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## THE NEW SINCERITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THE NEW SINCERITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY

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## Abstract

The New Sincerity is a provocative mode of literary interpretation that focuses intensely on coherent connections that texts can build with readers who are primed to seek out narratives and literary works that rest on clear and stable relationships between dialectics of interior/exterior, self/others, and meaning/expression. Studies on The New Sincerity so far have focused on how it should be situated against dominant literary movements such as postmodernism. My dissertation aims for a more positive definition, unfolding the most essential details of The New Sincerity in three parts: by exploring the intellectual history of the term “sincerity” and related ideas (such as authenticity); by establishing the historical context that created the conditions that led to The New Sincerity’s genesis in the 1990s; and by tracing the different forms reading with The New Sincerity can take by analyzing a diverse body of literary texts. The works of literature I examine come from a very brief span in the final decade of the twentieth century, but there are innumerable avenues for future research and study that can expand the study of The New Sincerity.

## Acknowledgements

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I am confident that my work would not have reached this point without the daily inspiration I receive from my children. Bridget, Matthew, and James, thank you for telling me—in your own ways—that I could do it.

## Dedication

You once wrote to me, “You’re brilliant. You are.” Through ups and downs and the good and the not-so-good, I haven’t always agreed with this 100%, but in the same message you also wrote, “I, obviously, know you can do it and I am always right.” If there are two things I’ve consistently been able to hold on to, the first is that, yes, every single turn our lives have taken has proven that you are right about everything—especially these important things. And second, I know that without your support, your love, and your believing in me, none of this could have ever been possible. This work is for my partner, my wife, and my best friend, Shannon.

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## Introduction - Sincerity, Authenticity, and The New Sincerity

The New Sincerity is a mode of interpretation defined by an intense focus on identifying and fostering coherent connections between readers and literary texts; it is often associated with clear and stable relationships between dialectics of interior/exterior, self/others, and meaning/expression. In the critical work that exists on the topic thus far, the impulses behind The New Sincerity have primarily been directed towards what a text *means*, or—more complexly—interpreting how an author or text navigates innumerable layers of artifice and performativity in order to pass along an earnest message, idea, feeling, or value to their audience; these studies have placed The New Sincerity in opposition to irony or any other mode of expression that purposely obfuscates meaning. However, this is not the only form that The New Sincerity can take, and the next step in scholarship on the topic—which my project takes as its primary purpose—is a foundational move that has not yet been undertaken at great length: to elucidate the multifaceted roots of The New Sincerity in order to ground it intellectually, historically, and textually.

In service to that end, this dissertation will make three primary moves: first, I will explore the complex intellectual history of the many forms “sincerity” has taken from the early modern period through the end of the twentieth century, a collection of disparate ideas that each have a bit of influence; second, I will unpack the historical and social contexts that helped develop the attitudes and anxieties which sought a new interpretive model; and third—the deepest and most expansive piece of the puzzle—to examine works of literature from the

period when The New Sincerity in American literature came together most clearly, the 1990s, in order to demonstrate how they condition and guide a particular mode of reading that emphasizes the text's connection with the reader as a bulwark against fragmentation and detachment. This introduction will focus on the first of these moves, while the remaining chapters will take on the heavy lifting of historicizing The New Sincerity and tracing its development through a diverse body of literary works.

In deciding where to begin a review of the intellectual history of “sincerity,” perhaps the simplest place to start is the dictionary. The OED includes four different senses for the word “sincere,” with each one of those (save the third) having multiple sub-senses; the word “sincerity” includes two senses, each with multiple sub-senses. There are obsolete and rare senses scattered between them. This is all to say that the history of the word “sincerity” is as complex as the different ways it has been deployed in literary and cultural studies, and before moving forward with defining The New Sincerity in literary-cultural terms, it helps to first pause over what this etymological history can add to our discussion. It is telling, considering my discussions and below about negative theology that the first definition of “sincere” listed in the OED reads: “*Not* falsified or perverted in any way” (emphasis mine). Since its earliest usage, sincerity has been linked to purity and the *absence* of corruption or contamination (see 1.a and 1.c); certainly, positive definitions do describe what sincerity *has* instead of what it *lacks*—“real, true” (“sincere,” sense 3), “honest, straightforward” (“sincere,” sense 4)—but negative definitions are just as frequent, if not more common. There is also a

deep-rooted connection to autonomy imbued in its usage: the words “free” and “freedom” come up in multiple definitions, as in “free from any foreign element or ingredient” (“sincere,” sense 2), “Freedom from falsification” (“sincerity,” sense 1.a), and “Freedom from dissimulation or duplicity” (“sincerity,” sense 2.a). What is implied here is that whatever stands against sincerity is not just in opposition, but seen as constraining and restrictive—the idea of “freedom from” also continues the trend of defining sincerity negatively. It is not surprising, then—as we will see below—that The New Sincerity has, at times, primarily been defined in opposition to other modes of interpretation. It is important to acknowledge this tendency before I begin to unfold a more robust definition: while I attempt to argue the terms of The New Sincerity positively wherever possible, it’s impossible to divorce it from oppositional forms and other intellectual traditions that have given it its shape.

The role of sincerity in the Romantic tradition of English poetry—and the way it evolved during the Victorian era—is a useful starting point to demonstrate how “sincerity” resists remaining a static concept, and how it can continue to be deployed anew as historical, social, and literary conditions change over time. For William Wordsworth and the poets associated with his thought, sincerity was a standard with which they judged poetry. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams writes that this had to do with the careful consideration the Romantics paid to how poetry can express *truth*; in a way, it was related to a parallel intellectual revolution in science, which looked outward at the natural world and came up with explanations for how it worked and how it is organized—these

were undeniable facts that could be verified through careful study. Instead of looking outward, poetry looked inward at “such facts as connected with soul, or a specific personality in its preferences, its volition and power” (318, quoting Walter Pater). Good poetry was “the overflow of expression of feeling in an integral and naturally figurative language,” while bad poetry was “the simulated or conventional expression of feeling” (298). Poetry gains its value from being a genuine, true expression of feeling—from being *sincere*—and not from being “artful or contrived” (319); there’s an element of spontaneity as well: sincerity *springs* from an individual without much thought, when a moment of inspiration hits.

Abrams points out that, in a way, this version of sincerity does retain the moral implications of its earliest prominent usage in English—to describe the pure religious doctrine espoused by the Protestant Reformation (318)—but this “test of character” is tied to aesthetics, not to any individually held belief: the “good” poet does not think a certain way or write in a certain style, but steadfastly strives to sincerely express himself or herself spontaneously and genuinely, reflecting how they truly feel (319). Patricia M. Ball writes about how these ideas became “confused” during the Victorian era, as the idea of sincerity *did* begin to take on overtones of a moral purity test, going so far as to call it an “adulterating” of the Romantics’ ideas (2). She looks primarily at the ways in which Thomas Carlyle used “sincerity” in both the Romantic sense (a poet speaking their truth) and as “a fundamental attribute of [the] hero in any sphere,” a mark of a “great man” (3). Ball believes that this dilutes the term and pulls it

away from the Romantics' conception as an *aesthetic* criterion and towards "the measure of worth" of a *person* (4). This shift—from focusing on the value of poetry to focusing on the stature of an individual—is significant, and the tension between the two continued to resonate through discussions of sincerity in the twentieth century. Although my conception of The New Sincerity doesn't rely on aesthetic judgments—it's something readers do (and that a text can *condition* and *lead* a reader do), not something a text *has*—what's relatable here is this Victorian-era tension between how much to focus on the people behind the texts and the texts themselves; as I will detail (and attempt to correct) below, the early scholarship on The New Sincerity has been held back by considerations of authors as central geniuses to its carrying out—moving away from this will open it up to even further study.

One of the more enduring critical conversations on sincerity during the last century comes from Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*; originally a series of lectures, Trilling describes the work on its first page as an observation of "the moral life in process of revising itself" (1). Very broadly, the object of his study is to examine how sincerity—as a moral imperative—is being supplanted by authenticity. For Trilling, to be sincere means to consistently have "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (1), to be true to one's self in order to always present an honest sense of self to those around you. There are parallels to the Romantic/Victorian conceptions of sincerity here (with more direct connections to come below), but the most telling difference is that Trilling's concern is *not* literary in nature. He is concerned with how to *live*

sincerely, how to embody the quality in day-to-day life, something that takes “the most arduous effort” (5). This herculean task to constantly put on your truest and most self-affirming face for everyone you meet leads Trilling to recognize the paradox at its heart: “Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are” (9); in other words, as Trilling puts it much more concisely: “we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person” (9), and this *act* of shaping oneself for the sake of others undercuts the moral imperative to always be true to oneself. If one plays at being sincere too often, one will eventually be found out, and you will be judged as not *authentic*.

This conclusion about the limitations and paradox at the heart of sincerity leads Trilling to reflect on the paradigm that has overtaken it in the twentieth century, namely *authenticity*. Trilling notes, as other commentators do (see, for example, Funk below), that the word is notoriously difficult to define, but places the outskirts of its limits at the place where appeals to sincerity cease to function. His examples are literary in nature<sup>1</sup>: he refers to a poem by William Wordsworth, “Michael,” that relates the plight of a shepherd wracked with grief over his son who will never return to his pastoral home—while he sometimes tends his sheep as normal, there are days when Michael sits the entire day and does nothing (91-

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<sup>1</sup> They also reference Romanticism, which could cause a reader to discern too direct of a connection between Trilling’s thought and the Romantics’ standards of sincerity above. To be clear: Trilling does *not* read Wordsworth’s poem for its aesthetic qualities, but for how it presents the challenges of living sincerely vs. living authentically.

92). Trilling concludes that it “would go beyond absurdity, it would be a kind of indecency, to raise the question of the sincerity of this grief,” as not only does Michael “[say] nothing...[and express] nothing,” but there is no separation between an interior state of grief and what observers can see on the outside; sincerity fails as a paradigm here because, as Trilling says, “There is no within and without: he and his grief are one” (92). Trilling writes that this tearing down of the boundary between within and without is given the name *authenticity* because society has chosen to place a high value on it: works of art gain authenticity by being understood on their own terms, artists gain a reputation as authentic for creating on their own terms, and the audience confronts their own *inauthenticity* after experiencing these works that inspire them to overcome it (98-99). And, as Trilling has suggested throughout his study, an understanding of authenticity has made it more difficult to hold up sincerity as a standard for living a moral life.

“Authenticity” has, of course, its own rich intellectual and philosophical history that predates Trilling’s study, even if he doesn’t reflect on it at any great length. His discussions necessitate a brief reflection on the place of the term *authenticity* in twentieth century thought and how it has influenced the shape of The New Sincerity. Heidegger’s *Eigentlichkeit*, often translated directly as “authenticity,” is a key component of his theories of being. Just as Trilling is interested in the deliberate choices people make to *appear* sincere to others (and the paradoxes that this process involves), Heidegger’s conception of being, *Dasein*, focuses on the deliberate choices individuals must make at every turn in

order to delineate the contours of their self; one's identity is always an open question, and by taking ownership of it and living for oneself, you can make strides to separate yourself from *das Man* (the "They"—not simply other individuals, but the totality of expectations and social mores that individuals fall into when they fail to live for themselves). Although commonly translated as "authenticity," a more literal translation of *Eigentlichkeit* would be "ownedness" or "being one's own" (Somogy and Guignon). There's a similar impulse here to what Trilling identified: authenticity is free from sincerity's worries about what other people think about how one is "supposed" to be. Heidegger's critics have objected to the insularity of these theories (see, for example, Adorno's critique that Heidegger's reliance on jargon creates a "refuge" for fascism and totalitarianism), but these overtures to autonomy and living for oneself are an important part of what I will unfold in this dissertation. As my very next paragraph will detail, more recent developments in philosophy have brought into question the ability of an individual to take these stands for themselves—an appeal to Heideggerian authenticity doesn't deactivate these theories, but I believe The New Sincerity does wish to investigate the efficacy of such a sense of being as a perpetual process worth considering.

Positing that The New Sincerity's focus on coherence or wholeness—whether it's a unity of purpose, a directness of expression, or what have you—has some of its roots in early-twentieth-century conceptions of authenticity and the self creates a problematic tension due to the shape that critical theory took on in the latter half of the century. In particular, the dominant trend in post-



structuralism and other post-war theories is that individuals do *not* have the ability to invest their attention and care to shape their sense of self. On the contrary, whether we speak of Althusser's structuralist conceptions of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, Foucault's reflections on biopolitics and discipline, or Spivak's theories on epistemic violence, the dominant waves in critical theory over the past few generations have viewed the very concept of the "subject" as something pre-determined by structures of power. The self does not precede power's subjugation, but is formed *by* it. Consider how the "Hey, you there!" (118) of Althusser's interpellation places the "you" before the concept of an "I" and makes even the thought of accessing a discernible self unencumbered by ideology and power unthinkable. In searching for a sense of coherence and connection, *The New Sincerity* acknowledges the pervasiveness of these theories and does not claim to have the key to deactivating the structures of power inherent in them. However, as I proposed above, readers carrying out an interpretation with *The New Sincerity* are constantly on the lookout for connections that can be made in spite of these theories—fragments that can be rearranged into a discernable whole, messages and theories of thought that can be pieced together to suggest opportunities for autonomy.

Returning to more recent developments in this realm, Wolfgang Funk's *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium*—certainly greatly influenced by Trilling—explores "how contemporary works of literature renegotiate the relationship between experience and its representation" in the wake of post-structuralism and postmodernism; he offers

authenticity as providing “the formal and theoretical parameters for this renegotiation” (1). This process is deemed “reconstructive” (2) to highlight how it aims to build over the gaps left by recent theories such as deconstruction. He fleshes out this process by working through the formal features that are shared throughout a series of texts—especially their reliance on metareference. He begins with the assumption that all literature is on some level self-referential, since every work uses language, which, existing outside of the text, relates it to reality while also making aesthetic choices to separate it from said reality (79). Metareferential works, however, “pose an irresolvable epistemological or ontological challenge to the reader, a challenge which cannot be resolved on the textual level” and which requires “the imaginative reconstruction of the act of literary communication” (79). Metareferential works disrupt the artistic illusions readers come to expect from conventional narratives, but Funk argues that this *increases* the believability of the work instead of making it more difficult to believe; the process, which he calls *authenticating*, is kick started by “the communicative act established in and through the very text,” (90)—not the content of the text itself. This language and the conception of authenticity owe a lot to Trilling in the way they ascribe great value to a concept that cannot be definitively defined but which has gained great value as the priorities of representation have changed over the ages; Trilling recognized this at the dawn of what is commonly called the postmodern era, while Funk brings it up at what he believes to be its end. The New Sincerity falls between these two conceptions. On the one hand, this is a temporal distinction, as Trilling’s focus is primarily on

works of literature from before the twentieth century, and Funk focuses on the early 2000s—I believe works from the 1990s are best situated to demonstrate the range of The New Sincerity as an interpretive strategy, and my studies below focus on works from a very tight period (1996-1997). I also believe that The New Sincerity falls in an area between these two theorists’ work in its conceptual concerns: whereas Trilling ruminates on what sincerity and authenticity *mean*, and Funk focuses on what authenticity can *do*, The New Sincerity can be seen as building a bridge between the two in the way it raises questions about just *how much* the consequences of post-war theory can be pushed back against; it’s an exploratory impulse that experiments with the limits of the prevailing notions of the most recent era in intellectual thought.

Situating The New Sincerity in this tradition of theories on sincerity and authenticity is a necessary move that has also become problematic in the existing critical literature. Adam Kelly’s essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” first presented at a conference in 2009 and then published in 2010, has become influential in both Wallace studies and work on The New Sincerity.<sup>2</sup> Kelly engages with Trilling directly, working through a number of similar points that I cover above; however, the connection between

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<sup>2</sup> In the years since Kelly’s paper was released, works on The New Sincerity frequently focus on Wallace, including Burn (2012), Williams (2015), Bartlett (2016), and McAdams (2016); others, including Jamshidian and Pirnajmuddin (2016) have applied the conception of sincerity in Kelly’s work to others authors (these scholars examined Tom Wolfe’s *Back to Blood*); Alber (2016) and Sydney Miller (2017) are among critics who deploy the specter of these ideas without directly mentioning Kelly’s work, but the influence is palpable. My Chapter 2 deals directly with Wallace’s work as well, but it focuses on my sense of The New Sincerity which departs from Kelly’s in key ways.

The New Sincerity and Trilling's conception of sincerity/authenticity gets off to a troubling start due to Kelly misreading Trilling's conceptualization of the subject. Kelly correctly describes Trilling's conception of sincerity as "[placing] emphasis on inter-subjective truth and communication with others," but he errs slightly by stating that "authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden" (132); as Trilling's reading of William Wordsworth's "Michael" is meant to demonstrate, authenticity may consistently evade definition, but outward expressions are frequently cast as authentic. He goes on to say that "the surface/depth model of the self [is] assumed by *both* sincerity and authenticity" (133, emphasis mine). As I have noted above, Trilling does not identify authenticity with the surface/depth model but with the *suspension* or *loss* of said model—in Wordsworth's poem, the character derives his authenticity from having no separation between his interior and exterior. Kelly contends, echoing Frederic Jameson, that Trilling's paradigms were "superseded by the privilege afforded to the inaugurating powers of capital, technology, culture, and especially language" (133)—essentially, it was postmodernity that killed sincerity and authenticity. Funk's persuasive argument pushes back against this: although the works of literature he analyzes share many formal features with postmodern literature—especially the self-referential pull of metafiction—he finds in them a spark of authenticity in the vein of Trilling's nearly indefinable concept.

An accounting of the connections between The New Sincerity and the legacy of Trilling's sincerity/authenticity requires a more subtle and careful reasoning about what factors they share and how they depart from each other;

it's much more complex than Kelly's telling that The New Sincerity replaces those paradigms. I discussed Funk at length to highlight the emphasis he places on the formal elements of its reconstructive fiction, especially its self-referentiality; as I have detailed above, The New Sincerity is a method of interpretation, a way of approaching texts and *not* the isolating of features of a text to explain what makes it "sincere." However, an element of authenticity's ineffability is retained in this process: as we will see in my chapters below, the fiction most closely associated with The New Sincerity is not simply "read with The New Sincerity," but it *guides* and *conditions* readers to read and connect with it in particular ways.

I hesitate to use the same sort of "re-" terms as Funk's "reconstruction" (such as "re-gain" or "re-claim") since that implies that The New Sincerity is rehashing previous theories of subjectivity, experience, or representation. It's the "new" sincerity because it is situated to consider all of these rich ideas—sincerity, authenticity, subjectivity, autonomy—in a novel way that pays credence to the diverse intellectual traditions described above without holding too closely to any of them.

As I have mentioned, The New Sincerity has long been associated with and is often defined as solely in opposition to postmodernism. Kelly's essay on David Foster Wallace gave rise to this persistent way of thinking. The essay spins on paradoxes, wondering: "If...a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers in a complex culture, and thus about communicating what sounds true, rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere?" (135). The anxiety described here is predicated on irony's constant obfuscation

of meaning—but it also echoes Trilling’s observations on sincerity from decades before beat-by-beat. This conclusion may not be wholly original, but what Kelly does next *is*: he focuses in on the leap of faith writers like Wallace inspire their readers to take, to accept and celebrate a “gift” that “displaces metaphysics while retaining a love of truth” (146)—i.e., Wallace asks his readers to trust him, and if they do, they will be rewarded with a meaning that bursts through the ironic barrier between them. This conception of The New Sincerity—as a contract between author and reader to trust each other—promises quite a bit, but it falls apart under close scrutiny. Its prerequisites include an author intentionally trying to bridge this gap with their work, a willing readership ready to take the leap with them, and a text that can be recognized as part of The New Sincerity—which is a tall order, since Kelly does not enumerate any formal features that could be traced across texts. As all critics who focus on The New Sincerity are, I am indebted to Kelly’s work for the way it has brought The New Sincerity under more consideration; however, I think we can be more precise about what The New Sincerity is and how it interacts with other elements of American literary culture.

I have contended above that the best way to think about the “sincerity” of The New Sincerity is to conceptualize it in terms of a sense of connection and understanding that looks to overcome fragmentation. I do not want to move on from this without acknowledging that this does more or less speak to a conception of fragmented subjectivity prevalent in postmodern theory, embodied by Jameson’s description of the self as “a conception of practices, discourses, and

textual play” more appropriately called “multiple surfaces” (12)—in this telling, the surface/depth model has fallen away, and all we are left with are surfaces onto which temporary meanings can be scratched, but which can be changed as quickly as they came to be. My description of The New Sincerity certainly sounds like a direct response to this, but I would argue that that is an oversimplification of the state of theory and literature during the end of the twentieth century. One key distinction to make is the difference between the terms *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*. Beginning with the latter, Geyh, Leebron, and Levy explain that technically speaking *postmodernity* is “a historical period stretching from the 1960s to the present, marked by such phenomena as upheavals in the international economic system, the Cold War and its decline, the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the American population, the growth of the suburbs as a cultural force, the predominance of television as a cultural medium, and the rise of the computer” (x). They describe *postmodernism* as “a tentative grouping of ideas, stylistic traits, and thematic preoccupations that set the last four decades apart from earlier eras” (x). The former refers to the *era* and the latter refers to the *trend in artistic production*, a distinction that some commentators miss.<sup>3</sup> I am comfortable saying that my conception of The New Sincerity is, at least in part, a

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview from 2016, Jameson admits that he wishes he was more precise with these terms while working on his influential works in the 1980s and early 1990s; when asked how he would describe postmodernism differently these days, he said, “The first thing I would do is to separate these terms postmodernity and postmodernism, because people have often thought that my first description of it was a sort of aesthetic inventory of stylistic features. In part it was that, but I had understood it in terms of periodization and social structure. And now I realize that it would have been much clearer had I distinguished postmodernity as a historical period from postmodernism as a style” (Nico, Young, and Yue 143-144).

product of postmodernity in the sense that the historical realities of the latter half of the twentieth century helped lay the foundation for it (see Chapter 1 for more details); however, I also believe that this mode of reading could continue *without* postmodernism—some of the terminology would certainly be different, but it could address the same crises present in the wider world.

