, the individual ethics of self-fashioning,
>
> Dionysiac celebrations of multiplicity, endlessly making it new) can't
>
> simply be walled off from the substantially more sinister work that these
>
> very same notions index within the economic realm—they're the
>
> watchwords of neoliberal capitalism as well. (23)

I should also note that I often use "neoliberal West" to refer to a cultural landscape that,

despite being constantly subjected to what Deleuze refers to as "deterritorialization,"[8] by

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[8] Nealon refers to Deleuze as the "thinker du joir" for the "post-postmodern" moment,
and argues that just as "contemporary biology is not merely interested in *interpreting*
genes, but in *changing* (and thereby potentially *financializing*) them," the logic of capital
in the neoliberal West similarly incentivizes profitable adjustments (*Post-
Postmodernism* 147-148). Given the broader purview of capital under the "commodify
everything" neoliberal zeitgeist, the post-postmodern subject is constantly being

and large still continues to privilege performances that reify heteronormative masculinity and the racialization of class. This landscape very much has a gradient of privilege, in other words, and the performing subject, in her bids to authenticate by "getting away with" citations of this content, is always establishing her position and posture on this landscape.

For better or for worse, I chose Wallace because I was drawn to this generation of authors through his work, and when commencing this project, his oeuvre was most familiar to me. Throughout my graduate studies, I kept bumping into people who shared a high estimation of his "cultural significance," a sentiment echoed by Smith in her introduction to the short story collection *The Burned Children of America* published in 2003, where she remarks on how Wallace's *Infinite Jest* "sat like a challenge on the shelves of hipsters everywhere," and claimed it was "the book you were going to have to deal with sooner or later, just as a previous generation had to deal with *Gravity's Rainbow*" (xi). In her preface to her short story collection *Martha and Hanwell*, she also proclaims Wallace as "the greatest contemporary innovator in the [short story]" (vii). It turns out, however, that attempting to provide quantitative evidence for the "cultural significance" of a contemporary author is a fraught exercise, due largely to the proprietary nature of readership data which unfortunately falls under the category of "corporate intel" for publishing houses.

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dislodged from familiar territory, forced to either circle the wagons in the name of fundamentalism, or learn how to position themselves using new language-games and political frameworks. Deleuze and Guattarri refer to this phenomenon as "deterritorialization" in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

I have become wary, however, of touting Wallace's legacy for three reasons. The

first is due to his treatment of the poet Mary Karr, with whom he had a troubled

relationship in the early 90s. In Megan Garber's article "David Foster Wallace and the

Dangerous Romance of Male Genius" published in *The Atlantic*, she recounts how

Wallace "once pushed Karr from a vehicle. During another fight, he threw a coffee table

at her." Garber goes on to reference one of Karr's tweets: "that's about 2% of what

happened. tried to buy a gun. kicked me. climbed up the side of my house at night.

followed my son age 5 home from school. had to change my number twice, and he still

got it. months and months it went on." As Garber implicitly argues, to engage in the

unqualified promotion of Wallace's work is to further reify the dangerous cult of male

genius as a discursively embedded excuse for the abusive treatment of women. The

second major qualification I'd like to make about Wallace here at the outset is the

myopic nature of the kinds of subject represented in his fiction. As Clare Hayes-Brady

points out, "Wallace's lack of engagement with female characters is palpable throughout

his work," and "a similar pattern governs the appearance and exploration of issues of

racial difference," such that "Wallace's characters are chiefly white, male East Coasters"

("Personally I'm neutral" 63).[9] With Jorge Araya, I acknowledge that "writers, after all,

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[9] So as not to misrepresent Hayes-Brady, I should point out that in this article (and also
in her 2016 monograph *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*), she is
something of an apologist for Wallace's myopia. She explains that "Masculinity in
Wallace's writing and characters is dominant, but subscribes to the myth of masculinity
in crisis, attempting to narrate and occupy instead of converse and understand. The fear
to which this misogyny is ascribed, then, is not merely the reaction of a masculine
subject that feels itself under threat from the feminine, but rather more subtly, the terror
of a narcissistic subject who feels his primacy challenged by the very existence of a

have no obligations to diversity" (239), but nonetheless find Wallace's representational

aporia problematic, given that Wallace proclaims the role of fiction to be an exploration

of "what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (McCaffery 131). This second qualification

is imbricated with my third qualification, which is that Wallace's fiction champions a

particular kind of hero, one who bravely constructs, via sincere speech acts, a sense-of-

self robust enough to serve as a barrier for filtering out the influence of the other. While

in the context of his fiction the construction of this barrier is figured as a coping

mechanism for drug addiction and for withstanding the paralyzing effects of Western

media, when coupled with his tendency to only represent WASP males, it fails to

acknowledge the fact that sincerity is not always a viable strategy for those whose

subject-positions are violently marginalized by hegemonic, neoliberal culture.

Given my hesitations about Wallace, a small part of my rationale for reading him

alongside Smith seems evident: among the other authors of his generation, her voice

represents one of the furthest coordinates from Wallace's on the neoliberal subject-

position matrix, and perhaps for this reason she shares none of the inhibitions Wallace

apparently had for portraying non-WASP characters. Beyond this, however, there is a

tenuous connection that exists between Wallace and Smith that is as persistent as it is

difficult to pin down. Both authors made their precocious debut on the Western literary

scene at the age of twenty-four and at the tail end of their respective undergraduate

educations (Wallace's *The Broom of the System* in 1987, Smith's much more widely

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subjective Other, with this fear specifically reified in the distinction of genders"
("Personally I'm neutral" 69).

received *White Teeth* in 2000). Both authors published large, sprawling novels near or at

the turn of the millennium (*White Teeth*, and Wallace's second novel *Infinite Jest*

published in 1996) which were so acclaimed that their names were established in some

circles as orienting landmarks on the sprawling territory of neoliberal literary

production.[10]

Further solidifying the connection between these two authors are scattered pieces

of evidence of the influence Wallace's fiction exerted on Smith. In her introduction to

The Burned Children of America, she claims Wallace, among the other authors[11] whose

work is represented in the collection, as a member of "my literary generation" (xiv). One

of the two epigraphs of *Changing My Mind*, her 2009 collection of essays published

roughly a year after Wallace's death, is attributed to Wallace: "You get to decide what to

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[10] Commenting on U.T. Austin's acquisition of Don DeLillo's archive in 2004, Harry
Ransom Center Director Thomas Staley notes that DeLillo's work "provides a bridge
from the work of earlier postmodernists, such as Thomas Pynchon, to the current
zeitgeist represented by modern young writers, such as Jonathan Franzen, David Foster
Wallace, Richard Powers, and Zadie Smith" ("Ransom"). Echoing this sentiment, David
Marcus writes in 2013 that "a new group of avant gardists—Richard Powers, David
Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Zadie Smith—tried their hand at the now… This new
generation sought to rebuild the world rather than deconstruct it, … to mine the present
for those rare, fragile moments of contact—those brief human intersections that remind
us that while we are all each desperately unknowable and alone we are also in this
together" ("Post-Hysterics"). In an interview with literary critic James Wood appearing
on Slate in 2015, Isaac Chotiner describes Wood as "someone who was happy to write
harsh appraisals of everyone from Zadie Smith to David Foster Wallace," as though their
names somehow constitute an exhaustive range of the contemporary literary landscape.
[11] The collection features fiction from Aimee Bender, Arthur Bradford, Judy Budnitz,
Amanda Davis, Myla Goldberg, Dave Eggers, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Safran Foer,
A.M. Homes, Shelley Jackson, Ken Kalfus, Matthew Klam, Jonathan Lethem, Sam
Lipsyte, Rick Moody, Stacey Richter, George Saunders, Julia Slavin, and David Foster
Wallace.

worship." In the last essay of the collection, Smith declares "he was my favorite living writer," and argues that "a difficult gift like *Brief Interviews* [*with Hideous Men*] merits the equally difficult gift of our close attention and effort" (259-260). There have been attempts to articulate a connection between the two authors beyond the coincidence of their fame, timing, and awareness of each other. Wood himself lumped Smith's *White Teeth* and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* together (among works by other authors like Salman Rushdie) in his now infamous New Republic article, "Human, All Too Inhuman" published in 2000, where he argues they belong to a new genre of "big, ambitious novel" he refers to as "hysterical realism." Under the aegis of hysterical realism, Wood argues, authors like Smith and Wallace enforce "connections [between their characters] that are finally conceptual rather than human" for the sake of maintaining a "bonhumous, punning, lively serenity of spirit" leaving the reader bereft of depictions of real human beings in believable situations. For Wood, this kind of literature suffers from a lack, and "that lack is the human."

I would argue, however, that this stitching together of characters via artificial, unbelievably serendipitous and largely impersonal forces belongs to a broader trend in cultural production at the turn of the millennium, one that film critic Alissa Quart calls "hyperlinked cinema" which, she argues, organizes films such as *Magnolia*, *Crash*, and *Happy Endings* ("Networked"). Rachel Greenwald Smith identifies the same organizing logic of hyperlinked cinema operating in Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*, noting that "the partitioning of the narrative into character perspectives […] is so clearly artificial that the very nature of separation among the characters is exposed

from the start as a narrative construction rather than as reflecting an established fact of

individual experience" (21). The result is a refusal "to locate value in the personal,

formally refiguring feelings as unpredictable forces that are modified, intensified, and

transmitted through interpersonal and interobjective relationships that exceed the

capacities of any individual to manage them" (24). The effect of this strategy of

narration, in other words, is to identify *feelings* as the motivating force behind "what

happens" instead of fully agentive subjects or even readily believable events.

Perhaps, then, rather than constituting what Wood would consider to be a failure

in the mimetic representation of human beings, the fiction of affect realists at the turn of

the millennium marks a shift in terms of what matters in meaningful representations of

characters in fiction. If, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, "writing has nothing to do with

signifying," but rather "has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to

come" (*Thousand Plateaus* 4-5), then I believe Smith, Wallace, and their contemporaries

are engaged in a project of mapping out what Nealon refers to as the post-postmodern

moment where "it's all about the practices of *force* and *power*, not about the states of

truth or *representation*" (*Post-Postmodernism* 94), and *affect* is figured in their fiction as

the place where the effects of force and power manifest in the human subject. The realm

"yet to come" these authors appear to be surveying is "the (non)site where the logic of

the individual subject overlaps with the logic of globalization" (42). Rather than

prioritizing a verisimilitude of "real human situations," these authors appear to be

stricken with an urgency to portray what it feels like to be subjected to the all-

commodifying forces of global neoliberal capital, where "you are a mutual fund, not a

subject" (100). Much more relevant, then, to such a mapping out of the overlap between the determining, global forces of capital and the iteratively performing subject are representations of *feelings* which, for the purposes of my project of reading Smith and Wallace together, act as idiosyncratic, agentive condensates of the experiences a given subject registers and enfolds. For this reason, perhaps, part of the way these authors "make room" for affect is in occasionally allowing the intensity of the absurd or the unlikely to lure it into view. Rather than "hysterical realism," then, I prefer to refer to the movement Wood identifies as *affect* realism.

My final and most compelling reason for reading Smith alongside Wallace is due to the fact that Smith more fully realizes, in her characterization, an affect-centered model of subjectivity. Wallace's myopia when it comes to the influence of the other seems to stifle him, to prevent him from imagining all the ways one's feelings are constituted in relation to that other, such that his project is largely confined to the role affect plays in constituting a self-of-self. In this respect, Smith's project circumscribes Wallace's, for while she also very much explores the constitution of a sense-of-self, that "self" is much more seamlessly affected by the communities in which the subject participates. This aspect of her work, I argue, stems from her insistence on showcasing the inherent value of connection when it comes to establishing not just a sense-of-self but also a sense-of-belonging. In summation, I have chosen Wallace and Smith because I believe their work to be representational of the concerns of a generation of writers that come after postmodernism; because Smith's fiction elegantly addresses and surpasses the representational gaps and conceptual limitations that plague Wallace's work; and as I

hope to make clear throughout my project, because the assumptions they both make about the crucial role authentication plays in the becoming of the neoliberal subject call for the installment of more space, time, and assent for sincere articulation in the dominant language-games of the West.

By way of providing a roadmap for this project, in my second chapter I attempt to schematize a retooled model of subjectivity based on the assumptions of Wallace and Smith. This model assumes that even during the most mundane of human experiences, we are constantly forming the neuro-synaptic associations that inflect the affect-heuristics we use to evaluate the positioning of ourselves and others within language-games. It assumes that when forming these associations, our perceptions are filtered and modulated by our feelings, the way light filters through a prism. At the same time, those very feelings are sculpted by associations made in the past. As such, much like the subject of poststructuralism, this is a subject that is constantly under construction, but what my model simultaneously insists upon is that, due to variation in the nature, order, and intensity of any subject's experiences, each subject is inherently singular. When we feel, according to this model, we *become* in ways that are inevitably idiosyncratic. I refer to this model as "the authenticating human" in order to emphasize the association-intensifying role our feelings play when we register a performance (whether our own performance or the performance of another) and we not only fail to detect something like "phoniness" in the performance, but perhaps even feel something like catharsis, or recognition, or the feeling of something clicking into place. I refer to this phenomenon of feeling right when registering a performance as authentication, and its intensifying

effects function not only to further cement the associations we make based on our perceptions during the performance, but to also further cement the level of authority (ethos) we ascribe to the performer in representing the various language-game dependent categories into which we classify them.

Given this definition of authentication, my model figures *sincerity*, a key term for my reading of Wallace, as a particular kind of authentication, one in which the performer and audience inhabit the same body—sincerity happens when we ourselves perform, register, and authenticate our own performance. Conceiving of the term in this way allows me to make sense of Wallace's insistence on the curative value of sincerity by enabling me to argue that one of the things that "becomes" when we perform sincerely is a *sense-of-self* made more "robust" via the effects of authentication: when we perform sincerely, we become not only incrementally different, but also more *confident* in that difference, allowing us to more readily locate our position in language-games. Another benefit of conceiving of sincerity in this way is that it allows the term to retain its historical connotation, which, in Lionel Trilling's terms, is "the congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2), without having to invoke the essentialized self that poststructuralism so thoroughly disperses. This is because, according to this model, one can be true to one's feelings while simultaneously possessing as many "senses-of-self" as there are language-games that we habitually play (though it may be that some associative "consolidation" occurs, for the sake of cognitive efficiency, when we enfold the associations that comprise these various senses-of-self).

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I go on in my second chapter to show the role authentication plays in the establishment and molding of cultural identity when we as audience members witness a performance. In the context of identity making, in order for a performer to "pass" as a member of a particular community, the performer must attempt to cite memetic content which has been felicitously performed and authenticated within that community in the past. This performance of cited content is then scrutinized via the affect-heuristics of the audience members. When audience members authenticate that performance, their enfolding of this memetic content inevitably comes to inflect what it takes for performers to authenticate within that same community in the future. Additionally, the authentication of a performer is often explicitly signaled by audience members with the performance of a different class of memetic content (the nodding of the head, applause, verbal acknowledgement, an expression of rapt attention, etc.), and I refer to this kind of signaling as "the granting of assent." When a performer registers an audience's granting of assent, a *sense-of-belonging* to that community is established or reified in the performer. As such, authentication not only plays a central role in how we establish a sense-of-self, but also in how we establish cultural identity, conceived of as a *suturing* of a sense-of-self to one or more senses-of-belonging. Conceiving of cultural identity and belonging in this way enables me to makes sense of Smith's insistence on the inherent value of "connection" for the subject. By granting assent to the other, even (or perhaps especially) in the context of mundane human interaction, we are not just allowing them to feel a sense-of-belonging with us—we're infinitesimally changing what it takes for performers like them to belong in the future.

My third chapter focuses on Wallace, and is organized around the conceit of investigating "what happens" to Hal Incandenza, the main protagonist of *Infinite Jest*, who by the end of the novel's plot is rendered mysteriously incapable of expressing himself. Departing from the prevailing scholarship on this mystery, which would point toward Hal having been exposed to either a hallucinogenic drug or the dangerous film that shares the novel's title, I argue that Hal's predicament can be fruitfully read as a cautionary tale for what happens when a culture's dominant language-games become so saturated with irony and cynicism that there remain scant opportunities for the subject to engage in enough sincere self-expression to establish a viable sense-of-self. Hal's emaciated sense-of-self prevents him from being able to soberly evaluate his own positioning in language-games, rendering him not only unable to speak, but also bereft of the ability to forge a sense-of-belonging within any supportive communities or to imagine himself engaging in any meaningful life-projects. Conversely, I show how the character Joelle Van Dyne is able to find both belonging and meaning through a twelve-step recovery program where she is induced to play language-games that privilege sincerity.

By reading the novel in this way, I showcase the assumptions Wallace makes about the subject in terms of the central role its affective heuristics play, and the susceptibility of those heuristics to the overall "tone" of a culture's dominant language-games. Wallace's prescription for the Western neoliberal subject, then, is to be sincere, to bravely push past the fear of being registered as too sentimental, or the fear of failing to authenticate (with oneself or another) as "cool" or "likeable;" and to iteratively

articulate mimetic representations of one's feelings so as to construct relatively stable senses-of-self. In this light, a sense-of-self functions as an evaluative reference point for our affect-heuristics as they perform the calculus of determining our next move in language-games, and as a necessary prerequisite for ever establishing a sense-of-belonging within community.

My fourth chapter showcases Smith's assumptions about the subject for whom a central struggle is always the establishment of a sense-of-belonging—a task made highly fraught by the paucity of viable cultural identities available for subjects who are gendered and/or racialized. Borrowing a conceit from Christian Moraru, who argues that E.M. Forster's admonition to "Only connect!" serves as an organizing theme for Smith's work, I survey the breadth of her novels and essays, identifying the various valences I feel the admonition accrues in an attempt to distill her own ethical prescription for the Western neoliberal subject. In a way that dovetails nicely with Wallace, I show how Smith is also invested in proclaiming the value of sincere expression, particularly within the context of interpersonal relationships. Reaching far beyond the scope of Wallace's concerns for the subject, however, Smith also demonstrates how belonging within community can serve as a kind of shelter and as an expanded horizon for expression, particularly for those who are drastically over/under-determined by the identities made available for them to authenticate against within hegemonic Western culture.

Where in Wallace, "the mundane" typically warrants something like paranoid vigilance for the nefarious influence of Western media, in Smith the mundane becomes an avenue for adjusting, however minutely, what it takes to belong. Given the

"unknowable" nature of the subject, whose idiosyncratic affect-heuristics are only ever expressed via the "one size fits all" nature of memetic expression, the simple act of granting assent to the unknowable other in the course of mundane interaction is figured in Smith as a powerful enchantment, as the instantiation of a more just world which, however ephemeral or contingent, inevitably changes both the self and the other. As such, Smith's prescription to "only connect" treats not only the individual subject by providing them opportunities to establish a sense-of-belonging, but also treats culture at large by setting the stage for larger adjustments of the protocols of authentication.

In my concluding chapter, I attempt to showcase the value of the authenticating human as a piece of equipment for describing the literature after postmodernism, using it as a lens to perform brief readings of three novels by Franzen, Eggers, and Eugenides. In the course of these readings, I also attempt to further develop the ethics of authentication, arguing that it calls attention to a particular kind of suffering which could be alleviated through the further installment of the conventions of sincerity and assent in Western language-games. I end my project by outlining the scope of future work, both in terms of my pedagogy and scholarship.

CHAPTER II

THE AUTHENTICATING HUMAN

There is a generation of literary authors[12] writing at the turn of the millennium who, I

argue, felt the impulse to "make room" for a more affect-centered model of subjectivity

within the stylistics and tendencies they inherited from the strain of postmodern

literature that preceded them. The conceits of this project are to figure this generation of

authors as affect realists, and to consider the work of Zadie Smith and David Foster

Wallace as being representational of the concerns of these authors—concerns which, as I

argue in my introduction, are in part about diagnosing postmodern cultural 'ailments'

and prescribing certain behaviors or postures as being 'curative' for the unhappy

postmodern subject. What follows in the present chapter is an attempt to articulate this

affect-centered model of subjectivity in such a way as to make sense of Wallace and

Smith's prescriptions to "be sincere" and "only connect," respectively.

If the model of subjectivity implied by the fiction of Smith and Wallace is as

affect-centered as I claim, it behooves me to place their work in conversation with what

Patricia Clough refers to as the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences. In

his foreword to the collection *The Affective Turn* edited by Clough, Michael Hardt

identifies "the two primary precursors to the affective turn" as being "the focus on the

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[12] As I specify in my introduction, I include Mark Danielewski, Jennifer Egan, Dave
Eggers, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, George Saunders, Zadie Smith, David
Foster Wallace, and Colson Whitehead as exemplars of this generation.

body, which has been most extensively advanced in feminist theory" by critics such as Judith Butler, and "the explorations of emotions, conducted predominantly in queer theory" by critics such as Eve Sedgwick (ix). As will become evident in my schematization of this model of subjectivity below, I largely rely on the assumptions of Butler's theory of performativity for the constitution of this subject, though for my purposes the "site" of what she refers to as sedimentation is the affect. I find this reliance to be warranted by language like the following found in Smith's fourth novel *NW*:

> Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (333)

While clearly gesturing toward performative ideas of subject formation given the use of the word 'drag,' Smith also here demonstrates a concern for the 'authentic' that manifests throughout her work, perhaps nowhere more evidently so than in her second novel, *The Autograph Man*. I argue that affect is precisely the site of overlap between the singular subject (standing in here for the authentic) and the various culturally embedded scripts the subject must cite when playing language-games. Rather than employ the psychoanalytic framework Butler uses, however, I account for both the singularity of the subject and the mechanics by which cultural scripts become sedimented within that subject's affect-heuristics via the recent claim of lifelong neuroplasticity made by the neurosciences.

From within affect theory, there is also a tendency to orient much of its

discussion about the relationship between the body and Foucauldian notions of power

according to a line of thought that traces its origin back to Baruch Spinoza, who

according to Hardt, is "the philosopher who has advanced furthest the theory of the

affects and whose thought is the source, either directly or indirectly, of most of the

contemporary work in this field" (ix). Spinoza's concept of the 'affectus' as the

modification a body experiences in its interaction with other bodies is particularly useful

when attempting to refer to the effects of power on a subject. Deleuze and Guattari

perhaps most popularize the term affectus in *A Thousand Plateaus* to refer to the

potentiality of the body to transition between its various capacities to act in response to

the experience of power over time—a way, in other words, to speak of fluctuating

intensities of biopower as they manifest agentively in the body. My own engagement

with this line of discourse is to argue that power manifests in two ways: as an experience

to be registered by the subject (i.e. a routine traffic stop or the advertisement of a

pharmaceutical company), and also as the way our affective responses to that experience

are inflected by past experiences of power. I argue that the 'affectus' is inevitable:

experiences of any kind *always modify the subject*, and the specific site of this change is

the affect. This renders my model of subjectivity radically susceptible to even mundane

expressions of power, like the perception, even in the periphery, of a billboard on a

highway. Rather than leading to something like cultural determinism, however, I insist

that it is precisely this radical susceptibility that guarantees the singularity of the subject,

given the inevitably unique ordering, intensity, and frequency of a given subject's

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experience of power. In other words, no two subjects ever register the same experience of power exactly the same, and therefore the effect of power on any subject is always idiosyncratic.

The neurologically oriented nature of my model exemplifies an increasing tendency in affect theory to converse with the sciences, an impulse manifested, for instance, in Sedgwick and Adam Frank's work with the psychologist Silvan Tomkins,[13] or in Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual* which often narrates the instantaneous and autonomic workings of the central nervous system as it registers both external stimuli and then constantly re-registers its own responses. This appeal to the neurological, as I mention in my introduction, is often employed by the affect realists after postmodernism. As Stephen Burn writes, "the 1990s was designated 'The Decade of the Brain,'" and "neuroscientific explanations of behavior form a much more prominent part of the worldview of the post-postmodern novelist" (*Jonathan Franzen* 25). Despite the way Hardt characterizes Butler's work as a "focus on the body," however, a neurological grounding for a model of subjectivity in many ways flies in the face of the postmodern tendency to be suspicious of scientific discourse. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's approach to the "materiality of the body" is largely to demonstrate the constructed nature of materiality via the same phenomenon of sedimentation I alluded to earlier. For Butler, biological categories like sex imply an "absolute 'outside,' an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse" (8). Such

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[13] See "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*.

attempts to draw "the line between what is and is not constructed" only ever result in a situation where "the 'unconstructed' becomes bounded once again through a signifying practice, and the very boundary which is meant to protect some part of sex from the taint of constructivism is now defined by the anti-constructivist's own construction" (11).

I would argue, however, that the neuroscientific impulse to account for all human memory, feeling, and cognition as the autonomic soliciting and interpreting of the purely associative encoding of registered experience ultimately has the effect of grounding *constructivism itself* in the ontological. In this way, then, I find little difference between the psychoanalytic, "Copernican revolution" of figuring the unconscious as an associative rebus and the implications of neuroplasticity. While the erotics of postmodern discourse certainly privilege psychoanalytic terms such as the "dream" and the "phantasmatic," such terms are often registered after postmodernism, particularly in pedagogical contexts, as needlessly esoteric. I hope to show how the tendency to appeal to neurological rather than psychoanalytic rhetoric in this strain of affect theory provides an alternate way of speaking about the constructed nature of the subject, while also opening up new, more accessible avenues for considering the nature of agency; and also for considering, as Wallace and Smith do, the possibility that the "healthiness" of the subject depends in part on its ability to establish a sense-of-self and a sense-of-belonging.

As a final introductory note, I have organized what follows according to the various core components of this model, intending for them to build upon each other as a series of "layers" or modules, a conceit that emerges from my training in the computer

sciences and my current vocation as a software developer within the digital humanities.

Taking a page from Massumi, I will also attempt, wherever possible, to provide

examples of what I mean in the form of narratives (or in Massumi's terms, parables).

Also, for the sake of brevity and for reasons that will be made clear, I refer to this affect-

centered model of subjectivity as "the authenticating human."

Human Singularity as an Ever-Changing Connectome of Pure Association

The human neurological system is, of course, far afield from what I am qualified to

speak about. Nonetheless, I tread forward here with the audacity of a theorist in the

humanities, and under a banner that reads "Interdisciplinarity!" in hopes that I will be

granted the most generous assumption, and that the inevitable ways in which I am

misrepresenting the field of neuroscience will become constructive points of contention.

I begin my foray into the forests of neurons that comprise our brains by invoking the

idea of *singularity*, the notion that each human being is somehow unique. In Sebastian

Seung's *Connectome: How the Brain's Writing Makes Us Who We Are,* he refers to the

unique configuration of neuronal association in a given human brain as a "connectome,"

and argues that we are, in essence, our connectomes. Our connectome is built over time,

via iterative encounters with phenomena in the world. Every word at our disposal, every

image, smell, touch, taste, and sound that we can recall "lives" in our neurological

system, encoded in the form of pure association, existing as clusters of neurons that light

up in response to stimuli, which in turn, via synaptic connection, light up other

associated neurons.

By way of reductive example, consider the toddler who stares at a tree. When she does so, the optical wiring of her nervous system sends encoded signals about what she sees to her brain, lighting up neurons corresponding to her perception of the shapes and colors of the tree's form. When her mother points to the tree and makes the sound of the word "tree," new signals are sent, this time coming from the auditory wiring of her nervous system, lighting up entirely different clusters of neurons corresponding, perhaps, to the sound of "ee." When these two stimuli occur simultaneously, a synaptic bridge is established between the two clustered sets of neurons (the ones established in her registering of its visual form and the ones established in her registering of her mother's voice). The more this toddler sees examples of trees coupled with hearing the word tree, the more intensely these clusters of neurons will fire in tandem, and the stronger the synaptic bridge between them becomes, until eventually, when either seeing a tree or hearing the word "tree," both clusters light up like fireworks. The point of this imaginary scene of learning is to explain how the sum total of human experience becomes encoded, one way or another, in the form of *pure association*, as neurons firing with varying degrees of intensity connected by synapses with varying connection strengths. Seung insists that this process of learning, of wiring and then re-wiring the brain, never stops. We encode until we die. He refers to this mutability of our grey matter as "neuroplasticity," and refers to the various processes of change our brains undergo as the 'four R's'—"reweighting, reconnection, rewiring, and regeneration," which are the observed means by which our brains are constantly reconfiguring themselves in response to our experiences in the world (129). Throughout this project, I will be referring to the

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moment we encounter a set of stimuli as a "registering," the moment our brains engage in the reconfiguration of our neurons and synapses as an "enfolding," and the content that gets enfolded as "pure association."

It is crucial for my purposes, however, to insist that nodes in this neural network of associations, as well as the connections that span them, grow and shrink with every registering, such that there is always a *topology* of association. Some clusters of neurons become referenced more than others in any instance of registering and enfolding, such that they become like localized *centers* or *hubs* for efficiently routing associative traffic pertaining to particular stimuli. In David Kemmerer's *Cognitive Neuroscience of Language*, he notes that when a neuron fires, "it's always an all-or-nothing affair, never a matter of degree" (35). When I speak of intensity, therefore, I refer to the fact that "neurons vary greatly, however, in the precise rate at which they fire," and a particular neuron's "firing rate will increase significantly above its baseline level" thus indicating "how confident it is that its preferred stimulus is present" (35-36). In a study referenced by Kemmerer, a single neuron was identified in a patient as having "responded robustly" to "photographs of the television host Oprah Winfrey" (38). Interestingly, "this neuron also responded to pictures of the actress Whoopi Goldberg," though it did so "to a much lesser degree." What studies like this reveal is that, within the associative network that comprises our brain, there is always unfolding a great drama of centering and re-centering, of *adapting efficiently*, via the phenomenon of neuroplasticity, to the world as it unfolds experientially around us.

We might imagine, in other words, the brain as a topographical map of associative intensities not unlike the rhyzomic yet stratified intensities of power Deleuze and Guattari use to characterize transnational networks of power in *A Thousand Plateaus*. I draw this analogy not to suggest that a map of the sprawling territory of capital exists within a subject's skull, but to suggest that there is enough of a homology or shared organizational logic between the two systems so as to render the use of neurological rhetoric in speaking about the subject useful when also speaking of that subject's relation to power. The neuro-rhetorical conceit that we encode our experiences of the world in the form of pure association is largely compatible with a Freudian conception of the unconscious, allowing it to be in conversation with more psychoanalytically oriented discourses. As Lacan notes, Freud opens "the royal road to the unconscious" by insisting that "the dream is a rebus" (128). Just as "it would be sheer buffoonery to pretend that in a given [Egyptian hieroglyphic] text the frequency of a vulture which is an *aleph*, or a chick which is a *vau* [...] prove that the text has anything at all to do with these ornithological specimens," so too would it be folly to look for anything like "meaning" in the topological network of pure association that our connectomes comprise. If I have a preference in this project for a neurological rather than psychoanalytic discursive anchoring in schematizing the authenticating human, it is to shift away from somewhat mystical emphases on the "mirror stage" or the interpretation of dreaming or the nature of signs, and to focus instead on how the unconscious is constantly "under construction," built incrementally over time via the registering and enfolding of experience.

The Affect as an Ever-Adapting, Autonomic Heuristic

A "heuristic" is a process by which we assess a particular situation in order to distill a standardized metric—an *indicator* that can be used to inform a decision. A thermometer, for instance, is a piece of technology (a heuristic) that evaluates the situation at hand and delivers a "temperature"—a metric that informs our clothing decision for the day. For the schematic of the authenticating human I develop here, the term *affect* or *affect-heuristic* refers to our own neurological technology of indication. In their article "The affect heuristic," Paul Slovic et al. argue that our feelings, in any given moment, are together like the gauges and blinking lights on the dashboard of a cockpit, granting us the means to make quick judgement calls: "Using an overall, readily available affective impression can be far easier—more efficient—than weighing the pros and cons or retrieving from memory many relevant examples, especially when the required judgment or decision is complex or mental resources are limited. This characterization of a mental short-cut leads to labeling the use of affect a 'heuristic'" (1336). This sentiment is echoed in Sianne Ngai's monograph *Ugly Feelings*, in which she deems it "entirely appropriate" to think of "emotive or affective qualities […] as compressed assessments of complex 'situations'" (42). I would trouble, however, the distinction that Slovic draws between what he calls an "affective impression" and the more conventionally "cognitive" task of "weighing the pros and cons." This distinction reifies the conventional notion that our "mind" is somehow separate from our "feelings." The authenticating human constitutes a radical centering of affect such that it no longer

makes sense to consider cognition separate from feeling—cognition, under the aegis of

this model, is better thought of as a focus on our feelings over time, for reasons I will be

elaborating upon later.

