“Feel Your Pain”: Neoliberalism and Social Form in Contemporary American Fiction

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, for giving me much more than human capital, and to Jenny, for feeling my pain.
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SUMMARY

Early in the political roman a clef *Primary Colors* (1996), the Bill Clinton character is moved to tears by a working-class man’s struggles with illiteracy, and the narrator, also moved to tears, feels “a sudden...surprising affinity” for the candidate. This moment is emblematic of Clinton’s appeal to middle-class liberals like the narrator, whose “affinity” is based on Clinton’s own apparent affinity for the poor, an empathy that the Republicans, with their demonization of “welfare queens,” apparently lacked. This lack is vividly dramatized in a slightly earlier novel, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1990), when the title character, a Ronald Reagan fan, proves that he has “has nothing in common” with a homeless man by attacking him with a knife. If you’re poor, these books suggest, Clinton will feel your pain, whereas Reagan will only cause you more of it. But if their affective relations to the poor were diametrically opposed, their policy recommendations turned out to be remarkably similar – for while Clinton didn’t demonize “welfare queens,” he kept his campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it,” removing 7.7 million people from public assistance by 2006, granting them “structure, meaning, and dignity” (Clinton) by demanding that, in the words of the psycho, they “get a goddamn job.” Hence we see that what Ellis’s contemporary Mary Gaitskill called the nation’s “frantic twist to the right” is performed one way by Republicans and another way by Democrats, just as it is performed one way by Ellis’s novel and another way by Gaitskill’s texts themselves. This dissertation is about how the contemporary American novel participates in and sometimes resists this “frantic twist.”

At the heart of this new orthodoxy is a commitment to the primacy of “human capital,” a discourse which figures society as a marketplace of individual entrepreneurs rather than a space of structural antagonisms like the relationship between labor and capital. I argue that this same
SUMMARY (continued)
discourse tends to guide the formal choices and thematic concerns of millennial American fiction, which imagines worlds constituted by “inner experience” and personal choice (Gaitskill); by families and family values (Ben Marcus, Jonathan Franzen, and Jeffrey Eugenides); by “stakeholders” in multinational corporations (Richard Powers); and by subjects with the symbolic-analytic skills – “human capital” as a contemporary economist would define it - necessary to navigate a world of transnational complexity (Karen Tei Yamashita). “Feel Your Pain” thus makes a periodizing claim, differentiating this generation of writers – mostly born in or around the 1960s – from their postmodern predecessors, whose work was guided by an interest in impersonal systems of power, language, and technology. I show how the discourse of human capital generates not just new political logics but new literary forms, from Franzen’s Clintonian version of the “big social novel” to (in a more resistant mode) Sesshu Foster’s reinvention of the “alternative history” genre.

In examining the neoliberal novel, my project contributes, then, to a history of both political thinking and aesthetic practice, histories which intersect in these books and which are made clearer, in my view, by being told together. Moreover, by articulating the relationship between neoliberalism and the novel in terms of how they represent social contradiction, I take a critical approach that is importantly different from those which tend to dominate the field, which examine neoliberal culture in terms of the tension between inclusion and exclusion, for example, or the tension between competing “affective” states. I argue that such conceptualizations do not capture the central problematic of free market capitalism (which depends on irreducible hierarchies of wealth and power) and therefore do not capture the central problematic of neoliberalism itself.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“FEEL YOUR PAIN”: NEOLIBERALISM AND SOCIAL FORM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

In “Up, Simba,” David Foster Wallace’s account of his week on the campaign trail during the 2000 U.S. Presidential primaries, the author contrasts the candidacy of John McCain with that of the president then ending his second term in the White House, Bill Clinton, “with his big red fake-friendly face and ‘I feel your pain’” (545) – that is, Clinton’s famous remark, made to an AIDS activist named Bob Rafsky during a 1992 fundraising speech, that became shorthand for his posture of sympathetic identification with the disadvantaged.¹ If the most important question during the 1992 campaign was whether Clinton could truly “feel your pain” – or whether “feel your pain” was just one of “the politics industry’s proven sales pitches” (Wallace 227) – the most important question during the 2000 campaign, Wallace suggests, is whether you can feel McCain’s pain, namely the pain he felt as a POW during the Vietnam War, when he was shot down and thrown into a North Vietnamese prison with horrific injuries.² Describing these events with scenic-level detail, Wallace breaks in periodically to encourage his readers to: “Try to imagine it….Try for a moment to feel this….try to imagine at the time, yourself in his place, because it’s important” (164).³

It’s “important” we feel this “hurt” (164), Wallace suggests, in order to appreciate the enormity of what happened next, when, following McCain’s father’s promotion to commander of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific, the North Vietnamese offered to set McCain free. He refused, at the cost of four more years of imprisonment and abuse, because “The U.S. military’s Code of Conduct for Prisoners of War apparently said that POWs had to be released in the order they were captured...” (164). McCain’s “promise” is based in this refusal: “it feels like we know, for a
proven fact, that he is capable of devotion to something other, more than, his own self-interest” (165-166). Encountering a politician who is “capable of” acting in a way unmediated by “self-interest,” we believe he is capable of speaking that way as well: when “crowds from Detroit to Charleston cheer so wildly at [McCain’s] simple promise not to lie….the people are cheering not for him so much as for how good it feels to believe him. They’re cheering the loosening of a weird sort of knot in the electoral tummy” (Wallace 188). As this language suggests, then, Wallace’s interest in McCain’s pain ultimately refers back to the “pain” of voters, a pain which, despite the corporal image of an “electoral tummy,” is a thoroughly emotional pain: “Because we’ve been lied to and lied to, and it hurts to be lied to. It’s ultimately just about that complicated: it hurts” (Wallace 188). This hurt triggers political apathy among young voters, “the sort of deep disengagement that is often a defense against pain. Against sadness” (187). Clinton’s “fake-friendly” insincerity only makes this “pain” and “sadness” worse, which is why, whereas Clinton promises “empathy with voters’ pain,” only McCain can “promise...relief from it” (188).

Thus, despite dismissing Clinton’s rhetoric of “I feel your pain,” Wallace’s text actually performs a strikingly similar gesture, transforming material deprivation into emotional “pain” and the U.S. presidential election into a referendum on the candidates’ relationship to this pain. This logic persists throughout the text, even as Wallace comes to question the very possibility of the kind of unmediated political relationship suggested by Clinton’s empathy and McCain’s promise: just as Wallace’s use of direct address encouraging readers to “try to imagine it at the time, yourself in his place,” actually draws attention to their very distance from McCain, Wallace’s text as a whole draws attention to the fact that contemporary political journalism actually makes it more difficult to access “‘the real John McCain’” (234). Such journalism
transforms every instance of un-self-consciousness into “shrewd, calculated appeal” (232), and as a result, “the final paradox...is that whether he’s truly ‘for real’ now depends less on what is in his heart than on what might be in yours” (234). Still, while this conclusion suggests that the relation between what’s in the candidate’s “heart” and “what might be in yours” is more complicated than Clinton’s rhetoric implies, it nevertheless continues to frame the political in terms of these “heart”-to-“heart” relationships – even if, indeed, this heart-to-heart plays out inside the mind of individual voters, in the “interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit” (229).

Understanding this convergence with Clinton is crucial for understanding contemporary literary history, I argue, because it sheds light on another development represented by “Up, Simba,” the expression of an influential aesthetic vision most clearly articulated in a literary-critical essay that appeared during Clinton’s first year in office. In “E. Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1993), Wallace argues that postmodern “irony” has been “co-opted” (177) by “televisual culture” (172) and now serves – like the lying politicians excoriated in his later text – only to intensify this painful “interior war” between credulity and cynicism. To viewers who look to television as the “real authority on a world we now view as constructed,” Wallace suggests, the “most frightening prospect...becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability.... The well-trained lonely viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Lonelier” (181). In response, Wallace calls for writing governed not by the idea that the world is “constructed” (180) – the idea underpinning the “distinctive forms” of “cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist, post-WWII literature” (177) – but by writing that endorses “single-entendre values” (193), that treats “old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (193). Wallace’s 2000 foray into
political journalism is just such a text, of course: while it reflects his postmodern roots, with its exploration of familiar postmodern “techno-mediatic themes” (McGurk 42) like the intersection of politics and mass media, it also reflects a desire to move past these themes, as it treats with “reverence and conviction” the “passé expressions of value” at the heart of McCain’s appeal and, more fundamentally, the “role of emotion” in politics itself, focusing squarely on how the campaign “actually makes US voters feel, inside…” (“Up, Simba” 159).

What Wallace’s article also demonstrates, however, is that analyzing political differences in terms of how “US voters feel, inside” means disarticulating those differences from material inequalities, structural antagonisms, and even ideological disagreements, which are constituted by universalizing truth-claims irreducible to what’s “happening inside your head” (Wallace 165). In Wallace’s text, social and economic inequalities do not seem to matter, and ideological disagreements are treated as an afterthought, something that even someone who voted for a liberal Democrat (Bill Bradley) in the 2000 primaries (157) only remembers when he hears McCain’s canned, stilted speeches, which are “sometimes scary and right-wingish, and when you listen closely to these it’s as if some warm pleasant fog suddenly lifts…” (215). More typically, in fact, ideology is simply discounted altogether:

That John S. McCain III opposed making Martin Luther King’s birthday a holiday in Arizona, or that he thinks clear-cut logging is good for America, or that he feels our present gun laws are not clinically insane – this stuff counts for nothing (italics mine) with these Town Hall crowds, all on their feet, cheering their own ability to finally really fucking cheer” (190 italics original)

This disavowal of ideological conflict suggests that Wallace’s post-postmodernism should not be understood as a rejection of postmodern “irony” but as a different version of this irony: if postmodern fiction insists that truth is a function of one’s position within a constructed “system” (LeClair) or ontological “world” (McHale), Wallace’s post-postmodernism insists that truth is a
function of what’s happening inside one’s “head” or “heart.” Rather than a “New Sincerity” (Kelly), Wallace’s post-postmodernism is more accurately described, then, as a new social vision, one in which relationships are no longer understood in terms of impersonal systems of power and language but, instead, as interpersonal relationships, grounded in and dictated by the dynamics of the individual mind.

Clinton’s rhetoric and policies are structured by a similar logic, as he too tends to locate political and social conflict on the “inside,” from the empathy that, as we’ve seen, is supposed to differentiate him from his Republican opponents to the psychic “dependency” that can only be cured by “ending welfare as we know it,” another famous promise from his 1992 campaign (“Welfare Legislation” 1; People 164). And, like Wallace, this social vision distinguishes Clinton from his immediate predecessors: what was new about his “New Democrats” was that their disavowal of the impersonal antagonisms of class allowed them to embrace formerly right-wing political objectives like welfare reform and trade liberalization. What “Up, Simba” ultimately makes visible, then, is that Wallace’s post-postmodernism participates in a larger cultural shift, the same shift that has shaped contemporary American politics, including the Clinton presidency, and, I contend, contemporary American literature as a whole: the shift we have come to know as the neoliberal turn.

As Michel Foucault argued in his prescient 1978 *The Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, American neoliberalism has been defined by the triumph of “human capital,” the discourse which figures society as a marketplace of ‘entrepreneurs of the self,’ (226) defined (and defining themselves) by, as Wallace puts it, their “values, emotions, or vulnerabilities” – a logic that individualizes even when, as in Wallace’s texts, those “values, emotions, or vulnerabilities” all relate to a desire to “transcend our own selfishness” (227). In this dissertation, I argue that this
same discourse tends to guide the formal choices and thematic concerns of millennial American fiction, which imagines worlds constituted by “inner experience” and personal choice (Gaitskill); by families and family values (Ben Marcus, Jonathan Franzen, and Jeffrey Eugenides); by “stakeholders” in multinational corporations (Richard Powers); and by subjects with the symbolic-analytic skills – “human capital” as a contemporary economist would define it - necessary to navigate a world of transnational complexity (Karen Tei Yamashita). *Feel Your Pain* thus makes a periodizing claim, differentiating this generation of writers – mostly born in or around the 1960s – from systems-minded predecessors like William Gaddis, Don DeLillo, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas Pynchon. I show how the discourse of human capital therefore generates not just new political logics but new literary forms, from Franzen’s Clintonian version of the “big social novel” to (in a more resistant mode) Sesshu Foster’s reinvention of the “alternative history” genre.

1.2 "What is Human Capital?" 6

If capital is that which yields “income and other useful outputs over long periods of time,” Gary S. Becker explained in a 1989 lecture, then:

Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are capital too in the sense that they improve health, raise earnings, or add to a person’s appreciation of literature over much of his or her lifetime. Consequently, it is fully in keeping with the capital concept as traditionally defined to say that the expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc. are investments in capital. However, these produce human, not physical or financial, capital… (15-16).

As Michel Feher notes, “human capital” theory actually reflects an expansion of “the capital concept as traditionally defined”; here, in Becker’s reference to “lectures on the virtues” and “a person’s appreciation of literature,” we glimpse what Feher describes as an expanded understanding of “both input (not only education but parental and social influences, lifestyle
choices, etc.) and output (not only monetary earnings but satisfactions of all kinds” (Feher 26-27). As Foucault suggests, moreover, this “extension of economic analysis to domains previously considered to be non-economic” was made possible by “an extension of economic analysis within its own domain” (*Birth* ix). More precisely, the theory – as formulated in works like Becker's *Human Capital* (1964) and *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976) and T.W. Schultz's *Investment in Human Capital* (1971) – represents the extension of a specific approach to economic analysis, the neoclassical analysis of "substitutable choices… the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends" (222), to a consideration of labor. In this approach, a worker’s wages are conceived not as “the price at which he sells his labor power” (Foucault *Birth* 223) but as the product of such “substitutable choices,” specifically choices about the allocation of “scarce means” – time and money – towards investments in his or her personal development, those “expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc.”

These mutually entailing theoretical expansions mean that almost every kind of “output” can be understood as the product of choice – a loss of “monetary” income can be understood, for example, as a choice to pursue “psychic income” instead (Becker 11) – and that almost any kind of “input” can be understood as a form of “human capital,” that is, the thing said to be responsible for a person’s fate in the marketplace. “Human capital” is thus above all a way of attributing economic success or failure to something “embedded or embodied in the person” (Becker 112), whether a personal choice or a personal quality or some uneasy combination of the two. According to Foucault and subsequent interpreters of neoliberal “governmentality” – his term for “the rationalization of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty” (*Birth* 2) – this economic theory has been important for neoliberalism because of both its explicit conclusions about the value of education and its implicit reconception of the human subject. In
the latter sense, Feher explains, the theory of human capital suggests that instead of a “social subject” split between a productive self and inalienable right(s) to life guaranteed by the state – a worker who can safely enter into the productive realm precisely because of this split – there is simply the productive self, comprised of nothing else but that which they make of and for themselves, as understood by themselves; “a relationship of self-to-self,” Barbara Cruikshank notes, that is at the same time “a relationship that is governable” (232).7

According to this logic, the state’s role is not to maintain “domains such as health, education, culture, and the like” but to transform these domains into liberalized marketplaces wherein people can engage in the “valorizing of the self (understood as capital)” (Feher 33). This shift clears space for the flourishing of other discourses and techniques intended to help individuals achieve the security and well-being formerly guaranteed by the liberal state.8 At the same time, the logic of human capital – in the context of neoliberalism’s “explicit constructionism” (Mirowski 434) rather than “laissez-faire” approach – could also be used to argue against the retrenchment of the state. As Francine H. Jacobs notes, for example, in the late 1980s social progressives began adopting the "investment metaphor" (12), in which children are described as social or human capital, something that has "instrumental value ...to American society...for example, as future workforce participants and contributors to the Social Security system” (15). Indeed, this idea that social spending on education is crucial was present in the works of Becker and Schultz, who argued that such investments are not only the source of higher wages but the solution to “the mystery of modern abundance" (Schultz 3), that is, the source of the innovation and productivity that will reverse the tendency of the rate of profit to fall – a view that has become even more widely accepted in the context of “the modern information economy” ("What is Human Capital?"). Of course, both positions – the call for state liberalization and the
call for state “investment” – reflect an embrace of the logic of the marketplace, or what Jacobs describes as an “economic rationale” for education, and both positions reflect a faith in the power of liberalized markets to meet people’s needs, either by providing sufficient “human capital” for people to get jobs or, in the latter view, by providing sufficient jobs for people with human capital.9

Following Foucault and his interpreters, I invoke the concept of “human capital” to refer not just to the economic theory itself but to the broad range of contemporary discourses that reproduce this personalizing, market-friendly logic. These discourses include, I argue, important left-liberal political formations like third-wave feminism (which I explore in Ch. 2), communitarianism (Ch. 3) and stakeholder activism (Ch. 4), as well as contemporary academic discourses like affect theory (Ch. 2) and literary-critical transnationalism (Ch. 5), each of which I examine in relationship to both neoliberalism and to contemporary American fiction. Perhaps the most representative of these discourses is the political rhetoric which transforms moral and ethical “values” – typically thought to be valuable precisely because they cannot be reduced to economic “value” – into a form of human capital. For example, in Rick Santorum’s 2005 book, It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good (which I discuss further in Ch. 2), the Republican Senator from Pennsylvania argues that self-sacrifice and traditional “family values” are the most important source of “social, economic, moral, cultural, and intellectual capital” in American life (9).10 In Santorum’s account, in other words, to be a conservative “steward” of American heritage (7) – which we might assume he believes to be intrinsically valuable – is, paradoxically, to transform every facet of that heritage into a form of “capital,” that is, the substance which derives its worth from the free market. In pragmatic political terms, what Santorum’s text helps us see is that this transformation of “values” into various types of “capital”
functions as a way of disavowing built-in class tensions – tensions which tend to override such individual values – and thus as a way of countering those who argue for interventions like “income transfers as a solution to poverty,” which, according to Santorum, merely erodes the social capital of families and thus prevents them from standing on their own “two feet” (10). 11

As we saw above – to return to my key example in this introduction – this “values” rhetoric has shaped not just the political debates of the last few decades but the literature and criticism of writers like Wallace. Again, his political text helps clarify his literary analysis: the “single-entendre values” he has in mind are not social ideals like economic equality or popular sovereignty, but those which, as he puts it, “had to do with ‘character’” (“Up Simba” 228), values like “‘moral authority’” and a commitment to “‘service’ and ‘sacrifice’ and ‘honor’” (166). Thus, in yet another convergence with Clinton – who called for a “New Covenant” defined by an “old-fashioned” commitment to traditional American virtues like “responsibility” and “community” (People 230) – Wallace seems to adopt a social vision strikingly similar to that of politicians whom he would surely describe (like McCain’s stump speeches) as “scary and right-wingish.” Beyond his individualizing focus on “character,” his conflation of “passé expressions of value” with “emotion” (mentioned alongside each other in his critique of postmodernism) suggests that Wallace understands politics in the same way that neoliberals understand the free market, that is, not as a space marked by irreducible antagonisms, but as a space whose “truth” – what the market provides, which candidate gets elected – is ultimately a matter of individual psychic satisfaction: the “psychic income” experienced by consumers and producers, the “relief” experienced by voters, who select a candidate not because the candidate shares their beliefs (which are rendered irrelevant) but because the candidate satisfies their “deep need to believe.”
Such structural analogies are crucial, I argue, because they are more than just structural analogies. That is, one of my key assumptions is that a writer’s vision of how the market works is objectively intertwined with their vision of how ideology works (even if this link is not made explicit in the texts themselves, and even if the writer is exploring issues that seem to have little to do with economic relationships). Specifically, I argue that disavowing the material reality of class conflict has the same effect as disavowing the material reality of ideological conflict: both gestures make it impossible to see how one is already involved in these conflicts, and both make it impossible to resist what David Harvey has described as neoliberalism’s “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (19 emphasis original). In making this claim, and thereby insisting on the strong connection between the neoliberal technology of human capital and class struggle, I am, of course, making a gesture that Foucault and his interpreters usually resist. But I argue that without considering the connection between discourse that insists “There are no classes in America” (as Santorum did explicitly during the 2012 Presidential primaries) and those who tend to benefit or suffer from such discourse, critics effectively reproduce this discourse – when, as the editors of a recent collection on “Capitalist Realism” note pragmatically: “One need not even necessarily accept David Harvey’s capsule description of neoliberalism as a ‘programmatic’ restoration of capitalist class hegemony….to concede a drastic shift in the past four decades toward greater concentrations of wealth in the hands of an elite few…” (Shonkwiler 5)

By articulating the relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary fiction in terms of how they represent the antagonisms of class and ideology, I am taking an approach that is also importantly different, moreover, from those which tend to dominate contemporary literary criticism. As I show in subsequent chapters, contemporary critics tend to examine neoliberal
culture in terms of the tension between inclusion and exclusion, for example, or the tension between competing “affective” states. I argue that such conceptualizations do not capture the central problematic of free market capitalism (which depends on irreducible hierarchies of wealth and power) and therefore do not capture the central problematic of neoliberalism itself.

1.3 “It had to do with ‘character’”

As Wallace’s comment about “character” suggests, the logic of human capital has important ramifications for how contemporary American writers approach the formal choices – like characterization – that tend to define literary writing. Indeed, only by understanding neoliberalism, I argue, can contemporary critics understand aesthetic developments like the fact that, as Stephen J. Burn has noted, “post-postmodernism is more obviously concerned with notions of character than postmodernism” (23). In “post-postmodern novels,” Burn writes, “we get a fuller sense of a character’s personal history,” (24), a shift that “represents a younger generation’s more fundamental belief in the shaping influence of temporal process – that the things that happen to you in the past make a difference to who you are in the present” (25). In other words, the contemporary novel is more committed, compared to its immediate predecessors, to the idea that, as Becker might put it, the “input” you receive as a child shapes the “output” you will receive (or produce for yourself) as an adult. To dramatize the importance of such personal history, “these younger authors more freely interrupt time’s passage through strategically deployed analepses” (flashbacks) (Burn 24) and, in their choice of subject matter, write comparatively more novels about “generational succession” (25), that is, novels about the relationship between parents and children, a phenomenon I explore, in part, in my chapters on Gaitskill, Franzen, Marcus and Eugenides.
In “Up, Simba,” meanwhile, we see this interest in the shaping effects of “personal history” play out in Wallace’s own “strategically deployed analepsis,” his recounting of McCain’s experiences as a POW, during which he encourages his reader to “take a second or two to do some creative visualization,” self-consciously invoking the brainstorming techniques used in acting and writing workshops to come up with ‘life-like’ characters. In literary-historical terms, however, what’s just as important as Wallace’s characterization of McCain and his characterization of his own reader is his characterization of himself, the author, and how he thus represents the very relationship between subject, reader, and author. Like Norman Mailer, another postwar American novelist who dabbled in political journalism, Wallace makes himself a character, not in the sense of having a “personal history,” but in the sense of being present in his own text, as if to drop the pretense of impersonality and authority associated with the title of “political journalist.” Walla makes himself a very different kind of character than Mailer, however, using different techniques and saying something different about authorial status, differences which ultimately help us see the distinction between a neoliberal text like “Up, Simba” and a canonical postmodern text like Mailer’s The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History (1968).

In Mailer’s text, the author is unquestionably the main character, despite the fact that he is writing about the 1967 antiwar March on the Pentagon without being one of “the real principals, the founders or designers of the March” (53). He justifies this self-centered focus by explaining that:

…it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such a history should be not only off very much to the side of the history, but that he should be an egotist of the most startling misproportions, outrageously and often unhappily self-assertive, yet in command of a detachment classic in severity (for he was a novelist and so in need of studying every last lineament of the fine, noble, the frantic, and the foolish in others and in himself). Such egotism being two-headed, thrusting itself forward the better to study itself, finds itself
therefore at home in the house of mirrors, since it has habits, even the talent to regard itself. (54)

Even, then, as he mocks himself as “an egotist of the most startling misproportions,” Mailer suggests that his “habits” and “talent” for self-regard – which he literalizes by referring to himself in the third-person and which he attributes directly to his status as “a novelist” – make him uniquely well-suited to represent “history,” which he describes elsewhere as “interior” (“emotional, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural”) and thus beyond the limits of the “historian,” who must observe “the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry” (255). This interiority has (unlike in Wallace’s text) an objective social force – indeed, Mailer seeks to trouble such “comfortable opposites” as interior and exterior, “history” and “novel” (255) – which is why Mailer suggests the “symbolic war” (199, 230) over “what the March on the Pentagon had finally meant” (216) will have enormous consequences, with nothing less than the “death of America” (288) at stake. Because this war is “symbolic,” moreover, his status as “novelist” makes him uniquely qualified to also intervene in this history, which he explicitly attempts to do by framing the protest as the latest in a series of “rites of passage in American history,” (280), a self-sacrificing act in which the protestors are reborn as true Americans and make it possible for “the sins of America” (287) to be forgiven.

In sum, Mailer’s characterization of himself implies that as a writer, he is more powerful than his readers and, indeed, his subject matter, a conception of authorship bound up in a vision in which social relationships are understood as a function of larger-than-life historical narratives and sharp conflicts over national identity. Wallace’s characterization of himself is designed to suggest, by contrast, that he exists on the same plane as his readers and his subject, figuring a relationship between individuals rather than between incommensurable positions in an impersonal structure – a view of the aesthetic experience that mirrors his understanding of
political and social relations more generally. He achieves this characterization by making himself a character in the text but, unlike Mailer, not a major character, which might imply that he is more important than his reader. For the same reason, on the handful of occasions he does refer to himself (after the “Optional Foreword”), he uses not the “I” pronoun but the name of his publication, “Rolling Stone” – not to invoke impersonal objectivity or professional legitimacy, as we might assume, but to gently mock his own all-too-human desire for such legitimacy, as when he describes how a group of serious journalists “handed Rolling Stone their suitcases to carry, as if Rolling Stone were a bellboy or a gofer instead of a hardworking journalist just like them even if he didn’t have a portable Paul Stuart steamer for his slacks” (170).

Thus, whereas Mailer refers to himself in the third-person to highlight the singularity of his character and the authority of his position (often using capitalized titles like “The Beast,” “The Romantic,” “The Novelist,” and “The Historian”), and whereas he mocks himself in a way that suggests he is worth mocking precisely because he is so important (earlier in the long passage quoted above he refers to his misproportions as “monumental”), Wallace does these things to emphasize his lack of singularity, authority, and importance. Indeed, he also makes frequent use of the pronoun “you,” in the sense of both the “you” of direct address and the “you” of ‘anyone’ or ‘people in general,’ and these lines create the impression of an almost physical proximity to his reader, one friend talking to another about a (“very cool”) third friend, with appropriately casual diction and syntax: McCain will “tease the press and give them shit in a way they don’t even mind because it’s the sort of shit that makes you feel that here’s this very cool, important guy who’s noticing you and liking you enough to give you shit. Sometimes he’ll wink at you for no reason” (187). As in many of his fictional texts, in other words, Wallace uses self-reference not for the reason postmodern writers do, to dramatize that the world is “constructed”
(“E. Unibus Pluram” 180), but to make himself seem (as he puts it in his 1999 short story “Octet”):

….more like a reader…down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. (136 italics original)\(^{18}\)

Wallace performs these acts of authorial self-abnegation because he wants to dramatize his attempts to form an emotional (rather than purely textual) connection with his reader, a relationship based on what he suggests is a shared fear and confusion “about whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the way you do” (“Octet” 136). In this sense, the question of whether others “feel our pain” – and the “pain” we feel as a result of this questioning – is crucial not just to Wallace’s politics but to his post-postmodern literary style.

As I explore in more detail in my second and third chapters, this desire to form an emotional connection with the reader, and an interest in emotional relationships more generally, informs the stylistic choices and formal experiments of many important contemporary American writers. Other novelists in my study, like Richard Powers (Ch. 4) and Karen Tei Yamashita (Ch. 5), are less interested in emotional relationships and, in fact, less committed to the task of articulating the emotional lives of individual characters, but their texts are nevertheless still structured by a fundamentally individualistic logic, a logic that frames social relationships in terms of perception and shared epistemic values – relationships which can, indeed, cut across structural divides like those separating reader and author or (as in the “expanding symphony” imagined in Yamashita’s text) performer and conductor (239).

Few of these novels are as explicitly concerned with presidential politics as Wallace’s campaign coverage, of course, but each is clarified by being read in conjunction with texts by presidents and other politicians, whose writings help show the consequences of the social visions
implicit in these literary texts. At the same time that I articulate the similarities between these two types of texts, however, I ground my analysis in the consideration of those formal elements which tend to differentiate literary writing from speeches, legislation, and other such political writing. Indeed, I argue that it is only by attending to these formal elements that we can recognize the convergences between contemporary fiction and contemporary politics. The “political vision” (Powers “Last”) implicit in Richard Powers’s *Gain*, for example, only becomes legible by analyzing the relationship between the settings and plots structures of its two main narratives. This dissertation assumes, then, that to understand the literary history of the “frantic twist to the right we are now experiencing” (as Mary Gaitskill puts it in her 1991 novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*), we must first understand contemporary aesthetic practices and their history, as these histories intersect in these novels and are made clearer, in my view, by being told together.

1.4 **Structure of the Dissertation and Chapter Descriptions**

My dissertation begins by looking at two early 1990s novels that articulate the moment of transition between what we might call Reaganite and Clintonian neoliberalism, the moment when adopting Republican ideals become a winning national electoral strategy for Democrats, thereby cementing the neoliberal turn. That chapter and each subsequent chapter focuses on key debates generated by this rightward shift, including debates about the left-liberal embrace of welfare reform and libertarian discourse (Ch. 2), family values (Ch. 3), “nongovernmental” politics (Ch. 4), and trade liberalization (Ch. 5). Finally, my analysis concludes with a consideration of a novel from 2005 (Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Atzex*) that expresses what I argue is a post-neoliberal vision, both aesthetically and politically. Ironically, the novel dramatizes this vision by, in part, looking backwards, to a pre-neoliberal period when trade unions were more powerful. I end by
suggesting that this vision of collective action also poses a specific challenge to the academic reader interested in the relationship between contemporary literature and neoliberalism: namely it challenges them to think about their own position as an increasingly devalued form of “human capital” within the neoliberal academy.

Chapter Two – “Inside Doesn’t Matter”: American Psycho, Mary Gaitskill, and the Varieties of American Neoliberalism

In Mary Gaitskill’s Two Girls, Fat and Thin (1991), the “world inside me” is what matters. In Brett Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1990), “inside,” quite explicitly, “doesn’t matter”; what matters, instead, is “surface surface surface.” This difference is striking because both texts seem to be about the same thing: Ellis’s Patrick Bateman is a “yuppie,” and Gaitskill’s Dorothy Never is a follower of “Anna Granite – Yuppie Grandmother,” a transparently-veiled version of Ayn Rand. Both texts suggest, moreover, that representing the “yuppie” is a way of representing America’s rightward political turn in the 1980s. If Bateman’s focus on “surface” is representative of the world created by Reagan, then respect for the “inside” might be understood to equal a rejection of Reagan and his neoliberal ideology. I argue, however, that Gaitskill’s text represents a different version of this politics, a therapeutic politics of empathy that – as Bill Clinton’s welfare-reform policies make clear – has been the necessary discursive supplement to the right-wing critique of the welfare state. Articulating the boundaries of contemporary American politics, these novels do, therefore, serve to dramatize the nation’s rightward shift, which continues to shape not only the mainstream parameters of “right” and “left,” but also, as I suggest in my conclusion, the political tendencies of 21st century literary criticism.
Chapter Three – “The Family Gone Wrong”: Post-Postmodernism, Conservative Politics, and the Contemporary Novel’s Contract with the Reader

In their work and in their high-profile debate about literary difficulty, Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus embody countervailing notions of the ideal form of the contemporary novel – “the realists” versus “the experimentalists,” as Marcus puts it – but what is true for Franzen will turn out to be true for Marcus as well: their novels tell a “very familiar family story” because family is how they “make sense of the world” (Franzen “Conversation”). This focus on the family will also cut across the oppositions central to contemporary American politics, according to which the economic vision in Democrat Hillary Clinton’s *It Takes a Village* (1996) should be an alternative to the economic vision in Republican Rick Santorum’s *It Takes a Family* (2005). In both politicians’ books, however, society is comprised by bearers of human capital, which is “replenished” through policies designed not to redistribute wealth but to, in Clinton’s words, “strengthen families.” In this chapter, I argue that this same logic informs the fiction and criticism of “post-postmodern” writers like Franzen, Marcus, Jeffrey Eugenides, Aimee Bender, Dave Eggers, George Saunders, and David Foster Wallace, who tend to imagine social relations in terms of the family, or – even when considering larger social collectives – in terms of relationships that function like those of the family, relationships governed by emotional and ethical bonds, “the family” as imagined by politicians when they speak of “family values.”