Another fact of literary reality that pushes back against The New Sincerity existing as a “reaction” to postmodernism is the simple fact that it was not the only literary form for the last few decades of the twentieth century; it’s often referred to as a “cultural dominant” (Jameson’s phrase, 4), but that should not erase the American literary landscape of the past few decades. Minimalism sprang up around the 1970s and featured “short [stories] peopled, according to many critics, with motiveless characters involved in meaningless actions” (Sodowsky 529); or, to be a bit more generous, it was “associated with struggling working-class characters, charmless rural and suburban settings and a certain terseness of expression” (Kirn). These stories were sparse and tiny compared to the maddeningly complex tomes of postmodernism, and they came in many different forms, including what became known as “Kmart realism,” which was “a fiction of brand names and contemporary cultural references, work that achieves texture without substance and that invokes an array of material practices it fails to investigate or challenge” (Clark 150).

As the century drew to a close, realism also saw a resurgence. All the way back in 1983, Bill Buford of *Granta* discussed “dirty realism,” described as “the belly-side of contemporary life.” Lee Konstantinou goes so far as to recognize



“clashing models of realism: realism as genre and realism as epistemic project” (111). The first, storytelling neorealists (e.g., Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides) are working with a commitment to presenting narrative and time realistically; the other side of the debate, dubbed “affective neorealists” (e.g., Sheila Heti and Ben Marcus), are focused on trying to “suss out and capture unnamed, unrepresented, and unreified zones of life” (111). Robert Rebein identified this “revitalization of realism” as one of the most significant literary events of the late twentieth century” (7), but it barely receives a mention in discussions of postmodern literary history. It is important to clarify that late-twentieth-century realism and The New Sincerity are *not* the same thing, even if they grew out of similar contexts. Their primary difference is informed, I believe, by the different ways “sincerity” had come to be defined in the *nineteenth* century. Realism in its various forms can be broadly defined as a collection of features shared by literary texts; it’s a genre, in simplistic terms. The New Sincerity is an approach to reading literary texts, often driven by the texts themselves. The impulses behind the two share many of the same drives—moving away from obfuscation towards direct expression, for example—but keeping them distinct is important.

There’s one more complication for thinking about The New Sincerity as a reaction to postmodernism: what do we do with it once postmodernism is done? Would The New Sincerity then become a historical artifact, too? What if postmodernism is *already* gone? Linda Hutcheon certainly believes it is, intoning in the afterward to her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “Let’s just say it: it’s

over” (165-166). She acknowledges that remnants of the postmodernist aesthetic remain, but isn’t concerned by it—after all, there are still vestiges of modernism nearly 100 years later. She closes by declaring that “Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own” (181), but leaves it up to her readers to find one. Stephen J. Burn’s *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* takes up the challenge, but its terminology is decidedly bland: Burn uses “post-postmodernism” to describe literature that dramatizes both its roots in and its separation from postmodernism (19); is informed by postmodern critiques of naïve literary forms, namely, realism (20); and places a greater focus on character (23). Of note in this work is Burn’s timeline of when people became fed up with postmodernism and began to theorize about what would come next; the earliest case of someone lamenting the loss of postmodernism for post-postmodernism was in 1975 (17). Realism has entered into this discussion as well, with Rebein and Leypoldt imagining that realism can retain its classic central concerns of keeping “the reader’s perceptive powers focused on the concepts, propositions, and values inherent in the textual fictional worlds” (Leypoldt 25) while employing some of the surface-level features of postmodernism to keep texts fresh and make them feel familiar to audiences who have read postmodern texts for decades. One must also reckon with the crowded field of “something-modernisms”: metamodernism—a “structure of feeling” as opposed to a structure of thought (Vermeulen and van den Akker)—and the subsets of hypermodernism, digimodernism, pseudomodernism, automodernism, and

altermodernism.<sup>4</sup> This is all to say that the landscape of American literature at the end of the twentieth century is not homogeneously postmodern, nor has it been since The New Sincerity first began to appear as a mode of interpretation. This discussion is meant to situate The New Sincerity in the context of literary forms and criticism of the late twentieth century, but I wish to emphasize that I do *not* view The New Sincerity as a literary movement or the beginning of a new discernible period in literary history. As I will detail a bit more in my methodology section below and in the chapters to come, The New Sincerity arose—at least in part—as a reaction to specific conditions of time and place (America in the 1990s), but that does not prevent it from being applied to literature from other periods and locales.

Before moving into my discussion of my primary texts in earnest, I would like to briefly outline my methodology and explain the reasoning behind how my dissertation is structured. Chapter 1 stands out as unique among the other sections of this project, as instead of carefully analyzing a literary text, it works to thoroughly historicize both the phenomenon of The New Sincerity and the term

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<sup>4</sup> A brief word on each of these: Lipovetsky describes *hypermodernism* as a modernism “extreme in terms of technologies, media, economics, town planning, consumption, and individual pathology” (33)—it’s a category that speaks to excess; Kirby (2009) distinguishes digimodernism as “a new form of textuality” brought on by the impact “computerization” has had on culture (50); elsewhere, Kirby (2006) defines pseudomodernism as any text “whose content and dynamics are invented or directed by the participating viewer or listener”; automodernism overturns accepted dialectics in the way it refuses to see “individual freedom and mechanical predetermination as opposing social forces”—instead, it investigates how today’s “digital youth” use the technology of automation to “express their autonomy” (Samuels 219); and, finally, altermodernism is broadly defined as “a new globalized perception” or art and creation based on “universalism” (Bourriaud).

itself. My contention is that a series of watershed historical events and socio-cultural trends through the last few decades of the century set the stage for a prevailing attitude yearning for unfiltered, unmediated expression and a more direct connection to something like “truth.” My analysis also spends a bit of time with each of a diverse set of cultural movements and moments that either actively took on or were given the moniker “the new sincerity”; none matched up exactly with the literary phenomenon, but all have their seeds in the same impulse. Chapters 2 through 4 are more conventionally fashioned, each focusing on the literary output of a single author (and, in most cases, focusing on one single text). Each chapter will focus on demonstrating how the texts guide and condition readers to interpret them through the lens of The New Sincerity, with careful attending to the text’s context, form, and overall narrative. This often comes through subtle gestures (of character, language, and intimate moments of the plot) as opposed to grand statements, so my method will often involve close reading of very small pieces of a much larger text to find these points.

Chapter 2 will begin to follow these trends by focusing on the work of David Foster Wallace, a writer whose influence on the study of The New Sincerity cannot be understated (see my discussion of Kelly’s essay on Wallace above, which has set the tone for discussions of The New Sincerity for years). I place this chapter before the others for two reasons. First, I must contend with the fact of Wallace’s ascendancy as the epitome of The New Sincerity in some corners of literary criticism. Unsurprisingly, I want to resituate Wallace’s texts—particularly his novel *Infinite Jest*—as just *one* literary example among many that provides

fertile material to watch The New Sincerity in action. This feeds into my second reason for placing this chapter before the others: analyzing Wallace's work and The New Sincerity is relatively uncomplicated, especially considering the layers added by the other two texts I will examine. Chapter 3 will work through the same basic process with the work of Junot Díaz, focusing on his short story collection *Drown*. With its multiple speakers, fractured narratives, and metafictional turns, it is not unlike Wallace's fiction in a number of ways on the surface. However, the stories' narrators have a very different relationship with power and a more complex experience with fragmentation as racialized Others in a prejudiced world—Wallace's texts have the privilege of avoiding this with their primarily white and straight characters, while Díaz's text confronts it head-on. My final chapter will bring The New Sincerity to bear on Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange*; I believe the reading that comes out here traces a clear development along the stretch of the entire dissertation: Yamashita's novel ups the complexity when it comes to negotiating the text's fragments and disruptive points, but retains the previous works' focus on connection and assemblage.

A brief example will demonstrate how this methodology will unfold over these chapters. As I have said, The New Sincerity is a mode of interpretation, and the literary texts that condition readers to reflect on the relationship between readers and texts, to build connections in the face of fragmentation and detachment, are—at least in part—welcoming to readers (although not in every respect—see my discussion of *Infinite Jest* in Chapter 1). My example is a text that reacts to similar conditions but guides readers *into* confusion and undecidability

instead of *away* from them. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is the epitome of a postmodern text in the way it confronts the fragmentation of the self, the arbitrary role of modern technology in determining the outlines of our bodies (in conjunction with structures of power), and the upending of traditional forms of knowledge and traditional institutions. The novel's narrator, Jack Gladney, faces a crisis after he's exposed to an "airborne toxic event," the result of a chemical spill that will one day kill him (135-136). Since the poison will take years to cause any damage, he appears fine on the outside, even though his insides are slowly deteriorating. The airborne toxins stand in for the diffuse nature of subjugating power: it's so pervasive and diffuse that it's difficult to identify a source, but the influence is always there, forcing Jack to drop any ambitions or dreams he has and into the roles that have been provided as his default (husband, father, professor). None of these go well: his wife has an affair, his children are defiant, and—even though he is the chair of Hitler Studies at his university—he's ignorant of German, "could not speak or read it, could not understand the spoken word or begin to put the simplest sentence on paper" (31). Frustrated by all of this, Jack attempts one dramatic gesture designed to demonstrate his autonomy: he sets out to kill the man having an affair with his wife. He shoots him, but in one of the novel's darkest comic moments, as Jack attempts to stage the scene like a suicide, the still-alive victim shoots Jack and they both have to rush to a hospital.

The text does not demand (or subtly suggest) that readers should feel anything resembling sympathy for Jack—his situation at all times is presented as ridiculous and comic, and the text sneers at any and all attempts he makes to take

control of his life. The final violent act is the worst of all: even with a gun in his hand, at point-blank range, he cannot finish the job. We can also see—although Jack misses this—that the gesture is misdirected: killing Willie (the adulterer), even if done right, doesn't suddenly set Jack's life back on track. He does get one chance, though, to *at least* open his eyes a bit and have an unmediated, straight conversation—but, like everything else, it goes over his head. In the hospital, Jack sees symbols and religious iconography that signify belief: “a neon cross over the entrance” (300), “black-habited, black-veiled” nuns assisting patients (301), “heavy rosaries” swinging from the nuns' belts (302), and “a picture on the wall of Jack Kennedy holding hands with Pope John XXIII in heaven” (301). Jack asks a catechismal question about the picture of heaven to the nun treating him, and she responds, “Do you think we are stupid?” (304). Jack is taken aback: “[You're] a nun. Nuns believe these things. When we see a nun, it cheers us up, it's cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes” (303). Jack's response is quite self-centered, but not the sort of self-affirming response that separates him as an individual: rather, he wants to feel comfortable and to have the nun confirm the way things are supposed to be. She refuses to do so: “[Non-believers] spend their lives believing that *we* still believe. It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here” (303, italics in original). She's offering him some tough love here by pulling up what he believes about belief by the roots, but it can also be seen as an opportunity to speak frankly and get to the bottom of something profound—but Jack doesn't take it. The nun begins to speak

to herself in German, some sort of prayer or meditation, and even though Jack has just been told, in no uncertain terms, that the nuns' beliefs are a sham, he says: "The odd thing is I found it beautiful" (305).

Even after being told the game is rigged, Jack feels comfort in this small prayer—not because he believes, but because he still somehow believes that the nun believes. The text presents him as a buffoon up until this bitter end. As I move through my chapters on other literary texts below, we will see works that do not pull back from these tough conversations and ideas—instead, they pull the readers along with them and condition them to confront these issues inside and outside the text. After those studies, my dissertation will conclude by looking beyond the scope of this project for the most fruitful places to apply The New Sincerity in the future, as well as raising some unanswerable questions that need further study. I believe, taken together, this dissertation offers a consistent picture of how The New Sincerity as a mode of interpretation operates—but I do not want it to be the final word. I am eager to track the expansion of this field in the future and to contribute to its development.



## Chapter 1 – What Is (Has) The New Sincerity (Been)?

My Introduction serves as a guide for situating The New Sincerity in important threads of intellectual history, including: the moral and theoretical landscape of reflections on sincerity (starting around the early modern period and extending to the mid-twentieth century); philosophical and critical theories from across the last century, especially concerning authenticity and subjectivity; and the American literary landscape of the same period, which includes postmodernism, minimalism, a return of realism, and other movements including the many *something*-modernisms. Defining the interpretative mode of The New Sincerity and carrying out readings informed by it are this dissertation's ultimate goals, and building out this critical/theoretical background is an important step, but there is another crucial piece of the puzzle to fit into place before moving forward: the socio-historic context of the rise of The New Sincerity at the end of the twentieth century. This chapter contends that the impulse behind The New Sincerity—the drive to connect, to make whole, to communicate clearly—pervaded American life during this period, especially in the 1990s. I will acknowledge and explore this landscape by detailing both the historical watershed moments and the smaller, less noticeable trends in American culture that, compounded together, produced a prevailing attitude that sought a new, fresh mode of reading in order to push back against the headwinds of detachment, fragmentation, and cynicism.

This chapter has its genesis in two places: first, the fact that the history of The New Sincerity outside of the intellectual realm largely remains unwritten.

This goes for both the gritty historical context of the period in which it arose and the background of the term itself: the phrase “the new sincerity” did not arise spontaneously in the realm of literary studies circa 2008; in fact, the term has either been taken on by or used to describe a number of cultural movements and moments in America since the 1980s. And second, no study on The New Sincerity in American literature has seriously considered at-length the deep-seated connections between the “other new sincerities” and what critics have begun to unfold in literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> My work here aims to rectify these gaps in the understanding of The New Sincerity as a historical phenomenon by taking two important steps, starting with a careful enumeration of the events and trends from the 1990s and trailing decades—in national and international politics, economics, demographics, and so on—that laid the groundwork for sincerity to return as an object of study and a prevailing cultural attitude. I will then spend time with each of a series of examples of “the new sincerity” in different spheres of American culture—music, cultural critique, trends in entertainment, popular literature, and philosophy—and carefully explicate how each represents an impulse similar to what we will see in literature. I believe that this approach will foreground my discussions of literary fiction in the remaining chapters by

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<sup>1</sup> In Adam Kelly’s seminal essay from 2010, a footnote mentions that “the new sincerity” as a term had been deployed before, in Jim Collins’ essay “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity”; however, Kelly concludes—without much investigation—that “there is little to link this genre of film to the kind of new sincerity I identify with the work of Wallace and his contemporaries” (136). It should be noted that in a follow-up essay from 2016—titled simply “The New Sincerity”—Kelly goes a bit further, acknowledging “a significant wave of cultural production that emerged from and responded to this period in American life” (198), but this is once again an aside and not a careful consideration of The New Sincerity’s cultural roots.

demonstrating that The New Sincerity grows out of a rich historical context—and that as similar forces change and evolve in the coming decades, The New Sincerity can adapt.

The decades leading up to the 1990s were transformative ones for the U.S. in a number of seismic ways. The late 1960s through the 1980s saw a drastic reimagining in the way American citizens viewed the inner workings of their government; the geopolitical landscape which had held sway since the end of World War II was reshuffled for the first time in generations; the idea/ideal of American exceptionalism was questioned like never before; and demographic shifts, the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and growing recognition of previously marginalized populations changed the perception of what it means to be “American.” These were more than just upendings of a status quo: they required a reorganization of accepted national identity, of the imagined community that held the country together, and of the U.S.’s place in the world. Within this decades-long stretch, there were a number of reactions to these new conditions that will look familiar: writing about Watergate specifically, Thomas Borstelmann writes that the era taught some new learned behaviors, like a reflex to “keep your guard up, don’t take things at face value, and assume ulterior motives on the part of people in charge. Above all, don’t be a sucker, and keep your distance” (10). He singles out postmodernism as a product of this period, calling it “a mood and a sensibility, a stance against the certainties of modern life,” and placing its growth as a “default setting” in the 1970s in opposition to “the now naïve-seeming quest of so many young people in the previous decade

for *authenticity and sincerity*” (10-11). The emphasis here is mine, and I’ve singled it out for obvious reasons: even though Borstelmann doesn’t reference Trilling or any of the thinkers on sincerity and authenticity that I covered in my Introduction, his work is keyed into those debates—and what’s more, it’s important to note that he believes such struggles are obsolete.

The point I want to make in my unfolding of the historical context of this study is that postmodernism and other cynical worldviews are not the only logical or potential reactions to the shifting foundations of American life in this period. The New Sincerity finds its historical roots here as well, especially in relation to: how a constant stream of revelations and scandals led to the growth of a desire to proactively search out the “truth”; how the teardown of absolutist language created a gap that could be filled by more nuanced and direct communication; and how the shifting of the country’s demographics provided opportunities for distinct new voices and viewpoints. It is worth noting that these very same conditions have been credited with the rise of a parallel movement that had very different goals in mind: neo-conservatism. The modern conservative movement in America, Borstelmann writes, rose as a rejection of the social, economic, and political restructuring of America: it called for “a return to an earlier era, one of remembered national strength” (13), even if it meant wiping out the gains made by marginalized groups during the same time —and in some circles, especially the Christian right, these gains (for women’s reproductive rights, modern divorce law, and LGBTQ+ rights) were actively fought against. Discussing The New Sincerity in such a context can be tricky, as a lackadaisical

approach could draw unintentional parallels between the two.<sup>2</sup> The primary difference to elucidate is that neo-conservatism recognizes the watershed moments in American history I will detail below as *mistakes* and *miscalculations*, while in light of The New Sincerity they are seen—even the worst of them—as opportunities to realign the default settings of American thought in more productive directions.

Watergate looms large as the paragon of the political scandals from the later decades of the twentieth century that realigned the American public's relationship with its government. The level of corruption involved certainly had been present in American politics since the beginning, but never before had it been so visible as during the buildup to Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. The "ultimate message embedded in Watergate," writes Borstelmann, "was simply not to trust government...Washington took on an aura of an 'inside the Beltway' place, sealed off from the genuine concerns and interests of average citizens outside" (45-46). But Watergate was simply the first in a series of revelatory scandals that showed the public how government officials operated when they thought no one was looking. In the same decade, the Church Committee revealed the U.S. intelligence community's complicity in the overthrow of democratically elected leaders (such as Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973) and covert plans to assassinate or neutralize many more (Livingston xix); such work being done in the public's name was unheard of up until that point. Events like these that

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Aaron Colton's piece from the summer of 2016 that uses Trilling's conception of sincerity to draw parallels—misguided ones, I believe—between then-candidate Donald Trump's distaste of "political correctness" and the pulling away from irony and obfuscation embodied by The New Sincerity.

eroded the public's trust in its institutions were not exclusive to the 1970s: the Iran-Contra affair during Regan's second term involved complex legal and technical issues that were difficult to explain to the public—Jenkins argues that it was only this complexity that saved Reagan's presidency (234)—and Bill Clinton's presidency was mired in controversy and accusations of backroom dealing from the first day he took office (see, in particular, the Whitewater scandal).

The U.S. involvement in Vietnam deserves mention in this conversation as well, as it speaks to a number of different shifts in American consciousness and attitude over the last few decades of the twentieth century. It had its own scandal of revelation with the publication of the Pentagon Papers, a series of classified documents leaked to *The New York Times* that were released beginning in 1971. The papers revealed that the Johnson administration had withheld facts and obfuscated others relating to the reasons behind the U.S. moves in Vietnam and the activities of the military and intelligence services there; this was doubly dubious in the way the administration lied to both the public and other branches of government (Apple). The failure of the U.S. to enact its agenda in Vietnam and its eventual abandonment of the region in 1975 led to the development of what historians call "the Vietnam Syndrome" (Livingston 114), another name for the general sense growing towards the end of the century that American exceptionalism was a myth that no longer held sway, that "the United States was perhaps not the unique, special, ever-victorious nation its citizens had tended to assume" (Borstelmann 27). The military failure in Vietnam was just one

manifestation of this: the economic difficulties overtaking the country around the same time—the OPEC embargo of 1973, high interest rates and inflation, an unsustainable housing market, and low consumer spending (Livingston 1-2)—also signaled that American capitalism was not immune to devastating shocks to its system that were felt in the wallets and pocketbooks of everyday Americans.

Perhaps paradoxically, the fall of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—the culmination of decades of tension between the world's great superpowers—contributed just as much to the worries about America's place in the world as it did to the discussion of it as a great victory for democracy. Jenkins writes, "In large measure, Ronald Reagan became president because a majority of Americans saw him as the candidate who would stand up to foreign enemies without surrender or compromise" (209). Reagan used clear-cut language to discuss America's greatest rival—"the evil empire"—and paid no mind to the growing paranoia over of domestic conspiracies (detailed above), focusing on the threats to America from international adversaries (209-210). He would frequently compare the threat of Russia and the U.S.S.R. to Nazism in an attempt to make clear that they were "not a rival ideology or a competing political force," but an intrinsic evil (210). The end of Soviet communism led many to ask: "What was America's mission in a world absent the 'evil empire'...What was to be done?" (Livingston 116). Richard Moser has connected the anxiety felt at this moment to America's Puritan tradition, with its "apocalyptic leanings" that imagined, as a nation whose fate was tied to its being blessed by God, America "would either suffer God's wrath for their sins or be

rewarded for their virtue” (42). As the 1990s dawned, the country had prevailed over the godless Soviets; why, then, was there continued domestic strife and uncertainty on the world stage? This incongruity and “What now?” attitude left many feeling rudderless in the face of the oncoming millennium.

One of the final parts of this discussion of how American attitudes and outlooks changed over the course of the final few decades of the last century has to do with a shift in the nation’s demographics and in the way the culture began to recognize previously marginalized groups and identities. On the latter, the 1960s onward saw incredible strides in Civil Rights for oppressed racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants, and the LBGTQ+ community.