Of importance to my readings of Wallace and Smith, however, is the fact that

these heuristics are *trained*. One of Wallace's conceits is the notion that there exists a

heuristic (or set of heuristics) for detecting deceit. It's what Wallace refers to as our

"bullshit antenna."[14] This particular heuristic is developed in response to (and in

vigilance of) ulterior motives, and the results of this heuristic manifest as the emotion we

typically refer to as *suspicion*. It is the same suspicion easily spooked fish have for the

dangling lure. It benefits us, as savvy consumers, to develop a keen eye for the shine of

the hook, to hold our private lives (and our wallets) close to the chest. This is because,

under the regime of capitalism, Western culture condones the lure. In the West, we

create entire business models which profit by the art of allurement. We allow massive

social domains, like Facebook, to be entirely funded by the shine of the hook. So we

watch for it. We learn to spot the catch, and in theory, the more we are subjected to

identifiable instances of manipulation, the keener our bullshit antenna becomes. Beyond

the mere detection of bullshit, however, my figuring of affect-as-heuristic performs the

work of explaining how we determine what language-games are in play in a discursive

context, and how we assign value to the various moves available to us in such language-

games.

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[14] Most notably in Wallace's description of Don Gately in *Infinite Jest* as "a gifted cynic,
with a keen bullshit-antenna" (356).

Another feature crucial to my understanding of affective heuristics is that they are *autonomic*. By autonomic, I mean that they are both autonomous and automatic. Our affects, in other words, *happen to us*. We register stimuli, and within microseconds, our emotional heuristics are firing. What this means is that every experience that was registered and enfolded as pure association while the affective heuristic was being "trained" over the course of our entire lives bears upon the situation at hand *instantaneously*. We have the capacity, in other words, to immediately leverage experiences obtained over decades of time. It also means that in any given moment of registering or speaking, there are likely thousands of affects evaluating and indicating at once—we have no control, in other words, of our *emotional state*, a state that gets enfolded associatively, whether we like it or not, with whatever else we're registering at that moment. So, despite our ability to recognize, for instance, that the computer-animated gecko we're watching on the screen is a commercial ploy in service of an insurance company, despite our awareness of the gecko-as-lure, we often find ourselves laughing at its antics, and Geico finds its advertising dollars to be well-spent, as they have successfully associated within our neural forests the positive feeling of laughter with our recognition of their corporate brand. As Rachel Greenwald Smith points out, the functioning of neoliberal flows of capital depends in part on figuring "the individual as responsible for herself," and in keeping with this requirement, there is currency in casting in turn "feeling as necessarily owned and managed by individual[s]" (2). The core argument of R. G. Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, however, is that literature has the potential to resist this tendency by

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representing emotions as largely *impersonal*—by showing how individuals have no more control over their feelings than they do their immune systems, literature is able respond to the urgent call to undermine the neoliberal notion that feelings are able to be strategically reigned in or deployed by highly agentive subjects. For this same reason, when schematizing the authenticating human, I insist on the autonomous and automatic functioning of affect. Whether we like it or not, our bodies are responding to the world around us in ways that are out of our control, *precisely because they were trained* via experiences that happened to us in the past.

At this level of abstraction, the affect as autonomic heuristic may register as overly cold or mechanistic, given that we're ultimately discussing feelings. In Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, she notes how in her earlier work in *Between Men* which concerns itself with revealing how male homosocial behavior is driven ultimately by erotic desire, her modeling of homoerotics

> views emotion primarily as a vehicle or manifestation of an underlying
> libidinal drive. Excitement, rage, even indifference are seen as more or
> less equivalent transformations of 'desire.' The nature or quality of the
> affect itself, seemingly, is not of much more consequence than the color
> of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination. (*Touching Feeling*
> 18).

While it is certainly true that my own distillation of affect may be similarly understood as a vehicle, as a way of accounting for the embodied phenomenon of "authentication,"

which I will be getting to shortly, it is important to note the distinction between the affect-heuristic and what is more commonly thought of as "emotion."

The identification of an emotion is our attempt to affix a useful (because reproducibly identifiable) label, using the signifying power of language, to what may be thousands of affect-heuristics knotted together and indicating at once. A particularly orderly person named Jorge, for instance, may survey the desk he just cleaned and feel something he interprets as "satisfaction." There may, however, be hundreds of affect-heuristics indicating at once throughout the landscape of Jorge's neurological system, such as an affect specialized in the detection of right angles, or an affect specialized in detecting the homogeneity of a flat surface, or one that indicates a lack of interruptions in a solid field of color, etc. The emotion of "satisfaction" is, to borrow Lacan's metaphor, a "quilting button" that serves to suture and interpretively marshal a bevvy of unnamable (because uniquely inflected by Jorge's experiences) affects. We can say, then, that affects are things that autonomically "happen" to Jorge, and that an emotion like satisfaction is something that Jorge "has" or "possesses" because he has done the interpretive work required to subsume a rich physiological field of sensations into something reproducibly identifiable, something nameable.

Given that Jorge's cognitive processes are constantly and iteratively registering not just external stimuli but also *their own workings* in the form of sensation, when Jorge reproducibly affixes the label "satisfaction" to what he is feeling, the clusters of neurons involved in his keeping-track-of the word "satisfaction" form synaptic connections to the clusters of neurons involved in his evaluation, for instance, of right-angledness. Thus, in

the mundane way in which synapses form between clusters of neurons, one could argue that the way Jorge uses the word "satisfaction" to refer to his set of uniquely inflected affect-heuristics exists, on the level of pure association, as *a real phenomenon*, albeit one that mutates and adapts every time he uses it (or even hears someone else use the term). As a way to tie things together, and in the spirit of quilting buttons and Jorge's satisfaction in orderliness, I should note that when using the word "feeling," I am referring to the entire process that includes: *(a):* the registering of external stimuli (like Jorge's desk); *(b):* the registering of the sensations (or indicators returned by affect-heuristics) autonomically generated by *(a)*; *(c):* the reproducible identification of these sensations as an emotion like satisfaction; and finally *(d):* the enfolding of *(a)* through *(c)* as the establishment or reconfiguration of pure association encoded as neurons and synapses in the brain. We can then say then, that to the extent that *(d)* constitutes, via neuroplasticity, an actual physiological change in Jorge, when Jorge *feels*, he *becomes*. We must take care, of course, not to get too caught up in the teleological allure of schematizing this process of feeling/becoming as a linear series of steps—from what I understand, if any of these steps are actually occurring as I've described them, they are occurring constantly and in parallel with each other at various levels of stratification in the neurological system, or in that more totalizing concept we refer to as human consciousness.

The Meme as an Ever-Evolving, Atomic Unit of Culture

The term *meme* was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and it is roughly synonymous with "human behavioral pattern." He argues that when thinking along these lines, "cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission," in that the economy of memes can give rise to a form of evolution by "non-genetic means, and at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution" (Dawkins 189). According to Dawkins, memes encode "fashions in dress and diet, ceremonies and customs, art and architecture" as well as "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (190). Whereas biological replication and mutation takes place via the exchange of DNA, cultural replication and mutation takes place via the exchange of memes.

The authenticating human considers *language* to be composed of (but not reduced to) memetic content. Mikhail Bakhtin, through his concept of *speech genres*, has already imagined language as a collection of patterns and sub-patterns subjected to a process similar to the accelerated evolutionary process proposed by Dawkins in his description of the meme. According to Bakhtin, "each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*" (60). While speech genres may stylistically pattern relatively large units of language such as "chronicles, contracts, texts of laws, clerical and other documents, various literary, scientific, and commentarial genres, official and personal letters," they also pattern smaller units, such as "rejoinders in everyday dialogue" (62). Regardless of how mundane, however, "there is not a single

new phenomenon (phonetic, lexical, or grammatical) that can enter the system of language without having traversed the long and complicated path of generic-stylistic testing and modification" (65). Along with Bakhtin, then, I believe memetic content to be patterned *recursively* in that memes become embedded within memes, with the outermost memes (think genres or language-games) ordering the more embedded patterns (think paragraphs, sentences, words, etc.).

Indeed, many of the analytic methodologies employed within the digital humanities already assume a homology between language and genetic code. Michael Drout's work on the transmission of traditions in medieval literature, for instance, applies the same kinds of algorithms that look for genetic patterns in biological organisms in order to provide evidence of influence in the texts of Anglo-Saxon authors and poets. With recourse to "memetics" as a theoretical approach, Drout claims "we can therefore explain the workings of various cultural phenomena the same way that evolutionary biologists explain the development of various morphological, physiological, or behavioral features in organisms: in terms of the combination of processes of selection and the contingent effects of history in a heterogeneous world" (1). Like Dawkins and Drout, I find the concept of the meme to be useful, and I find it more useful than a subsuming of human cultural expression under the concept of "language" for a variety of reasons, some of which are expressed by Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*. While Sedgwick never employs the term *meme*, to my knowledge, she has "taken a distinct step to the side of the deconstructive project of analyzing apparently nonlinguistic phenomena in rigorously linguistic terms, as when Butler

analyzes a particular gestural style as a variety of performative utterance" (6). Her

reasons for doing so are on the one hand to insist that "the line between words and things

or between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena is endlessly changing," and on the

other to maintain that "many kinds of objects and events *mean*, in many heterogenous

ways and contexts," and she sees value in "not reifying or mystifying the linguistic kinds

of meaning unnecessarily." My own further reasons for preferring memetics over

linguistics include the connotation of a polyvalence of meaning "meme" has acquired

given its most common usage as "internet meme"—as my own 12-year-old son will tell

you, the purpose of a given internet meme is not to convey a specific meaning, but rather

to produce a range of effects in its audience. A meme exploits the immediate, ephemeral

cultural context to produce a range of effects, and the study of these effects seems to fall

more readily under the purview of the scholar of cultural studies rather than the

hermeneuticist. My final reason for preferring the meme is because, again, thanks to the

connotation it has acquired via the internet, memes are inherently assumed to *evolve* via

the very iterative process of playing with its constituent parts that Butler describes in her

consideration of the performative utterance.

The Economy of Memes and the Memetic Transfer

A model of the brain as a topologically distributed network of pure association allows us

to imagine it as the scene for the accelerated evolutionary process by which memes are

made more "fit for use" in culture, particularly if we consider our affective heuristics to

be the sculpting forces of this process—how the deployment and registering of memetic

content makes us feel helps determine the frequency and context with which we use it. If we can imagine our cognitive processes as being *limited*, in that there are only so many associations and so much in the way of affective heuristic "power" that can be efficaciously brought to bear at any given moment, then we can open the way to thinking through an *economy of memes*. Because the cognitive scene where this economy plays out is so complex, however, I will attempt to explore it initially via narrative.

Jane is sitting at the dinner table, engrossed by the meal in front of her. She takes the next bite, and as she looks up, she sees Shawn, her boyfriend, down on one knee beside her chair, proffering a sparkling object in a black velvet box. Jane's optical pathways send these signals to her brain and her affective heuristics begin the task of pattern matching to determine the broad strokes of the language-game (ordering meme) in play here. Before a single microsecond has passed, her heuristics have ruled out entire swaths of human cultural genres, identifying "a proposal" as the most immediate context, a context which, given the deafening intensity of Jane's affective response as she registers and enfolds it, has suddenly trumped all other language-game contexts, such as "being in a restaurant" or "eating food." Like all language-games, the ordering meme of the proposal establishes the players (the proposer and the proposee), as well as a field of recognizable positions each player might occupy (the sincere-hearted, aspiring proposer; the emotionally overwhelmed proposee; the defeated proposer who has been turned down; the elated fiancé; etc.). Now that the game is in play, the field has been charged with *value*. Certain positions become more pleasurable to occupy than others, and every possible utterance (indeed, every expression of any kind) has now become a

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move in this game. The grist of any move available to Jane lives as pure association in her head, and her affective-heuristics are now spinning madly, evaluating memetic content that might be strung together and deployed in such as way as to produce a vector that will move her in the direction of a position she'd like to occupy. Very little (if any) of this drama, this economic *scene* has risen to the level of consciousness for Jane. The blood that rushes to her cheeks, the trembling in her hands as she sets down the fork, the composure with which she folds her hands in her lap, and the tears that fill her eyes— each of these "moves" are deployed as the outcome of autonomic processes. Before Shawn can open his mouth to speak, in other words, Jane has already registered and enfolded many times over a context *made new* by her own deployment of memetic content, and she is always-autonomically evaluating and re-evaluating the efficacy of her moves based on how they have made her feel.

Under the aegis of this economy of memes, affect plays an inextricable role in the way behavioral patterns are associatively and evaluatively retrieved, performed, registered, and enfolded. If we are to place under the auspices of the humanities a study of this "accelerated evolutionary process" which shapes language, or indeed *any aspect of human culture* that consists in the trafficking of behavioral patterns, it behooves us to pay close attention to how *feelings* are the forces that inflect memetic content as it is transferred in and out of the topologically distributed associations in the human brain— feelings construed as heuristic processes emerging from the same neural forest of associations they inflect. Shawn's own affective-heuristics, the ones that have been trained via the hundreds of instances of "the proposal" he has witnessed on television

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and in movies, are now filling him with something like "warmth" or "encouragement" as he registers the tears forming in Jane's eyes. In the speech he has prepared and memorized for this occasion, there is a clause that reads something like, "I know we haven't really talked about marriage yet," a clause he included as a way to mitigate the risk of springing this proposal on Jane. Now that his heuristics are sending him the green light in the form of encouragement, however, the autonomic, affect-mediated means by which Shawn is able to string together memetic content (what I refer to as the memetic transfer) compel him to drop this clause from his speech. Thanks to his affective evaluation of Jane's tears, its inclusion now somehow "feels wrong," perhaps because such a gesture might slow down this welcome momentum, and maybe even introduce the risk of drawing attention to his foolhardiness. Should Shawn's proposal-as-speech-act be felicitous, one effect of his registering and enfolding of the event will be perhaps a devaluing of the meme "I know we haven't really talked yet" in future instances of speech. The felicity or infelicity of a speech act factors, in other words, in our subsequent use of the specific memetic content we chose to deploy (or not deploy in this case).

The effect of conceiving of this proposal, and indeed any form of human expression in terms of an economy of memes, is a de-privileging of the conveyance of meaning as the primary goal of communication, placing in its stead the acquisition of a desired position in whatever language-games are in play. Similarly, we can conceive of the *failure* of communication to be less about some kind of descriptive inaccuracy (or even the failure of signs to refer to objects in the world), and more about a failure on the

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part of the speaker's affective-heuristics to adequately evaluate, in the moment of speaking, the riskiness of a given move. In this way, the model of the authenticating human, with its consideration of the economy of memes as instantiated within the memetic transfer (or moment of utterance), fits naturally within a theoretic context that conceives of the subject as a node in a flowing network of power.

The decentering of meaning is not a new theoretic impulse. In J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, for instance, he distinguishes among the various ways we "use" an utterance, and refers to the way we use speech to convey meaning via constative statements as "locutionary." He then argues that the locutionary is ultimately driven or ordered by the "illocutionary," or the way we use language to achieve specific effects in the world. While I agree with Austin that the illocutionary dimension of language orders locutionary content, I am uneasy with the level of agency he seems willing to ascribe to the speaking subject. When describing the locutionary act, he writes: "Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them" (101). While I'm willing to grant that certain more formalized language-games like "writing a dissertation" or "performing a wedding ceremony" privilege the act of composition and editing and thus reify the notion that a speaker is intentional in choosing the memes that comprise their performance, this notion is a dangerous one in that it implies a kind of rationality that simply doesn't exist at the level of the memetic transfer as I conceive it. The determination of the language-game in play, of the

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positions on the field, of the evaluation of those positions, and of which memes comprise our best move toward the best position are all mediated by our affect-heuristics, and thus are things that "happen to us." If the authenticating human can be said to "choose our words carefully" or "engage in composition," it is due to the rapid, iterative nature of the memetic transfer. In the act of composing a written sentence, for instance, we take several stabs at making our next move in the language-game, and then subject those various attempts to the same heuristic processes that gave rise to them in the first place in order to establish which articulation (or combination of articulations) best moves us in our intended direction.

One of the major implications, then, for a more affect-centered model of subjectivity is the question of agency. Where does it lie? This question haunts many of the characters in the fiction of Wallace and Smith. In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, the addicts that participate in Alcoholics Anonymous are informed that a drug addiction is like a spider that weaves its web of influence throughout the brain, insinuating its agenda to secure the next dose in every aspect of the addict's life. In Smith's *NW*, one of the main protagonists (Natalie/Keisha) finds herself answering classified ads for sexual encounters due to "a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people" despite the fact that she is a successful barrister, wife, and mother (334). These characters also feel a sense of discord, suggesting that there are various affects vying for influence at once on the character's behavior. It would seem, then, that agency "happens" at two levels: at the level of the individual affect itself, and then again at the level of the "economic scene" of the memetic transfer, where the various forces exerted by each affect-heuristic are

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evaluated and inflected to form an amalgamated vector. In this way, we can conceive of a kind of "affective mathematics" much like the kind used in physics to predict the velocity and direction of an object in motion given the various forces (like gravity and air-friction) acting upon it.

This imagining of the process of human decision-making as an autonomous, economic scene with its own, idiosyncratic "mathematics" for ascribing value to language-game moves suggests a further homology between the neurological and the workings of capital. This particular homology has been explored by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, though strictly in the psychoanalytic terms initially defined by Freud and then elaborated upon by Lacan. Žižek argues that the way dream-work translates latent dream-content into a legible dream-text is homologous to the "secret" process by which commodities and labor are assigned value under the aegis of capitalism. It is from this vantage point that Žižek is able to support claims like this one, made by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in *Intellectual and Manual Labour*: "[T]he formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and the division of intellectual and manual labor which came into existence with it" (qtd. in Žižek 8). In other words, Žižek is willing to claim that the same, hidden mechanisms by which capital assigns value to commodities *are homologous to* the mechanisms by which the unconscious charges certain "thoughts" or mental associations with affective-intensity, always considered in psychoanalytic terms as desire. Put in the simplest of terms, the study of how value gets assigned to commodities in a capitalist system reveals something about

what I'm calling the "affective mathematics" of the subject's decision-making process.

This homologous relation between the memetic-transfer and the ascription of value to commodities in a capitalist system serves to further complicate the question of where agency lies. By way of illustrating this complication, I turn to the philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois, who similarly complicates questions of agency by way of thinking about culpability. In *The World and Africa*, Du Bois writes about "a young woman, well trained and well dressed, intelligent and high-minded" who lives in "a lovely British home, with green lawns, appropriate furnishings and a retinue of well-trained servants" (41). "How far is such a person responsible for the crimes of colonialism?" he asks.

> It will in all probability not occur to her that she has any responsibility whatsoever, and that may well be true. Equally, it may be true that her income is the result of starvation, theft, and murder; that it involves ignorance, disease, and crime on the part of thousands; that the system which sustains the security, leisure, and comfort she enjoys is based on the suppression, exploitation, and slavery of the majority of mankind. […] For this someone is guilty as hell. Who? (42).

In the starkest terms, Du Bois lays his finger on the problem of ascribing blame to the high-minded consumer for the atrocities committed in order to secure the means of production. Ultimately, for Du Bois, "the sin of capitalism is secrecy: the deliberate concealing of the character, methods, and result of efforts to satisfy human want" (257). The troubling thing about the homology I allude to above, then, is the implication that just as the capitalist system leverages various opaque "layers" of production such that

the gruesome provenance of a given product is obscured, the human decision-making process is largely opaque because mediated by affect-heuristics that "happen to us."

My point is not to suggest that people can't be held accountable for their behavior, or that it is fruitless to unveil the secret injustices of capitalism. It is rather to suggest that in view of a more affect-centered model of subjectivity, attempts to identify an agent, assign blame, or "carry out justice" must ceaselessly attend to the conditions that enabled or "vectorized" the unethical behavior to begin with. The specific "event" wherein the subject engages in unethical behavior is, according to this model, likely the culmination thousands of mundane experiences registered and enfolded by that subject in the past. For this reason, I believe authors like Smith and Wallace fictionally represent people who are lonely, suffering from anhedonia, bored to death, hopelessly addicted, disenchanted, misread by their communities, overwhelmed by anxiety, or falling out of love; but never people who are evil. There are no villains in the fiction of affect-realism, and if so many of these characters are victims of something, they are victims of a toxic, unjust culture whose dominant language-games shape and mold their feelings.

Self-Authentication and the Establishment of a Sense-of-Self

I have so far spoken briefly of "an economy of memes" whereby one or more organizing memes, perhaps best understood as language-game(s), become recognized by our affective-heuristics as being "in play," thereby charging positions on the discursive playing field with value—positions we then attempt to occupy via the deployment of memetic content (i.e. words) figured as *moves*, each of which are now considered by our

affect-heuristics as being more or less efficacious (or strategically valuable) according to the ordering power of the game. Having now sketched out the *scene* of this economy of memes, I now turn my attention to the phenomenon I refer to as *authentication*, which can be thought of as the process by which we evaluate our *positioning* (or the positioning of others) on the field of play. Returning to the predicament Jane finds herself in, with Shawn on one knee beside her chair at the restaurant, let's assume that the words now issuing from Shawn's mouth, organized under the memetic rubric of "a proposal" by the affective heuristics in his mind, arrive at the auditory signal gates of Jane's neurological system. As these signals (along with everything else she is registering) solicit a series of recursive associative responses, particular neural clusters light up with varying intensity, spreading out and lighting up other clusters over synaptic pathways. This "lighting up" washes back and forth over Jane's body in the form of signal feedback loops (these are Jane's *affects*), and this washing back and forth nuances and modulates itself as it solicits its own set of associative responses. As Shawn's words tumble like rocks into a pond, Jane's registering of them sets off new ripples that course their way through her body. Shawn finishes speaking, and the memetic structure of the language-game of "a proposal," infused with the new situational context updated by Shawn's utterance, begins to charge the playing field, building as a kind of pressure on Jane to open her mouth and respond.

Let's assume, hypothetically, that most of the *feelings* stirred up in Jane by Shawn's words are negative. Let's assume that Jane has been on the lookout for a good exit strategy, for a gracious way to inform Shawn that she cannot articulate a life-story

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that both includes him long-term and also feels right. The pressure exerted by the language-game, however, is intense—other people in the restaurant have noticed, have turned their heads to see what happens—and it is a pressure that privileges, via the economy of memes, an affirmative response on her part. For this reason, a pit of fear forms in Jane's stomach as she realizes she must deliver among a cloud of witnesses what will be recognizable by Shawn as a rejection of his proposal. The playing field for Jane is now charged with sites of intensity. There is a negative intensity, coming from her need to decline Shawn's proposal, that forms like a repulsing magnetic field around the position of the "elated fiancée." Similar negative, repulsing forces form around other positions, like the "cruel person" who would humiliate Shawn in front of all these people by informing him of all his shortcomings, or the "causer of a scene" who would draw unwanted attention from the other restaurant patrons. Emerging like a life-raft in a violently coursing stream is the position of the "blameworthy decliner," the person who takes the burden quietly upon herself, the person who claims "it's me, not you." Jane's affect-heuristics have identified, more or less below the level of consciousness, the position she wishes to occupy, and these same heuristics begin to sculpt and deploy memetic content able to move her in a vector toward this position. While this *move* certainly involves the speaking of statements like "I'm sorry," and "you're a wonderful person who deserves happiness," and "I'm just not in a place right now to get married," etc., it is also of course composed of nonverbal memetic components—she takes his hands in hers, her brows furrow, etc. There is also some "leakage" coming from the fear

she feels that manifests as a trembling in her voice and the accumulation of sweat in her palms.

As the words issue from Jane's mouth, they too are registered by Jane, and in the affective feedback that washes back and forth, she recognizes something like guilt or failure—this proposal will not be a felicitous speech act on Shawn's part, and perhaps she feels it is her fault. Let's assume, however, that she also feels guilty for another reason: as indicated by the "leakage" of fear and anxiety produced by the torrent of her feelings, what she is saying to Shawn is not an accurate representation of her feelings. Her "bullshit antenna" is going off. There is a subset of the field of memetic content selected by her affective-heuristics which, should she have articulated it, would have resembled a litany of reasons why Shawn isn't right for her, reasons which, particularly in this context, would have been humiliating for Shawn to hear, and despite her unwillingness to build a life together with him, she nevertheless feels care and affection toward Shawn, and does not wish to cause a scene. While her utterance has satisfied the rules of the language-game in play, placing her on the field in the position of the blameworthy decliner (it's me, not you), *she does not feel authorized by her feelings to be occupying the "it's me, not you" position*, and therefore the opportunity for "self-authentication," or *sincerity*, has been foreclosed.

In offering this neurologically inflected model of subjectivity that foregrounds the role affect plays in the selection, ordering, and transfer of memes, I hope to identify a *cleft* between affective-heuristics that indicate the pressures and positions of the language-game (the strategic), and affects that indicate our relation to (or difference

from) those positions (the mimetic), and to suggest that there are moments when we articulate something and, unlike with Jane in this instance, something clicks, something *feels right* about what we have said, and we experience little if any "leakage" from our affect-heuristics. In these moments, our affective-heuristics have evaluated and authorized our words. In these moments, we are sincere. This model assumes, in other words, that sincerity, when construed as self-authentication, is *a real phenomenon in the world*. While in my third chapter I will be providing an account of sincerity's origin and development in the West, culminating with its consignment to the rubbish bin along with other Western "virtues" tainted by essentialism, it's important to note here that this conception of sincerity attempts to unmoor itself from its past commitments to a fixed, essentialized self whose emotions make themselves available for being solicited and reported on.

Toward what end, however, would we want to rescue and retool the phenomenon of sincerity? As I stated earlier in the case of Jorge who feels something like satisfaction when he surveys his clean desk, this moment of feeling results, however minutely, in a moment of becoming for Jorge: when we feel, we become. Building off of this principle, then, sincerity's role in this model of subjectivity is as a growth accelerant—the associations we enfold are *made stronger* in moments of self-authentication because the interpretive work we've performed in surveying and articulating our feelings about them felicitously aligns with the position we'd like to occupy. In the simplest terms, when we speak sincerely, a seemingly univocal, singular sense-of-self *becomes* more intensely.

As I mentioned above, there was a cleft between what Jane actually felt about Shawn on the one hand, and what her affect-heuristics compelled her to say to him on the other. During the memetic transfer (the moment of speaking), her evaluative heuristics compelled her to occupy the position of the "blameworthy decliner" when responding to Shawn. Jane's "bullshit detector," however, has identified a *remainder*, a field of unarticulated affective content surrounding her decision about Shawn, and on her drive home from the restaurant, she finds herself ruminating about the things she left unsaid. This rumination builds inside her like a kind of pressure, such that when she walks into her apartment and finds her roommate Alisha watching Netflix on the couch, she is compelled by her feelings to initiate a new language-game, perhaps best described as "catharsis," one which positions Alisha as the confidant; one in which Jane wishes to *move* from the position of the troubled friend to the position of the unburdened comrade.

While the economy of memes that orders this cathartic language-game certainly values as a kind of currency the sensationalizing of Jane's retelling, on the whole it is a game that privileges sincerity. Thus, within the context of certain language-games, sincerity is figured as a kind of *speech act*, the felicity of which depends at least in part on Jane functioning as both speaker *and* audience, such that as Jane strings together her utterances via the memetic transfer, she is also registering and evaluating her own words—should her affect-heuristics fail to mark them as bullshit, should there, in other words, be little if any affective "leakage," the speech act is felicitous, and Jane is able to enfold her own retelling as a "true" story about herself. In other words, as Jane confesses her "true" feelings about Shawn to Alisha, about how she felt pressure to deceive him,

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she not only comes to occupy the position of the unburdened comrade in the immediate language-game of catharsis, but is also enfolding new associations about herself that form the grist of her positioning in future relationship endeavors—grist that establishes for her a kind of "hereness" that will serve in the capacity of more-readily locating herself in language-games to come. In this way, then, sincerity-as-speech-act does something in the world, and that something is the growth of Jane's sense-of-self.

A sense-of-self, then, according to this model of the authenticating human, exists as a cluster within the larger network of pure association which, while uniquely instantiated in any moment of speaking, also serves as a kind of template, readily providing a rough approximation of our position in whatever language-games are in play. This rough approximation of our position, this "hereness" serves as a kind of shortcut, an efficacious starting position from which our affect-heuristics begin calculating our next best move. Rather than considering a "self" as some kind of essential kernel of our being, however, a *sense*-of-self is more like a piece of equipment that is constantly under construction, being inevitably shaped by our experiences and modified according to how effectively, or how *felicitously* we are able to deploy it. And despite the way in which, for instance, the pronoun "I" may invoke or instantiate for us a singular subject in a moment of speaking, there are likely as many inchoate senses-of-self as there are language-games which we find ourselves habitually playing. Nonetheless, when considering the economic limits of the cognitive labor we perform during the memetic transfer, it is likely that just as a single neuron "responds robustly" to an image of Oprah Winfrey, the autonomic processes that create and redistribute our

neural associations so as to efficiently route our soliciting of them in a moment of registering or performing likely ensure that these senses-of-self are marshalled under as few "routing hubs" as possible—it may even be the case that the neurons that light up when we consider the pronoun "I" act in precisely the same way as Lacan's quilting button, subsuming a field of "selves" under a single network of associations. For this reason, throughout the project at hand, I most often refer to one's efficiently routed senses-of-self as a singular entity.

In a bid to bolster my claim that sincerity (self-authentication) helps establish for us a sense of "hereness" or sense-of-self, I will take here a brief detour into the *via negativa* by exploring the implications of deceit. Neurological studies of deceit reveal that, when we lie, our prefrontal cortex, which is chiefly responsible for complex executive functioning (i.e. playing chess), lights up like a Christmas tree.[15] It costs us more, in terms of cognitive resources, when we lie—it places us under so much cognitive-load that it takes more time to construct our utterances. Interestingly, with so many resources tied up in trying to craft utterances that will fly under the deceit-radar of our interlocutors, we allocate less resources to other areas of the brain, such as the amygdala, which is largely responsible for our ability to empathize.[16] If feeling is

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[15] In "The neurobiology of deception: evidence from neuroimaging and loss-of-function studies," neurologist Nobuhito Abe refers to fMRI scans of the brains of study volunteers who are lying, noting that while lying, frontal regions of the brain responsible for executive decision making are intensely "lit up." According to Abe, Similar studies have shown that patients with Parkinson's disease, which involves frontal executive dysfunction, have greater difficulty in forming intentionally deceptive responses.
[16] From "Empathy and helping: effects of racial group membership and cognitive load" by Meiring et al.: "The cognitive-load manipulation did appear to influence empathic

becoming, then when we register our own deceitful utterances, what exactly is getting

"enfolded"? What are we becoming when we deceive? The answer, I believe, is *not*

here. Depending on the success of our bid to deceive, we may be enfolding new

associations into the same networks of neurons that keep track of good chess moves. We

are becoming more strategic. We are not, however, enfolding associations that locate us,

that potentially *authorize* us. Moreover, by registering utterances which are spoken in

order to fool another, the associations we enfold into the associative trees we use to keep

track of the other are not empathetic ones—the other, once deceived, also becomes *not*

here. What we become when we deceive is dislocated. Alienated. In effect, we trade a

stronger sense-of-self and a potential empathetic point of connection for an

advantageous position in the language game.

One of the most effective ways in which we misrepresent ourselves as players in

the language game involves invoking the *rhetoric* of sincerity in order to patch up the

fissures in our deceitful utterances. When composing deceitful utterances,[17] we may

attempt to manipulate "the small movements of eyebrows and contractions of facial

muscles that serve to express emotion" in a bid to gain the assent of our audience, to

convince them of our authenticity as speaker (Bennet 195). In other words, we may

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responding, however: The high cognitive–load condition was associated with increased vagal efference and reduced sympathetic output, which we interpret as increased attentional allocation at the expense of empathic arousal" (436).