Chapter Four – “Clean Hands”: Post-Political Form in Richard Powers’s *Gain*

Using the vocabulary of corporate governance, the relationship between the two main “characters” of Richard Powers’s 1998 novel *Gain* – Clare, Inc., a fictional American corporation, and Laura Bodey, an Illinois woman stricken with ovarian cancer, probably due to
exposure from the local Clare chemical plant – might be described as the conflict between “shareholders” and “stakeholders.” That is, their relationship seems to depict the tension between those who profit directly from a corporation’s activities and those who have a different kind of “stake” (in Laura’s case, her health) in those activities. Various critics have praised Gain for thereby disarticulating the political from more traditional oppositions like the struggle between nations or between classes; my claim however, is that the novel seems to disavow political opposition altogether. This disavowal is evident in the very structure of its twinned, non-intersecting storylines, which take the form of dramas of pattern recognition, driven not by conflicts of interest or ideology but by the question of whether characters will perceive the increasingly counterproductive dynamics of capital. There are no intractable conflicts here, not even between those “shareholders” and “stakeholders”; indeed, in Powers’s text, “all mankind became stakeholders.” I argue that this narrative logic reveals what, in fact, is already implicit in such “non-governmental” movements as “stakeholder activism,” which flourished during this period and which imagines a political field structured not by antagonism but by a plurality of interests, interests to be coordinated by a government that can somehow stand outside this realm of interests.

Chapter Five – SUPERNAFATA vs. El Gran Mojado: Alternative Fictional Realities and the Fight for Free Trade

In 1993, Bill Clinton’s support for the North American Free Trade Agreement put him at odds with American organized labor and critics concerned about NAFTA’s effects on Mexican farmers, workers, and indigenous populations. In this paper I examine two novels which seem to participate in this anti-NAFTA discourse, Karen Tei Yamashita’s Tropic of Orange (1997) and
Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex* (2005), both of which depict the struggles of Mexican laborers displaced by the effects of liberalization and driven to southern California in search of work. But, whereas Yamashita represents the conflicts faced by these migrants as cultural conflicts, using the conventions of magic realism to “narrate...the confrontation of antagonistic epistemes,” (Chiang 839), Foster’s text suggests such a framing is a mistake, imagining an alternative history in which non-Western cultural and epistemic values have triumphed but the violence of exploitation remains. At the same time that the novel dispels the utopian potential of this “Aztek” world, however, it also creates a different type of alternative timeline, with a narrative that ends before the moment it began and a plotting that deliberately raises questions about whether the ending will, in fact, segue into the beginning. I argue that this temporal disruption opens up precisely because the main character rejects his vision of an “alternative history” and decides instead to lead a unionization drive with his fellow workers, as if he can create the possibility of an “alternative future” only by embracing a vision of the world organized by class, not “episteme.” Situating both books in the context of the neoliberal turn crystallized by Clinton’s support for free trade, I show how this turn has produced not only a range of political positions but a range of aesthetic responses, including strange new deployments of non-realist literary genres like magic realism and alternative history.

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1 For footage of this exchange, see the Academy Award-nominated documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), which also provides valuable historical context about Rafsky himself. See also http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=231475, a long-running thread in which members of *The Straight Dope Message Board* debated for years about whether Clinton ever, in fact, said the phrase “I feel your pain.” This discussion includes a link to another famous moment during the 1992 campaign, when Clinton’s empathetic response to a debate question from an audience member about how the national debt has “personally affected each of your lives” seemed to distinguish him from incumbent George H.W. Bush, who was seen glancing at his watch. For footage of this debate moment, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/16/bill-clinton-debate_n_1971685.html.

2 The question of whether Clinton’s empathy is real or fake structures the plot of *Primary Colors* (1996), Joe Klein’s anonymously published *roman a clef* about the 1992 presidential election. In the novel’s first scene, political staffer Henry Burton, considering a job with Governor Jack Stanton’s presidential campaign, accompanies Stanton on a
visit to an adult-literacy program in Harlem. As one of the program's students tells the story of being passed up from grade to grade, only to be humiliated on his graduation day, Burton begins to cry:

I tried to gulp down the sob, but Dewayne had caught me somewhere deeper, and earlier, than politics.

Damn. I shuddered, tears leaking out of the side of my eye. And: Do you know how it happens at a moment like that, when you are embarrassed like that, you will look directly—reflexively—at the very person you don't want seeing you. I looked over at Jack Stanton. His face was beet-red, his blue eyes glistening and tears were rolling down his cheek. (8)

This scene, and the "sudden, sharp, quite surprising affinity" Burton feels for Stanton—*Primary Colors*’s fictional “Stand-in” for Clinton—encapsulates Stanton’s political "genius" (3); he is able to convince people that he not only sincerely cares about them, but that he actually *shares* their emotional experiences, that he connects with them on that level "deeper, and earlier, than politics" (7). Stanton proves this shared emotion by embodying it—by the "tears...rolling down his cheeks" (8), in this scene, and by his body language and his constant touching. During handshakes, for instance, his left hand and facial expressions are constantly sending messages: "If he doesn’t know you all that well and you’ve just told him something ‘important,’ something earnest or emotional, he will lock in and honor you with a two-hander, his left hand overwhelming your wrist and forearm. He’ll flash that famous misty look of his. And he will mean it” (3).

There is a tension here, of course, the same tension that Wallace will suggest is intrinsic to contemporary campaigning: Stanton is putting this meaningful, pre-political "affinity" on display for explicitly political purposes.

As Burton himself puts it, Stanton's performance in the adult literacy class—from the tears to a story about his "Uncle Charlie", who also didn't know how to read (a story that later turns out to be at least partially false)—is an "impressive bit of politics" (10). The book is haunted by the possibility that he does not, in fact, "mean it." Does Stanton really "feel your pain," to use Clinton's famous phrase, or is his body signifying emotions he does not really have in order to be liked? The novel ultimately resolves this tension between authenticity and self-consciousness through a strange synthesis. When Burton finally threatens to quit the campaign, fed up with Stanton's deceptions, Stanton tries to convince him to stay by admitting, "We live an eternity of false smiles— and why? That's the price you pay to lead" (364). But his words are less convincing than his body language:

"Henry, come on," Stanton said, stretching his arms out across the desk toward me. His voice caught slightly. His eyes narrowed, burrowing deep, searching my consciousness, desperate to make a stronger connection. His brow, his nostrils, the veins in his neck, his arms, his fingers—everything was reaching out, everything was focused on me. I knew this moment so well; I had seen him do it so many times. He could talk about an eternity of "false" smiles: His power came from the exact opposite direction, from the authenticity of his appeal, from the stark ferocity of his hunger. There was very little artifice to him. He was truly needy. And now he truly needed me. (366 emphasis original).

If, earlier in the novel, his "power" seems to come from empathy, his power in this moment seems to come from his capacity to make *himself* felt, to achieve the "stronger connection" he achieves by the end of the paragraph, a connection that happens beneath the level of his verbal politicking and that Burton doesn't so much understand as intuit. Now the prospective follower feels his pain, "the stark ferocity of his hunger."

3 Wallace’s article has a complicated publishing history. It originally appeared in the April 2000 edition of *Rolling Stone* as “The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub” (for which Wallace was awarded the 2001 National Magazine Award for feature writing). Next it appeared, at nearly twice the length, with all the material that had been cut from the *Rolling Stone* article, as “Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate,” published as an e-book “BY THE (NOW-DEFUNCT) "I-PUBLISH" DIVISION OF LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, INC.” (156). This text was republished in Wallace’s 2006 nonfiction collection, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, the source of my citations here. Finally, during the 2008 Presidential campaign, when McCain was the Republican nominee for President, the article was republished as a stand-alone print book entitled *McCain’s Promise: Aboard the Straight Talk Express with John McCain and a Whole Bunch of Actual Reporters, Thinking About Hope*.

4 Another way to put this is that “Up, Simba” reflects Wallace’s call for texts that are about the painful tension *between* postmodern self-consciousness and such "passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability," that is, texts which therefore do not simply reject the “insights” of postmodern fiction and contemporary theory in favor of “older and more naïve forms of communication” (Kelly 134). Still, this balancing act, which Kelly explores in the context of writing about Wallace’s fiction, reflects a crucial shift of emphasis.
Indeed, these “doubts” quickly “dissolve” once McCain starts talking directly to journalists or voters at Town Hall Meetings, where he is “smart and alive and human and seems actually to listen and respond directly to you” (215).

According to the editors of the *Journal of Human Capital*, which premiered in 2007, “human capital” is: …a person’s embodied knowledge, health, skills, and abilities as they affect production, exchange, and entrepreneurship, as well as disembodied human knowledge, as reflected in publications, patents, and other forms of intellectual capital that contribute to the formation and transfer of new knowledge and innovation. While paralleling physical capital—including buildings, factories and machines—as a means of production, human capital also has a special role in promoting productivity growth and economic development. (“What is Human Capital?”)

Feher has provided one of the clearest explications of Foucault’s account of the shift between liberal and neoliberal governmentality. As he summarizes, liberal governmentality posited a careful division between the realm of production, where calculating individuals can ply their “natural” tendency to maximize their interests, and the realm of reproduction, comprised of regulatory measures aimed at market failures and normative disciplinary techniques necessary for “the formation of subjects who can distinguish” between these realms (Feher 24). By contrast, American neoliberal governmentality rejects both this “naive naturalism” (insisting instead that markets and those who will thrive in them must be constructed) and this delineation between “the negotiable and the inalienable” (Feher 24).

Theorists of governmentality have described this transition as the shift away from the “social citizenship” of the mid-twentieth century welfare state. As that form began to develop in the late nineteenth century, Rob Aitken writes, “Problems were no longer addressed as individual pathology or ‘moral weakness,’ but as social questions that could be resolved in terms of a social whole or mechanisms of social government: social security or social insurance” (92).

Under neoliberal administrations, in place of these themes and practices: …are proposed notions of security provided through private purchase of insurance schemes, health care purchased by individuals and provided by the health industry, housing offered through the private sector and occupied through private ownership, efficiency secured not through selfless dedication and commitment of professionals but through the discipline of competition for customers. (Rose *Governing* 226)

Hence: “The political subject is now less a social citizen with powers and obligations deriving from membership of a collective body, than an individual whose citizenship is to be manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options” (Rose *Governing* 226).

Since Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism – and particularly since the publication of *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* in 1991 – these and other researchers have begun to explore the rationalities implicit in the neoliberal technologies of the self. Their analyses typically proceed by showing how some version of “self-actualization” is posited as a human need, and then linked with an individual activity framed as the means to achieve that need: investment for average citizens (Harmes, Aitken, Langley); embracing personal health-care “optimization” (Rose *Life Itself*); creative work (Rose *Governing*, Hicks); or simply working on one’s “self-esteem” or “self-appreciation” (Cruikshank, Feher).

For an analysis of how the acquisition of “human capital” is mediated by institutionally generated, socially necessary stratification ignored by neoliberal economists, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "The Problem with Human Capital Theory – A Marxian Critique” (1975); for an analysis of how neoliberal novels misrecognize this stratification, imagining education as a way of guaranteeing meritocracy and thus "justifying" inequality, see Walter Benn Michaels, "The Neoliberal Imagination" (2005).

Santorum identifies himself, like then-President George W. Bush, as a "Compassionate Conservative" (Santorum x), a label that many have suggested was an attempt by Republicans to co-opt Clinton’s politics of empathy. See, for example, Jonah Goldberg’s “Compassionate Conservatism Redux,” John Sexton’s “It’s the Compassion Narrative, Stupid” and Lisa Duggan’s *The Twig light of Equality*? (16).

Santorum’s metaphor for self-sufficiency – families standing on their own “two feet” – perhaps says more about his patriarchal view of the family than he intends. For a more canonical neoliberal polemic against economic redistribution, see Friedrich A. Hayek’s “Equality, Value and Merit.” Unlike Santorum, Hayek makes a point of
delineating between individual “merit” and “value” and making the “strange and even shocking” contention that the latter should not have any relation to the former (88). Merit – by which he means not the “objective... ‘merit’ of an idea, a book, or a picture,” but the “merit acquired by the person who has created them”, (97), i.e. whether the person acted morally, tried hard, or is personally responsible for their success – can never be accurately assessed by other people, while the usefulness or “value” of what a person produces has an objective presence. In light of this epistemological difference, Hayek argues that “it is an essential characteristic of a free society that an individual’s position [i.e. how much money they have] should not necessarily depend on the views that his fellows hold about the merit he has acquired” (88).

Of course, even while delineating between market “value” and subjective and objective moral “merit,” Hayek’s essay performs the same basic gesture as Santorum’s book, which is to make the market the key determinant of social relationships and “an individual’s position.” Hayek’s own chief moral commitment is to “individual liberty (80) and the “limitation of all coercion by equal law (83), including the limitation of “all attempts to impress upon society a deliberately chosen pattern of distribution” (82). This means, of course, that “distribution” will correspond to what the market ‘undeliberately’ produces; every other possible source of motivation is too “subjective” (89) to serve as a guide to social policy.

12 Many of the theorists of neoliberal governmentality, including Feher, Nikolas Rose, Rob Aitken, and Paul Langley, have expressed an ambivalent relationship to the forms they describe, often because they see the potential for what Heather J. Hicks (a literary critic influenced by Rose) describes as the “new, more hopeful horizons” in these “new forms of subjectivity” (205). In addition, many of these theorists have been critical of analysis like that of Adam Harmes, who argues that “the emergence of a widespread ‘investment culture’ – one of the new neoliberal discursive forms – is a way of “strengthening the hegemonic dominance of finance capital — linking the perceived interests of tens of millions of workers to its own by embedding ‘investor practices' in their everyday lives and offering them the appearance of a stake in the neoliberal order” (1). This type of analysis ignores, to quote Langley, “the partial, fragmented, and discontinuous features” (86) of financialization and other neoliberal phenomena.

In this sense, the theorists of governmentality evince the same resistance to “totalizing visions” (Vint 411) that, as I discuss briefly in my final chapter, continues to shape contemporary literary criticism. In response, we can look to Nicholas Brown’s thoroughgoing defense of “the necessity of the concept of totality” (9) in *Utopian Generations*:

At a more concrete level, it is often said that the concept of totality allows no room for contingency; totalizing narratives neglect the openness of the struggles that constitute real history. Here one might repeat a gesture that seems facile yet unanswerable, namely that the narrative of the end of totalizing narratives is itself a totalizing narrative… [furthermore] the imagined lack of frame turns out to be disavowed totalization whose truth only emerges when it is made explicit….What the rejection of the frame as such produces, paradoxically, is the reliance on one particular unacknowledged frame, namely capitalism as the ahistorical horizon of all history. (11)

If this debate marks the “irreducible divergence” (Balibar 52) between the Marxist and Foucauldian understanding of the structure of social conflict, we can also respond to the theorists of governmentality by simply acknowledging what Foucault himself pointed out about neoliberalism. As he summarizes, the neoliberal claim was, in part, that welfare policies like Social Security actually “advantaged the better off to the detriment of the worse off” (*Birth* 200) and that spreading the “game” of economic competition as far as possible would be to “the advantage of the greatest possible number of people” (*Birth* 201). Whether or not the first part of the claim is true – the work of Robert Brenner and Duménil and Lévy suggests otherwise – the second part of the claim is clearly not: in the years since Foucault’s lectures, as neoliberals have seized “state power” in the United States and England (Harvey 40), the “economy has functioned increasingly well, but for the wealthy ever more satisfactorily” (Brenner xxviii).

Indeed, in Foucault’s account, inequality and a functional class division is part of the *explicit content* of neoliberalism. For instance, he describes the “negative tax” – designed to keep the poor above a basic threshold of “absolute poverty” – as a way of avoiding redistributive policies aimed at “relative poverty” (i.e. inequality), and as a way of creating “a kind of infra- and supra-liminal floating population, a liminal population which, for an economy that has abandoned the objective of full employment, will be a constant reserve of manpower which can be drawn on if need be, but which can also be returned to its assisted status if necessary” (*Birth* 206). Accepting neoliberalism on its own terms means accepting, in effect, the *justness* of both inequality and class dominance – the antithesis of what it means to imagine “new, more hopeful horizons.”
In A Pinnacle of Feeling (2008), McCann argues that many of the canonical texts of post-Civil War American literature, including The Armies of the Night, have been structured by the promises and paradoxes of what he calls “presidential government,” the discourse that called for “robust executive leadership” and “the creation of a new political system in which Americans voters would abandon their party affiliations to embrace a personal relationship with the president,” who “would ideally serve as a national redeemer who could restore the sovereignty of the people and return America to its democratic mission” (x). Both books argue that the causes of the long downturn were intrinsic to capital, specifically the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and both reject the "supply-side explanation" that the downturn was caused by factors extrinsic to the market — i.e. the costs formerly necessary (or seen as necessary) to guarantee social reproduction, such as high wages and employment, strong labor unions, and a large welfare state. They also concur that, instead of restoring productivity, the main effects of the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Bush II economic policies - basically attempts to lower all of these costs, as well as a "monetarist" emphasis on keeping interest rates high — were to worsen the downturn and transfer wealth to "finance," by which, Duménil and Lévy write, "we do not simply mean the financial sector of the economy, but the complex of capitalist classes, whose property materializes in the holdings of securities (stock shares, bonds, Treasury bills, etc.) and financial institutions (central banks, banks, funds, etc.)" (Duménil 16). This deepening domestic inequality has been matched, moreover, by a deepening inequality between the global center and the global periphery: finance has benefited from neoliberalism, and American finance has benefited most of all, even, or in some cases because of, the "vast series of crises" caused by the internationalization of capital and markets (Duménil 128; 98-109).

Wallace proceeds to perform this “creative visualization” himself, offering a long string of rationalizations in a run-on sentence that culminates in a bit of stream-of-consciousness: “and by the way oh Jesus imagine it a real doctor and real surgery with painkillers and clean sheets and a chance to heal and not be in agony and to see your kids again, your wife, to smell your wife’s hair...” (165). As I suggested above, this passage actually stages the failure to access that “dark and box-sized cell in a certain Hilton half a world and three careers away” (233), and thus it helps enact the displacement of Wallace’s concern from McCain’s “self-interest” to those of voters; immediately following this moment of imagined interiority, Wallace seems to retreat: “None of us” can know whether we would have refused the offer because, “It’s hard to even imagine the levels of pain and fear and want in that moment, much less to know how we’d react. None of us can know” (165).

In the text’s “Optional Foreword,” Wallace tells us that “My own resume happens to have ‘NOT A POLITICAL JOURNALIST’ right there at the very top” (156).

In The Armies of the Night’s two-part structure is designed to perform this democratic redemption, McCann argues, with Mailer the novelist playing the role of the presidential “redeemer.” Whereas “in book 1, ‘history as a novel,’ Mailer as character is... bumblingly preoccupied with personal reputation...in a way that makes his individual story an apt representation...o f a confused and privatized country,” in “book 2, ‘the novel as history,’ Mailer the writer transforms that embarrassing document into what he calls ‘a collective novel’ by abandoning public reputation for a redemptive encounter with ‘the interior,’” (142). The point, McCann writes, is clear:

History and the housing projects of fact are appropriate for an incoherent, media-besotted society, as is the self-preoccupation of the egocentric author. The novel as a personal exploration and act of courage, on the other hand, delivers the genuinely collective action.... [Hence] We move from the denunciation of an atomistic, liberal empire to the vision of a virtuous republic characterized by the heroic action of its citizens and by their mutual commitment to their shared national purpose. (142)

In this reading, then, “history” and “the self-preoccupation of the egocentric author” need to be overcome by, and in the name of, “the novel” and “collective action.” This interpretation seems to run to counter to Mailers’ own statement, at the end of book one, that “in writing his personal history of these four days, he was delivered a discovery of what the March on the Pentagon had finally meant” (216), an account that suggests that book one’s “personal history” was not the obstacle to 'deliverance,' but its very source.

More to the point, I argue that McCann’s reading overstates the degree to which the text opposes “history” and the “novel,” when, as I suggested above, Mailer seeks to trouble such “comfortable opposites” (255). Book One has a third-person narrator who can access the interiority of a specific ‘character’ (Mailer himself), not a “first-
person narrator” as McCann writes (141), precisely so that Mailer can deliver nonfiction prose in narration that -- unlike first-person or surface-level third-person – is uniquely associated with fiction writing. For a similar reason, it’s important to note (as McCann does not) that Book Two actually begins as “a History,” and only transitions into the “collective novel” about half-way through, when the narration encounters the point where “no documents can give sufficient intimation” of what really happened during the March and must thus “enter that world of strange lights and intuitive speculation which is the novel”; nevertheless, the prose that follows is “still written in the cloak of a historic style, and therefore conspicuously attempting to be scrupulous to the welter of a hundred confusing and opposed facts” (255).

Thus, rather than simply spurning the “housing projects of fact” in favor of interiority, as McCann suggests, Mailer asks us to reflect on the complex relationship between the two, a relationship that is only becoming more complex, as he suggests elsewhere in the text, as “the century was entrenching itself more deeply in the absurd” (54). Now that “History inhabits a crazy house,” he writes, “egotism may be the last tool left to History” (54). In light of this interest in the relationship between fiction and history, I find the arguments that put Mailer’s “nonfiction novel” in the same category as postmodern texts like E.L. Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel and Robert Coover’s The Public Burning more plausible than McCann’s own categorizing gesture, which is to link Mailer with “writers as diverse as Whitman, Wright, Ginsberg and Ellison,” which he does on the basis of their shared “vision of national renewal” (144).

17 Wallace’s own explanation for referring to himself this way establishes this gently self-deprecating, humanizing tone:

I was absurdly proud of my Rolling Stone press badge and of the fact that most of the pencils and campaign staff referred to me as “the guy from Rolling Stone.” I will confess that I even borrowed a friend’s battered old black leather jacket to wear on the Trail so I’d better project the kind of edgy, vaguely dangerous vibe I imagined an RS reporter ought to give off. (You have to understand that I hadn’t read Rolling Stone in quite some time). (158)

18 In fact, the author’s great fear in the story is being mistaken for “just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist” (135). The story is comprised of a multi-part “Pop Quiz” that concludes with a Pop Quiz aimed at “a fiction writer” writing just such story, in which the writer must decide whether to included this final “Pop Quiz” or scrap the project altogether; it concludes with the observation that doing so (which he obviously does) will put him at risk of looking “fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure” (136). In this sense, Wallace is repurposing “tired old S.O.P metafiction” (130) in order to do the thing he called for in his essay critiquing postmodernism, that is, take the risk of “leaving oneself open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability.” For an incisive (albeit, in my view, overly celebratory) analysis of how this and other Wallace fictions reflect his understanding of the author’s relationship to the reader, see Adam Kelly’s “The New Sincerity.”
2. “INSIDE DOESN’T MATTER”: AMERICAN PSYCHO, MARY GAITSKILL, AND THE VARIETIES OF AMERICAN NEOLIBERALISM

Late in Mary Gaitskill’s Two Girls, Fat and Thin (1991), freelance journalist Justine Shade, the “thin” girl of the title, goes to a chic café to interview Dorothy Never, the “fat” girl, about Dorothy’s idol, Anna Granite, a transparently veiled version of Ayn Rand. Although Justine has interviewed her once before, in this “precious cafe” Dorothy “seemed even more huge…even more insistently strange…” (263). For a moment, Justine:

… felt embarrassed to be sitting next to a fat lady wearing hideous chartreuse sweat pants, big red hair and the plastic jewelry of a drag queen with an ironic sense of humor. Horrified, she considered the possibility of an acquaintance coming in and seeing her with this person, or even the waitress, who would surely notice how odd they looked together. Then the stubborn kid who had defied society once before spoke up; "I don't care what you douche-bags do. I'm not gonna hate Emotional anymore," and she sat down smiling. (263)

"Emotional" is the nickname of a sixth-grade classmate of Justine’s who is picked on for being overweight and “uncool” (102), in both senses of the word – she is unstylish, and she wears her emotions on her sleeve, “the worst insult imaginable” (99). Dorothy reminds Justine of Emotional not only because she too is overweight, but because she too is uncool: Dorothy is unstylish because her aesthetic tastes, from her clothes to her love of Anna Granite, as well as her obsessive attachment to these tastes, run to the melodramatic.

The text credits childhood sexual abuse for Justin e’s initially hostile attitude toward Dorothy and Anna Granite, toward Emotional, and toward emotion itself – a hostility that also plays out in a series of sexual relationships in which she allows herself to be objectified, or objectifies her partner, in masochistic or sadistic ways. Overcoming this hostility is key to her character development and the plot of the novel; in this sense, by transcending her aversion to Dorothy's lack of style and physical unattractiveness, as she does in the passage above, and by learning not to “hate Emotional,” as she seems to do by the end of the text, Justine performs two
versions of the text's main theme: the insistence that the “world inside me” (118), the location of emotion, individuality, and subjectivity, is what matters, and that ‘outside,’ the place where your body and style are judged and objectified by “society,” does not.

This insistence makes Two Girls, Fat and Thin very different from another novel of this period, Brett Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1991), in which “inside,” quite explicitly, “doesn’t matter” (397, emphasis original); what matters, instead, is “surface surface surface” (342, 375).

Unlike Justine, American Psycho’s Patrick Bateman never resists his horror at the sight of unsexy bodies and bad clothing. At the video store:

…I wait for twenty minutes to be checked out by a dumpy girl (five pounds overweight, dry fizzy hair.) She's actually wearing a baggy, nondescript sweater – definitely not designer, probably to hide the fact that she has no tits, and even though she has nice eyes: so fucking what?....I keep swallowing, thinking I have to see her shoes, and so as inconspicuously as possible I try to peer over the counter to check out what kind of shoes she’s wearing, but maddeningly they’re only sneakers – not K-Swiss, not Tretorn, not Adidas, not Reebok, just cheap ones. (112-113 emphases original)

This desire to label and to objectify – to assign status on the basis of labels or (what amounts to the same thing) reduce others to simply blank slates upon which he can write his desires – extends to its logical endpoint, murder: “The things I could do to this girl’s body with a hammer, the words I could carve into her with an ice pick” (112).

And, whereas Two Girls, Fat and Thin is a novel of psychological development and subjective experience, exploring the “inner world” (114, 133, 167) of its two main characters, American Psycho is, as this passage indicates, a novel that stays at “surface” level: Bateman’s narration sticks mainly to either listing the sensory details of his expensive life-style, including the brand names of every item of clothing he sees, or passing judgment on these details on the basis of their price, trendiness, or physical attractiveness. In American Psycho, moreover, there is no psychological development, in the sense that we learn almost nothing about Bateman’s
history prior to the events of the novel, including nothing about his development into a "fucking evil psychopath" (20), and in the sense that he undergoes no apparent development in the course of those events. Instead of cohesive character and plot development, we read an episodic narrative in which a basically static character passes through a series of discontinuous situations and settings – “Video Store then D’Agostino’s,” “Lunch with Bethany,” “Bum on Fifth,” etc. – a structure that puts emphasis not on Bateman’s unfolding relationship with himself, but on his interactions with the people and places named in the chapter titles.

This difference in emphasis, inside versus outside, is also striking because both texts are about the same thing: Patrick Bateman is a “yuppie” (199, 212, 394) and Dorothy Never is a follower of “Anna Granite – Yuppie Grandmother” (290). Both texts imply, moreover, that representing the “yuppie” is a way of representing America’s “frantic twist to the right” in the 1980s. In Two Girls, Fat and Thin, Justine articulates the link between "yuppie," "Anna Granite" and right-wing politics in her magazine article about the author:

This cultural utopia of greed, expressed in gentrification and the slashing of social programs, has had its spokesperson and prophet for the last fifty years, a novelist whose books are American fantasies that mirror in all its neurotic excess, the frantic twist to the right we are now experiencing. Anna Granite, who coined the term 'the Truth of Selfishness,' [a reference to Rand's The Virtue of Selfishness] has been advocating the yuppie raison d’être since the early forties; it is only now that her ideas are being lived out, in mass culture and in government. (288)

In American Psycho, meanwhile, this link between “yuppie” and right-wing “government” is established by the novel’s final chapter, which makes an obvious parallel between Bateman, the harmless “boy next door” who is really a “fucking evil psychopath” (20) and Ronald Reagan, who presents himself as a “normal,” “undangerous,” “harmless old codger” despite having been “involved in such total shit” (396-397) – a connection made in the same scene in which Bateman insists that “inside…doesn’t matter.”
One implication of this parallel, in Ellis's novel, is that Bateman’s focus on “surface” is representative of the world created by Reagan (and Margaret Thatcher and other right-wing leaders), the world of what we now call neoliberalism. That is, "Bateman is best understood," as Thomas Heise writes, "as Ellis's fantasy of the quintessential neoliberal subject” (29). If valuing "surface" over inside means relating to other people only as potential objects of consumption – as sources of satisfaction, markers of status, or (in the case of the stream of homeless people in *American Psycho*) superfluous – and if doing so equals the embodiment of neoliberal logic, then we might expect that respect for others’ "inside" equals a rejection of this logic.¹ Indeed, Gaitskill's novel can plausibly be read in these terms, as it seems to satirize Rand – whose idealization of capitalism and the individual made her "the 'novelist laureate' of the Reagan administration" (Burns 279) – by suggesting that the truth of “‘the Truth of Selfishness’” is that its adherents are nothing like the characters in Granite’s books; instead of “proud outcasts moving through a crowd of resentful mediocrities” (132), her followers are themselves “resentful mediocrities,” “outcast” precisely because they don’t know and don’t care what happens in the minds of others. That is, even as the novel seems to endorse Justine's refusal to judge Dorothy on the basis of her looks and style, it also makes Dorothy an often ridiculous figure, showing that her hostile, obsessive relationship with Justine is dictated by her own self-absorbed fantasies, with little understanding of what is actually happening in Justine's mind – a self-absorption accentuated by the fact that Dorothy's sections are narrated in first-person, in contrast to the close third-person narration used to tell Justine's story.

Despite its ironic treatment of the novelist who influenced neoliberal politicians, however, Gaitskill's novel is not a rejection of neoliberal politics; instead, I argue, it embodies a different version of this politics, namely the liberalism of the post-Reagan left. As I will
show, just as right-wing political discourse insists that individuals must be ‘free to choose’ when it comes to how they work and how they consume, Gaitskill’s texts insist that individuals must be free to choose what type of behavior best accords with their own “inner” experience of the world, including controversial behavior like sadomasochism, sex in the workplace, or – as in her most famous story, “Secretary” – both at once. Like (what used to be known as) an ‘economic conservative,’ Gaitskill is committed to the primacy of personal choice, as both a condition of being and an ideal; like an economic conservative, she thereby re-imagines social problems as personal problems. The difference is that her social imaginary leaves room for the power of therapeutic intervention: the self may have to be taught not to “hate Emotional,” including the Emotional within.

This individualizing logic helps explain why Two Girls, Fat and Thin turns out to be a refinement of Rand's "rational egoism," not a critique. Gaitskill creates ironic distance between Dorothy and the novel's readers, not (as I discuss later in the paper) so that we may see the limitations of Dorothy’s political vision, but so that we may see the limitations of her relationship with her own desires, namely her desire for the kind of "Emotional" nakedness that Granite would have scorned. The novel suggests she is in denial about what she really wants, as we see Dorothy act "desperate...for human contact" (181), while at the same time feeling guilty for these acts because she knows "Anna Granite would not have approved" (183). In other words, the point is not to critique Dorothy for being so caught up in her "inner world" that she becomes oblivious to the "inner world" of others; the point is that Dorothy is not inward-looking enough. She is guilty of violating one fundamental tenet of "Definitism" [the novel's version of Objectivism] – “Don't deny your own experience" (27) – while adhering too closely to another, its "insistence on strictly objective truth" (14). As Gaitskill spells out in an interview, Dorothy:
...has been very limited and deluded by trying to live her life according to this other person’s ideas as expressed through fictional characters... At a certain point it’s useful to her but there’s a lack of fluidity. She makes it to be like “This is it, this is the literal truth,” whereas if it were something that’s held a little more lightly, it might not have that limiting effect. ("Interview by Matthew Sharpe")

That is, Gaitskill and her novel seem to accept Granite/Rand's belief in "the right of the individual to seek out whatever serves and pleases him, as long as others are not trampled upon" (182), but rejects her belief in "literal truth," the definitiveness of Definitism. The novel asserts the personal nature of truth itself: something is 'true' if it accords with your own internal experience, if it makes you feel whole and not "limited," if it is – as Dorothy herself puts it – “empowering” (27).