Commentators were sure to be realistic about these advancements, though: Van Gosse writes that there still exists great “resentment” over the perceived *loss* of rights and privileges by the previously dominant white, straight, and male vision of America, and that the Civil Rights movement is still, in many ways, being enacted, and that proponents of these changes need to remain committed “no matter how mindlessly partisan and trivialized those struggles sometimes appear” (4-5). These shifts in both public policy and perception dealing with the acknowledgment and support of marginalized populations are the result of deliberate activism and choice; however, there is a coming change in the makeup of the American population that needs no such help moving along: the so-called “browning of America.” The U.S. has always been a majority-white country, but a noticeable shift in its demographics is imminent: in 2011, more non-white children were born than white children for the first time in the nation’s history



(Frey 1). Other changes are underway in the way communities are organized: in 1990, only five of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. had a “no majority” population—i.e., there was no one racial or ethnic group that made up more than 50% of its population—but twenty years later, in 2010, twenty-two of those 100 metro areas had a “no majority” population; current projections indicate that sometime around mid-century, there will be no racial majority in the U.S. as the white population drops below 50% (Frey 4-5). While the resentment that Gosse writes about certainly still exists<sup>3</sup>, the shifting demographics of the nation certainly also provide opportunities for the development of a new, more diverse understanding of what it means to be American.

The totality of this historical context has contributed to the rise of The New Sincerity in American literature and, more broadly, a renewed interest in sincerity throughout American culture as a whole. Some of the titles of the historical accounts I quote above emphasize the enormity of these shifts: Frey’s *Diversity Explosion*, Jenkins’ *Decade of Nightmares*, and Livingston’s *The World Turned Inside Out*; they stress outbursts and terror, confusion and uncertainty.

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<sup>3</sup> In his work on the shifting demographics of America, *Diversity Explosion*, William H. Frey writes optimistically that “if demography is truly destiny, then these fears of a more racially diverse nation will almost certainly dissipate” (2). Elsewhere in the book, he identifies Barack Obama’s two terms as president as a turning point in America’s history of race (213), and predicts that even national Republican candidates will attempt to make inroads to expanding minority communities—particularly the Hispanic community—as that demographic becomes more important to hold in the hopes of being elected (234). His book was published in 2014, about a year before Donald Trump launched his successful presidential campaign that fed off of this still-simmering resentment; Frey couldn’t have predicted this, but it does dampen the optimism of his predictions.

The explanation behind the title of the last of these helps shed light, I believe, on what exactly about this period helped plant the seeds for The New Sincerity. Livingston writes that the many examples of “intellectual revolution” from this period “complicated the ways we could perceive the relation between *our insides* and all of what we normally designate as *outside*” (xiii-xiv, emphasis mine). We have already seen in my Introduction that the history of sincerity as an intellectual idea (whether it is being treated as an aesthetic category, a moral imperative, or a philosophical quandary) regularly spins on a similar axis, trying to determine the appropriate way to present or express oneself— “inside” here referring to a sense of self, a genuine feeling, or something similar—to other individuals, our community, or institutions—the “outside.” The historical legacy of the waning decades of the twentieth century adds complications to these theoretical discussions: how is it possible to recognize sincere communication when the “truth” (as evidenced by Watergate, Vietnam, Iran-Contra, and so on) is constantly fungible? With the end of the existential threat of the Soviet Union and the absolutist language surrounding it (“evil empire,” “red menace”), where does one begin to reclaim the nuance of careful expression? And how should we reconcile the unstoppable demographic shifts in America’s diversity when the country’s traditions, institutions, and even language itself have a deep-seated connection to its racist roots? Borstelmann writes that in times of such upheaval, the growing sense of “uncertainty becomes productive—or not” (9). My contention is that The New Sincerity grew out of this complex series of historical moments as many Americans seized upon it as an opportunity to experiment

with modes of expression and interpretation that were not couched in detachment, irony, or other defense mechanisms that sprang up cynically against these watershed moments. In my following chapters I will detail how this played out in American literary fiction—how texts began to work in concert with readers to build a fresh conceptualization of the reading experience—but before I turn there, I would like to give some attention to the “other new sincerities” that co-existed in American culture during the 1980s and 1990s.

The earliest, broadest use of the term “the new sincerity”<sup>4</sup> comes from American music criticism; since the mid-1980s, music journalists have applied it to a diverse set of performers: from stars like John Cougar Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen, to singer-songwriters like Vic Chesnutt and Rufus Wainwright, to crooners like Tony Bennett, and to independent rock bands like The National and Bright Eyes<sup>5</sup>. This designation is often conferred without explanation, as if the new sincerity in American music is a well-worn genre like punk or grunge. Its origins are much more obscure, and can be traced back to the alternative music scene of Austin, Texas in the early-to-mid 1980s. Austin has long been known for its vibrant cultural community and for being a liberal bastion in the center of one

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<sup>4</sup> Working with so many disparate sources leads to a problem with formatting my central term; some uses of the phrase capitalize just “New” and “Sincerity,” while others use no capitalization at all. I have decided to render the subject of this dissertation—that is, the mode of reading focused on subjectivity and its construction—as “The New Sincerity” (capitalizing all three words). When speaking of just the *term* that has been used in many different ways, I will default to “the new sincerity” (since it does not always directly reference my main idea). However, if a particular example favors a different formatting (see, for example, Kaplan and Stevenson below), I will use that rendering while in direct engagement with the source.

<sup>5</sup> See, respectively, Baskett (1986), Moon (1995), Wilson (1998), Wells (1991), “The National” (2013), and Sanneh (2005).

of the most conservative states in the U.S. The city's individualistic spirit is embodied by a slogan adopted by a local independent business alliance: "Keep Austin Weird."<sup>6</sup>

Barry Shank's *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* studies the origins, shape, and influence of a musical scene from the 1980s known as the New Sincerity. The aesthetic of this scene clashed heavily with the trappings of other musical cliques, such as punk rock. Punk shows involved dressing up in what at the time was still considered "funny clothes," a costuming that united the performers and the audience as a "self-imposed minority"—a community that only its members can understand (123-124). Shank's study contains a number of interviews with musicians involved in the New Sincerity, and they often discuss a desire to be part of a signifying order—to be part of a community and to just be themselves—as a reason for loosely organizing into a new scene. Mike Hall, front man of the Wild Seeds, told Shank: "It was like, just going out to dance. And all of a sudden I became conscious of the scene. And then you know, wanting to go write, wanting to get my songs into a band, wanting to get the band into a scene" (120). One of Shank's other interviewees uses the words "normal" and "mundane" to describe the look and feel of the scene (151-152). While the extremely local nature of this scene stops us from drawing too many connections, I do believe that the artists' desire to communicate directly with their audience—without layers of artifice needed to mold an "exclusive" scene—is emblematic of the same impulse behind The New Sincerity in literature

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<sup>6</sup> See *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas* by Joshua Long (2010).

yearning to emphasize a connection between text and reader.

“The new sincerity” shed its hyper-local limits in the early 1990s—instead of only referring to *one* very specific musical scene in *one* American city, the term began to be used to discuss much broader aspects of American culture. One of the first widely published pieces to consider is the article “Wipe That Smirk Off Your Face: A Nice and Almost Wholly Irony-Free Guide to the New Sincerity,” written by Peter W. Kaplan and Peter Stevenson and published in *Esquire* magazine’s September 1991 issue. This was one of the first deep-dives into something called the New Sincerity in the popular press, and certainly would have been many readers’ first exposure to the term (the authors do not mention that the phrase had been used elsewhere). In the early pages of the piece, they proclaim: “There is a New Sincerity in the land... a new purported directness...a sudden cessation of attitude...a new emphasis on niceness...[a] determined trend toward clear exposition...[that is] frontal, scrubbed, never enigmatic or layered” (142). They see the New Sincerity as a rising cultural tide that will—if it doesn’t already—dominate American culture. This is made clear in the “info boxes” that sit in the article’s margins: each details which prominent people and things—including movie stars, politicians, musicians, magazines, popular athletes, and even drugs and shapes—are emblematic of the New Sincerity and which can be seen as remnants of what came before, the “Old Sincerity.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The use of these “info boxes” is a fascinating reflection of just what the authors are up to and how it connects to the theorizing in my Introduction: it demarcates a clear, undisputed line between the Old and New Sincerity, and it implies that their job as cultural critics is to *read* instances of the New Sincerity around them—while this isn’t a one-to-one match with my conception of The New

In a confusing twist, Kaplan and Stevenson use this term “Old Sincerity” to describe postmodernism. They define it as a “period in which subtext dominated” with a “kind of universal ironic attitude,” when instead of straightforward messaging and clear meaning, “a network of underground cultural agents passed each other notes day and night, debunking the culture by reciting its jingles, slogans, and symbols” (142). The authors see in their formulation of the Old Sincerity (remember: they mean “postmodernism”) an impenetrability of quickly-shifting surfaces and a sneering attitude towards the upending of traditional structures of knowledge—a culture where it is difficult to tell exactly what someone means (if they are expressing something that matters to them, or if it’s just language and phrases pastiched together with available materials). Kaplan and Stevenson view the New Sincerity as reversing this course. They contend that the rise of the New Sincerity is linked to the idea that “Life is serious business,” implying that there are some events that deserve reverence, reflection, and stern reevaluation, such as wars and economic downturns (the first Gulf War and the recessions of the early and late ‘80s were fresh in their minds). When people’s livelihoods and literal lives were hanging in the balance, they assert “[irony] was not only in bad taste but worse—not funny” (144). It’s not that humor was *never* appropriate—it’s that the New Sincerity rises out of a period in which understanding what *should* or *shouldn’t* be joked about was valued. This is reflected in the other claim worth noting: “The New Sincerity is Not Getting It” (144)—that is, being proud to be outside of and not in-tune with jokes and japes

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Sincerity (they still see it as a “quality” in a person or text), the act of reading is an important connection to draw.

at the expense of serious issues. This urge to abandon detachment and embrace connections also becomes a hallmark of The New Sincerity in American literature.

Kaplan and Stevenson’s essay was a key step in making the ideas behind The New Sincerity more visible, but certainly the most recognizable instance of the tensions brewing around sincerity early in the 1990s—that is, the one that reached the most American households—was the controversy surrounding NBC’s *The Tonight Show* between 1991 and 1993. Johnny Carson, who had hosted the program for thirty years, announced his retirement in 1991, and the network immediately began searching for a successor. Carson’s legacy was as a highly regarded arbiter of culture—someone who established trends, anointed new stars, and waded through the morass of everyday life to give the public a humorous spin—primarily known for his straight talk and friendliness.<sup>8</sup> A sense of loss surrounded his departure, and his reputation guaranteed that the selection of his successor would be controversial. The eventual decision—which saw Jay Leno become the host of *The Tonight Show* over David Letterman—sparked the most high-profile discussion around The New Sincerity in American cultural consciousness up until that point.

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<sup>8</sup> Carson’s retirement drew dozens of reminiscences, many of which demonstrate the warm feelings his public persona elicited in his viewership. See Zucco (1992) for his descriptions of Carson’s “comfortable, predictable and safe” views on society and culture; Roush (1992) for memories of the “midnight-hour comfort zone of grace and class and cloistered goodwill” that Carson developed; and Lunsford (1992) for a bit on the fear some had that Carson’s “polite, detached manner” would be replaced by a “hotter, more personal style” of commentary.

The debate between supporters of Leno and Letterman did involve issues of loyalty and inheritance—Letterman had for years hosted his own show following Carson’s, and for all intents and purposes he was the heir apparent<sup>9</sup>—but its heart had to do with the two hosts’ differing comedic styles. Phil Kloer’s assessment painted Leno as the “mild-mannered comic with the Dudley Do-Right face,” someone who could appeal to middle America as “a straightforward joke-teller who likes to rib politicians, fads and convenience stores”; as a fill-in for Carson over the years, he had cultivated a reputation as a “clean” comic, with no taste for taboo topics (nothing touching on sex or race), and, even when he decided to put someone down, “he does so with such a twinkle and lack of malice that he never seems mean” (Kloer). The parallels here with Carson’s reputation for affability and approachability are undeniable, and so are Leno’s clear bonafides as a *sincere* voice for late-night television—that is, a straightforward talker aiming to get his message across to as many important demographics as possible (we should never let it stray from our minds for too long that NBC’s decision had to do with potential ratings and revenue). Letterman’s approach, on the other hand, was unambiguously mired in self-referentiality and irony; his brand of comedy didn’t resonate with Carson’s style at all.

Eric Mink wrote that Letterman’s comedy originates from “an assumption of exclusivity”; in order to “get” Letterman’s appeal, you have to be “clever,

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<sup>9</sup> At least the heir apparent *at that moment*. For many years during the 1980s, Joan Rivers was the “permanent guest host” of *The Tonight Show*, until she began hosting her own late night show on the fledgling Fox network—she was banned from the NBC program for 28 years (Heigl). Below I discuss how expectations and coded prejudices made this field toxic for people of color, but we should not ignore how the same obstacles existed for women.



plugged in, hip”—his viewers see themselves as “not ordinary people but special people.” Whereas the target of Leno’s jokes were politicians or big corporations or the annoyances of everyday life, the most common material for Letterman’s monologues and skits was *the show itself* and the inside workings of show business; this self-referentiality makes late-night talk shows the joke, jibing viewers to remember that there was no deeper meaning behind the enterprise. Leno respected the institution, while Letterman approached it with ironic detachment. The hosts’ on-screen personas also play into their essential difference. Mink writes that with Leno, audiences get the feeling that he “is just what he seems to be”; he garners viewers’ attention for telling it like it is and for an apparent harmony between who he *is* and how he *appears* on screen. On the other hand, Mink believes that even Letterman’s biggest fans can never know “how much of the on-camera personality is put-on and how much is genuine,” making him “poorly suited” for *The Tonight Show*, since the show “operates on the conceit that a funny-but-real-people host puts celebrities so at ease that they let down their guard and reveal their true nature.” In other words: *The Tonight Show’s* conceit requires a host that’s committed to directness and frankness, someone who presents a harmony between their inner self and the face they show to the world so that they can inspire the same in their guests. Letterman didn’t fail to win the job because he wasn’t funny, but because his ironic detachment would severely alter *The Tonight Show’s* brand. Leno provided a sincere sense of self (reminiscent of Trilling’s conception) that was predictable and comfortable; Letterman, on the other hand, could be fragmented and erratic.



*Alternate covers for the September 1991 issue of Esquire*

The September 1991 issue of *Esquire*, which includes the piece by Kaplan and Stevenson discussed above, was published with two alternate covers. Both featured David Letterman’s headshot behind the headline, “Have a Nice Decade.” The difference lies in his facial expression: in one, he’s smiling; in the other, he’s scowling (pictured above). Although the words are the same on the two covers, Letterman’s face shifts the meaning: sarcastic on the left, sincere on the right. Placed side-by-side, they highlight what Letterman represented in the late night wars: a wildcard whose tendencies could not be trusted to get across an inclusive message that would please a wide audience. NBC chose the safer option, as Leno’s reputation—and the consistent, classically sincere presentation of his sense of self—painted him as a broad comic who could serve as a welcoming presence. NBC’s victory in the ultimate ratings war between the two hosts<sup>10</sup> validated the network’s decision to go with the man who came across as more sincere.

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<sup>10</sup> Letterman eventually launched *The Late Show* on CBS to directly compete with Leno. Letterman had the upper hand through 1994, but Leno took the lead in 1995 and held it for every year the two hosts were head-to-head. Letterman’s

There is one figure from the late-night television landscape of the 1990s that is barely mentioned in all of the above-quoted pieces on the period: *The Arsenio Hall Show* was a bona fide hit as the decade got underway, but it disappeared before it was half over.<sup>11</sup> Very few commentators were optimistic about his chances of rising to the top of the heap, and the fact that Hall was the only person of color in the late-night game is often cited as the reason for why he didn't have staying power. As the show began to become a recognizable part of American pop-culture, Itabari Njeri wondered whether Hall would become "a household word or the answer to a Trivial Pursuit question," especially given the fact that it was "the blackest...late-night party in town, the kind of party *many Americans have never been to*" (emphasis mine). That final, italicized phrase was what made Hall's show unique but also all-but guaranteed that he would end up on a Trivial Pursuit card. For the commentators quoted above who identified Jay Leno as the safe choice to run the *Tonight Show* for NBC, the unspoken footnote is that he was handpicked to feel welcoming to, to crack jokes for, and to come

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show briefly took over the top spot in 2008 when Conan O'Brien took over Leno's gig, but when Leno returned the next year he recaptured the pole position. In Letterman's final year, 2013, he was second to Leno's successor, Jimmy Fallon (Molla, Lightner, and Tovar).

<sup>11</sup> In 1990, while Carson was still the host of *The Tonight Show*, Hall's show actually was the #2 rated late-night program, ahead of Letterman's *Late Night* (Svetkey). By the time it was cancelled, Hall had fallen behind Leno and Letterman, and he also saw his ratings and affiliates picked-off by other offerings, such as the critically maligned *The Chevy Chase Show*—the cultural cache Hall had built up during the 1989-1993 period (perhaps none more visible than Bill Clinton's saxophone soloing during his successful presidential campaign) dropped off with his ratings, which were dipping by almost 25% per year when the show was cancelled for good (Lippman).

across as sincere to the largest and most important demographic groups, which are all white Americans.

Even commentators that wrote favorably about Hall and his show slipped into coded language that predicted how the “unsafe” nature of his program would be part of its undoing. For example, Rick Kogan—writing about the show in 1989—predicted that Hall would be “the late-night king of this century’s final decade,” due to his desire to create “a show for everyone, a television melting pot.” There are two points to pull out here: that Kogan gives Hall’s show a calling higher than simply being a revenue stream for a network, *and* that this purpose—epitomized by the loaded phrase “melting pot”—is about bridging divides in the service of some greater good. But his piece is loaded with racially coded language that presages what became untenable about Hall’s program rising to the very top. Kogan somehow *fails* to mention anywhere that Hall’s program is building its audience and reputation in a field completely dominated by established white figures, but he does work in two references to Hall’s “obvious sexuality” (noting it’s something hosts like Carson and Letterman *don’t* exude) and a “danger” that’s “not exactly Richard Pryor-esque, [but] is nevertheless compelling” (which could be a reference to Pryor’s evolution from a “clean” comic to something more blue, his descent into substance abuse, his history of domestic abuse—or all three). He ascribes Hall a “chameleonlike quality” that allows him to pass for “a graduate of Choate” one minute and for “some street corner hustler” the next—this is framed as a compliment, but the article’s subtext racializes Hall in a manner that suggests the “street corner hustler” is what the author sees as his *real* self. In the tradition

of Carson, Kogan expects hosts like Hall to present themselves consistently, to be sincere, to not constantly shift between different modes; he is unable to recognize Hall's code switching—talking like a college grad one minute and a street performer the next—as a sophisticated navigation of racial and social politics. Hall had the gargantuan task of switching between these different sides of himself and still meeting the expectations of the genre, while Letterman and Leno could simply stay on-brand at all times. When David Letterman began to produce *The Late Show* for CBS to take on Leno, CBS affiliates began to drop Hall in droves. *The Arsenio Hall Show* was cancelled in 1994.

Popular fiction also became a site that considered the growing importance of sincerity in the 1990s. In the example below, what's more telling than the interpretation and interrogation of the fiction itself is the backlash against it *and* the backlash *to that* backlash. Consider 1992's *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller and 1995's *The Horse Whisperer* by Nicholas Evans. These novels are usually dismissed as pulpy and disposable, with one critic describing them as “the world's longest greeting card[s]” in one review (Maslin “Love Comes Driving”) and “voluptuously soapy” in another (Maslin “Healing a Girl”). Playing off of “voluptuous,” many reviewers and commentators place a focus on the novels' unabashed embrace of sensuality, whether it's their “folksy romance” (Katz) or the “metaphors of romantic unity and sexual transcendence”

(Gerrard).<sup>12</sup> Despite their roaring success<sup>13</sup>, the books were lambasted by the literary press for their lack of depth and creativity.

What's of interest to us here is not the novels' "quaking" sexuality, as Gerrard describes it, but how their readers' defense of the books against dominant literary trends reflects the decade's interest with sincerity. Susan Chenery describes *The Horse Whisperer* as an "old-fashioned, wholesome, *non-literary* story" that has a "beginning and an end" (emphasis mine). The word "literary" being deployed as a slur here speaks to a fed-up-ness with the dominant postmodern mode of literature at the time. With the word "wholesome," Chenery certainly is describing the novel's values, but it also speaks to its resistance to deconstructions of form (i.e., that it's "whole" instead of "fragmented"). The text is unambiguous, with a clear compatibility between its message and what appears on the page—there's no contradiction or division in what it *means* and what it *says*: there's no irony here. The backlash against the critics of these texts is telling as well. Writing on the one-year anniversary of *The Bridges of Madison County* ascending to the top of the *New York Times* Best-Seller List, Sarah Lyall asked how a book so "derided"—she notes it was dismissed as "bodice-heaving" and "filled with 'quasi-mystical business'" by the *New York*

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<sup>12</sup> It was Katz first—followed soon after by Gerrard—who labeled these books as part of a genre called "the new sincerity." Katz doesn't define the term, but he suggests it has something to do with the books being "escapist" stories.

<sup>13</sup> *The Bridges of Madison County* spent 164 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller List and frequently appears on lists of "best-selling books of all time." Evans also received a £2-million advance for North American publishing rights before his novel was even complete. It's worth noting here that, even though Evans is British, I believe his work deserves recognition in a discussion of American culture for its subject matter and for the impact it had as a phenomenon in the American press.

*Times* upon publication—could continue to achieve such great success. Fans of the book (and the booksellers who dole out copies) provided her with an answer that echoes the then-popular critique of David Letterman described earlier in this chapter: “New York is filled with cultural snobs who just don't understand.” One book-store proprietor told Lyall:

“I've had a number of customers come in and say that it reminded them of their own lives, that they *once had an experience like that in which they had to make a decision like that...* There's more of this, perhaps, *than some people who sit in very sophisticated offices say*. Maybe they don't know everything about life.”