[17] In Jill Bennett's "A Feeling of Insincerity," she draws from the work of Denise Riley to argue that we often engage in a kind of "ventriloquy of inner speech" where we affectively respond to an inner dialogue, attempting to deduce via our own affective responses how sincere our performances might be perceived by our audience.

deploy sincere-seeming memetic content as a rhetorical strategy, as an attempt to "hack"

the authentication protocols of our audience.[18] Because there is simply no way to verify

whether a speaker's statements are self-authorized, and because the West so readily

condones the art of allurement, we feel more comfortable reducing our discussions of

sincerity to rhetoric, as though sincerity exclusively belongs in the domain of

manipulation.[19] For this reason, we must take care to maintain the difference between

sincerity (self-authentication) and *the rhetoric of sincerity* (the crafting of sincere-

seeming statements). This dichotomy is perhaps most famously embodied by

Shakespeare's Iago. Iago is a character so adept at imitating sincerity that he becomes

the epitome of a relatively new category of person at the turn of the 17th century: the

villain. According to Lionel Trilling, the term villain originally "referred to the man who

stood lowest in the scale of feudal society […] who seeks to rise above the station to

which he was born" via acts of guile and deceit (16). Iago, the only character in the First

Folio explicitly designated as "a villain," is Othello's most trusted advisor. His

performances in the play, however, are covertly deceitful—he wishes to rise in rank and

power, and in order to do so he masterfully imitates the quality of sincerity. According to

Beatrix Busse, Iago is a "rhetorician of politeness" who constantly employs "vocative

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[18] J.L. Austin goes to great lengths to classify the various infelicities that can occur in a speech act. He specifically refers to instances of insincerity as "abuses," which do not always manifest as misfires (18).

[19] As Bennett writes, "the discussion of sincerity has [refocused] on the semiotics of appearances, not just on an academic but also on a popular level. Sincerity is readily understood as an effect of speech or performance, rather than something that is inhabited in any deeper or more ethical sense" (197).

terms that refer to Othello's ranks, both social and military and seem to be compliant

with Iago's social roles" in order to "add to the sincerity" he exudes (373, 365, 371).

Iago is an early example of the kind of arms race between those who employ the *rhetoric*

of sincerity for ulterior motives, and the heuristics of deceit which seek to detect such

motives. The point is that regardless of how sophisticated one's heuristics of deceit

become, the more that same heuristic can be employed as a litmus test for the

development of effectively manipulative performances.

The dichotomy I've drawn here between sincerity and deceit can be thought of

along the lines of the mimetic (when being sincere our affect-heuristics act like

cartographers, attempting to draw a memetic map of the associations in our brain lit up

by stimuli) vs. the strategic (when being deceitful we are like chess players attempting to

make the most advantageous move in the language game). It is, of course, impossible to

be entirely mimetic for several reasons. The first is that there's simply no "outside" of a

language-game. Even language-games that are conducive to sincerity, such as the ones

we play when we recline on the psychologist's couch, sit in the confession booth, write

in our private journal, or get down on our knees to pray, have teleological structures to

them. They are *commodified*, in a sense, by the end goal, whether it be to manage our

anxieties, to rid ourselves of guilt, to cathartically narrate our experiences, or to become

externally authorized by the divine. The second reason is that the signs we have at our

disposal cannot possibly correspond to what gets encoded in the brain as pure

association. In order for our "moves" to remain legible as code, they must be comprised

by recognizable memes. Those memes have become "fit for use" within our broader

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cultural milieu—the memetic vocabulary we have at our disposal is, in other words, "one size fits many." There are no memetic expressions capable of directly representing the synesthetic and uniquely inflected associations that light up across our neurological systems. Our affect-heuristics make do with the memes that resonate most. The third reason why self-mimesis is impossible is because the associations in our brains and the affective heuristics that "light them up" are emergent properties of the sum total of our registered experiences. Our affective heuristics are thus *trans-temporal*.[20] By virtue of the way the brain encodes our perceptions over time into pure association, our affective heuristics provide near-instant indicators, though the conditions for those indications were built over a lifetime. We are violently compressed or stretched out when we are represented in narrative time. Finally, there's no separating out the ways in which our heuristics are shaped by the moment of the telling. We may be any combination of hungry, hungover, tired, enraptured, emotionally wounded, or wired on caffeine. We are, in other words, not anything like an essentialized self performing an act of detached self-reporting. We are always writing fiction. And so the strategic is always mixed up in the mimetic. No matter how strenuously we try to fashion in language an exact representation of our feelings, we are always, to a certain extent, misrepresenting ourselves.

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[20] In his monograph *Parables for the Virtual*, Brian Massumi considers affect to be "outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively delocalized, spreading over the generalized body surface like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart" (25).

For this reason, I find value in defining sincerity as apart from simply "telling the truth." By construing sincerity as an affect-mediated speech act in which the speaker and audience occupy the same body, we can sidestep the trap of a meaning-focused approach to language that fixates on the "accuracy" of our words, and instead focus on whether we register our own memetic expressions as bullshit—whether, in Austin's words, we "get away with it" (30). This shift in emphasis also saves us from falling into the moral trap of vilifying deceit. Rather than consider sincerity the moral opposite of deceit, we can construe sincerity as an opportunity to build a more robust sense-of-self. And just as Jane chose to be more strategic than mimetic in declining Shawn's marriage proposal, sometimes the positions we need to occupy in a particular language-game demand that we set aside that opportunity in order to maintain healthy relationships.

In the fiction of Smith and Wallace, sincerity is more often than not referred to in its absence, as an opportunity missed out on by a character. As I will go at lengths to show in my subsequent chapter, sincerity is most strongly associated in the story-world of *Infinite Jest* with the language-games played by participants of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step recovery program, and the protagonist, Hal Incandenza, suffers from an extreme case of an emaciated sense-of-self. As the plot ends with Hal being wheeled away on a gurney, the reader is left with a sense of frustration over the fact that, instead of being given the opportunity to articulate his feelings in the context of AA, he accidentally attends the wrong meeting, and the opportunity is foreclosed. Similarly, toward the end of Smith's *NW*, two estranged best friends have the opportunity to

disclose the closely guarded secrets that keep them apart—a schism which drives much of the novel's plot:

> With what was left of clarity [Natalie] offered her friend a selection of aphorisms, axioms and proverbs the truth content of which she could only assume from their common circulation, the way one puts one's faith in the face value of paper money. Honesty is always the best policy. Love conquers all. […] She spoke and Leah did not stop her, but Natalie was wasting her time. She was in breach of that feminine law that states no weakness may be shown by a woman to another woman without a sacrifice of equal value in return. Until Natalie paid up, in the form of a newly minted story, preferably intimate, hopefully secret, she wouldn't be told anything in return… (398)

In both cases, the inability for the protagonists to engage in sincere articulation is attributed to dominant language-games which devalue or preclude such openness. In *NW*, Smith's reference to "that feminine law" alludes to larger cultural patterns, what she calls "the system of images" that alienate characters from each other and also from themselves throughout the novel (322). In *Infinite Jest*, Hal's younger brother Mario notes that

> the older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that is really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some

rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or

laughs in a way that isn't happy. (592)

Indeed, the cynicism that saturates the dominant language-games of *Infinite Jest* is one

of its most striking dystopic elements, and as I argue in my next chapter, the novel

designates it as the primary culprit for Hal's emaciated sense-of-self.

One of the features, then, that mark the logic of the fiction of Smith and Wallace

is this portrayal of hegemonic Western culture as always limiting the subject in its ability

to express itself sincerely, position itself viably, and form healthy relationships with

others. In Wallace's words,

> "in dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates
>
> and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still
>
> live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have
>
> as dark a worldview as it wishes, but it'd find a way both to depict this
>
> dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human
>
> in it" (McCaffery 131).

This portrayal of the West as a dark, suffocating, disenchanting force not only further

problematizes the question of agency by suggesting that the subject is largely bereft of

opportunities to express itself at all within the confines of hegemonic culture, but also

serves to position "good art" as being somehow remedial or curative—an assumption

which, I argue, provides further evidence for the notion that authors like Smith and

Wallace see their projects at least in part as ethical interventions. While this framing of

resuscitating art vs. debilitating culture can certainly be found elsewhere in the Western

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literary imaginary (i.e. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, the poetry of the Beat

Generation), these affect-realists are the first to figure culture as predominantly

'postmodern' without also being ideologically opposed to postmodern tenets. To further

distinguish this literature from the literature immediately preceding it then, whereas

much postmodern literature treated the reader as a seeker of esoteric, ontological

revelations, the logic of affect-realism renders the reader a kind of patient to be treated

for the ailments contracted from exposure to culture.

Other-Authentication and the Establishment of a Sense-of-Community

In this schematizing of the authenticating human, I have so far largely emphasized the

performing subject—so what happens when we *witness* a performance? When, as

witnesses, we register the memetic content deployed by the performer, we autonomously

employ a subset of affect-heuristics attuned to treating that performance as an

authentication token.[21] I posit that among the chorus of affective indicators are certain

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[21] I borrow the conceit of the 'authentication token' from terminology surrounding the secure socket layer (SSL) authentication protocol of the internet. In order for a server's internet traffic to be considered secure, that server's administrator must request an SSL certificate from a trusted institution referred to as a certificate authority. Once the certificate authority issues the SSL certificate, the administrator installs it on the server in the form of a private encryption key, and from that point on, any web traffic coming from that server is encrypted using that key. When, for instance, a web browser solicits data from this server, the encrypted data is sent along with *an authentication token* for the client to scrutinize. The client then verifies this token of authenticity by checking with the same certificate authority that issued the SSL certificate to make sure the encrypted data is coming from a trusted source. Should the token pass scrutiny, the client proceeds as though the server were *authentic*, and this "authenticity" is most often symbolized by an image of a lock next to the address bar of a web browser, intended to

"bullshit detectors" whose purpose is to determine something like the "authenticity" of the speaker. These heuristics indicate *a degree of authority* in the performer's ability to represent communities in the mind of a witness. We have feelings, in other words, that ascribe a context-dependent level of ethos to the performer, and I refer to the feeling of ascribing a high level of ethos to a speaker as other-authentication (as opposed to sincerity, or self-authentication).

In order to elaborate on other-authentication, I must first establish that a "sense-of-community" exists as a cluster of associations made about an arbitrary grouping of people that are registered and enfolded in idiosyncratic ways in the mind of a witness. By way of illustration, consider an island populated with a random assortment of human beings who, for the sake of argument, have no sense of any kind of community. For any one resident of this island, as they go about meeting and interacting with the other residents, they begin to form associations—associations they then use to efficiently classify both themselves and the other residents. At first, any one resident may group the other residents according to their own idiosyncratic logic. They may, for instance, classify residents according to the style of their clothes, the timbre of their voice, etc. Over time, however, certain attributes become more "important" than others, given the exigencies of life on the island. Let's assume, for instance, that the main food source on the island is coconuts, and so it becomes important to be able to efficiently identify lithe, tall residents. A subset of the island's residents soon become easily classified at a glance

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assuage the anxieties, for instance, of a user as they enter sensitive information into the form of their bank's web page.

as "tree-climbers," and a bevy of idiosyncratic memes *beyond* being lithe and tall begin to cluster with these attributes. Let's say, for instance, that climbing palm trees is a particularly dangerous task, and so it becomes beneficial for the island's residents to associate bravery, strength, and selflessness with the arbitrary physical attributes of being lithe and tall, as a way to encourage tree-climbers to risk their lives. Indeed—it becomes so beneficial to the island's residents to associate bravery, strength, and selflessness to the arbitrary physical attributes of litheness and tallness, that their affect-heuristics value language-game moves that make it seem as though it were an ontologically based, material *fact* that there exists a class of residents called "tree-climbers," and that tree-climbers *are*, ontologically, brave and happy to risk their lives. Once enough speakers iteratively perform these kinds of statements over time, culture on the island begins to homogenize, such that new residents are born into a system whose flows of power instill in their affect-heuristics, via the iterative performance of memes, a *sense-of-community* for tree-climbers—one that has the effect of inscribing a cluster of attributes on the bodies of residents depending on an arbitrary feature of their skeletal structure.

This crystallization of memes on the site of a speaker's body is, I believe, what Butler means by sedimentation: "The process of that sedimentation or what we might call *materialization* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power" (*Bodies That Matter* 15). Earlier, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes:

> Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar
> phenomenon of a "natural sex" or a "real woman" or any number of

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prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation

that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified

form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in

binary relation to one another. (140)

For Butler, this sedimentation via the iterative performance of memes over time explains

how "power relations" come to "contour bodies" (*Bodies That Matter* 17). W.E.B. Du

Bois argues along the same lines in *The World and Africa*:

A system at first conscious and then unconscious of lying about history

and distorting it to the disadvantage of the Negroids became so

widespread that the history of Africa ceased to be taught, the color of

Memnon was forgotten, and every effort was made in archaeology,

history and biography, in biology, psychology, and sociology to prove the

all but universal assumption that the color line had a scientific basis. (20)

By associating the arbitrary feature of skin color with a cluster of memes and instilling,

via iterative performance, those associations as a sense-of-community in the Western

subject, the great majority of the world comes to fall beneath a color line that enables

their violent exploitation by those who come to authenticate as "white." As Butler

consistently argues throughout her work, however, despite how deeply embedded in

purportedly "empiricist" discourses like biology the prioritization of certain markers on

the body become for classifying people, it is the very iterative nature by which our

affects are trained by these discourses that provides the possibility for them to be

retrained—a process I refer to throughout this project as adjusting the protocols of authentication.

Having established the nature of a sense-of-community as a cluster of associations used for efficiently classifying speakers, I should note that any one performer is often classified by a witness as belonging to *multiple* communities at once. For a member of the white working-class, for instance, Donald Trump might "authenticate" as belonging to the communities of "presidents," "business men," and "reality television stars." Further complicating this process is the fact that other-authentication is, unlike the SSL protocol of the internet, never an "all or nothing" affair. When a speaker is authenticated by a listener's affective-heuristics as belonging to a community, the speaker is also ascribed a *level* or *degree* of authority in representing that community. The affect-heuristics of a supporter of Hillary Clinton in the last presidential election may, for instance, ascribe a very low degree of authority to Trump in representing the community of "presidents." Whereas the classical notion of ethos more or less amounts to the authority a speaker has to persuade the audience to their point of view, for my purposes here, what gets ascribed to the performer in moments of other-authentication is restricted to the degree of authority a speaker has to instill in their audience, via the enfolding of their performance, *the association of new memetic content with the various senses-of-community into which a witness classified them in the first place.*

In other words, when Trump mocked the differently-abled reporter Serge Kovalski by forming his hands into claws and making strange noises, for the audience

members with whom Trump authenticated as a member of the community of "presidents" with a high degree of authority, that behavior, in the form of memetic content encoded as pure association, became associated *more strongly* with "presidents" than it did for audience members whose affect-heuristics granted him a low degree of authority in representing "presidents." For audience members whose affect-heuristics strongly authenticate Trump as a president, Trump's mocking behavior has been enfolded into the memetic warehouse available for citation for future performers who would attempt to authenticate as a president with these audience members. This moment of enfolding constitutes, for my purposes, *an adjustment of the protocols of authentication*. By "getting away with" mocking behavior as an authenticated president, Trump has adjusted what it takes to "pass" as president, at least with certain audience members. In this way, according to this model of the authenticating human, if self-authentication (sincerity) is a growth-agent for a sense-of-self, then other-authentication is a growth-agent for a sense-of-community in the minds of individual audience members. Just as a sense-of-self is composed of pure association acquired in moments of registering and enfolding—association that amounts to "a way of feeling" about oneself, so too is a sense-of-community composed of pure association, amounting to "a way of feeling" about groups of people.

We must be careful, however, not to reduce the "witness" to the role of passive receiver. When in the physical presence of a performer, there exists a field of memetic conventions available for witnesses to cite as a way of *granting assent* to the performer, and this granting of assent is itself a species of speech act. In mundane, everyday

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interaction, assent often takes the form of a molding of the body and the face so as to convey "attentiveness," perhaps punctuated by polite acknowledgement in the form nodding the head, or raising an eyebrow, or issuing slight, affirming vocalizations appropriate to the tone adopted by the performer. In other language-games, such as a "political rally," there exists in Western culture a much more bombastic range of memetic content available for citation in the granting of assent, such as whooping and hollering or frenetic applause. And with the advent of social media, new, asynchronous ways of granting assent present themselves, such as the clicking of the like button, or the sharing or "retweeting" of posts. The granting of assent, according to this model, has "growth-agent" effects in both the witness and performer. When participating in a political rally, for instance, the affect-heuristics of audience members begin to bleed together, amplifying and building momentum. Should a large, noisy contingent of audience members engage in a bombastic granting of assent, it increases the probability that, for other audience members, the performer will authenticate strongly, thus cementing any adjustments of the protocols of authentication implicit in the performance. For the performer registering the assent of their audience, assent functions to increase the probability that the memetic content deployed by the performer will be deployed by that performer again. More importantly for our purposes, should the performer be attempting to occupy a position contingent in their mind upon their membership in a particular community, the registering and enfolding of assent amounts to the establishment or reifying of a *sense-of-belonging* in the performer.

To tie all of this together, then, we can consider *identity* to be the frequency with which a performer is authenticated by audiences as having a high degree of authority to represent a community. While this community will always index a slightly different cluster of memetic content given the idiosyncratic nature of any one witness's sense of that community, the phenomenon of sedimentation often produces enough homogeneity/stability for it to be reproducibly identifiable my multiple subjects. To the extent that a performer is able to felicitously occupy positions in language-games that are contingent upon being able to authenticate in a community, the performer can be said to possess a sense-of-belonging in that community, and this sense-of-belonging comes to inflect their sense-of-self. To the extent, however, that a performer either has an identity imposed upon them that hinders or prohibits them from occupying the language-game positions their feelings compel them toward, or to the extent a performer wishes to establish a sense-of-belonging in a community in which they largely fail to authenticate, we can identify potential sites of social injustice, and work toward adjusting the protocols of authentication.

Adjusting the Protocols of Authentication

There are any number of strategies for adjusting the protocols of authentication, and many of these strategies involve interventions in the broader memescape of culture, such as Butler's proffering of drag in the last chapter of *Gender Trouble* as a way to destabilize gender binaries and draw attention to the phantasmatic nature of the category of sex, or Du Bois' work to publish and edit *The Brownies' Book*, which was a magazine

targeted at African-American children for the purpose of making "colored children realize that being 'colored' is a normal, beautiful thing" ("True Brownies"). According to the model I am schematizing here, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on the way an audience member or reader registers and enfolds new memetic associations with the communities represented by these performances, thus affecting the sense-of-community the audience will then go on to use when self-authenticating or authenticating the performances of others. As I will demonstrate in my fourth chapter, however, Smith emphasizes in her work a more "bottom up" approach, emphasizing opportunities in our mundane, everyday interactions to "only connect" with the unknowable other—a connection forged via two kinds of risk taking: the risk of sincerely articulating something about oneself despite the inevitable and unbridgeable gap of understanding, and the risk of granting assent to an other with whom one might not agree.

The risks involved are real. Sincere articulation often "costs" more in terms of the cognitive labor required to solicit and articulate one's feelings, and often the investment of this labor leaves one more vulnerable to the pain of rejection. The risks involved in the granting of assent are even more fraught. By insisting on the layered nature of communication, however, the granting of assent in a bid for authentication does not entail something like agreeing with the locutionary content of a performer's words. In fact, the whole point of granting assent in this way is to establish a sense-of-belonging that bypasses the locutionary altogether. "Connection," in the way I mean it here, can be thought of as a speech act whose felicity is the establishment or reification

of a sense-of-belonging in a highly localized sense-of-community (you and me). Part of

the value of this connection lies in its potential to either arc across the gaps of power or

highlight the places where such connections are fraught. The assent granted by one to

another in moments of connection, then, is more or less equivalent to a decision to grant

the most generous assumption to the other, an assumption which, at its core, is a choice

to believe that "should I have been in the same shoes as you, experientially speaking, I

would have turned out exactly the same as you." In many ways, then, granting assent in

a moment of connection potentially requires even *more* cognitive labor than the act of

speaking sincerely, because it requires an act of imagination, an attempt to perform the

calculus that solves for the *x* of one's interlocutor. And of course, there's always a risk

that the performer will register this kind of assent as a condoning of their potentially

unjust speech, and so in cases where a connection is made with someone whose affect-

heuristics compel them to occupy positions in language-games that exploit or

marginalize, "connection" is merely the precondition for the difficult work of dialogue.

It seems to me, however, that the "curative" value of a propensity or openness to

connection would be short-circuited by an expectation of reciprocity on the part of the

other. The moment the investment of cognitive labor required of being sincere and

granting assent is registered as a "courtesy" that ought to be returned in kind, it ceases to

be about trying to forge an uncanny connection and becomes something like the

enforcement of "civility," and civility is often a tool of empire, a way of insisting upon

the marginalization or erasure of someone else's way of being in the world via "polite"

acts of rhetorical violence. Perhaps this is why, especially in Smith's fiction, the *domain*

for connection is always the mundane. It would seem like a misapplication of this ethic, for instance, to grant assent to someone like Trump at a political rally in hopes that a connection will be made, or to suggest that having a sincere conversation with Roger Ailes would be better than firing him for sexual harassment, or to critique members of the Black Lives Matter campaign for not sitting down and being nice to more white people. Instead, the effectiveness of connection in adjusting the protocols of authentication seems to lie in the ubiquity of the mundane, in the everyday work of offering oneself up as a singular human being to be idiosyncratically registered and enfolded by the other, and of granting to the unknowable other the most generous assumption, in hopes that by establishing a feeling of belonging, we will open new avenues for becoming.

Toward an Affect-Mediated Dialectic of Becoming

The authenticating human attempts to take seriously Butler's declaration in *Senses of the Subject* that "the senses are primary and [we] feel things, undergo impressions, prior to forming any thoughts, including any thoughts we might have about ourselves" (2). I have attempted to respond to her call "to discern how the subject is initially animated by what affects it and how these transitive processes are reiterated in the animated life that follows" (4). I have done so, however, with the parallel agenda of presuming the merit of the respective prescriptions of Wallace and Smith to "be sincere" and "only connect," and for this reason I have foregrounded the phenomenon of authentication as an affect-mediated process by which we autonomically vet and inflect what we register. This

"vetting" ultimately determines how strongly we enfold certain associations about ourselves (self-authentication) and about other people (other-authentication) into the "pure association" of the topologically configured neuro-synaptic networks of our singular brains. We can consider, then, that this enfolding is *how we become*, and we can consider the two "poles" of this becoming (associations we make about ourselves and associations we make about others) as components for a dialectic whose end result is a suturing of our sense-of-self onto a sense-of-community, a suturing best thought of as a sense-of-belonging. As I argue in my introduction, while Wallace's fiction makes a strong case for the crucial role a sense-of-self plays in our ability to locate ourselves in language-games, this amounts to only one pole of the dialectic I schematize here. Smith's work constitutes, then, a much more comprehensive imagining of the dialectic of becoming for the authenticating human, and for this reason I have relegated further elaboration on this dialectic, including a discussion of how it fits more comfortably within a Deleuzian rather than Hegelian philosophical framework, to the fourth chapter of this project.

Indeed, I hope to show the kind of interpretive work this model of the authenticating human can do for us in reading Wallace and Smith in the chapters that follow, thus intervening in the scholarship surrounding these authors to situate them as forerunners, as participating in the "in-breaking" of the affective turn in literature in the way they attempt to "make room" for affect via the character-function in literature. Beyond this, I believe the authenticating human to be useful as equipment for reading and responding to accounts of social injustice and as motivation for certain pedagogical

postures. We might use this model, for instance, to explore Du Bois' conception of "double-consciousness" by considering the "vast veil" of the color-line as the collective protocols of authentication enforced by the white communities of the Jim Crow South (*Souls of Black Folk* 3). When speaking of the black youth in these communities, Du Bois notes how

> their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above. (3)

By conceiving of the walls that are "strait and stubborn" to white people yet "relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable" to the black community as the memetic field of associations that comprise the sense-of-community corresponding to "good American citizen," we can argue that the true "site" of these barriers lies in the feelings of white people—feelings that are trained and sedimented via the iterative performance of memes made efficient over time for the purpose of exploiting black labor. We can also point out how, insidiously, these same memes are registered and enfolded by the very people they have evolved to exploit, thus producing similar feelings in black people *about themselves*, a phenomenon which gives rise to internal strife born of dueling senses-of-self. Du Bois

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writes that "the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,–this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (3). In the terms provided by this model, the dialectic that places a black sense-of-self in tension with the white sense-of-community precludes this merging, this suturing of a sense-of-self onto a sense-of-belonging. In light of this, the onus for creating a more just society lies with white people who must attend to the kinds of memetic content they are willing to cite when attempting to authenticate as "good American citizens," and to the kinds of people to which they are willing to grant assent.

This model also, however, problematizes words like "willing." To be willing to do something, according to this model, is to already possess strong feelings that indicate in the direction of that behavior. Assuming, then, that the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom is in part a reaction of the white working class who feels increasingly unable to authenticate in the ways they are accustomed, an opportunity for adjusting the protocols of authentication for that community presents itself. We might conceive of an intervention in the cultural memescape not unlike the aforementioned projects of Butler and Du Bois, but which targets the white working class for the purpose of portraying them authenticating as "good Americans" without having to define themselves in contrast with communities of color. Such a project would have to take careful inventory of the authenticating memes often cited in white working-class communities, and to creatively imagine alternatives for the subset of memes, like the Confederate Battle Flag of the South, which have evolved in such a way as to establish an oppressive gradient of privilege. The success of

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such a project would entirely depend on the degree to which working class audience members are iteratively exposed to this imagining (thus informing the kind of medium appropriate for such an intervention), as well as the degree to which they are able to authenticate its protagonists as indeed members of the white working class. Such a project, then, calls for creative work like that of Smith and Wallace in that it must pass beyond critique and into the realm of imagining new worlds.

Setting aside for the moment the parameters of such a project, I should point out that it is difficult to distinguish such a targeted cultural intervention from other kinds of political interventions more commonly referred to as "propaganda." Indeed, meddling in the memescape with the intention of shaping feelings is precisely the accusation levelled by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence against the Putin administration of Russia, which is reported to have carried out a massive social media campaign to influence white working-class Americans to vote for Trump.[22] What are the ethics of such interventions? It is perhaps precisely for the purpose of sidestepping issues like this that Smith implies the domain for "only connecting" be most appropriately considered the everyday mundane. This posture on Smith's part amounts to a bottom-up model for cultural intervention—a "trickle-up economics" for memes. Given these ethical concerns, it would seem that such a project would only be viable given the participation of (or even better, ownership by) actual members of the white working class. Regardless of the feasibility of such a project, my point is to illustrate how more

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[22] The Office of the Director of National Intelligence has made its findings on this matter available here: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

affect-centered models of subjectivity might inform our reading and responding to issues of social injustice.

On a closing note, it seems appropriate to point out that the authenticating human is, like all of culture, a field of memetic content which is made efficient at doing certain work. There are limits to a model which insists on the value of speaking sincerely and connecting with others, particularly for those whose speech is frequently labelled subversive, dangerous, and "unpatriotic," and whose attempts to connect are met with discomfort, fear, and often hatred. I will be exploring those limits in greater detail in the third and concluding chapters of this project. While I have attempted to show how such a model might be useful in reading and responding to issues of social injustice, I am wary of its (mis)use as a justification for elevating sincerity and connection to the level of virtue in service of the policing of civility. And like all models of subjectivity, it risks rhetorically installing itself (particularly given its neurological trappings) as a universal subject, which as Gayatri Spivak makes clear in "Can the subaltern speak?", undermines Derrida's own prescription to render delirious "that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us" (308). Thus, I must be adamant in insisting that if the authenticating human describes something like a dialectic of becoming, it does so primarily as a way of explaining how it might be possible for Wallace's and Smith's respective prescriptions to "be sincere" and "only connect" to be considered efficaciously curative. For this reason, if the piece of equipment I have built in this chapter proves useful, I hope its use remains primarily restricted to providing a compelling reading of Smith and Wallace, providing a kind of "litmus test" for a full examination of the work of their peers in

arguments about periodization, or perhaps as a pedagogical tool for exploring the

implications for the Western literary subject on the eve of the affective turn.

CHAPTER III

BE SINCERE: HAL INCANDENZA AND THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE

DISAPPEARING SELF IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

I argue here that David Foster Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest* with the purpose, in part, of

diagnosing and treating an ailment afflicting the Western subject at the turn of the

millennium, an ailment that engenders feelings of abstraction, isolation, paralysis, and

meaninglessness, and one whose etiology is prolonged exposure to dominant cultural

language-games Wallace figures as postmodern. The treatment for this ailment,

according to the logic of the novel, is the playing of language-games that privilege

sincerity. These claims about the text are largely consonant with scholarship by Marshall

Boswell, Adam Kelly, Lee Konstantinou, Nicoline Timmer, and others, and such claims

are typically employed by these scholars in the service of periodizing Wallace's fiction

as coming 'after' postmodernism. While the project at hand certainly participates in this

discussion, it distinguishes itself by being most interested in the kind of subject assumed

by these claims about the dangers of postmodern irony and the curative value of

sincerity, arguing that such a subject is radically affect-centered. As such, rather than

considering *Infinite Jest* as "post-postmodern" the way Boswell does, or as characterized

by "New Sincerity" as Kelly does, this chapter figures the novel as participating in a

broader literary trend at the turn of the millennium which seeks to "make room for

affect" in the stylistics of postmodernism.

This chapter makes use of the affect-centered model of subjectivity I refer to as

the authenticating human, which I schematize in the previous chapter. Employing the authenticating human as a piece of equipment, I argue that in order to account for postmodern irony as an affliction (and sincerity as that affliction's cure), its "site of attack" is best considered the subject's sense(s)-of-self. In the broader context of my dissertation, then, this chapter serves to establish the subject's sense(s)-of-self as but one pole in a larger dialectic of becoming—the second pole of this dialectic being the subject's sense(s)-of-belonging, which I explore in my subsequent chapter on the fiction of Zadie Smith. Taken together, then, this project not only proffers the fiction of Wallace and Smith as exemplary of what I refer to as the affect-realism after postmodernism, but also attempts to synthesize their respective prescriptions to "be sincere" and "only connect" as an "ethics of authentication" particularly suited to aiding the subject of the neoliberal West.

There is a preponderance of evidence to suggest that Wallace indeed had designs on diagnosing and treating Western culture in the writing of *Infinite Jest*. In a letter Wallace wrote to Don DeLillo in 1992, he confesses that DeLillo's books "inform my heart and my work, inspire me in the very best sense of 'inspire'" (Letter). It is likely that one of the ways in which DeLillo's work informs Wallace's is in the cultural analytic focus of much of DeLillo's work.[23] Indeed, DeLillo is often credited with crafting fictional worlds that foretell of cultural phenomena before they actually occur—Wallace himself refers to DeLillo as a "true prophet" ("E Unibus" 169), and DeLillo's

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[23] See, for instance, Jayne Anne Phillips' 1985 review of *White Noise* where she writes that the novel "has dealt not so much with character as with culture."

reputation as prophet continues unabated.[24] Within the same letter Wallace writes to

DeLillo, Wallace goes on to confess that he did not love *Libra*: "I read it in galleys when

I was trying to do some fiction-work of my own in the transfiguration of real U.S. fact

and myth, and jealousy kept me from being able to love *Libra*, and I've been afraid to

reread it." Given that *Libra* was published in 1988, there is a decent chance that the "real

U.S. fact and myth" Wallace was working on was indeed some incipient form of *Infinite*

Jest. When asked by Boswell when he'd started working on the novel, Wallace replied

"It doesn't work like that for me. I started *IJ* or somethin' like it several times.

'86,'88,'89. None of it worked or was alive. And then in '91–'92 all of a sudden it did"

(qtd in Max 318). If Wallace felt something like jealousy toward DeLillo in the late

'80's over the foundering state of *Infinite Jest*, it is interesting to consider that the timing

for when Wallace's novel is jolted to life coincides was his foray into cultural analysis in

the form of his now infamous essay, "E Unibus Plurum: Television and U.S. Fiction,"

published in the Summer 1993 edition of *Review of Contemporary Ficition* alongside an

interview with Wallace conducted by Larry McCaffery.

     Indeed, much has been made of the connection between "E Unibus Plurum," the

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[24] In Michiko Kakutani's 2007 review of DeLillo's *Falling Man*, she claims that "no writer has been as prescient and eerily prophetic about 21st-century America," at least in part due to the way DeLillo "managed to anticipate the shock and horror of Sept. 11" via *White Noise*. Cornel Bonca helps to reify DeLillo-as-prophet in his revisiting of *Cosmopolis* in the LA Review of Books nearly a decade after its publication: "Re-reading *Cosmopolis* now, however, in the light of David Cronenberg's new film adaptation, and given the context of the 2007 global economic meltdown and the Occupy Movement that followed, it appears to me that Don DeLillo has once again taken on the mantle of the artist-prophet." For more on DeLillo as prophet, see *Understanding Don DeLillo* by Henry Veggian.