Such subjects are not the rational, self-possessed individuals that underlie Ayn Rand's embrace of *laissez-faire* – but, as most historians of this period stress, neoliberalism itself should not be confused with *laissez-faire.* As a political practice, it is predicated on *constructing* markets and *teaching* people to embrace the acts of buying and selling, precisely through such discursive technologies as Bill Clinton's act of linking "empowerment" with getting off welfare (“Welfare" 6). As this example suggests, the therapeutic politics of empathy have been the necessary ideological supplement, not the alternative, to the right-wing critique of the welfare state. In this sense, by reading Gaitskill's fictions, we can begin to see how Ayn Rand is transformed into Bill Clinton. By reading Ellis’s and Gaitskill's fictions together, as well as writings by Clinton himself, we can see what Bill Clinton also had in common with Ronald Reagan. Articulating the boundaries of mainstream American politics, these texts do, therefore, serve to express "the frantic twist to the right we are now experiencing" – the rightward turn which continues to shape not only the mainstream parameters of “right” and “left,” but also, as I suggest in my conclusion, the political tendencies of 21st century literary criticism.
2.2 “Typically, the pain returns”

Patrick Bateman is "unfeeling" (Murphet 27): he understands, on some level, what others are feeling, but he lacks empathy, the ability to share those feelings. He can’t feel your pain, so he won’t stop hurting you: “‘Patrick oh god stop it please oh god stop hurting me…’ But typically, the pain returns—it’s too intense not to—and she passes out again and vomits, while unconscious, and I have to hold her head up so she doesn’t choke on it and then I Mace her again” (246). He won’t stop hurting you, in fact, because he wants his "pain to be inflicted on others” (377). The “pain” experienced by this rich, healthy, self-indulgent yuppie can only be a psychic pain, but the novel’s form forecloses understanding of such pain, except in fleeting, fragmentary bits of self-analysis like the statement just quoted. According to the text’s logic, pain can only be located at the level of “surface, surface, surface,” which is why this pain appears to Bateman as a purely physical sensation – “my head feeling like someone has lit a bonfire on it, in it, a constant searing pain that keeps both eyes open” (343) – and why, to “inflict” this pain on someone else, he must torture, mutilate, and kill them, not just tell them his story; “confession”, to Bateman, “meant nothing” (377 emphasis original).

Patrick Bateman seems, then, like the antithesis of Bill Clinton, the President who famously 'feels your pain.' As Clinton put it in his acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic National Convention, “I know how you feel” (“New Covenant” 221 emphasis original). The line was directed at “every child in America tonight who is out there trying to grow up without a father or mother” (221) but it was also aimed, as one journalist put it, at “everyone who has experienced hardship” (Taylor). Feeling this pain, Clinton will do everything he can to make the pain go away: "if other politicians make you feel like you are not part of their family,” he tells his audience of lonely children and weeping parents, "come on and be part of ours" (221). This
empathetic embrace of the emotional seems to align Clinton with (the mature) Justine Shade and to differentiate him from Patrick Bateman; it is specifically designed, of course, to differentiate him from Bateman’s political analogues, Ronald Reagan and George Bush, whose “trickle-down economics” (“New Covenant” 225) have strained, not extended, the loving family: “People are working harder than ever, spending less time with their children, working nights and weekends at their jobs instead of going to PTA and Little League or Scouts, and their incomes are still going down” (221-222). Clinton’s empathy tells him that such neglected children need love and support – not from their government, however, but from their birth family: even as he promises that a Clinton presidency will be a more inclusive “family,” he will tell deadbeat fathers to "take responsibility for your children...Because governments don’t raise children; parents do" (221).

As this phrasing suggests, Clinton's call for personal "responsibility" from "deadbeat" parents went hand-in-hand with his campaign promise to reduce the size of the welfare state by “ending welfare as we know it” (228). Clinton made good on this promise in 1996, signing the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act,” a sweeping welfare-reform bill, and once again his call for “personal responsibility” is figured as a gesture of compassion, the expression of an empathetic relationship with those in pain. Citing years of heartfelt conversations with “mothers on welfare,” Clinton explains: “A long time ago I concluded that the current welfare system undermines the basic values of work, responsibility and family, trapping generation after generation in dependency and hurting the very people it was designed to help” (1). Such remarks locate the cause of poverty in the mind of poor people, in their psychic "dependency," not in external, impersonal social phenomena such as institutionalized racism, deskilling, or urban disinvestment. By explaining poverty in this way, Clinton can thereby argue that the government must try to change their minds, not their situations, namely by requiring them to work, curing the
“dependency” that caused them not to work in the first place. Only reentering the “world of work” will give “structure, meaning and dignity” to the lives of those on welfare (“Welfare” 2).

This rhetoric of "personal responsibility" and "dependency," as well as "the removal of explicitly racist, misogynist language" is what differentiated the welfare-reform tactics of Clinton and subsequent "compassionate conservatives" from that of their Republican predecessors, who deployed "images of sexually promiscuous, lazy welfare queens breeding for the profit of an ever-enlarging welfare check" (Duggan 16). And yet, as many commentators have noted, Clinton's embrace of welfare reform is also what aligned him with his Republican rivals, who argued that social welfare programs must be scaled back in order to foster economic development (Brenner 13-27; Katz 18; Duggan 9-17). To that end, the reform bill replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which treated welfare as a federal entitlement, with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a program of block grants to states requiring recipients to begin working after two years and placing a lifetime limit of five years on benefits paid by federal funds (Blank 1; Chappell 245). And, if fiscal conservatives had thereby "won the war" (Katz 6), the “unheralded victors” were “poverty and economic inequality” (Chappell 244). The bill triggered a massive decline in welfare caseloads and a massive increase in the number of working single mothers; Marisa Chappell notes that “Republicans and Democrats alike celebrated the bill’s success in reducing welfare rolls, but most women who move ‘from welfare to work’ find themselves in unstable, low-wage dead-end jobs that fail to lift their families out of poverty” (245). Hence “the share of working poor rose in the late 1990s and has remained higher than the early 1990s" (Blank 2) – in the context of an economy that “has functioned increasingly well, but for the wealthy ever more satisfactorily” (Brenner xxviii).
It turns out, then, that when it comes to the poor, the man who says "I feel your pain" agrees with the man who says, "I don't have anything in common with you" (Ellis 131). Signing the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act” is simply Bill Clinton’s way of telling them, like Patrick Bateman, to “get a goddamn job” (Ellis 130).

2.3 “On Not Being a Victim”

The final scene in Two Girls, Fat and Thin seems to restage, with a twist, the moment of each woman’s childhood sexual abuse. Justine Shade has been tied to her bed by a sadistic lover, who is verbally re-enacting her molestation, but this time she is rescued by Dorothy Never herself, who arrives at Justine’s apartment to confront her about her scathing article about Anna Granite. Afterwards, the two exhausted women lie down together, and here the novel offers a more subtle reversal of Dorothy’s own sexual abuse. As a teenager, Dorothy is raped repeatedly by her father, and in those scenes, her identification with Granite’s isolated characters is figured explicitly as a psychic escape mechanism, “the immobile constant that stood watch while I struggled to maintain silence and stillness” (134). On the novel’s final page, Dorothy once again struggles “to maintain silence and stillness,” unable to sleep while lying back-to-back with Justine, the two women "politely observing the conventions of strangers sharing a bed" (312).

Finally:

“I can’t sleep,” said Justine.
Her voice was so worn that I turned to her with an impulse to comfort. At the same time she turned towards me. Her thin arms went around my body, her face pressed against my shoulder. I held her side and cupped her head, careful not to touch her injured back. Her body against me was like a phrase of music. My muscles were calmed, white flowers bloomed on my heart. [Anna Granite character] Asia Maconda’s face still stared at me from inside my head. I stared back, wondering that this completely imaginary face had meant so much to me for so long. I watched it dissolve into pieces as I went to sleep with my arm around Justine Shade. (312-313)
As this scene slips into a relationship between two unconscious bodies, the interior space, where Dorothy stares at images "inside my head," seems to "dissolve" – but what gives this dissolution its force is that Dorothy embraces something more 'inward' still, her disavowed desire for a relationship with a real person (more specifically, a real woman) instead of her old "mainstay," Anna Granite's "completely imaginary" characters.

With this embrace, then, we see that harmony emerges when Justine and Dorothy stop paying attention to the external and impersonal – society's hostility to the emotional, the beautiful isolation of Anna Granite’s characters, the polite “conventions of strangers sharing a bed” – and start paying attention to what’s happening in their own heads. In other words, both women are finally following Dorothy’s advice to Justine: “Don’t deny your own experience” (27). In Gaitskill’s writing, learning to value one’s own “internal experience” in this way is crucial, because "It's hard to be responsible for something that isn't valuable” ("Victim" 8). That is, in Gaitskill’s writing, “responsibility” is a responsibility to this experience. In her 1994 Harper's essay, “On Not Being a Victim,” for instance, she defines "becoming responsible" as reaching "my own conclusions about which rules were congruent with my internal experience of the world" (3).

On the surface, this is a different kind of “personal responsibility” than that described by Clinton – it’s a “responsibility for one’s self,” as Dorothy puts it, rather than a responsibility to provide for one’s own material security and well-being (183 emphasis mine). And yet, by suggesting that welfare recipients need to work in order to have “structure, meaning and dignity” in their lives, Clinton implies that taking responsibility for one’s security is also form of taking “responsibility for one’s self.” In both sets of texts, then, paying attention to one’s “internal experience” is transformed into a kind of ethical imperative. In this sense, we can see that both
authors’ texts are underwritten by the commitments of the “self-esteem” movement and other therapeutic discourses that flourished during the 1980s and ‘90s, and that served, according to political scientist Barbara Cruikshank, to transform “personal fulfillment” into “social obligation” (232). This discursive linkage between the personal and the social prompts Cruikshank to argue that “self-esteem” serves as a technique of neoliberal governance, a way of rearticulating the proper relationship between the state and its citizens: “Premised upon the limits of politics and the Welfare State,” such discourse “places the hope of liberation [from ‘social problems,’ including ‘chronic welfare dependency’] in the psychological state of the people, especially poor urban people of colour to whom most of the ‘social problems’…are attributed” (232-233). During this period, “self-esteem” and other therapeutic buzzwords were deployed not only by politicians and social scientists, moreover, but also by well-known feminist writers like Gloria Steinem and Peggy Orenstein (Hewitt 61-64). This turn to the therapeutic was controversial among feminists, however, precisely because of how it seemed to locate problems and solutions in the minds of individual women rather than in collective action (Cruikshank 231, Peck 38).

By relating Dorothy and Justine’s story in terms of their psychological development and subjective experience, Gaitskill does seem to locate the cause of their actions, relationships, and problems on the “inside.” By doing so, she, like Clinton, implies these individuals are, paradoxically, “personally responsible” for their own lack of “responsibility,” and that their irresponsible actions are thus the products of choice. But, just as one can ask what kind of ‘choice’ is synonymous with psychic “dependency” (even if one accepts the logic of this claim), one can ask what kind of choice is synonymous with being "caught," like Justine, in a psychic "steel trap that had closed on her when she was five years old" (279). While the political stakes
of the first question seem much more obvious, the force of the second question becomes clearer when Gaitskill’s texts are recognized as interventions into the feminist debates about sexuality prominent throughout her career. For, during the period when *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* was published, many writers were asking precisely this question: What kind of ‘choice’ is masochism?

In an essay in *Coming to Power*, a 1981 anthology edited by members of the lesbian feminist S/M group SAMOIS, Gayle Rubin argues that masochism should be understood as consensual behavior; at the same time, she argues that criminalization has actually constrained individuals’ ability to make this choice: “…the overwhelming coercion with regard to S/M is the way in which people are prevented from doing it. We are fighting for the freedom to consent to our sexuality without interference and without penalty” (223). Rubin’s tactic here is to reverse the argument made by some feminists that masochism (and by extension sadism) should *not* be understood as a choice, but as a kind of 'false choice,' a form of “coerced-consent” (*Gay Community News* qtd. in Rubin 216), in the sense that it derives from the "internalization" of "heterosexual dominant-submissive role playing” (Russell qtd in Rubin 208).  

Gaitskill’s texts on S/M, including *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, have been read as making a version of this anti-S/M argument: in Lesley A. Rimmel’s review, for instance, she argues that the novel portrays female masochism as the byproduct of a patriarchy responsible for the “pain, anguish, and trauma” of “the sexual abuse of girls” (19). According to Rimmel, Justine is not really "'consenting' to her sadistic lover," (19 scare quotes original) because her submission is the product of this trauma. Yet the novel seems to insist on the consensual nature of Justine's sexual practices; in fact, her dominant partner, Bryan, expresses how free she really is by taking this freedom away. It is only after he refuses to untie her, despite her repeated requests to do so,
that Dorothy Never has to intercede on Justine’s behalf. Afterwards, when Dorothy asks Justine, “Why did you let him do that to you?,” she stresses that consent became coercion only after he crossed this line: “I didn’t let him do anything,” she snapped. She looked at me almost insolently. “I told him what to do.” Her jaw twitched violently. “Except towards the end” (385). By underscoring the difference between being “caught in the steel trap that had closed on her when she was five years old” (279) and actual bondage, then, this scene ultimately suggests that being caught in a psychic “steel trap” is not so different from being free.

Another submissive young woman, a secretary who is spanked and humiliated by her boss, is the protagonist of Gaitskill’s most famous short story, “Secretary” (1988), and here the question debated by these writers – is female masochism a choice or a false choice? – dovetails with a broader question, a question in which quite a bit more, politically and legally, is at stake: What kind of ‘choice’ is female sexual behavior in the workplace? Influential feminist texts and legal rulings of this period suggest that when women ‘consent’ to sexual behavior in the workplace, whether that means consenting to sex or simply enduring sexual advances, this consent should really be understood as a form of "coerced-consent." That is, because they "tend to be employed in occupations that are considered 'for women,' to be men's subordinates on the job, and to be paid less than men both on the average and for the same work," (MacKinnon 9), women have a more limited range of options for dealing with unwanted sexual attention than men. In this disadvantaged position, ‘consenting’ to harassment might actually be a more plausible alternative than quitting or than complaining.5

According to this logic, Debby's decision to submit to weeks of humiliation from her boss, the sole proprietor of a small law firm, should be understood as a form of "coerced-consent," as her options are essentially to quit or to submit to the abuse, rather than being able to
stop the abuse and keep her job. She finally does quit, following an incident in which the lawyer orders her to pull up her skirt and then masturbates: "'You're not worried that I'm going to rape you, are you?'" the lawyer asks, as she hesitates to comply. "'Don't. I'm not interested in that in the least.' " (142). Debby's decision to submit to these specific commands could be seen as a particularly clear example of a constrained 'choice,' because, by saying he isn't going to "rape" her, the lawyer could be sending exactly the opposite message: 'remember that I could rape you if you resist.' By this logic, we might imagine that at this moment, Debby feels she must 'choose' between submission and her safety.

But Gaitskill makes a point of showing that Debby does not feel coerced during this incident: "I turned my head away from him. I thought, I don't have to do this. I can stop right now. I can straighten up and walk out. But I didn't. I pulled up my skirt" (143). When later given a chance – by an investigative journalist who has heard about their relationship – to embrace a narrative of gendered victimization, Debby refuses. Moreover, the biggest clue these acts should be understood as consensual is also the most famous fact about the story: the secretary is sexually excited by being spanked by her boss, “more excited, in fact, than I had ever been in my life” (141). And she is more excited still by the final encounter between them, masturbating in the office bathroom as soon as she is alone; and though she will later describe this encounter as “something hideous” (145), she will also later masturbate “two, three, four times in a row, always thinking about the thing” (146). By the story’s final line, she seems to have resolved her ambivalence, concluding that allowing yourself to be objectified – which she experiences as “the sensation of being outside yourself” – “wasn't such a bad feeling at all" (147).

Of course, the fact that Debby is sexually excited by these acts in no way precludes the possibility she was raped. But this excitement does signal consent in a different way as well, as it
takes on a specific meaning within the context of a sadomasochistic or dominant-submissive relationship: in such relationships, the whole erotic thrill is giving ownership of your body over to someone else. As Gayle Rubin implies, by delineating so sharply between S/M and coercion, practitioners are not turned on by actual rape; there is no excitement unless the submissive partner has actually consented to the demands of the dominant partner. "S/M must be consensual, mutual, and safe" and "its basic dynamic is an erotic exchange of power negotiated between two or more sexual partners" ("SAMOIS" 288). What the lawyer tells Debby is literally true: he is "not interested" in raping her, not "in the least," because actual coercion holds no thrill for him.

As this example suggests, then, Gaitskill's answer to questions about female sexuality is consistent: this behavior should be understood as consensual, the product of choices that are just as 'free' as the choices made by men, even in cases of self-destructive behavior caused by sexual abuse, and, more controversially, even in the workplace. Both positions reflect her commitment, like Rubin, to the liberal logic of contract, to the idea that self-ownership and the ability to transfer this ownership counts as a form of freedom. And, while Rubin seems to distinguish between sexual relations and economic relations (222), a purely "'sexual laissez-faire'" nevertheless still adheres – as Pamela Haag argues – to the same "grammar of liberalism" that equates freedom, in the economic realm, with "liberties of exchange" (Haag 87-88 emphasis original). In other words, the "freedom to consent" that SAMOIS were “fighting for,” according to Rubin, is structurally analogous to what libertarians and economic neoliberals have been fighting to preserve and, indeed, to spread – the freedom to sell one’s labor, ‘unencumbered’ by union interference or government regulation, as well as this freedom’s necessary corollary, the freedom to consume (Friedman 65-67). Within neoliberal economic and political practice, “the expansion of the empire of choice is,” as Stephen G. Engelmann puts it, “almost by definition
good…” (146-147). Or, as Bateman’s friend Price puts it, when he hears about “some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually wants … to be out on the streets”: one should “let the bitch have her way—Holy Christ – let the fucking bitch freeze to death, put her out of her own goddamn self-made misery…” (6 emphasis original). That is, according to the logic on display in *American Psycho*, individuals are not only personally responsible for the choices that have put them where they are (“self-made misery”) but they should be even more "personally responsible," free to make whatever choice they want (within the framework of buying and selling to provide for one’s well-being) no matter how self-destructive: “let the bitch have her way—Holy Christ – let the fucking bitch freeze to death.”

This indifference to the woman’s motives is what separates the logic in *American Psycho* from Gaitskill’s (and Clinton’s) therapeutic sensitivity to the “inside” – to the psychic factors that might cause a bad choice, to the psychic factors that make something count as a good choice. Because of this focus, Gaitskill’s work is more likely to differentiate between good and bad choices, and less likely to treat choice as an end in itself, which is clear when comparing Justine Shade and “Secretary”’s Debby Roe. Although both characters express ambivalence about their sexual habits, the narrative trajectories of these stories suggest that for Justine, masochism is a bad choice, while for Debby, it’s a good – or at least ‘not so bad – choice. The difference is simply that for the former, submission feels like being caught in a psychic "steel trap,” while for the latter, submission "wasn't such a bad feeling at all.” Debby is the only one of the two, in other words, who seems to be taking “responsibility for one’s self.”

Still, what unites right- and left-wing neoliberalism is their commitment to individual choice, as both a condition of being and an ideal – “almost by definition good,” or as the precondition for something “good” – a commitment that puts both in tension with traditional
forms of left-wing politics, which seek, in various senses, to limit the relevance of individual choice. I’ve already suggested, for example, how the logic of “Secretary” runs counter to that of sexual harassment discourse, which tends to situate choice in the context of gendered power imbalances, especially during the period in which the story was written. Of course, sexual harassment discourse is still committed to the ideal, if not the reality, of individual freedom of choice, in the sense that it is designed to prevent employers from discriminating against individuals on the basis of their “sex” and thus impede their freedom to sell their labor; it assumes that if all workers can be protected against discrimination, they will thereby be "free." More radical forms of left politics, from classical Marxism to any of its various “intersectional” alternatives, reject this assumption, assuming instead that capitalism requires economic inequality and that therefore the logic of contract is inevitably contradictory: the free market guarantees “freedom” for those with the luck or material resources to take advantage of it, but only on the condition that it simultaneously restricts the freedom of the poor and exploited. Hence, purifying the market to guarantee individual freedom is not the goal of this kind of politics; instead its goal is to promote economic redistribution and thus serve as a check – or something even more powerful – on the contradictions of capital.

Writers like Lisa Duggan and Nancy Fraser suggests that it is precisely this “redistributive” element that has been sacrificed by contemporary forms of left politics, including contemporary feminism, culminating in “emergent ‘multicultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics – a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ … compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources” (Duggan xii). To make the case that Gaiteskill embodies this “frantic twist to the right,” then, one must examine how she treats the issues of
economic inequality and class conflict. In this context, that means returning to the question, finally, of “the yuppie.”

2.4 “Everybody’s rich”

Although Patrick Bateman never identifies himself as a "yuppie," and on one occasion protests, "You may think I'm a really disgusting yuppie but I'm not, really" (199 emphasis original), other characters insist on calling him one: he's a "'yuppie' " who gives off "'bad vibes'" (212); a "'yuppie scumbag'" (394); a "'Fucking yuppie'" who should "'Go back to Wall Street'" (199). In an analysis of what he calls – following a Janet Maslin essay of this period – “yuppie devil” films, Kevin L. Ferguson describes what this label "would signify to a late-80s audience" (2). Although coined in 1983, a mix of “the acronym for ‘young urban professional’ with ‘hippie’ or ‘preppy’ ” and “used as a demographic label” for a certain segment of Baby Boomers, the term soon became “a pejorative description of a lifestyle…identified with a culture of wealth, conspicuous consumption, and conservative politics” (2). Despite his resistance, then, Patrick Bateman is, by this definition, a yuppie; indeed, Ferguson calls American Psycho the locus classicus of the “yuppie devil” genre.

The term would have signified the same "pejorative description of a lifestyle" for the readers of Justine Shade's article, “Anna Granite…Yuppie Grandmother,” appearing in a fictional, Village Voice-style publication called "Urban Vision." The article's thesis is that this lifestyle – the yuppies' "'cultural utopia of greed'" (Two Girls 288 ) – is an expression of Anna Granite's "ideas," namely the "'Truth of Selfishness'" (288). From this thesis, we might expect that Dorothy Never, follower and former assistant to the Yuppie Grandmother, is herself a yuppie – and yet her character seems designed to invoke these stereotypes only to show they do not apply. For instance, Dorothy, like Bateman, is “working on Wall Street” (Ferguson 2), but
whereas he is a 26-year-old investment banker, a Harvard MBA who comes from a family so rich that he works only to “fit…in” (237), she is a 34-year-old legal proofreader who works the midnight shift, and who set out on her own after cutting off contact with her family and dropping out of college. In other words, he is “rich,” and Dorothy is one of the “millions” who “are not” (Ellis 392).

The fact that Bateman is a yuppie, despite insisting that he isn't, and that Dorothy is not a yuppie, despite the implication she is, points to a deeper difference between the two characters: Bateman is representative of a class, and Dorothy is not. By this, I do not simply mean that what Bateman consumes is described with much greater detail. More specifically, Bateman, unlike Dorothy, is figured as being a participant in an inherently antagonistic political and economic system, what it means to be a member of a "class" in the traditional leftist sense of the term. Furthermore, his representation suggests this antagonism plays out in the form of the disavowal of this very antagonism, a denial of class that benefits members of one class, the wealthy, at the expense of others. On one hand, for example, Bateman's self-explanatory "tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick" (113) works as a quick figure for self-conscious class warfare, for how the rich of this era refused to socialize profit while ‘pretending’ to do so – for how, perhaps, trickle-down economics was just a "trick." At the same time, what Bateman tells this "bum" – "Jesus, will you get a fucking shave, please" (113 emphasis original) – is a version of what he says to homeless people throughout the novel: there are no class differences, only a set of rules for success, like getting a "fucking shave" or getting a "goddamn job," that everyone can choose to follow if they wish. “Everybody’s rich’,” (23 emphasis original), one yuppie says, giving voice to this assumption.
Such juxtapositions suggest that "personal responsibility" is a way of disavowing – denying with the mouth what is done with the hand – collective class struggle, the efforts by the rich to reproduce themselves as a class, through all the political and economic instruments at their disposal (even if this reproduction takes on new forms, like the "Wall Street yuppie"). Bateman's representation, in other words, seems designed to articulate the relationship between economic class, politics, and ideology as a lived practice. Dorothy's representation, on the other hand, seems designed precisely to counter such articulations, as it insists that she is simply an individual with feelings, not a member of a class, and thus not a participant in these larger antagonisms. Indeed, her lifestyle is so different from Justine's account of the "cultural utopia of greed" and her political commitments so detached from Justine's description of the "national swing to the right" – except for a few platitudes about the "power of the individual," Dorothy doesn't appear to have political commitments – that we are likely to have the same reaction as Dorothy: “What did this have to do with Anna Granite?” (290).

As I've already noted, Justine is not the first or last to link Anna Granite (that is, Ayn Rand) with the ‘Reagan Revolution’ of the 1980s: *The New York Times* would even dub Rand the 'novelist laureate' of the Reagan administration, citing her influence on Alan Greenspan, Martin Anderson, and several others (Burns 279). Nevertheless, Dorothy’s skeptical reaction is the correct one, as none of “this” has anything to do with what Ayn Rand/Anna Granite means in this book. Whereas the novel insists that Dorothy's appreciation for Anna Granite is a function of her personal experiences as a victim of abuse, Justine's article – even while acknowledging these experiences – insists on connecting appreciation for Anna Granite with a particular ideology, the “yuppie raison d’être,” as if to suggest that attitudes about the author are bound up in class and class politics. In this sense, the article Justine writes is the article the investigative reporter
wanted to write at the end of “Secretary”: she takes what is a personal choice and makes it a function of a larger social conflict. In the investigative reporter’s article, this conflict would have been the imbalance of power between men and women; here it is the imbalance of power between rich and poor, yuppies and the victims of “gentrification and the slashing of social programs” (288). Both the story and the novel insist that such a framing is a mistake – through Debby’s refusal to talk with the journalist, and through the alienation both Dorothy and the novel’s readers feel when confronted with Justine’s article.

The structural similarity between Dorothy’s appreciation for Anna Granite and Justine and Debby’s masochism is made evident in such parallels, but this connection is clear even within the narrative of Justine's life itself, where we see that her attitude about the novelist and her sexual practices are simply different versions of the same phenomenon. To her, Anna Granite’s followers are not really an ascendant ideological force, but a group of nerds forming their lives “in conjunction with the shadows invented by a mediocre novelist” (21). She writes the piece because she’s “morbidly attracted to obsession, particularly the useless, embarrassing obsessions of the thwarted” (21 emphasis mine). These lines suggest that, despite its avowedly "political" tone, her article is instead a manifestation of her ambivalent hatred of “Emotional,” a chance to enact “her most private fantasy,” the same thing she saw when she looked at her old classmate: “the victim crucified before a jeering crowd” (100). That is, the article is her opportunity to crucify these “flesh-and-blood humans” on "the protruding nails of the deliberate meanness that held the piece together" (295), while masking her “private fantasy” in the guise of left-wing cultural critique.

According to this logic, then, neither Justine nor Dorothy are participants in the larger social conflict known as class struggle; within this text, such struggle simply does not exist.
Hence, the conflict between them should not be understood as political, but as interpersonal, or rather intrapersonal, as their real conflict is within themselves, their struggle with their innermost desires, the denial Gaitskill treats as an irresponsible choice. Locating their conflict on the inside means that the resolution happens on the inside as well: by relating to themselves differently, the characters will begin to relate to the other differently, processes which, in the mutual embrace that ends the novel, are indistinguishable. In sum, instead of making this conflict about Ayn Rand stand in for the opposition between rich and poor, or between free-market fundamentalism and welfare liberalism – conflicts which, from a left perspective, are intrinsic to capitalism itself, and which can only be addressed through political interventions aimed squarely at this antagonism – the author chooses to internalize this conflict, and is thus able to imagine a resolution requiring no political intervention.

If many novels engage in such "personalization of social contradiction" (86), as Francis Mulhern suggests, then this conclusion helps clarify what's at stake, discursively speaking, in the different ways in which novels may go about this task. By using the story of an individual "yuppie" to articulate a conflict irreducible to the mind of an individual, as an individual, Ellis figures a world in which social relations are determined, above all, by collective political action. On the other hand, by disavowing the structural necessity of political antagonism – whether defined in terms of material class conflict or in terms of competing political ideologies, which are, by definition, universalizing and irreducible to the self – Gaitskill imagines a world in which the possibility of cooperation amongst individuals replaces the inevitability of struggle between groups. Crucially, the same logic present in this neat dénouement, which Rimmel describes admiringly as “anti-rape fantasy” (19) and which Elizabeth Young disparages as “contrived” (180), is present in Clinton’s political texts as well,
including his texts on welfare, which seem just as “contrived” because they seem just as ‘fantastic.’ By locating the cause of a social conflict – in his case, the conflict between those receiving welfare and those who don’t want to pay for it – within the individual, namely the individual receiving welfare, Clinton is able to imagine a resolution that unravels the antagonisms of capital by simply ignoring them.

2.5 “Millions are not.”

In conclusion, I will suggest that finding this disavowal even within texts that we might expect to be (or that, in Clinton's case, explicitly claim to be) alternatives to the Reaganism caricatured in American Psycho should compel literary critics to reflect on their own commitments, as literary study – by virtue of its critical attitude toward both the workings of power and its own methods and assumptions – also tends to imagine itself as an alternative to mainstream political discourse, on the "right" or "left." Indeed, I argue that literary-critical approaches that ‘internalize’ social conflict – like those that focus on the relationship between subjects and social norms – effectively reproduce this neoliberal disavowal of structural antagonism, licensing critics to ignore how neoliberalism has played out very differently for different social groups.  

For a prominent example of this approach, we can look to Lauren Berlant’s 2011 book, Cruel Optimism, which includes a revised version of a 2002 essay on Two Girls, Fat and Thin. Berlant argues for the progressive political potential (if only as potential) of the novel’s final scene, a potential inhering in the fact that, at the end of a novel depicting “subjects moving through life seeking a rest from the feedback loop of trauma and compensation that their histories seemed to dictate” (Loc. 269), the conclusion offers “a fantasy that someday the self-consuming negotiation of ambivalence will stop and the subject can rest” (Loc. 2181). This
“fantasy” is potentially a political fantasy because the traumatic “histories” to which it responds include such public crises as “a heteronormative good-life modality that was not good for anyone in it” (Loc. 2120); the very collapse of these “heterofamilial-economic…norms” (Loc. 2104); and the “exciting and insecure” days of “early neoliberalism, with its romance of the temporary, the flexible, and the entrepreneurial” (Loc. 2016), represented in the text by the women’s work as receptionists, third-shifters, and freelancers. The novel’s culminating embrace “suspends that scene and wants the reader to pause for a bit, to look at what two women do together,” making possible a “queer feminist utopian” (Loc. 2111) vision. Although Berlant proceeds to describe only the sexual possibilities opened up by this vision, we might imagine – especially if the conclusion counts as a “suspension” of exploitative "early neoliberalism" – that "what two women do together" is intended to signify processes of material cooperation and sharing as well.

Still, if this fantasy has a political valence, the problems it solves remain rooted in the individual subject. In other words, Berlant, like many contemporary critics, frames "neoliberalism" and its "utopian" alternative in terms of their relation to subjectivity, in terms of whether these phenomena compel or assuage, in this example, the "self-consuming negotiation of ambivalence." By this logic, political antagonism is located not in the relationship between classes or groups, but on the inside, in the relationship between the subject and their ideological "fantasies of the good life” (Loc. 52). From her readings of contemporary literature and culture, Berlant concludes that for many subjects, this relationship has, under neoliberalism, turned “cruel,” which is “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Loc. 25). Disarticulating antagonism from social conflict is problematic, however, because it means the critic does not have to account for how neoliberalism has played out very differently for different people, namely for members of different classes. In her Gaitskill essay, Berlant briefly
acknowledges that not *all* people have experienced the effects of neoliberalism in the same way, alluding to Justine and Dorothy's status as “two middle-class white American girls” (Loc. 2131), the children of the “professional classes,” but here too she refers to the *subjective* effects of class privilege, which, she argues, has caused the women's “complex interiority” and “involution” (Loc. 2134). Berlant does not seem interested in exploring how neoliberalism has precisely *not* been "cruel," materially speaking, to America's wealthy.