The emphasis in both spots here is mine, and is meant to highlight the ways in which readers of *The Bridges of Madison County* and *The Horse Whisperer* seek out validation for their lived experiences in these books. What provides meaning to these readers quoted here are the decisions they make in their own lives; the books offer a chance to feel connected in a way that the arbiters of culture who slam the texts—like the people in the “sophisticated offices”—have no say in. No matter one's opinion on the literary value of these works, it was clear that their success speaks to the decade's interest in sincerity.

The final outburst surrounding sincerity in the 1990s asked questions about the moral implications of a culture permeated by irony. One of the flashpoints around which this discussion gathered was Jedediah Purdy's book *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, published in

1999.<sup>14</sup> Its preface opens with this simple declarative sentence: “This book is a response to an ironic time” (xi). Purdy does not hesitate to establish a moral standing that values straightforward communication, single-entendre principles, and a rejection of irony as the key to building a vibrant, peaceful community and country. He describes his work as a “plea for the value of declaring hopes that we know to be fragile” (xi). Purdy’s purpose here reflects Trilling’s conception of sincerity as a moral imperative that has fallen out of favor; although Purdy doesn’t reference Trilling directly<sup>15</sup>, we can see the way his book fits into the tradition I outlined in my Introduction.

Purdy begins his attack on the ironic heart of American culture by singling out its ironist par excellence: Jerry Seinfeld, the star of the most popular half-hour comedy of the 1990s, *Seinfeld*. This program represented more than simply humor to Purdy; rather, it (and Seinfeld the man) was “irony incarnate” (9). He

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<sup>14</sup> Connecting this book to the phrase “The New Sincerity” led to an interesting discovery. In a profile piece for *The Guardian* from early 2000, Oliver Burkeman refers to a *New York Times* article that “labeled Purdy the harbinger of ‘The New Sincerity,’ a ‘fair-haired boy who not only professes decency but exudes it from every respectful pore.’” The piece he quotes is Marshall Sella’s 1999 feature “Against Irony” from *The New York Times Magazine* that profiled and interviewed Purdy. However, the phrase “The New Sincerity” does *not* appear in Sella’s piece. Burkeman has either misremembered Sella’s article (even though the rest of the quote is correct) or he has merged her thoughts with those of some other person. Either way, Purdy’s work and the conversation around it certainly deserve a place in a discussion of sincerity in the 1990s.

<sup>15</sup> There is an indirect reference: Purdy uses a quote from Oscar Wilde early in his book, and the bibliography tells us that he pulled the quote from Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*: “The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered” (Purdy 19; the quote appears on Trilling 118, although it is broken up over a few lines). This sort of indirect reference—quoting a writer who is quoting someone else, without going back to the original—feeds into one of the critiques of Purdy discussed below: his scholarly carelessness. The quote is from Wilde’s *Epigrams: Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*.



identifies the unspoken central tenant of irony as “a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech—especially earnest speech” (10), which *Seinfeld* depicts perfectly: the character Jerry famously has a new girlfriend in every episode, and it’s never addressed as something he hopes to change; each and every character acts solely on their own self-interests, often as they’re ostensibly working to help someone else; and *any* expression of heart-felt feelings is shrugged off as a weakness—or worse.

The third episode of *Seinfeld’s* ninth season, titled “The Serenity Now,” emphasizes this last point that Purdy returns to many times in his book: that irony has stunted the richness of American life primarily through how it views *all* sincere expression as cliché and to be rejected. In “The Serenity Now,” Jerry’s girlfriend admonishes him for never expressing any emotions—for example, he agrees to cancel plans to attend a New York Knicks game without arguing—and she asks that he try getting mad sometimes. When he does, *all* of Jerry’s emotions—happiness, sadness, grief, love—begin to flood out uncontrollably; he has to ask his friend Elaine, “What is this salty discharge?” when he cries for the first time in the show’s nine years, and responds by exclaiming: “This is horrible—I care!” The spell isn’t broken until Jerry encourages his best friend George to let *his* feelings out in the same way; the exchange takes place off screen, but we get George’s summation: “So, that’s it. All of my darkest fears, and everything I’m capable of. That’s me.” Jerry reacts with horror, and when George pleads, “I thought I could count on you for a little compassion,” Jerry replies: “I think you scared me straight.” The implication that being “straight”—normal, at

ease, in a “default” setting—in American culture in the 1990s means being totally detached from emotional expression and involvement is what Purdy’s text protests most directly.



*From Seinfeld, “The Serenity Now”: Jerry’s look of shock when he discovers that George has a complex and deep interior life. He says: “Well, good luck with all that.”*

Purdy became a minor phenomenon with his first book, which he wrote at just twenty-four years old—he became a frequent cultural commentator on NPR’s *Morning Edition*; he was the subject of a profile piece in *The New York Times Magazine* that called him “the spokesmodel for sincerity” (Sella); and he continues to write about American culture and society (he has since published three further books) and teaches law at Duke University. However, his work was met with some criticism. Purdy finds fault in our ironic age’s lack of depth, but Caleb Crain admonishes him for producing a work that lacks any real intellectual rigor, calling Purdy “photogenic, sonorous and out of his depth.” Crain describes the book as a collection of quotes that act as “fine touchstones” but do nothing to

create a coherent philosophy. He also identifies two moments where Purdy misquotes Henry David Thoreau, a thinker Purdy takes as a model of simplicity and directness. He also believes Purdy has misidentified his enemy: according to Crain, what Purdy calls “irony” can just as easily be labeled “sarcasm, cynicism, skepticism, narcissism, materialism and despair.” Todd Pruzan at *McSweeney’s* also took a swipe at Purdy’s depthlessness by imagining him drinking champagne in a limousine hot tub, driving down the Las Vegas Strip extolling, “I loooooove the common things...And I really mean it.” These critiques suggest that Purdy’s work is not intellectually rigorous or—at the very worst, considering its subject matter—performative, trying so hard to be sincere that it falls short (a pitfall that Trilling foresaw as the paradox at the heart of holding sincerity as a virtue). Purdy faded from the cultural consciousness when the fervor over his book died down, but his ideas and the reactions to them demonstrate how issues of sincerity can engender such debate, especially in a decade imbued with them from the beginning.

My explorations in this chapter—both into the historical context of The New Sincerity and into sites of sincerity in American culture before the turn of the century—are not meant to be exhaustive; there’s certainly more to be said about the swelling tide of sincerity in popular entertainment, criticism, moral philosophy, politics, and so on—however, a totalizing study of these would certainly stand on its own, and the focus of this dissertation is the workings of The New Sincerity in American literature. The context detailed in this section plays an important role in establishing the historical and cultural milieu where

this impulse began to carve out a place in a culture still dominated by postmodernism. As this dissertation moves into its remaining chapters, my goal is to unfold the complex ways readers brought a new perspective to literature during the 1990s—and how the texts themselves fostered a new sense of connection that's at the heart of The New Sincerity.

Chapter 2 – “The space between two heartbeats”: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and The New Sincerity

This chapter will carry out a reading of David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* in order to demonstrate The New Sincerity in action along a paradigm that includes contributions from both the reader and the text itself—as I detailed in my Introduction and Chapter 1, a diverse body of intellectual debates over the meaning of concepts such as “sincerity” and “authenticity” along with a historical and cultural context that emphasized obfuscation, fragmentation, and detachment primed readers during the 1990s to yearn for an interpretive mode that focused on the inverse: clarity, coherence, and connection. This central impulse—to abandon the tenets of movements like postmodernism and related critical theory and to focus on a sense of connection that feels alien to the contemporary literary landscape—is shared by the texts I will read in the following chapters. Both their form and content guide and condition the readers (a more cynical reading may even say *manipulate*) to connect with their characters and narratives in deep, meaningful ways. My reading of *Infinite Jest* will first consider the wide scope of the novel’s speculative world, carefully examining how the text confronts the reader with both its form (textual *and* physical) and the exaggerated, twisted, and often darkly comic version of American society it presents; these elements reflect the historic-cultural context of both the novel and the readers. This reading will push towards isolating the parts of the text that, in effect, “override” its threads of detachment and fragmentation: the personal, intimate narrative of one of its central characters,

Don Gately, whom the text drives readers to connect with through a fresh form of reading—The New Sincerity.

I have decided to focus on Wallace’s fiction in my first chapter on literature due to the role his work has played in heightening awareness of The New Sincerity as a literary phenomenon that deserves critical study. As discussed in my Introduction and referenced in Chapter 1, Adam Kelly’s first influential piece on The New Sincerity focused exclusively on Wallace, and discussions on Wallace’s relation to sincerity have only multiplied in the ensuing years.<sup>1</sup> I appreciate that this is a treacherous approach, since placing Wallace first in my discussion of fiction could imply a distinguished position for him. While I want to acknowledge—and already have—the primacy that has been placed on Wallace in previous studies, my goal here is to demonstrate the growth and diversity of The New Sincerity as an interpretative strategy, *not* to evaluate Wallace’s fiction (or the author himself) against some standard of sincerity, a distinction that clearly separates my work from what has come before. One final reason for this chapter’s placement has to do with an evolution of theme: the works discussed in the later chapters have to deal with layers of fragmentation and detachment (originating from oppression and injustice centered on race, gender, language,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that these discussions are *not* monolithic in their viewpoints—that is, unlike Kelly, not every critic sees Wallace as a paragon of sincerity. Wampole (2012) argued that the “sincerity” associated with Wallace has actually led to the “Deep Irony” of hipster culture. Fitzgerald (2012) disagreed with her scope, asserting that she discusses the attitude of one “sub-sub-sub-sub-culture” instead of “society’s cultural output” as a whole. Ashby and Carroll (2014) wrote that Wallace’s main thrust was that “[irony] is ruining our culture”; Warshauer (2014) argues that they’re not wrong, but that Wallace is now obsolete.

and more) that Wallace's texts do not address. Interrogating *Infinite Jest* as a way into The New Sincerity in American literature will provide in-roads to discussing these more complex works and recalibrate the place Wallace's work holds in the field.

Critical studies of Wallace's work have continuously struggled over where to identify the locus of meaning, the central point in the author/text/reader paradigm where a reading should focus. There has been quite a bit of scholarship that interests itself with the fate of the author himself and where "David Foster Wallace" (set off here to emphasize the conflation between the actual author and the idea or reputation of the author) fits into discussions of the literary canon. Lance Olsen's "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein," from 1993, began the long-running trope of examining how Wallace's work makes its case against celebrated authors or works; in this case, Olsen focuses on Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is referenced throughout Wallace's early work.<sup>2</sup> In the same journal issue where Olsen's piece appeared, James Rother's "Reading and Riding the Post-Scientific Wave: The Shorter Fiction of David Foster Wallace" aimed to situate Wallace in the constellation of American literary periodization, eventually deciding on the term "post-scientific" to describe the final wave of postmodernism that he occupies; this attempt to define where Wallace fits into

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the years, further examples include: LeClair's (1996) appraisal of Wallace's connection to his contemporaries, such as Richard Powers and William T. Vollmann; reviews from 1996 that compare Wallace to three postmodern giants: Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Williams Gaddis (see Birkets, Cryer, and Donahue); two pieces by Jacobs (2001 and 2007) that put Wallace in conversation with Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dostoevsky (respectively); Den Dulk's work on Wallace and Kierkegaard (2012); and Andersen's reconsideration of Wallace's self-professed "enemies": Nabokov, Pynchon, and Barth (2014).

accepted and newly burgeoning literary movements—especially those that were “post-*something*”<sup>3</sup>—has become a mainstay of his work’s critical reception.

I bring up these strands of critique surrounding Wallace’s work to further differentiate my project from them: I believe that attempting to place discussions about The New Sincerity in these sorts of paradigms—that is, in discussions of the canon or periodization—is more reductive than productive. I have defined The New Sincerity as a mode of interpretation originating from particular historical and cultural conditions, but I want to emphasize that inserting my work into a body of criticism that leans on the canon and discussion of literary periods does *not* mean that I am primarily interested in either canonization or periodization. “The New Sincerity” is not a new period in American literature, nor do I want to frame it as an opportunity to build a canon of “sincere” works. In my Introduction and Chapter 1, I acknowledged the debt The New Sincerity owes to movements such as postmodernism—while not purely reactionary to this dominant literary era, postmodernism nonetheless shaped readers’ expectations of what literature could and should do. The New Sincerity can be considered “of its time” in the ways it germinated in specific intellectual and historical moments and how the impulse behind it is dependent on those conditions. However, I do believe that it has broader applications, which will become more apparent after working through the literary examples in this and the following chapters.

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<sup>3</sup> For more recent examples, see Dubey’s “Post-Postmodern Realism?” (2011), McLaughlin’s “After the Revolution: US Postmodernism in the Twenty-First Century” (2012), and Grausam’s “Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism” (2013).



Wallace's career was well underway when *Infinite Jest* was published in 1996—although it was his first book to be released in the 1990s, he had already completed a novel and a short story collection.<sup>4</sup> Wallace seems to have begun writing the book in earnest around 1989, although bits and pieces of it were probably written much earlier.<sup>5</sup> The novel is widely known for its length, verbosity, complexity, and “scholarly” nature—that is, out of its 1,079 pages, the final ninety-eight are comprised entirely of endnotes that provide glosses, background, and side-stories to the main narrative. The publication of this book was when the “legend” of David Foster Wallace began to take hold: the novel's reception and reputation often precede its actual content<sup>6</sup>, and this fertile ground is where the mythologizing described above really took off<sup>7</sup>.

The novel's form is the first place where the text confronts readers, presenting them with textual *and* physical elements that highlight issues of

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<sup>4</sup> The story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair* was delayed by its publisher, Viking Penguin, due to concerns that its depiction of real-life celebrities could open the company up to lawsuits. One of the figures of central concern to the publisher was David Letterman, who plays a central part in the story “My Appearance” (for details, see Max 105-109).

<sup>5</sup> From his archival work, Stephen J. Burn relates in *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* that there is a two-page fragment from as early as 1986 entitled “Las Meniñas” (“The Infants”), which comprises a bit of one of the novel's earliest sections (xii).

<sup>6</sup> See Dave Eggers on the tenth anniversary of the novel's publication: “...make no mistake that *Infinite Jest* is something *other*. That is, it bears little resemblance to anything before it, and comparisons to anything since are desperate and hollow. It appeared in 1996, *sui generis*, very different from virtually anything before it. It defied categorization and thwarted efforts to take it apart and explain it” (145).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Wallace's work, and *Infinite Jest* in particular, are not universally praised. A rising tide of critique, especially recently, has delved deeply into its shortcomings, especially having to do with representation: see Gandert (2017) on the problem of whiteness in Wallace's work and pieces by McKinney (2015), Crispin (2017), and Coyle (2017) that explore the complicated and problematic issues around gender that pervade his writing.

detachment and fragmentation that the book's dizzying narratives will take on as well. The tome itself is massive, and before the spine is cracked it presents challenges: it weighs nearly two and a half pounds<sup>8</sup>, has oversized pages, and features type that spreads nearly to the edge of every page. Once reading of the actual text commences, it is frequently interrupted by endnotes; labeled "Notes and Errata" (983), there are 388 notes total and 981 pages in the main text, which averages out to an endnote every 2.5 pages. These necessitate unique reading strategies: with the constant flipping to the back of the hefty book, the usual recommendation is to use two bookmarks. These features all add up to create a reading experience that is both uncomfortable and non-immersive—*Infinite Jest* frequently reminds its readers that it is a physical object, breaking up the experience of becoming connected with and feeling a part of a fictional world. The actual content of the book—its plotting, characters, and style—continues this pattern.

Despite its reputation, the central plot of *Infinite Jest* is quite "manageable" if broken down into its component parts. There are hundreds of named characters, dozens of relationships and inter-relationships between them, and the novel bounces back-and-forth along its timeline, but there is an undeniable arc at its core that can be divided into three threads—each of these contributes to the novel's overtly confrontational relationship with its readers. First, the narrative revolves around an object sought by many characters: a video cartridge

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<sup>8</sup> This is according to the book's weight listed on Amazon.com—by comparison, Junot Díaz's *Drown*, which I will discuss in the next chapter, is listed at one-fifth the weight of *Infinite Jest* (8 ounces).

referred to most often as “the Entertainment,” sometimes as *samizdat* (to emphasize its underground nature), and rarely as *Infinite Jest*, the title given to it by its director and only known by a few. This video has the ability to completely capture the attention of anyone who views it, rendering them unable to tear themselves away—victims who are forcibly removed from viewing it never recover psychologically, and anyone left to their own devices will eventually die of starvation. Its first victim, watching alone in his apartment, “sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching... having now wet both his pants and the special recliner” (54)—as his wife and then a string of others try to come to his aid, they each glance at the TV and lose themselves as well, until there are eight frozen, catatonic people who want nothing except to stare at the screen. The novel is *about* dangerous art that tears people out of themselves while at the same time *being* a disruptive work that pulls the rug out from under readers’ expectations about what a text should look or feel like, or even how it should be physically handled. The novel’s second thread involves political instability and intrigue clearly related to this cartridge: set in a semi-recognizable near future, the novel’s world sees the United States, Canada, and Mexico realigned into a single political unit, the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.), currently helmed by President Johnny Gentle, a former show-business personality who’s a figurehead for the more conniving members of his administration. The government is working furiously to locate the Entertainment, since another group is very close to obtaining a copy: Les Assassins des Fauteuils

Rollents (A.F.R.), a Québécois separatist organization that plans to use it for their terroristic ends.

*Infinite Jest* spends a great deal of time describing how the arrangement of the political, social, economic, and cultural world of the novel differs from our own—however, as I will comment on below, it’s certainly not unrecognizable, and each of these elements further emphasizes the sense of detachment and fragmentation that readers feel outside of the text as well. The novel takes place in a speculative near future, but the exact year is never given in traditional Gregorian form; this is due to time’s *subsidization*: each year is denoted not with a number, but with the name of a product whose corporate owner has paid for sponsorship rights.<sup>9</sup> The bulk of the narrative takes place in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, but flashbacks to the Year of the Whopper and the Year of the Trial-Sized Dove Bar are common.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of this new time schema came about at the same time as the formation of O.N.A.N., a super state comprising the entirety of North America. Despite airs of equality, the U.S. still holds the most power and influence, embodied most clearly by the Great Concavity, a large portion of former northeastern U.S./southeastern Canadian

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<sup>9</sup> Along with naming rights, the sponsor gets to decorate one of America’s most famous landmarks to its liking: “[New York] harbor’s Liberty Island’s gigantic Lady has the sun for a crown and holds what looks like a huge photo album under one iron arm, and the other arm holds aloft a product. The product is changed each 1 Jan. by brave men with pitons and cranes” (367).

<sup>10</sup> Various estimates of the novel’s years have been made using in-text clues; both McClean (1995) and Burn (2012) posited 2009 as The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, which would make 2001 the last year of unsubsidized time; the novel doesn’t dwell on this, but the split between unsubsidized time and Subsidized Time is frequently used as a reference tool, just like BC/AD and BCE/CE.

territory that Canada has been tasked with administering; the Concavity is being used as a toxic waste dump, known for its (perhaps pseudo-mythical) enormous herds of hamsters (93) and the far more troubling “Feral Infants,” oversized human babies allegedly terrorizing citizens on the border after being mutated by toxic waste (991).

O.N.A.N. is headed, nominally, by the aforementioned Johnny Gentle, a former “lounge singer turned teenybopper throb turned B-movie mainstay...then in later public life a sterile-toupee-wearing promoter and entertainment-union bigwig” (381); in reality, his strings are being pulled behind the scenes by Rodney Tine, the architect of governmental reconfiguration known colloquially as “Rod the God” (92). Much of the novel’s political intrigue is provided in a series of expositional conversations between Hugh Steeply, an O.N.A.N. spy, and Rémy Marathe, an A.F.R. operative conducting espionage as a quadruple agent.<sup>11</sup> Marathe is, like all A.F.R. agents, confined to a wheelchair, a result of losing a game of chicken to a train that *all* A.F.R. agents must lose in order to be initiated—a lengthy endnote describe the process (1055-1062). The political and social paradigms in the novel—where citizens are no longer an integral part of the democratic process, where time and language have been infiltrated by corporate interests, and where an existential threat hovers just outside of the realm of possibility—reflects the anxieties of its post-Watergate, post-Cold-War,

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<sup>11</sup> As the text explains in an endnote, “the A.F.R....believed that Marathe was functioning as a kind of ‘triple agent’ or duplicitous ‘double agent,’” pretending to pass information on to O.N.A.N. in order to gain actionable intelligence; in fact, he eventually grew to being “only *pretending* to pretend to betray,” since he cared more about gaining help for his ill wife than for the goals of the A.F.R. (995).

and postmodern contexts. The text is so lengthy and dense with descriptions and forays into these parts of the world that it causes readers to feel bogged down, to feel alienated, and to feel detached from what's going on. However, I believe that it is conditioning readers to be on the lookout for narratives that can be read differently—from the start, ideas like connection, coherence, and even comfort are marginalized as odd and out-of-place, making them even more noticeable when they appear as central concerns of the novel's third narrative thread.