McCaffery interview, and *Infinite Jest*. As Adam Kelly notes, the first two critical

monographs on Wallace's work (Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* and

Stephen Burn's *Infinite Jest, A Reader's Guide*) both privilege what Kelly terms "the

essay-interview nexus" as a kind of skeleton key for unlocking *Infinite Jest*, and much

subsequent scholarship has continued in this vein ("Death of the Author"). While I

would like to avoid centering Wallace's essay and interview from 1993 in my own

reading of *Infinite Jest*, I nonetheless feel that a few details from "E Unibus Plurum" are

relevant for teasing out the kind of subject the novel assumes. These details appear

within the context of a rather meandering argument in which Wallace claims that

television is a particular kind of cultural technology that has evolved to become efficient

at being "malignantly addictive" for its viewers, and the effects of the average six hour

daily dose of television are that it creates difficulties for "relationships, communities,

and the addict's very sense of their self" (163). He suggests that postmodern literature

often ironically invokes the "pop images" disseminated by television in order to "*make

the familiar strange*," a strategy he believes is intended to critique television, to "restore

what's (mis)taken for 'real' to three whole dimensions" (172-173). He goes on to argue,

however, that he finds this strategy misguided, as television has "beaten the imagists to

the punch" by "absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern

aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-

marketed narrative" (173). He finds irony, in other words, to be a dead-end when it

comes to resisting the effects of television, given that television has already appropriated

this strategy. In the end, he suggests that "the next real literary 'rebels' in this country

might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'aint-rebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching," who would be "outdated" because they are "too sincere" (192-193). "E Unibus Plurum" is Wallace's first attempt, in other words, to position sincerity as a therapeutic intervention intended to treat certain maladies arising from the postmodern condition.

One of the essay's assumptions relevant to my project is that "television somehow trains or conditions our viewership" in that our experience of it "inform[s] our deepest responses to what's watched" (164). He argues that high dosages of daily TV watching overdetermines the "system of conflicting whispers" within "an average, workable brain." This assumption about the constitution of the subject renders it radically susceptible to mundane, everyday activity like watching TV. The authenticating human accounts for this radical susceptibility by considering the subject's feelings to be *agentive*—they are like autonomic, magnetic forces pulling the subject in the direction of certain language-game moves. These feelings are like "the system of conflicting whispers" to which Wallace refers. Those feelings are also *trained* by virtue of the way the subject is always registering and enfolding mundane experience (like watching a commercial on TV). The "memes" or memetic content comprising these experiences, when registered by the subject, become enfolded as pure association into the same neuro-synaptic networks solicited to produce those feelings in the first place. In this way, the subject is always *becoming*, even while watching reruns.

As a final note on "E Unibus Pluram," I wanted to point out some of Wallace's assumptions about the nature of the "pop image" and its relation to subjectivity. In an

argument about the homogenizing effects of television, Wallace notes that of "new importance" for post-WWII "mass commercial culture" is that "Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images" (166). While I'm not entirely sure when the U.S. was "united by common feelings," it is interesting that, for Wallace, exposure to common images *does not necessarily give rise* to common feelings. While television has certainly has a homogenizing effect in terms of the field of memetic content made available to the subject for citation, he implicitly maintains the power of our singular experiences of the world to guarantee that the *feelings* evoked by a given image will remain uniquely inflected. The persistence of singularity in the face of a somewhat homogeneous flow of televisual images helps explain why he feels the ironic citation of the pop image in literature is ultimately a dead end for his purposes. The problem, for Wallace, is not that the pop image needs to be revealed as such by making the familiar strange—this effect is already built-in to a postmodern culture in which an image can be granted new currency by qualifying it with the knowing and mischievous wink of irony. The problem is that the pop image is by nature "one size fits many," and therefore its expression, regardless of how qualified by irony, will be largely ineffective at representing rich and uniquely inflected affective responses. For Wallace, then, sincerity indexes the gulf between what the pop image is efficient at conveying and what the subject actually feels. Contrary to claims that Wallace is somehow interested in returning to a moment before postmodernism, I would argue that modernism's concern with how we come to know the world fetishizes a different gulf: the gulf between images and *real objects in the world*. By shifting the goal post from "truth" to "sincerity,"

Wallace is suggesting that the mimetic project of literature becomes less about accurately representing the world and more about accurately representing how the world makes us feel. Given these assumptions about the subject, then, the meat of this chapter is an attempt to read *Infinite Jest* for a more thorough working-out of how he believes Western culture's infatuation with irony at the turn of the millennium leads to problems with human relationships and an emaciated sense-of-self, and how he sees playing language-games that privilege sincerity as serving a therapeutic function for these ailments. Before moving into this reading, however, given sincerity's importance for my reading of Wallace, it behooves me provide a brief genealogy for the term.

Like all words, sincerity is subjected to the evolutionary nature of memes—our use of the term changes over time so as to be well-adapted to its context. Most discussions of sincerity in the humanities cite Lionel Trilling, who states that sincerity, "as we now use it," means a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 2). For Trilling, sincerity is best articulated by Shakespeare's Polonius, who exhorts his audience to be true to one's own self such that one cannot then be false to any man. For scholars in the humanities after the heyday of postmodernism, it is untrendy indeed to consider being "true to one's own self" a virtue, given that having a discernable self at all is a fantasy that underwrites the Western worldview and its attendant structures of power. Authors like David McNeill, for instance, tell us that "the concept [of sincerity] seems of little use in a world in which Cartesian assumptions concerning the subject have well and truly passed their use-by date. Postmodernism's decade-long housekeeping exercise consigned any number of terms tainted with essentialism to the

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lexical rubbish bin, and 'sincerity' appears a fine candidate for such treatment" (McNeill 157). Given that sincerity has been "tainted with essentialism," most recent scholarship dealing with sincerity has qualified the term by relegating it to the rhetorical domain as merely another technique in the art of persuasion.

Consider Susan B. Rosenbaum, whose monograph *Professing Sincerity* begins not by defining sincerity as such, but by defining the *rhetoric* of sincerity as "the range of expressive conventions used to mark the voice, figure, and experience of the first-person speaker as that of the author, including claims to originality, spontaneity, authenticity, artlessness, and immediacy" (2). Right out of the gate, for Rosenbaum, sincerity is the parlor trick by which a performer attempts to cash-in on the fallacy of logocentrism by participating in "the self-interested performances of a profit-driven society" (4). The subtitle for R. Jay Magill, Jr.'s monograph *Sincerity* declares that sincerity inspires "the curious notion that we all have something to say (no matter how dull)." Magill's definition for the term is "confronting one's innermost thoughts or emotions and relaying them to others straightforwardly, no matter how relevant to the topic, injurious to one's own reputation, or embarrassing—or however correct or incorrect" (13). Despite Magill's admission that sincerity can sometimes "inspire human beings to lessen the pain of others" and provide "a counterweight to some constant political or consumerist values" such as "domination, deception, envy, [and] greed," he finds "unvaryingly sincere people" to be "the most annoying" (225-227). Perhaps it is precisely the imperiled state of sincerity that Wallace is referring to when he claims that his "anti-rebels" would be "outdated" and "dead on the page" (*Supposedly Fun* 81).

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There are various competing etymologies for the term sincerity. Perhaps the most widely cited (and most frequently disputed) etymology considers sincerity to be derived from the Latin words *sine cera* (without wax). Magill recounts the tale of Roman merchants who used *sine cera* to advertise the quality of raw marble or marble sculptures, as "lesser-quality marble contained cracks that were patched with wax to disguise natural impurities" and deceitful sculptors used wax to hide mistakes (29). Magill is quick to refer to the *OED*, however, which argues the improbability of this origin. Perhaps Trilling's own denouncement of this etymology as "merely fanciful" is due to the same reason (Trilling 12). Nevertheless, both Magill and Trilling agree that, regardless of its origin, the term originally referred "to things rather than to persons," and more specifically to the pure, untainted, homogenous, or integral quality of a product (Trilling 12). Given the improbability of the *sine cera* origin of sincerity, why does the etymology show up so frequently in discourse surrounding the term? Magill includes this unlikely etymology because "it is a great story" (29). What makes it so great?

I believe there is something particularly haunting about the image of a marble statue, perhaps a mimetic representation of the human being, whose cracks and imperfections are convincingly hidden by the skillful application of wax as a response to the profit-making pressures of the marketplace. The marble statue of a human being covertly patched by wax serves as a kind of distilled metaphor for the ways in which the total field of our affect-heuristics in any given moment of registering the world around us are warped and parameterized in a moment of articulation, via the memetic transfer,

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by the pressures of the language-game. The metaphor brings to mind the fast-paced bustle surrounding an open-air market stall, the high stakes placed on one's ability to occupy the positions of the astute buyer and the shrewd seller, as well as the pressure to *see through* what may be the manipulative performances of others. Perhaps the Roman marketplace becomes, in the imagination of those contemplating the origin of the term sincerity, the birthplace of a kind of fetish for encounters with the other that do not require the expenditure of so much angst. According to the tale told by Magill, the practice of hiding imperfections with wax became so prevalent that the Roman Senate "passed a law declaring that any marble bought by the government be flawless and therefore *sine cera*" (29). While this fabled origin for the term sincerity is unlikely, I believe that the Roman law which insists on the purity of its government's purchased commodities fulfills a function similar to the function the term sincerity eventually came to fulfill during the Reformation, a time characterized by the new ascendancy of capitalism in the wake of the waning of feudalism.

The waning of feudalism gave rise to new anxieties surrounding the protocols of authentication. Whereas feudal English sumptuary laws attempted to reify, via one's physical appearance, the "partitioning of society into precise social categories to which legislators assigned specific articles of clothing and jewelry defined according to kind, number, and value," the decline of these laws opened up new possibilities for people to misrepresent their positioning (Muzzarelli 600). How do you determine a speaker's level of authority when you can no longer trust in the authenticating protocol of dress? Concurrently, the protestant attack on Catholic doctrinal tenets such as transubstantiation

and purgatory often adopted rhetorical strategies which characterized Catholic priests as

deceivers who, while appearing to be channels of the divine, were in reality interested in

wealth and power.[25] How can you determine your metaphysical standing when you can

no longer trust in the authenticating assent of the Catholic clergy? By the 16th century,

England became "preoccupied to an extreme degree with dissimulation, feigning, and

pretence" (Trilling 13). An argument can be made that the reason behind this

preoccupation, wherein "so many values [were replaced] with the one supreme value of

sincerity" (Roberts 553), is that people no longer knew where to put their trust. It may

be, in other words, that tectonic cultural shifts, especially those that undermine existing

protocols of authentication, give rise to a fascination with sincerity.

It may be plausible, then, to consider the West at the end of the millennium to be

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[25] Martin Luther, for instance, railed against those that committed "barefaced robbery,
trickery, and tyranny appropriate to the nether regions" (qtd. in Magill 32). Luther was
referring to various popes such as Pope Innocent VIII who "fathered sixteen illegitimate
children, sold Church offices, bribed cardinals," and "established a Vatican bank for the
sale of pardons" (Magill 32). William Tyndale's autobiographical work, *The Obedience
of a Christian Man*, drips with vitriol for Catholic clergymen who "a thousand things
forbid … which Christ made free; and dispense with them again for money" (18).
Perhaps motivated by the persecution Tyndale suffered for promoting his translation of
the Bible (the first English translation from the original Greek and Hebrew), he accuses
the clergy of what amounts to deceit: "They will not let the lay-man have the word of
God in his mother tongue, yet let the priests have it; which for a great part of them do
understand no Latin at all, but sing, and say, and patter all day, with the lips only, that
which the heart understandeth not" (17). More interestingly, however, the Reformation
"heuristics of deceit" began to associate with these foibles a set of memes, especially
those which may have originally become "fit for use" for conveying awe and grandeur.
William Tyndale rails against the Catholic "conjuring" of "churches, chapels, altars,
super-altars, chalice, vestments, […] bell, candlestick, organs, chalice, vestments, copes,
altar-cloths, surplices, towels, basins, ewers, ship, censer, and all manner [of] ornament"
(92). The gilded attire of Catholic priests who "in three or four years shall […] in those
offices get enough to pay for a bishop's bull" began to register as inherently insincere.

in a crisis of authentication similar to the one experienced by English subjects during the Reformation. In the dystopic world of *Infinite Jest*, the lines of the nation-state have been coopted and blurred via corporate merger. Nations have been "incorporated" under ONAN, a rather masturbatory acronym for the Organization of North American Nations, and even time itself has become subsidized—each calendar year is "sponsored by" a consumerist product, such that much of the novel's plot unfolds during the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment." These grim yet comedic elements make it clear the dystopia is intended to function as a parody of the neoliberal impulse to commodify everything. This impulse is largely figured as a deterritorializing force in its undermining of national and temporal boundaries. In a disturbingly prescient way, the novel also features a "pissed-off American electorate" who, in "a spasm of panicked rage," elected a television star (Johnny Gentle) to the nation's highest office (382). My point here is to suggest that the novel is parodying feelings of fear and unease in response to the destabilizing wiles of the free-market, and to further suggest that we can read both the English Reformation and the neoliberal West as a time when those same wiles reach deep into authenticating cultural infrastructures, causing widespread anxieties and a fetishization, in turn, of sincerity. In this way, then, perhaps Wallace's work constitutes less of a "New Sincerity" and more of an "Old Anxiety," and for this reason I find it compelling to decenter his work in efforts to look for a literary shift at the turn of the millennium—a decentering I attempt to effect by reading his work in relation to Smith's who, as I argue throughout my project, actually maps out a more robust schemata for the affect-centered subject.

Despite Wallace's contempt for much of the cultural manifestations of postmodernism, he leans heavily in his writing craft on postmodern aesthetic sensibilities—the narrative structure of the novel is fragmented and scattered such that the narrator hops in time and space with every scene. There is nonetheless an identifiable nexus of plots and characters, and the Incandenza family occupies center stage. The youngest of the three sons of Avril and James Incandenza is Mario, who attends the Enfield Tennis Academy along with his older brother Hal (the oldest brother Orin has already graduated and is playing college football). Unlike the rest of the characters in the novel who are adept at playing the sardonic language-games of postmodernism, Mario's sensibilities are attuned differently:

> The older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that
> everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that is
> really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some
> rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or
> laughs in a way that isn't happy. (592)

Mario's sensibilities, in other words, allow the reader to categorize postmodern cynicism alongside the other dystopic elements in the novel. Suddenly bereft of clear national boundaries, of the explicit sequencing of time, and of affirming ways to express oneself, Wallace's characters find themselves in a crisis of authentication—the protocols by which they anchor and evaluate themselves are in dire need of renegotiation.

This sentiment is perhaps expressed most explicitly in the novel by Rémy Marathe, a French Canadian member of the Quebecois separatist movement's black-ops

group called "the Wheelchair Assassins" who engages in dark political intrigue alongside his enemy and comrade, Hugh Steeply, an Agent for O.N.A.N.'s Office of Unspecified Services. In one of his many secretive conversations with Steeply, Marathe ruminates on the special brand of "freedom" espoused by global neoliberal capital:

> No one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress. […] But what of the freedom-*to*? Not just free-*from*. […] How for the person to freely choose? How to choose any but a child's greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? (320)

Marathe here identifies, if in rather patriarchal, anthropomorphic terms, the absence of traditionally relied-upon protocols of authentication. It seems that, for Wallace, postmodernism's default posture of incredulity toward metanarratives has chased the "loving-filled father" out of the room, and corporations have seized upon the opportunity to cash-in on America's inability to resist the allure of "a child's greedy choices." One of the ways, then, to periodize *Infinite Jest*, and particularly Wallace's emphasis on sincerity in the novel, is to find a parallel in terms of a crisis of authentication in the Early Modern period: when the ideological underpinnings of a culture's protocols of authentication are under attack, subjects who would otherwise find themselves automatically relying upon those protocols begin to feel anxious about how to authenticate, and begin to fetishize the ability to *authenticate themselves* via moments of sincerity.

Having now situated *Infinite Jest* within my understanding of Wallace's ambitions for the novel as being in-line with the tradition of authors like DeLillo who seek to use literature as a way to perform cultural analysis, within Wallace's early assumptions about the subject as they manifest in "E Unibus Plurum," and within the larger historical context of the West's tendency to respond to crises of authentication by recourse to the notion of sincerity, I turn my attention to the main goal of this chapter, which is to employ the authenticating human as a piece of equipment for tracing "what happens" to Hal Incandenza and Joelle Van Dyne—protagonists whose function in the novel, according to my reading, is to show the difference sincerity can make with regard to the health of the subject within the context of postmodern culture. Of the two protagonists, Wallace allocates the most narrative space to Hal.

Despite the emphasis placed on Hal throughout the novel, it becomes frustratingly difficult, given the leaps in time and perspective, to reassemble a cogent narrative about what happens to him. In what follows, however, I will treat the very opening scene of the novel as a jumping-off point, as it presents to the reader a curious mystery about Hal which is never explicitly resolved in the text. We find Hal, who will soon be going to college, being interviewed by an admissions committee at Arizona State University. While the committee is highly impressed with Hal's athletic prowess, and feels motivated to find a way to admit him on a tennis scholarship, there are some issues with his application portfolio. Most distressing is the incongruity between the grades he received at the Enfield Tennis Academy, grades which were literally off the

charts,[26] and the scores he received on his standardized tests, which were "quite a bit closer to zero than [the committee is] comfortable with" (6). The committee's suspicion is that Hal is a kind of idiot savant, a tennis genius who is otherwise incapable of performing academically, and that his mother, who is the director of the Enfield Tennis Academy, has doctored Hal's transcript and purchased falsified admissions essays. Throughout the interview, Hal is asked repeatedly by the committee to explain himself.

As the admissions interview continues, however, Hal remains silent, despite the increasingly insistent solicitations of the committee for him to speak. This is in part due to the coaching Hal has received—Hal has been advised to avoid speaking at all if possible, and "people have promised to get [Hal] through this" (8). Indeed, Hal's uncle (C.T. deLint) is present in the room, and attempts to speak on Hal's behalf, acting in the role as the Enfield Tennis Academy's varsity tennis coach and Prorector. However, the true reason for Hal's silence, for why deLint is having to speak on his behalf, is because Hal is suffering from a mysterious ailment, an ailment that renders all of his communicative performances not only entirely unintelligible but in fact *disturbing* to behold. Hal "compose[s] what [he] project[s] will be seen as a smile," and what the committee perceives is a grimace, prompting them to ask, "Is he in pain? Are you in pain, son?" (5). DeLint, in his role as intercessor and salesman, responds accordingly: "'Hal's right as rain,' smiles [his] uncle, soothing the air with a casual hand" (5). Tiring of deLint's intercessions on Hal's behalf, the committee asks deLint to leave the room,

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[26] As the Director of Composition puts it, "Most institutions do not even *have* grades of A with multiple pluses after it" (6).

at which point Hal is directly confronted and asked to give an account of himself.

When Hal attempts to respond, the committee is horrified by "the *sounds* he made" which are registered as "*sub*animalistic noises." Hal's physical gestures are registered by the committee as being like "a stick of butter being hit with a mallet" or a "writhing animal with a knife it its eye" (14). The committee reacts strongly to Hal's unexplainable behavior, and he is "pinioned from behind by the Director of Comp[osition]" and wrestled to the floor (12). He is held until an ambulance can arrive, and is then taken to a hospital where he can ostensibly find professional help for his ailment. Strangely, however, the narrator provides us, in the form of perfectly legible dialogue, with what Hal has purportedly said. Portions of Hal's response bear close scrutiny:

> "My applications's not bought," I am telling them… "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex." … "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe." … "I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function." … "Please don't think I don't care." (11-12)

Throughout his speech, Hal is responding to a failure to authenticate as anything beyond "just a boy who plays tennis." He seems aware, in other words, of the committee's misidentification of him as something not quite human, as a *forgery* of a human being crafted for manipulative purposes. For Hal, to be human is to be complex, to have agency, to have feelings, to believe in things, to care. Yet in this room, he is reduced to a commodity, and instructed to be silent and allow the exchange (the exchange of his labor

on the tennis court for a scholarship) to occur without his interference. The exchange, however, has broken down. Hal can no longer passively assume the role of the marble statue in the Roman marketplace—the wax has been spotted, his flaws have been revealed. He has been asked to speak for himself-as-commodity. Unfortunately, Hal's ailment, which can be thought of as an involuntary incongruence between avowal and actual feeling, precludes him from doing so.

Curiously, this opening scene occurs, chronologically speaking, as the very last event in the complex and interwoven teleology of Wallace's mammoth text. As the curtain closes on this teleology and thus our knowledge of "what happens to Hal," the last event available to us in the plot is Hal being wheeled away on a gurney. Squirreled away within the narration of this last event is the foretelling of an inevitable future event, one which only occurs hypothetically within the text: "*It will start* in the E.R., at the intake desk if C.T.'s late in following the ambulance, or in the green-tiled room after the room with the invasive-digital machines; or, given this special M.D.-supplied ambulance, maybe on the ride itself…" (17, emphasis mine). Wallace refuses to be explicit about what it is that will be starting. Our best clue as to the nature of this foretold event is given at the very end of the scene:

> It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably—a
> nurse's aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban
> orderly who addresses [Hal] as *jou*—who will, looking down in the
> middle of some kind of bustled task, catch what he sees as [his] eye and
> ask So yo then man what's *your* story? (17)

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What is the significance of this foretold event, which will presumably be Hal's response, in the form of a narrative, about what happened to him? Do we write it off as a kind of metafictional ploy, an announcement at the beginning of the novel that what follows is precisely Hal's story, a ploy which structures the narrative, in high postmodern style, as a Möbius strip? If so, then what becomes conspicuous about the rest of the novel is how little we learn of Hal's story. And what we *do* learn about Hal's story tends to come from other characters—indeed, in only one brief moment in this giant text does Hal open his mouth and articulate a story *about himself*.[27] Perhaps, then, this foretold event is not so much found within the text of *Infinite Jest* as it is the "start" of the treatment for Hal's ailment, figured here as an act of self-narration, one that can only occur *outside* of the text, as a labor to be performed by the reader who is entrusted to answer the question, "What's your story?" It is not uncommon for Wallace to have written an ending that calls for the reader to act in this way. As Jeffrey Severs writes:

> Wallace designed texts that lead up to the precipice of this … choice to
> accept birth and be born a second time. His fictions therefore not
> infrequently end with a greeting to this new self that can only now begin
> the real struggle, rather than walk off into a presumed state of maturity
> that obviates the reader's action. (7)

I agree with Severs, with the caveat that in this case the "end" of *Infinite Jest* is encountered by the reader as a curious beginning, one which begins to propel the reader

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[27] This scene occurs during a brief conversation between Hal and his brother Mario on pg. 784 of the novel—I will be returning to this scene later.

through the text, motored at least initially by the question, "What happened to Hal?"

It is my contention that the provenance and nature of Hal's ailment in the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* has not received the critical attention it deserves. In order to account for Hal's strange behavior during the admissions committee interview, Marshall Boswell believes that Hal has either "ingested the lethal drug DMZ" or "accidentally viewed the Entertainment" (Boswell 139). While either of these are certainly options for the reader to gravitate toward,[28] I believe them to be red herrings.

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[28] Michael Pemulis, who is at once Hal's closest (non-family related) friend and drug dealer, has scored six tablets of DMZ, which Pemulis describes as the "Great White Shark of organo-synthesized hallucinogens" (*IJ* 211). Pemulis warns that the drug, if taken in high dosages, can cause the user to lose one's mind, which was the case with a particular Army convict who was given too much of it, and who was "found later in his Army cell, in some impossible lotus position, singing show tunes in a scary deadly-accurate Ethel-Merman-impression voice" (214). Later, Hal confesses to Pemulis that he had a terrible dream in which he'd been given a massive dose of DMZ: "'In the dream the horror was that I wasn't really singing "There's No Business Like Show Business." I was really screaming for help. I was screaming like "Help! I'm screaming for help and everybody's acting as if I'm singing Ethel Merman covers! It's me! It's me, screaming for help!"'" (1063). Toward the end of the novel, Pemulis' stash goes missing, and there is a scene where Hal falls asleep holding his toothbrush. It is within the realm of possibility (though never explicitly stated within the text) that the mysterious disappearance of Pemulis' DMZ and the curious detail of Hal's toothbrush are related, and that while Hal was sleeping, someone dosed his toothbrush with DMZ. One could alternatively support the DMZ argument by reference to a strange interlude in the opening scene of *Infinite Jest*, wherein Hal recalls having eaten a strange mold as a child. This interlude occurs directly after the first part of Hal's response to the admissions committee, which ends with: "I cannot make myself understood now… Call it something I ate" (10). As for the possibility of Hal having "viewed the Entertainment," the Entertainment here refers to the last film created by the auteur James Incandenza (Hal's father) before he committed suicide. The film, titled "Infinite Jest," is so mesmerizing, so potent in its capacity to entertain that all who view it succumb to a fatal paralysis, entirely unable to stop watching. There are a few moments in the text that suggest Hal had access to the film toward the end of the narrative. The first is during an early scene where, in a flashback, Hal's father impersonates a therapist and tells Hal that there is an entertainment cartridge "implanted in your very own towering father's

By reducing "what's happened to Hal" to an off-the-page dosing incident involving one potent substance or another, the reader ignores all of the symptoms that indicate a progressive decline in Hal's ability to communicate with others throughout the rest of the text.[29] In other words, while there is evidence to suggest that either DMZ or the Entertainment served as a final accelerant or catalyst, Hal had been moving along an increasingly alienating trajectory well before either of those substances could have come into play. As such, what follows is an attempt to construct an etiology that instead considers the culturally dominant posture of postmodern irony as the chief vector for Hal's disease, a posture which, when adopted over long periods of time, results in a state of anhedonia and paralysis, in an overabundance of unarticulated affective "leakage," and ultimately in an emaciated sense-of-self, rendering Hal unable to locate his own positioning in language-games such as the one imposed by the admissions committee.

I begin my foray into figuring the posture of postmodern irony as a vector for Hal's ailment by pointing out the tendency for the denizens of the story-world of *Infinite Jest* to rely almost exclusively on the ironic invocation of memes, often in the form of a running gag, and always for the purpose of both offloading cognitive labor and mitigating the risk of having to express one's feelings. This tendency is distilled via the

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anaplastic cerebrum" (31). Toward the end of the novel, Gately is experiencing a series of fever dreams, and in one of them, "he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up" (934). Finally, just before the end of the opening scene in question here, Hal recalls that one of his tennis academy comrades was "standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17).

[29] For a fan-based exploration of the etiology of Hal's ailment beyond drug dosing or exposure to the Entertainment, see the forum topic "What happened to Hal?": http://infinitesummer.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=112

metaphor of mask-wearing that Wallace invokes in three different contexts within the text. The first instance of mask-wearing we encounter is found in an account of the rise and fall of "videophony," a technology whereby household telephones are replaced by devices that can only send or receive calls via video (think Skype, Facetime, etc.). Wallace's account of the phenomenon of videophony largely centers on the evolution of the memetic conventions used to answer a videophone call, and as such functions as a kind of parable for thinking through the complex interplay between the innovative technological cycle of capitalism, and how our "use" of these innovations, in the form of memetic conventions, evolves according to the ways we use *feelings* to evaluate and mitigate risk.

After the early enthusiasm and wide adoption of videophony, consumers realized that whereas "good old aural telephone calls could be fielded without makeup, toupee, surgical prostheses, etc.,"

> there was no such answer-as-you-are informality about visual-video telephone calls, which consumers began to see were less like having the good old phone ring than having the doorbell ring and having to throw on clothes and attach prostheses and do hair-checks in the foyer mirror before answering the door. (147)

Videophony's broadening of the memetic scope to include the visual suddenly triggers a field of anxieties surrounding the mundane act of answering the phone. These anxieties, for Wallace, seem to have their root in the desire to be "liked" in our encounters with the other, the desire, in other words, to be granted assent. According to the logic of "E

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Unibus Plurum," our imagined protocols for the granting of assent are trained via television: "if we want to know what American normality is—what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television" ("E Unibus" 152). This is because television functions like a mirror, but "not the Stendhalian mirror reflecting the blue sky and mud puddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile." The solution to this problem of over-exposure in communication became "the advent of High-Definition Masking," which provided a "wildly attractive high-def broadcastable composite of a face wearing an earnest, slightly overintense expression of complete attention" in the form of a "form-fitting polybutylene-resin mask" which videophony users would wear while making calls (*Infinite Jest* 147-8). As the market for these masks evolved, consumers "began preferring and then outright demanding videophone masks that were really quite a lot better-looking than they themselves were in person" (148). This humorous account of the evolution of videophony serves, for my purposes, to highlight a perceived cleft on the part of the videophone user between what they feel the protocols of authentication call for (in order for me to be granted assent, I must have an attractive, attentive face), and what they themselves feel willing to perform in the mundane act of answering the phone. While Wallace never explicitly denotes videophony mask-wearing as a metaphor for postmodern irony, its presence in the text serves to reveal the logic behind mask-wearing as a way to off-load the emotional labor of presenting oneself, of mitigating the risk of "being liked" by deploying ready-made memetic content that serves to perform work beyond, or perhaps despite, what the mask-wearer actually feels.

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The second instance of mask-wearing we find in Wallace's dystopian near-future occurs as a protocol for the UHID (Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed)—an organization formed "to afford the scopophobic empathic fellowship and the genesis of sturdy inner resources through shame-free and unconstrained concealment" (226). Members of UHID wear a face-concealing veil "both in solitude and before other's gaze" such that "no mortal eye will see it withdrawn" in an attempt to "be reduced to nothing but a voice among other voices, invisible, equal, no different, hidden" (534). The most prominent member of UHID within the narrative of *Infinite Jest* is Joelle van Dyne, and in a conversation with Don Gately about UHID, Gately asks whether the veil of UHID is like "people hating their faces on videophones" (534). Joelle responds that the veil is due to being "so desperate to feel some kind of control that you settle for the *appearance* of control" (535). The veil grants UHID members the power to "*appear* to other people as if you have the strength not to care how you *appear* to others." In other words, the affective-heuristic economy that evaluates mask-wearing in *Infinite Jest* also values performances that project *indifference*—the mask must be at once "likeable" but also recognizable, in its nonchalance, as being worn "indifferently."

What the prevalence of mask-wearing in the novel reveals is that the dominant language-games in Wallace's parody of the 90's do not consider the expression of emotion to be a valid move. The purpose of the deployment of ready-made memetic content is to mask feelings which are inherently unlikeable. And so, an air of indifference must be maintained to mitigate the risk of allowing any affective "leakage" to show beneath the mask, because according to these language-games, any display of

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emotion is accounted for as "sentimentality." These neuroses about what the other might perceive "under the mask" have been internalized by Wallace's characters, to the point that Hal, for instance, is brimming with them in his private reflections:

> Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. (694-695)

Hal's anxieties about being "really human" are hidden behind his blank-faced stare, his indifferent tone-of-voice. Thus, Hal's "hip empty mask" is the third instance of mask-wearing, and it borrows the same logic of "likeability" from the rubber videophony mask and the "indifference" of the UHID veil (695). What the model of the authenticating human allows us to insist upon, however, is that the deployment of the mask does not rise to the level of a conscious decision on the part of the wearer. Rather, it is the wearer's *affect-heuristics* that compel them, via the memetic transfer, to don the mask in a bid to authenticate with the other. Mask-wearing is behavior that arises from feelings that, paradoxically, have been trained to devalue the interpretive work of discerning, accounting for, and expressing one's emotions.