We can find a similar blind spot in the work of those who have argued, for example, that Patrick Bateman is suffering from a "crisis of postmodern masculinity" (Storey 57). According to this reading, Bateman's violence is a psychotic reaction to the encroachment of various feminized "others," which he experiences as a threat to his masculinity. This claim implies that Bateman is just as much a 'victim' as those he abuses and murders, including the poor and homeless: Berthold Schoene's reading, for example, seeks to "pathologize modern masculinity in order to highlight and problematize the violent trauma it inflicts on both men and their others" (378 emphasis mine). Such readings imply, furthermore, that if the tension between the subject and these social norms were resolved, the novel's central conflict would be as well: if he weren't "straitjacketed by masculine norms and ideals," Bateman's "existential terror might not necessarily translate into homicidal violence" (Schoene 384).

Both implications run counter, however, to the intense class divisions of this period and of this novel. Bateman is precisely *not* a 'victim' of "postmodernity" in the same way as, for instance, "Al," the homeless man who has been laid off from his job: Al is a "fucking loser" (131), as Bateman puts it, at the same moment he slides a knife into Al's right eye, while Bateman and other members of the financial class are, materially speaking, fucking winners. And, if we accept that Bateman's violence represents the "violence" of economic disparity – as
such scenes, and the frequent conflation of his violence and his conspicuous consumption, seem to insist – we see that this violence precisely won't be assuaged if Bateman gets in touch with his true, un-"straitjacketed" self or adapts to the changing norms of "masculinity," as it is one of the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism.

Indeed, when articulated this way, we see that such readings perform the same discursive maneuvers as Clinton's texts, idealizing internal experience and disavowing economic inequality even while such inequality deepens. I suggest that such modes of reading therefore risk foreclosing an engagement with precisely what a truly oppositional text like American Psycho has to tell us. Inside doesn't matter, it insists: who cares how neoliberalism "feels" when we can see how it works?

1 In his relationship with other characters, Bateman resembles the subject imagined by the Chicago School's influential "economic approach to human behavior," which assumes that individuals engage in "maximizing behavior" – evaluating options like consumers intent on maximizing their satisfaction – in all the "fundamental aspects of life" (Becker Economic 4). Following the lead of Foucault, who made this re-conception of the subject the centerpiece of his analysis of American neoliberalism, subsequent theorists of neoliberal "governmentality" have argued that this figuration of the self-as-chooser, rather than as social subject or subject of rights, is implicit in the various contemporary discourses designed to teach individuals to think of themselves as choosers, to teach individuals how to make the right choices, and to teach the importance of choice itself. As my analysis of Gaitskill and Clinton suggest, these discourses include not only those concerned with avowedly "economic" choices, like investments that will help increase your earning power, but also those concerned with mental well-being and happiness, like the self-help industry and the self-esteem movement, in which action takes on the same form as these economic choices. On these points, see Foucault (226), Rose (Governing 226), Burchell (29), Engelmann (9-10), and Cruikshank (239-245).

2 For particularly clear articulations of neoliberalism's "constructionism" (Mirowski 434), see Foucault (119-133), Feher (31-33), Mirowski (429-446), and Miller and Rose (80-82).

3 According to Robert Brenner, the main effects of neoliberalism have been economic stagnation coupled with deepening inequality and exploitation, measured in terms of the polarization of income; decline in the fall of the poverty rate; decline in the rate of increase of median family income; and a flat-lining in the annual growth of real wages for productive and non-supervisory workers (Brenner xxviii).

4 For representative statements of anti-S/M feminism, see Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis, especially Rian's "Sadomasochism and the Social Construction of Desire."

5 For a judicial articulation of this "cruel trilemma," see Bundy v. Jackson (1981), an important precedent to the Supreme Court's 1986 Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson decision, which confirmed that the creation of a "hostile work environment," is a form of unlawful sex discrimination.
More recently, Vicki Schultz has argued that by emphasizing gendered power imbalances as the cause and effect of harassment, or by assuming that harassment happens because of desire, jurists like Catherine MacKinnon and the authors of the earliest court decisions are unable to account for same-sex harassment or harassment caused by gendered stereotyping rather than desire. In 1998, the same year as Schultz's "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment," the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, Inc. that "harassing conduct" can indeed take place between members of the same sex (79) and that it "need not be motivated by sexual desire to support an inference of discrimination on the basis of sex" (80).

Nancy Fraser argues that feminism has shifted from a politics of both redistribution and recognition to primarily a politics of recognition, so that "What had begun as a needed corrective to economism developed in time into an equally one-sided culturalism (108). Literary studies has experienced a similar turn, shifting from a class/ideology paradigm to a power/discourse paradigm, and thus, from Fraser’s perspective, it too has “dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism” (109).

In Money, Speculation, and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction (2007), Nicky Marsh provides another, slightly different example of this critical dynamic. Marsh examines literary engagements with the discourse of the “fictionalization” of money, discourse in which the speculative economy has been framed as a means of disciplining the marketplace and empowering both workers – in the form of share ownership – and traders themselves. Marsh is explicit in her critique of Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal policies and rhetoric, which, she writes, “relies…not on a broad analysis of the social effect of the market forces she was intent on unleashing but on a crude denial of the social” (41). She debunks, for instance, Thatcher’s claims about the democratic potential of popular finance, describing how policies of privatization and deregulation led not to “a swelling number of individual shareholders attending the board meetings of their own companies” (73), but to the continued dominance of the financial sector by large institutional shareholders and individuals from the upper classes.

But Marsh is ambiguous about whether the subject of her critique is what the rhetoric of financialization conceals or the form of the rhetoric itself. She describes the mystifying power of the discourse of finance – “especially its militarized discourses of discipline and its libidinous discourses of excess” (8) – suggesting that these discourses “produce and conceal” “particular social relationships” (8), namely relationships of economic inequality and gendered hierarchy. And, as she suggests in her readings of contemporary British authors like Martin Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, and Alan Hollinghurst, the rhetoric used to demystify the discourses of finance also relies on some of the same militarized and sexualized figures, albeit with the valences reversed. For example, in response to discourse celebrating finance’s "libidinous and disruptive power," such authors responded with "frequently gendered images of castration and disease," framing threats to national and working-class sovereignty as "threatened masculinity," in a way that "rendered its converse, femininity, dangerously powerful." (123). In Marsh’s account, then, it is possible to both demystify and mystify at the same moment, indeed, in the very same metaphors. This suggests a certain ambivalence about the act of pointing to real material inequalities – is it politically progressive in itself, or is it politically progressive only if it demystifies using the correct metaphors? In other words, there is ambiguity about whether the problem is real material inequality or whether the problem is sexist representation.

Clearly, these are both problems, but, as many critics have suggested, they are problems with different logics, requiring different kinds of political intervention. As John Guillery argued, in the midst of the canon debates of the ’80s and ’90s, the problematic of representation is “inherently limited by its reduction of the political to the instance of representation, and of representation to the image” (8). The politics of representation has thus “seldom escaped the trap of reducing the political to the cultural” (13). These reductions are limiting, of course, to the degree they fail to acknowledge that the lives of the disenfranchised are conditioned by the structures and institutions of capital, which produce and reproduce material inequalities. Such problems cannot be solved with changes at the level of representation; they can only be solved with changes at the level of the structures and institutions of capital. Marsh’s conflation of political economy and representation is thus merely a less explicit version of Heather J. Hicks’s ambivalence about which critical lens to use in interpreting the neoliberal forms in her study of The Culture of Soft Work: a lens that considers the structural requirements of capitalist accumulation, or a lens that sees value in the flourishing of “new forms of subjectivity” (205).

Whether or not the neoliberal logics and practices of human capital have been good for disenfranchised groups, as Hicks concludes, is an open question. The work of Barbara Cruikshank suggests, for instance, that the feminist-embraced discourse of self-actualization or self-esteem has only been empowering for some women, i.e. middle-class women. Cruikshank argues that the self-esteem movement – embodied by the state-funded “California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility” (1983) – has pathologized poor single
women on welfare by suggesting that these women “are not fulfilling their responsibilities to society because of their lack of self-esteem, a deficiency demonstrated by their being on welfare in the first place. (239). Such pathologizing leads Cruikshank to conclude: “The failure of a women’s movement united across race, class, gender, and sexuality is due as much to the means by which we are ‘empowered’ as to any ‘lack of self-esteem’” (249).
3. “THE FAMILY GONE WRONG:” POST-POSTMODERNISM, CONSERVATIVE POLITICS, AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL’S CONTRACT WITH THE READER

As antagonists in the most high-profile literary debate of the last decade, Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus seem to embody countervailing views about the ideal form of the novel. Indeed, Marcus’s 2002 text, *Notable American Women*, is precisely the kind of writing that Franzen attacks in “Mr. Difficult” (2002) – his controversial essay charging “difficult,” inaccessible writers with violating their “contract” with readers – and that Marcus defends in his widely discussed rebuttal, “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It” (2005). The book begins, for example, with an “introduction” by Michael Marcus, a fictionalized version of Marcus’s own father, imprisoned by his family in an underground chamber in the back yard and subject to a steady stream of piped-in “language poison,” elements which raise thorny ontological questions nowhere to be found in Franzen’s work.

At the same time, however, this introduction also points to a surprising convergence. Reflecting on the relationship between father and son, and the need to “speak critically” about “the book you are holding,” which the son has “brought to the father for purposes of examination, correction, or criticism,” (5), Michael Marcus posits that:

Any other father would agree that corrections in this life must always be sought. A son’s goal, if the son is operating at capacity, must be to extend the bodily range and mental power of his father.... When that task is compromised, the father is expected to speak loudly and with force to ensure that a correction is registered. (8)
The figuration of the father-son relationship (and the parent-child relationship more generally) as one of “correction” – the father correcting the son, the son acting as a corrective for the father – plays an even more important role, of course, in Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001), published just six months earlier. In Franzen’s book, the first son’s “entire life was set up as a correction of his father’s life” (181); the second son also turns up his nose at his parents’ lifestyle, and his mother laments that “there were limits to correction – no way, in the end, to penetrate behind the blue irises and eradicate a boy’s disgust” (263), the third and final child, a daughter, represents the parents’ “last opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and make corrections” (281).

This shared imagery suggests that, despite their differences, both novels tell a similar story: “the universal tale of a family struggling to reconcile its shared sense of disappointment and resentment” (Battaglia) or, as Marcus himself puts it, the story of “the family and the family gone wrong” (“How can...”). “Family is how I make sense of the world,” Franzen explains, when asked why his novels tell this “very familiar family story” (“Conversation”) and the same is true, I argue, for Marcus – the family is central not just to his novel, in other words, but to his entire worldview. As this convergence suggests, moreover, the family will turn out to be central not just to Franzen and Marcus, but to contemporary fiction as a whole, transcending formal oppositions like those personified by these authors – oppositions like “the realists” versus “the experimentalists,” as Marcus puts it (41), but also those commonly used to distinguish contemporary aesthetics from those of literary postmodernism. Franzen is, after all, the novelist critics turn to most frequently when attempting to define what it means to be “post-postmodern” (Burn 17), while the very elements that make Marcus’s work
“difficult,” or at least non-“realist” (metafiction, ontological instability, alternate histories, characters that don’t act like real people, etc.) also tend to define old-fashioned “postmodernism” in these accounts.\(^2\) I argue that this shared focus on the family not only unites Franzen and Marcus but also tends to distinguish them – and a number of authors who, like Franzen and Marcus, were born around the 1960s (Franzen in 1959, Marcus in 1967) and who are self-conscious about developing the art of fiction – from their postmodern predecessors.\(^3\) Whereas writers like Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Ishmael Reed, and Kathy Acker tend to imagine social relations in terms of impersonal systems of power, language, and technology, writers like Franzen, Marcus, Aimee Bender, Dave Eggers, Jeffrey Eugenides, George Saunders, and David Foster Wallace tend to imagine social relations in terms of the family, or – even when considering larger social collectives – in terms of relationships that function like those of the family, relationships governed by emotional and ethical bonds, “the family” as imagined by politicians when they speak of “family values.”\(^4\)

This shift is explicitly thematized in Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* (2011), especially in its first section, which focuses on protagonist Madeleine Hana’s experiences as an undergraduate at Brown University in the early 1980s. During her junior year, Madeleine briefly dates a classmate named Billy Bainbridge, a wealthy “legacy” student and aspiring filmmaker who “didn’t like to talk about his family” (30). The narrator notes that:

> On the wall of his living room, Billy had painted the words *Kill the Father*. Killing the father was what, in Billy’s opinion, college was all about. “Who’s your father?” he asked Madeleine. “Is it Virginia Woolf? Is it Sontag?”

> “In my case,” Madeleine said, “my father really is my father.” (31)
Whereas Madeleine’s academic peers don’t like talking about “family,” Madeleine does. To be more precise, whereas Madeleine’s academic peers want to talk about impersonal relationships, like those that exist between artists and their influences or, in other scenes, between subjects and public discourse, Madeleine wants to talk about interpersonal relationships, like those that exist between a father and his real, flesh-and-blood daughter. This conflict is reproduced, moreover, on the level of literary taste. Whereas Madeleine’s peers like self-referential postmodern novels that demonstrate that “Books aren’t about ‘real life.’ Books are about other books” (28), Madeline likes 19th-century novels focusing on the relationships of actual “people,” in a “place resembling the world” (47).

Eugenides will eventually resolve these conflicts with, as the title suggests, a self-conscious return to 19th-century narrative, but his novel also suggests that this embrace of the family actually makes possible – as we’ve already started to see – a wide range of aesthetic responses. Indeed, The Marriage Plot’s Leonard Bankhead, a character reportedly inspired by David Foster Wallace (Haglund, “Yes”), seems designed to allegorize how a focus on affective relationships can produce new forms of experimentation, just as it does in the work of Marcus, Wallace and other contemporary novelists. When a classmate raves about how Austrian novelist Peter Handke treats his mother’s suicide as just a “literary trope,” Leonard responds that “If I was going to write about my mother’s suicide, I don’t think I’d be too concerned about being experimental” (27). And yet Leonard – a research scientist who suffers from manic depression and who, like Wallace, takes such painful emotional relationships seriously – also resorts to “being experimental” to manage these relationships, tweaking his doses of lithium to try to endure his own emotionally fraught marriage to Madeleine.
As *The Marriage Plot* exemplifies, moreover, if a focus on the family was unfashionable in 1982, when the novel is set, it is anything but unfashionable by 2011, when the novel is published. This vision will turn out to be foundational not just for contemporary fiction, but for contemporary politics as well, as evidenced by another surprising “bipartisan” consensus: in *It Takes a Village* (1996), the “village” described by Hillary Clinton turns out to be simply an extended version of the “family” described in Rick Santorum’s *It Takes a Family* (2005). This convergence is just as counter-intuitive as the convergence between Franzen and Marcus, of course, as Santorum’s title is intended to emphasize his disagreements with Clinton, who famously took the name of her own book from an African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” There are indeed important differences here, of course, but both Democrat and Republican agree that the role of government is precisely “to strengthen families” (Clinton 291) and, in so doing, strengthen “the village,” which, whether being used literally (Santorum) or metaphorically (Clinton), is said to be organized by the same values as the family. As Santorum puts it, “the family creates, strengthens, nurtures, and replenishes” (12) the “five pillars of American civilization: social capital, economic capital, moral capital, cultural capital, and intellectual capital” (10), which means that the way to help “low-income families” (12) is not to redistribute “economic capital” but to foster “the formation, stability, and success of the traditional family” (10). Clinton seems to endorse this prescription for the poor, a consensus reflected in the fact that welfare reform – justified by her husband Bill as way to inculcate “the basic values of work, responsibility and family” (“Welfare”) – is trumpeted as a success in *both* Santorum and Clinton’s books.
These political texts help clarify, then, that by turning to the family to “make sense of the world,” the contemporary novel is participating in a broader cultural shift, what academics have come to call the neoliberal turn.10 Central to this turn is the dominance of “human capital,” a term that signifies the product of “activities that produce future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people,” (Becker 11) including investments that improve “skills and abilities, personality, appearance, reputation, and appropriate credentials” (Becker 262). In other words, “human capital” is the discourse that attributes economic success and failure, for both individuals and nations, to individual “values,” in every sense of the word: the economic value of “the resources in people,” including their education and labor power; the personal values that prompt individuals to make certain choices and not others, perhaps generating “psychic income” at the expense of “monetary” income; the moral values, like the “virtues of punctuality and honesty,” that are said to generate success (Becker 15); and – as in these texts – the “family values” practiced and transmitted by individuals in their relationships with family.

Such values are not new, of course, but what does seem historically distinct is the way this discourse equates them directly with "capital," with one's ability to navigate the marketplace – a shift that only makes sense, politically, in the context of the right-wing critique of the welfare state, according to which individuals are encouraged to think of themselves, not the state, as responsible for the happiness and welfare of themselves and their family.11 As this list suggests, “human capital” is above all a way of attributing poverty and inequality to anything but the contradictions intrinsic to the market and market logic. To imagine a world organized by human capital, including a world
organized by “family values,” is to imagine a marketplace comprised of nothing but capitalists – entrepreneurs of the self, as Foucault famously put it (226) – a vision that disavows the fundamental antagonism that makes this marketplace possible: the antagonism between capitalists with actual capital and “capitalists” with just “human capital,” that is, “capitalists” who are really just workers or poor people.12

3.2 Family Values in the Marketplace

This disavowal is most apparent in texts about contemporary social relations themselves, texts like The Corrections, which Franzen describes as his “Clinton novel” (“Conversation”) because of its setting (post-Cold War, pre-9/11 America) but which will turn out to be “Clintonian” in terms of its social vision as well. The novel articulates the various new ways in which “the wealthy few subdue the unwealthy many” (Franzen 444), and yet, like Clinton, Franzen seems to gesture to these conflicts only to resolve them with a return to the family.13 The storyline focusing on Chip Lambert, the family’s middle child, for example, dramatizes how American financial elites take advantage of IMF-mandated restructuring in newly liberalized nations, enriching themselves at the cost of crippling damage to those nations’ infrastructures. After he gets embroiled in a conflict with Lithuanian oligarchs and loses all his money, however, Chip’s story seems to change: he has lost his money, but more importantly he has “lost track of himself” (540); he will quickly rediscover “himself,” however, in his nation – “The continent, his homeland” (540) – and more centrally his family. As the novel concludes, and after returning to his parents’ Midwestern home on Christmas Day, Chip appears to have been “miraculously transformed” (563), “...as if his consciousness had been shorn of all identifying marks and transplanted, metempsychotically, in the body of a steady son, a
trustworthy brother” (546). Indeed, he will start making sacrifices on behalf of his family (and his own new wife and child) for the first time, as if embracing not only his membership in the Lambert clan but the responsibilities that (according to family-values discourse) come with membership.

What’s striking here is the abrupt shift from a type of relationship defined by antagonism to a type of relationship defined by the absence of such antagonism. These relationships are, of course, crucially different: the structural tension between Dale Meyers, (fictional) manager of a three-billion-dollar “no-load growth fund” in eastern Iowa, and the people of Lithuania (whose national airline is liquidated after Meyers buys and sells its fleet) (112) is not reducible to a drama of “consciousness” and “identifying marks,” as a person’s position within the “wealthy few” or the “unwealthy many” will shape the trajectory of their life whether they affirm that membership – as Chip does with his family – or not. Nor can these class tensions be understood in terms of a failure of empathy or “mutual responsibility” (Clinton 289). The conflict between Dale Myers and the people of Lithuania is an impersonal, internal requirement of accumulation itself: “the wealthy few” must “subdue” (dominate, exploit), the “unwealthy many,” or they will no longer be “the wealthy few.” Whatever acts of charity are made possible by the ability to “imagine how hard another person’s life was” (524) – like Denise Lambert’s decision to forgive her brother Chip’s $20,000 debt (after she discovers her ailing father has made his own sacrifice on her behalf) – must take place within the limits sketched out by this structural necessity.15

According to the narrative logic of *The Corrections*, however, being a dedicated member of a family can substitute for (and thus resolve the conflicts of) being a member
of a class. Collin Hutchinson’s description of this resolution as “communitarian” (202) is clarifying because it underscores not only that this vision of a world constituted by “family” is structurally analogous to a vision of a world constituted by “community” – both embrace “the supremacy of the market as they promote decentralized forms of collectivity distinct from the state” (DeFilippis 100) – but also that both views can be contrasted to those of the Clintons’ political predecessors: what’s being rejected in the novel’s ending is not the public world but the “utilitarian individualism” (Hawkins 78) of the father and the “expressive individualism” (Hawkins 78) or “libertarian-individualist ethic” (Hutchinson 200) of the children, a rejection that reflects a “left-liberal” hostility to “the rise of Reaganite economic libertarianism” (Hutchinson 204).

Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* rejects this “Reaganite economic libertarianism,” as well, I argue, and here this gesture is closely intertwined with the novel’s rejection of postmodernism. Early in the book the narrator explains that “Going to college in the moneymaking eighties lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution. (25). In other words, semiotics is ‘radical’ and ‘revolutionary,’ but only in the same sense as making money during the Reagan years. Although this connection is only hinted at, what seems to link “French theory” (19) with Reaganism is that it too is committed to a vision of radical individual freedom. That is, the novel suggests that such theory is committed to the idea that acknowledging how public discourses tend to over-determine affective relationships (like those of the family) can somehow translate into *freedom* from those discourses. Reading Roland Barthes’s *Lover’s Discourse*, an assignment in her “Semiotics 211” class, for example, Madeleine concludes that: “If you used your head, if you became aware of how love was culturally
constructed and began to see your symptoms as purely mental, if you recognized that being ‘in love’ was only an idea, then you could liberate yourself from its tyranny” (79).

The student who raves about Peter Handke’s *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* makes a similar point about literature. Because “‘we’ve read the sentimental, filial account of a dead parent...a million times,’” it “‘doesn’t have any power anymore,’” but we can regain this “power,” by embracing the over-determination of the private by the public, the real by the textual: by treating his mother’s suicide as “just a literary trope.” Handke is able to “‘break free’” from “‘all that tradition’” (28).

*The Marriage Plot* itself suggests, however, that this view is an inauthentic account of human freedom. As I noted above, Madeleine’s boyfriend Billy Bainbridge believes in “killing” your artistic “father”(30) – in Billy’s case, he explains, it’s “Godard” – implicitly so that, to use Madeleine’s language, you can “liberate yourself” from his “tyranny.” But when we see Billy for the final time, in the illicit tableaux that causes the couple’s demise, he “lay curled, John Lennon-style,” against one of his female roommates. “Both were naked. A second later, in a puff of smoke, Fatima [his other roommate] materialized, also naked, shaking baby powder over her gleaming Persian skin. She smiled at her bedmates, her teeth seed-like in purple, royal gums” (32). The infantilizing imagery here – the baby powder, the name Fatima, which means “one who weans,” and the fact that Billy’s pose reproduces the famous photo of John Lennon, curled in a fetal position around Yoko Ono – suggests that by attempting to live out the spirit of ‘60s-era free love and radicalism, Billy isn’t so much killing his artistic “father” as becoming his father’s son. Fatima’s “purple, royal gums,” and royal lineage (she is the niece of the shah of Iran, the narrator informs us) suggests, moreover, that Billy is not
liberating himself from “tyranny” but simply subjecting himself in a new, less honest way.

Still, if, like Franzen, Eugenides sets out to articulate limits to our individual freedom, he seems ultimately more invested in affirming this idea’s necessary corollary, that we do have individual freedom within these limits. That is, the novel’s main project is to affirm the importance of the choices that take place within affective relationships, including ritualized affective relationships like marriage, which is why the novel can be read, as one reviewer put it, as “an attempt by Eugenides to reclaim [marriage] for a generation and demographic – and to champion the old-fashioned realist novel as a serious pursuit for thoughtful novelists” (Haglund). In other words, by redeeming the choices that take place within marriage, Eugenides is trying to redeem the marriage plot itself, rescuing it from, on one hand, those who say that the plot has lost meaning because of women's equality and the liberalization of divorce law:

> What would it matter whom Emma married if she could file for separation later? How would Isabel Archer’s marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a prenup? As far as [K. McCall Saunders, Madeleine's fusty Victorian Lit professor] was concerned, marriage didn’t mean much anymore, and neither did the novel. (22)

At the same time, Eugenides is also trying to rescue marriage and the marriage plot from those who, as we’ve seen, think meaningful choice is impossible within such a “culturally constructed” and “sentimental...tradition.” He stages this redemption through a plotline that turns on the changing interpretations of a line from the Barthes text: “‘Once the first avowal has been made, “I love you” has no meaning whatsoever...’” (67). The first time that we encounter this line, Madeleine herself has just said “I love you” to Leonard for the first time; reading the sentence together, the two lovers seem to interpret it to mean
that those who make this avowal are simply performing roles from an antiquated script that no longer has any intrinsic value. That is, they take the “first avowal” to refer to the first historical utterance, the very founding of the “lover’s discourse,” the exteriority and long tradition of which renders Madeleine’s own statement meaningless. As if as a result, the two lovers stop being lovers.

However, when the quote comes up for the second time, in the midst of the lovers’ reconciliation later in the novel, they interpret it differently. “‘No, but—think about it,’” Leonard tells Madeleine. “‘That means the first avowal does have meaning’” (127 italics original). He is referring joyously to Madeleine’s “first avowal,” already in the past, and his own “first avowal,” still to come; what’s important to note here, then, is that they are not simply emphasizing a different implication of the same point they understood earlier in the novel, but interpreting the meaning of the word “first” in a different way: now it refers to the “first” time in the context of a specific relationship. This shift in referent makes its own rhetorical statement, as it suggests that while saying “I love you” means subjecting oneself to a pre-existing ‘cultural construct,’ it constitutes a singular, meaningful action in the context of a specific relationship, perhaps because, as in this novel, saying “I love you” for the first time fundamentally changes that relationship. As if as a result of this reinterpretation, moreover, the two lovers resume their affair, an affair that eventually culminates in marriage (and, eventually, divorce.)

Of course, as I began to suggest above, if it’s controversial in 1982 to say that the choice to get married “does have meaning,” by 2011 this statement is deeply uncontroversial, and indeed the real controversy now is not whether this choice is meaningful but whether everyone gets to make this choice. Affirming the value of
marriage itself is uncontroversial, writers like Lisa Duggan and Yasmin Nair have suggested, because doing so constitutes no real challenge to the neoliberal consensus; indeed, Nair (co-founder of the “Against Equality” collective that has published an anthology of “queer critiques of marriage”) argues that:

Marriage, as configured in the U.S., is neoliberalism’s handiest little tool. It allows for the most intense privatization of resources by placing the responsibility for people’s welfare squarely in the realm of the family. Need health care? If you don’t have a job that gives you that, or have parents who can put you on their plan, or a spouse with a job that allows you access to the same, you’re screwed. In that sense, neoliberalism loves marriage – it’s an effective and economical way to ensure that the state can abdicate from its responsibility for people’s health and well being. (Nair)

Even the rejection of the “libertarian-individualist ethic” (Hutchinson 200) – as when Franzen and Eugenides show us, in different ways, that you can never be your own “father” – is compatible with this abdication of responsibility by the state, which becomes clearer when we look at how this left-liberal vision actually shapes the rhetoric and policies of a figure like Hillary Clinton.

If “we care about family values,” she reminds her readers, "we have to be concerned with what happens to those values in the marketplace" (267). In other words, Clinton suggests that the relationships of the "marketplace" can and should themselves be guided by "family values." Clinton complains that too often, however, this doesn't happen: “Instead of ‘We're all in this together,’ the message from the top is frequently, ‘You're on your own’” (272). When companies favor "short-term profits" over policies that benefit workers, the cause, she suggests, is a failure of a sense of "mutual responsibility" (289), as if what she describes as the “built-in tension” of the market would be assuaged if those at “the top” (rich people and business owners) started treating people at the bottom (poor people and workers) more like family members in need.
According to this logic, there is no real social conflict here, no truly intractable "tension"; indeed, it turns out that the market’s “built-in tension” is not a tension between social groups but between, in Clinton’s account, “the drive to satisfy consumers’ demands by maximizing productivity and profitability” and the needs of the “the workers and families who are, after all, those very consumers” (272). By internalizing conflict in these ways – by making it a function of a lack of family values in business owners or (elsewhere) poor people and by framing it as a conflict between a consumer’s own “demands” and “needs” – Clinton is able to ignore the collective, structural antagonism that tends to trump these individual expressions of love and (ir)responsibility. Thus, the role of government is not to protect those at the bottom from those at "the top" (through, for example, policies aimed at economic redistribution), but to ensure that these groups work together, practicing the "family values" that will allow all to thrive. To compel companies to allow "good workers to be good family members,” for example, the Clintons advocated legislation like the Family and Medical Leave Act – "the first bill my husband signed into law as President, on February 5, 1993" – which guarantees workers at large companies the right to take unpaid leave "in order to care for a new child, a sick family member, or their own serious health condition, without losing their health benefits or their jobs" (78).

This federal intervention into the marketplace has had a major impact on workers' lives, with employees taking advantage of the leave an estimated 100 million times between 1993 and 2012 (“Family”); it also put the Clintons at odds with the organized business lobby and small-government conservatives like Santorum, who voted against the bill as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Bill Clinton's predecessor,
George H.W. Bush, who vetoed the bill twice while in office (“Votes”; Lenhoff). From a perspective that insists that we’re not ‘all in this together,’ however, such laws read as a refinement, rather than a critique, of the basic logic of the "marketplace." This is not simply because of the FMLA's limits (the guaranteed leave is unpaid, and it is only guaranteed for full-time workers at large companies), but because of its very goals. As Hillary Clinton's phrasing suggests, legislation like the Family and Medical Leave Act will be especially beneficial to "good workers" – employees with plentiful “human capital” who will no longer be discriminated against (in effect) for having needy family members. But such policies don't speak to the basic contradictions of neoliberalism, according to which such "good workers" may get ahead only if the majority of workers fall behind.

3.3 “Contract Kind” of People.

I argue that this “left-liberal” neoliberalism informs how writers like Franzen and Marcus “make sense” not just “of the world,” but of the world of letters, a connection that is especially crucial for understanding a self-reflexive text like Notable American Women. If we return to these two authors’ disagreement about literary difficulty, we find that Marcus actually shares Franzen’s belief that the role of the novelist is to maintain a “community of readers,” an agreement that seems to contradict the terms of their debate. That is, one might expect Marcus, as a defender of difficulty, to reject Franzen’s notion of an authorial “Contract” with readers: “Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader’s attention only as long as the author sustains the reader’s trust” (Franzen “Mr. Difficult” 240).
Indeed, one might expect Marcus to embrace a “wildly different” model of how “fiction should relate to its audience”: the “Status model,” which entails indifference or hostility to readers in search of a “pleasurable experience” (Franzen 240). But Marcus’s “correction” (as his response is subtitled) proves to be yet another defense of the reader, namely those readers to whom “difficulty” provides both the “pleasurable experience” and “sense of connectedness” that Franzen demands of fiction: “Some of us feel relief when we read this kind of writing, because it proves there is always more to think and feel, always another mind to engage and enter, always intensities we did not know existed” (Marcus 51 emphasis mine). In his concluding paragraph, Marcus explicitly adopts Franzen’s “Contract” metaphor to declare: “This isn’t a manifesto. It’s a response to an attack from the highest point of status culture. The contract I signed? Not to stand by when a populist pundit puts up his dull wall and says what literature can and cannot be” (52).