After the struggle for the Entertainment and the novel's political thriller aspects, the third narrative thread closely follows a pair of loosely connected protagonists who—for the most part—seem untouched by the geopolitical intrigue going on around them. The first is Hal Incandenza, a dual teenage prodigy in tennis and academics who—more importantly to the other threads mentioned above—happens to be the son of the deceased auteur behind the *Infinite Jest* cartridge. The other is Don Gately, a live-in counselor at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House<sup>12</sup>, a recovering opioid addict, and a former burglar. This split between two protagonists functions, at first, as another layer of the novel's fragmentation—but eventually turns into the driving force behind reading it with *The New Sincerity*. At the beginning of the text, it seems like Gately's only connection to the Incandenza family is proximity, since Ennet House sits at the bottom of the hill where Hal's tennis academy soars above the outskirts of Boston; however, as the novel progresses, Gately becomes more ensnared in the novel's wider ranging plots. The remainder of my reading of the

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<sup>12</sup> One of the novel's endnotes points out that the redundancy in the organization's name is “[sic]” (995).

novel will zero in on Gately's story as the narrative thread that upends the default reading of it as an overwhelmingly alienating, disagreeable text. The novel, through Gately's example of navigating its suffocating morass, guides readers to read for connection instead; it's an inviting rather than confrontational attitude, which will draw in readers who yearn—consciously or not—for something to relate to .

This is all especially apparent with how Gately's story ends, but before jumping into the novel's later pages, it's important to set the context for who Gately is, how he tangentially gets involved with the novel's broader narratives (but gets *directly* plugged into its central themes), and how he's forced to take profound steps that readers are meant to identify with. Gately is a larger-than-life figure in many ways, starting with his physicality: he was given the nickname "Big Indestructible Moron" in his adolescent years for his size, especially for his head, which became an asset when he played high school football (448). He has lived quite a full life before the novel even begins: by his late twenties, Gately had already been an addict for more than a decade, favoring alcohol and the opioid Demerol.<sup>13</sup> He worked towards sobriety at Ennet House (which shielded him from serious burglary charges, including one that inadvertently resulted in the death of a Québécois bureaucrat connected to the A.F.R.), and as the novel's main narrative opens, Gately has graduated to being a live-in counselor, helping other

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<sup>13</sup> Gately's status as an addict has been a staple of criticism of the novel since the 1990s, and some of my work below will interact with this idea directly. For a more general look at how the text interacts with addiction, see Curtis (2016), who focuses on the novel's double binds (like the AA mantra, "The truth will set you free, but not until it's done with you"); he believes the novel is more than *about* the double bind of addiction; it's an "enactment" of it (29).

residents work towards putting their lives back together—it's a cut-and-dry redemption arc to this point, but it doesn't end there: it's complicated by events outside of his control. One of his residents, Randy Lenz, works through his difficult withdrawals from cocaine by killing dogs for the thrill of it; towards the end of the novel, he kills a canine owned by a group of Canadians that follows him back to Ennet House for a confrontation. Gately stands up for his resident, and for his trouble he's shot in the shoulder, a wound that requires surgery and eventually becomes infected. About two-thirds of the novel's last 170 pages cover Gately's recovery at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where he takes visitors, thinks and dreams about his childhood and former life of crime, interacts with the hospital staff, and is visited by a ghost-like figure who calls himself a wraith. Throughout, Gately is in intense pain, since he refuses narcotic painkillers in light of his addictions; he's also unable to speak, due to being intubated. Gately's hospital stay twists on a three-pronged paradigm, as his abilities to judge time, to use language to communicate, and to discern reality from hallucinations are compromised. This intensely personal and intimate struggle through a fragmented, detached relationship with the world around him draws readers towards Gately in ways that the broader descriptions of the world do not.

Gately's sense of time in the hospital is presented as a problem of perception—very early in this section, we're told that what "Gately perceived as light-cycles and events all out of normal sequence was really [him] going in and out of consciousness" (809). There are very few clues provided by the text as to how much time has passed between the shooting and any of the events that take



place in the hospital; we don't have the same thrown off circadian rhythms as our protagonist, but the lack of context mimics that confusion. His initial annoyance at this lack of knowledge grows into frustration as time (although we don't know how much) marches on, especially because none of the people who walk in and out of the room—doctors, nurses, visitors, and so on—“think to tell Gately what day it is” (894). There are practical reasons for needing this information: Gately has a job that he's missing, he has Alcoholics Anonymous meetings he's not attending, and he's worried about the timeline of the possible police investigation into the shooting (since he may have been responsible—his memory is foggy—for injuries to or even the death of the assailants). Compounding this issue with time is that Gately has no ability to ask about it or about any other topic: when Tiny Ewell, one of Gately's residents, comes to visit, Gately tries to ask him a question and “finds to his horror that he can't make any sounds come out” (812). This “horror” returns many times when Gately tries and fails to communicate, coming sometimes as “hellish, horrid” (818), “suffocated,” and “terrifying” (831). Instead of words, he forms “pathetic little scared aspirated sounds” (823), he “mews” (825), and he tries to “blink at [visitors] in a kind of crude code” (821). This inability to communicate is figured more than once as a violation, as if Gately's been stripped of something that makes him human or a free-acting agent: he refers to his “raped throat” (813), an image that will return later in a different context. The reason for this is, of course, that Gately's been intubated: feeling around with his hands, he finds that he's “had like this like tube in his throat the whole time and hadn't even known it” (858). Gately's injuries have

taken him out of two systems (time and language) that provide order and stability through a relationship with others; this leaves him alone to try and solve the problem of how to deal with his pain and detachment.

Gately's inability to discern between reality and unreality—that is, either dreams or hallucinations—is figured as even more distressing than his issues with time and language. Wracked by the physical pain of the infection in his shoulder and the psychological torture of being unsure of what's going on beyond the walls of St. Elizabeth's, Gately becomes haunted by “[ghostish] figures...at the peripheries of his vision,” who “materialized...and then de-materialized” (809). Readers are led to believe—just as Gately believes—that at least some of these figures *actually* exists: nurses moving soundlessly through the halls, doctors coming in to read his charts, and visitors sitting at his bedside. Very early on, though, the seed of doubt gets planted: he refers to “a *probably* real Pat Montesian” (817, emphasis mine)—his supervisor at Ennet House—sitting by his bedside. The “probably” stands out, bringing everyone that appears in the room into question.<sup>14</sup> Some figures appear to be fantasies: one of his residents, Joelle van Dyne, with whom Gately is falling in love, shows him photo albums and tries to connect with him on an intimate level; however, she appears to understand that he'd like a pad of paper to try to communicate with, but since he never gets it, it seems like the visit may have been imagined (922).

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, one of the more dream-like figures—a young man in the bed next to Gately, who appears to have “either [a] square head or [a] box on his head” (917)—is certainly really there; he's a student from the tennis academy whose head became stuck in a computer monitor during a near-riot on campus.

Then there's the doctor whom Gately identifies as either "Indian or Pakistani"<sup>15</sup>: he enters the room at the worst possible time, just as Gately feels like he's about to have a breakthrough with his AA sponsor. The doctor "sweeps in, radiating brisk health and painless cheer," prodding Gately with, "And so you are now ready to let us provide the level of analgesia the trauma warrants...which these medications are boys doing a large man's duty here, yes? There has been reconsidering in light of the level? Yes?" (886). Gately questions the reality of the doctor's visit immediately; his entreaties for Gately to "[surrender] your courageous fear of dependence and let us do our profession, young sir" (888) are read as Gately's "Disease," his addiction, trying to convince him to give in to his desire for painkillers. To try and break the spell, he grabs the doctor's genitals—this snaps him out of his trance, confirming that it was a hallucination. Gately's status as an addict plays an important role in how he finds a way to carry on, to abide, in the face of the challenges in front of him. The readers of *Infinite Jest* will not all be addicts themselves, but we can recognize that the paradigm of addiction offers relief that's quite different from the connections at the heart of The New Sincerity. Gately's Disease is always out to manipulate him, to draw him back towards his substance, trying to convince him that it'll make him comfortable in a world that's difficult to bear—it's offering him an easy way out, a false chance. The way addiction offers a way to passively detach *from* detachment

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<sup>15</sup> Gately's casual racism (or, if we're being generous, his cultural insensitivity) comes up throughout this and other sections of the novel; he describes the doctor's nametag: "The name in gold piping on his white coat has a D and a K and a shitload of vowels" (885).

demonstrates how it's antithetical to the connections valued by The New Sincerity.

There is one visitor to Gately's bedside who encapsulates the dread he feels in light of all these uncertainties over time, language, and representation: a wraith. Appearing a few times at the edges of his vision until he finally "stays in one spot long enough for Gately to really check him out" (829), this ghost-like figure de-emphasizes his importance by calling himself "a plain old wraith, one without any sort of grudge or agenda, just a generic garden-variety wraith" (829); he's insisting that he's not there to haunt or torment Gately, but simply to hang around. Wraiths have a unique relationship to space and time: they move so quickly that it takes "incredible patience and fortitude for him (the wraith) to stay in one position long enough for Gately to really see him and interface with him" (830); it's suggested that he has to sit still for *months* in his conception of time simply for Gately to see him sitting there—to demonstrate his speed, the wraith disappears for mere seconds and returns with a cold can of Coca-Cola embossed with Chinese characters (832). The wraith also exceeds the constraints of language: he has "no out-loud voice of [his] own," but is able to communicate with the intubated Gately using his own "internal brain-voice," nearly psychically (831). Finally, the wraith *could*, of course, be a hallucinated or dreamed representation of one of Gately's inner desires or fears: he imagines it could be his "Sergeant at Arms, the Disease, exploiting the loose security of Gately's fever-addled mind" (like the Pakistani doctor), or, on the other hand, the wraith could

be a version of Gately's Higher Power, the God of His Understanding come to show him the way of enlightenment (833).<sup>16</sup>

The wraith is not simply a god or a devil, and it may not be a manifestation of addiction, but the path it offers is just as unsatisfying: it presents the solution to Gately's problems as coming from without, being given to him by an external force instead of originating from within. The wraith primarily represents this linguistically. Speaking to Gately through a seemingly telepathic link, the wraith frequently inserts words into Gately's consciousness that he has never heard before, words like "*ACCIACCATURA* and *ALEMBIC*, *LATRODECTUS MACTANS* and *NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT*, *CHIAROSCURO* and *PROPRIOCEPTION*" (832; the words inserted by the wraith are nearly always presented as capitalized and italicized to distinguish them from Gately's "own" words). Gately uses these terms appropriately—such as forms of the word "dextral" to describe the pain in his right shoulder—even though he's never heard them before, and while it surprises him at first, it eventually becomes comfortable.<sup>17</sup> He thinks that he "kind of liked it. The dialogue. The give-and-take. The way the wraith could seem

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<sup>16</sup> There's ample evidence that the wraith is the spirit of James Incandenza, Hal's father and the auteur behind the deady Entertainment so many characters are in pursuit of: it discusses its history with creating misunderstood films (836), while the elder Incandenza was an underground filmmaker known for his eccentricities; it describes its youngest son struggling with language late in its life (837), something we see Hal going through earlier in the novel; and it describes working on one last piece of film before its death, an entertainment "so bloody compelling" and "magically entertaining" that it would bring the viewer "out of himself" (839), which is of course *Infinite Jest*, the Entertainment.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs (2007) points out that a similar thing happens in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where characters will randomly think of words spoken by unrelated characters elsewhere in the text; Wallace reviewed Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky for *The Village Voice* in 1996, so teasing out this connection does make some sense.

to get inside him. The way he said Gately's best thoughts were really communiqués from the...dead" (923). The interactions Gately has with the wraith are dangerous in the way they threaten his autonomy, just as political forces throughout the novel's world try to homogenize language in an effort to coerce or dominate<sup>18</sup>. Gately *feels* this even if he doesn't *know* or express it consciously; he refers to the wraith's incursions into his brain as "lexical rape" (832), a violation of his control over his self. Gately tries to rationalize all of this: he recognizes that he's a metafictional narrator (still believing that the wraith is a fever dream), and begins to ponder the fact that he's pondering about the dream-ness vs. reality-ness of his experiences vis-à-vis the way his language has become infected by and altered by the dream he's dreaming, and all of these mental gymnastics get "so multilevelled and confusing that his eyes rolled back in his head," and he passes out (829-830).

The wraith's attempt to feed Gately the words needed to describe his situation feels too much like a violation of Gately's autonomy for him to reside in it, despite the fact that it's the *only* type of communication open to him in his current state. He can't get up and walk away, nor can he shut off a voice that's not

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<sup>18</sup> Avril Incandenza—mother of Hal and wife of the late Entertainment auteur—helped found the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts, an "academic PAC that watchdogged media-syntax and invited florid fish-lipped guys from the French Academy to come speak with trilled r's on prescriptive preservation...held marathon multireadings of e.g. Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language,' and whose Avril-chaired Tactical Phalanx (MGM's) was then (unsuccessfully, it turned out) court-fighting the new Gentle administration's Title-II/G-public-funded-library-phaseout-fat-trimming initiative" (288). Although never described in detail, the group was involved in what's known as "the M.I.T. language riots of B.S. 1997" (987). This slightly absurd resistance group helps highlight the politicization of language in the novel.

his yet is sounding inside his own head. The journey he must go on in this section of the novel adds this lexical intrusion on top of his pain, his addiction, and his anxieties about being found out and punished for his crimes—and what he comes up with is a form of abiding, repurposing the language of resisting addiction and withdrawal<sup>19</sup> to carve out a way forward to get through one more day of his pain. It's important to note that in this conception, *abiding* is a conscious choice, an action, and not simply “waiting” or “doing nothing.”<sup>20</sup> Gately works through this with three subtle actions: dwelling in the imprecise but personal nature of his language, embracing the power of his own experiences, and reconfiguring time to his own internal clock—each of these steps returns a bit more cohesiveness to Gately's experience of the world and his sense of self, providing him the agency he needs to *choose* to abide until his body can catch up and his recovery can take hold.

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<sup>19</sup> Studies of the rhetoric of addiction, compulsion, and recovery in many disparate parts of *Infinite Jest* have been around as long as the novel has. Some of the more recent works to address it: Harris (2008) argues that *Infinite Jest* provides a “clinical” investigation of addiction's role as a guiding metaphor for twenty-first-century Western culture; Freudenthal (2010) explores why, in a book so full of addicts and compulsives, Gately is the only one who seems to recover; and Miller (2016) considers the themes of both addiction and boredom in a religious context.

<sup>20</sup> As referenced above, the rhetoric at the heart of AA—“keep coming back,” “it just works,” “grow or go”—has long been connected to Wallace's personal discomfort with irony. See Goerlandt (2006) who calls Gately the “spokesperson” for other AA members in the book and not just uncomfortable with irony but “highly anti-ironic” (310). However, I align my thinking more with Doyle (2018), who recognizes that the text differentiates between the “suspension of rational thought” in AA that literally saves people's lives and the hard work of rationalization that must be undertaken to solve “wider, less easily diagnosed existential woes” (263). As I detail, I believe Gately is taking concrete steps to attempt to work through the latter, as the platitudes that have given him strength before aren't up to the task of getting him through the intense experience he's now living through.

The narrative voice in command throughout *Infinite Jest* tends to be corrective; there are over twenty examples of the voice interjecting “(sic)” — sometimes in the main text (11, 154, 223), but often as an endnote (1006, 1024, 1034)—in order to point out errors made by characters, institutions, and voices in the novel. For example, when Tiny Ewell is recounting Gately’s heroics on the night of the shooting, he uses an apparent Latin phrase, “*se offendendo*” (814); an endnote, however, tells us that Ewell probably meant “*se defendendo*,” a legal term referring to self-defense (1076). The only narrative “I” in the text belongs to Hal Incandenza, who we’re told was a “lexical prodigy” at ten years old (30)—and is the son of a Militant Grammarian—so it’s not surprising that he’ll jump in from time-to-time to correct others. The narrative voice does *not*, however, break into Gately’s narrative at the end of the book to correctively nudge the text, despite his many “mistakes.” In Gately’s mind, the word “prosfeces” stands in for “prosthesis” (823), “señorio” for “scenario” (826), “orchasm” for “orgasm” (863), and “tittymount” for “tantamount” (893). Many of these words are perhaps misheard, owing to their speakers’ accents or rushed style of speech (not surprisingly, many of them are spoken by doctors). But even some of Gately’s references inside of his head, particularly cultural references, stand uncorrected: he remembers the television program *Northern Exposure* as “*Exposed Northerners*” (834), waxes about the character “Nom” (actually “Norm”) from the TV show *Cheers* (834), and remembers the English class he failed in high school as his personal “Water Lou,” since it sunk his chances at a football career and changed the course of his life (905). This all happens concurrently with the



wraith inserting words into Gately's mind, words that he's never used before and has no sense of understanding for. The language is only imprecise on the surface for readers: for Gately, there is no disconnect between the meaning of "orchasm" and "orgasm," for instance, because Gately's misspelled word still points to the same experience or the same feeling, regardless of spelling. This is a subtle power move: Gately is taking the reins of the narrative for a small moment, insisting that *his* language has value because it's personal to *him*. A similar thing goes on throughout the section when it comes to Gately's personal experiences: he doesn't have any overarching beliefs to tide him over (earlier in the text, it's revealed that Gately has trouble with Alcoholics Anonymous' third step because "he was ashamed that he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power" [442]), so his own life story *becomes* that Higher Power, that explanation of meaning that can give his life purpose; more than once, he shifts into his memories in order to endure his greatest moments of pain (918, 926). The memories he flashes back to are of the great pains and troubles he's already endured—growing up with an abusive stepfather and alcoholic mother, working through recovery for his addictions—and they provide a spark for him to work on abiding in the present, not as a simple escape. When the scene in the hospital bed ends—as I explain below, when his fever spikes the staff pulls out his tubing to make sure they can keep him stable—it seems like a logical place to end the book, but it actually continues for another seven pages. Gately's pain at that moment is so severe that he flashes back to another time in his life, when he had the worst trip he ever had: after an associate tries to rip off a local gambling boss,

he and Gately are caught red-handed and some thugs torture and kill Gately's partner by purposely overdosing him, reviving him, and then overdosing him again; they're not ordered to kill Gately, but due to his complicity in the aftermath of the scheme, they inject him with some seriously dangerous drugs against his will (977-979). Gately retreats not into a pleasant memory but into the worst one he can think of—he survived that time, waking up on a beach on the final page of the novel (981), so he's bringing these memories to the surface not as self-flagellation but to remind himself that he can survive anything.

Gately's uncorrected linguistic tics and the embracing of his personal history as powerful begin to subtly build a sense of autonomy that will help him endure the worst of his pain. Gately still has to deal, however, with the problem of time: he doesn't know how much longer his suffering will last (or how long it has been going on), and that indeterminate gulf in front of him nearly pushes him to accept painkillers, to numb himself to the linguistic and representational crises that have come down upon him in his convalescence. He works through this by returning to his story, remembering another time when he was going through "some evil fucking personal detoxes," and how "building a wall" around each day of recovery was too difficult, and even doing it around every *second* felt unfathomable; in order to endure, in order to abide, Gately built a wall around a section of time even smaller than a second, into "the space between two heartbeats" (860); only when he got through one of those tiniest of gaps would he think about the next one, and that allowed him to endure. This self-discipline created a connection between Gately's experience of time—normally an

arbitrary, communal agreement taken for granted as true, akin to language—and the pulsing beat of his own body, an experience that made him feel more “excruciatingly alive” (860) than any other in his life, before or since.<sup>21</sup>

Gately “tries to imagine what kind of impossible leap it would take to live that way all the time, by choice, straight” (860), and although he can’t access that feeling in the moment—it would require looking *too* far ahead, past his recovery and way too many heartbeats hence—this is the kind of seed that a reading through *The New Sincerity* latches onto. As I outlined above, the text works very carefully to guide readers to this moment. It begins by setting up the novel as confrontational in both form and subject matter: it’s unwieldy to carry and read, and also expresses essential anxieties common in contemporary life (detachment, alienation, feeling unrepresented or exploited). The novel moves from the macrocosmic of its world—geopolitical maneuvering, shifting national borders, terroristic plots—to a more local view (various communities around Boston, including the tennis academy, the recovery house, AA groups), before finally settling, in its conclusion, on one person’s experience trying to navigate a difficult, stressful, and painful situation. It’s when the book drills down to this final level that its attitude and tone begin to change: readers have been conditioned to read Gately as unusual, strange, and out-of-place for the world of the text because he is so relatable. The text does not assume too much about its readers—it knows not

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<sup>21</sup> Henry (2015) has written about the role of epiphanies in *Infinite Jest*, and is particularly interested in its “false” epiphanies—the text provides a fake-out, he writes, at first leading us to believe Gately’s self-sacrifice in the face of the angry Canadians will lead him to understand something deeper about his relationships with others—in fact, this leads him to the realization that he has not overcome his violent tendencies (483).

everyone who picks up the book is going to be an addict, or struggling with immense pain like Gately, or *literally* cut off from time/language/reality like he is—but it *does* assume that they're in search of a story like Gately's, something to connect to, something to relate to. There are so few other characters that are relatable: our other protagonist Hal, is a teenage polymath and athletic superstar and an addict like Gately, but he often pushes blame for his shortcomings to others; the various government agents we meet are all exaggerated stereotypes, be they conniving backstabbers or blundering spies who can't get out of their own way; the other addicts in Gately's recovery house engender some sympathy, but so many of them have one exaggerated characteristic that they come off almost like cartoon characters. Gately is the only character whose inner life readers get to know in such depth and with such intimacy that they have the ability to reach across the page and feel a kinship with him, as the text does assume that they feel this sense of disconnect and fragmentation as well.

This congruence between these two moves—a text fostering a very specific type of reading of itself to connect a reader with it, and a reader coming to the text looking for a connection—that mode of reading is The New Sincerity. It's important to note a few things here: first, it would be folly to assume that all readers come to a text looking for the same sort of connection, that they all have the same goal for *using* the text in mind, and I don't predicate The New Sincerity on a specific purpose like this for that reason. What it does assume, based on the specific historic-cultural period that it arose out of in America, is that readers have absorbed at least some of the prevailing anxieties of the era: distrust of

authority, a dread of purposelessness, and a general feeling of fragmentation that grows out of the last few decades of the twentieth century. Without Gately's story, *Infinite Jest* would be a simple reenactment of those worries, and it would be a sluggish, morose narrative that lives up to the chore of actually handling and flipping through its pages. With it, it provides an opportunity—a word that has come up more than once in this dissertation so far—to foster a connection and identify a model that can work productively to overcome late-twentieth-century angst.