    The model of the authenticating human also allows us make sense of Wallace's

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account of how Hal came to wear his "hip empty mask." Wallace's account posits

something universal about human education, namely that there comes a point where "we

enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is

loneliness, excluded encagement in the self" (694). One way to account for this moment

is to consider that a sense-of-self is nothing but pure association, and to posit that once

Hal's association with his parents and home-life no longer benefits him among his peer

group, the sense-of-belonging Hal established over iterative encounters with family

members begins to feel outdated, and the memetic content he might have strung together

based off of those feelings no longer seems to position him felicitously when playing

language-games with his peers. Bereft of this sense-of-belonging, Hal's sense-of-self

(again, this roughly means position-in-the-world) perhaps feels emaciated, and this

results in loneliness. This moment of vulnerability after childhood is not a unique

phenomenon to postmodern culture. According to Charles Guignon,

> Ever since the time of Rousseau, the inner/outer dichotomy has been
>
> interpreted in terms of the distinction between the child and the adult.
>
> What is characteristic of the inner self is that it is childlike, spontaneous,
>
> in touch with its own true feelings, and capable of an intuitive
>
> understanding of what things are all about. In contrast to the child, the
>
> adult self is perceived as hardened and artificial. The adult's feelings are
>
> muffled and deformed by playing socially approved games; his or her
>
> perceptions are forced into the grids of standardized interpretations. (*On*
>
> *Being Authentic* 83)

While the authenticating human does not conceive of something like a fixed, "inner" self due to the nature of neuroplasticity, childhood may still be considered a particularly formative moment, given that this is when one's neurological "routing hubs" are initially established, forming the deep infrastructure of our associative pathways. For this reason, perhaps, the feeling of being unmoored or lonely during the transition to adulthood may be particularly acute. Nonetheless, Wallace believes that this moment culminates in a desire to be "admired and accepted and included," or what he calls "peer-*hunger*" (*IJ* 694). Given how acute this peer-hunger becomes, "we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young." And in this state, Wallace argues, "the U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to." It is from the "U.S. arts," then, that Hal is "shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté." Wallace is speaking, here, of *sedimentation*, of the way felicitous performances of memetic content get enfolded into our sense-of-self iteratively over time.

As for how the U.S. arts come to be saturated with "jaded irony," Wallace writes that "most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people" (*IJ* 694). We find, in "E Unibus Pluram," a hint of who he might mean by these "sophisticated older people." In a survey of what *The New York Times* has to say about television in 1990, he refers to "a breathless article on how lots of Ivy League graduates are now flying straight from school to New York and Los Angeles to become television writers and are clearing well over $200,000 to start and enjoying rapid advancement to

harried clip-boarded production status" ("E Unibus" 156). Assuming, then, that the

graduate programs at Ivy League schools in the 80's and 90's were steeped in high

postmodern/post-structuralist theory, Wallace seems to posit a kind of "trickle-down"

postmodern irony whereby French theory taught by humanities professors is internalized

by graduate students who then write the television shows that young adults internalize in

turn. Perhaps this explains why he makes statements like these in the McCaffery

interview accompanying "E Unibus Plurum":

> However misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the
>
> postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all
>
> authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant
>
> for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to
>
> diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this
>
> stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it
>
> we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possible
>
> ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment. (147-148)

While it lies outside the scope of my project to evaluate Wallace's account of how

postmodern irony comes to permeate culture, this account is of interest for my purposes

because of the kind of subject it assumes. This is no longer a subject that becomes

interpellated exclusively by ideological state apparata or the technologies of discipline

exercised in schools or prisons—this is a subject whose body (figured here as a mask-

wearing face) is sculpted by power as it flows in from the mundane act of watching

television, helping to further what Foucault terms the biopolitical agenda of power,

which is to cover "the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population" (*"Society Must be Defended"* 243).

Having identified Hal as particularly susceptible, due to "peer-hunger," to the television conditioning Wallace figures as a kind of disease vector for instilling a toxic posture of irony, I want to consider, using the rhetoric and logic of the authenticating human, *how* it is that irony could be considered so toxic. Before going into the mechanics of irony in this way, however, it's important to consider the particular brand of American irony Wallace rails against as arising out of a historical moment and tied to a specific type of identity: the post-WWII hipster. In his monograph *Cool Characters*, Lee Konstantinou narrates the emergence of this figure by first drawing attention to Norman Mailer's troublingly racialized, 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," wherein Mailer defines the hipster as

> the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war … then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperative of the self. ("White Negro")

For Mailer, "it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries," and as such Mailer's tracing of the provenance of the American hipster falls in line with a tradition of appropriating and then patronizing African-American culture. Regardless, Konstantinou sees this post-war existentialism blending with the New Critical extolling

of irony as a strategy to acknowledge "the pressures of context" on poetic meaning to form a new kind of identity available to the white liberal intellectual, one which "fused a specific social ontology (society as the arena of symbolic struggle), a hermeneutic strategy (close reading), and a normative attitude (irony)" (53-54). It seems natural, then, for close reading and a penchant for irony to evolve into what Paul Ricoeur comes to term the "hermeneutic of suspicion" in his 1970 volume *Freud and Philosophy* (33). My point in this brief account of the hipster is to suggest that postmodern irony is part and parcel of a larger network of associations which come to form the protocols of authentication for belonging to a sense-of-community made most available to white male intellectuals. For Hal, in other words, to establish a sense-of-belonging among his peers, he must *authenticate* by felicitously deploying ironic performances.

As for the *mechanics* of irony, we can see it functioning as the antithesis of something like sincerity. If for the authenticating human sincerity is a growth agent for more intensely forming the associations that comprise a sense-of-self (I am *here*), *irony* is our affect-heuristics' strategic way of deploying memetic content so as to flag it as no longer fit for use, to *dis*-associate the meme from a sense-of-self (I am *not here*). To ironically cite a meme is to at once claim that *(a)* there exists a community of people who actively cite the meme in question in order to authenticate, and *(b)* I myself (the performer) *transcend* this community. By transcend, I mean to say that the performer understands "all too well" what it takes to authenticate within a particular community, while at the same time claiming that precisely because of this thorough understanding, the speaker's sense-of-belonging is found elsewhere, outside and beyond the community

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in question. The effect of felicitous ironic citation, then, is the enfolding of negative associations regarding both the meme and any communities which actively cite it. For this reason, irony is chiefly a tool of detachment, it is the opposite of a growth agent—it is the assertion of boundary. In this light, then, it is reductive to claim that sincerity is "good" and irony is "bad," as reductive as saying that, when tending a garden, fertilizing is good and de-weeding is bad.

According to Wallace, however, when irony becomes so deeply embedded within the protocols for authenticating within Western communities that it must be deployed when speaking about virtually anything, it has a bevy of debilitating effects. When always detaching oneself from all roots, when always positioning oneself as transcending all communities, one develops what Wallace calls "the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui" (*IJ* 694). When a hipster's affect-heuristics compel them to inflect their memetic content with ennui, the purpose is to move the speaker toward occupying the position of "the sophisticated person." When irony-cum-ennui becomes embedded within the protocols for authentication, it gives rise to "that queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive." Over time, these performances of world-weariness become internalized, and give rise to "one of the really American things about Hal": *anhedonia* (693). For Wallace, "standard U.S. anhedonia" is a low-grade depression, a "spiritual torpor in which one loses the ability to feel pleasure or attachment to things formerly important," a "radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" in which "everything becomes an outline of the thing.

Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world" (692-3). As we

account for what happened to Hal in order to trace the etiology of his "really American"

ailment, we can say that chief among his symptoms is anhedonia, and it results from an

overreliance upon the "hip empty mask"[30]—a mask that is "likeable" because it

authenticates as sophisticated and indifferent, and dangerous when adopted as a default

posture due to the mechanics of irony, as it precludes the reification of "hereness," and

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[30] Interestingly, a confluence of the themes of mask-wearing, television, and
psychological well-being can be found in Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the
System*. The protagonist of the novel, Lenore Beadsman, is the daughter of a wealthy
baby food tycoon, and her sister Clarice is married and has two young children. As a
family self-help exercise, Clarice has her family stand in front of a large television which
projects an image of a theater audience (in this exercise, the normal configuration of
television and audience is reversed). She then passes out masks to each member of the
family—masks which "were very good and very lifelike," each one made to resemble
the face of the family member who wears it (166). After the family dons these masks,
Clarice then passes out a second set of masks, masks "that had just generic features and
the words FAMILY-MEMBER stamped in white across the forehead," and which the
family also donned (on-top of the lifelike masks) (167). Clarice's family members step
forward and recite memorized speeches as though speaking to the "audience" on TV,
explaining that while identifying chiefly as a family member granted them each a feeling
of security and belonging, when anything threatened the stability of the family, "it also
made the people in the family not as much people anymore, and then they were alone
and invisible and unhappy" (167-8). After another round of mask-wearing involving
each family member depending upon an external, physical object or pursuit for their
identity formation which leaves them equally unhappy and disoriented, Clarice's family
consulted with "an outside party whose whole life was directed toward helping family-
members grow and see themselves clearly both as selves and members, and so come to a
fuller and happier sense of self" (172). This outside party facilitated a process in which
family members "talked with one another, and aired the things they weren't comfortable
with as people right then." At this point in the exercise, the family members remove their
masks and ritualistically (with dancing) declare their therapy to have been successful.
Prefigured, then, in *The Broom of the System* is this matrix where mask-wearing is
indicative of an atrophied sense of self, and where the practice of a language-game
(family therapy) that privileges sincere speech is purportedly capable of treating the
ailment.

may in fact erode the associative grist of a sense-of-self.

In his article "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony," Allard den Dulk provides further insight into why Wallace finds irony so dangerous. In correspondence with Dulk, Wallace writes that "most of the problems of what might be called 'the tyranny of irony' in today's West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life" (325). For Kierkegaard, it is not so much any particular deployment of ironic language that constitutes unhealthy irony. It is rather the adoption of irony as an attitude toward existence that results in what he refers to as an "aesthete," or someone who has "the courage to doubt everything," to "fight against everything," but is lacking "the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything," including a sense of self (332). When an aesthete's "life-project founders, this is seen not as evidence that he has made an unwise choice of life-projects but as evidence that no life can be meaningful[.] Therefore, the ironist frequently becomes nothing." The result of this long-term adoption of irony as an attitude toward existence is what Kierdegaard refers to as *boredom*. "Boredom in the Kierkegaardian sense is the result of the negative freedom of the aesthete's irony: it follows from the conclusion that there is nothing left in the world with which the aesthete is connected, which is of value to him. The term boredom is used to describe the individual's basic, languid state of apathy, as well as the frenetic attempts that he might undertake, 'out of boredom,' to distract himself from that boredom" (335). The path out of the trap of existential irony is what Kierkegaard refers to as a "leap," or "a commitment to the project of the self: by freely choosing to take on that situation as his

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own and from there give shape to himself, 'he can just as well be said to produce himself'—it becomes his 'task.' The self is not some pre-existing 'core' that the individual always already has, and that unifies his existence; instead, the individual's existence is fragmented and has to be *made* whole—that is what it means to become a self" (339). As I will be showing shortly, Hal's predominantly ironic posture very much undermines his ability to ascribe meaning to any conceivable life project, and the Kierkegaardian "boredom" that results compounds this inability by driving Hal to engage in paralyzing self-medication.

In my attempt to trace what happens to Hal in order to make sense of the opening scene of *Infinite Jest*, I have so far explored Wallace's use of the metaphor of mask-wearing for representing his characters' adoption of the default posture of irony in language-games, and have attempted to show that this mask-wearing leads, according to the logic of the text, to a de-privileging of the expression of emotion (figuring it as "sentimentality") and a "hollowing out," or a brand of depression Wallace refers to as anhedonia. If Hal's anhedonia is a symptom that arises from mask-wearing, I now turn to *paralysis* as a symptom which is most frequently associated in the novel with addiction. *Infinite Jest* is rife with representations of addiction, ranging from Hal's mostly harmless addiction to marijuana, to Joelle's near-fatal addiction to free-base cocaine. Hal and the other drug users at the tennis academy he attends see it as a way to "help manage the intra-psychic storms" of their high-stress, competitive environment (53). The theory behind this stress-management is that it is beneficial to "basically short out the whole motherboard and blow out all the circuits and slowly recover and be

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almost neurologically reborn." Hal's justification of drug use as stress management is but one variation on the reasons explicitly given by characters in novel, all of which tend to fall into the categories of "release or relief or fun" (22).

Despite the reasons articulated by a given character, however, drug use is largely figured in the text as a self-reinforcing habit that requires and promotes secrecy. Hal, for instance, "likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high" (49). This secrecy, then, functions on two levels. Most trivially, there is secrecy in the sense that no one is around to witness the use of the drug or its aftermath. Ken Erdedy, another marijuana addict in the novel, has "long ago forbidden himself to smoke dope around anyone else," and in fact "he couldn't even be around anyone else if he'd smoked marijuana that same day, it made him so self-conscious" (21). Aside from secrecy in the form of physical isolation, however, there is a second and more interesting secrecy. Hal doesn't know "why he likes [the secrecy] so much" (51), and Erdedy "didn't even know what [the marijuana's] draw was anymore" (21). In other words, while a character will often articulate a reason for initially using a drug, the character eventually loses track of the reason why they continue to use it—the reason why they are compelled to use the drug, in other words, has become a secret. While this may seem like a mundane observation about how drug users often become psychologically dependent on their drug of choice, Wallace's exploration of the *mechanism* of this dependency reveals a particular kind of subject I find most readily described by the authenticating human.

Much of the novel's explicit dealing with the mechanism of dependency takes

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place in the context of the Ennet halfway recovery house managed by Don Gately, a recovering opioid addict who used to fund his addiction via burglary. Gately has developed, during his time as a burglar, the ability to "turn his attention on and off like a light" (273). In the course of his recovery at the Ennet halfway house, it was brought to Gately's attention that "his special burglar's selective attention … could be dangerous because how can you be sure it's you doing the screening and not The Spider" (274). "The Spider" here refers precisely to the kind of psychological dependence one develops while addicted to a substance. In terms of the authenticating human, The Spider is a subset of affect-heuristics trained during iterative drug use to value any performances that will eventually result in further use of the drug. At the halfway house, Gately is made wary of the use of his selective attention because there is no consciously identifiable cleft between "you" and "The Spider." Because our affects are things that "happen to us" and are therefore layered beneath the level of consciousness, and because we inevitably rely on these affects to make decisions in the world (our affects are agentive), then the degree to which The Spider makes certain phenomena available to Gately's "attention" while filtering out others is entirely unknown to him. The Spider is largely hidden, in other words, beneath a veil of secrecy, and for this reason the addict finds it difficult to articulate, even to themselves, why they continue to use the drug. Given this inability to self-authenticate when it comes to explaining their behavior, the path of least resistance for the addict is to hide the behavior, to shield themselves from the emotional labor of trying to authenticate with the other. In this way, addiction in *Infinite Jest* promotes secrecy, and therefore leads to isolation.

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Beyond the isolating effect of drug use in the novel, which could itself be construed as a kind of paralysis (you can't treat what you can't articulate to yourself or to others), drug use is portrayed by Wallace as leading to paralyzing thought-patterns. The narrator refers to Hal's habit as leading to "marijuana thinking," which is the tendency to get lost "in a paralytic thought-helix" (335). This paralyzing effect is not limited to the use of marijuana. In one of the many Gately-centered scenes where the narrator muses on the nature of addiction, it is noted that "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. That the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*" (203). With recourse to the authenticating human, we might sketch out the mechanics of how drug use might result in paralytic thinking.

As I argue in my second chapter, "the memetic transfer" is the economic scene in which our affect-heuristics solicit and evaluate our pure associative responses to stimuli in order to calculate, via "affective mathematics," our best move in the language-game(s) in play. The frequency with which we use memetic content in our performances, then, depends on the felicity of these moves, i.e. whether they allow us to successfully occupy desired positions in language-games. We might make a few assumptions, then, about the "language-game" of drug use in *Infinite Jest*. The first is that, due to the isolating effects of the behavior, it is an inward-facing game played by oneself. The implication here is that whatever "moves" actually being performed or registered by the drug user, beyond the physical imbibing of the drug, are largely taking place inside the skull. The second assumption we can make is that, in idiosyncratic ways depending on

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the drug, there are neurochemical effects which warp and skew the user's affect-heuristics—for Erdedy, marijuana "made his thoughts jut out crazily in jagged directions" (22). In accordance with the model of the authenticating human, we are always registering and enfolding our experiences such that when we feel, we become. Therefore, when drugs make us feel differently, *we become differently*. The last assumption we can make about the language-game of drug use in the novel is that the felicity of any performance while playing the game depends on whether it moves one toward occupying the position of "the blissful person" or "the person who forgets." Given that the bulk of this work in moving toward these positions is accomplished via the drug-induced release of serotonin, dopamine, etc., then the "thoughts jutting out in crazy directions," figured here as moves in a language-game played by oneself, come to be evaluated as more or less equally felicitous by the user's affect-heuristics, independent of the actual memetic content of the thought. The result is a kind of evaluative flattening of thought-moves, such that any one thought may be as felicitous as the rest. Based on these assumptions, the opportunity to reify a sense-of-self via the economic scene of memetic trial and error governed by our affect-heuristics is hijacked by drug use in the novel, a hijacking that may in fact work toward the opposite of reification, toward the dispersal of a sense-of-self, potentially resulting in long-term paralysis.[31]

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[31] Hal's best friend Michael Pemulis describes the way marijuana will "paralyze you over time," recounting as evidence "once-promising stand-up guys spending their lives in front of the TP [teleputer, or the equivalent of Netflix], eating Nutter Butters and whacking off into an old sock" (1064).

One of the core anxieties of *Infinite Jest*, then, is the degree to which our mundane experiences, while under the long-term influence of certain drugs, lead toward the attenuation or even dispersal of a sense-of-self, and this anxiety is carried over by Wallace into his consideration of the effects of media consumption. If television is figured in the novel as a kind of disease vector for infecting its viewers with toxic, ironic postures, it is also figured as a paralytic *in the same way* as drug use. The most extreme example of TV-as-paralytic is "The Entertainment," which refers to the last film created by the auteur James Incandenza (Hal's father) before he committed suicide. The film, titled "Infinite Jest," is so mesmerizing, so potent in its capacity to entertain that all who view it succumb to a fatal paralysis, entirely unable to stop watching.

The existence of this deadly film is the impetus behind the high-level spy interactions between the aforementioned Hugh Steeply and Remy Marathe. These two spies serve as a conduit of information about the nature and whereabouts of the Entertainment, and during one of their secret rendezvous, Steeply offers as an "analogy with the Entertainment" an anecdote about an experimental biomedical research project wherein electrodes were implanted in the brain which allowed, with the press of a button, for electrical current to stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain. The resulting sensation was the "neural distillate of, say, orgasm, religious enlightenment, ecstatic drugs, shiatsu, a crackling fire on a winter night—the sum of all possible pleasures refined into pure current and deliverable at the flip of a hand-held lever" (473-4). When the experiment was performed on rats, "the rat would press the lever to stimulate his [electrode] over and over, thousands of times an hour […], ignoring food and female rats

in heat, […] stopping only when the rat finally died of dehydration or simple fatigue"

(471). When word of the electrode implant experiment got out, there were "human

volunteers lining up literally around the block" who were mostly "young" and "able-

bodied" (472). Steeply's analogy of The Entertainment as a set of electrodes implanted

in the brain assumes a particular kind of subject, one whose decision-making is

ultimately driven by feelings that happen to them, and in the broader scope of the novel,

these feelings are shaped by the kinds of interactions they have, by the drugs they take,

by the television they watch.

The Entertainment is an extreme manifestation of the anxieties surrounding

media consumption articulated by Wallace in "E Unibus Plurum," and as I argued

earlier, I find it unlikely that Hal was ever exposed to the film. An account of the effects

of Hal's own media consumption, however, is provided by the wraith of his father James

who appears to Gately in one of his fever dreams.[32] James speaks of *figurants*, which are

the "human furniture" in the background of shows like *Cheers*, in that they are

"nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar's crowd, concessions to realism,

always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent

conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without

sound" (834). The wraith of James recounts how, toward the end of his life, he saw "his

own personal youngest offspring [Hal], a son, the one most like him, the one most

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[32] The appearance of the wraith of Hal's father is, as Marshall Boswell notes, one of the
many "intricate allusions" to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*Understanding* 165). According to
the logic of this relationship between *Infinite Jest* and *Hamlet*, Hal is Prince Hamlet and
James is King Hamlet.

marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant," and that "no horror on earth or

elsewhere could equal watching your own offspring open his mouth and have nothing

come out" (837).[33] James' own accounting for his son's transformation into a *figurant*

involves what he calls "the fifth wall." James' own father "would sit, cough, open that

bloody issue of the *Tuscon Citizen*, and […] turn that newspaper into the room's fifth

wall" (31). He sees the same behavior in his son Hal, who has "lived his whole ruddy

bloody cruddy life in five-walled rooms," referring to the giant swaths of time Hal

spends either reading books, watching TV, or using the computer (31). In the dystopic

world that Hal inhabits, much like in ours, being a member of the middle-class more or

less guarantees access to interfaces (like computers) that allow Hal to erect this fifth

wall, an act that has the paradoxical effect of at once closing oneself off to others and

opening oneself up to seemingly limitless knowledge of the world. Hal's head is

brimming with things to say, and yet he is entirely unequipped to establish a position

from which to speak them.

There is a cruel, cyclical nature to Hal's insatiable appetite for

information/entertainment consumption. From an early age, Hal believes that "life

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[33] This fear on James' part of his son becoming mute manifests elsewhere in the text. In a flashback near the beginning of the book, we encounter a scene in which James, who is still alive at this point, is impersonating a therapist in order to have a conversation with Hal. Throughout their conversation, Hal wonders whether his father is "still having this hallucination I never speak," and the scene ends with the father "praying for just one conversation, amateur or no, that does not end … like all the others: you staring, me swallowing" (31). Later, well after his father had died, Hal recounts that "Himself, for two years before his death, had had this delusion of silence when I spoke: I believed I was speaking and he believed I was not speaking" (899).

depended on seeming gifted or precocious," and would thus become "maniacally obsessive" about "commit[ing] to memory entire dictionaries" so that he could attend spelling-bees which proved for Hal "a public turkey-shoot and approval-fest" (999). Unfortunately for Hal, the more he dedicates himself to consuming information and thinking through problems behind the fifth wall, the less able he finds himself to engage with the very living, breathing interlocutors from which he is seeking approval. The apex of this trajectory of isolation occurs toward the end of the novel, where Hal is lying on the floor of his room, paralyzed by depression. He imagines "a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but the lightly breaded chicken fillets [he] was going to consume over the next sixty years," as well as "another, dimmer room, filled with the rising mass of the excrement [he'd] produce, the room's double-locked steel door gradually bowing outward with the mounting pressure" (897). Hal seems unable to ascribe value to any life-projects beyond an accumulation of meat and excrement:

> it seemed like a kind of black miracle to [Hal] that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic. We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly… A flight-from in the form of plunging-into. Flight from exactly what? These rooms blandly filled with excrement and meat? To what purpose? (900).

This inability to ascribe value to things extends beyond life-projects, affecting Hal's mundane interactions with other people as well. When Michael Pemulis, Hal's closest friend, finds him lying on the floor, Pemulis asks him what's up, and Hal "could see [his] asking [Pemulis] where he'd been all week leading to so many different possible responses and further questions that the prospect was almost overwhelming, so enervating [Hal] could barely get out that [he]'d just been lying here on the floor" (907). The resulting relationship between Hal and Pemulis (his closest friend) is such that the sum of Pemulis' knowledge of Hal's biggest, most recent trauma (the suicide of his father) "could be inscribed with a blunt crayon along the rim of a shot glass" (1065). Hal's ailment, in other words, is at once a head brimming with things to say, pressurized by an excess of information; and a sense-of-self so atrophied from a lack of human connection that he has no purchase, no "hereness," no position from which to communicate.

Tying all of this together in terms of "what happens to Hal," Hal finds himself at an early age in the grip of peer-hunger. He then turns to the "U.S. arts" in order to learn how to fit in, and is consequently exposed, behind "the fifth wall," to a high volume of experiences which train his affect-heuristics to privilege the language-game position of "the sophisticated, world-weary person." In his bids to authenticate in that position, he routinely wears a jaded mask of hip ennui, and through iterative performances while wearing that mask, he internalizes the postmodern aversion to sentimentality. When faced with the trauma of his father's suicide and the stress of his highly competitive educational environment, this aversion to sentimentality precludes him from soliciting

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and articulating his feelings, so instead he deals with his trauma and stress by self-medicating with drugs that further compound his inability to express himself by inducing paralytic thought patterns. Over time and under these conditions, Hal's sense-of-self atrophies to the point that he is no longer able to readily position himself in mundane language-games, and without that reference point, his affect-heuristics are unable to soberly calculate his next best move in everyday conversation.

As for Wallace's proposed treatment for this ailment, we must turn to the members of AA in the novel, for whom sincerity is the precondition for recovery. In order to participate in the program, one must be willing to perform a "Commitment speech" in which the speaker is encouraged to tell the story of their addiction. As Gately recounts,

> it can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle. (369)[34]

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[34] This idea of the "maximally unironic" also appears in the short story "Octet," in which the narrator declares that his metafictional ploy to ask the reader whether the short story is working for her can only be successful if the author is "100% honest. Meaning not just

Conversely, the AA program is, as Gately describes it, a "goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons" (350). Indeed, there is a sheen of mysticism surrounding the functioning of the AA program—the addicts who have experienced recovery through the program describe it as "almost magic," and are in fact are encouraged not to attempt to make sense of it, to "check your head at the door" of the halfway recovery house (271, 374).

How can one be expected to be sincere when reciting eye-roll inducing corny slogans? The answer, for Gately, is that the slogans become meaningful over time, having been ascribed value within the context of the meetings, and more significantly, within the context of one's own recovery. For Gately, "the vapider the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers" (446). Ostensibly, while playing the language-game of AA, a game which feels foreign and corny initially, one is engaging in the construction of a sense-of-self that isn't so fully dependent on the object of one's addiction. The idea is that, upon entering the program, the participant's dominant sense-of-self is "substance user," such that when ascribing value to the best moves in a language-game, the participant's affect-heuristics incentivize language-game moves that guarantee their next fix. After the AA process has begun to work its magic, however, a *new* reference point is established, a new cluster of memetic content has become associated with the self over time and in moments of authentication. And it is only under

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sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked—more like unarmed. Defenseless" (*Brief Interviews* 154).

the auspices of this new sense-of-self that the cheesy clichés of AA acquire enough

personal meaning to become recited sincerely. As Gately notes, "You're encouraged to

keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it, just like if you ask somebody with

serious sober time how long you'll have to keep schlepping to all these goddamn

meetings he'll smile that infuriating smile and tell you just until you start to want to go

to all these goddamn meetings" (369).[35]

Perhaps the most fleshed-out example of the AA program's success within the

novel is in the case of Joelle Van Dyne, a freebase cocaine user who, up until her

participation in the program, would attempt to quit by "throw[ing] away the pipe and

shak[ing] [her] fist at the sky and say[ing] *As God is my fucking witness NEVER AGAIN,*

as of this minute right here I QUIT FOR ALL TIME" (859). Once provided the forced

abstinence of the program and given weekly opportunities to articulate her story,

however, she begins to ascribe personal meaning to the once trite phrase "One Day at a

Time," realizing that rather than attempting to quit for all time, all she needs to do is

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[35] This "fake it until you make it" road to sincerity appears elsewhere in Wallace's work.
Consider, for instance, the short story "Octet" in which a man struggles with feelings of
hatred toward his father-in-law—feelings which make the man feel horribly guilty, given
that his father-in-law is dying of cancer. The man feels obligated to show up on a regular
basis at the father-in-law's bedside with his wife in order to show support, yet each visit
leaves the man feeling even more hatred/guilt. Upon confessing these feelings to his
closest friend, the man's friend's advice is "to make it his secret penance and gift to the
[father-in-law] to just hang in there and silently to suffer the feelings of loathing…, but
not to stop accompanying his wife…, in other words for [the man] simply to reduce
himself to bare physical actions and processes, to get off his heart's back and stop
worrying about his makeup and simply Show Up" (*Brief Interviews* 142). By the time
the father-in-law passes away, the man "weeps longer and louder than anyone," and his
grief is "extreme and sincere" (143).

resist for one day—or for what she articulates in her own terms as "one endless day" (860). I would like to suggest, then, that there are two ways in which *time* works in relation to sincerity to (re)establish a subject's sense-of-self. The first and most mundane of these is the way time provides iterative opportunities to articulate oneself. Not only does each iteration further ensconce a purely associative sense-of-self for efficient solicitation and retrieval by our affect-heuristics, but each iteration is also building upon and inflecting the enfolding of previous iterations, such that the subject is provided space-over-time to engage in the trial-and-error required to subject those articulations to the vetting power of self- and other-authentication.

Further emphasizing the role time plays in providing the space for the effective fashioning of a sense-of-self is a single scene in which Hal confesses to his brother Mario that he smokes marijuana, and that he's terrified of his mother finding out because "it'd kill the Moms, Mario. It'd be a terrible kertwang on the Moms. Not so much the [marijuana]. The secrecy of it. That I hid it from her" (784). Hal is also frightened because it has been announced that there will be drug screening before the next match, and so he has to spend the next 30 days not smoking the marijuana he's come to depend on. He says, "I feel a hole. It's going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole" (785). He asks his brother, "So what do you think I should do?" (785). Mario's telling response is, "I think you just did it. What you should do. I think you just did" (785). What Hal "just did" was play a language-game (confession) that privileges sincerity. Unfortunately, not enough time-as-space was afforded to Hal to fashion a viable sense-of-self—this scene is the only instance in the novel of Hal being sincere.

For the second and perhaps more interesting relation between time and sincerity, I will turn to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who in *Oneself as Another*, speaks of "attestation" as "the capacity to designate oneself" as the agent of an action (94). For Ricoeur, what the self has at its disposal via the power of attestation is the ability to temporally configure past experiences via the mechanism of *narrative emplotment*. Having done so, we are able to "stabilize the real beginnings formed by the initiatives […] we take," and among those beginnings narrated in the past tense, "we find projects, expectations, and anticipations" toward which we find ourselves oriented (162-163). For Joelle, her ability to attest to day-long successes with abstinence, and to do so with what Ricoeur refers to as veracity (a concept he employs in a way mostly analogous to what I mean by sincerity), provides her the means to imagine "one endless day" filled with meaningful life-projects. In other words, when the AA participant is provided the space and language-game pressures to engage in sincere self-expression, particularly in the form of a self-narrative, the associations enfolded back into the participant's affect-heuristics, thanks to the power of emplotment, have the effect of devaluing certain behavioral "moves" by associating them with a past sense-of-self, conversely incentivizing those moves that position them more firmly in the direction of a sense-of-self now tantalizingly existing in an imagined future.

As a final note about the efficacy of language-games that privilege sincerity for the establishment of a sense-of-self, I should draw attention to the power of being granted assent by the witnesses of a participant's performance. As I argue in my second chapter, a sense-of-self is but one pole of a greater dialectic of becoming, with the other

pole being a sense-of-community. By spending time at AA recovery meetings, the participant establishes a network of associations about "those who recover," associations which must be felicitously cited by the participant in order for them to authenticate. These associations, as they exist idiosyncratically in a given subject's mind, form what I mean by a sense-of-community. According to Wallace, the convention for audience members upon hearing a performer speak is to respond by saying "Good to hear you" (362). This speech-act constitutes a granting-of-assent. When registered by a performer, *particularly by a performer who registered their own speech as sincere*, the effect is a suturing of the participant's newly formed sense-of-self onto that sense-of-community, resulting in a sense-of-belonging. In this way, then, we can say the way in which an "addict" *becomes* "in recovery" is via this dialectic, where a sense-of-belonging emerges in the interplay between a sense-of-self and a sense-of-community—an interplay itself mediated by the affective phenomena of self- and other-authentication.

I have done my best, via the reading above, to attempt to convey how sincerity might have curative value at the turn of the millennium. There is, however, some critical distance warranted in considering Wallace's prescription to "be sincere," and I will now explore the limitations of this prescription by considering the kind of "hero" his fiction implicitly engenders. This hero is always male, and always a WASP. This hero has transformed himself, through a continuing practice of ruthless self-interrogation and disclosure, into a "quietly iron-spined [person] who [is] internally strong enough not to let any kind of abuse or humiliation get to them," whose sense-of-self, however mutable or unknowable, is paradoxically (because of this recurring practice of self-examination)

unassailable (*Brief Interviews* 132).[36] For the self-knowing hero, however, there is a cost

paid in terms of human connection. In the short story "Octet," the narrator speaks of

"some nameless but inescapable 'price' that all human beings are faced with having to

pay at some point if they ever want truly 'to be with' another person instead of just using

that person somehow" (*Brief Interviews* 155). While Wallace deems this price

"nameless," he goes on to describe it as "giving up something (either a thing or a person

or a precious long-held 'feeling' or some certain idea of yourself and your own

virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of

death." For Wallace, in other words, the unassailable self is also a lonely self, for in its

ceaseless self-regard, it also becomes (perhaps unwittingly) a zealous guardian,

unwilling to contaminate itself through challenging interaction with the other.