Not only, then, do both authors obscure the differences between author and reader – there is no difference, only “us,” the “community of readers” the author is “first” a part of – but they also disavow the antagonism that traditionally exists between such “communities.” This disavowal is implicit in Marcus’s line that “This isn’t a manifesto”: instead of making a call to action, asserting the superiority or historical urgency of his particular aesthetic practices, Marcus writes his essay because:

...it seemed important to hear from the kind of reader that Franzen seems to be claiming does not, or should not, actually exist. I am not advocating the complex or difficult approach as the superior one, or claiming that it is better than seeking to commune with the largest possible audience. (51)

Nor, in fact, is Franzen claiming that it is “better...to commune with largest possible audience”; as various critics have noted, his attacks on the “big social novel” and formal
experimentation (gestures which he sees as intertwined in the work of writers like Pynchon and Gaddis) all seem to resolve themselves, over the course of the essays in which they appear, into declarations of personal identity rather than aesthetic critiques.\textsuperscript{18} Accessible fiction is not superior, it seems, it’s simply that, “In my bones...I’m a Contract kind of person” (Franzen 241). According to this logic, the different styles may coexist; indeed, this logic \textit{insists} that the different styles coexist, that there be as many styles as there are “kind of reader” or “kind of person.” There turns out to be little difference, then, between the notion of an authorial “contract,” as these authors use the term, and what Franzen describes as the Contract model “taken to its free-market extreme,” that which declares “You’re the consumer; you rule” (241). Whether imagining the world of letters as a collection of literary “kinds” (to be celebrated because of the value of kinship itself) or as a collection of market segments (the mass market and the niche market), Franzen and Marcus have transformed the traditional aesthetic conflict between the “mainstream” novelist and “avant-garde” novelist into a relationship that isn’t a conflict at all.\textsuperscript{19}

Elsewhere, in fact, Marcus implies that his readers are actually part of the same community as those who read Franzen, in the sense that they are looking for the same things and are appeased by the same aesthetic strategy: including the family in \textit{Notable American Women} allowed him to give “the reader...those moments that are considered more traditional, or at least more anchored” (“How can...”) As he explains, “in searching for ways to bring emotion to the book, placing a family at the center of it was like taking a shortcut toward emotionality. Thinking, \textit{I need emotion here. Where can I find it?} Put a family in there. Make it fall to pieces.” (“How can...” emphasis original). In sum, Marcus’s family–focused emotional “shortcuts” and communitarian commitment to the
reader seem to strip designations like “experimental” of any meaning. At the same time, however, these elements are, I argue, central to the ways in which Marcus reflects on and innovates with novelistic form – another, less oppositional understanding of “the experimental.” Incorporating the domestic narrative allows him to pose a question – what happens to affective relationships in a world built out of the depersonalization of communication? – that is really a question about literature itself, a question about how to balance the desire to create emotional identification in the reader (a unique motive for the avowed experimentalist) with the desire to ignore the reader, to use language in a new way by testing out its non-representational, non- “figurative” functions (“Why Experimental” 49) (a traditional motive for the avowed experimentalist).20

As we’ve already seen, Michael Marcus’s introduction poses this question immediately, mixing the family narrative in with moments that are much less “traditional,” much less “anchored” in a world that is recognizably our own. The physical and discursive “technologies” of this world, including his parents’ strange “corrective” techniques, are all deeply unfamiliar, all predicated, it seems, on a deep hostility to both emotion and language; indeed, the various technologies of “emotion removal” (103; 105; 117; 181; 197) – including “strategic fainting” (74), the head stuffed with cloth (117), the “stillness equipment” (152) in the “stillness shed” (151) – are all simultaneously “The Technology of Silence” (97). The common denominator of this resistance to emotion and this resistance to language is the resistance, specifically, to interpersonal communication, to the language by which subjects share their feelings, with the desire, instead, for formalization, with its values of impersonality and objectivity. This movement from the interpersonal to the impersonal seems to be implicit in the very logic by which Ben
Marcus invented these technologies, all of which seem grounded in the literalization, formalization, and materialization of various metaphors and associations concerning language, writing, and speech – concepts which therefore enact the very problematic that animates the text itself.

Most obviously and, perhaps, most importantly, Ben’s mother Jane belongs to a female cult of “Silentists,” a plot element that seems to represent the literalization of a common metaphor about the role women have played in public life and in the writing of history: that they have been “silenced.” Indeed, Marcus has said the book took its name from an example of that metaphoric silencing: “The title does reference an actual set of women’s histories that, in their early edition, were begrudging and condescending” (“Interview”). The trope of the cult of Silentists also seems to represent, meanwhile, the formalization of this metaphor, in which these historical acts of silencing have been transformed into Silentism, a creed and a code of conduct embraced by both women and (to a lesser extent) men. Furthermore, as part of this re-invigoration of silence – what Marcus describes as his “reparatory action,” his attempt to respond to those early women’s histories by depicting “glorious and graceful, highly fantastical” women’s lives (“Interview”) – the notion that silence is ‘good for you’ (and that emotion-filled language is therefore bad) seems to have been materialized. On one hand, interpersonal communication is now physically bad for you – thus we have concepts like “language-poison” and “speech wind – an early form of menacing weather” (77).

On the other, silence is now a kind of desirable body type, to be achieved through the modification of the body itself. Speech, feeling, and shared feelings happen in the mouth, brain, and ears; therefore the “head is decentralized” (77) by stuffing it full of
cloth, or through a “a diet meant to feed and promote silence, limit motion, and restrict
hearing to an-all vowel repertoire” (65). An “all-vowel repertoire” is better because
“vowels indicate pleasure and consonants indicate pain and confusion” (60) Why?
Because, the narrator explains, “experiences of intercourse were free of consonants” (60)
– in other words, vowels are the sounds of pleasure the body makes (and thus have a kind
of mindless “objectivity,” even if they fall short of pure silence) while consonants are the
sounds of two disconnected subjects forced to resort to actual speech. That is, the
narrator (“Ben Marcus”) associates speech with others’ disappointment in his love-
making (61), precisely the kind of messy “emotions” the book fantasizes about replacing
with the impersonal pleasures of head-stuffed bodies, efforts which merely confirm the
centrality of emotion to the book’s project.

As this analysis suggests, moreover, in the process of reading what is at root a
generic coming-of-age story – filled with common childhood traumas like adolescent
sexuality, seeing one’s parents fight, even the death of a pet – the reader must decipher
the most basic presuppositions of Ben’s narration, as if learning the facts and norms of a
whole new world. By thereby mixing the “emotional” and the conceptual, instead of
simply proceeding with his initial vision of the book as the “set of missing entries for this
scholarly project of women’s histories” (“Interview”) (though this vision is still
represented in the book in a series of chapters called “Dates”), Marcus transforms what
would have been an instance of a familiar postmodern genre, the “secret” or “alternate”
history, into something that seems generically distinct. In this sense, Marcus’s novel,
like The Corrections, reminds us why the literary critic interested in what comes after
postmodernism must also be interested in the varieties of neoliberalism: the intersection
of “left-liberal” commitments with the disavowal of structural antagonism (the triangulation sparking renewed interest in affective and ethical social bonds) generates not just new political forms but also new literary forms, from Franzen’s “Clinton novel” to an “experimental” novel in which “emotionality” emerges as a problem.

Of course, the most significant of these new forms might be the very debates that have structured this essay – “the realists” versus “the experimentalists,” “Reaganism” versus the “communitarian renaissance response to Reaganism” (Hutchinson 192) – debates which turn out to be ways of generating consensus, not conflict, even as economic exploitation and inequality (the material conflicts of class) have only intensified (Brenner xxviii; Piketty 838-843). To put this in more pointed terms, we can say that the most important fact about these neoliberal literary and political debates is, indeed, polarization – not of ideology, however, but of wealth and income in the United States.

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1 For a discussion of how Marcus invokes the term “experimental,” see Paul Stephens’s “What Do We Mean by “Literary Experimentalism”? Notes Toward a History of the Term.”

2 Critics who argue that Franzen’s work represents a break from the past have shown how he rejects (sometimes incompletely) postmodern metafiction in favor of realism (McLaughlin); the postmodern critique of the subject in favor of traditional characterization (Smith); and the “postmodern spatial turn,” with its “disconnection from historical time,” in favor of narratives that “promise...some kind of renewed historical understanding” (Kelly 395; 407). By reading his work in conjunction with Notable American Women, a novel that features many of the formal elements associated with postmodernism in these accounts, I hope to gesture toward a new way of describing "post-postmodernism" (Burn), one that considers not only formal distinctions (such as whether a text is metafictional or realist, traditional or experimental) but also distinctions (and convergences) in how texts imagine social life. Doing so is crucial for recognizing how literary fiction has participated in broader cultural developments during this period, including the triumph of neoliberal ideology. Of course, many of these critics do connect Franzen's stylistic developments to shifts in his (and other contemporary writers') political and social philosophies (see, for example, Kelly, Irr, Hutchinson, and Hawkins), and some have explicitly connected Franzen with the neoliberal turn (Smith). But by suggesting that neoliberalism can be defined specifically by its disavowal of social contradiction – rather than, for example, "individualism" (Smith 426) – I hope to also shift the terms by which academic readers categorize texts (and critical practices) as either oppositional to or in concert with this political ideology.

3 Some of these authors (like Franzen) claim to move past postmodernism, while others (like Marcus) carry on its legacy of formal experimentation (and some, like David Foster Wallace, do both); whatever their
explicit or implicit claims about postmodernism however, I argue that these authors’ social visions mark them as “post-postmodern.” At the same time, as this phrasing suggests, all of these authors do situate themselves in relation to the postmodern tradition; making claims about the other major flavors of contemporary American fiction – what Mark McGurl has recently described as “high cultural pluralism” (or “ethnic literature”) and “lower-middle-class modernism” (or “minimalism”) (68) – is beyond the scope of this chapter. One highly speculative suggestion, however, is that the postmodern branch is becoming more like “high cultural pluralism,” with its emphasis on “a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic” (McGurl 56). As Madhu Dubey notes, Franzen’s 1996 essay, “Perchance to Dream” [later published as “Why Bother? (The Harper’s Essay),”] suggests he is envious of what he describes as the subcultural authority afforded to and by these novelists’ ethnic group membership (Dubey 365; Franzen 51); perhaps these (mostly) white male authors’ fictions of family and critical narratives about “communities of readers” can be read as an attempt to reclaim some of this identitarian legitimacy. I should also note here that my description of postmodern literature itself has been influenced by McGurl’s account of “technomodernist” literature, a term that is helpful because it articulates the connection between two elements frequently identified as “postmodern:” the extension of the modernist project of "systematic experimentation with narrative form" and "technomediatic themes" (42). [The connection, in brief, is that both elements reflect an identification "with the 'emptiness' of pure formality – that is, with the systemacity of the system itself" (62).]

4 Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), for example, dramatizes the author’s attempts, following the sudden death of his parents and the adoption of his younger brother, to create a supportive community of like-minded young cultural consumers, a “lattice” that is explicitly figured as an extended family, connected by “blood” (237, 339, 436). Bender’s *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2001), meanwhile, uses the story of 20-year-old math teacher struggling to come to terms with her father’s mysterious mental illness, in order to explore conflicts between individual fulfillment, family membership, and the public relationships of adulthood. The stunted young woman, Mona Grey, achieves a level of independence from her family by the end of the novel, but this process is narrated in a fabulistic style that seems to transform the adult world of Mona’s future into an expansion of the fairy-tale world of her childhood.

5 In literature, this turn might be traced back (as articulations of “post-postmodernism” often are) to the 1993 publication of “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” David Foster Wallace’s influential critique of postmodern irony in fiction and on TV. This critique was, after all, predicated on how such irony discourages displays of emotion and belief and therefore weakens bonds of sociality: “the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability....The well-trained lonely viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Loneliher (181). In politics, meanwhile, it’s true that the inauguration of “late twentieth-century moralistic discourse on family values in the United States” is commonly dated back to 1965, with Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Stacey 5); by 1976, moreover, the Republican party had made “family values” part of its national platform (Stone 68-69). I would suggest, however, that we might identify 1992 as the moment when this discourse came to define the political mainstream for the first time, as that year “family values” was a key campaign issue for both Republicans and Democrats (Peck 111-125; Stacey 52-82).

6 Clinton’s point is that, because children “exist in the world as well as in the family” and because this "world" now extends “well beyond the town line,” forming a newly “global village” (6), the problems facing children can no longer be solved by private families or local communities alone; "outside institutions," including federal government programs, are necessary to “strengthen families” so they can “raise strong children and to protect themselves from influences that threaten to undermine parental authority” (291). Santorum’s title signals his resistance, not to the idea that “children exist in the world as well as in the family,” but to this embrace of outside institutions, which, in his view, do not strengthen families but weaken them, along with other “intermediary institutions” like those literal, old-fashioned villages still defined by “the town line.” As he puts it: "The warm, fuzzy image of Senator Clinton's book is that of a community rich in social capital, but the truth of the matter is that liberal policies which tie individuals to the government break the bonds of true community and deplete social capital" (67). By
invoking "social capital" – a term strongly associated with the "communitarian" movement that flourished in the 1990s and that many have argued was central to Clintonian politics – Santorum underscores one of my major premises: that Santorum's emphasis on the family and Hillary Clinton's emphasis on the village are (at least on the level of political economy) structurally analogous and thus largely interchangeable, despite the fact that "a turn to the community" was supposed to be the alternative to those approaches that "turned to the family as the cause and solution to social problems" (DeFilippis 98).

As of mid-2014, of course, the most visible difference between how Clinton and Santorum understand “family values” concerns gay marriage: unlike in 1996, Clinton now believes gays and lesbians should be free to marry, while the most famous fact about Santorum is his hostility to gay rights. My point here is not that differences like these don’t matter. My point is that – as Franzen’s novel suggests – this disruption of Santorum’s patriarchal, heterosexist, Christian-fundamentalist notion of family can be read as an extension, rather than a rejection, of the neoliberal discourse of family values. In *The Corrections*, Chip and Denise’s embrace of family is triggered by the very failure of the patriarch, and the novel ends with their mother’s begrudging acceptance of their “‘alternative’ lifestyles” (565): Denise is lesbian or bisexual and Chip marries an “extremely Jewish” woman who is already “seven months pregnant” (564 italics original).

For analysis of the convergence between family-values discourse, communitarianism, and Clintonian politics, see Peck (111-125) and Stacey (54-55). For critiques of the way that “community” is deployed in post-Reagan political discourse, see Derber, Blackshaw, and DeFilippis et. al.

As I note in my “Introduction,” “human capital” discourse can also be deployed to argue against this retrenchment of the state and has been used as a strategy to call for public spending in a way that appeals to those on the right. Part of the problem with the adoption of the “investment metaphor” to support spending on education, Francine H. Jacobs notes, is that this approach “validates…behaviors that mark the private sector, such as the evaluation of these investments in terms of payoffs at a later date, the search for the most cost-effective strategies, and the possible withdrawal of public support should the economic rationale for the investment recede” (15).

Of course, just as many critics have argued that New Left politics contained certain affinities with, and was thus recuperable by, neoliberal politics, we can make a similar caveat about the postmodern novel: its interest in broad structures of domination (like *Mumbo Jumbo*’s parody of racist grand narratives about Western cultural development, for example, or *The Crying of Lot 49*’s “parable of power” (39) figuring Cold War paranoia as a form of social control) make it distinct from the contemporary novel, but this interest does not necessarily translate into an anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal vision.

This political context is why Bill Clinton's comment during his 1992 Presidential nomination speech that deadbeat dads need to "take responsibility for your children...Because governments don’t raise children; parents do" (221), is the necessary corollary, not the contradiction, to Hillary's argument that "It takes a village to raise a child."

In "Neoliberal Family Matters," Susan Koshy reads Jhumpa Lahiri’s short-story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) as a “quietly devastating critique” (355) of the discourse that defines family values – specifically the “parenting norms” of the Asian-American “model minority family” (346) – as the source of immigrant class mobility and intergenerational accumulation: “One of the searing ironies of the collection is that an inheritance so orchestrated around accumulation should in the end come to be felt as an inheritance of loss” (373). This sentence encapsulates what I argue is a problem central to most attempts to think about the relationship between contemporary literature and neoliberalism: a tendency to confl ate one kind of structure, that of material “accumulation” and “loss,” with another, that of “identity and belonging,” (374), the structure Koshy has in mind, in fact, when she refers to “loss.” That is, what the characters in Lahiri’s stories have “lost,” according to Koshy, is a sense of personal agency and cultural membership; they are neither as empowered nor as comfortable (as “Asian” or “American”) as neoliberal discourse says they should be. The difference between these two structures is that, while material accumulation by one class requires material loss by another, “identification” by one group does not require alienation by another; indeed, Koshy argues that a sense of “loss” can be the very *basis* for its own form of identification:
“[Lahiri] reads this attenuated agency not as a lack, but as the ground of an ethico-aesthetic politics of tangentiality” (373). Since neoliberalism depends on obfuscating the first type of structure, it’s not clear to me why a text that performs the same obfuscation (according to this reading) can count as a “devastating critique.”

By way of contrast, we can look to Carpenter's Gothic (1985) – by William Gaddis, "Mr. Difficult" himself, the writer Franzen singled out for his most sustained critique of postmodern fiction – a novel that provides a natural counterpoint to The Corrections, in the sense that both texts dramatize how even the private space of a single family home is permeated by the geopolitical. What's striking about Carpenter's Gothic is the tension between what Gaddis could (and, by expectation, should) be doing to tell his story of global political conspiracy – narration of multiple settings, multiple time-periods, and multiple personal histories – and what he actually does, which is to keep the narration confined to one place (a house on the Hudson) and one short period of time; just as importantly, rather than relaying memories or personal histories, the narration confines itself to relaying dialogue, physical action, and subjective impressions that don't quite rise to the level of internal monologue, creating the sense that one is constantly in "the present," in both space and time. This aesthetic tension suggests a structural tension between the events that take place in the house and the neocolonial intrigue that happens outside it, especially since these external events are constantly invoked in the dialogue without ever being fully explained, meaning the reader is constantly attempting (and never quite succeeding) to decipher this broader context (until, for the main character at least, it is too late). This tension is absent from The Corrections, because Franzen does what Gaddis does not – narrate multiple places, times, and personal histories (albeit all with the confines of one nuclear family) – and because he ultimately suggests that the substance of these family relationships are identical to the substance of these public relationships, including the new relations of globalization.

The house of Chip’s parents, every bit of it “saturated with an aura of belonging to this family” (541), seems to reestablish his “organic” connection to his family, in preparation for his rebirth as a family man: “The house felt more like a body – softer, more mortal and organic – than like a building” (541). Soon, literally “dressed in the old man’s clothes,” which “fit him better than he would have guessed” (542), Chip begins to feel like “a person of substance, as if there were something to him…(546)

The scene which serves as the climax of the storyline focusing on Denise Lambert, youngest of the three adult children in the nuclear family headed by Alfred and Enid Lambert, provides another example of how the novel personalizes the impersonal relations of capitalism. Earlier in the novel we learned that, fourteen years before the present action, Denise had an affair with a married co-worker, Don Armour, while interning at Midland Pacific, the railroad company where her father was Chief of Engineering, at about the same time the company was being acquired by a pair of corporate raiders intent on stripping its assets. During this later climactic scene – which takes place during the family’s final Christmas together before Alfred’s hospitalization for Parkinson’s and dementia – Denise discovers a crude drawing, reproduced graphically in the text, of a heart shape containing the letters "DA + DL" (524) on the underside of the workbench in her father’s small basement laboratory. Recognizing the initials and piecing together her father’s confused ramblings, Denise realizes that Don Armour attempted to use the affair, with the graffiti as proof of their relationship, to blackmail her father into helping him keep his job when the company downsized. She also realizes that Alfred’s sudden, financially and emotionally costly resignation from the company shortly after her affair (a decision that remained inexplicable until this moment ) was how he avoided either surrendering to Armour or letting his daughter’s reputation be tarnished to his co-workers.

The presence of this heart – in the armor-piercing hand of “D” Armour, inscribed in the private space of a man to whom "you could do no greater kindness than to respect his privacy" (526) – reads as a dramatic affirmation of the mediation of the "private" by the "public." For the entire novel, it turns out, the relationship between a father and daughter has been complicated by their relationships with people outside the domestic sphere and, more generally, by the relationships that exist between a company's workers, managers and owners. Like Hillary Clinton, then, Franzen wants to show that children “exist in the world as well as in the family,” but, also like Clinton, his interest in the "world" is ultimately predicated on his interest in "the family." In this scene, for example, he invokes the public dynamics of the "village" in order to articulate a contradiction in a private relationship, the relationship between father and daughter. Because
Alfred denied the power of the village – through his very idealization of individualist values like "privacy," self-reliance, hard work, and industry – his attempt to raise a "perfectly responsible and careful daughter" (525) results in what, to his mind, is the opposite, a daughter who commits the ultimate act of "betrayal" (281).

Crucially, even though the problem here is with the very notion of "privacy" itself, resolving this problem would entail relating to his daughter (and his relationship to his daughter) differently, a resolution that is still "private" in its scope, still concerned with the question of how "to raise a child." Throughout the novel, in fact, the narrative focus subordinates the public, worldly material to the development of the family plot, the working through of the conflicts between parents, children, and siblings. In this sense, *The Corrections* seems to insist on the *primacy* of the family, as if Franzen imagines a world comprised primarily of families rather than other forms of social organization.

One could argue, perhaps, that the novel's system of figurative linkages, what we might call its symbolic rather than narrative logic, suggests a slightly different vision. As many reviewers and critics like Nathan K. Hensley have suggested, the private crises and tensions of the Lambert family seem to allegorize the global economic crises and tensions of this period. The book's title, after all, refers not only to the relationship between parents and children, but also to the market "correction" – the "year-long leakage of value from key financial markets" (563) – that took place in 2000, ending what was, as the novel reminds more than once, "the longest sustained economic boom in American history" (92). And we can read Denise’s reaction to her discovery about her father in allegorical terms as well. She concludes that loving her father by respecting his privacy has kept her from recognizing (or allowed her to ignore) how much suffering she has caused both him and her mother:

...no matter how often and how bitterly Enid had complained to her, she’d never gotten it through her head that life in [her hometown] had turned into such a nightmare; and how could you permit yourself to breathe, let alone laugh or sleep or eat well, if you were unable to imagine how hard another person’s life was? (524).

This reaction seems to articulate another contradiction of "privacy" – that a discourse predicated on respect for the individual can serve to justify indifference to their suffering – and the shift in pronouns suggests that Denise's question to herself is also a question to someone else, namely to the others in the text who have lived "well" while somebody else’s life "has turned into such a nightmare." Thus, the scene also seems to allegorize broader social conflicts, the contradictions of an era when the privatizing, liberalizing politics of globalization allowed "millions of newly minted American millionaires" to engage in "the identical pursuit of feeling extraordinary" (197), while "ordinary citizens lived in ceaseless fear of being fired and ceaseless confusion about which powerful private interest owned which formerly public institution on any given day" (444).

These two interpretations, the narrative and the symbolic/allegorical, reflect two slightly different ways of understanding how the novel articulates the relationship between family and the world; the key, however, is that both interpretations are shaped by the logic of human capital. Implicit in the analogy between Denise’s family and economic globalization is the suggestion that the same thing that caused her disconnection from her parents' plight – a failure of sympathetic imagination – caused this social disconnection as well, as if the relationship between the corporate raider and the laid-off railroad worker, for example, is governed by the same ebb and flow of compassion as her relationship with her parents. In other words, this analogy implies that the relationship between members of different classes is grounded not in structural antagonism but in the same personal qualities that dictate the relationship between family members. Hence, if the narrative logic of the text suggests a world comprised primarily of families, its figurative logic suggests a world that is like one big family.

16 In this sense, *The Corrections* performs narratively what Hillary Clinton does rhetorically, as when she urges business owners to imagine that, as the title of her chapter on economic policy indicates, “Every Business is a Family Business” (265). This idea is explicitly parodied in George Saunders’s “Pastoralia” (2000), a dystopian satire whose main characters reenact the lives of cave dwellers at a historical theme park. Late in the novella management releases a memo reminding workers “that we are a family, and you are the children...and... that we, in our own way, love you,” (48) but the truth is clearly that the relationship between workers and their bosses is antithetical to the more selfless relationships between friends and family in the text; indeed, the narrator’s bosses eventually pressure him into betraying his less-competent partner in the name of protecting his family, and as the story ends, he and his new partner are locked in a
fierce competition, each going to absurd lengths to prove their dedication to the role of cave dweller, as if downward pressure has reduced them to acting like primitives in a violent state of nature. Still, though Saunders pokes holes in the idea that businesses can operate like families, the only alternative to business in the text is family, or rather family values, as when the narrator reflects on how his father, a worker at a meat-processing plant, used to help cover for his less-competent partner – acts of kindness that were eventually paid back when the partner gave money to the narrator’s mother following the father’s death (46). Collective action like union organizing or political engagement play absolutely no role in this story (nor in “Sea Oak,” the Pastoralia collection’s other workplace satire), and this absence raises the inevitable question of whether these alternatives are being ignored by Saunders himself or merely by his characters; in either case, these stories suggest the startling lack of class consciousness even in contemporary fictions dedicated to the precarity of the modern worker.

17 Although I agree with Rachel Greenwald Smith when she argues that Franzen’s novels and criticism, as well as much of the critical celebration of Franzen, seem to privilege “individual emotions” over “broad systemic dynamics” in a way that accords with the imperatives of “neoliberal capitalism” (426), I think that the importance of family and community in both Franzen’s writing and neoliberalism itself means that it is too simple to describe either as a celebration of “individualism” (426). For the same reason, affective literary criticism’s opposition to “humanism and the insularity of the individual” (442), does not constitute, in of itself, an anti-neoliberal position; although attending to the “deindividuating affective forces that bind humans to one another and to other species” (435) (a theme Smith finds in Richard Powers’s The Echo Maker) might translate into more radical “new forms of consciousness” (441) than the family- and community-mindedness of the texts in my study, these texts nevertheless demonstrate that neoliberalism can accommodate many different forms of subjectivity.

Indeed, for reasons I explore in my second chapter, affect theory itself seems to reproduce many of neoliberalism’s personalizing, internalizing gestures. It is also theoretically problematic in a more a general sense – in brief, it seems to depend on the notion that literary texts can somehow generate preconscious "sensory responses" before "codifications and values," and thus potentially disrupt those "codifications and values" (Smith 149), even though the very act of reading (to say nothing of the very act of sitting down to read, and so forth) entails the positing of concepts, and thus to have a "sensory response" is to have already started codifying and evaluating.

18 “Why Bother? (The Harper’s Essay)” culminates in a “realization that my condition was not a disease but a nature...I was a reader” (Franzen 94). It’s no accident, I think, that the identitarian turn in The Corrections’s narrative seems to mirror the identitarian turn in this narrative of The Corrections, that is, Franzen’s narrative about how he came to reject the kind of fiction he wrote before that book. Critic James Wood, who applauds Franzen’s rejection of the “social novel” in this essay, acknowledges that this identitarian turn “casts doubt on the certainty with which he believes in that [rejection]. For a start, his essay was so autobiographically infected that his argument quickly sickened into subjectivity....his essay repeatedly had recourse to the personal as a way of solving what should have been impersonal arguments” (32). Of course, Wood is well-known for arguing that, as a rejection of the social novel, The Corrections itself is insufficient: in a New Republic cover story, he characterized the book as a mix of the DeLilloesque encyclopedic novel and the “novel of intimacy, of motive, of relation” (36), that is, the novel of family. But whereas Wood sees this as an aesthetically inept “wavering” (38) between two forms, I suggest that we might view The Corrections as, instead, a hybrid, a novel that, like Notable American Women, mixes a familiar postmodern genre with a commitment to the family, and thus creates something historically specific – namely a reinvention of the “social novel” appropriate for the period in which “family” actively displaces “society.”

19 To be clear, I am not suggesting that Franzen and Marcus make the familiar (plausibly left-wing) point that literary texts can be understood as commodities and that therefore we shouldn’t overstate the radical potential of one style or another; I am suggesting that they imagine the field of aesthetic judgments in a way that is structurally analogous, in its logical entailments, to how neoliberals imagine the social field, as a zone free of irreducible conflict. Besides Franzen’s ambivalent remark about the Contract model “taken to its free-market extreme,” they do not explicitly raise the question of the autonomy of the work of art; if they were going to start thinking along these lines, moreover, then Franzen and especially Marcus would
need to also consider how institutionalized cultural capital shapes their position in the marketplace. One could make the equally familiar, equally plausible case that Marcus’s career is sustained not by consumer desire, even of the niche variety, but by institutionalized cultural capital that absolutely depends on the notion that the value of his writing cannot be reduced to consumer desire (and by this notion’s necessary corollary, that the value of other, less “superior” forms of writing, like genre writing, are absolutely reducible to consumer desire.) Marcus’s disavowal of this fact is implicit in the tension between his claim that experimental writing has “almost no cultural influence or power whatsoever” (49) and the fact that, as many have noted, when he wrote the essay, “Marcus chair[ed] the MFA program in fiction at Columbia, one of the most prestigious graduate programs in the nation” (Row; see also Stephens 145-146; 168).

In any case, as Nicholas Brown has recently argued, the claim that artworks have no autonomy from the market was never entirely true anyway, partially because that claim entails an evacuation of the intentional, purposive gesture implicit in any serious attempt at art (but not in commodities, indifferent to the specific way they will be used by consumers) and partially because the market for art ultimately depends on spheres of autonomy from the market (like “the MFA program in fiction at Columbia”). More importantly still, the claim that art has no autonomy simply doesn’t have the same “egalitarian promise” as it used to, since “a world where the work of art is a commodity like any other is the world neoliberalism claims we already live in and have always lived in, a world where everything is (and if it isn’t, should be) a market” (12); a world in which “the claim of the universality of the market is… the primary ideological weapon wielded in the class violence that is the redistribution of wealth upwards” (13).

20 Marcus proposes to use language in the same way as an innovative poet, in a way “not tied to obedient or recognizable structures of sense and form” (50); he wants to work with language “as a painter might with color, as a composer might with sound, as a dance might with movement” (52). Marcus’s demand for artistic freedom in his search for novelistic form (the freedom enjoyed by other arts) connects his project with a long tradition, of course, a tradition which – at least since Henry James’s “The Art of the Novel” – has often entailed declarations of indifference to the values and emotions of the reader. Equally common within modernist rhetoric more generally – at least since T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” – are declarations of the irrelevance of the values and emotions of the author. Marcus is working within and in response to this tradition when he explores the problem of how to balance such "impersonality" with an interest in interpersonal human relationships.

21 It may seem counterintuitive to link the privileging of vowels/physical “intercourse” over consonants/verbal intercourse with an attempt to privilege the impersonal over the interpersonal, since the affairs of the body seem distinctly linked to the particular and the affairs of language seem distinctly linked to the abstract; in other words, it seems that you could make the opposite argument, that in these lines interpersonality is being privileged over impersonality. I think the logic of the passage in question supports the first reading, but of course my larger point is that the book is animated by the very tension between these poles.

22 For influential accounts of postmodern literature’s treatment of history, see Jameson (21-25; 364-376) and McHale (84-96).
4. "CLEAN HANDS": POST-POLITICAL FORM IN RICHARD POWERS'S

GAIN

Richard Powers' 1998 novel Gain is composed of two main narratives: the nearly two-hundred year history of Clare, Inc., a fictional American corporation, and the story of the final few months in the life of Laura Bodey, a Lacewood, Illinois woman stricken with ovarian cancer, probably due to exposure from the local Clare chemical plant. Interspersed between the two narratives are bits of free-floating text depicting Clare packaging, advertisements, brochures, scripts for TV commercials, press releases, and other public relations media. One of the novel's most obvious formal peculiarities is the fact the two main storylines never truly intersect: the executives at Clare are never aware of Laura as an individual, and Laura is never able to confront the executives personally, nor discover the exact cause of her illness. In an interview, Powers explains:

The traditional book implicitly promises that all open frames will come together. The challenge of a book that's created out of two incommensurable frames is to show how they entangle without contriving a dramatic confrontation, say, in the form of a lawsuit. Gain suggests that any lawsuit resolution would be a red herring. A lawsuit is not going to give Laura any redress. No lawsuit is going to change the rules of existence or recast the dialogue between the personal and the corporate. ("Last")

Actually, the novel does feature a "lawsuit" – a class-action suit filed in the name of those sickened by Clare chemicals, including Laura Bodey – but, just as Powers suggests, this lawsuit never culminates in a "dramatic confrontation" between defendants and plaintiffs, in or outside the courtroom. Instead, the corporation settles, suddenly and inexplicably, and Laura can only surmise that “the common stock has fallen to unacceptable levels…an offer is the more cost-effective solution” (333).
The anti-climatic quality of this resolution underscores what a courtroom confrontation might obscure – that no lawsuit is “going to give Laura any redress." The lack of any kind of "dramatic confrontation" between Laura and Clare suggests, moreover, that no such confrontation could resolve the novel's central conflict. That is, this omission signals that the novel is not ultimately concerned with the conflict between an individual consumer and individual corporation, but with, as Powers puts it, "the rules of existence," the broader "dialogue between the personal and the corporate." Powers' comments suggest, furthermore, that this deferral serves not only a rhetorical function, directing reader attention to the larger social processes on display, but also a mimetic one, representing a hard truth about these "rules of existence": in the era of multinational corporations, the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is increasingly mediated and complex, making "confrontation" more and more unlikely.