There's a danger here that I do want to address directly: of this reading of the novel sounding too much like a platitude: *all we need to do is connect, and we can overcome anything*. I believe that the text's complexity and its ambiguous ending help overcome this, as does its own direct engagement with the mysterious power of simple statements—as referenced in a footnote above, many characters in the text feel discomfort with the clichés that get bandied about AA meetings as powerful statements of truth (“Keep coming!”); that is, at first: Gately and so many others have grown from being skeptical of this entire process to concluding: “It just works, is all; end of story” (350). On the ambiguity of the ending, it's important to note that although Gately feels like he's gotten to a place where he can endure all pain and get through without submitting to his addiction, it's not always that easy: his fever spikes and the medical staff takes immediate action, and Gately “[feels] an upward movement deep inside” as his breathing tube is removed from his throat, a feeling “that was so personal and horrible he woke up” (974). He wasn't sleeping, so what he “woke up” from

wasn't a dream world, but a more productive state of being where his temporary isolation actually opens him up to a deeper understanding of his self and gives him a better opportunity to survive. Is he able to maintain after he's taken off life support and made to re-enter the rest of the world? How far can he take this living between two heartbeats—is it something he can extrapolate into a wider state of being after his convalescence ends? Readers aren't provided with answers to these questions, which can be as frustrating as any ambiguous ending—but it does, as I contend above, prevent the narrative and the connection it fosters between texts and readers from coming off as too trite. The open-ended conclusion functions as a challenge to wade into these under-explored regions of thought to find a bedrock for pulling together meaningful connections.

Before moving on, I do want to briefly identify some more avenues for research in Wallace's oeuvre that could produce productive discussions about The New Sincerity. It would be fascinating to take these ideas and use them to work through the last novel Wallace was writing in his life, *The Pale King*, which was published posthumously in 2011. The basic conceit of the book involves a diverse collection of employees at an IRS processing center in the Midwest and, as Michiko Kakutani describes in his early review, the novel “depicts an America so plagued by tedium, monotony and meaningless bureaucratic rules and regulations that its citizens are in danger of dying of boredom.” Ralph Clare's study of the novel asks probing questions about “what does it actually mean to write about boredom? What does Wallace mean by 'boredom'? How does Wallace's take on boredom fit into a larger literary and cultural context?” (428). A

study working with *The New Sincerity* and *The Pale King* would almost certainly take boredom as its starting point as well; pointedly, I would ask: how does *The Pale King* take the cultural and historical concerns of *Infinite Jest* and extend them to issues of labor and work towards the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century? There certainly should be a wealth of work to do with how the characters in the text *deal* with the boredom and monotony of their jobs: do they find a productive way through it, like Gately's abiding? *The Pale King* also multiplies the dual-protagonist feature from *Infinite Jest*; although there's a clear narrator (named David Wallace, who introduces himself by saying, "Author here" [66]), there are numerous candidates for the central protagonist, and trying to tease out whom the text conditions us to read as relatable will take some careful analysis. *The Pale King* stands as an important document for the study of *any* theme or issue in Wallace's fiction, since it is, of course, the last book he worked on before his death.

Departing a bit from what this chapter has covered so far, I would like to suggest that reading Wallace's *non-fiction* could also be an important step in carving out his work's relationship to *The New Sincerity*. This runs the risk of giving the author a little too much credit and agency: I am *not* suggesting that he pioneered or created this form of reading. However, I do believe that some of his own reading strategies, as demonstrated in his non-fiction, show an affinity for this approach (the impulse to seek out connections, to move away from fragmentation and detachment to something more stable). Consider his essay "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," which was originally published in *Rolling*

*Stone* in October 2001 and offers an account of the days following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks before circling back to memories of the morning of 9/11. The opening of the essay is a snark-filled reflection on why so many American flags popped up in front yards after the attacks, but it becomes something else entirely when the text shifts its attention to the morning of 9/11. Wallace watched the events unfold on television in the company of a few elderly women from his church at the house of a woman named Mrs. Thompson, and as President Bush addresses the nation about the attacks, he begins to wonder about the motives behind the messages on the screen:

[Maybe] it's a little odd that *all three* network anchors are in shirtsleeves...or that the constant rerunning of horrific footage might not be just in case some viewers were only now tuning in and hadn't seen it yet...None of the ladies seem to notice...that some of [Bush's] lines sound almost plagiaristically identical to those uttered by Bruce Willis (as a right-wing wacko, recall) in *The Siege* a couple of years back. Nor that at least some of the sheer weirdness of watching the Horror unfold has been how closely various shots and scenes have mirrored the plots of everything from *Die Hard I-III* to *Air Force One*. Nobody's near hip enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before. (139-140)

This passage shows Wallace reading: he is keyed in to the ways in which the political speeches surrounding the day are re-hashes of clichés that are just as much at home in mid-level Hollywood blockbusters. He knows that the



President's words are filtered through innumerable layers of speechwriters and corporate interests and diplomatic juggling—that the President's words and actions are not his own, but determined by the complex interplay of discourse and power. He hopes against hope that President Bush is “not just some soulless golem or nexus of corporate interests dressed up in a suit but a statesman of courage and probity” (140).

And then he looks around and realizes that the assembled crowd in Mrs. Thompson's house is praying. He's reading their actions, too, but instead of turning his critical eye towards them (the futility of prayer, the absurdity of belief, and so on), he pauses—there's an ellipsis between the line about Bush the golem and what comes next—and concludes: “...it's good, this is good to pray this way” (140). He's reacting not to the content of their prayers, but to the gesture itself, that their impulse is to draw closer together and find ways to connect rather than to approach the discourse around the event with ironic detachment. In the face of what the text calls again and again “the Horror” (131 and many following pages), the women are able to insist on the control they can take in the situation—they can disassociate from the ever-present knowledge that their actions are essentially useless in the face of international geopolitics by choosing to just *do* something, as a group, that makes them feel vital and alive.

This resembles the abiding that marks Gately as outside the norm and worth reading closely with *The New Sincerity*. So much of Wallace's non-fiction approaches similar situations—although none as shattering as 9/11—in which, as he puts it in the speech eventually published as *This Is Water*, one must

“exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think” (53) and “[be] conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to” (54). These phrases reflect the type of reading essential for The New Sincerity: able to wade through and understand the complexity and noise of a text like *Infinite Jest*, but also to be cognizant that the quiet moments—intimate moments, like Gately’s choice to live between his heartbeats—are the ones that deserve the closest attention.

Chapter 3 – “I knew then what it must have been like”: The New Sincerity and  
Empathy in Junot Díaz’s *Drown*

Junot Díaz’s fiction has not yet received much critical attention in relation to The New Sincerity—in fact, no author’s work has received as much attention as David Foster Wallace, whose place in the field is exalted, sometimes to an exaggerated degree (see my discussion of Wallace’s work and its reception in Chapter 2 for more details). There have been a few mentions: in Adam Kelly’s 2016 essay on The New Sincerity, Díaz comes up briefly, with Kelly citing the way he uses the history of the Dominican Republic as a parallel to the trauma his characters feel (198). Iannis Williams also mentions Díaz in his discussion of The New Sincerity, but this is in a laundry list of authors who are classified under the term “New Sincerity,” with no further explanation about what makes Díaz’s work stand out or how it should be approached. This chapter will contend that using The New Sincerity to interpret Díaz’s fiction opens up productive critical space in more than one capacity: first, approaching Díaz’s work in a way similar to Wallace’s helps demonstrate that The New Sincerity was enmeshed with American literature in the 1990s—no other extensive study has gone into depth between more than one author’s work, and this and the following chapter aim to fill that gap; and second, working with Díaz’s fictions helps diversify the body of The New Sincerity by looking at texts where the fragmentation and detachment dramatized within are distinctly related to issues of race, ethnicity, class, and—in some instances—sexuality. In *Infinite Jest*, Gately is very much presented as an “everyman” (coming from humble beginnings, smart and clever but not *too*

educated, with personal failings that he has paid his debt for, able to blend in), just another regular guy who is subject to the general forces of anxiety and the stressors placed on all Americans at the end of the twentieth century. This is an oversimplification of Gately's character, but this general way he's presented does begin to demonstrate how short-sighted seeing him as a "prime example" of a late-twentieth-century subject is, as his whiteness allows readers to slot him in as "normal" while the same sort of strategy would label Díaz's characters as "Other." A careful reading of Díaz's fiction opens up *The New Sincerity* as an interpretive strategy that can be brought to bear on a diverse body of texts that's truly representative of the American experience at the turn of the century.

Primarily, I will carry out a reading of Díaz's first book, the short-story collection *Drown*, a text that can be opened up with *The New Sincerity* along a similar paradigm that we saw with *Infinite Jest*, but with a different focus: as we have seen, the text anticipates that readers come to their reading with a desire to pick up the pieces and fragments—of stories, symbols, plotting, style, or what have you—and construct a coherent message, a connection, or a theme. *Drown* is much more focused on fragmentation—in its style, language, organization, and subject matter—than it is with issues of connection as *Infinite Jest* was, but it grows from the same impulse. The book's style and tone are much more reserved than the other texts examined in this dissertation; everything—from its unadorned language, to its sentences' terseness, to its brutal directness when describing violence and abuse—comes across with a bluntness that seems to lack the layered deferring of meaning that is found in the other texts I analyze. This

quality, however, is one strategy the text uses to guide its readers along. My analysis will carefully work through the three stories from the collection that best illustrate these qualities (with reference to a few others) in order to trace the methods the text uses to push readers to arrange the book's disparate pieces into a coherent whole, with special attention to how issues of racial oppression and the changing demographics of the U.S. are integrated into this discussion.

Díaz's work has a complex popular and critical reception history. Since the success of his 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he has developed a place in the American literary consciousness as a touchstone or literary entry point for discussing issues of concern for Latin-American communities in the United States, even being asked on multiple occasions to comment on the impact of Donald Trump's candidacy (and later presidency).<sup>1</sup> His work's critical history includes many disparate threads, but the most prominent concern is its representation of the Dominican-American experience; the ways in which it struggles with issues of masculinity; and its blend of genre fiction, high literary ambitions, and linguistic uniqueness.<sup>2</sup> Since nearly every one of his works dramatizes narratives of immigration, diaspora, assimilation, and oppression, it has long been described as postcolonial; Hana Riaz has described Díaz's work as "a plea to...set the agenda for our belonging in the cultural fabric of this nation

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<sup>1</sup> See an interview with García (2016) and a piece Díaz contributed to *The New Yorker's* "Aftermath" series, published days after the 2016 election.

<sup>2</sup> I will touch on criticism dealing with all of these themes below, but for a broader sense of how these have been covered, see Bautisa (2009), Kondali (2012), and Lazendorfer (2013) on Díaz's use of the Dominican-American experience and D.R. history; Frydman (2007), Ramirez (2013), and Horn (2104) on masculinity; and Lopez-Calvo (2009), Pifano (2014), and Manzananas-Calvo (2016) on Díaz's intertextuality and linguistic prowess.

where race, class, gender and imperialism remain key constructs of our experiences.”<sup>3</sup> This dissertation has carefully described the complex connections between The New Sincerity and the postmodern, but has only very briefly touched on other strands of critical thought like postcolonialism. With this chapter I wish to make those connections much more explicit. Although *Drown* has aesthetic qualities that undoubtedly could be described as postmodern, the experiences of the characters that we follow throughout—all either immigrants or the children of immigrants—are directed by endless instances of epistemic violence, barriers put in place due to cultural and linguistic differences, denials of access to basic services and rights through a continued pattern of marginalization, increased scrutiny and violent crackdowns by law enforcement, and a reinforcement of difference through state-sponsored education. I have intimated elsewhere that The New Sincerity is an adaptable approach to interpreting literature that can be applied to all sorts of texts, and by focusing on Díaz’s work I hope to open discussions for its application to postcolonialism and beyond.

Calling *Drown* a “short story collection” belies the text’s complexity; the book is much more than a compendium of disparate narratives. Its ten sections, each of which *could* function as a standalone piece, are interconnected in innumerable ways, beginning with their content but extending to their reflections on race and power. The one thread common to all of the stories is that they are

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<sup>3</sup> See also Gonzalez (2016) who argues that Díaz’s texts yearn for a “non-emancipatory” form of decolonization and Saldívar (2016) who believes that Díaz’s work offers radical new readings of gender and sexuality in postcolonial literature.

centered on communities with their roots in the Dominican Republic; three of the stories take place entirely on the island, while six of them focus on Dominican characters (some born in the D.R., some Dominican-American) in the U.S., and one story—the final one, “Negocios”—that jumps between the two countries. The timeframe of the stories stretches from at least the late 1970s until the book’s present day, which is likely the 1990s; this firmly plants the narrative in the heart of the Dominican diaspora, a large-scale migration event sparked by political and economic unrest in the Dominican Republic in the middle of the twentieth century. The number of Dominicans living in the U.S. swelled from 12,000 in 1960 to 350,000 in 1990 (an increase of nearly 3000%); many of these migrants followed the same paths as characters in *Drown*, arriving in the Miami area (which has the second-largest Dominican population in the U.S.) and eventually settling in the New York/New Jersey area, which has nearly ten times the Dominican population of south Florida (Nwosu and Batalova). The harsh realities many immigrants faced as newly-minted U.S. residents—including cyclical poverty, governmental neglect, and racist/xenophobic attitudes and institutions—are presented plainly throughout the book, and make up a substantial portion of the oppressive systems that its characters struggle against.

We are guided through a number of stories from the perspective of Yunior (né Ramón de las Casas, after his father), whose family immigrates to the United States from the Dominican Republic when he is a young boy. Yunior’s stories are presented in more or less chronological order, beginning with the first, “Ysrael,” throughout which Yunior and his brother think about and speak of their father—

Ramón Sr., also called Papi—who is in New York City. The next story, “Fiesta, 1980,” occurs *after* Yunior, his brother, his sister, and their mother immigrate to the U.S. to join Papi. “Aguantando” flashes back to the family’s time on the island, highlighting the struggles they went through when Papi was in America and had seemingly abandoned his family. “Negocios” wraps up the family’s history by circling back and providing Papi’s immigration story, when he came to the U.S. without his family. Yunior’s stories provide the book with its backbone, but they also emphasize its fragmented and disjointed nature: the stories shift back and forth in time and place, often without warning, disorienting readers. The narrator’s voice is also inconsistent: Yunior sometimes comes across as juvenile and inexperienced (see my discussion of “Ysrael” below), while at other times he will narrate even older events with care and a mature perspective. The state of the other narrators is even more troublesome than Yunior’s shifting approach.

Of the remaining six stories, only one features a named narrator: “Aurora” is told from the point of view of a young man named Lucero. The five stories left over are told by narrators who are never identified by name. “No Face” is about Ysrael, a young boy whom Yunior meets in the collection’s first story. “Drown” is told by a young man whose family history and home life are quite similar to Yunior’s, but we can’t be sure it’s him. In a similar vein, “Edison, New Jersey,” which primarily follows a young man whose life has devolved into the monotony of work and not much else, connects to the other stories with its reflections on the Dominican community in New York and with its narrator’s listlessness. “Boyfriend” and “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” feature



the most disembodied of the narrative voices in the text—we learn very little about the speakers, as they’re mostly concerned with describing other people.

A continuum exists among critics about how to identify the unnamed narrators: it ranges from insisting that the “core four” stories (“Ysrael,” “Fiesta, 1980,” “Aguantando,” and “Negocios”) are the only ones that Yuniór narrates (Gonzalez 2015) all the way to referring to every narrator as “Yuniór” without providing justification (Irizarry)—off the spectrum, there is at least one critic who believes there are *multiple* Yuniórs narrating the stories, perhaps as many as three (Saez). I align myself most closely with John Riofrio’s conclusion that some of the unnamed narrators *could* certainly be the character named Yuniór we see in other stories, but for all intents and purposes that distinction does not matter; he posits that the “thematic cohesion” between the stories is key, no matter who’s telling them (23).

I will lean on Riofrio’s appeal to “thematic cohesion” in my examination of *Drown* and *The New Sincerity*. The presence of multiple narrators does present an obstacle when discussing the particularities of each of their stories, and I will avoid making broad statements about anything that *all* of the stories do or feature—however, in the sense that the text offers readers fragments and gives the tools to reassemble them, each story has something to add, no matter if the speakers are different. I will primarily focus on three stories (“Ysrael,” its opening story; “Drown,” the titular story that comes in the middle; and “Negocios,” its final story) in an effort to identify the subtle moves a reading with *The New Sincerity*

is drawn towards, and to theorize how the text conditions its readers to work with the stories in fascinating ways.

“Ysrael,” the story that opens *Drown*, is the earliest of Yunior’s stories, chronologically. He and his family (save his father) have yet to immigrate to the U.S., and the bulk of the narrative follows him and his older brother, Rafa, as they travel the countryside in the Dominican Republic. That description doesn’t give the story its due when it comes to the darkness that it exudes: it begins ominously, with Rafa tilting his head to listen to some invisible message (at least, this is what Yunior perceives with his nine-year-old mind) and saying of a local boy named Ysrael: “We should pay that kid a visit” (3). Although this story doesn’t have the sweep or scope of the other stories I will examine (it takes place over the course of one afternoon and is, basically, just an interaction between a couple of kids), it is indicative of how the stories present fragments and expect readers to piece them together. The fragments in this story have to do with what’s behind the whole endeavor: why do Rafa and Yunior seek out Ysrael? Why does the meeting devolve into such brutal violence? What was the use of the trip in the end? On the surface, the answers here may come across as unsatisfying, but in light of the rest of the collection, it speaks to the work’s concern with injustice and can function as an entry point for readers who come to the text worried about the arbitrary nature of oppression.

Ysrael, a young boy mauled by a pig in his infancy and left with a hideously scarred face, is subjected to the constant spread of rumor, vicious forms of abuse, and outright ostracization. Around the rural town of Ocoa he is as much of a

folktale as he is a person: “He was something to talk about,” Yunior tells us, “a name that set the kids to screaming, worse than el Cuco or la Vieja Calusa” (7)—these comparisons to monsters and ghouls sets Ysrael up as an outsider, a figure who does not fit inside the normal order of things. It’s worth noting that Yunior and Rafa are far from being locals in Ocoa—we’re told that they are “shipped” there to live with their aunt and uncle every summer after school lets out, since their mother (currently raising them alone) does not have the “time or energy” to look after them (3). They are given the chance to fit in, to shed their otherness, by joining in the abuse of Ysrael—but the fact that their *inclusion* hangs by a thread based on how they *exclude* him keeps readers on the watch for arbitrary and thin lines that masquerade as the rule of law in the text. We’re treated to a flashback that shows us a time when Yunior threw a rock at Ysrael; when it struck him, he was treated to a chorus of approval by the neighborhood kids: “You did it! You fucking did it!” (14-15). Yunior and his brother are able to shed their outsider status—at least for now—by adopting cruelty as their dominant attitude towards the outcast boy of Ocoa.<sup>4</sup>

This story is infected with toxic masculinity, and it exacerbates the abuse directed at characters in the story, including Ysrael: Rafa’s attitude towards his boyhood rivals and any girls he sets out to “conquer” is one of dominance and

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<sup>4</sup> Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz takes this reading a bit further in her study of *Drown* as a Dominican-American auto-ethnography—she identifies this as “the terrible cruelty of socially disadvantaged children towards others who have fared even worse than they have” (219); in this reading, Yunior and Rafa don’t just join the anti-Ysrael mob to be accepted, but to turn attention away from their own difficult situations—namely, their mother who is struggling to care and provide for them and their father who consistently breaks promises about when they will be able to follow him to the imagined prosperity of the U.S.

abuse. He spends his days in the countryside having casual sex with local young women, and Yunior has to listen to his brother's stories "about tetas and chochas and leche"; this sexual slang doesn't mean much to Yunior, as he knows he "was too young to understand most of what he said," and yet "[he] listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future" (6).<sup>5</sup> Even before Yunior's own sexual awakening, he's learning to take a position that subjugates those who are weaker or meant to be used—Rafa might say—as sexual objects. A similar thing is going on with the boys' journey to go see Ysrael: Yunior "kept expecting Rafa to send [him] home, and the longer he went without speaking, the more excited [he] became" (9); Yunior feels like he's being initiated, that he will finally get to experience something grown-up—when they arrive and approach Ysrael for the first time, Rafa hands Yunior a knife (14), revealing that the excursion has malicious ends.

When Yunior and Rafa finally lay eyes on Ysrael, he's figured as different in a number of ways. He's "about a foot bigger" than the other boys, and Yunior wonders if he's being fed "that supergrain the farmers around Ocoa were giving their stock" (15). The mask does block what the boys assume to be the most

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<sup>5</sup> A common thread among critical studies of Díaz's work is a focus on how masculinity is shaped for the generation of young Dominican men embodied by Yunior and Rafa. John Riofrio investigates how the historical realities of the mid-to-late-twentieth-century Dominican experience—with many fathers traveling to America to make a way for or to support their families—left boys like Rafa without active masculine role models. They are then forced to act out scripts of masculinity that are exaggerated versions of what they remember of their fathers, creating a hyper-machismo that was already a dangerous example. The above passage from "Ysrael" shows the next level, where boys are learning dominance and violence as the defining feature of masculinity *from other boys*, perpetuating the patriarchy in disastrous ways.

grotesque features of his face, but the “handsewn” job does not conceal everything: we’re told that his “voice was odd and full of spit” (the mask can’t disguise the sound) and that as he talked “the saliva...tricked down his neck” (15). The final difference surprises the boys: Ysrael is flying a kite that is “no handmade local job. It had been manufactured abroad” (16). Like Yuniór and Rafa, Ysrael’s father is in the U.S., and he sent the kite back as a gift—this causes Rafa to bristle, as their father only sends them gifts around Christmas. Even Ysrael’s clothing makes him stand out, as he wears leather sandals and obviously North-American-style threads (15); despite his unfortunate circumstances, Ysrael has valuable material possessions that Yuniór and Rafa only dream of.<sup>6</sup> Rafa takes these differences as an affront and smashes an empty glass cola bottle directly on top of Ysrael’s head, which explodes in a shower of shards. The injured boy “stumbled once and slammed into a fence post that had been sunk into the side of the road”; he stumbles a bit before crashing to the ground, where Rafa kicks him for good measure. At this point Ysrael is only semi-conscious, as he does not respond to the kick but is trying to push himself up, to no avail. In the moment, Yuniór can only manage to cry, “Holy fucking shit” (18).