    I believe Wallace's fear of self-contamination and his concerns about the

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[36] Perhaps the most vivid example of this hero in Wallace's fiction is "[t]his one
particular boy" in *The Pale King* who has made it his life's goal to "press his lips to
every last micrometer of his own individual body," despite there being areas of his body
with "impossible unavailability to his own lip" (403, 408). Over the course of several
years of this daily practice, the boy is transformed. He develops "along unusual physical
lines" with his lips "markedly large and protrusive," but physical transformations aside,
his teachers at school come to describe him as a "calm," "unusually poised," and "self-
containing" child who remains, socially speaking, on the margin (402-3). It seems in
keeping with Wallace that this conceit of self-kissing might act as a poignant (yet subtly
ridiculing) metaphor for the act of self-interrogation. While this boy's identity is never
revealed, I believe Wallace may have intended for this boy and the tax examiner Shane
Drinion to be the same character. Drinion is "a very odd bird" who "tends to sit very
quiet and self-contained" while "his mouth hangs slightly open" (450-452). His "posture
is very good without being stiff or rigid" and he "looks like a man whose back and neck
never hurt" (454). Problematizing my theory that the self-kissing boy and Drinion are
one and the same, however, is the fact that Drinion claims to have "spent much of his
childhood in an orphanage," whereas the boy spends his childhood with his father (451).

postmodern condition to be cut from the same cloth—both are manifestations of an anxiety about the dispersal of the self, the hijacking of one's language (and therefore one's agency) by the voice of the other. I also believe that Wallace is not alone in having these anxieties, and that his readership (which also skews male and WASP) identifies deeply with these fears. As I have already argued, I believe these anxieties to have an origin similar to those experienced by the same Early Modern British subjects who first used the term *sincere* to refer to the quality of a human being (and not just a commodity). Just as the Reformation undermined a great center of cultural authority by tearing down the institution of the Catholic church in England, so too have the wiles of the Western neoliberal free-market encroached upon the authority of virtually every institution. What follows in the wake of such wholesale undermining of authority is *a crisis of authentication*—the protocols of authentication must be renegotiated. We must develop more equitable, decentralized ways of establishing authority. And those who feel unmoored by this decentering begin to fetishize a world in which selves are on the inside what they claim to be on the outside. During a crisis of authentication, *sincerity* becomes a sought-after quality, not just because of the reassurance it offers that not every human interaction is about people using each other, but because if it is indeed possible to more faithfully disclose one's innermost thoughts and feelings, then a tantalizing possibility presents itself: the possibility of giving a true account of oneself and then having that account be fully assented to by the other. This, I believe, is what Wallace may have ultimately been after in his fiction: to say something true about himself (or people like him), and in so doing, to truly be liked.

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I find Wallace compelling in his suggestion that massive doses of entertainment ingested behind the fifth wall engorges one's warehouse of citable memes, making it dangerously easy to offload the risk of self-expression by wearing masks which have been already vetted by the mega-gaze of TV viewership. Without a healthy dose of the feeling of felicitous self-expression, it may be that one's sense-of-self can become emaciated, making it difficult to locate oneself, and therefore difficult to soberly assign values to possible moves in the language games in play. Where I depart from Wallace, however, is in his suggestion that the antidote to this potential ailment is to become the self-contained hero who must vigilantly attend to the boundaries of the self, who must count any significant influence emanating from the other as a kind of cost, a kind of death. Such influence from without is an inescapable feature of belonging in community—it happens in the most mundane adherences to the communal protocols of authentication: I attempt to make conversation; you politely listen or appear bored; I enfold your response in the form of pure association. When you speak, I become. This does not always have to be counted as a cost. In my estimation, when those possessed of the kind of hegemonically distributed and deeply sedimented privilege that belongs to white men like myself *do* count outside influence as a cost, what we may ultimately be defending is not a healthy sense-of-self but precisely the kind of subject who is incapable of empathizing, and therefore prone to suppressing information about the suffering of those around us. If we're not careful, in other words, establishing sincerity as the only road out of world-weary cynicism may only serve to perpetuate Western conditions of production that racialize, gender, and oppress the majority of the world.

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Finally, for those who (by virtue of their subject-position in the Western neoliberal matrix) are not able to authenticate as male or even WASP the way people like me can do so effortlessly, there is an error in the calculus that assumes they too experience(d) postmodern culture as a crisis of authentication. For them (the majority of human beings), the road to becoming a more "healthy" human being may not be paved with felicitous moments of self-expression. Under the auspices of hegemonic Western culture, they may be all too aware of their location in the dominant language-games in play, and may even find their attempts at sincerity to be met with violence, not assent. For this reason, I feel it is important that, when speaking of the "literary generation" of Wallace and his peers, we not foreground Wallace's work by referring to this literary movement as "New Sincerity." By speaking instead of the kind of affective subject I have schematized in my second chapter, we make room not only for Wallace's prescription of sincerity for the resuscitation of a sense-of-self, but also for Smith's prescription of connectedness. In my subsequent chapter, I will be exploring, through her fiction, how a posture of openness toward the influence of the other, one that doesn't count such influence as a cost, might lead to a sense of belonging.

CHAPTER IV

"ONLY CONNECT": THE PASSION IN THE PROSE OF ZADIE SMITH

Something about the fiction of Zadie Smith resists classification. Many critics, like

Maeve Tynan, claim for instance that "Smith's writing concerns itself with themes such

as ethnic (dis)orientation, identity politics, and the latter-day consequences of

colonialism, thus firmly locating her within a postcolonial paradigm" (73). Having

"firmly located" Smith's work, however, when trying to read *On Beauty* as a

postcolonial rewriting of E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, Tynan finds that unlike more

"politically or ethically minded" rewritings such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

which is a feminist and postcolonial re-writing of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *On

Beauty* reads more like "a peaceful negotiation of the source text rather than a hostile

takeover" (83, 77). According to Tynan, in a typical postcolonial rewriting, "gaps,

silences, and omissions are sounded out, and priorities are weighted in toward the

disadvantaged" (83). In *On Beauty*, however, Smith supplements "Forster's analysis on

class relations with an investigation of racial dynamics in contemporary society," thus

updating rather than challenging the concerns of *Howard's End* (78). Tynan concedes

that "*On Beauty* veers from the traditional format of a typical postcolonial rewriting,"

due in part to the fact that "the central appeal to Forster's writing for Smith would

appear to be his character's *lack* of a single, coherent identity" (78, 83). Indeed, while

considering the character Kiki Belsey, Tynan notes that despite "the blackness of Kiki's

body," she "has no clear core or center from which to produce a single, fixed identity,"

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and must "negotiate a plurality of centers, weaving a self from intersecting discourses of race, gender, and class" (84-85). While consonant with poststructuralist tendencies to decenter the subject, characters with no fixed identity to strategically marshal in opposition to hegemonic discourse prove awkward in postcolonial readings.

Tynan concludes her essay by claiming that for Smith, "existence is not the successful resolution of conflicting thoughts, histories, cultures, and ideologies; existence resides *in* the chaos of a constant becoming" (86). In claiming that Smith's fiction largely concerns itself with the subject that becomes, Tynan's concluding remark proves most effective, for my purposes here, in classifying Smith's work. As I argue throughout my project, Smith belongs to a generation of authors who attain degrees in the humanities at a time when postmodern/post-structuralist theory was at its height, and as these authors establish their literary careers at the turn of the millennium, they find something restrictive about the stylistics of postmodernism, particularly when it comes to the expression of emotion. In response to the postmodern aversion to sentimentality, Smith's fiction "makes room for affect" by assuming a model of subjectivity for her fictional characters that emphasizes the role *feelings* play in the establishment of a locatable position on the Western neoliberal cultural landscape. For this reason (along with others stated in my introduction), I feel that her work can be fruitfully read alongside David Foster Wallace's as dealing with contemporary anxieties surrounding the nature of self and identity. Where in my third chapter I show that Wallace's response to the problematic of the self—particularly a self subjected to a late 20th century cultural milieu saturated with irony—is to issue something like a homiletic prescription to "be

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sincere"; here I will be employing the model of the authenticating human laid out in my second chapter in order to show how Smith's own homiletic prescription in response to the problematic of the self *and* identity is to "only connect."

In Smith's acknowledgements for *On Beauty*, she writes that "it should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E.M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other." The first line of the novel echoes that of *Howard's End*, and the epigraph of *Howard's End* is "Only connect…" (xxxvii). The ellipses after the epigraph function like a hyperlink. They refer to a moment in Forster's novel shortly after the first kiss between Margaret Schlegel, the novel's chief protagonist, and Henry Wilcox:

> Only connect! That was the whole of [Margaret's] sermon. Only connect
> the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will
> be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the
> beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.
> (168)

The remainder of the following chapter will be structured according to the various valences I feel that "only connect" accumulates throughout Smith's work. As such, I am implicitly arguing that the motto comprises a significant part of Smith's own sermon, though often in ways that transcend their origin as found in Forster.

The Strategic and the Mimetic

Maurice Chittenden leverages a critique of Smith's first novel *White Teeth* in *The Sunday Times*, quoting Haider Rahman, who is purportedly the inspiration for the character Millat Iqbal in the novel: "I recognised myself in *White Teeth* but I also recognize that it is a work of fiction."[37] He goes on to say that the novel is full of "wishful thinking" in its portrayal of British race relations, because unlike the ease with which Millat is able to pass between the worlds of his radical Islamic friends and the home of the upper-middle class Chalfens, "what we're seeing in the East End of London is ghettoization… The kids lead lives with one foot in the airport. They don't want to belong. They don't want to become part of the British story." If *White Teeth* "was celebrated for its optimistic portrait of a 'post-racial' country," Smith's fourth novel *NW* is much less cheery on the subject. In her "Notes on *NW*," she writes that she was inspired by the notion of the "problem play," where "not everyone ends up happy and married, nor everyone bleeding and dead" (*Feel Free* 249). *NW* provides for London a kind of topological map of privilege, and on this map "someone is always left behind. And in the London I grew up in—as it is today—that someone is more often than not a young black man" (250).

There are several young black men in the novel she is likely referring to, one of whom being Felix Cooper, who I will return to later, but suffice it to say that he very much ends up "bleeding and dead" from a knife wound over something as trivial as his

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[37] I am indebted to Tynan's article for making me aware of Chittenden's piece.

phone and a pair of cubic zirconia earrings. Another black man left behind is Nathan Bogle. As a child, Nathan was "good with everything" in school (366). Indeed, Leah Hanwell, one of the two main protagonists (and one of the few white characters in the novel) confesses to have had a crush on him when they were children. Fast-forward to the present of the novel, and Nathan is a homeless man in his thirties doing what he can on the street to survive.

One night on Willesden Lane, Nathan encounters Natalie Blake, the other main protagonist of the novel, who went to school with Nathan and Leah. When they were schoolchildren, Natalie was referred to by her given name "Keisha," a name she has since discarded in order to be successful in her career as a lawyer. Nathan confides in Natalie, telling her "I done some bad things Keisha I'm not gonna lie. But you know that ain't really me. You know me from back in the day" (366). In this moment, Nathan appeals to his "real me," a person "most people don't know." Throughout the novel, we catch glimpses of what has happened to Nathan since he was his "real self." He had apparently been so talented at soccer that he dropped out of school and played for the Queen's Park Rangers. Unfortunately, his stint as a professional athlete didn't last long: "Bad tendons. I played on. No-one told me. Lot of things would be different, Keisha. Lot of things. That's how it is" (366). Since then he had purportedly "beat his father to a pulp," and is now running a gang of scam artists (49). Nathan gives his own account of how he ends up on the street:

> Everyone loves up a bredren when he's ten. With his lickle ball'ead. All
> cute and lively. Everyone loves a bredrin when he's ten. After that he's a

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problem. Can't stay ten always. […] There's no way to live in this country when you're grown. Not at all. They don't want you, your own people don't want you, no one wants you. Ain't the same for girls, it's a man ting. That's the truth of it right there. (376)

Nathan's analysis of his predicament is clear: had he had enough people around him who didn't see him as "a problem," perhaps someone would have advised him not to drop out of school, or helped him save his athletic career by telling him not to play with bad tendons. Had the country he lived in been able to authenticate him in any other way, he would not have ended up on the street. If *White Teeth* holds out the tantalizing possibility of reinventing one's identity in the churn of societal change, *NW* emphasizes the impossibility of occupying any viable positions in language-games when your identity as "a problem" has been overdetermined in the neoliberal West.

Whereas Nathan's character serves as a kind of extreme example of what happens when there are so few livable language-game positions for a black man to occupy, Natalie's character reveals the kind of contortions a black woman must perform in order to achieve success in the neoliberal marketplace. She recalls the "break" when she ceased to be "Keisha" and became someone else: "She became Natalie Blake in that brief pause in their long history, between sixteen and eighteen. Educated herself on the floor of Kensal Rise Library while Leah smoked weed all the live-long day" (80). Throughout the novel, moments like this make it clear that Natalie is not afforded the same latitude as white women like her best friend Leah. Along her way to becoming a barrister, Natalie meets Theodora Lewis-Lane, an Afro-Caribbean woman like herself,

who has mastered "the female barrister's unofficial uniform" (283). Theodora's advice to Natalie is not to bother with "human rights" cases like "police brutality" because "people tended to associate you with your clients" (284). Natalie is told to "avoid ghetto work" and to focus on schooling her face:

> When some floppy-haired chap from Surrey stands before these judges, all his passionate arguments read as "pure advocacy." He and the Judge recognize each other. They are understood by each other. Very likely went to the same school. But Whaley's passion, or mine, or yours, reads as 'aggression.' To the judge. This is his house and you are an interloper within it. And let me tell you, with a woman it's worse: 'Aggressive hysteria.' The first lesson is: turn yourself down. One notch. Two. (285)

The further Natalie goes down her career path, the narrower and more parameterized her identity choices become, and the more alienated she feels because of it. She begins to lose herself entirely among the various roles she inhabits:

> Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (333)

Bereft of the opportunity to both self-authenticate and belong, Natalie feels "a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people," and finds herself answering classified ads for sexual encounters (334). Even during these clandestine encounters, however, she is

unable to escape the imposition of identity: "Everyone's seeking a [black female] 18-35. Why? What do they think we can do? What is it we have that they want?" (340).

It is Natalie who articulates what I believe to be the crux of the novel:

> There is an image system at work in the world. We wait for an experience large or brutal enough to disturb it or break it open completely, but this moment never quite arrives. Maybe it comes at the very end, when everything breaks and no more images are possible. In Africa, presumably, the images that give shape and meaning to a life, and into whose dimensions a person pours themselves—the journey from son to Chief, from daughter to protector—are drawn from the natural world and the collective imagination of the people. (When Natalie Blake said "In Africa" what she meant was "at an earlier point in time.") In that circumstance there would probably be something beautiful in the alignment between the one and the many… To behave in accordance with these images bored [Natalie]. To deviate from them filled her with the old anxiety… Her very equanimity made her anxious. It didn't seem to fit into the system of images. (322)

Distilled in this instance of free indirect speech are the core concerns of the novel—concerns which are never far from Smith's writing in general. For my purposes, the "image system" referred to here maps roughly onto what I mean by "language-games" as both the positions available for certain people and the memetic content they must felicitously cite in their performances in order to occupy them. Caught up in feelings of

inauthenticity, Natalie fetishizes a moment "in the past" (which she projects onto

Africa), a moment when the positions available for people to occupy were drawn from

"the natural world and the collective imagination of the people"—a context in which one

is able to both self-authenticate and belong. Implied here is a critique of the neoliberal

West: the natural world has been apportioned, commodified, and made scarce; the

collective imagination of the people has been colonized by a system of images which has

evolved in order to perpetuate the conditions of production—conditions which make

black women work twice as hard to earn a slice of the pie, and which preclude working

class black men altogether.

What interests me most about this reading of Nathan and Natalie is the

persistence of something like a sense-of-self, what Nathan refers to as "the real me" who

was last recognized when he was ten years old, or what Natalie refers to chiefly as an

absence, as an "inauthenticity." There persists, in other words, something that *feels*

bored or *feels anxious* when playing language-games. Here, Smith touches on one of the

core problematics of the discourse surrounding identity, a problematic laid out by Stuart

Hall in his introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Hall points to a critique of the

Althusserian account of subject formation laid out by Paul Hirsch, wherein Hirsch

argues that interpellation depended "on a recognition which, in effect, the subject would

have been required to have the capacity to perform *before* it had been constituted, within

discourse, as a subject" (7). Hall notes that Foucault's archaeological works (*Madness*

and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, The Archaeology of

Knowledge) can be similarly critiqued, because while they "offer a formal account of the

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construction of subject positions within discourse," they still fail to explain "why it is

that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others," thereby

reinscribing "an antimony between subject positions and the individuals who occupy

them" (10). In the volumes comprising Foucault's later "History of Sexuality," however,

"he tacitly recognizes that it is not enough for the law to summon, discipline, produce

and regulate, but there must also be the corresponding production of a response (and thus

the capacity and apparatus of subjectivity) from the side of the subject" (12). For Hall,

the best accounting for the production of the "capacity and apparatus of subjectivity" is

found in Butler's performativity. With recourse to "that reiterative power of discourse to

produce the phenomena it regulates and constrains," we can now think less in terms of

"identity" and more in terms of the process of "identification," whereby "an effective

suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed',

but that the subject invests in the position" (6). According to Hall, this suturing "has to

be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process." Therefore, when

accounting for how a subject comes to occupy a subject-position, it is not enough to

have a "system of images." In order for identity to be effective politically, it requires that

the subject not only engage in iterative performances which "cite" previous, felicitous

performances of the identity, but to do so *while also* feeling something like agency, or a

sense that their strategic performances have been imbued with enough of a mimetic

representation of their feelings that they have a sense of ownership over the

performance.

What Smith reminds us of in *NW* is the fact that the performance of an identity can be felicitous for everyone *but* the performer. Natalie Blake can wear court drag and British drag and still feel misrecognized when hailed as a barrister. Thus we come to the first valence for Smith's prescription to "only connect": on the one hand there is the prose, the many, the system of images, the strategic moves one makes when playing language-games; on the other there is the passion, the one, the "authentic," the mimesis we engage in when trying to survey and express *how we feel*. When we "only connect" the prose and the passion, when we are able to felicitously imbue the strategic with the mimetic, when we are able, in other words, to not only authenticate with others when attempting to occupy a recognizable identity but to also self-authenticate, to *be sincere*, we can begin to establish a sense of belonging, a space where the many and the one overlap, if only ephemerally. Hall is quick to point out that the process of identification "does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change" (3). Identification is a recurring process for "the endlessly performative self" (1). Nor are there ever guaranteed to be livable positions to occupy within a system of images, a fact we are grimly reminded of via the character of Nathan Bogle. But if we are to live in fragments no longer, according to Smith, we must try to at least articulate the ways we feel over/under determined by the positions available for us to occupy.

Through the character of Felix Cooper in *NW*, Smith provides an idea of what it might look like to attempt to imbue the strategic with the mimetic, to connect the prose with the passion. Felix is the son of a Jamaican immigrant, and after having hit rock

bottom with drug problems, he has fallen in love with a woman who is helping him put his life back together. In *NW*, we are privy to the last hours of his life as he runs a few errands around London. On one of these errands, he is attempting to purchase a used car from a young middle-class white man named Tom. As they enter a pub to discuss the price of the car, Tom attempts to buy Felix a beer, but Felix confesses to Tom he is an alcoholic and must decline the offer. Tom assumes (for no discernable reason other than Felix's skin tone) that Felix is carrying drugs, and asks for some weed. Felix responds by murmuring the Serenity Prayer under his breath, and otherwise lets this micro-aggression go. Tom, who has been interrupted several times by phone calls from his girlfriend, asks about Felix's own girlfriend, and Felix proceeds to tell him that his girlfriend has "Changed my life. I tell her all the time: you're a lifesaver. And she is" (151). Tom's phone rings again, and Tom declares that "I seem to be stuck with a life-destroyer." Felix responds:

> "Nobody can do that, Tom. Only *you* have the power to do that." Felix was sincere, but saw he had provoked a sort of smirk in Tom, which in turn provoked in Felix a need to press his point home more strongly: "Listen, this girl changed my outlook totally. Globally. She sees my potential. And in the end, you just got to be the best you that you can be…" / [Tom] nodded at Felix deeply, satirically, samurai-style… He lifted his empty glass to clink against Felix's, but Felix was not impervious to irony and left his own glass where it was. (151)

In bringing attention to this scene, I want first to point out that Felix is having to navigate some difficult terrain while maintaining the position of "shrewd negotiator" in the language-game of car buying. Perhaps the path of least resistance, when offered a beer, would be to accept it. Perhaps most people would have been offended at having been read as a drug dealer. Felix handles both situations with aplomb (read: strategically), and in the end, manages to haggle Tom down significantly from the asking price. More interesting, however, is the exchange quoted above, wherein Felix feels compelled to "press his point home." In this, we are told, "Felix was sincere." In the midst of a strategic exchange, Felix imbues it with a mimetic expression of his *feelings*. By doing so, Felix is implicitly making a bid for connection—he is offering to bridge a racial/class divide, and he takes this offer seriously, as indicated by his refusal to toast to Tom's cynicism.

I also want to point out, in defense of reading Smith alongside Wallace, that we find distilled in the scene above one of Wallace's homiletic tropes: the humble hero who struggles with addiction, eschews irony, and plays language-games that privilege sincerity. Unlike Wallace, however, who rarely if ever explores the margins of the Western subject-position matrix in his fiction, Smith does not shy from the disheartening truth about Wallace's prescription to "be sincere": not every position benefits from sincerity equally. As a case-in-point, Felix is riding on the underground when "a white woman, hugely pregnant and sweating" asks if he can tell his friend to move his feet so she can sit down. His "friend" is a total stranger to Felix—another young black man, but Felix "touched him lightly on the knee" and says "Oi, bruv—I think the lady wants to sit

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down" (193). The stranger is offended that Felix would ask him to move on her behalf. Felix gives up his seat for the woman, and shortly after exiting the train, he is accosted by the stranger and his friend; robbed, stabbed, and left for dead halfway through the novel. In so doing, Smith reveals the limits of sincerity—articulating a robust sense-of-self may be good medicine for the young, middle-class white man like Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, who is likely to find opportunities for his sense-of-self and his senses-of-community to overlap. For the young, working-class black man like Felix, however, there is no room in the Western neoliberal system of images for him to be recognized as anything but a problem, no matter how persistently he attempts to imbue his strategic performances with mimetic expressions of how he feels.

To Belong with Others is to Become

If for Wallace much of his characterization in fiction feels like a pushing outward, like a sense-of-self that must be located beneath the rotting detritus of culture and fostered back to life through the playing of language-games that privilege sincerity; Smith is much more interested in the way a messy topology of cultural milieux flow in and leak out via her character's relationships. Consider Clara Bowden, an Afro-Caribbean woman who, when introduced to the story-world of Smith's *White Teeth*, does not "descend … from on high, attached to nothing other than wings" (23). In order for the reader to come to know Clara, they must travel from the outside in:

> And there is no getting away from Ryan Topps. Just as a good historian
> need recognize Hitler's Napoleonic ambitions in the east in order to

comprehend his reluctance to invade the British in the west, so Ryan

Topps is essential to any understanding of why Clara did what she did.

(23)

Smith's characters-as-subjects are inextricably embedded—they are like organs whose

functioning cannot be discerned outside the body. *Swing Time* is her fifth and most

recent novel, and unlike the rest of her fiction, it is narrated in the first-person. While the

reader is certainly granted access to the narrator's affective interior, the narrator remains

unnamed, leaving the reader bereft of any way to address the narrator except by proxy—

she is the daughter of a feminist Jamaican intellectual, the best friend of a dancer named

Tracey. In the absence of such anchoring relationships, the narrator feels unmoored:

"That autumn, in my first term at my new school, I found what I was without my friend:

a body without a distinct outline" (*Swing Time* 213). In comparison with Wallace, in

other words, the kind of subject Smith assumes is far more decentered, reconfigured

such that her narrative lens attends more diligently to the spaces *between* characters.

There is a strong ethical dimension to Smith's attending to the spaces in-between.

In her essay "*Middlemarch* and Everybody," she openly admires George Eliot as a writer

of ideas, claiming that Eliot, inspired by Spinoza's concept of *conatus*, "replaced

metaphysics with human relationships" (*Changing My Mind* 39). Smith draws attention

to the character of Fred Vincy, who "of all the people striving in *Middlemarch*," is the

only one "*striving for a thing worth striving for*" because he is "in love with a good girl,

a girl who does not love him because he is not worthy" (36). Despite the unrequited

nature of this love, it "enables him to feel another's pain as if it were his own. For Eliot,

in the absence of God, all our moral tests must take place on this earth and have as their rewards and punishments here. We are one another's lesson, one another's duty" (38). Taking the via-negativa in order to drive home her point, Smith highlights another moment in *Middlemarch*: "'The theatre of all my actions is fallen,' said an antique personage when his chief friend was dead; and they are fortunate who get a theatre where the audience demands their best" (qtd in Smith 37). As is the case with the narrator of *Swing Time* who is "a body without a distinct outline" without her best friend, Smith implicitly argues with Eliot that a sense-of-self, however robustly articulated, has no valuable function, no 'worth' without the stage provided by human relationships.

Earlier in *Changing My Mind* in her essay on Forster, Smith writes that "connection, as everyone knows, was Forster's great theme; between people, nations, heart and head, labor and art" (17). As I survey the various valences "only connect" accumulates throughout her work, I find the one at hand most clearly articulated by Christian Moraru in his essay "The Forster Connection or, Cosmopolitanism Redux":

> In Smith, the world is world of relations rather than an assemblage of separate entities. We live fully, she suggests, to the extent that we make connections and relate to one another. In her view, relationality is world rationality, the very formula of being. To be is to be with others. (133)

If I were to amend Moraru's articulation for the purposes of my project, however, I would restate his final clause: To belong with others is to become.

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In *Howard's End*, we find Margaret Schlegel's admonition to "Only connect!" contrasted with Henry Wilcox's own philosophy: "My motto is Concentrate. I've no intention of frittering away my strength on that sort of thing" (Forster 168). Margaret's response resonates here: "'It isn't frittering away the strength,' she protested. 'It's enlarging the space in which you may be strong'." In my amendment of Moraru (to belong with others is to become), the word "become" serves to capture Margaret's sense of trajectory, the possibility of "enlarging the space" of being. Of Smith's novels, *White Teeth* most demonstrates how connection serves to extend the horizon of becoming. Consider Millat, who has become the ringleader of a crew of misfits who call themselves the Raggastanis:

> Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati, and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezer* who would fight in their corner if necessary; kung fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani. (192)

Parsing this passage using the terminology I establish in my second chapter, what Smith is describing is a language-game, which is comprised of memes (Allah, kung fu, Black Power), positions to occupy (hard-as-fuck, bad-ass), and the citational precedence which

patterns these memes, allowing a given performer's affective heuristics to attribute value to the deployment of certain memes under certain conditions, with "value" here understood as the efficacy with which the performance will move the performer toward a position they autonomically strive to occupy. By referring to the Raggastani language-game as "a hybrid thing," Smith gestures toward the postcolonial concept of hybridity. While this concept does not entirely map onto a reading of *White Teeth* for reasons I will be explaining below, it is helpful in providing an account of the genesis and function of language-games like this one. In his foreword to *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, Homi K. Bhabha notes that "hybridity works with, *and within*, the cultural design of the present to reshape our understanding of the interstices—social and psychic—that link signs of cultural similitude with emergent signifiers of alterity" (III). In order to shed some light on the "cultural design of the present" in the novel, I must attend more to the context of the above passage.

In this particular moment of the narrative, 14-year-old Millat has mobilized his Raggastanis to join a protest against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. No one in his crew has read the novel, but "people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry" about it (Smith *White Teeth* 194). While the Raggastani appropriation of Allah is likely as "blasphemous" as anything in Rushdie's novel, Smith suggests that the true source of the anger of Millat and his crew is due to the paucity of positions available in the British imaginary for "people like Millat." Millat knows that for the majority of his countrymen, he was

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a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat … was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. (194)

According to the terminology of hybridity, the racist over/under-determination suffered by "people like Millat" is caused by what Bhabha calls a discursive "hollow" in hegemonic British culture, and "hybridity emerges from, and engages with, these 'hollows' in the democratic regime. The agency of hybridity is profoundly shaped by these discriminatory, disempowering hollows" (Bhabha III). We can see, then, how the Raggastani language-game may have been a speculative contrivance of Smith's formed as this group of 14-year-old kids' response to the hollow of the British Paki—the invincible bad-ass with Allah in her corner as the inverse of the enfeebled curry-shifter bereft of sexuality.

If in some ways the postcolonial theoretical lens of hybridity maps neatly onto aspects of Smith's work, in other ways this mapping is strained by the humorous tone of her prose. As the Ragastannis ride the train to Bradford in order to take part in the protest, they banter among themselves: "'Allah'll fuck him up, yeah?' cried Rajik, the least intelligent, who thought of God as some kind of cross between Monkey-Magic and

Bruce Willis. 'He'll kick him in the balls. Dirty book.'" (194). In Rainer Emig's essay "The Empire Tickles Back," he considers the tightrope walked by authors who wish to marshal the political efficacy of hybridity while also employing humor. Interrogating films like *Bend It Like Beckham*, Emig notes that the "price to be paid" for winning over a mass-cinema audience "was a depiction of Asian-Britain as essentially quirky" (175). It is perhaps the case, particularly with *White Teeth*, that Smith's sense of humor lends the text a "celebratory" tone[38] and applies a veneer of quirkiness to her characters—a veneer which makes for an awkward postcolonial reading of the text. Thinking past this critique, however, Emig reminds us that Bhabha's conception of hybridity and the kind of "third space" it creates "owe their formulation to the acknowledged influence of Bakhtinian theory," and more specifically Bakhtin's ideas about dialogism (171). Just as the novel provides a space where monolithic culture can be subverted and challenged when placed in dialog with the voice of the other, hybridity's third space enables "other 'denied' knowledges" to "enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (172). In this way, then, hybridity can also be said to resonate with Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, with its "joking temporal reversal of rules."

Coming back to the notion of connectedness and how it "enlarges the space" of being, if Smith's depictions of hybrid, third spaces don't overtly lend themselves to being mobilized for political purposes, it is because she is less interested in showing how

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[38] I'm thinking here of Maurice Chittenden's criticism of the novel, referenced at the beginning of the previous section.

they resist hegemonic cultural norms and more interested in showcasing how these spaces become a kind of shelter for those inside them. Given the diversity of membership in Millat's crew (Indian, Pakistani, Bengali), each member brings to the community their own internalized warehouse of citable, idiosyncratic memes built in moments of registering and enfolding both the diasporic cultural performances of their family and the performances found in the canon of Western pop culture. Having found each other in the discursive hollow of the British Paki, by renaming and owning this space, they are indeed "reversing the rules of recognition" and opening up the possibility for authenticating while integrating citations of these memes in their performances. A Bengali Raggastani can cite a Pakistani meme, and so long as the performance falls in line with the rhetorical grain of the Raggastani language-game, the performer is likely to be granted assent. In so doing, both the performer and her fellow Raggastanis will register and enfold the effects of the performance, thus effecting a "becoming" for both the performer, and via their audience, the Raggastani language-game itself.

Given the nature of signs, there are no memes, no signifiers which can directly correspond to the signified, which according to the model of the authenticating human, are always the affective heuristics of the performer. That said, some memes are better than others at approximating how we feel in a moment of self-expression. Any community where one can perform sincerely and be authenticated has the potential to provide an extended horizon of citational precedence for the performer, and in the happy circumstances where the performer finds memetic content to cite within such a community that enables them to express their feelings in a way that feels more sincere,

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the performer is afforded by the community an opportunity to articulate a sense-of-self made *more robust* because it has been authorized by the other, inculcating in the performer a sense-of-belonging.