Powers' comments help clarify his intentions, then, but they also reveal something about his attitude toward these social relationships, as well as his understanding of the task facing the social novelist. By counter-posing the act of representing complex processes with "traditional" contrived "dramatic confrontation," Powers evokes long-running debates about the relationship between social totality and aesthetic form. To gain a critical perspective on his aesthetic strategies, it's worth briefly recalling Georg Lukács' intervention in these debates. While Lukács acknowledges that the global economy is (already, in 1932) too complex and decentralized to depict in terms of traditional character relationships, he argues that representing this "sum of facts" about the global economy is not the same as representing social “totality” ("Reportage" 74). Totality, in Lukács' account, is the dialectical unity of social form and content, “the inextricable
coalescence of accident and necessity” (“Reportage” 58). Capturing it means capturing “the relationship of characters to objects and events, a dynamic interaction in which characters act and suffer” (“Narrate” 112) – the "turbulent, active interaction of men" (“Narrate” 126).

In Gain, I argue, this antagonism is missing. The absence of a confrontation between Laura and the CEO of Clare is simply the most obvious and most plausible of a series of less obvious, less plausible ways Power’s novel disavows struggle, “the turbulent, active interaction of men.” Using the vocabulary of contemporary social movements, the relationship between Laura and the corporation that sickened her might be described as the conflict between a “stakeholder” and “shareholders” – that is, as the tension between a member of "the motley crew of suppliers, workers, consumers, patients, and even neighbors who happen to have a stake in a corporation's activities" (Feher Nongovernmental 24), and those owners of the “common stock” (Gain 333) who profit directly from Clare’s activities. As various critics have noted, Gain thereby disarticulates the political from more traditional oppositions like the struggle between nations or between classes, as if to suggest that globalization has redrawn the lines of conflict and alliance.¹

When I suggest that the novel disavows struggle, I do not simply mean, however, that Powers breaks with the traditional categories of political opposition. My claim is that the novel seems to disavow political opposition altogether. This disavowal is evident in the very structure of its twinned storylines, which take the form of dramas of pattern recognition, driven not by conflicts of interest or ideology but by the question of whether characters will perceive the increasingly counterproductive dynamics of capital. Read
together, these storylines imply that there are no conflicts of interest or ideology, but simply shared misperceptions of an inefficient system. We see a tension between ends (our desire to maximize the quantity and quality of our lives) and means (our reliance on market-driven, corporate-sponsored innovation), a tension figured as a misalignment between what all people want and what mindless corporations have been allowed to do. There are no intractable economic conflicts here: not between workers and owners, not between rich and poor, not even between "stakeholders" and "shareholders."

In fact, this narrative logic reveals what is already implicit in such "nongovernmental" movements as "stakeholder activism," which aspire "To be involved in politics without aspiring to govern, be governed by the best leaders, or abolish the institutions of government" (Feher *Nongovernmental* 12). Like *Gain*, these movements suggest a distinct "political vision" (Powers "Last"), or what might be better described as a "post-political vision": social relations are comprised not by subjects in conflict, but by diverse interests that are nevertheless commensurable with a singular 'public interest,' commensurable provided they are recognized and coordinated by a government that intervenes from somewhere outside the realm of "politics."

This same rationality is also implicit, I will argue, in the very object of critique by both *Gain* and many of these "nongovernmental" movements: neoliberalism, the contemporary ideology which "holds that social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" (Harvey 3). Unlike classical liberals, neoliberals believe that such "market transactions" will produce "social good" only if the proper conditions – including the training of citizens who will thrive in such markets – are carefully constructed by government (Mirowski 439); this connection of "social
good" with "market transactions" nevertheless depends on a disavowal of the class antagonism intrinsic to capitalism. Deregulation, privatization, and the promotion of corporate rights have been crucial to this neoliberal project, which means that, despite Gain's grim portrait of unchecked corporate power, the novel nevertheless shares an underlying political logic with the ideology most responsible for the expansion of this power.

The rest of this chapter will trace out these contradictory dynamics, beginning with an analysis of how Powers articulates the complex connection between individuals and the development of multinational corporate capitalism. In my last two sections, I will show how his approach ultimately resolves the contradictions of class struggle, figuring a vision of the social that marks Gain as not only “post-political” but “post-historical” -- with all the political and historical baggage those terms imply, and contrary to Powers' intention to think politically by thinking historically.

4.2 God and Insurance, Salve and Salvation

A mode of governmentality entails an account of how the relationship between the state, the market, and individual subjects should be arranged to best fulfill government's biopolitical function, its concern with "the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, and develop its life" (Foucault History 136). In essence, Gain is a narrative about how a counterproductive form of this relationship reproduces itself through ideological narratives unlike the narrative of Gain. Thus the novel's political intervention is intended to support its aesthetic one, and vice versa. Both projects are constituted by a faith in the power of pattern recognition or misrecognition – instead of political conflict – as the motor of historical change.
Iterations of the ideological narratives critiqued by Gain appear throughout the novel, but one particularly succinct rendition is found on a cardboard calling card bearing one of the first Clare slogans, dating back to when they were still simply a family business, "S, R, & B Clare...He that hath clean hands shall grow stronger and stronger" (71). This card appears twice in the book: first as a fragment in the novel's textual collage, second as an artifact in a private museum dedicated to Clare memorabilia, which Laura visits late in her illness. Spying the card, Laura muses: “What else did anyone ever want? Here it is, the thin thing pulling life on, the value-added thread tying salve to salvation” (295).

This "thin thing" is a miniature narrative, and like all the other mini-narratives in the novel, it ties "salve to salvation." That is, they all narrate the possibility, inevitability, or indisputability of an improved quality of life through the consumption of what might be called – using a metaphoric licenses granted by the novel itself – "biotechnology," from soap to genetic engineering, from pharmaceuticals to life insurance. “Thank God for insurance,” Laura muses, while hooked up to a chemotherapy treatment. “Anyone who denies progress has never seen a parent die from inability to pay for treatment” (114).

Gain suggests that such “undeniable” narratives conceal a crucial contradiction, one well-articulated by Melinda Cooper – drawing on Marx – in her recent analysis of finance-driven life science: "As long as life science production is subject to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation, the promise of a surplus of life will be predicated on a corresponding move to devalue life" (49). This is because:

...there is one limit that capitalism never escapes – the imperative to derive profit and thus to recapture the “new” within the property form...It cannot expand into a new-space time of accumulation, beyond its actual limits, without bringing this one internal limitation along with it. Thus, even when it seems to move into the
most evanescent and unexpected of futures, it will need to subtract from the very surplus it calls into being. Only on this condition can the promise of surplus life be rendered profitable. (25)

Promising only "surplus life," the ideological narratives in Gain conceal this necessary devaluation of life, a contradiction the novel exposes through a tactic of ironic juxtaposition.

In the narrative voiced by Laura Bodey, for example, the "progress" that saves lives, insurance, is predicated on a simultaneous, disavowed devaluation of life: the life that could be saved, but which will not be because of a lack of insurance. Laura never questions the link between "treatment" and ability "to pay for treatment," or – what amounts to same thing – ability to pay for insurance “to pay for treatment.” The author’s ironic distance here is clear: as Laura muses about insurance, hooked up to her chemotherapy treatment, she imbibes a medicine that is also a poison, a cure for the effects of pollution that is itself a pollutant. "Cisplatin, she remembers. The killer heavy metal...The kind of stuff they'd sue you for letting within ten miles of the village water supply. But here they've worked her up a private hip flask" (114). More pointedly, we later learn that Laura's chemical treatment is produced, in part, by Clare, the same company that produced the "life-enhancing" chemicals that seemingly made her sick in the first place.

Such loops are designed to suggest that these technologies of surplus life produce not only surplus death, but new markets for new technologies of surplus life, leading to surplus "life" for the Clare corporation, at the expense of victims like Laura Bodey. Again and again, we see innovations in "business," as embodied by Clare, that transform the products or byproducts of business – from toxins to the disruptions of "creative
destruction" itself – into new avenues of accumulation, new ways to "survive" periods of over-accumulation and crisis: "Business changed to meet the upheavals that business instigated...," and hence there is "no reason why the corporation...could not go on self-propagating forever" (180).² In the present, hooked up to the chemicals that give both life and death, Laura sits at the crux of this giant, ever-hastening feedback loop between people and corporations, in which, according to Gain, the relationship between humans and the natural world becomes increasingly mediated by business.³ This is a change without the "progress" or development promised by the ideological narratives of "salve and salvation," as the system doesn't escape the basic contradiction described above. Thus, "He that hath clean hands," the person who has used Clare cleaning products religiously, will not "grow stronger and stronger"; instead she is "desiccated," exhausted," and "wiped out" (295) by cancer. Meanwhile, the one with “dirty” hands – the corporation, guilty of polluting and other offenses – has indeed grown “stronger and stronger,” transforming from a small soap company to a multinational, multi-conglomerate, literally "covering the earth" (295).

The ironic juxtaposition in this scene also works on another level, however. On this level, the sign seems ironic not because it misrepresents the reality in front of it, but because it reveals an unintended truth. Having "clean hands" also invokes being free of responsibility, and the very definition of a "Corporation" – at least in Ambrose Bierce's Devil's Dictionary, quoted in the novel – is "an ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility" (159). The ones who can wash their hands of responsibility – not the stakeholder but the corporate person, externalizing social cost in order to make a profit, and the shareholder, enriched by these actions but only on the
hook for the price of his or her share – shall indeed “grow stronger and stronger.” In this sense, the novel suggests the corporation is itself a kind of biotechnology, extending the scope and duration of a businessperson’s life-project but also churning out unnecessarily shortened lives. Thanks to incorporation, "Business now far outstripped the single life's span" (154).

To recap, then, in *Gain* the ideological narratives of “salve and salvation” conceal contradiction and conceal change-without-development; in so doing, they also conceal their own ideological function. The novel itself, in contrast, is designed to expose this function. In scenes like Laura's visit to the chemo clinic, the novel suggests that by internalizing such narratives of "progress," – thinking them at the same moment, in this scene, that she literally internalizes Clare chemicals – consumers like Laura help Clare reproduce itself. And, in *Gain*, the reproduction of a single corporation is metonymy for the reproduction of an entire system. This is the essence of *Gain*’s political intervention: to compel recognition that misperception of these patterns has been the motor of capitalism's counterproductive trajectory, and, because every "contradiction" implies the possibility of resolution, to make the reader see that correct perception can be the motor of real "progress," not this change-you-can't-believe-in.

### 4.3 The End of Business

Though so far I've focused on how Powers juxtaposes imagery to create this effect, his tactic of ironic juxtaposition also informs the structure of the novel as a whole. The critique of ideology I've just described suggests two “storylines,” one whose structure can be described as “evolutionary,” the other as “novelistic.” Articulating these
two implied stories helps clarify the formal differences between the Gain's main narratives.

On one hand, there is the actual history of the Clare corporation, whose reproduction shares the same structure, if not the same blind mechanisms, as the reproduction of a species. By virtue of both conscious innovation and blind luck, the company is continually adapting to its environment, the market, and thus has continued to survive; it is continually “adaptive,” in the biological sense of being suited to reproduce, even when it is shaping the very environment around it, as in the case of Laura Bodey. This reciprocal trajectory – “species” (corporation) and “environment” (market) evolving in relation to each other – is metonymy for the “evolution” of capitalism itself: each time Clare’s old methods of accumulation are exhausted, we see it turn to new modes, “lifting the whole entrepreneurial cycle to ever-higher playing fields” (339).

This evolutionary narrative could be said to be “meaningless,” in the same sense that evolution, in its strict biological definition, can be described as meaningless: there is no “meaning” to survival beyond survival itself. If a corporation or a species lives or dies, it only means that a corporation or species lives or dies; the only reason to fight for survival is to fight for survival: "the end of business was to outlast the needs it satisfied" (157) – that is, the end of business is to keep doing business. This is different, of course, from how we typically understand the events of a “plot,” which has meaning precisely because it was created by a writer to do some sort of narrative work. A “plot” is, as I’ve already implied, a good description of those life-structuring beliefs about the system, according to which the system is moving in a progressive trajectory. Such narratives
impute a "meaning" beyond the mere fact of survival: what has happened ought to or had to happen.

Accordingly, the history of Clare is made to seem "formless" by the way its features contrast with the features of the other narrative, a story whose implied genre is, as Powers puts it, "80s domestic fiction" ("Last"), the minimalist "portrait of alienation" ("Making" 306). The formless "anti-narrative" quality of the Clare narrative suggests a lack of aesthetic unity, relative to the "novelistic" quality of Laura's story. This difference creates the impression that, unlike Laura's story, the form of Clare's history has been dictated by history itself -- that is, by circumstances other than the designs of an author. I should hasten to add, however, that the "formed" quality of Laura's narrative is only visible when viewed in relation to the other narrative. There is nothing in the story itself that draws attention to its constructedness; there are no explicit frame-breaking gestures such as -- as in Powers' 2009 novel Generosity -- an author commenting on the relationship between his or her novelistic narrative and evolutionary development.

What makes the Clare sections of Gain seem formless is, first of all, their excessive repetitiveness. We read a historical narrative marked by a constant stream of business- and life-saving innovation, economic booms, economic crises, and destruction of life -- and dogma nevertheless insisting that this time, business has gotten closer to its ultimate goal, "To beat death," (350): "In light of "Adam's expiring curse...it seemed that life's weight might lift a little before this generation passed away" (68); "The game was as good as solved" (180); "Prosperity no longer meant inevitable subsequent shutdowns" (288); "Soon death itself would be brought into the process, made to occur at the optimal
This repetitiveness not only renders these moments ironic, as I've already suggested, but also creates the impression that Powers is simply putting in "everything that happened" to Clare. His choice about where to begin and end the story of his corporate "person" adds to this impression. Although the author begins his novel with an account of how Clare came to Lacewood in the 1880s, as part of a brief opening exposition about the town itself, the rest of the history proceeds chronologically, from when Jephthah Clare comes to America in 1802 until the turn of the millennium. In other words, the history of the American company that began as "J. Clare's Sons" begins with J. Clare arriving in America and ends when history catches up to the present. In both senses, this inclusivity violates that classical rule-of-thumb that the good poet "does not put into his poem everything that happened" to his subject, since "An indefinitely large number of things happens to one person, in some of which there is no unity" (Aristotle 97). The implication is that something other than narrative unity dictates the choice about what to include and what not to include.

In contrast, instead of repetition, and instead of the repeated failure to recognize the contradiction leading to this repetition, Laura's story is structured in part by the growing awareness of its main character, a dawning recognition of how much both her mind and body have been shaped by corporations. This development culminates in an epiphanic moment in which Laura realizes not only what (probably) caused her cancer, but also that the influence of corporations on her life extends much deeper, in a way that makes the ambiguity of the exact material cause of the cancer irrelevant. Her story,
moreover, is framed in a way that suggests an internal, organic logic governs when it begins and ends. Her story begins roughly with the beginning of her conflicts — her struggle with cancer and her struggle for self-awareness — and ends when she has lost the first struggle and achieved some measure of victory in the second, the moment quoted above. In other words, as Aristotle might put it, her story is narrated to suggest "A whole...that which has a beginning, middle, and a conclusion" (96).

Finally, where Clare’s history relies overwhelmingly on what we might call, following Jesse Matz, the narrative speed of “summary” (66), Laura’s story is much more frequently (and, for novels, typically) comprised by the narrative speed of “scene” (Matz 66). "Summary" is when the amount of time spent narrating is shorter than the amount of time narrated; "scene" is when the time spent narrating is equal to the time narrated (Matz 66). In scenes, the time narrated is equal to the time of narration often because the narration concerns "events" like dialogue and the movements of consciousness, which happen at the "speed" of language itself. In the atypical Clare narrative, as Paul Maliszewski points out, there is very little dialogue and not much time spent dwelling in individual consciousness (169). The result of making a corporation the main character is that we have "focalized information" — a term Powers uses in his critical essay on systems novels ("Making" 307) — instead of traditional focalized consciousness, the traditional vehicle of narrative conventions like "character development" and "dramatic interest."

So, while Powers avoids "contriving a dramatic confrontation" between "the personal and the corporate," he does make strategic use of the traditional contrivances of dramatic unity. His point seems to be that the "evolution" of business lacks the narrative
form we ascribe to it, yet we must inevitably ascribe such a form because "We all live our
lives as a tale that is told..." ("Last"), a rough quotation from the Psalms that Powers has
cited in both novels and interviews. Precisely because "we belong to" something "larger
than ourselves," ("Last") in the sense of institutional structures that must be constantly
renewed by succeeding generations, the future is marked by the possibility of new stories
and new structures. Noting a scene in the novel that quotes Churchill – " 'We construct
our buildings, and thereafter, they construct us' " (260) – Power says, "I think the politics
of my writing hover around this idea that yes, we have constructed our buildings, but no,
they don't have to construct us" ("Last").

Before fully accepting Powers' own account of "the politics" of his writing,
however, it's crucial to examine what is posited, what is assumed, and what is foreclosed
in his actual treatment of the political. In the context of a historical novel, this means
taking a closer look at how the novel posits history itself. In Gain, this means returning,
once again, to the “Riverton Mansion,” home of the “Lacewood Historical Society” (50).

4.4 **History, Politics, and the Manufactured World**

As she struggles through rooms filled with Clare memorabilia, Laura Bodey
watches as:

Each glass showcase gets a little older than the last. The Me Decade reverts to the
Summer of Love, which fades back into the Golden Era...After three or four
cases, she realizes she has entered the loop backwards. But she’s in too deep to
leave and start again from the beginning. (294)

This “backwards” encounter with history suggests, quite simply, a failure to think
historically, a failure to understand how past turns into present. Powers signifies Laura’s
inability to connect past with present by showing her inability to connect present to
future; as she nears the end of her tour – the beginning of the museum – she “pictures a
microscopic bit of corporate history laid out in a last, empty display. A settlement big enough to close down the whole, ancient operation” (295). As I’ve already noted, this settlement is far from “big enough to close down the whole, ancient operation”; instead, as she realizes only later, it’s an investment in the company’s future, a “cost-effective solution” (333).

Furthermore, Powers suggests that Laura’s failure to think historically is a function of the particular way she encounters history, an approach he figures in terms of spatial positioning: she’s “in too deep,” lacking the “aerial view” (89) afforded to the reader. She can see only the bits of commercial propaganda produced by Clare; as readers, we can see not only the bits of propaganda, represented by the collage-like stream of texts dividing the two narratives, but also the contradictions figuratively hidden by that textual stream. Laura’s failure is thus a failure to start “from the beginning,” a failure to examine the basic structures and processes that have led to this ever-intensifying feedback “loop” between consumers and corporations. By having Laura tour the museum in reverse, then, Powers simply underscores the novel’s main political and aesthetic statement: to encounter history through a collection of ideological narratives is to “enter the loop backwards,” as it means trying to understand dynamic processes through texts whose systemic function is, in part, to hide these processes.

Never quite achieving the vantage afforded to the reader, Laura has access only to decontextualized bits of clichéd historical imagery – “The Me Decade reverts to the Summer of Love, which fades back into the Golden Era” – experiencing the postmodern “disappearance of the historical referent…A new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra
of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 25). By attempting to depict the processes, not just the products, of global capital, Gain can be read as the attempt to fill in this realm “beyond imagining” (Gain 320), an attempt to relocate “the historical referent,” to recontextualize and reanimate the “pop images and simulacra” of corporate culture. But to truly think historically about capitalism is to think politically – and vice versa – and the political is precisely what Powers forecloses in his text.

The most banal way this is true is that, as one interviewer points out, "An absence in this book–and throughout most of the other ones–is that politics and politicians don't really walk across the stage" ("Industrial"). There is no discursively equivalent "politician" mediating between "the person" and "the corporation-as-person." Opposition or alternatives to capitalism also barely exist in this history – but the disavowal of the political goes even deeper than that as well. When Powers does attempt to depict politics as such, and when he does acknowledge the presence of other political systems, it becomes clear that human conflict itself, the very substance of the political, is largely absent from his text.

Here, for instance, is the core of Powers' description of the great political and economic struggles of the Depression and New Deal era:

By the fall of 1932, Lacewood was as radicalized as a conservative farm town would ever get. Folks who would have not stooped to slip bread and water under Debs’s prison bars lined up to vote for Norman Thomas. And the revolution would have prevailed, society would have transformed itself at last, had not Roosevelt come along and stolen the best lumber out from underneath the militant Socialists and turned it into mainstream party planks. First, the President brought back booze, that distraction beyond value. Then, almost instantly, he went on a shark hunt. Two successive, sweeping securities acts lowered the boom on all the clever riggers of the big money. It was time, Roosevelt declared, for business to play by the rules and remember the original purpose of doing business. What that purpose was, neither Roosevelt nor anyone else ever ventured to recall. (308)
This is, in fact, political history as “pop image” or “stereotype”; what's more important, however, is that it is political history as a stream of inert facts, bits of data forming recognizable patterns. The pattern is signified in the ironic final line: here is yet another misrecognition of business's fundamental purposelessness. Rather than finding a way to dramatize the human conflicts at work during this period, showing how these major events emerge out of individual struggles, mediated by class – an approach that emphasizes both the contingency of these events and the continued relevance of these struggles – Powers depicts the Depression and New Deal as simply the working out of a systemic tendency, which we perceive from a position of ironic remove. This depoliticizing abstraction has the perverse effect of naturalizing the metastasization of corporate capitalism, as if it really did happen like evolution. Such a suggestion clashes with Powers' insistence that what "we have constructed" doesn't have to "construct us," because it implies that corporations and their contradictions will always be with us; this conclusion must be drawn from Gain because there is nothing in the formal logic of the text to signal that the system is the product of choices between contested alternatives.

Not all of the novel’s historical content is so radically compressed, of course, but even its more developed moments are structured like information to be processed. One way to articulate what’s missing from Gain is to note the absence of what Lukács calls the “mediocre hero,” a narrative technique allowing the historical novelist to dramatize that “society” is not simply “uninterrupted self-reproduction, as something stagnant; society also stands amid the current of history. Here the new opposes itself hostilely to the old…” (Historical 39). Because, for instance, such a hero “sides passionately with neither of the warring camps in the great crises of his time” (Historical 37), he or she
"can become involved alternately with the leaders of each of the opposing parties...these leaders can be portrayed not merely as social and historical forces but men in human relationships" ("Narrate" 141). Thus the mediocre hero helps the writer move beyond mere "description of important historical events," to create "a moving human drama in which we get to know the typical agents of great historical conflict as human beings" ("Narrate" 141), positing history as "the arena for human ambitions, a stage or battlefield for men's struggles with each other" ("Narrate" 135).

This sense of “hostility” and historical dynamism is absent from Gain. In Richard Powers' novel, there are no "mediocre heroes," in either the historical or present-day narrative, precisely because there are no "opposing parties", no "warring camps" with which Laura or any other character can become involved. Modern history is not posited as a "battlefield for men's struggles with each other," not as a series of conflicts between classes, alternate political systems, political parties, modes of production, or even different stages in a mode of production. Instead, history is posited as an unfolding conflict between the public interest and the working of the system, a conflict that takes the form of dramas of pattern recognition and misrecognition.

In the characters of Benjamin Clare (a scientist) and Samuel Clare (a religious Adventist), Powers does attempt to depict alternatives to the business-for-business's sake approach modeled by the third brother, Resolve Clare. It's telling, of course, that the value systems represented by these reluctant businessmen are not real political alternatives or threats to capitalism, which is why, as Powers himself shows, they are ultimately subjected to the imperatives of the corporation. Again, though, the key point is not that Powers doesn't depict political alternatives – which would imply that this novel
would be importantly different if it had a fourth, socialist brother. Instead, the key point is how he chooses to depict these dalliances with other ways of being. Like Laura Bodey, the stories of Benjamin and Samuel are tales of ideological blindness and estranged insight; indeed, Powers frames these stories in a way that suggests they are the same story.

Here, for example, is how Powers depicts the great, transformative moment in Samuel's life, a transformation that plays out in a little over three pages. After his devout wife, Dorcas, reads a William Miller tract predicting "The world would end at the stroke of midnight, October 22, 1844" (81), Samuel settles his "earthly accounts" and sells off his "worldly property," including his share of the Clare company, which he signs over to his brother Resolve. Samuel and Dorcas don "ascension gowns" and head to the highest point in the house to wait for "world's last midnight" (82). Their disappointed return to earth segues directly – without the typical commercial break – into Laura's return from her first chemo visit:

In the early hours of October 23, Samuel and Dorcas Clare, Elizabeth, Mary, and baby Douglas descended from the upper rooms of their house, still stubbornly theirs. They walked back through the obstinately undissolved foyer, emptied at last of the waking nightmare of deliverance. And they looked out, like returned Crusoes, upon the manufactured world.

They send Laura home. Except it isn't home anymore...
All this space: it's never been anything more than an obligation to fill it. And the filler, all her carefully coordinated furniture: so cozy a nest once. Now lifeless twigs, the rotted rigging of a ship in a vacuum bottle.
She must have been mad. Had some crazed idea that the house would be her safe haven. Would always take care of her. She's spent years taking care of it, keeping up her end of the deal. But now, at the first called debt, the house gets ready to renege. (83-84)

In one sense, these two experiences are polar opposites. Laura expected her house to save her – to be "her safe haven" that would "always take care of her" – while Samuel
expected his house to "dissolve" during "deliverance." Laura expected that the prosperity wrought by business innovation would be the means of her salvation, while to Samuel, prosperity merely prefigures and predicts salvation: "The turning of fat to soap, of labor to cash, of wilderness to rail-served settlements merely predicted in miniature Miller's final transformation. All added value was God's..." (82).

The underlying structure of these two experiences, however, is the same. In both cases, Powers shows how "deliverance" transforms into abandonment, into the feeling of being stranded in one's own home. He uses this narrative to stage a confrontation with the meaninglessness of the "manufactured world" – as it "reneges" on its "debt," "emptied at last of the waking nightmare of deliverance." It is merely "the manufactured world" – the world as made by, and whose only meaning is to serve, business. The allusion to *Robinson Crusoe* is established in the Clare scene and further elaborated in Laura's scene: the means of deliverance, a ship, turns out to be a mere simulacrum, "the rotted rigging of a ship in a vacuum bottle." Later, as her days are disrupted by the effects of the chemo and her alienation deepens, this inter- and intra-textual bond is made even more explicit: "Her life. Her life, Laura keeps telling herself. But the thing feels like nothing she's ever visited. She's back in some alien England, after years shipwrecked on a coral shoal that shows up on no one's map" (119).

The crucial point is that both of these narratives – one less than four pages long, the other comprising half the novel – are structured by revelation, or failed revelation, not conflicts with other characters. The tension between "American religion" and "American business" does not play out, for instance, in tension between Samuel and Resolve; unlike Paul Thomas Anderson's filmic treatment of this theme, here there will not be blood.
There is no brotherly conflict either before or after Samuel's leave-taking. "After the world stubbornly refused to end, Resolve welcomed Samuel back into the business. Never again on equal footing, of course" (103). This pregnant phrasing signifies a decline in the status of spiritual justifications for American business, but, plot-wise, it never translates into any kind of fraternal discord. Even Samuel's supper-time disagreements with Dorcas – "man and wife grappling with the terms of their existence" – are predicated on a fundamental agreement about the need to serve God.

Just as there are no intractable conflicts within these narratives, least of all conflicts between characters from different classes or positions in the mode of production, there are also no real conflicts between the characters in one narrative and the characters in the other. The parallel established between Samuel and Laura – the suggestion that they've both expected capitalism to do something it cannot do, whether to prologue or provide “deliverance” – suggests that both the shareholder and the stakeholder have the same basic interests, and that both have simply made the same mistake about how to achieve it, a mistake the reader is put in the position to observe. This narrative act disavows the conflicts intrinsic to different class positions, or between the shareholder enriched by corporate actions and the stakeholder negatively affected by it.

Indeed, this conflict remains disavowed even though Samuel rejoins the company, denies what he recognized about business, and, having outlived Resolve, is the brother who decides that Clare should incorporate – and thus it is he, as much as any other character, who can be said to be responsible for Laura Bodey's death. Yet Powers maintains the figurative parallel, having Samuel defend his decision to incorporate with
words that echo Laura's desire for a home that "Would always take care of her": "Business," Samuel declared, "of rights ought to be our ancestral home, stately and permanent, upon whose paneled halls hung the portraits of all those whose hands had raised the beams and sped the plow" (158).

Thus, when "Samuel and Dorcas returned to commerce's fold chastened but unrepentant Adventists," it is supposed to reveal something about their characters, but it also reveals something about Powers. When Samuel muses, "Visitation was merely delayed. All mankind became stakeholders in Creation's impending completion" (103), it is supposed to reveal that he has turned his back on his revelation about the "manufactured world." It also underscores, however, that in Gain "all mankind became stakeholders." In this simultaneously trans-historicizing and trans-politicizing gesture, Powers figures a world with no fundamental disagreements about the ends of social life, and thus with no fundamental disagreements about the role of government, a world that is ostensibly "post-historical" and "post-political." According to the logic of Gain, government is to concern itself with what, according to Foucault, liberal governmentality has always been concerned with: the "biological existence of a population" (History 137).

4.5 Nongovernmental Politics and Economic Government

Articulating this act helps situate the novel in its most immediate political context, the anti-corporate, anti-globalization, pro-environmental movements that flourished during the late 1990s. In his analysis of such "nongovernmental" movements, Michel Feher suggests that, despite vast differences, "what specifically concerns nongovernmental activists is not who governs – who is in charge, for whose benefit, and to what alleged end – but how government is exercised" (Nongovernmental 14 italics
original). Governmental performance by the state – or by corporate executives, "given to claiming that their management optimizes the prosperity of stakeholders" – is judged in terms of the biopolitical function of power, a mode of legitimation "useful for nongovernmental activists," who are able to hold such officials accountable in the name of whether their measures "contribute to the welfare of the governed" (Nongovernmental 16). Strategic or otherwise, this philosophical overlap between those in positions of power and those who seek to hold them accountable also highlights the (ostensibly) "post-ideological" quality of this type of politics. No longer contesting "who governs" means no longer contesting which type of government will exist, no longer contesting which ideology should be "in charge." This means, in effect, no longer contesting whether preserving liberal capitalism is the best "end" and no longer questioning that it contributes to the welfare of the governed.

In its approach to representing politics and history, Gain displays the same post-ideological commitments. It not only posits a universally shared end, the general "welfare of the governed", but also represents the formal structure of the political in the same way as nongovernmental politics. The latter's aspiration to be political but "nongovernmental" projects a certain vision of the relationship between the state and civil society. Specifically, it posits separate-but-interconnected zones. There is a zone for "political" involvement, where nongovernmental actors should advocate for their interests, and a separate zone for the "institutions of government," tasked with coordinating these interests in order to maximize "the welfare of the governed." Implicitly, nongovernmental actors should not pursue their interests into the realm of the state, and the state can and should stand “outside” this realm of interests, somehow free of its conflicts. Implicitly,
this is why nongovernmental actors believe they can “be involved in politics without aspiring to govern” and why they eschew the goal of traditional party politics, to "be governed by the best leaders."

These refusals, and the disinterest in abolishing the “institutions of government,” also imply that civil society can and must be coordinated, rather than being marked by either intractable conflict or inevitable harmony. In Gain, the zone of private interests is represented by the contents of the two main narratives, and the zone of government is to be filled by the reader, standing "outside" the realm of private interests, observing the inefficient relationship between the human and the corporate, and reacting by finding some way to solve this inefficiency – though Gain does not tell us exactly how to do so, as its goal is “to suggest a political vision without declaring a simplistic resolution to the enormous questions raised by the ascendance of the corporation" (Powers "Last").

Feher suggests that "the 1990s were arguably the golden years – or at least the boom decade – of nongovernmental politics" (24) in part because of nongovernmental politics’ compatibility with neoliberalism. Although Feher himself does not make this connection, the analysis above suggests that this compatibility is predicated on a shared mode of government, the same as that articulated by Gain. In this mode, what Stephen Engelmann calls "economic government," the state “serves neither the people nor a ruler but instead an economy” (2 italics original), in the sense that it is predicated on coordinating private interests in the name of maximizing the “public interest,” a move that depends on “a logic of commensurability” that Engelmann calls “monistic interest” (3): “What first looks like a plurality of interests grounded in present experience and relations is always a prospective singularity” (51). Both the commensurability of interests
and the expectations that define these interests must be constructed, “in a system that
governs by coordinating the self-government of its members” (3).