Rafa’s turn to violence here wasn’t completely random, but is an attempt to restore order. Despite their differences, Yuniór and Ysrael are on the verge of a connection before the assault breaks out: in just a few minutes of conversation,

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<sup>6</sup> In her work on Chican/o and Latina/o fiction that traces loss as a “principal motif in literature foregrounding colonization and migration” (36), Ylce Irizarry uses these examples to demonstrate how the New York of “Ysrael”—where Yuniór’s and Ysrael’s fathers both reside—typifies the sense of loss children of immigrants feel: even though they have never visited (in fact, precisely *because* they haven’t), it represents a large part of their identity that they cannot access.

they find common ground—they bond over their absent fathers and their love of wrestling (17-18). As they're talking about wrestling, Yuniór notices that Ysraél's "mask twitched" (18)—despite the concealment of most of his face, he knows this is a smile. This is the moment where Rafa interjects violently. In order for he and Yuniór to retain their status as members of the community in Ocoa, Ysraél needs to remain an outcast—the assault aims to put both Yuniór and Ysraél back in line by enforcing the order that allows Rafa and Yuniór to live comfortably in Ocoa, even though they aren't locals. This story conditions readers to approach the other narratives in the collection with these difficult concepts in mind: the arbitrary nature of oppression, the banality of evil and violence, and the institutionalization of these suppressive ideas. I will turn my attention now to two other stories from *Drown* that explore these issues in different ways: while focusing more directly on systemic oppression and violence, these other stories owe a debt to "Ysraél" in the way it prepares readers to confront these tough questions, while at the same time beginning to work with readers to pull together, piece by piece, some alternative or a way to overcome it.

The story "Drown" is a productive place to turn next due to the way it acts as an intersection between violent acts like Rafa's and the deterministic systems in the narrative that set expectations and demand compliance from the characters. The narrator—who remains unnamed throughout—is trapped in a suffocating condition that has two sources: first, he's dancing around an unnamed trauma that pushes him to isolate himself from his family and friends. Deep into the story, we come to find out that an unexpected pair of sexual assaults have

driven the narrator into despair and left him feeling crushed, defeated, and unable to move forward—they've *drowned* him, reversing the comforting, womb-like depictions of water elsewhere in the text. At the same time, he feels the intense stress of systemic oppression pushing and pulling on nearly every part of his life. It's through this two-pronged approach that "Drown" serves as a pivot point for focusing more keenly on the institutionalized oppression carried out by the classism, racism, and xenophobia that infects the narrator's daily life. At the end of this story he feels rudderless and stuck; his despair is palpable, and although there are suggestions that he's found brief respites from the normal routine, the systems of power that strip him of the ability to control his own life are as present as ever.

There are two timelines in "Drown," and a summary of the story must deal with them separately before discussing the inciting event where they intersect; just like Yunior's set of stories, the shifting between timelines fragments the narrative and needs to be reconciled to do anything with the text. In the story's "present," the narrator is in his late teens/early twenties and shares an apartment with his mother; she cleans houses for a living, and he sells marijuana to the neighborhood kids—they work together to pay the bills, some coming from her above-board job and some coming from his drug trade, which apparently she knows nothing about (94). During his "off" hours, he goes to bars with friends, stumbles home, and then runs off his hangovers in the mornings (99). As the story opens, the narrator's mother tells him that his friend Beto has come home from college to visit the neighborhood, and this news only causes him to stare

more intently at the television (91). But when he knows she's no longer watching over him, he goes to Beto's parents' apartment, puts his ear to the door and listens—he tells readers, “I haven't decided yet if I'll talk to him”; he reflects that they haven't seen each other in two years, and if he continues to avoid him “two years will become three” (92). He doesn't knock on the door, and the streak continues.

Knowing that Beto's back in town causes the narrator to reminisce about their youth, when things were simpler and they were inseparable. He says, “We were raging then, crazy” (91), before detailing the wild things they got into as adolescents: urinating on other people's stoops before challenging them to fights (91), shoplifting from the mall (97), and—his favorite memory—climbing the fence at the community pool for night swims (92). This last item gets described in the greatest detail: they were “never alone” at the pool, since “every kid with legs was there” (92). As he's wandering around in the present day thinking about Beto being home again, our narrator goes to the pool for old time's sake, and even though he's “not the oldest motherfucker in the place, but it's close,” he's immediately transported back to the earlier time when the pool was an escape from the suffocating heat: “The water feels good...I glide...without kicking up a spume or making a splash...While everything above is loud and bright, everything below is whispers” (93). The way he experiences time is flexible: not always linear, but sometimes good (how simply entering the water transports him back to his youth and calms him) and sometimes bad (how thinking about Beto drags up memories of the assaults). In contrast to what the title of the story suggests,



underwater is where he feels most comfortable and at peace—it's nearly like a return to the womb, where he feels protected and the troubles of the world are all muted. As we will see, the pool also becomes the launch pad for the event that overthrows his understanding of his own narrative—but that does not undercut how calming being under the surface is for him.

When they were younger, even before the events that would end their friendship, the boys began to grow apart as Beto began to resent where they came from. We are told that Beto “hated everything about the neighborhood, the break-apart buildings, the little strips of grass, the piles of garbage around the cans, and the dump, especially the dump” (91). Our narrator doesn't have the same contempt for their home; in response to Beto's anger about their environment, he says simply, “Yeah,” but then adds (silently, just for readers), “I wasn't like him” (92). In the earlier years—not so much in the present—he is fine with where he is and has no ambitions beyond the neighborhood where everything is familiar. Some of the difference has to do with age—Beto is older and is already thinking about his future, a difference seen most clearly in a story about the narrator going truant. He would ditch Beto at the bus stop and spend the day watching TV, wandering the mall, or watching old documentaries at the library while his friend was at school (101-102). When they would meet at the bus the next day, Beto would tell him, “You need to learn how to walk the world...There's a lot out there” (102). Beto's bit of wisdom isn't an invitation to skip school again; in fact, it's the opposite: he's challenging the narrator to expand his horizons, to think beyond instant gratification and lazily wasting away

his days. He never heeds this advice, and if there was a chance he was ever going to, what transpires between them undercuts that completely.

There are hints of what caused the rift between the two from the very beginning of the story, but it's treated as a dark secret for the most part. On the very first page, the narrator says of Beto, "He's a *pato* now but two years ago we were friends" (91, emphasis mine). This instance of calling Beto "gay" can, at least early in the narrative, be written off as just the way some young men deploy it as an insult: another way to say Beto is a "loser," "uncool," or in some way persona non grata. But when we get to the section of the story that begins, "Twice. That's it" (103), it takes on a more literal meaning. What follows are details of two sexual encounters between the young men: upon retiring to Beto's apartment after swimming at the pool, the boys watch pornography and Beto initiates seemingly out of nowhere: "What the fuck are you doing?" the narrator asks as Beto masturbates him. As soon as it is over, the narrator leaves without another word. The next night it happens again, and it ends in disbelief once more, with our narrator saying, "Fuck this," and abruptly leaving (106). As far as we know, this is the last time the two see each other besides the day Beto leaves for college and Yuniór sees him off (107); the "present" of the story takes place two years later.

Although the current body of criticism surrounding the story does not do so, I want to very plainly discuss what happens in Beto's family's apartment as a betrayal of trust and a repeated sexual assault—an act of violence. This is an important distinction to make for two reasons. The first is extra-textual: I

concede that most of the criticism regarding this part of the story was published before the heightened consciousness brought to issues of sexual assault over the past few years, but correcting these missteps is an ongoing project that should be undertaken at every opportunity.<sup>7</sup> The second has more to do with the way the text presents this as an event that, paired with the systems of power surrounding the boys' lives, further fragments the narrator's experience of his world and his control over his life—and, at the same time, his control over the narrative. Even before the assault, their friendship always had an element of dominance built in, with Beto frequently expressing his power over the narrator in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. When they were younger Beto “would walk into the apartment without knocking”—even in matters of basic personal space, Beto felt entitled—and the crackling of his voice “made you think of uncles or grandfathers” (91)—even though there was only a one- or two-year gap between them, Beto is always described as being more mature, more adult. In an early scene that becomes more troubling once all is revealed, Beto pushes the narrator's head under water at the pool when he refuses to tell him where he learned the word

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<sup>7</sup> Some discussions of the story get close to this point, but some miss it entirely and analyze it as the sexual awakening of a repressed young man. Gonzalez calls what the narrator experiences “sexual bliss” (45) and concludes that the story is about the way social codes cause young men “to act irrationally in matters of love and affection” (46). Stringer contends that Beto “did nothing violent or coercive,” and that the narrator “passively consented” to the acts—however, she's willing to grant that the two encounters “seem to have traumatized the narrator” (120). Irizarry comes closest to describing the encounters in terms of assault by connecting them to a brief encounter Yuniór has in “Ysrael” (Irizarry conflates the narrators of these two stories), where a man fondles his genitals and Yuniór yells homophobic slurs at him, but doesn't tell anyone; Irizarry concludes that Yuniór learned both “homophobic discourse” *and* “to be silent about sexual violence” very early in life (64); however, she then goes on to discuss his revulsion of Beto as misunderstood sexual attraction.

“expectorating.” We’re told, “[Beto] hated when I knew something he didn’t. He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me under...He was stronger than me and held me down until water flooded my nose and throat” (94). The first time through, this reads as horseplay; the second time, though, it can be seen as Beto trying to figure out how far he can push the narrator before he says “no” or “stop.”

The descriptions of the assaults make it even clearer that Beto’s advances were unwanted, as they fill the narrator with paralyzing terror. The first time, even after he says, “What the fuck are you doing?” Beto does not stop, and the narrator can only keep his eyes on the television, “too scared to watch,” and that as soon as it is over—very quickly—he immediately knows that he “wanted out.” The next day, he spends all his time in the basement, “terrified that [he] would end up abnormal, a fucking pato” (104). The use of the word “abnormal” here shows that the narrator has already begun to reflect on how the assaults will affect how others view him—something that was done *to him* will have much more of an effect on who he is than anything *he does*. In nearly the same breath, though, he talks himself into going to see Beto again, since “he was [his] best friend” (104). He feels like he owes something to Beto, that he can’t possibly have misunderstood his friend so badly—he’s trying to rewrite what happened here, but it leads to more manipulation by Beto. When Beto invites the narrator back to his apartment again, he says, “Let’s go...Unless of course you’re not feeling good” (105). He’s putting the onus on the narrator—who is already scared, scarred, and confused—to say more than just “no” to his advances; for him to speak up here,

he would have to admit to being sick, to being *not well*, to being a victim—not a thing he’s willing to identify himself as yet. This blatant psychological gaslighting works, as he doesn’t say “yes,” but responds, “I’m feeling fine” (105)—which is certainly not an assent, but which Beto can label “not a refusal” and justify the second assault.

The narrator’s fear of being seen as “abnormal” functions as a clear segue between the way his abuser—Beto—disrupts the narrator’s coherent sense of self and the ways in which a similar process takes place at the hands of societal pressure, communal expectations, and institutionalized oppression.<sup>8</sup> Although the narrator rarely addresses it directly—he demonstrates little-to-no consciousness of these sorts of forces working around him—he faces a daily assault of classism, racism, and xenophobia that works to depress his opportunities and self-worth. We saw earlier that Beto expressed disgust at the environment the boys grew up in, an urban area that was neglected by the state, left to rot and fester. It’s under-policed and infested with crime, with the narrator’s mother worried more about locking her window than anything else (the very last line of the story is the narrator promising her that he will lock them up [107]). We’re told that above every sign that their community doesn’t matter

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<sup>8</sup> While I have made clear my disagreement with various critics about how to categorize Beto’s assault on Yuniór, I believe there’s still value in the ways in which they explore Yuniór’s anxiety over some of these issues, especially how the story interrogates queer sexuality and *machismo*. Irizarry’s chapter is worth a look for the way it argues that the book is especially entrenched in Dominican narratives of homophobia and *not* American ones—the former which she calls “communal” and the latter “institutional” (64). Stringer makes the claim that there isn’t just homophobia in the world of the text, but that the text *itself* is homophobic, especially in the way it pushes its one gay character to the margins and doesn’t make him a fully realized person (121).

to the powers-that-be, Beto hates the dump most—“especially the dump” (91)—and it’s a perfect symbol of the decay that’s allowed to overwhelm them: even when you can’t see it, the stench is there. The narrator has come to accept this as just the way things are: “I don’t know how you can do it,” Beto says to him about his lack of motivation to get out of there and do *anything* else (91)—much the same way the memory of the assaults will overtake the narrator as the new normal, he’s so trapped in these cycles that he believes there’s nothing else out there.

The blatant racism that will crop up more clearly in “Negocios” is a bit more muted in “Drown,” with just a few examples that spring to the foreground: as detailed above, the boys and their friends wait until after dark to hop the fence to the community center pool (92)—although never stated directly, it’s implied that they wouldn’t be welcomed during the day; there’s always a constant, low-level fear of being targeted by the police or other authorities for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as when the kids just want to beat the heat at the pool (93); and then there’s the low expectations placed on the cohort by authority—they’re not expected to go anywhere or do anything but to simply fall into the cycle of poverty and crime that infects the community. A clear example of this comes up at an auspicious time: as the narrator allows his mind to drift as a defense mechanism during the second assault, he recalls a time in high school when a teacher had his class watch a space-shuttle launch. The teacher—“whose family had two grammar schools named after it,” we’re told—compares the class to the shuttles: “A few of you are going to make it. Those are the orbiters. But the

majority of you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand onto his desk”—what goes unsaid, but what we can easily infer from the narrator’s other experiences, is that the classroom is filled with students of color, certainly at least many Latin-American kids, and the teacher is telling them in no uncertain terms that he does not expect them to succeed. This takes hold in the narrator early in his life, and he says that “[he] could already see [himself] losing altitude, fading, the earth spread out beneath [him], hard and bright” (106)—the dominant motif of how he feels in the story is drowning, but this fear of crashing and burning comes from the same central anxiety: the narrator experiences his life as the object of external forces that pull him, push him, and abuse him from every direction. All of the narrators in *Drown* experience this in one way or another, feeling trapped in narratives whose terms are imposed from outside; the text conditions readers to expect this as the default setting for the Dominican and Dominican-American characters populating Díaz’s stories. Yunior—the most prominent narrator in the book—certainly is a victim of this, but his final story offers the potential for something else: reading through *The New Sincerity* is always ready to pounce on an opportunity to upend expectations like this, to piece together fragments into something productive, just as in *Infintie Jest* our reading sought connection in a detached world and the text was willing to comply. In *Drown*, the key to piecing together the disparate threads of these stories is empathy.

“Negocios” is the last and longest story in *Drown*, but its conspicuous placement and heft have not been reflected in the critical commentaries on Díaz’s

work: “Negocios” doesn’t receive the attention or praise that the other stories do. Ibarrola-Armendariz relegates it to a parenthetical list of stories that let readers “get to know in more depth some of the characters that have played a key role in Yuniór’s later life” (223), and Stringer calls it “a simple picaresque” (119). These near-dismissals don’t do justice to the important role “Negocios” plays in complicating the themes explored in the other stories, especially if read through *The New Sincerity*. It can be easy to miss, since even though Yuniór returns as the narrator of the story, it isn’t ostensibly “about” him: he plays a very minor role as a character in the text, which retells the details of his father’s immigration into the United States while Yuniór was still very young. But his role as *narrator* here is key: while his “character” for the most part is simply a toddler left behind in the D.R., his full function is more resonant—he’s the story teller, the one providing the lens for his father’s experience even though he wasn’t personally present for most of the events described. It’s through his act of piecing together this narrative from the people who *were* there that the text re-positions itself vis-à-vis the fragmentation that has plagued its narrators’ lives; a careful analysis with *The New Sincerity* reveals, just as it did in *Infinite Jest*, that the story’s quietest moments upend the expectations that readers have been conditioned to expect, shining a light on how empathy can be a key for building a coherent narrative.

Yuniór’s father rarely appears in corporeal form in other stories from *Drown*—mostly, he’s absent and simply spoken about, such as in the conversation Yuniór and Rafa have with Ysrael. In “Aguantando,” he’s also absent—that story



opens with, “I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life” (69), and details the family’s struggle waiting for him to return. Besides “Negocios,” he gets his most page-time in “Fiesta, 1980.” As the story opens, Yuniór, Rafa, and their sister are presenting themselves for inspection before setting off for a family outing, all cleaned and dressed for a party—and they better be, because as Yuniór puts it, “If Papi had walked in and caught us lounging around in our underwear, he would have kicked our asses something serious” (23). Ramón Sr. runs his house like a little dictatorship, and it fills his family with anxiety; everyone is on edge and constantly stressed, and Yuniór even responds physically, as he always vomits when riding in Papi’s van. The authoritarian from “Fiesta, 1980” gets his origin story in “Negocios”: we come to understand that Papi exerts such harsh control over the members of his family because he’s never had control over *himself*, thanks to the systemic oppression that overwhelms him. This reaction will easily contrast to the story’s conclusion, where the interest of our reading with *The New Sincerity* really lies—but before we turn there, it’s productive to examine how the story doubles down on the collection’s presentation of systemic prejudice and its deterministic nature for our characters.

Young Papi is a dreamer, and what he dreams about, more than anything else, is carving out a place for himself. Even when still in the D.R., he was “hustling and borrowing...from anyone he could put the bite on” (163), as long as it led to his personal gain—this includes his family. While in bed with his mistress, Papi dreams that “the money Mami’s father had promised him was spiraling away in the wind like bright bright birds” (164). The cash Papi was

expecting as a nest egg is in danger because of his infidelities, and he decides, it seems, to visit his father-in-law to do penance. He says all the right things, removing his hat and intoning, “All I want for your daughter and our children is to take them to the United States. I want a good life for them” (164)—but there’s only the one plane ticket, and as the distance between Ramón and his family increases, his connections to them become more tenuous. With dreams established as an important part of this text, it’s telling that before Papi’s first sleep in America—where he dreams of “gold coins... stacked high as sugar cane”—we’re told, “He didn’t dream about his familia and wouldn’t for many years” (169). Although this is not an excuse, Papi is quite distracted when he arrives: expecting to move along from one stepping stone to the next on his journey to New York, “the city of jobs” (167), he is disoriented upon arriving in Miami with everyone “speaking English and the signs were no help” (167). He has nowhere to turn for guidance, and there are no referents to stabilize his reading of the world around him. Papi is unmoored, no longer the hustler he was in the D.R.—he’s now the mark, and he gets swindled by roommates withholding rent and arranged-marriage brokers who abscond with his savings. The descriptions of his sorry state wade into the darkly comic; shortly after he arrives in New York, his experience is described like this:

[He’d] been robbed twice already, his ribs beaten until they were bruised. He often drank too much and went home to his room, and there he’d fume, spinning, angry at the stupidity that had brought him to this freezing hell of a country, angry that a man his age had to masturbate

when he had a wife, and angry at the blinkered existence his jobs and the city imposed on him...The roaches were so bold in his flat that turning on the lights did not startle them. They waved their three-inch antennas as if to say, Hey puto, turn that shit off. (179)

Papi has gone from feeling in control and having the upper hand on everyone at home to being told what to do by *bugs* in the U.S.—probably the biggest drop-off we have seen in the entire book. The word “blinkered” is telling: he’s so tied down to his job and simply surviving day-to-day that he has no time to look around him—Papi sees only what’s right in front of him, leading to a fragmented understanding of his new city, his new community, and his place in them.

Just as we have seen with narrators throughout the book, Papi is both the subject of interpersonal violence and systemic oppression; however, it should also be noted that he is just as often a *perpetrator* of petty violence—fights, beatings, and such—as he is the victim, if not more so. He allegedly beat the first person in the U.S. to cross him, a roommate who wasn’t paying his fair share of rent (174); he punched a friend of his *off a ladder*—this image of a ladder will return momentarily, and this fight will have a new resonance—for getting him mixed up with an arranged-marriage scam (181); he would wander the streets of New York while mired in depression and return home “with his knuckles scuffed and his clothes disheveled” (192); and he got in two fights early on at the best job he had—a union job—due to the racism of his co-workers (194). It’s notable that the thread running through a number of these examples is Papi lashing out at a slight or a perceived slight against him—when he got to the U.S. he didn’t speak

any English, but he certainly understood enough to know when he was being exploited or was the butt of everyone's jokes. Some of these examples also bleed into the systemic racism and inequality that Papi constantly suffers under. His first night in America, he considers sleeping on a Miami beach to save some money, but "the inscrutability of the nearby signs unnerved him"; it hasn't taken him long to develop the fear that "the slightest turn of fortune could dash him" (168), since the laws and regulations he now lives under do not give dispensations for the fact that he does not understand the country's language or customs—in fact, he comes to learn that the system is far from indifferent towards those in his situation, but is constructed *with the intended purpose* to suppress them. He hears stories and comes to fear any contact with police, believing "they liked to beat [immigrants] before they turned you over to la migra" or "sometimes they just took your money and tossed you toothless on an abandoned road" (175). At his most desperate, Papi accepts a ride from some police officers that are transporting a serial killer, and he's more anxious about the officers than the killer who is sitting right behind him (176-177). The union job mentioned above is full of unfairness stemming from racial tensions: we are told that "racism was pronounced" at the aluminum plant, and that even though Papi had "the highest performance rating in the department," he was always strapped with "the shittiest schedule" (194); the good shifts went to his white colleagues. As unjust as that is—especially in a union, where promotions and raises are supposed to be based on experience and merit—it seems like an inconvenience compared to what happens later: after being injured on the job,

Papi tries to stand up for himself by hiring his own lawyer, but his ignorance of the legal system leads him to contacting a divorce lawyer; his bosses, of course, are incensed that he would try to outmaneuver them legally, and when he's healthy he gets demoted (202-204).