If there is a place in Smith's oeuvre where this valence for "only connect" is most distilled, it can be found in *On Beauty*, in the scene where Kiki Belsey meets Carlene Kipps. By the time we reach this scene, it has been established that Kiki's husband Howard considers Carlene's husband Monty to be his arch-nemesis. In a conciliatory gesture, Kiki approaches the Kipps' new home intending to invite them to a party, and she finds Carlene in her garden. Their entire conversation is marked by the theme of connection-as-shelter, culminating in Carlene saying, "I love a line from a poem: *There is such a shelter in each other*.[39] I think it is so *fine*. Don't you think it's a wonderful thing?" (93). The intimacy Carlene insists upon in this scene is startling for Kiki—at times she is "left with her mouth open." Returning to my brief discussion of Bakhtin's notion of "speech genres" in my second chapter and how, as I argue, the concept maps neatly onto what I mean by "memes" and how they themselves are subject to larger patterning memes or language-games, Bakhtin notes how "finer nuances of style are determined by the nature and degree of *personal* proximity of the addressee to the speaker" (*Speech Genres* 96). Implied here is the notion that proximity has a modulating effect on our affective heuristics, such that a greater degree of such proximity "gives rise to a certain *candor* of speech" (97). The apparent function of such

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[39] The line is from "Pedigree" by the poet Nick Laird, who is Smith's husband.

candor is the establishment of a new space "more or less outside the framework of the social hierarchy and social conventions, 'without rank,' as it were." Indeed, "in intimate styles this is expressed in an apparent desire for the speaker and addressee to merge completely" (97). Bakhtin's identification of the "apparent desire" to merge completely has some Hegelian implications which, as I will show later, are ultimately incompatible with Smith's conception of connection. Suffice it to say, however, that the opportunity to expand one's horizon of becoming in moments of connection is due not only to a "reversal of the rules of recognition" which leaves oneself and the other freer to authenticate in a space "without rank," but also to a *privileging of candor*—proximity through connection, in other words, modulates our affective heuristics, inviting us to articulate ourselves more sincerely, to *become* more intensely.

Shortly after Carlene's citation of the poem, their conversation is interrupted by a distraction:

> Just passing by the gate five white teenage girls, barely dressed, were going by. They had rolled-up towels under their arms and wet hair, stuck together in long sopping ropes, like the Medusa. They were all speaking at once. / '*There is such a shelter in each other*,' repeated Mrs Kipps, as the noise grew fainter… (94)

This distraction is rife with imagery—the members of this group are "barely dressed," there is mention of rope, rolls of cloth, water, and a strange simile: "like the Medusa." The presence of the article 'the' here feels out of place somehow, or placed intentionally for a purpose. All of this imagery and the simile that accompanies it sound like a

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reference, in fact, to Théodore Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, with its

barely clad survivors waving sheets of cloth and clinging to each other in order to keep

from falling off the raft and into the ocean. The title of the painting refers to the *Medusa*,

"part of a convoy of vessels carrying soldiers, civic officials and colonists to Senegal"

(Harper 136). When the ship ran aground, "the captain joined the lifeboats and ordered

cables attached to a makeshift raft holding the remaining 135 crew and passengers.

Accounts differ about whether the cables were cut or broke. The captain sailed away."

At first blush, given the grain of my discussion so far, it makes sense to consider the raft

a metaphor for connection—it serves as a kind of shelter from the sea, and it

circumscribes people who need each other to survive. However, there is a troubling

ambiguity to this reference: "In the days that followed the most appalling acts of

brutality and betrayal, including cannibalism and murder, took place among those

abandoned on the raft" (136). This ambiguity is echoed by Carlene, who recounts how

when told of the line from the poem, her husband Monty said "that was all very well but

I should place it on a scale—a scale of judgment—and on the other side of the scale I

should place *L'enfer, c'est les autres*. And then see which had more weight in the

world!" (Smith *On Beauty* 94). Implied by this scene, first off, is the fact that whatever

Smith means by connection-as-shelter, it is not a phenomenon reserved for those who

find themselves in discursive hollows (while white, teenage girls find themselves

gendered in the shadow of hegemonic Western masculinity, their brief appearance here

doesn't seem to call attention to this fact). The second implication is that connection-as-

shelter is a kind of risk. There is always a cost in placing oneself, in terms of becoming,

in the hands of the other. The payoff can sometimes mean an expanded horizon; at other times, "hell is other people."

While there are moments in Smith's work, like the scene between Kiki and Carlene, that make evident the value of connection, there are just as many (if not more) scenes where connection costs so much that it feels less like a shelter and more like a trap. Kiki's daughter Zora is smitten by a young, working class poet named Carl. While initially their relationship affords Carl the opportunity to attend creative writing courses at Zora's university, when an expensive painting goes missing from a faculty member's office, the coincidence of his presence is enough for several faculty members to accuse him of theft. A similar occurrence happens in *Swing Time*, when the rekindled relationship between the narrator and her friend Tracey leaves Tracey vulnerable to accusations of having stolen a cash box. *NW* is rife with such examples. In the opening pages, Leah answers a knock at her door to find an old classmate named Shar in need. Leah lets her in, pours her tea, and gives her money to get to the hospital. Upon seeing Shar to her cab, Shar gives Leah a kiss. Leah discovers later that Shar had scammed her, and the episode haunts her throughout the rest of the novel. Felix Cooper's gesture of kindness toward a pregnant white woman on the tube costs him his life.

The most disturbing instance of connection-as-cost occurs at the end of *NW*. Earlier, as Natalie wanders the streets of Willesden suffering from enough existential angst that she considers committing suicide, she is given connection-as-shelter by her estranged classmate Nathan Bogle. Gripped by the candor of their proximity, Nathan lets slip the fact that he was the "friend" of the man who stabbed Felix Cooper by the train

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station, thereby making him an accessory to murder (370). Throughout the novel, Natalie and Leah, whose relationship forms the narratological backbone of the text, have become increasingly distant and at times even hostile toward each other. As the novel draws to a close, Leah has become paralyzed by depression, and Natalie is summoned by Leah's husband to see if she can get Leah to talk:

> With what was left of clarity [Natalie] offered her friend a selection of aphorisms, axioms and proverbs the truth content of which she could only assume from their common circulation, the way one puts one's faith in the face value of paper money. Honesty is always the best policy. Love conquers all… She spoke and Leah did not stop her, but Natalie was wasting her time. She was in breach of that feminine law that states no weakness may be shown by a woman to another woman without a sacrifice of equal value in return. Until Natalie paid up, in the form of a newly minted story, preferably intimate, hopefully secret, she wouldn't be told anything in return… (398)

Both Natalie and Leah are burdened with their respective secrets. Natalie's marriage is in ruins upon her husband's discovery of her sexual escapades. Leah, whose husband desperately wants children, has recently had an abortion she keeps secret from him because she does not want to have kids. Neither of them are aware of each other's burdens, and neither are willing, here, to pay the cost required by connection.

The novel ends by revealing how such costs can be paid by other means:

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Leah found the number online. Natalie dialed it. It was Keisha who did

the talking. Apart from the fact she drew the phone from her own pocket,

the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two

good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day… "I got

something to tell you," said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her

voice. (401)

Apparently, the "secret" required to rekindle their connection was the one Natalie

learned from Nathan Bogle. They are calling the police to turn him in, and the cost

Nathan pays by connecting with Natalie is his freedom. The common thread that runs

through these instances of disastrous connection is the fact that despite how connection

entails a flattening of social hierarchy, the reversal of the rules of recognition is

contingent upon the ephemeral context of a language-game inflected by intimacy. Once

the spell of candor is lifted, the subject-position matrix snaps back into place with a

vengeance, requiring a pound of flesh for the breach in protocol. And it is a price that is

most often paid by the marginalized.

On the surface, these disasters seem to work against my argument that Smith is

calling for her readers to only connect. I would counter this, however, by insisting that

Smith imbues her portrayals of intimacy with the reverence due to something rare and

beautiful in the world. *On Beauty*'s title is a reference to Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*,[40] wherein she writes:

> The banishing of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades has been carried out by a set of political complaints against it… Beauty is, at the very least, innocent of the charges against it, and it may even be the case that far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, it instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries. (57)

The disasters that befall Smith's characters after moments of connection always come from the outside, from an impersonal system of oppression, even when the system's wheels are set in motion through acts of betrayal. In these moments, the reader feels a sense of loss and injustice, of the potentiality of beauty trampled under ugly boots. Insisting on the "innocence" and inherent value of beauty is not the same as embracing the Hegelian notion that history cannot progress without its bloody battles and brutal subjugations. The ends do not justify the means. No amount of beauty can exculpate Natalie and Leah from their monstrous betrayal of Nathan Bogle. But for Smith, to say that the betrayal happened *because* of the beauty is a mistake. Rather, the beauty of Nathan's granting-of-assent to Natalie shines *despite* the betrayal, and continues to do so

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[40] In the acknowledgements for *On Beauty*, Smith writes: "Thank you to Elaine Scarry for her wonderful essay 'On Beauty and Being Just', from which I borrowed a title, a chapter heading and a good deal of inspiration."

now as it casts light on the injustice of the color line that belts the global capitalist system.

The Indispensable Mundane

Smith is an author of the small. A writer of the mundane. In this way she is like Margaret Schlegel, who upon declaring "Only connect!" the whole of her sermon, reveals how connecting is related to a granularity of seeing:

> [Henry] simply did not notice things… He never noticed that Helen and Frieda were hostile, or that Tibby was not interested in currant plantations; he never noticed the lights and shades that exist in the grayest conversation, the finger-posts, the milestones, the collisions, the illimitable views. (*Forster* 168)

The drama of becoming, for Smith, takes place on the stage of the everyday, and as her readers, we are granted access to the "lights and shades" of her character's conversations: we get to watch as they try out "positionings," and if we attend closely enough, we can detect the cleft that marks the difference between sincerity and other-authentication. In *White Teeth*, a heated discussion takes place between Alsana Iqbal (the mother of Millat and Magid), a Bengali woman who is married to a much older man; and Alsana's niece Neena, who while also Bengali, spent much of her youth in the United Kingdom, and identifies as a lesbian. The argument is over the ideal level of communication between spouses, and Alsana believes that "for a marriage to survive you don't need all this talk, talk, talk; all this 'I am this' and 'I am really like this' like in

the papers, all this *revelation*—especially when your husband is old" (65). Neena, however, cannot stomach the notion "that a good dose of repression keeps a marriage healthy." Consider the exchange that follows:

> [Alsana says,] "What you don't understand, my Niece-of-Shame, what none of your generation understands…" / At which point Neena cannot stop a piece of onion from escaping from her mouth due to the sheer strength of her objection. "My *generation*? For fuckssake, you're two years older than me, Alsi."

Here we have crystalized, like a fly trapped in amber, an example of a moment of sincerity as I conceive of it under the auspices of the authenticating human. As Alsana forms her utterance, her feelings guide and direct the way she strings together pieces of memetic content, and in a moment of articulation, she dons a positioning the way one might put on a shirt—she attempts to occupy "member of an older, wiser generation." Her attempt to authenticate in this way is rejected by Neena. Alsana, however, has spent years of her life being married to a man twenty-five years her senior. The fact of her age has little to do with her sense-of-belonging to an older generation: "Alsana continues regardless, miming a knife slicing through the Niece-of-Shame tongue-of-obscenity": "[What none of your generation understands] is that not everybody wants to see into everybody else's sweaty, secret parts" (65). Alsana's dismissal of Neena's objection marks the cleft between what I have been referring to as self-authentication (sincerity), whereby Alsana's affective-heuristics fail to flag her own positioning (belonging to an older generation) as bullshit; and other-authentication, whereby Neena would need to

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grant assent to Alsana's positioning. According to my model of the authenticating human, the effect of this felicitous moment of sincerity on Alsana's part is a moment of becoming whereby her sense-of-self has become more strongly associated with the nexus of memes that resonate in her mind with "older generation." Had Neena granted assent to this performance, the effect of that felicitous moment of interpersonal authentication might have been a moment of becoming on the part of everyone participating in the conversation—everyone present may have enfolded associations between Alsana and "older generation," thereby inflecting the nexus of memes they associate with both entities, if only incrementally.

For Smith, the mundane also forms the crucible from which emerges (if iteratively and over large swaths of time) the very fabric of culture. Her prose envisions how small moments set the stage for a renegotiation of the more deeply sedimented, infrastructural elements of culture, i.e. religion:

> If religion is the opiate of the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister. If religion is a tight band, a throbbing vein, and a needle, tradition is a far homelier concoction: poppy seeds ground into tea; a sweet cocoa drink laced with cocaine; the kind of thing your grandmother might have made. (161)

The difference between homely, localized traditions and something as far-reaching as religion is a difference in potency, dissemination, and embeddedness. Something as infrastructural as religion forms the roots of the tree of culture. But Smith insists that homely "tradition [is] culture, and culture [leads] to roots" (161). If at times her

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characters believe that religion forms "deep roots that no storm or gale could displace" (161-2), Smith's fiction often imagines moments of large-scale upheaval so violent that "a mammoth tree" will "[tear] itself from the dog shit and the concrete" and land itself squarely in one's living room (188). These moments of upheaval, however, are always coming from the outside in her work, from a confluence of impersonal forces that are not attributable, in terms of agency, to any one of her characters.

The final scene of *White Teeth* can be read as such a moment of violent rupture, where the advent of gene-splicing, embodied in the tumor-sprouting "OncoMouse" is put on display in Trafalgar Square on New Year's Eve in 1992. Gathered together in this narrative space are fundamentalist Muslims and Christians along with atheist scientists and eco-terrorists. Each group is possessed of its own agenda, and is composed of its own motley assortment of characters whose homely, mundane interactions form the meat of Smith's text. It's from the grist of the mundane, Smith seems to argue, that the opportunity to renegotiate culture-wide, infrastructural protocols of authentication (what counts and doesn't count as a valid performance) presents itself—the fate of kings and empires rests, ultimately, on what one chooses to put in one's tea. This implies something about agency: if we have it, it lies buried somewhere in our affective-heuristics. Not so much a series of decisions we consciously make, but a bleeding through of our singular experiences, an inflecting of the language-games we play with our small, idiosyncratic feelings.

Perhaps for this reason, Smith feels ambivalent toward the political. She often makes statements like this one in 2006: "I'm not the most political person in the public

sense" (*Thalia*); and echoed in 2018: "I am not by nature a political person" (*Feel Free* 41). This suspicion of the political is derived from her conception of the human being as fundamentally limited: "I believe in human limitation, not out of any sense of fatalism but out of a learned caution, gleaned from both recent and distant history" (39). These limitations do not, however, preclude societal change: "There is still this redeeming matter of incremental progress. It might look small to those with apocalyptic perspectives, but to she who not so long ago could not vote, or drink from the same water fountain as her fellow citizens, or marry the person she chose, or live in a certain neighborhood, such incremental change feels enormous" (38). Political change happens, and the effects are "enormous," but the conditions for such change emerge from the small, the incremental, the everyday. In order to bring about change, we must first take care to only connect by attending to the mundane.

Political change aside, this attendance to the mundane is ultimately where, Smith feels, one can imbue life with something like meaning. In her essay "Smith Family Christmas," she admits that "Christmas is the enforcement of ideals that, in truth, do not matter" (*Changing My Mind* 228). She likens it, along with things like God or marriage, to a dream. She finds value, however, in "letting go of that Kantian will of yours, … giving it up to a beautiful, insane, mystical idea" (229). The value of "letting go" is that it opens you up to connection, where the play of the mundane can work its magic: "It is, of course, Family (messy, complex, miserable, happy, so many gradations of those last two words) that is the real gift, beneath the wrapping. Family is the daily miracle" (228). While sentiments like these may strike the Western ear as sappy, their expression in her

work are yet another reason why I find reading her alongside Wallace compelling: they qualify her as belonging to Wallace's "next literary 'rebels'" who are "dare to back away from ironic watching" and treat "old untrendy human troubles and emotions" with "reverence and conviction" ("E Unibus" 192).

Prayers for Love

In Smith's article "In Memoriam: Zadie Smith on David Foster Wallace," she writes chiefly about Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, implicitly arguing that his short story collection functions as a kind of homily preached within a context where one can become "giddy with po-mo relativity" because "the logic of the market seeps into every aspect of life" and it feels as though "you get to decide what you worship." According to Smith, Wallace's work reminds us that, despite this freedom to choose, "nine times out of ten we worship ourselves." Her final word on Wallace's *Brief Interviews* sounds less like a description of Wallace's work and more like a description of her own:

> When the praying man puts his hands together, the gesture might be metaphysical, but he's seeking a genuine human connection, which, in Dave's stories, is as hard to find as any god. Love is the ultimate value, the absurd, impossible thing—the only thing worth praying for.

If Wallace fetishizes moments of bravery where, despite the risk of seeming naïve or overly sentimental within the postmodern cultural milieu, one chooses to articulate something sincere; Smith fetishizes moments of "genuine human connection," where

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despite "the logic of the market" which atomizes, commodifies, and then alienates the self, one "prays for love" by recognizing human relationships as the only escape route out of solipsism. Much of Smith's dialogue is a "prayer for love" in that, regardless of whatever else the utterance is doing, it also functions as a bid to authenticate with the other. In a moment of authentication, the speaker and audience both open the door for a chance, however minutely, to adjust the protocols of authentication (what it takes to belong) by means of the deployment-of and then granting-assent-to the speaker's performance.

There is a kind of sanctification, or *re-enchantment* of mundane human interaction in the assumption that every iterative human performance in the presence of the other constitutes an adjustment of the protocols of authentication. The word "enchantment" is typically associated in the discourses of the humanities with Max Weber's framing of the ascendency of modern science as a disenchantment, an encroachment of the always self-surpassing valuation of scientific achievement over all other forms of value creation, *including its own* ("Max Weber"). The result, according to Weber, is that "aesthetic values now stand in irreconcilable antagonism to religious values, transforming 'value judgments (*Werturteile*) into judgments of taste (*Geschmacksurteile*) by which what is morally reprehensible becomes merely what is tasteless.'" This sentiment is echoed by Wallace: "this modernist legacy has formed part of a more general 'intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country,' one of the things, he argued, 'that's gutted our generation'" (qtd in Kelly 134).

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Among authors like Smith and Wallace at the turn of the millennium, there was a renewed impulse to sound the alarm over "disenchantment," which has been a persistent feature of Western culture since the Enlightenment. It is my contention that this impulse arose out of a general cultural anxiety about the nature of the subject, an anxiety that stemmed in part from the explosion of the global media industry and the birth of the internet. In the face of such exponential growth in both the production and dissemination of media, suddenly the implications of the decentered subject of poststructuralism seemed more dire. The "surface area" of power's influence came to include swaths of new territory, "territory" both in terms of the nature of the media and the duration and frequency of exposure. Throughout the nineties, Wallace was wary of the 5-6 hours per diem of television watching the average Westerner. In *The Autograph Man*, Smith's narrator declares that "*You watch too many films* is one of the great modern sentences. It has in it a hint of understanding regarding what we were before and what we have become" (324). In her most recent book of essays, she speaks of "generations" of humans using the rhetoric of upgrades, referring to her generation as "Person 1.0" and those of her students as "People 2.0" (*Feel Free* 45). The difference between them, she argues, is in part due to Facebook, which is "some of the software currently shaping their generation" (46): "We know what we are doing 'in' the software. But do we know, are we alert to what the software is doing to us? Is it possible that what is communicated between people online 'eventually becomes their truth'?" (56). She is not neutral about this shift. She warns that when we reduce human identity to "the careless thoughts of a

Harvard sophomore," it directly impacts the subject in ways that might not be healthy (63).

Imbricated with anxiety about media exposure is the assumption of a subject that inevitably becomes, regardless of how mundane the experience it registers. It may be that the widespread popularization of cognitive behavioral therapy in the late nineties,[41] with its implicit blurring of the line between our thoughts (mind) and our behavior (body), was a contributing factor to this anxiety. Our very thoughts and feelings, according to this paradigm, are conditioned by what we habitually do and experience. Given this newly popularized understanding of the subject of neuroplasticity and the scale of the media bombarding it, what are the limits of this influence, and what features of human being might it threaten? Wallace's *Infinite Jest* explores the hypothetical that there *are* no limits to media's influence (consuming the film to which the title refers results in the total paralysis of anything like agency), and as I show in my third chapter, what is threatened by this infinite influence is the subject's ability to foster a sense-of-self robust enough to be able to make any value judgments at all. As I have shown here, a recurrent concern of Smith's work is the inescapable pervasiveness of a "system of images," and the tendency for the impersonal forces that arbitrarily categorize human beings into hierarchical stratifications of privilege to isolate and alienate people, threatening the possibility of "genuine human connection."

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[41] In psychologist Albert Ellis' "The Rise of Cognitive Behavior Therapy" (2001), he notes that cognitive behavioral therapy "is perhaps the most common form of psychological treatment that therapists actually do today, no matter what system of therapy they say they follow" (190).

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What I try to show in the brief genealogy of sincerity I provide in my third chapter is that anxieties like these are cyclical. Just as, in the early modern period, the downfall of Catholicism led to anxieties about one's soteriological status and who can be trusted to verify it—anxieties which in turn led to a fetishization of sincerity—so too can we consider the turn of the millennium a time when the drastic acceleration of the deterritorializing flows of capital led to similar anxieties and a similar fixation on sincerity. I would like to add here, however, another layer of resonance between the early modern period and our own. Consider Harold Bloom's controversial, opening remarks to *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*:

> Literary character before Shakespeare is relatively unchanging; woman and men are represented as aging and dying, but not as changing because their relationship to themselves, rather than to the gods or God, has changed. In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they reconceive themselves. Sometimes this comes about because they *overhear* themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others. (xvii)

The central argument of Bloom's book is that "Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us," and it lies far outside the scope of this project to either defend or refute statements like Bloom's. Suffice it to say, however, that the subject of literature does not emerge unchanged by the turmoil of the early modern period—the function of the literary character *adapted* to explore questions about who we are, how we establish trust, and by what mechanisms do we change in the West. I believe we can

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locate a similar, albeit far more subtle adaptation in the character function of the literature of Smith's generation of writers—a shift I attempt to detect by attending to the dialectics of becoming in their work.

In Western philosophy, the notion of human becoming via dialectical encounters with the other finds its nexus in Hegel, and as Butler shows in *Subjects of Desire*, one can read 20th century French theory as in part a struggle to move beyond the dialectic found in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In Butler's words, the *Phenomenology* provides the following account of human becoming:

> The Hegelian subject expands in the course of its adventure through alterity; it internalizes the world that it desires, and expands to encompass, to be, what it initially confronts as other to itself. The final satisfaction of desire is the discovery of substance as subject, the experience of the world as everywhere confirming that subject's sense of immanent metaphysical place. (9)

Implicit in this conception is a trajectory, one that vectors both individual and historical becoming, and popular Western notions of progress often assume such linearity of progress. Smith rejects such notions: "progress is never permanent, will always be threatened, must be redoubled, restated and *reimagined* if it is to survive" (*Feel Free* 41). There is also a kind of singularity implicit in the Hegelian dialectic—a self-conscious, singular subject encounters a self-conscious other, and both are sublated in the synthesis that leads, ultimately and over the course of history, to the Absolute. As

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Tynan points out in the opening of this chapter, Smith's characters *have* no fixed core.

One of the epigraphs to *Feel Free* seems relevant here:

> 'The eyes are not windows. There are nerve impulses, but no one reads
> them, counts them, translates them, and ruminates about them. Hunt for
> as long as you want, there's nobody home. The world is contained within
> you, and you're not there.' / —Daniel Kehlmmann (iii)

In my second chapter, I do insist on something like singularity for the authenticating

human, but this singularity resides in the unique patterning and intensity of the pure

association stored within our neuro-synaptic network. This singularity ought not be

conflated with something like a sense-of-self, which gets built in the course of

registering and enfolding while playing language-games. We likely possess as many

"senses-of-self" as there are language-games that we find ourselves habitually playing,

and if there's something like an orchestration between them, it is due to the need to

efficiently route our associative traffic, and not some kind of inevitable sublation of the

many according to a unifying telos inherent in the cosmos. The "becoming" envisioned

by the authenticating human can just as readily lead to fragmentation, to splitting, to

insurmountable trauma.

Additionally, Hegel's becoming tends to have a single lens, a focus on the One

subject and the single event. What becomes during "encounters with alterity" according

to the authenticating human is always a multiplicity of entities at several levels of

stratification: the neuro-synaptic networks of the performer and each audience member;

the various senses-of-community (as they exist idiosyncratically in the minds of each

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audience member) appealed to in the performer's citation of memetic content; the memes themselves as they accrue new inflections via the performance in the minds of every witness; the language-games (including the positions available for players to occupy) that pattern these memes; and in felicitous circumstances, a sense-of-self, perhaps *sutured* to a sense-of-community, inculcating in the performer a sense-of-belonging. And this multiplicity of becomings, of course, is happening at different times for different people, over and over again with the granularity of milliseconds in neurological time. If there can be said to be a single, overarching thing that "becomes" in the wake of a performance, it is what I've been referring to as the protocols of authentication.

Perhaps the most striking difference between a Hegelian dialectic of becoming and the one offered here has to do with the function of the "otherness" of the other. With Hegel, the other serves as both a limit on the freedom of self-consciousness and as the source of "the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us" (Butler 47). The other stands in the way, so to speak, of the Hegelian subject's desire to find itself reflected in the world, and so the erotics of this desire manifest in the subject as a drive to either destroy or merge with the other. For the authenticating human, however, encounters with the other can only ever take place within the context of a language-game, and so the function of the other's "otherness" is always to *locate* oneself on the field of play, to establish the relative value of one's positioning. In this way, the difference between Hegel's becoming and that of the authenticating human is like the difference between playing a zero-sum game and driving a car through the shifting flow of traffic.

Altogether, the kind of becoming experienced by the subject of Smith's fiction is more akin to the line-of-flight for Deleuzian nomad:

> This is how is should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. (*Thousand Plateaus* 161)

Inherent in this prescription is the assumption of a "self" that is not "a person, subject, thing, or substance," but rather "relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected," or what Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) refer to as a "haecceity" (261). How can such a thing possess "a small plot of land," or be capable of lodging itself anywhere? According to D&G, "it is by conjugating, by continuing with other lines, other pieces, that one makes a world that can overlay the first one, like a transparency" (280). Mapping these valences for "only connect" onto this way of thinking about the subject, one "conjugates" by imbuing strategic language-game moves with memetic representations of one's feelings; by taking risks, by enlarging the space in which you can be strong; by hunting for "lines of flight" within the present mundane for opportunities to become. These conjugations make something like an efficaciously real space—a newly inflected language-game position, a world, a raft, a stratum. And regardless of how constructed or contingent or ephemeral, when we occupy such spaces, we inevitably register and enfold our experiences within them; we

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are granted opportunities to articulate ourselves, and depending on the felicity of such performances, we establish a more robust sense-of-self, "a small plot of land" that constitutes our point of departure for the next moment of becoming.

By conceiving of the subject in this way, as an assemblage of relations in ephemeral space, encounters with alterity are less like occasions for mutual recognition and more like re-mappings of territory—what D&G refer to as "reterritorialization." Proximity to the other is not figured here as an asymptote of knowledge, it is not an affordance of the opportunity to increasingly come to "know" the other. It is rather the affordance of an opportunity to articulate what it's like to be with the other, to describe and enact connection-as-space. As such, the other always remains wholly other, and this otherness is ultimately what "sanctifies" or "enchants" a granting-of-assent—it is the inauguration of a new world *despite* the unbridgeable chasm that separates its inhabitants.

In Smith's oeuvre, the enchanted nature of connection is placed most boldly on display in *White Teeth*. Consider Samad Iqbal (Alsana's husband), who says, "you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country … where you are never welcomed, only tolerated" (336). As time passes and the immigrant *becomes* according to the protocols around him, "you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging" (337). Samad's lament about a vanishing sense-of-belonging is delivered as dialogue to Irie Jones, the daughter of Clara Bowden and Samad's best friend Archie Jones. Irie inherits her black skin from her mother, skin which grants her an even lower default level of ethos according to Western protocols. For Irie, however, the idea of a place where no one belongs "sounded

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like *paradise* to her" (337). When Samad asks Irie whether she empathizes with Samad's

feelings of loss, Irie recognizes that "what he really meant was: do we speak the same

language? Are we from the same place? Are we the same?" (337). As a response to these

questions, "Irie squeezed his hand and nodded vigorously, trying to ward off his tears.

What else could she tell him but what he wanted to hear? 'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, yes,

yes.'" In the context of the connection-as-space that "conjugates" Samad and Irie,

Samad's expression of lament at belonging nowhere constitutes a "prayer for love," a

bid to authenticate, an attempt to belong. What Smith's prose helps us to see is how,

beyond the locutionary effects of an utterance like Samad's (unless you're white, you'll

never feel like you belong in London), every utterance *also functions* as a bid to

authenticate. We are able to see how the felicity of any speech act ultimately depends

not on whether the audience agrees with the perceived content of the speech, but on

whether the audience *assents to the position in the language-game* that the speaker is

attempting to occupy. When Irie repeats the word "yes" to Samad, she is not agreeing

with his characterization of the cosmopolis as dystopia, or to his assertion that he and

Irie are the same. Rather, she is granting assent to his attempt to belong with her in his

sadness *despite* the fact that she is overdetermined by a separate gender, race, and age.

While the immediate effect of this felicitous moment of sincerity on Samad's part may

be an enfolding of associations that will embolden him to articulate dystopic

characterizations of the cosmopolis in the future, Irie's granting-of-assent to Samad also

inculcates a sense-of-belonging in both of them, one that will push against Samad's

certainty of belonging nowhere, against Irie's delight in such a possibility. As Irie and

Samad go on to perform the calculus of evaluating their positioning in whatever language-games they find themselves playing in the future, that calculus will now include, however minutely, a consideration of this new conjugation, this world layered like a transparency on-top of the old one.

Toward an Ethics of Becoming

As I have attempted to show, the kind of subject assumed by Smith's fiction is one for whom connection provides an avenue for becoming, not just for the subject herself, but for the entire "world" instantiated by her encounter with the other, with its languages-games and the positions they make available to occupy. By participating in worlds like these, no matter how mundane, a tantalizing possibility presents itself, depending on how much agency we're willing to ascribe to the performing subject: the possibility for intentionally molding these language-games, for affecting what it takes to belong. In my second chapter, as I schematize this authenticating human, I side in many ways with the poststructuralist conception of agency, which minimizes, almost to the point of disappearing, the conscious sovereignty of the subject over her own behavior. I would like to nuance that discussion here by making an important qualification.

By subsuming all bodily sensation, *including cognition,* under the rubric of "affect," and by claiming that all affective phenomena are autonomic (a system that registers, reacts, and enfolds independently and below the level of consciousness), I am *not* arguing for something like behavioralism or determinism, which holds that discourse is processed by our neurological systems the way a coding algorithm is processed by a

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computer, determining all of human behavior. Such behavioralism requires total consistency in the way every human reacts to the same memetic content, just like a computer program requires the total consistency provided by the same operating system running on multiple computers. The authenticating human insists on singularity, enough distinctness in terms of the ordering and intensity of experience to guarantee that the same piece of memetic content will never be registered in the exact same ways by any two human beings. As such, even though agency is happening automatically, beneath the level of consciousness, the performing subject still operates with its own unique set of concerns and priorities, representing itself (both in the mimetic and the legislative sense) in the language-games it plays. For the performing subject who experiences pain and suffering due to the unavailability of viable language-game positions, or even for the writing subject who, as a "born-ogler," *perceives* such pain and suffering, their own unique set of concerns can come to include something like a desire for justice, for a more ethical "system of images."

Indeed, for Smith the production of what she calls "good writing" *requires* an awareness of the suffering of others:

> Now, a sad American writer, who feels the sadness all around him, has a responsibility at this present moment to recall the *what-if*, the equal pains of other people, many of them brown-skinned and far away… This sadness takes on a moral aspect and becomes good writing and good *being* (good writing requires, *demands* good being, I'm absolutely adamant on this point). ("Introduction" xxii)

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The main thrust of this chapter is a reading of Smith's oeuvre in this light, assuming that her work is, at least in part, an attempt to address the suffering of the Western neoliberal subject by prescribing a form of connection that solicits sincere expression, that provides a shelter and a new horizon for that expression, that attends to the mundane in order to set the stage for larger renegotiations of what it takes to belong, and that re-enchants our granting-of-assent to the other. Read alongside Wallace's prescription to be sincere, a dialectic of becoming emerges, one that figures a robust sense-of-self and a secure sense-of-belonging as vital for the subject caught-up in the deterritorializing flows of capital at the turn of the millennium in the neoliberal West. Given this assumption about what the subject needs in order to flourish, we find an ethic that insists on playing language-games that privilege sincerity, on recognizing and promoting the inherent value, warranted by beauty, of human connection. Be sincere! Only connect! So that you and I can locate ourselves, so that we can create a world where we belong.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: JONATHAN FRANZEN, DAVE EGGERS, JEFFREY EGUENIDES,

AND THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICATION

In my introduction, I provided as a rationale for reading the fiction of Zadie Smith and

David Foster Wallace together the hypothesis that their work is exemplary of a larger

trend that characterizes the work of their literary generation—a generation frequently

positioned as coming after postmodernism. I further suggest that one of the identifying

features of this body of work is the assumption of a more affect-centered model of

subjectivity, a model I refer to as the authenticating human, which I attempt to

schematize in my second chapter. In this concluding chapter, I will attempt to subject a

small sampling of the work of Jonathan Franzen, Dave Egggers, and Jeffrey Eugenides

to the "litmus test" of the authenticating human to make some initial assessments as to

whether they indeed assume such a subject when crafting their characters. Throughout

these readings, I will also work toward fleshing out what I call the ethics of

authentication, which itself tries to take seriously the notion that the subject's affective

health in part depends upon its ability to on the one hand speak sincerely for the

establishment of a sense-of-self, and on the other be granted assent within community

for the establishment of a sense-of-belonging. I wrap things up by outlining the scope of

future work for this project, both in terms of my pedagogy and scholarship.