This act of coordination is the role of governing institutions, which are to
approach lawmaking like “landscaping” (58):

Order must be constructed according to the “junction-of-interests prescribing
principle.” This principle demands that one be given the interest to do what
contributes to the aggregate interest, and to not do what diminishes it. Whatever
their pedigree, those interests that are not optimal in light of this principle must be
changed; mechanisms must be deployed so that doing what is in the aggregate
interest is in one’s own interest. Laws and their attendant penalties and rewards
are simply motives provided by the legislator who, since every motive has its
corresponding interest, constructs interests. (54)

In this system, interests must be constructed because not everyone has "a clear view"'
(67), a lack of foresight that necessitates roles for both "direct" and "indirect" legislation,
the latter of which is "the function of the moralist or 'deontologist'" (67). As Engelmann
explains, “the landscape is always better known by some—for example, deontologists—
than by others, and their role is to sketch out the landscape's prospects and explain to
different people how they fit in. (67).¹ Gain is designed to serve a similar explanatory
function, to “sketch out the landscape's prospects” and thus create readers who self-
govern with the same "clear view" – the “aerial view” (89) – of their interests. In Gain, as
in economic government, these interests are made commensurable with the singular
“public interest,” the balance of what is best for all “stakeholders” in a global economy of
gains and losses.

In his conclusion, Engelmann clarifies that while neoliberalism is a form of
economic government, economic government is not necessarily neoliberal. For instance,
“whereas Bentham’s conception of the value sought by economic government, utility, is a
notoriously open one,” utility for neoliberal “is strictly defined in terms of preferences”
(146), meaning that “the expansion of the empire of choice is almost by definition
good…a great candidate for increasing efficiency and aggregate utility” (146-147). One
could make a similar caveat about Gain: it has the same formal logic as economic
government, but that doesn’t mean it is thereby “neoliberal.” In Gain, as I’ve already
suggested, the unthinking “expansion of the empire of choice” – in the form of an endless
stream of marvelous new biotechnology – is precisely the problem, not "a great candidate
for increasing efficiency and aggregate utility.”

Powers makes his criticism of neoliberalism – in the form of a criticism of
finance-driven life-science – even more explicit in a 1998 New York Times op-ed piece,
published just five months after Gain. Written partially in response to “The ban on
Federal financing of fetal tissue research,” which “effectively signs over all such research
to corporations,” the essay suggests that “the ultimate power to manipulate all biological
processes…lies increasingly in private hands.” Market logic is driving the commercial
life-sciences in the direction of “ever more exotic biological techniques,” Powers writes,
but:

The health benefits deriving from stem cell research are likely to be arcane and
expensive and nowhere near as consequential to world health as, say, the
application of existing cheap, low-tech treatments for malnutrition and infant
diarrhea. Even in our own country, simple prevention could save more lives more
cheaply than the most futuristic technologies ever would. ("Life by Design")

Moreover, "exotic" experiments conducted by profit-seeking scientists can be both legal
and ethical yet still have "long-term social consequences" that "alter the basic terms of
existence beyond our ability to live them" ("Life by Design").

Powers concludes that “we will need stronger instruments of reflection than what
markets provide” in order to put biotechnology to its “proper use." This is not
neoliberalism (at least not in its purest theoretical form). It is, however, economic government, in which the role of government is not to maintain rights, extend equality, or express sovereign will, but to save and preserve "life" itself, with an interest in "world health" that implicitly cuts across lines of national sovereignty. In Powers' essay, such a government is held accountable in the name of whether it has the "wisdom" to make the most efficient use of what life science can do.

This op-ed clarifies the intervention made by Gain and helps us understand what’s at stake in its final lines, when its historical narrative catches up with the advent of "the ultimate power to manipulate all biological processes." In a brief dénouement, we see Tim Bodey – son of Laura, who has died of the cancer – grow up, go to MIT, and join an "interdisciplinary research team" that develops a computer algorithm "that would take any amino acid sequence and predict exactly how it would fold up" (355):

In such a vat, people might create molecules to do anything. The team found itself staring at a universal chemical assembly plant at the level of the human cell. Together with a score of other machines just then coming into existence, their program promised to make anything the damaged cell called out for.

And no one needed to name the first cure that would roll off their production line.

It was then that Timothy Bodey mentioned a healthy bit of capital he had tucked away, untouched since childhood. [His portion of the settlement money from Clare.] The sum had been compounding forever, waiting for a chance to revenge its earning. The figure was now huge, a considerable bankroll. And softly, Tim suggested that it might be time for the little group of them to incorporate. (355)

As I’ve already noted, we’ve heard this kind of triumphal rhetoric many times before – "the game was as good as solved" (180), "Life would be at nothing's mercy" (324), etc. The description of Tim's computer program also echoes the language used to describe the product, production facilities (the "vat," the "production line"), and promise of that more primitive form of biotechnology, soap. Indeed, the rapid move from innovation to the
decision "to incorporate" reads like a compressed retelling of Clare's rationalization of the process of soap-making and its decision, in 1867, to incorporate.

All this repetition renders the triumphal rhetoric ironic, and we should have no problem completing the pattern in our minds. What will happen next is what has happened before: this new, finance-driven technology will create surplus life, but, "Janus-faced," it will also create a surplus of early death. We know this will happen because – to reiterate one of the novel’s key ideas – the very point of “incorporation” is to externalize risk, to profit by not paying the true cost of production, including costs like those associated with the loss of life caused by pollution. In this sense, the novel’s conclusion dramatizes what Powers argues for explicitly for in his op-ed piece, the need for non-corporate funding alternatives, like federal financing, for life-sciences research.

But, even if we accept this type of intervention on its own terms – as an effort to substitute one form of liberal governmentality for another – there is something missing from this critique: we know what should happen, roughly speaking, but not why it doesn’t. We don't know why, for instance, corporate-driven research is so crucial to neoliberal policy, and we are never shown the connection between biotechnology and the political efforts of a certain class in a certain country – the financial class in America – to reestablish their dominance.13 My point is not that Powers should have depicted all these developments in order to explain why Timothy Bodey feels his best (or only) option is “to incorporate” – that would be to confuse, again, “the totality with a mere 'sum of facts'” (Lukács “Reportage” 74). Instead, my point is simply that without a formal acknowledgment of such political struggles, there can be no explanation, in the structural and historical sense, for this scenario. Gain’s ending thus crystallizes how Powers’s
evacuation of a political aesthetic ultimately undoes his efforts to depict (and intervene in) the complex processes of corporate dominance.

1 Ursula K. Heise, for instance, reads *Gain*—along with Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*—as a narrative of a newly emerging risk society, in which “new kinds of risks will create new kinds of social structure characteristic of different forms of modernity” (753). Bruce Robbins reads the novel as a meditation on “how the nations of the world might join together in some other way than via the profits of the American multinationals, and what we might do with each other, and for each other, if we could” (90). As I suggest above, however, Powers’s re-envisioning of "the political" goes even further than these readings allow. Articulating what this vision reveals and conceals helps clarify what is truly distinct about both this text and this 'post-political,' 'post-historical' period in political history; doing so also helps us recognize that such critics' own paradigms—in this case, "risk theory" and transnational "cosmopolitanism"—also tend to downplay the ideological and economic divisions at the heart of global capitalism.

2 The best, most concise example of this order at work in the novel is the depiction of the relationship between industry and "nature" itself. The novel suggests that industry's destruction of the American pastoral—"the Indian's Arcadia" (117)—creates a market for simulations of the American pastoral, which, like Clare's "Native Balm" soap, will also be produced by industry (118): "Live as the natives once did, and those shocks"—the shocks produced by the "age of steam"—"might disappear" (118). Much later, the desire for a home garden, another simulacrum, creates a market for Clare's chemical herbicide, which intervenes in the growth cycle of the plants, leading to surplus life for those plants, but also intervenes in the life cycle of the human using it; this leads to surplus "life" for the corporation, in the form of a new market for the anti-cancer drug, taxol. Although "Bristol-Myers Squibb" makes the drug—as it does in real life—"Clare sells them cheap materials" (151).

3 After Laura Bodey dies, her daughter, Ellen, is also stricken with ovarian cancer, as if business becomes the new source of inheritance even as it figuratively displaces the old source of inheritance. Powers’s treatment of Ellen concludes with this paragraph, in his dénouement: "The only thing Ellen really wanted was to have kids. She and Tom tried for years: concentrations, harvesting, implanting, in vitro. Nothing worked for them. But because the doctors were perpetually in there looking, they saw her ovarian trouble early, and gained her many years" (354). The implication is that mothers are no longer the source of life; business is now the source of both life ("concentrations, harvesting, implanting, in vitro," and the chemical treatments that "gained her many years") and death (the chemicals that give her "ovarian trouble," that make her "gain" of "many years" a net loss.)

4 The use of such "excess" to draw attention to systemic patterns is central to Tom LeClair’s definition of the “systems novel,” a critical term Powers embraces. See LeClair’s *The Art of Excess* and Powers’s “Making the Rounds.”

5 Noting that "Those who believe in the postmodern break would find ludicrous the notion that we're part of any project at all!", Powers dismisses this position as "our current malaise: not to believe that we belong to anything larger than ourselves" ("Last"). I suggest, in response, that Powers mischaracterizes both postmodernism and what makes his own work (as he implies here) post-postmodern. Postmodernism properly understood, does not deny that “we belong to anything larger than ourselves." Indeed, it makes precisely that point, framing social relationships in terms of impersonal structures like competing historical narratives that usually depend (especially in the New Left-informed postmodernism that attempts to counter this process) on the systemic marginalization of certain types of individuals; at the same time, of course, the very act of figuring these narratives as narratives creates the kind of postmodern irony or “break” that Powers refers to. In *Gain*, Powers also frames the world in terms of an impersonal system (hence his self-identification as a “systems novelist” in “Making the Rounds”) but individuals participate in this system as structurally equivalent individuals (they are all consumers or “stakeholders”) not as members of groups that are either idealized or excluded.
(In 2007’s *The Echo Maker*, meanwhile, individuals seem to participate in a larger system of cognitive evolution, and they do so, again, as structurally equivalent individuals, each defined by their unique cognitive/neurological profile.)

6 Both Jameson and Powers imply that this lost sense of history is at least a more authentic experience of the present than the unthinking embrace of the narratives of progress. In *Gain*, the narratives of the characters who come the closest to achieving the perspective of the reader – Laura and her ex-husband Don – culminate in experiences of disorientation caused by a loss of a sense of “inside” and “outside,” the same reason, according to Jameson, why postmodern art can longer “think historically” (ix). Laura’s epiphany about the power of corporations, for instance, is also a sublime experience of something “six degrees beyond imagining,” the raw power of an unlocatable system that blurs all boundaries between cause and effect, life and business: “It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining” (320).

Jameson, of course, called for work that provided temporal and spatial “cognitive mapping” (54) – “which was in reality nothing but a code word for ‘class consciousness’” (418). As I suggest above, this consciousness is missing from *Gain*, which is why it too fails to “think historically.”

7 This omission might seem plausible as a representation of how political reality appears at the present, when real alternatives to capitalism are harder to imagine, and when more and more workers are actual "shareholders," and thus are in what Erik Olin Wright calls “contradictory class positions,” able to “appropriate part of the social surplus” (18). But here again it seems appropriate to judge the text in terms of Lukács’s requirements for the social novelist: they must ‘indicate pervasive features that show clearly, and in a palpable and concrete fashion, the connection to the essential and driving forces,” not merely to depict how “combinations of individual features appear in empirical reality” (“Reportage” 52).

8 By way of contrast, we can look at how this ‘post-political’ vision, as I describe it, shapes the narrative logic of Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), which, like *Gain*, is interested in the relationship between turn-of-the-millennia corporations and the cities and towns they call home. In this novel a town council hires a "nomenclature consultant" to arbitrate their dispute about the renaming of the town. The book's plot – in which the consultant rejects the name, "New Prospera," suggested by both his firm and the local software millionaire, in favor of a name proposed by one of the town's original settlers, a recently freed African-American slave – seems to stage the triumph of one set of values (the importance of being true to history and to the self) over another (the importance of promotion and branding), a triumph of non-corporate values *within* the framework of corporate governance. What we really see, however, is the very collapse of this framework, as the novel concludes at the precise moment the narrator makes his choice, precisely because the concept evoked by his choice – “Struggle” – challenges the very assumptions of a post-political logic.

9 Feher reads this compatibility in strategic terms, suggesting that NGOs thrived because they offered a way of checking the injustices of the free market without constituting or calling for greater state intervention, and thus were able to withstand critiques, by both right and left, that the state "was governing too much" (19).

10 Engelmann credits these views to the political philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, a key influence in his genealogy of economic government.

11 Of course, as I have noted throughout this dissertation, federal investment in the sciences, as a form of investment in “human capital” development, is perfectly compatible with, and indeed formed an important part of, neoliberalism during the Clinton years. For a celebratory account of this investment, see the Center for American Progress’s “Power of Progressive Economics” (10-11).

12 For example, both products function as "Janus-faced" intermediaries (46, 355) who are able to "mesh" with two different materials: the “transforming algorithm that worked in two directions” is able to mesh
with “the raw source and finished product” (355), while soap is “an interlocutor that managed to coax mutually hostile materials” – water and grime – "onto speaking terms” (46).

13 For an analysis of these connections, see Melinda Cooper's *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. 
5. SUPERNAFATA VS. EL GRAN MOJADO: ALTERNATIVE FICTIONAL REALITIES AND THE FIGHT FOR FREE TRADE

When Bill Clinton described the political battle over the North American Free Trade Agreement as “a symbolic struggle for the spirit of our country,” (“Remarks”) it’s safe to say he wasn’t envisioning the kind of symbolic struggle that ends Karen Tei Yamashita’s 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*: a fantastic, larger-than-life professional wrestling match. Staged in front of a huge, multinational crowd at the fictional “Pacific Rim Auditorium” (233) in Los Angeles, the fight features, in one corner, a wrestler named SUPERNAFTA, who enters the ring with a high-tech digital fanfare worthy of a “Hollywood art director” (260), who wears “a titanium suit with a head of raging fire” (256), and whose secret weapon is missile launcher that shoots tiny “patriot” (262) missiles out of his finger. In the other corner we have El Gran Mojado (that is, the Giant Wetback), who appears in the ring “by magic” (260), whose costume includes “a blue cape with the magic image of Guadalupe in an aura of gold feathers and blood roses” (258), and whose secret ‘weapon’ is a giant pair of angel’s wings (262). In speeches to the crowd before the fight, the two wrestlers do seem to debate free trade: SUPERNAFTA promises his audience they will receive “a piece of the action” if they’re willing “to free the technology and the commerce that make the money go around” (257), while Mojado – whose alter ego is an itinerant street performer who has crossed into the U.S. from Mexico – responds that for poor people, “getting a piece of the action” means “dividing into tiny pieces what is always less and less” (259). As the two wrestlers’ props suggest, however, Yamashita characterizes the fight over NAFTA as not simply a political disagreement or a struggle over the distribution of wealth, but as a clash of what
we might call epistemes: SUPERNAFTA represents the “rational forces of the North,” (239) which Yamashita links with “progress, technology, loans and, loaded guns,” (146) while Mojado represents the “magical world” (254) of the South, marked in the text by the blurring of the boundaries between past and present, folklore and history, and reality and “performance” (263).

This “magical world” is the world of Latin American magic realism, a link made explicit earlier in the novel, in a scene that implies that Mojado’s alterego Arcangel has stepped out of the pages of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s most famous short story, “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” (48). Of course, this flamboyant intertextuality also pushes us to reflect on the very deployment of these magic-realist elements, as if their real importance lies not in what they say about Latin America but in the fact they are being used by Yamashita, a Japanese-American novelist, in the first place. As Caroline Rody argues, the novel’s depiction of the chaotic arrival of the "magic realism of the South...in realist L.A.” could be intended to serve as “an allegory of the transnationalization of the U.S. novel” (134). In this sense, the “magical” South embodies the blurring not just of conceptual boundaries but of political borders, suggesting that the wrestling match between north and south is better understood as a struggle between the national and the transnational. Indeed, SUPERNAFTA, the walking embodiment of an international trade agreement, is pointedly labeled a “national hero,” while Mojado is labeled an “international hero,” as if Yamashita’s project in this novel is to rescue the radical potential of, as Rody puts its, “.boundary crossing…migration…the unstoppable flow of people and the literary imagination across the borders of nations” (135).¹
Atomik Aztex, a 2005 novel by Sesshu Foster, a Japanese-American novelist often compared to Yamashita, seems to offer a similar vision: like Tropic of Orange, Foster’s book responds to the contemporary plight of the “mojado” by imagining a world governed by radically different, distinctly non-North American epistemic values. This vision takes the form of an alternative history in which the pre-colonial Aztecs defeated the Spanish conquistadors and built a “global civilization” ruled not by European technorationality but by “Aztek teknospirituality” (5). In this world, the main character, Zenzontli, a member of the indigenous Nahaua tribe that founded the Aztec empire, is “Keeper of the House of Darkness” (1) in the Aztec capital of “Teknotitlan,” a celebrated “Warrior of Cast” in the “leadership cadre” (56) of the “elite Jaguar unit” (62). In our world, which we see in narrative passages described initially as hallucinatory visions, the same character is an impoverished “illegal” toiling away under grim conditions on the “kill floor” of an East Los Angeles meatpacking plant.

This shift in status suggests that Zenzontli is disenfranchised and exploited in our timeline – that is, in real history – precisely because of the historical triumph of the European “version of Reality” (2), as if Foster believes, like Yamashita, that the way to resist the mistreatment of illegals is to imagine alternatives to the “rational forces of the North.” But Foster ultimately rejects this way of framing the political struggles of undocumented workers, I will argue, and he does so precisely by suggesting that even a world governed by different cultural or epistemic values would still be marked by the same structural imbalances that shape Zenzontli’s life. In this alternative reality, economic production is driven not by the exploitation of Mexican illegals but by the human sacrifice of Spanish slaves and others, including, by the end of the Aztec portion
of the narrative, Zenzontli himself. At the same time that the novel dispels the utopian potential of this Aztec world, however, it also creates a different type of alternative timeline, a disruption of the linear narrative that seems to open up precisely because Zenzontli rejects his vision of an “alternative history” and decides instead to organize resistance at the meatpacking plant. I argue that these temporal twists and turns are designed to suggest that workers like those in this novel can create the possibility of an “alternative future,” as it might be called, only by embracing a vision of a world defined by the structural antagonism between labor and capital, not by the conflict between nationalism and transnationalism or other any epistemic conflict.

From the perspective articulated by Foster’s novel, then, Yamashita’s speculative attempt “to imagine the world otherwise” (Vint 402) seems less radical, less “otherwise.” Indeed, I will argue that reading these two novels together helps us see that despite Yamashita’s opposition to NAFTA, her novel and liberal pro-NAFTA discourse characterize contemporary social relationships in a strikingly similar way. Making this connection is useful because, as critics like Rachel Adams have suggested, this social vision reflects a new development within American fiction. Comparing Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novel The Crying of Lot 49 with Tropic of Orange, Adams argues that whereas postmodern novels tend to represent the transnational connections created by globalization as occasions for or manifestations of paranoia and political paralysis, post-Cold War novels like Tropic of Orange tend to represent these same connections as “a shared perception of community” and thus the opportunity for “innovative forms of mobilization,” new “political networks that bypass traditional coalitional categories” (12). While I think Adams overstates the political quietism of the postmodern novel, the
affective difference she identifies does point to what I see as a deeper difference: whereas postmodern novels tend to be interested in impersonal, antagonistic social systems and concentrated asymmetries of power (if not necessarily class antagonism), contemporary novels tend to be interested in social relations based not on structural position but on individual values and abilities, from the emotional and ethical bonds of family to those transnational “communities” of “shared perception” identified by Adams. As I’ve argued throughout this dissertation, we can draw discursive connections between these literary developments of the 1990s and the political developments of the same decade, including, as I’ll show here, Bill Clinton’s support for free trade, suggesting that these developments can be understood as a reflection of the same broader cultural shift, the shift that has come to be known as the neoliberal turn.

The “symbolic struggles” over NAFTA are a particularly good site for thinking about these developments because they crystallize the moment when the nation’s most successful Democrat embraced what had been, at least in the previous decade, a Republican position, the attitude that promoting free trade is more important than “protecting existing [jobs] from low wage competition outside the U.S” (Waddan 46). Running on a pro-NAFTA platform in 1992 and pushing for the treaty’s legislative approval in 1993, Clinton put himself at odds with the “old Democrats” (Waddan 59) in Congress – his main adversaries in these “symbolic struggles” – but firmly in step with the national political electorate, who supported both his candidacy and, according to the number of phone calls pouring into Congress on the eve of the vote, NAFTA itself (Cameron 204). As many have argued, Clinton’s victories thus seem to confirm the shift suggested by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, namely that the right-wing
enthusiasm for liberalized markets had moved to the center of American political discourse.⁶

Of course, during and after the 1992 Presidential election, Clinton also strove to distinguish himself from his Republican predecessor and opponent, George H.W. Bush, the original American sponsor of the agreement. Like Bush, Clinton argued that easing restrictions on trade with Mexico and Canada would create new manufacturing jobs in the U.S. through the creation of new markets for American goods, but, unlike Bush, he insisted that the agreement had to be accompanied by side-treaties protecting labor and environmental standards and, more controversially, federal investments in education and retraining if capital flight or cheap imports cost Americans workers their jobs (“Expanding Trade”). This dual commitment to trade liberalization and investment in education and retraining was reportedly inspired in part by Clinton’s Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, whose 1990 book *The Work of Nations* provides a more fleshed-out version of the worldview implicit in Clinton’s speeches on NAFTA (Woodward 20-21). Reich argues that the global economy is no longer comprised of discrete national economies dominated by large national corporations but “regions of a global economy” (304) increasingly dominated by transnational “enterprise webs” (91). Within this new economy, Reich suggests, the most valuable type of labor is not the manufacturing work necessary for the “high-volume, standardized” (231) production of large national corporations but the “symbolic-analytic” (177) work necessary for the “high-value, specialized” production of these new global webs. To help American workers, then, U.S. economic policy should focus not on preserving the types of manufacturing jobs that will be lost due to trade liberalization but on providing workers with the “symbolic-analytic”
skills necessary to participate in these enterprise webs. Indeed, Reich argues that trade itself tends to inculcate the development of “human capital” (109) and thus the U.S. should reject what he calls “zero-sum nationalism” and “eschew trade barriers against the products of any work force as well as obstacles to the movement of money and ideas across borders” (312).

As Alex Waddan notes, the call for investment in human capital was “a more liberal call to arms” than those which focused solely on freeing up economic borders or on slashing the size of government; nevertheless, as Waddan also notes, “It did still, however, reflect a limited policy framework inasmuch as the human capital approach was a supply-side model which would provide workers with skills, but not actual jobs” (71). In other words, this approach still evinces a faith in the power of the market itself to provide jobs for all those who have sufficient “human capital.” As this implication makes clear, the concept of human capital functions in various ways within Reich and Clinton’s texts, the same multifunctionality that prompted Michel Foucault to put this concept at the heart of his 1978 account of American neoliberalism: it signifies not just the economic value of an individual’s set of skills and abilities but also the source of individual and national wealth in an economy driven by innovation, as well as, more broadly still, a distinct vision of the dynamics of the market itself.

We can contrast this vision of the market, implicit in the Clinton’s rhetoric on NAFTA, with that of the “old Democrats”: instead of inevitable tension between the internationalizing drive of capital and the needs of workers, the New Democrats see potential harmony between the internationalizing drive of capital and the needs of workers. This difference seems to translate, in turn, into a different vision of the role of
the Democratic party, a vision in which the New Democrats reproduce their disavowal of economic class conflict on the level of governmental politics: instead of protecting workers from the internationalizing drive of capital, the New Democrats will harmonize these interests so that everyone, including both capital and labor, benefit from this drive. In this context, according to Reich, this means not just liberalizing trade and investing in human capital, but convincing the current class of symbolic analysts, who “constitute the greatest part of the most fortunate fifth of the population” (250), to embrace these strategies, thereby helping the “bottom four fifths” (301). This rhetoric implies that the way to aid the “bottom four fifths” is not to do political battle with the “fortunate fifth” (perhaps by using regulation and redistribution to limit their ability to exploit the “bottom four fifths”) but to find ways to “motivate” (186) this fortunate class, in part by suggesting, as this book strives to do, that the dual commitment to free trade and human capital will make possible an ever-proliferating network of enterprise webs, enriching all nations in the process: “We meet...on an infinitely expanding terrain of human skills and knowledge,” Reich insists. “Human capital, unlike physical or financial capital, has no inherent bounds” (312).9

In Yamashita’s Tropic of Orange, as I’ve already noted, free trade results not in such boundless, self-generating wealth for all, but a situation in which, as El Gran Mojado puts it, the “95 percent” are forced to divide “into tiny pieces what is always less and less” (259). And yet Yamashita ultimately depicts this struggle in a way that suggests the real problem with NAFTA is not that it deepens economic inequality, however, but that it embodies the “rational forces of the North,” which in this text means being committed to conceptual boundaries that obscure the economic, ecological, and cultural
complexity of globalization. Thus, while Yamashita and the New Democrats disagree about whether NAFTA is, in effect, a heel or a “Hero of the People,” like El Gran Mojado, they do agree about what it means to be a “Hero of the People” at this moment in history: it means being an “international hero,” waging an epistemic battle against the forces of “zero-sum nationalism,” all those who refuse to recognize that we live in a transnational world and who want to, as Clinton puts it, turn “inward, building walls of protectionism around our Nation” (“Remarks”).

Fittingly, each of the novel’s formal elements – from multinational characters like Mojado to the networked structure with which it interrelates these characters – is designed to articulate this new social interdependence. Its chief magic-realist gesture, for example, is to literalize the cliché that, under globalization, the “far away” has become “close-by.” Yearly immigration from Mexico to the U.S. more than doubled between 1993 and 2000, and the novel imagines that, as this wave of migrants begins to flow north, the entire Southern landscape, starting with the area around the Tropic of Cancer, flows north with them, transforming geography and pushing vast crowds of people into downtown Los Angeles. Standing on an overpass in downtown L.A., a character named Manzanar Marukami observes that the migrating South will soon “crush itself into every pocket and crevice, filling a northern vacuum with its cultural conflicts, political disruption, romantic language, with its one hundred years of solitude and its tropical sadness” (170). As this phrasing and the references to Gabriel Garcia Marquez (“one hundred years of solitude”) and Claude Levi-Strauss (“tropical sadness”) suggest, it is not just the Southern geography and population flowing north, but Southern history and culture as well.
This storyline is a good example, then, of how in *Tropic of Orange*, the breakdown of national borders is always at once the breakdown of “rational” borders, here the breakdown of the boundaries between past and present, representation and reality, and – the split constitutive of rationalism itself – order and disorder. That is, the novel explicitly links this chaotic northern migration to the Mexican government’s efforts to rationalize economic relationships by making their nation more attractive to foreign investment and trade, including the financial manipulations that led to the collapse of the peso in 1995 and, of course, NAFTA itself.\(^{13}\) Thus, while, the liberalization of trade is often touted as a way to make the economic relationships between nations more efficient, as each nation embraces their “comparative advantage” (Hing 21), and while NAFTA was justified, in part, as a way to *decrease* illegal immigration (Gore “NAFTA Debate”), this book suggests that freer trade has produced not economic specialization and social order but disruption, instability, and chaos.\(^{14}\) And, as the movement of the land itself suggests, this disruption is also an ecological disruption, meaning – as critics like Rody have noted – the dialectic of order and disorder can be read in environmental terms as well, as if nature is subverting the efforts of those forces which try to control and exploit it.\(^{15}\)

These linkages are why NAFTA is characterized as a “rational” force, and why the rational is characterized as the enemy of the transnational: such transnationalism undoes the very premises of the rational from the inside, and thus must be suppressed. Of course, while Yamashita dramatizes how these transnational flows can lead to “cultural conflicts” and “political disruption,” she also suggests that they can help bring about positive social change – an attitude that separates her from one of the most famous
critics of NAFTA, Republican commentator Patrick Buchanan, who agrees, like Clinton and Yamashita, that this is a “symbolic struggle” between the national and the international, but who is squarely on the side of the national. While Buchanan argues that free trade threatens “American Sovereignty” and that, as the subtitle of one of his books warns, “Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization,” Yamashita imagines that the “invasion” of these “immigrants,” and, more centrally, the transnational, “trans-rational” sensitivity they seem to carry with them, can be the foundation for new, more progressive social networks. These new epistemic communities proliferate in the novel, from the squatters who respond to a tainted-orange crisis caused by a convoluted global supply chain by embracing economic “self-sufficiency” (191), complete with an “urban garden” (191) planted under the hood of a broken-down automobile, to the new community embodied by Yamashita herself, that is, the U.S. novelists who incorporate magic-realist elements in their new, “transnational” fictions.

The purest distillation of this utopian imagery, however, centers round Manzanar, the homeless former surgeon who, from his vantage point above the freeways, is the first to recognize the spread of the “magical” South into Los Angeles, as well as other “complexity of layers” that “ordinary persons never bother to notice,” (57) the “complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56) that encompasses everything from obscure traffic patterns to “very geology of the land.” 16 He expresses this sensitivity by pretending – or by imagining – that he is conducting the Los Angeles traffic like the conductor of a symphony, and by the end of the novel, this fantasy seems to have caught on:

Little by little, Manzanar began to sense a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself and others like him.
He found himself at the heart of an expanding symphony of which he was not the only conductor. On a distant overpass, he could make out the odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton. And beyond that, another homeless person had also taken up the baton. And across the city, on overpasses and street corners, from balconies and park benches, people held branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks, and conducted. (239)

This image of a “new kind of grid” seems to depict the emergence of a new, more egalitarian social order, grounded in a new set of epistemic commitments, those held by Manzanar and “others like him,” namely a sensitivity to the “complexity of layers” that, in our world, “ordinary persons never bother to notice.”

What’s striking about this utopia, however, is how closely it resembles the vision in neoliberal political texts. Just as Reich imagines a world comprised solely of “human capital,” rather than a world defined by the structural distinction between labor and capital, Yamashita imagines an “expanding symphony” comprised solely of conductors, rather than a symphony defined by the structural distinction between performers and conductors. In Reich’s text, moreover, what follows from this disavowal of structural antagonism is a vision in which social transformation happens not through political force – in which one group uses collective action and state institutions to impose their will on another group – but through a change in perception, in which those in power are convinced to act in the benefit of those who are not. In Yamashita’s novel, similarly, what follows from the disavowal of structural antagonism is a vision in which social transformation happens not because a metaphoric “conductor” imposes his will on others, but because those other figures are moved to embrace his vision, as if this new order emerges from within rather than being imposed from without.

Indeed, this same logic seems to shape how Yamashita understands her relationship to her readers (and, implicitly, how her own novel might thus effect social
change.) The book’s front matter includes both a “Contents” page – divided into seven sections with seven chapters each, each chapter focusing on one of the novel’s main characters – and a “HyperContexts” chart that lists section titles across the top and character names down the side. Using this chart, readers can determine which chapter characters appear in for any given section and thus (if they only want to read a particular character’s narrative, for example, or if they want to read each narrative one at a time) create their own path through the novel, rather than being bound by the narrative order established by the author on the “Contents” page. In this sense, the “HyperContexts” chart allows readers to relate to the novel like hypertext, not unlike how Manzanar relates to the various “layers” of social complexity: “he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows” (56). By reading around in *Tropic of Orange*, then, readers become part of the “expanding symphony,” the literary experience in which Yamashita is “not the only conductor.”

Of course, it is only by virtue of the disavowal of structural antagonism that the “new kind of grid” – the new epistemic community of those committed to transnationalism – can count as a brighter future for the homeless people in Yamashita’s novel or the displaced workers in Reich’s book. From a perspective that insists on such antagonism, “human capital” absolutely does have an “inherent bound,” namely the limit internal to all forms of capital, according to which capital only has value if not everyone has it, or, what amounts to the same thing, the internal limit which prompts those with capital to resist its redistribution to those who don’t. From this perspective, then, it doesn’t matter how many people are moved to recognize the complexity of the new transnationalism – no matter how far the “expanding symphony” expands, only some of
these people will ever have the “human capital” necessary to actually participate in the
new “enterprise webs.” This conflict re-emerges in political history – Clinton was
successful in his “symbolic struggle” to pass NAFTA, but he was mostly unsuccessful in
convincing “the fortunate fifth,” to support jobs training (Waddan 80-82) – but this
conflict is mainly absent from these texts.