      In her monograph *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*,

Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that "since the early 1990s" there has been a

proliferation of what she calls the "affective hypothesis," which is "the belief that

literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional

specificity of personal experience" (1). Her overarching goal is to trouble this hypothesis

in part by showing how literature at the turn of the millennium has a tendency to figure

one's affects as being privately owned and managed not unlike a stock portfolio, and this

casting of affect as "personal" has the effect of reifying (rather than resisting) the logic

of neoliberalism: "Under neoliberalism, a model of the subject emerges that reconciles

the contradictory commitments of democratic citizenship and capitalist competition by

jettisoning the political demands of liberalism and retaining the economic imperatives of

the liberal market" (5). As a case-in-point, she briefly examines both the content and

reception of Franzen's *The Corrections*, and begins by drawing attention to the

following scene:

> Although in general Gary applauded the modern trend toward individual
>
> self-management of retirement funds and long-distance calling plans and
>
> private-schooling options, he was less than thrilled to be given
>
> responsibility for his own personal brain chemistry, especially when
>
> certain people in his life, notably his father, refused to take such
>
> responsibility. But Gary was nothing if not conscientious. As he entered
>
> the darkroom, he estimated that his levels of Neurofactor 3 (i.e.,
>
> serotonin: a very, very important factor) were posting seven-day or even
>
> thirty-day highs, that his Factor 2 and Factor 7 levels were likewise
>
> outperforming expectations, and that his Factor 1 had rebounded from an

early-morning slump related to the glass of Armagnac he'd drunk at

bedtime. He had a spring in his step, an agreeable awareness of his above-

average height and his late-summer suntan. His resentment of his wife,

Caroline, was moderate and well contained. Declines led advances in key

indices of paranoia (i.e., his persistent suspicion that Caroline and his two

older sons were mocking him), and his seasonally adjusted assessment of

life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his

mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed. (137-138)

In the above passage, Gary Lambert, who is the vice president of a bank, imagines his

brain as an economic scene, where the performance of certain neuro-chemical indices

determine emotions and thought-patterns, somewhat constituting an affect-centered

model of subjectivity, though one satirically imagined as being measured and potentially

controlled not unlike a stock-market. R.G. Smith argues that "the parallels between

personal experience and the economic logics that underlie neoliberalism extend beyond

these satirical passages to the structure of the novel itself," as evidenced by the novel's

organizing conceit of "correction"—a term that refers not only to the stock-market

correction after the dot-com bubble bursts at the end of the novel, but also to the various

course corrections Lambert family members undergo (8).

In my second chapter, I suggested a kind of homologous relationship between the

neurological and the economic at two different strata of the authenticating human: the

efficiently hierarchical yet also associatively rhyzomic patterning of our neuro-synaptic

networks is not unlike the structure of the global capitalist flows of power envisioned in

Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, and the "affective mathematics" that govern the memetic transfer are not unlike the ways in which commodities are ascribed value in a capitalist marketplace. What these homologies imply for my purposes here is that, like the free-market, both the topology and functioning of the neurological system are subjected to a kind of efficiency that *self*-corrects in ways that have nothing to do with "agency." While I share R.G. Smith's observation that the novel belies "an apparent acceptance of the notion that the economy and the personal function in tandem," she also reads passages like the above "as affectively reinforcing neoliberal norms," such as the cult of "wise self-management" and the notion that "if properly managed, [the self-as-market will] continue to rise over time" (11, 9). I would argue, however, that Franzen's satirical tone in the passage above functions specifically to critique the notion that one's affects can ever be "wisely managed," as evidenced by Gary's denial of being "the least bit clinically depressed"—a denial revealed as such later in the novel. Indeed, when Gary eventually admits to his wife that he is "extremely depressed," it releases "weeks of accumulated tension" such that "he felt euphoric" (234). Gary does not experience this correction of his affective state as the result of wise self-management. He experiences it as a "surrender" (234).

Reading what Gary experiences in terms of the authenticating human, Gary's denial of his depression via his positioning as "shrewd affect portfolio manager" in the language-game of self-help results in a swelling tide of affective leakage which builds and pressurizes, compelling him to drink too much and act recklessly. It is only when he "surrenders" his positioning by speaking sincerely in the language-game of confession,

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and only when his wife, no longer estranged from him, grants assent to his performance by engaging in sexual intercourse, that Gary establishes a more robust sense-of-self:

> The thought came to him—inappropriately, perhaps, considering the tender conjugal act that he was now engaged in; but he was who he was, he was Gary Lambert, he had inappropriate thoughts and he was sick of apologizing!—that he could now safely ask Caroline to buy him 4,500 shares of Axon and that she would gladly do it. (235)

I would argue, in other words, that the "euphoria" Gary feels upon confessing his depression is precisely the feeling of authentication—of having articulated something about himself, and upon registering the context updated by that articulation, of feeling "right," as though something had clicked into place. If the resulting sense-of-self that *becomes* as a result of this felicitous speech-act can be reckoned as a "correction," I would argue that it would be a mistake to conflate that correction with an adjustment that will inevitably lead to a "rise in the market." The "4,500 shares of Axon" Gary purchases, arguably as a result of this becoming, end up hurting him in the long run, as it is later revealed that "he'd taken a nasty little bath on a biotech IPO whose shares he couldn't sell before June 15" (562). Gary has not positioned himself to become more successful or virtuous. He is rather more firmly locatable, more comfortable in his skin, and thanks to the assent of his wife, he more readily belongs. I believe it is precisely this attention to the role affect plays in human becoming that prompt critics to position authors like Franzen as coming after postmodernism. As critic Sam Tanenhaus claims in 2010, *The Corrections* "cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out

its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism" (qtd in R.G. Smith, 10).

Setting aside the homology between capitalist and affective economies, I'd like to entertain a slightly different analogy for the economy by thinking of it as "language-game" for the purpose of nuancing what I consider to be the ethics of authentication. In the last pages of the novel, Gary's mother Enid reflects on the dot-com bubble bust:

> It seemed to Enid that current events in general were more muted or insipid nowadays than they'd been in her youth. She had memories of the 1930's, she'd seen firsthand what could happen to a country when the world economy took its gloves off; she'd helped her mother pass out leftovers to homeless men in the alley behind their roominghouse. But disasters of this magnitude no longer seemed to befall the United States. Safety features had been put in place, like the squares of rubber that every modern playground was paved with, to soften impacts. (561)

I draw attention to this passage in order to reflect on whether, just as "safety features" can purportedly be built into an economy to shelter its participants from the destabilizing effects of self-correction, it might be apt to consider the respective prescriptions of Wallace and Smith to "be sincere" and "only connect" as, at least in part, specifications for "safety features" that can be built into language-games in order to "soften the impact" from the destabilizing effects of deterritorialization.

Deterritorialization, as I understand the term, is the effect of the constantly shifting protocols of authentication—a shifting that has been drastically accelerated by

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the wiles of the neoliberal marketplace. By way of example, consider the academic job market in the humanities. According to Jonathan Kramnick, whose article "How the Jobs Crisis Has Transformed Faculty Hiring" appears in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the nature of the hiring process is highly dependent on the field in question, and is everywhere "shaped by codes that are nowhere spelled out." Considered in terms of the authenticating human, these codes are comprised of memetic content that must be felicitously cited by job applicants in order to be authenticated as a "good candidate"— they are, in other words, the protocols of authentication. Ever since the 2008 recession, and particularly in the humanities, "the number of tenure-track jobs has precipitously declined," and "the implosion of the market colors everything—from the morale of students worried about their future to the habits of search committees enjoying a buyers' market." This crisis has resulted in "broad cultural and institutional shifts." Whereas "there used to be a single job list that appeared in print in mid-October with minor supplements added later in the year," "today that job list has gone digital, appears earlier with frequent updates, and has several major rivals." Whereas "hiring committees as a rule used to interview candidates at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association," now, thanks to the wide adoption of, to use Wallace's term, "videophony" (Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.), "a once-uniform timeline between advertisements and offers has come undone." The protocols of authentication, in other words, have shifted greatly and with great speed over the course of a decade.

One way to analyze this crisis specifically as a "crisis of authentication" is to consider what it means when a language-game becomes "a buyer's market." As I argue

in my second chapter, there often exists a cleft between what the pressures of the

language-game compel us to articulate (the strategic) and what we're actually feeling

(the mimetic), resulting in a swell of affective "leakage" in the subject. When occupying

the position of the seller in a buyer's market, the strategic drastically *over-inflects* the

language-game, leaving little if any "space-as-time" for the subject to engage in the

pursuit of sincere articulation, resulting in feelings of paralysis, as the subject is bereft of

a sense of "hereness" from which to venture forth. Given the inherently competitive

nature of such games, and given the dearth of opportunities for the subject to be granted

assent, the subject also feels alienated, with nowhere to belong. Such an ethics calls

attention to these feelings of paralysis and alienation, counting them as real human

suffering—suffering which indicates the existence of real impediments to "becoming."

To the degree that the subject experiences affective leakage as a kind of

suffering, it seems to follow that the establishment of a more robust sense-of-self would

require the subject to make sense of their condition through what Paul Ricoeur refers to

as the work of emplotment.[42] To articulate "what happened" using the power of narrative

temporally configures painful experiences on a trajectory of becoming that locates the

suffering self in the past and builds anticipatory momentum. Dave Egger's *A*

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius bills itself as such an emplotment. Amid his

self-referential and repeatedly digressive acknowledgements to the novel, there are

sections which "acknowledge the major themes of this book" (xxvii). One of those

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[42] See my discussion of this toward the end of my third chapter.

themes is titled "The Telling the World of Suffering as Means of Flushing or at Least

Diluting of Pain Aspect," and he provides as an example one of "the author's" reasons

for attempting to become a cast member of the seminal reality TV show *The Real World*:

> to purge himself of his past by trumpeting his recent life's events to the
>
> world, and thus, by spreading his pain, his heartbreaking story, to the
>
> show's thousands or millions of watchers, he would receive in return a
>
> thousand tidal waves of sympathy and support, and never be lonely
>
> again… (xxxi)

Distilled here are both poles of the dialectic of becoming: to felicitously trumpet recent

life events establishes a new sense-of-self, and to have that articulation assented to by

the other amounts to a sense-of-belonging.

In ways that resonate with Smith's insistence on the value of connection for, as

Forster puts it, "enlarging the space in which to be strong," Eggers refers to the

community he belongs to as a lattice:

> The lattice that we are either a part or apart from. The lattice is the
>
> connective tissue… I see us as one, as a vast matrix, an army, a whole,
>
> each one of us responsible to one another, because no one else is… You
>
> wear snowshoes when the snow is deep and porous. The latticework
>
> within the snowshoe's oval distributes the wearer's weight over a wider
>
> area, in order to keep him or her from falling through the snow. So
>
> people, the connections between people… become a sort of lattice, and
>
> the more people [who] know your situation and your story and your

> troubles or whatnot, the wider and stronger the lattice, and the less likely
>
> you are to … *fall through the snow*. (*Heartbreaking* 212)

Again, the strength of this lattice is contingent upon the other knowing "your story," and in order for this story to both locate the subject and also assure the subject that it belongs, it must be authenticated.

Intriguingly, Eggers repeatedly employs the acknowledgements of his book as an opportunity to engage in what he himself acknowledges as self-deprecation. His second reason for wanting to be a cast member on *The Real World* is

> to become well known for his sorrows, or at least to let his suffering
>
> facilitate his becoming well known, while at the same time not shrinking
>
> from the admission of such manipulations of his pain for profit, because
>
> the admission of such motivations, at least in his opinion, immediately
>
> absolves him of responsibility for such manipulations' implications or
>
> consequences… (xxxi)

I draw attention to this passage for two reasons. The first is that Eggers' logic here (the disclosure of manipulative motives absolves responsibility) implies an affect-centered model of subjectivity in which one's affects (motives) are themselves agentive, and thus not entirely under the performer's control. While I can imagine how owning up to the "impersonal" nature of one's feelings might be required for a particularly conscientious person to feel self-authenticated, I find the notion that acknowledging the agentive nature of one's affects somehow "absolves" the subject from responsibility to be a dangerous one. Such arguments, for instance, are often used to absolve sexual predators

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and shift the blame to the victim—"it's not his fault the way she dressed made him feel that way," etc. In my opinion, rather than absolve the performer, the agentive nature of impersonal affects only ever *also* indicts the cultural "system of images" that the performer registered and enfolded iteratively over decades of time.

The second reason I highlight the passage above is because Eggers is not alone in his penchant for self-deprecation. Smith, when referring to her own collection of essays in the foreword of *Feel Free*, writes that "essays about one person's affective experience have, by their very nature, not a leg to stand on" (xi). Wallace, when asked by Larry McCaffery about whether he intentionally aggravates a sense of loneliness in his readers, responds that, as time passes, "it gets harder to know for sure when [my fiction's] antagonistic elements are in there because they serve a useful purpose and when they're just covert manifestations of this 'look-at-me-please-love-me-I-hate-you' syndrome I still sometimes catch myself falling into" (McCaffery 136). I argue that this self-deprecatory tone of the affect realists after postmodernism is a manifestation of the ethics of authentication. In order for an articulation to be felicitously self-authenticating, the performer must acknowledge somehow the existence of any remainder, of any affective leakage that still persists despite the performer's best attempt to "be true to oneself." Additionally, to the extent that the subject wishes to truly feel like they belong, they must subject their emplotments of the self, warts and all, to the authenticating gaze of the other. It is only under these conditions that the lattice of the snowshoe can feel truly strong, and not contingent somehow on the strategic obscuring of one's own self-doubts.

If Eggers belongs, as Liesbeth Altes claims, "to a young generation of American writers who defend the value of lived experience and shared emotions against fashionable cynicism and post-modern ironic relativisation" (122), then Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* places him firmly within this generation. The novel's exposition takes place at Brown University in 1982, and Madeleine, the protagonist, who possesses "the reflexive ability to separate the cool from the uncool," has taken interest in postmodernism:

> If restoration drama was getting you down, if scanning Wordsworth was making you feel dowdy and ink-stained, there was another option. You could flee … the old New Criticism. You could defect to the new imperium of Derrida and Eco. You could sign up for Semiotics 211 and find out what everyone else was talking about. (25)

Semiotics 211 functions in the novel to present an idiosyncratic distillation of the canon and tone of high theory. This distillation places Derrida at its center, who is referred to by one student as "my absolute god," and whose *Of Grammatology*, another student confesses, "blew my mind" (26-27). There is also mention of Blanchot, Saussure, Pynchon, Barthes, Balzac, Culler, Lyotard, Gaddis, and others (26-28, 41, 48, 57). What work does this distillation perform?

In one sense, Eugenides employs theory so as to pit it against emotion. As Willa Paskin and others have noted, one of Madeleine's classmates, Leonard, is a rather obvious tribute to Wallace, in that he "is a philosophy double major who chews tobacco, wears a bandanna, disdains ironic detachment, and has a history of mental illness." In a

telling classroom scene, Leonard, who is elsewhere referred to as "touchingly sincere," takes issue with Peter Handke's novel *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*: "If I was going to write about my mother's suicide, I don't think I'd be too concerned about being experimental… Didn't this book strike anyone as a tad cold?" (50, 27). Another student named Thurston, who positions himself in the classroom language-game as the teacher's pet, replies: "Better cold than sentimental" (28). Thurston's "theory" is that Handke writes the novel in a cold, detached tone as the answer to the question, "how do you write about something, even something real and painful—like suicide—when all the writing that's been done on that subject has robbed you of any originality of expression?" In this exchange, the one contribution of the professor, who "didn't run the class so much as observe it from behind the one-way mirror of his opaque personality," is to drop a sarcastic zinger: "'Popular literature,' [the professor] quipped, proposing an essay title, 'Or, How to Beat a Dead Horse'" (26, 28). In response to his sarcasm, "a spasm of mirth traveled through the class." I argue then, that one of the ways in which Eugenides' work participates in the larger trend of his literary generation is to adopt a posture of critique toward 'postmodernism,' a posture which, like Wallace's, involves the construction of a straw man for theory for the purpose of casting it as a trendy but emotionally debilitating force in the cultural milieu of the last decades of the millennium.

Madeleine and Leonard enter into a relationship whose trajectory spans the length of the novel—a trajectory marked by Leonard's rapid decline into manic-depression. Before the extent of his mental illness has reared its ugly head, however,

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Madeleine declares to him for the first time: "I love you" (66). Leonard's response is to

pick up Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* and point to the phrase "I love you." As she reads

these words,

> Madeleine was flooded with happiness. She glanced up at Leonard,
>
> smiling. With his finger he motioned for her to keep going. *The figure*
>
> *refers not to the declaration of love, to the avowal, but to the repeated*
>
> *utterance of the love cry*. Suddenly Madeleine's happiness diminished,
>
> usurped by the feeling of peril. (67)

Theory looms like a specter in the narrative, imperiling not only emotion, but also the

ability for the novel's protagonists to find comfort in institutions structured by

conventional Western metanarratives.

The novel focuses primarily on two imperiled metanarratives, the first being "the

marriage plot," which is both the subject of Madeleine's thesis and the source of so

much angst in the novel, given her failing marriage with Leonard. The effect is to

highlight the embattled state of cultural institutions like marriage in light of the

ascendency of theory for Madeleine and her cohort, who maintain ambiguous

relationships with these institutions while nonetheless striving to find meaning within

them. The second imperiled metanarrative is Christianity. Mitchell, who is the third

major protagonist and also a student at Brown, is madly in love with Madeleine—a love

that goes largely unrequited throughout the novel. He is also, however, very much

infatuated with religion:

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He was trying to diagnose the predicament he felt himself to be in. And

not just *his* predicament, either, but that of everyone he knew. It was an

odd feeling… Everyone he knew was convinced that religion was a sham

and God a fiction. But his friends' replacements for religion didn't look

too impressive. No one had an answer for the riddle of existence. (96)

Again, Mitchell's "predicament" is the embattled state of Christianity, and while he is

constantly beset with doubts about the existence of God or concerns about his faith's

imbrication with Western logo-centrism, he, like Madeleine, chooses to "make the

Kierkegaardian leap" to pursue meaning within the discursive confines of Western

metanarratives (401). In general, this posture toward metanarratives, which can be

thought of as a postmodern incredulity held in tension with a pragmatic opportunism,

seems to be shared by the affect realists after postmodernism. In Smith, the church can

be a conduit for beauty,[43] in Wallace the appeal to a higher power can help addicts

recover.

Due to Mitchell's disappointment at the engagement of Madeleine and Leonard

and his drive to solve "the riddle of existence," Mitchell finds himself in Calcutta

volunteering for the ministry of Mother Theresa. The odd climax of this episode reveals

something about the kind of subject Eugenides assumes for his characters. After three

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[43] The epilogue of *The Autograph Man*, which is written in free verse, takes place in a
Jewish synagogue, and consists of lines from the Kaddish interspersed by descriptions of
audience member's gestures. In *On Beauty*, Howard Belsey finds himself deeply
disturbed at being moved to tears by a funeral service (286-287). In *NW*, Leah
encounters a statue of a black Madonna that affectively speaks to her in a church (83).

weeks of volunteering, where his tasks mainly consist of running errands or speaking with the infirmed, he is finally entrusted with a more taxing duty: he must bathe an elderly man who is in excruciating pain. Shortly afterward,

> Mitchell began to move. Already knowing that he would regret this moment for a long time, maybe for the rest of his life, and yet unable to resist the sweet impulse that ran through his every nerve, Mitchell headed to the front of the home … and up the steps to the bright, fallen world above. (321)

Mitchell is indeed haunted by his sudden abandonment of the ministry, and he is never able to account for "the sweet impulse" or why he was unable to resist it, belying an affect-centered model of subjectivity.

The novel's resolution, I argue, involves a potent depiction of the phenomenon of authentication, and ends with a granting of assent. Upon arriving home from his travels, Mitchell goes to stay with Madeleine at her parents' house—Leonard has abandoned her because he does not want to subject her to his depression any longer. Up until his last night there, their relationship is strictly platonic. Upon finally making love to the object of his desire, however, Mitchell is swollen with affective leakage, and he attends a Quaker service whose language-games privilege meditative silence:

> For a while, he went deep. He breathed in and out, and listened, among the other listening bodies. But something was different today. The deeper Mitchell went inside himself, the more troubled he was. Instead of his previous happiness, he felt a creeping unease, as if the floor were about to

give way beneath him… A still, small voice was speaking to him, but it was saying things he didn't want to hear. Suddenly, as if he was truly in touch with his Deep Self and could view his situation objectively, Mitchell understood why making love to Madeleine had felt as strangely empty as it had. It was because Madeleine hadn't been coming to him; she'd only been leaving [Leonard]. After opposing her parents all summer, Madeleine was giving in to the necessity of an annulment. In order to make that clear to herself, she'd come up to Mitchell's bedroom in the attic. / He was her survival kit. / The truth poured into him like light, and if any of the Friends nearby noticed Mitchell wiping his eyes, they gave no sign. (405)

Figuring meditative cognition here as a species of articulation, as Mitchell registers his own articulation, he feels something click, and experiences an inrushing of light, as though an affective traffic-jam has suddenly become sorted. This feeling is precisely the phenomenon of self-authentication as I have attempted to present it throughout this project, and it results in a becoming: Mitchell now sees himself as occupying the position of "survival kit" in the language-game of love.

After the service, he addresses Madeleine sincerely:

"From the books you read for your thesis, … was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then *they* get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last

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thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life? And so finally the guy doesn't propose at all, even though he still loves her? Is there any book that ends like that?" / "No," Madeleine said. "I don't think there's one like that." / "But do you think that would be good? As an ending?" (406)

The novel closes with a granting of assent, as Madeleine, "smiling gratefully," answers "Yes." Given its critical posture toward postmodernism, its affect-centered model of subjectivity, and its showcasing of the role of authentication in a dialectic of becoming, Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* aligns neatly within the affect realist impulse to "make room" for affect after postmodernism.

As a way of drawing this manifestation of my project to a close, I'd like to attend briefly to the limits of the authenticating human and propose a modest project for the purpose of subjecting the ethics of authentication to a test. By virtue of presenting authentication as a kind of accelerant or even a necessary ingredient for becoming, the ethics of authentication calls attention to the gradient landscape of privilege in the West, where certain subject-positions are less welcome to engage in sincere expression, due to the ways they have been racialized, gendered, or queered by the hegemonic, discursively embedded protocols that tend to "overcode" the majority of language-games in the West. Consider for instance, Shervin Assari's statistical analysis of data collected by the National Survey of American Life, which shows that self-identified African American males

gain fewer psychological benefits from their education attainment and income because of the pervasive racism and discrimination. As the SES [socio-economic status] of African American males increases, they are subject to more contact with whites, which in turn increases their discriminatory experiences. High-SES African American boys attend predominantly white schools and high-SES African American men work in predominantly white work places. Discrimination, which is shown to reduce the health gain of SES, is more common towards male than female African Americans. Furthermore, African American males are more prone to the effects of discrimination and environmental stressors on distress and depression. (5-6)

What Assari's work suggests is that, even when black men are in some sense "granted assent" in the language-game of the academic hiring process, they still find themselves having to occupy the position of "black man" in ways that undermine their opportunities to belong.

Having outlined some ways in which the ethics of authentication calls attention to human suffering as induced by an over-inflection of the strategic in language-games, I would like to similarly outline how such an ethics might *respond* to the suffering it identifies. Crafting a response to this brand of suffering, however, is greatly complicated by the fact that the subject described by the authenticating human is radically susceptible, in terms of the shaping of its affective heuristics, to experiences garnered over a lifetime in the context of the everyday mundane. In light of this susceptibility, any

single "response" in the form of a specific performance at a specific place and date seems futile in its capacity to effect change in affective responses built over decades. For this reason, perhaps, Smith points toward the mundane itself as the most effective space to change how people feel. If we were to conceive, however, of an efficacious response beyond personal relationships, it would need to be conceived of at the cultural level, and I argue therefore that an intervention at this scale cannot take place without the powers of production and dissemination of the very neoliberal marketplace whose dominant language-games such an ethics seeks to "correct."

In the fictional story-worlds of the novels of Smith and Wallace, the wiles of the neoliberal free-market increasingly encroach upon the mundane. Whether in the form of the high doses of media consumption Wallace is wary about, or in the form of the "system of images" that encage Smith's characters, the tendrils of the free-market's influence are largely figured in opposition to what Wallace describes as "those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 131), or in opposition to what Smith calls "genuine human connection," as evidenced by the disturbing resolution of her novel *NW*. Given the susceptibility of the authenticating human's feelings to being shaped by these forces, the ethics of authentication might seem, at first blush, to inherently be an ethics that pits the human against the market.

Intriguingly, however, the same tenet of "when we feel we become" that renders the authenticating human radically susceptible conversely guarantees that, due to variations in the order, frequency, and quality of that subject's experiences, that same

subject will always remain, at least to a certain degree, inherently unique, and there's a sense in which wariness toward the market results in a fetishization of the persistence of human singularity. Smith's observation here about the fiction of her generation seems particularly poignant:

> Physical death deprives you of body, of consciousness, but there is a second death discussed in these stories with more passion: the death of authenticity. This is an old, old postmodern story, but for so many of the writers … the problem just won't go away. Advertising stalks these stories as a corporeal, evil force in the world, replacing the human voice with advertising copy. *Just one second of unmediated thought please—* this has become the West's new literary pastoral pose. ("Burned Children" xvi)

Much like the London urbanite of the 17ᵗʰ and 18ᵗʰ centuries who fetishized the purity and simplicity of nature, the neoliberal Western subject fetishizes the "unmediated" thought. This sentiment is echoed by Sarah Banet-Weiser, who notes in *Authentic™*: "We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we *need* to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange" (5). In Banet-Weiser's analysis, however, rather than inevitably serving as an "evil force in the world" working toward the erasure of human emotions, the market can actually *foster* self-expression and solicit the granting of assent through the practice of self-branding:

Political virtue, emotions, affect, and morality did not, then, disappear

from the corporate landscape as a consequence of neoliberal doctrine and

practice (as Friedman suggested they must in order to do the actual work

of advanced capitalism). Rather, these dynamics have been reimagined

and made legible from the perspective of individualized politics. This

reimagining takes place in the context of a contradiction: the rise of

advanced capitalism, with its blurring between state and corporate

interests, and the marketization of individuals and the normalization (in

the US, at least) of self-branding are accompanied by what seems to be an

oppositional discourse, an increasingly public lament about the loss of

morals, ethics, community, and meaning in the lives of individuals. (145)

It may be, then, that the prescriptions implied by Smith and Wallace are themselves a

byproduct of the very market they position themselves against, and that it is only thanks

to that market that the need for senses-of- self and belonging has been rendered legible.

As such, rather than allow the project of such an ethics to be overdetermined as

sheer resistance to the Western neoliberal marketplace, perhaps such an ethics could be

better construed as one that seeks to install "safety features" that ensure enough "room"

for the subject at any location to engage in self-expression and be welcomed by the

granting of assent. From this vantage point, the marketplace can be considered a

problematic space in need of remodeling—a "construction zone" rather than the ground

zero for evil. Such a posture toward the market would prevent these efforts from aligning

with other, more insidious threats to the Western subject, such as the suspicion toward

media that has often characterized radical right-wing political agendas, most recently in the form of the #FakeNews sentiment that seeks to quell the attempts of journalists to hold the Trump administration accountable to the public it purportedly represents. By figuring the market as opportunity, this ethics can also valorize certain impulses like that of the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements which, articulated in terms of the authenticating human, are language-games that incentivize both the expression of trauma-as-feeling and the granting-of-assent to such expression.

Given its emphasis on authentication, however, this ethics would seem to call for more space than is currently allotted to expression over social media. The character limits imposed by Twitter (limits which in turn "train" our affect-heuristics to devalue more lengthy expression on social media) seem inadequate for the "space" required by the felicitous establishment of a sense-of-self. Beyond this, the medium of these expressions primarily relies upon text (though perhaps accompanied by a static image), and as I have tacitly argued by using the term "meme" throughout my project rather than more textually oriented terms, such restrictions arbitrarily limit the full bandwidth of human memetic expression. Additionally, the asynchronous and casual nature of "favoriting" and "retweeting" strikes me as a poor substitute for the power of assent granted by a physically (or at least synchronously) present witness. As such, this ethics would seem to account social media movements as *supplementary* to practices that leverage more space, bandwidth, and synchronous time.

I believe a good place to start, then, for installing the "safety features" of sincerity and connection at large scale and in a way that leverages the power of the

market is the humanities classroom. While somewhat dated and certainly framed by Marxist ideology, Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" makes the case that "the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological State apparatus [the church], is the *educational ideological apparatus*" (26). And indeed, as I show in my third chapter, there is evidence that Wallace in particular believed that the ascension of poststructuralist theory in the academy was responsible for the installment of irony as the dominant posture in Western language-games at the turn of the millennium. While I myself am not interested in the indictment implicit in such claims, particularly given the straw man it assumes by minimizing the emancipatory agenda that tends to inflect poststructuralist theory, I do find it convincing that the humanities classroom provides enough iterative time and space to deeply impress upon students the value of certain language-game conventions.

It is already the case that the humanities classroom is often billed as a "safe space" for those who occupy marginalized positions, and in general for the critical examination of hegemonic, discursively embedded assumptions. In the spirit of the Deleuzian nomad who lodges herself on a stratum and experiments with possible lines of flight, I suggest that this impulse for the creation of a "safe space" be leveraged toward the establishment of learning objectives that teach students how to identify and reflect upon the nature of language-games, how the pressures of these games can unjustly position us, how those positions can result in the build-up of "affective leakage," and

how such pressure calls for iterative self-articulation as an opportunity to become and a chance to adjust the protocols of authentication. Such a classroom would provide "room" for this kind of articulation through discussions and writing assignments that prompt them to intentionally engage in the establishment of a sense-of-self. Assent would be built-in to such assignments, as they would be counted toward a participation grade. In terms of considering concrete steps toward future work for my project, then, my first step will be to incorporate these objectives into my own pedagogical practices.

Beyond this classroom intervention, however, I can imagine the following direction for this work. My first step would be to leverage my vocational skills by designing and implementing a digital humanities project that would perform a "distant" and comparative reading of three aggregated corpora: the collective works of authors who have been periodized as 'postmodern,' the works of the authors under consideration here, and the 18th-century novel of sensibility. The goal of this project would be to detect linguistic patterns, such as the frequency of lemmatized words like 'feel,' a broad sentiment analysis, topic modeling, the tendency to use active or passive sentence constructions when referring to the behavior of characters, a network analysis to look at the "connectedness" of characters, etc. Such a project would provide evidence that either supports or troubles the assumption of a literature 'after' postmodernism, while also providing a roadmap for engaging in closer readings by identifying unaccounted for trends, outlying texts, and recurring themes.

Equipped with the roadmap provided by a distant reading, I would then develop a body of work that explores the following questions: Is "affect realism" really the best

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way to talk about the literature after postmodernism? How do certain authors contribute to this movement, and in what ways are they different? Why are certain authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Amy Tan, or Teju Cole often excluded from the discourse surrounding these authors, and should that be the case? How different or "new" is this impulse, and to what degree might it be a manifestation of recurring "crises" in the West? To what degree is a neurologically grounded model of the subject compatible with extant psychoanalytic discourse, and what problems do they respectively solve? To what degree does authentication overlap with the rhetorical notion of ethos? To what degree does this literature (and the ethics it seems to imply) challenge or reify neoliberal norms? Regardless of the direction my future work might take, I hope to have already made the case that, whatever's happening in the literature after postmodernism, it involves making enough room for affect so that the human that becomes can find a place to belong.

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