Indeed, in Yamashita’s novel, such antagonism emerges only as a problem, a
theoretical error to be resolved, not the prerequisite for political resistance to capital. This
is the implication of a parallel, analyzed by critic Sharon Vint in a 2012 article, that the
book establishes between the plight of the “mojado,” on one hand, and a “subplot
regarding the sale of transplant organs,” on the other. The imagery of the border-crossing
scenes suggests that free trade prompts “Mexican labor to cross into the US without
allowing Mexicans as embodied living beings to do likewise” (407), as Vint puts it, and
the parallel with the organ-transplant market is that, “Just as the human body is
physically destroyed when cut up to become organs-as-commodities, so too is the full
human subject destroyed when reduced to the commodity of labor-power” (407). On one
level, this reading suggests that displaced Mexican nationals are not victims of
“exploitation,” impoverished to make other people rich, but victims of “reduction”: they
are treated like “labor-power” but not citizens, and thus the full complexity of their “lived
experience” is not acknowledged. This framing implies that the solution to the injustices
of trade liberalization is to treat undocumented workers as citizens, not just as labor-
power, a solution that might seem insufficient to the displaced Mexican farmers working
in Mexican maquiladora factories or the displaced American factory workers working in
low-paying jobs in the U.S. service industry.17 On a deeper level, moreover, the novel
suggests that even thinking of undocumented workers as “labor” is a way of doing violence to their status as “embodied living beings,” another instance, like NAFTA itself, of the “binaries, rationalisms, and reductive materialism of Western modernity” (Zamora 498 qtd. in Rody 135). Therefore this way of thinking must be transcended in order for the transnational utopias envisioned by the novel to become a reality.

As I started to suggest above, Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex* seems to be structured by a similar analogy: in our world, Zenzontli is cheap, undocumented labor, reduced to the “commodity of labor-power,” and he has been “physically destroyed” as a result: years of working the line at the Farmer John slaughterhouse have left him with a missing finger-tip (44), a damaged knee (8), a permanent “‘night cough’” from the chlorine used to clean the plant (51) and a permanent coating of “shit-stink…the stench of work, my job” (44). In the Aztec world, Zenzontli has been made whole, elevated from the bloody “kill floor” to the status of respected “Warrior of Cast,” the Aztec’s “Keeper of the House of Darkness.” Indeed, *Atomik Aztex* has been read in ways that suggest it too critiques the violence of “reduction” and celebrates the progressive “political use” of standing up for “multiplicity” (Pöhlmann 232, 234). In “Cosmographic Metafiction in Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex*,” for example, Sascha Pöhlmann argues that the novel’s “political value lies in its celebration of potential, since the text ultimately takes a stand against singular, moncausal, or linear explanations of world and history that are always connected to power, hegemony of discourse and the silencing of possibilities, alternatives, and dissent” (240). In other words, like *Tropic of Orange*, the book offers a “critique of grand narratives and totalizing visions” (Vint 411). Pöhlmann makes this claim not simply because the text imagines an alternative history in which the “Aztex”
defeated the Spanish but because it juxtaposes and intermingles alternative timelines in a way that “not only makes it impossible to identify a narrative protoworld, but it denies the whole idea of a protoworld [that is, a real, “original” world] in general by allowing its worlds and histories to radically intersect” (233).  

Of course, assigning progressive potential to this vision of an “irreducible” “plurality of worlds” (233) means framing the novel’s central conflicts in a specific way: it means that Zenzontli’s struggles are, ultimately, epistemic struggles, as it implies that the “harsh working conditions and everyday racism” (237) in the Farmer John slaughterhouse are ultimately a product of those “singular, monocausal, or linear explanations of world and history,” and that the way to make things better for this “oppressed migrant worker” (232) is, therefore, to embrace “an ever-changing complex and multiple structure of realities” (233). As Pöhlmann notes, the novel’s formal structure can be read as a manifestation of what Zenzontli describes as the Aztec’s “cyklikal konceptions of the universe where reality infinitely kurves back upon itself endlessly” (3), and Pöhlmann uses this fact to suggest that the alternative epistemic values he endorses are distinctly non-“Western” values: the novel’s “particularized world view rejects Western notions of linear time and Euclidean space” (234). Implicitly, then, the real solution to Zenzontli’s oppression is to live in a world still dominated by “Aztek” rather than “Western” values – a solution that doesn’t seem so surprising, in fact, when one considers how central the image of “Aztlán” (the mythical, pre-Columbian homeland of the Aztecs) has been to the Chicano Movement’s efforts to imagine a more viable future for Mexican-Americans in the United States.
And, of course, this is precisely the “solution” that the novel seems to offer up with its alternative historical timeline. As I also started to suggest above, however, in Foster’s novel, the triumph of the Aztecs pointedly does not end the violence of oppression in the New World: though their civilization is built on values antithetical to those of the “stupider realities…in which the Aztek civilization was ‘destroyed’” (2) – “just plain ugly” realities which “in no way …fit our aesthetic conception of how the universe is supposed to run” (2 emphases original) – this smarter, more beautiful reality will turn out to be just as asymmetrical as our own. Not only is Aztec civilization powered by the mass human sacrifice of Spanish slaves\(^{21}\), but the governing “Aztek Socialist Party” even has its own “klique of Neoliberal Ekonomists” (146), run by a former slave trader and the current Minister of Labor, whose “market reforms” put this klique in conflict (like Clinton and his Secretary of Labor) with their party’s “trade union positions” (185). These elements seem designed to make it impossible for those who care about Zenzontli’s plight in our history to embrace this alternate history either, as if Foster wants to suggest that the “aesthetic” superiority of the Aztec “vision of reality,” which Zenzontli insists on throughout the novel, is precisely that, a purely “aesthetic” superiority, a matter of mere appearance. Like the difference between words spelled with a “c” and words spelled with a “k,” the two “realities” look different but end up meaning the same thing: eventually the decision is made, seemingly because of these interparty squabbles and various political machinations, that Zenzontli himself must be sacrificed.

And yet the chapter in which Zenzontli is finally disemboweled on top of the Great Pyramid ends on an impossibly defiant note:

Except that never happened. Let me make that clear, I would never let that happen. That might have happened on some alternate reality when I wuzn’t
looking, some fucking Other World when they didn’t let me get my two cents in. But it didn’t happen this time. Cuz I didn’t let it happen. I had to make my move sooner, at some previous point in History so that could never occur. (152).

The next chapter is a flashback to an earlier point in the Aztec timeline, a sequence in which Zenzontli himself escapes from slavery and learns how “being free felt” (165), but there is nothing in that chapter or the rest of the novel to suggest that his life in the Aztec world will turn out any differently. Indeed, the book ends with three consecutive chapters focusing on his life at the meatpacking plant, the longest stretch of the novel to do so, as if to make clear that this time becoming “free” will require him to make his “move” in our reality, not in that “fucking Other World.” His “move” will turn out to be leading a union ratification drive at the plant, successfully gathering and delivering ratification petitions, bloody from the slaughterhouse floor, to his CIO rep, despite being under constant surveillance by a management spy. And, sure enough, this “move” will happen at “some previous point in History.” That is, the novel imagines that Zenzontli will be able to literally change History – not the history of the post-colonial Americas, but his own personal history – precisely by unionizing, an act that will require him to acknowledge, not deny, his status as “labor.”

This historical disruption is made possible, in a formal sense, by a narrative which, while never entirely clear or stable, seems to begin close to the present day (when Zenzontli’s children are full-grown adults) only to flash back closer to mid-century (when his children are still children or haven’t been born yet), in the midst of the CIO drive to unionize the plant. In the novel’s final chapter, Zenzontli succeeds in scheduling the “union certification vote” (194) and is beaten – but not broken – by a pair of L.A. cops in search of his now-missing foreman, who has apparently robbed the company and skipped
town (although there are also dark hints that what really happened is that Zenzontli has murdered him). On the book’s final page, trying to recover from his beating, Zenzontli muses that “I might even think this was the mechanism of my doom & permanent exile from Aztlán except that I’ve existed in this kondition so long it has become second nature” (203). I argue that this ending gestures toward the possibility that because of his political radicalization, Zenzontli may stop having hallucinations or fantasies about the Aztek Socialist Imperium, thus triggering his “permanent exile from Aztlan.” And, while the second clause of this sentence seems to negate this possibility – “I’ve existed in this kondition so long it has become second nature” – to call something “second nature,” is, of course, to denaturalize it, to suggest that it might be subject to historical change after all.  

If Zenzontli really is exiled from Aztlán, however, the consequences would indeed be radical, as it would mean that his life at end of the novel, set close to mid-century, will not segue into his life at the beginning of the novel, set closer to our time, when he still believes he is an Aztec warrior despite being a meatpacker bullied by an abusive (conspicuously still-present) foreman.

In other words, through these narrative manipulations, Foster gestures toward the possibility that, by embracing the antagonism between workers and management, Zenzontli has created the option of an “alternative future” for himself, a future different from the one in which, in both realities, he winds up as a kind of “human sacrifice.” This vision is, in a sense, transnational, as Zenzontli’s fellow union members include everyone from “Europians” (140) like his Anglo friend, Ray, to “a short thick guy, Nakatl, a black Central American Taoist happy fat man” (5) – but in Yamashita’s novel, this vision would count, of course, as a form of “reductive materialism,” as it transforms the
“complexity of layers” into an irreducible “binarism.” To put this another way, whereas *Tropic of Orange*, to use Rody’s language, transforms “realist LA” into the “magical world” of the South, *Atomik Aztex* rejects this “magical world” in favor of an LA which is not “realist” in the stylistic sense, but which nevertheless reflects realism’s traditional function, representing the social dynamics and “shit-stink” of modern urban life. We might, therefore, describe Foster’s speculative vision as nostalgic, especially in light of the obvious fact that Zenzontli’s future is already our not-so-recent past, the time before neoliberalism and the precipitous decline of the political power of American unions. NAFTA itself has just turned 20 years old, and, in literary criticism, transnationalism has become a buzzword.24

By the same token, however, the very unthinkability of a powerful union moment, at this moment in history, can make it seem like a radical option after all – especially, I think, to the group that this novel is about, on one hand, and the group that is most likely to read it, on the other. Immigrant workers have made Los Angeles “the major R & D [research and development] center for 21st century trade unionism” (Davis qtd in Fink 179), and organized labor may still turn out to be the most effective means of coping with the destabilizing, polarizing effects of trade liberalization, especially insofar as unions themselves have begun to think “transnationally,” from fighting on behalf of amnesty for undocumented workers in the U.S. to working across national lines to ensure that workers’ rights are represented in trade agreements (Fink 178; Kay 257).25 Meanwhile, if 2013 was “the Year of the Adjunct,” as some have suggested, then those of us who are graduate students or recent PhDs in the humanities, the chief audience for experimental texts like these, are only now just beginning to come around to the way of thinking in
Foster’s novel (Boldt). That is, there seems to be a groundswell of young academics starting the embrace the fact that, while our destiny will probably not include missing finger tips, slashed knees, or permanent night coughs, nevertheless our destiny is as cheap, exploitable, highly precarious academic labor. But this is why it matters, I think, that Atomik Aztex is not, ultimately, a pure example of the “alternative history” genre: in the end, it doesn’t ask us to pretend that what happened didn’t happen, like the standard counterfactual history, but to consider a means by which what happens after the last page of the book – that is, after the book is closed – might play out differently.

1 Mark Chiang describes this decontextualized form of magic realism as “global realism,” and suggests that its political relevance is circumscribed by the fact that its appreciation is a form of “cultural capital” (841); in this way, he suggests, “Tropic of Orange evinces the limits of the political unconscious of the literary field” (842).

2 This contrast might seem surprising because of the two authors’ close affiliation (they frequently praise each others’ work in interviews, and Foster thanks Yamashita in the acknowledgments of his book) and because they are often mentioned alongside each other in criticism on contemporary American fiction. Although no extended comparison of their work has been written, the two novelists are often discussed together because of their shared interest in exploring racial politics through speculative genres like alternative history and magic realism (Saldivar 3, 5, 6) and because they both participate in the emergence of a “yellow Chicanismo... in which writers of Asian descent have queried the boundaries between Asian American and Chicano literary representation...” (Sohn 176). In 2003, when the two authors comprised a panel at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kelly Writers House, the student newspaper’s coverage of the event focused on their shared interest in Los Angeles and its “racial tensions, urbanization, and immigration issues” (Rabin).

3 As Alex Waddan summarizes, “The trade pact was designed to eliminate all tariffs on goods produced and sold in the US, Canada and Mexico from the beginning of 1994. Not all tariffs would be removed immediately, but the vast majority would within a ten year spell, with a few remaining for fifteen years. The agreement also stipulated that there could be no discrimination against investors from the other countries” (61).

4 “Clinton’s Democratic administration was forced to rely on Republican support to ratify NAFTA. On November 17, 1993, the House of Representatives voted to pass NAFTA by a vote of 234 to 200; 132 Republicans and 102 Democrats supported the measure, while 143 Democrats and 56 Republicans plus the lone independent opposed it. Three days later, NAFTA passed the Senate by 61 to 38, with 34 Republicans and 27 Democrats voting in favor, and 10 Republicans and 28 Democrats against” (Hufbauer 8).

5 According to Maxwell A. Cameron and Brian W. Tomlin, “after the Gore-Perot debate [on November 9], calls to Congress went from eight-to-one against the deal to almost eight-to-one in favor of it” (204).

6 For concise accounts of Clinton’s adoption of neoliberal economic ideas, see, for example, Peck (119-120) and Robert Pollin’s “Anatomy of Clintonomics.”
Indeed, in 1993, Reich endorsed NAFTA itself, telling labor unions that they were “just plain wrong” in opposing it. (Neikirk).

Twenty years after the passage of NAFTA, most scholars on the left still believe the agreement is bad for American workers, crediting it with a net loss of American jobs and a depressing effect on American wages. The AFL-CIO website, drawing on a study by the Economic Policy Institute, states that “nearly 700,000 U.S. jobs have been lost or displaced since NAFTA took effect in 1994.” In their 2005 book, *NAFTA Revisited: Achievements and Challenges*, Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott and Diana Orejas— who are supporters of the agreement and critical of EPI’s methodology— caution against overestimating the effects of NAFTA itself on employment and wages. They argue that the agreement lead to a small net job gain in each country and a decline in wages for some— but not all— displaced workers, particularly workers with lower skill levels (57-59; 103; 105). Perhaps the most unambiguous of “NAFTA’s Broken Promises” (as the consumer advocacy group Public Citizen puts it) is the claim by its supporters that the agreement would improve jobs and working conditions in Mexico and thus lead to a decline in illegal immigration to the U.S. (Gore, “NAFTA Debate”). The “annual flow of immigrants from Mexico to the United States more than doubled” (“Broken Promises” 9) between 1993 and 2000, and, indeed, many have credited this increase to the Mexican government’s efforts to make their nation more attractive to foreign investment and trade, including, of course, NAFTA itself. Not only did the agreement require the privatization of land that had long been reserved for communal use by indigenous populations, helping to trigger the Zapatista uprising in the southern state of Chiapas, but its agricultural provisions “removed Mexican tariffs and other limits on corn imports but did not discipline U.S. subsidies” (“Broken Promises” 9), leading to a flood of cheap corn products and the collapse of corn prices, pushing “1.1 million small farmers— and 1.4 million other Mexicans dependent upon the farm sector...out of work between 1993 and 2005” (Judis qtd. in “Broken Promises” 9).

Such statements about “human capital” perform the same gesture as all” bourgeois” definitions of capital— “it posits the possibility that inanimate objects [or in this case education, training, medical care, etc.] are productive in the sense of generating an income stream” (Mohun 68). The task for any Marxist analysis of this logic, then, is to articulate how this income stream is actually grounded in exploitative social relations.

As the various strands of criticism about the novel have articulated, the book mixes a postmodern “critique of grand narratives and totalizing visions” (Vint 411), a cosmopolitan embrace of “the shifting and hybrid transnational identities brought about by globalizaton (Mermann-Jozwiak 4), and a “profoundly ecological vision,” whose “boundary-crossing energies” are dedicated to articulating “the unpredictable, irrepresible natural energies that overcome artificiality, divisions, tyranny and oppression, and death itself” (Rody 140).

The novel is rife multinational identities and transnational affiliations, like Bobby Ngu, “ a Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15), whose wife, Rafaela Cortes, is a Mexican working as a caretaker at a house in Mexico owned by an Mexican-American.

To the list of “genres or subgenres” incorporated by Yamashita’s novel— including “postmodern satire, magic realism, Los Angeles disaster fiction, Asian American fiction, ethnic American fiction, Mexican fiction” and “border novel” (Rody 131) — we should add the term “network narrative,” a phrase I’ve borrowed (fittingly, for a novel so saturated with film references) from David Bordwell’s *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (2006). As Bordwell implies, the structure of such narratives can be summed up by two contemporary clichês: “the “butterfly effect” and “six degrees of separation” (99); i.e., its main gesture is to show that the “distant” has become “close” (in terms of causality or relationship), a gesture that is useful for depicting the effects of globalization. In *Tropic of Orange*, action in one setting will frequently affect action in a far-away setting, and its seven main characters are either interrelated in multiple ways or brought into relationship as the novel progresses (Manzanar, for example, turns out to be Emi’s long-lost grandfather).

When this mass movement reaches the U.S.-Mexico border, we see:
...waves of floating paper money: pesos and dollars and reals, all floating across effortlessly—a graceful movement of free capital, at least 45 billion dollars of it, carried across by hidden and cheap labor. Hundreds of thousands of the unemployed surged forward—the blessings of monetary devaluation that thankfully wiped out those nasty international trade deficits. (200)

Here Yamashita literalizes common figurative language about the wealth created by foreign trade and investment in a manner that shows precisely how figurative this language really is, as the passage suggests that the “free,” “graceful,” “effortless” movement of capital has actually been made possible by the same forces that produced this massive “surge” of “the unemployed.” It turns out that this apparently “free capital” – the same “movement of money...across borders” celebrated by Reich – has actually, in effect, been “carried across” by this “hidden and cheap labor.”

In “Tropics of Globalization: Reading the New North America,” Molly Wallace argues that in scenes like this, Yamashita uses metaphor to expose the material imbalances obscured by the metaphors (the “tropics” or acts of troping) of globalization. In this sense, Yamashita seems to be articulating a vision in which undocumented workers in the U.S. are participants in a class struggle, the victims of efforts by the international financial class to profit at the expense of the Mexican people. And yet Wallace’s article actually underscores that Yamashita’s real object of critique is not structural imbalance but totalizing discourse (or, to use Wallace’s language, discourse that fails to preserve the “antimony” between economics and culture, materiality and metaphor). Describing the novel’s climactic wrestling scene, Wallace suggests that Yamashita is “at once participating in” and “self-consciously parodying” discourse that oversimplifies globalization as a David-and-Goliath battle of local vs. global (156). This claim suggests that the villainous “Goliath” here is not NAFTA but those who would say ‘either/or’ (you believe this discourse OR you parody it) instead of ‘both/and’ (you believe it AND you parody it).

In light of this commitment to the “complexity of layers,” it’s not clear to me, moreover, that the novel serves as a corrective to the vision of globalization implicit in Arjun Appadurai’s Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, as Wallace argues. Wallace shows how Appadurai’s articulation of the world as a series of “scapes” [technoscapes, ethnoscapes, etc., a vision which recalls Manzanar’s view of the world as a series of “maps”] can serve to elide “the materialities of uneven development,” an “inattention to the materiality of free trade in the North American context that renders his utopian model problematic” (151). By contrast, “If Appadurai’s...cultural economy’ effaces the gap between the economic and the cultural, Karen Tei Yamashita’s fictional model of the U.S. in globalization represents it” (151). But Wallace’s account of what’s “problematic” here seems to shift: from “inattention” to “materiality” to “inattention” to the gap between materiality and culture. The fact that Yamashita is so committed to representing and preserving the latter, as Wallace argues, suggests that her novel doesn’t so much reject Appadurai’s logic as perfect it.

As immigration scholar Bill Hing summarizes: “The economic theory underlying free-trade agreements is the concept of ‘comparative advantage,’ which asserts that in a free marketplace, each country will specialize in the activity in which it has a comparative advantage....since each country is specializing in a particular area or product, each country should mutually benefit from the agreement and generate more overall income” (21).

Another example of this economic and ecological dialectic is the novel’s other major plot device, an outbreak of poisonous Brazilian oranges that kills a driver on the Los Angeles freeway, triggering a massive pile-up that threatens to shut down the entire city. Determining the exact source of this outbreak proves to be impossible because of indirect routes created specifically to outwit efforts to impose order on global trade. As one source explains to the novel’s journalist character: “Well, say Brazil’s quota for oranges is exhausted, then Brazil exports to Honduras, Honduras to Guatemala, Guatemala to Mexico, and Mexico to the U.S. Then it’s cool even though everyone knows the orange harvest is dead in Mexico in June. Keeps everyone in business” (244). As the journalist realizes, the attempt to impose order on this system only causes complexity to proliferate in unpredictable ways, a proliferation mirrored, moreover, by the non-resolution of the novel’s various cross-border plots and subplots, which take the shape of “the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger and larger” (249)
One of these “layers” is a living “map of labor,” including “the daily hires hugging their knees on the backs of pickup trucks, looking backward into traffic, eyes fixed, challenging the pretensions of other workers inside cars that they imagined defined their existence” (237). In keeping with the aesthetic logic of the novel, it’s crucial that Manzanar does not see just see one “map,” however, as that would imply some “totalizing vision,” but many maps: “There are maps and there are maps and there are maps. The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56 emphasis original). This imagery equates the act of perceiving patterns with the act of creative arrangement, as if to make the point that because “seeing” patterns also means “filtering” out what does not fit the pattern, the observer is always present in the observed. Manzanar’s infectious delusion – the notion that by perceiving patterns in the traffic, he is actually creating or “conducting” them – can be read as metaphor for this same concept: that is, in a world of irreducible “complexity,” perception is creation.

As Jodi Dean argues, the “binary inclusion/exclusion does not indicate the primary axis of justice. For example, a pressing contemporary issue concerns undocumented workers. The remedy to the problem of those without papers is to get them papers – and thus membership in the state. This isn’t a bad goal, but it is a goal that extends rather than takes or changes state power….This is not a communist position because capitalism is a system that constituively exploits people, not one that constitutively excludes them” (30).

This is Lois Parkinson Zamora’s phrase, quoted approvingly by Caroline Rody in her article on Tropic of Orange, to describe colonial discourse, a discourse which, according to Zamora, magic-realism exists to critique. In an analysis of Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, the influential anthology edited by Zamora, Christopher Warnes notes that the term is often “simply a drudge for a postmodernist postcolonialism obsessed with hybridity, liminality, and what Peter Hallward calls ‘the facile denunciation of binaries’” (7). Warnes notes that: “Generalising accounts abound describing the ways magical realism represents the “writing back” of the margins to the centre, how it blurs the binaries of modern thought, how it critiques the assumptions of the Enlightenment, how it shows up the limitations of European rationalism, how it reveals the ethical failings of realism” (6).

This “lack of ontological purity” (240) is only deepened, moreover, by the fact that Zenzontli’s narration constantly draws attention to itself as a textual construct, in a way that is “often comic-like and exaggerated,” through devices like the use of “absurd, mock exhaustive” catalogues (228), “anachronism and anatopism” (240), and a “complex system of intertextual references” that incorporate and parody texts from the reader’s own reality.

“El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” adopted by the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in 1969, is typically considered the founding document of this discourse. Although the literature on Aztlán is vast, for a brief useful summary of the history of the concept and some of the criticisms that have been made of it, see Khader (84-85). In interviews, Foster has described how, as “a happa, mixed Anglo/Japanese American, growing up in the mestizaje of Chicano barrios of East L.A. during the Vietnam War,” he had a complicated relationship to the nationalism and separatism implicit in the idea of Aztlán (“Interview with Sesshu Foster.”). He notes that:

The Chicano movement was founded on the idea that [the] Southwestern United States was part of Mexico that was taken over by the U.S. and so should constitute its own separate nation. Blacks were calling for Black Power and Black Liberation...East L.A. was right across the river from Little Tokyo - I went back and forth; I had family and friends in both places. But because there was a nationalism going on at the time, there were feelings of exclusiveness and the fact that I was going back and forth bothered some of the people I knew. But I could never not deal with people just because they were of different ethnicities. I could never deal with turning Little Tokyo into a Bosnia, its own enclave. (“Excerpts from Sesshu Foster Interviews”) More pointedly, in a 2009 interview, in response to praise for his “ability to incorporate elements of indigenous heritage without exoticizing them, without the sort of neoliberal delicacy that it seems to me early Chicano writers and their direct literary descendants sometimes resort to,” Foster implies that the political usefulness of the concept of Aztlán has run its course:
I came of age during the Chicano movement and witnessed how it, like other countercultural and civil rights movements of the time, expressed and articulated community needs and demands that had been roiling below the surface for generations. It was exciting. Most contemporary ideas about ethnic identity are forty years old. My perspective on the indigenous elements in Atomik Aztex is that I view them as political and social iconography and ideology (see the Chicano murals painted in the Ramona gardens housing projects, or Estrada courts, for example), not ethnography of the millions of living Nahua speakers in Mexico. Our identity as Americans, as citizens of whatever it may be, is collectively bound up in on-going discourse and dialogue about our relations, our culture and history. Times change, and we can’t recycle categorical definitions of ethnic character that are forty years old any more than we can recycle racist assumptions about the self from the 19th century. People do, of course, but writers are supposed to be hipper than that, more up to date. (“Atomik Atztek: A Conversation”)

21 As part of the “applied Aztek Sciences of the Human Heart,” (5), Zenzontli notes, “we cut out millions of hearts every year” (4).

22 At times, for example, Zenzontli implies that he came to the U.S. and got his job at the Farmer John plant as early as the 1930s or 1940s (75), while at other times he narrates his migration in a way that evokes more recent border crossings, which could make his presence in the US, like that of El Gran Mojado, a product of NAFTA (40). Describing how he “crossed deserts to get here,” the narrator poses a series of rhetorical questions, including “When 19 other vatos were asphyxiated in a boxcar locked in the Arizona sun, who you think was the last left alive sucking air out of a tiny rust-hole?” (40). There have been a number of high-profile incidents in which large numbers of undocumented workers died in locked train cars while trying to sneak into the country, including incidents in 1987, 2000, and 2002, while the image of immigrants dying in the Arizona desert is strongly associated with life after 9/11, when the Border Patrol began stricter policing of more heavily populated border areas. Other anachronistic references that seem to connect the novel with the present include allusions to the EZLN and Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the Mexican president who spearheaded the drive to approve NAFTA.

23 Another thing we can say about the ambiguity of this ending is that, rather than replacing one inevitability (the inevitability that the past becomes the present, as it inevitably does in real life) with another (the inevitability that the past will not become the present, as it may do within a fictional narrative), Foster ends the novel by insisting on indeterminacy, as if to take issue with the idea of historical inevitability itself. This too can be read as an intervention into how class politics are understood in the age of neoliberalism. As we’ve seen, there is an apparently still thriving tradition among literary critics to link “totalizing” visions with teleological “grand narratives” (Vint 411), to connect “singular, moncausal, or linear explanations of world and history” to “the silencing of possibilities, alternatives, and dissent” (Pöhlmann 240). The referent of these terms is not entirely spelled out in either of these articles, but the idea of totality is, of course, strongly associated with the Marxist insistence on interpreting social relations in terms of the contradictions of capitalism, and one of the most famous teleological “grand narratives” is, of course, the idea that “History” is simply the inevitable march towards communism. Foster’s intervention is to delink these two concepts, and thereby to clarify that focusing on material antagonism (which, in the Marxist tradition, means focusing on the dialectical interplay of structure and human agency) does not mean transforming “History” into some objective, prewritten masterplot. Indeed, it means precisely the opposite, because it means rejecting the one-sided reification of “world and history” that such narratives imply. As writers like Nicholas Brown, Jodi Dean, and Slavoj Žižek, have argued, the tendency to link “totality” and “the silencing of possibilities, alternatives, and dissent” is not only a misrepresentation of Marxist thought, but can function, moreover, as its own means of “silencing…dissent,” namely the dissent of those who seek to imagine “alternatives” to neoliberalism. To use’s Pöhlmann’s own language: to insist on the “irreducible” “plurality of worlds” means we don’t have to care what happens to Zenzontli in this world; to deny the very idea of an originary “protoworld” – which logically also means denying the very idea of a “destination” world – means we are effectively stuck here in the world of ever-deepening inequality and exploitation, unable to posit social realities different from those imagined by neoliberalism. By rejecting this logic, I argue, Foster seems to trying to preserve the very possibility of this speculative project.
In “Cognitive Mapping, Then and Now: Postmodernism, Indecision, and American Literary Globalism,” Emilio Sauri argues that contemporary literary-critical transnationalism, including Rachel Adams’s reading of *Tropic of Orange*, attempts to answer Fredric Jameson’s call for “cognitive mapping,” that is, for literature and theory that thinks spatially and thus thinks historically, thereby overcoming the impasse represented by postmodernism, which is “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson ix). The transnational turn in American studies responds to globalization by trying to transcend national borders, removing the U.S. from the conceptual “center” of its analysis, so that it can fathom the new (or newly visible) economic interdependence. As Sauri points out, however, this act of “de-centering” serves to obscure the ways in which the U.S. does, in fact, occupy the center of the capitalist world system, and thus transnationalism’s cognitive maps offer no route to a post-neoliberal future:

> For while Adams... and other critics agree that the division between the US and Latin America—or between wealthy nations and poorer ones—finds its origins in the unevenly developed flows of capital between the peripheries and the center, that history is nonetheless rendered extraneous to this remapping precisely because acknowledging it requires us to recognize the US as the incontrovertible “center” of the Americas, if not the world system. Which is to say that the commitment to the multiplication or mapping of different locations, perspectives, or positions can be considered political only within a space utterly removed from the contingencies of history. Yet, it does not take a very strong historicism to note that the expansion of global capitalism has long involved much more than the annihilation of cultural difference, even when the dynamic it names shifts into the expansion of a “Western” or “American” monoculture under the sign of globalization; therefore, as plainly as we can see that both the United States and Latin America are equally implicated in the development of this system, it is just as clear that each occupies a radically unequal position within it. And what this means is that insofar as we understand the positions populations within the US, Bolivia, Argentina, or Mexico occupy in the world system not as merely different but as radically unequal, we can begin to see how this commitment to the multiplication of positions not only fails to provide a more complete picture of the relationship between these and other nations, but also—and perhaps more importantly—makes any attempt to formulate an alternative to this system impossible. (481)

Leon Fink writes that, between 1990 and 2000, “Beginning with SIEU’s Justice for Janitors campaign at the Century City luxury office complex... sustained by the extended New Otani drive by Local 11 (Hotel and Restaurant Employees) and fueled by drywalleros, house framers, country workers, tortilla makers, and even bus rider unionists,” L.A.’s “new immigrant Latino and Asian workforce had spurred the most sustained and successful union-organizing work in the country” (128). Tamara Kay suggests, meanwhile, that one of NAFTA’s “unintended consequences” is that “labor unions began to conceptualize themselves not only as national unions but also as North American unions,” a reconceptualization made possible by the fact that the treaty helped create institutional frameworks (albeit weak ones) for transnational trade negotiation and enforcement of labor rights and, perhaps more importantly, a new sense of shared economic interest (256-257 emphasis original). She cites, for example, a 2000 personal interview with Jeff Hermanson, former director of the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center Mexico program:

> ...the best way to engage in solidarity is to say yeah, I have an interest here, and here’s my interest. If your wages are so low and continue to remain so low, I’m going to lose all the jobs I’ve got. So it’s in my interest that your wages increase. What’s your interest? Well, your interest is in increasing your wages. So guess what, we have a common interest. That’s the only solid basis for solidarity, common interest...[and in the human rights sense] I can’t have the right to organize and bargain collectively as long as you don’t. (69)

For background, see, for example, Elizabeth Sergan’s “The Adjunct Revolt: How Poor Professors are Fighting Back”; Keith Hoeller’s “The Wal-Martization of higher education: How young professors are getting screwed”; and Tamar Lewin’s “More College Adjuncts See Strength in Union Numbers.”
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