Ramón develops a complex understanding of how privilege works, whether it's based on race, socioeconomics, or some other uncontrollable category. Although he arrived in the U.S. with just some cash in his pocket and no one to guide him, Papi does make friends along the way—despite his obvious character flaws, the text paints him as a charming and gregarious man. One of his friends, Jo Jo, offers to help Papi get set up with a *negocio*<sup>9</sup>—a business—so he can have a steady stream of income and make something of himself. Papi wants that feeling—to be self-sufficient, to be able to provide—and the text even calls it his “dream,” but he doesn't want to go about it the way Jo Jo offers: “he had seen a few [immigrants], fresh off the boat, shake the water from their backs and jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud” (190-191). Earlier in the story, Papi imagines his entrance into American life as a ladder, and he knows he has to acquire legal status in order to “place his hand firmly on that first rung” (179). These reflections demonstrate his understanding of the privilege afforded to some by birth or circumstance, even if he can't

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<sup>9</sup> Gonzalez (2015) briefly goes over the multiple meanings of this word—in the text, it's literally used to mean “a business” (like Jo Jo's hot dog carts or convenience stores), but Gonzalez leans on the more uncommon translation, which is for “affairs” (as in, “getting your affairs in order”) (22); but this second meaning also fits in nicely to the role that Papi's extramarital affairs play in this and other stories.

express it in such terms: native-born Americans begin on the ladder to success, and they start higher up if they are white, or wealthy, or connected—Papi isn't even on the ladder when he arrives, but rather crawling through the muck below it (the piece about the ladder appears in the same paragraph as the talking roaches mentioned earlier, for context). We don't know why those other immigrants were able to hop the line and get a head start on the path to success—it was probably a combination of lucky circumstances, connections, and hard work—but it creates a resentment in Papi that stalls him below the ladder, festering in his feelings of inadequacy.

Papi's bitterness comes from his growing realization that he is subject to a system of institutionalized inequality that works to grind labor and life out of him for nothing in return—it's not that the system fails him, of course; it does exactly what it is designed to do, which is to keep the powerful in power and to keep the subjugated down. These systems peg their subjects according to their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and many other arbitrary attributes, and this determinism captures the authority to control one's own sense of self. We've seen revelations similar to Papi's throughout the book: in "Ysrael," Yunion begins to glimpse the destructive nature of the scripts of masculinity his brother is initiating him into; and in "Drown," the narrator's life is determined by the neglected neighborhood he grows up in, the assumptions made by authority about his future based on his race, and the perceived reactions of a homophobic community to the facts of his sexual assault.

As the text began to condition its readers to recognize in “Ysrael,” the pressures exerted on the characters, the violence perpetrated against them, and the oppression placed upon them is all arbitrary and for the most part random, carried out by people and institutions in power so they can retain their exalted positions. In the face of this, our narrators are laid low: at the end of “Ysrael,” Yunior prepares to keep unquestionably following his brother, and the narrator of “Drown” locks himself inside his basement hoping to avoid the dangers of the outside world. Papi may face the same realities and always have an at-least low-level resentment for what’s become of him, but his reaction is quite different: he takes this as an opportunity to do whatever he wants—when things start to fall apart for him, he leaves Nilda (the woman he married to gain citizenship, forsaking Yunior’s mother) and finally calls his family from the D.R. to live with him in the U.S. His actions speak to a nihilistic conclusion: if there is no bedrock beyond the dictates of constructed systems, there’s nothing stopping him from picking up and trying to start over somewhere else—as long as he feels no remorse for abdicating his responsibilities and abandoning his new, American family (which he clearly does not).

This reads as a dour ending to a long, complex story that comes at the end of a dour book—the story opens with abandonment, and it closes with its sequel. But the story doesn’t end focused solely on Papi’s infidelity to his family: Yunior returns to the page, pulling double duty as an active character in the text *and* narrativizing his collection of the details that would come to populate “Negocios.” In the final few pages of the story, Yunior visits Nilda, Papi’s second wife, the

woman he married to gain legal status in the U.S. If it wasn't for the fact that he had a secret family back in the D.R., the early days of Papi and Nilda's romance could be classified as adorable: they meet at a laundromat folding clothes on Christmas Eve; he considers inviting her to a party during their first encounter but gets too nervous; she helps him practice his English so some of the barriers he faces can begin to come down; and he pursues her relentlessly until she gives in to his charms (182-186). This does not last long: Nilda learns about his original family pretty quickly, and he has to "deliver some of his most polished performances to convince her that he no longer cared about [them]" (187); he "wore a ring, [but] didn't act the part of the husband" (186); he begins to physically abuse her, especially when she asks questions about his other family (193); and when he begins to tire of her—he specifically mentions her gaining weight as a reason why (200)—he smuggles his things out of her apartment bit-by-bit, taking extra socks and shirts with him to work until there's nothing left (205). He leaves her alone to care for her daughter, their son<sup>10</sup>, and boards a plane for the D.R. to retrieve his other family.

The meeting between Yunior and Nilda occurs, Yunior tells us, "after [Papi] had left us for good, after her children had moved out of the house" (206);

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<sup>10</sup> It's worth mentioning that we are told this son was "also named Ramón" (192). The "also" here is significant, because on the one hand, the baby is "also" named Ramón because its father is named Ramón—but lurking here is the fact that it's *also* named Ramón like *Yunior* is named Ramón. This is reinforced later when, more than once, the baby is referred to as "the third Ramón" (200, 204)—1. Papi; 2. Yunior; 3. Nilda's son. We're told that occasionally Papi would err and call the baby "Yunior" (204) and these lexical slips may have been one of the first signs that he was comfortable switching between his two families with no real concern for the welfare of others involved.



this places it well outside the time frame of the rest of the story, not just after Yuniór and the rest of his family came to the U.S., but after the third Ramón grew up and moved away from his mother. It's distant, then, at least temporally, from the events of the story that take up most of its pages. It's an essential part of the story, narratively, because without this meeting, Yuniór would not have been privy to many of the details about the portion of his father's life spent with her—we're told that for Yuniór and Nilda, it was like "reliving an event—a whirlwind, a comet, a war—[they'd] both seen but from different faraway angles" (206-207). The wording here is telling, as Papi becomes a destructive event, part natural ("whirlwind") and part manmade ("a war"), as well as something once-in-a-lifetime, something observers will never forget ("a comet"). Every amateur astronomer knows that observing a phenomenon from different angles is essential for determining its essential properties, and Yuniór feels this way about his conversation with Nilda: she has allowed him to perceive ins-and-outs of his father that he didn't have access to before.

If Yuniór expected their conversation to be him simply pumping Nilda for information, using her to get some details to tell a better story, it takes an unexpected turn. The last words spoken on the page aren't about Yuniór and Nilda, or about Nilda and Papi, but concern Yuniór's mother: after speaking for a while, Nilda comes out with, "I thought that I would never stop hurting. I knew then what it must have been like for your mother. You should tell her that" (207). Nilda has the right to feel aggrieved after the many burdens she has faced. Like all of the characters we have gotten to know, she has spent years dealing with the

unfairness of an immigrant's life: working twice as hard just to survive with zero recognition, starting from below the bottom of the ladder and climbing as high as she can with no help from those around her. On top of this, as a woman she is used in ways that Yunior and Papi wouldn't understand: she has to raise her daughter on her own, she's used as a pawn for Papi to gain citizenship, she's abused and neglected, and after enduring all of that she then has to raise *another* child alone. But her final statement in the book isn't one of resentment or grief; rather, it's an empathetic gesture aimed at building connection and sharing the burden of another. Nilda's life has been fragmented and not under her control in most regards up until this point, but in this deliberate act of reaching out to Yunior's mother, she gets to *choose* what her experiences are used for: to empathize, to build a connection, to heal, to pass on power to someone else. We never know if Yunior gets this message to his mother—nevermind if it actually helps her—and that unresolved thread is frustrating in the same way that Don Gately being “woken up” at the end of *Infinite Jest* prevents us from knowing if his abiding was successful in keeping him clean and getting him through his pain. What's key is how Yunior processes this moment and the effect it has on him as a storyteller—and how the way he uses it satisfies the readers' desire to collect and organize the fragments of the stories into something coherent.

Yunior doesn't talk through what he thinks about this moment; unlike Gately, Yunior guards his innermost thoughts for most of the book. In the absence of a direct explanation, we're left to consider what he *does* after speaking with Nilda and examining that to suss out the effect the conversation had on him. One

of the more fascinating choices that Yuniór makes after leaving is that he decides he wants to be alone: Nilda invites him to visit her restaurant, and although he walks up to the window and glances at the people inside, he determines they are “all of them versions of people I already knew” (207), and instead of going in, he goes home. Also noteworthy is that looking through the window, he has to peer through his own reflection to see these people. On its face, this act seems oddly closed-off: Yuniór is turning down camaraderie and a nice (and probably free) meal to go and be by himself. And yet the way he describes this choice is important: he turns down the invite because the crowd on the other side of the glass is too familiar; there’s a clue here that Nilda’s gesture of empathy is sinking in—it’s most difficult to be empathetic, to seek a connection, and to try and understand someone who is *unlike* you, as opposed to someone whom you’re in step with. By embracing the urge to seek out *difference*, Yuniór is gesturing towards coherence, a wholeness that he’s never had before: despite the fact that he’s still under the same pressures and oppression that has always been there, he’s made a choice to ditch the familiar and to seek out something complementary, a much tougher road—but if he’s willing to put the work in, the text has suggested it could bring him the sort of peace and understanding that Nilda has already demonstrated.

*And yet the text doesn’t end there either*—“Negocios” has a multiplicity of endings, and even after Yuniór makes this choice to head home, his mind continues to work. It’s telling that what he does next is think of his father—Nilda’s olive branch to Yuniór’s mother is an unselfish, empathetic move that

could only be directed in one direction if Yuniór tried to emulate it: at Papi, the person who represents the antithesis of what Yuniór wants to be. But of course they have plenty in common as a pair of immigrants trying to navigate the expectations of their adopted country while balancing the expectations of their native community. On the final pages, he tries to imagine what Papi did on the day when he finally left Nilda and started back to the D.R. to pick up the family. He describes very matter-of-factly what he did that day: “drank a cup of black café...lit a cigarette...walked down Atlantic...smoked cigarette after cigarette and killed his pack within an hour” (208). He could’ve picked up bits of this story from both Nilda and Papi, so we have no reason to doubt it, but the final paragraph proposes two things that *could* have been: Yuniór would “like to think” that Papi “grabbed that first train” and went straight to the airport, eager to get home to retrieve his family; but what is “more likely true” is that he went to hang with a friend “before flying south” to get the family (208).

There’s a noted lack of judgment here: even though Yuniór would love to feel wanted, to know that his father was eager to reunite with his family, he doesn’t begrudge him seeing a friend one more time before heading back to the D.R. if that’s what actually happened. It’s also worth noting, retroactively, that these sorts of judgments are kept out of the whole of “Negocios”: whether Yuniór is discussing his father’s infidelities, his violence, or his abandoning the family, he never paints him in an overly negative light, even though he would have every right to feel aggrieved and do so. Nilda’s model of empathy seems to be sinking in even if it’s taking a slightly different form: Yuniór’s *uncritical* look at Papi’s life—

providing all the facts, even the ugliest, but never passing judgment—is more than just him “coming to terms” with his father; rather, it’s his attempt to weave empathy into the text, to not excuse Papi but to attempt to understand him and to tease out the things that they share—to take the fragments that he does have and assemble them into a coherent narrative that he can live with in peace. In doing so, Yuniór claims his father’s origin story as his own, a move that doesn’t disrespect his father but does allow him to *use* his and his father’s story in a way that undercuts the lack of control he has over his day-to-day life. Just as I clarified in my reading of *Infinite Jest*, the text certainly doesn’t expect all readers to have an experience just like Yuniór’s—but it does anticipate them seeking models and theories for how to pick up a fragmented existence and bring it some semblance of wholeness, and Yuniór certainly provides that.

Chapter 4 - "If they didn't see it, they didn't see it": Balancing The New Sincerity  
in *Tropic of Orange*

This chapter will conclude my dissertation's tracing of The New Sincerity across literary texts by bringing it to bear on Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange*. As I have laid out in the previous chapters, my contention here is that this novel stands as a complex example of how The New Sincerity grows out of both sides of the reader/text paradigm—it requires, on one side, readers primed (by historical and cultural moments, by engaging in robust intellectual debate) to either seek out or be receptive to texts that engage with ideas of fragmentation, detachment, and obfuscation; and, on the other, texts that undermine these concepts by fostering connections with readers that emphasize coherence and clarity. This is a delicate situation that requires, in a way, "buy in" from both sides: my Introduction and Chapter 1 detailed how the 1990s served as a confluence of historical, cultural, and intellectual factors that drove the growth of this interpretative mode. The texts I examined in Chapters 2 and 3 cleaved closely to a specific structure: present a world characterized by detachment or fragmentation that grows out of totalizing forces that individuals cannot overcome—and then introduce a character who discovers a process of being that allows them to gain at least a semblance of personal control, even if it's just over the use of their own story or over the pulse of their own body. The readings of *Infinite Jest* and *Drown* presented above take for granted that such moves are possible. What separates *Tropic of Orange* is that it does not take these

possibilities for granted—above all else, it is interested in the obstacles that can stand in the way of the balancing act required to produce this mode of reading.

*Infinite Jest* and *Drown* present complementary conceptualizations of the source of the connections that drive The New Sincerity: one that originates in a deep interiority (Don Gately's abiding), and one that finds its starting point in empathy, an outward-facing orientation that deeply considers the needs and feelings of others (Yunior's storytelling). In my reading of *Tropic of Orange*, I will demonstrate that the novel provides a model somewhere in the middle of interiority/exteriority, feeding off the paradigm of its central questions about the careful balancing act required to think about or argue for The New Sincerity. As I have in my previous chapters, I will explore how the novel's form and content both contribute to conditioning readers to digest the text in a certain way. In particular, I will expound on the text's balancing act by looking at *two* characters that mirror one another, one clinging to interiority as a tactic for self-preservation against a hostile world and another who only ever looks outside of himself to ensure the survival of his community. These two protagonists (the novel actually has seven), Emi and Buzzworm, differ from the characters I have explored in other texts in that they have a complex understanding of the ways in which their lives are subject to cultural appropriation, gentrification, governmental neglect, media sensationalism, and state-sponsored violence against the underclass and non-white populations; each discusses these issues at length, whereas Gately and Yunior *felt* the anxiety of being under the thumb of these forces without being able to explain their inner workings. However, this

knowledge doesn't release them from these systems of power or ensure their success—*Tropic of Orange* suggests that developing an awareness of the balancing act of interior/exterior and self/others is a constant state of being that must be maintained with careful attention.

As far as my research has found, *Tropic of Orange* has never been mentioned in any discussions of The New Sincerity. Like many of the texts and theories presented so far in this dissertation, however, it has been lauded in the critical literature as a transitional text, existing on the boundary between literary movements, between nations and cultures, and between visions of the past and the future. Critical attention has been paid to the novel's focus on environmental justice, including investigations of the disproportionate toll global warming and other ecological disasters take on the poor and marginalized.<sup>1</sup> In a related gesture, a good amount of critical work on the novel has paid service to the visions of dystopia that it evokes through its disasters, its apparent lawlessness, and the brutal violence carried out against innocents.<sup>2</sup> Still other critics have expounded on the importance of globalization and global networks in the text,

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<sup>1</sup> See Crawford (2013) who connects the descriptions of climate in the novel to the history of Japanese internment in America during World War II; Palmer's essay (2016) which focuses on the central image of the orange and how this "strange fruit" charts the course of environmental injustice in relation to the migrant worker communities of the American southwest; and Thompson (2017) who traces the all-American image of the car as the culprit responsible for global warming and the means by which so many flee disaster areas.

<sup>2</sup> Delgado (2016) believes that teaching texts like *Tropic of Orange* as dystopian allegories of racial conflict can be a fertile ground for discussion with young adults today, due to the prevalence of dystopian themes in young adult literature (*The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and others); Tekdemir (2014) views the dystopic bend of the novel as a reenactment of the conquest of the American frontier, but this time by exploring how formerly colonized peoples are now seen as the invaders.



studying both the positive and negative aspects of Los Angeles as a “transnational” city.<sup>3</sup> The rich critical history surrounding the novel makes it a good candidate for reading with the interpretative lens of The New Sincerity—so many of these studies already touch on detachment, marginalization, fragmentation, and unmoored identities; I will touch a bit more on the novel’s critical reception below, woven into my outlines of the plot and the studies of the characters whose narratives draw the reader in.

An analysis of two of the novel’s central characters does necessitate an outline of the overall structure and plot of the book, which is complex and layered. The action of *Tropic of Orange* takes place over the course of seven days, the book follows seven protagonists, and each of these characters gets seven chapters that focus on them. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the organization and physical properties of *Infinite Jest* come off as confrontational, a challenge to readers’ expectations about how a book should be handled and read. *Tropic of Orange* takes an opposite approach, presenting a clear-cut organization that orients the reader in the text before they even begin. The specificity of the novel’s organization is almost zodiac-like, with each protagonist’s chapters carrying titles organized around a common theme such as “Morning,” “Daylight,” “Midday,” and so on for one character, and another character’s chapters all having work-related

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<sup>3</sup> See Vint (2012) on how the novel envisions the imagined lines of nation being pulled towards something more just with the movement of the titular orange; in Joo (2012) the author follows how the multiracial protagonists cut against the dominant view in futuristic film version of Los Angeles where multiculturalism has been a disaster; and Sadowski-Smith (2001) who reaches back to Aztec and other pre-Columbian Mesoamerican myths that are involved in the novel’s representations of transnationalism.

titles: “Coffee Break,” “Time & a Half,” “Deadline.” Each chapter opens by providing a location, sometimes extremely specific L.A. locales—streets like “Jefferson & Normandie” (right in the middle of South Central L.A.) or neighborhoods like “Koreatown” and “Westside.” The overall impression that this organizational structure gives is that of precision and solidity—no matter the page of the book, there are guideposts that will let you know where you are and what you need to focus on (there is even a chart prior to the main text that lays all of this out—see figure below). However, I contend that the chart and the novel’s frequent thematic and positional guideposts provide the *illusion* of clarity: despite how organized they make the book appear, the narrative undercuts the assumption of tidiness by presenting a chaotic world—as we will cover below, the central crisis is the aftermath of a gigantic fuel tanker explosion—that pushes the boundaries of how time, space, and the real world can be represented. Primarily, this comes across in how space and time become curved and distorted as a magical orange is carried towards L.A. from Mexico and drags the Tropic of Cancer along with it—Buzzworm talks to a young man who avoids being shot as bullets curve in the air (85) and every character experiences time standing still (137).<sup>4</sup> This instability is an important part of my reading of the text with *The New Sincerity*: in the face of a world where even time and space are unreliable, the urge to protect oneself against uncertainty is paramount. The characters in

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<sup>4</sup> Critics have discussed the debt the text owes to magical realism; see Tekdemir (2011), Adams (2007), and Wallace (2001). Not mentioned in any of these critical studies is the similarity between the chart in *Tropic of Orange* and the family tree that appears pre-text in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, one of the best-known examples of magical realism.

*Tropic of Orange* are so intertwined, however, that even the smallest reconfiguration of one character’s story affects all of the others; to control the length of this chapter, I will provide a summary of the novel before exploring the stories of just two characters: Emi and Buzzworm.

HyperContexts				Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	
Summer Solstice	Diamond Lane	Cultural Diversity	The Eternal Buzz	Artificial Intelligence	Queen of Angels	Pacific Rim	
<b>Rafaela Cortes</b>	<b>Midday</b> -Not Too Far from Mazatlán chapter 1	<b>Morning</b> -En México chapter 10	<b>Daylight</b> -The Cornfield chapter 18	<b>Dusk</b> -To the Border chapter 24	<b>Dawn</b> -The Other Side chapter 30	<b>Nightfall</b> -Aztlán chapter 38	<b>Midnight</b> -The Line chapter 45
<b>Bobby Ngu</b>	<b>Benefits</b> -Koreatown chapter 2	<b>Car Payment Due</b> -Tijuana via Singapore chapter 12	<b>Second Mortgage</b> -Chinatown chapter 15	<b>Life Insurance</b> -L.A./L.J. chapter 26	<b>Visa Card</b> -Final Destination chapter 34	<b>Social Security</b> -I-5 chapter 40	<b>American Express</b> -Mi Casa/Su Casa chapter 49
<b>Emi</b>	<b>Weather Report</b> -Westside chapter 3	<b>NewsNow</b> -Hollywood South chapter 9	<b>Disaster Movie Week</b> -Hiro's Sushi chapter 20	<b>Live on Air</b> -El A chapter 27	<b>Promos</b> -World Wide Web chapter 29	<b>Prime Time</b> -Last Stop chapter 41	<b>Commercial Break</b> -The Big Sleep chapter 44
<b>Buzzworm</b>	<b>Station 10</b> -Jefferson & Normandie chapter 4	<b>Oldies</b> -This Old Hood chapter 13	<b>LA X</b> -Margarita's Corner chapter 16	<b>You Give Us 22 Minutes</b> -The World chapter 22	<b>AM/FM</b> -FreeZone chapter 31	<b>The Car Show</b> -Front Line chapter 37	<b>Hour 25</b> -Into the Boxes chapter 48
<b>Manzanar Murakami</b>	<b>Traffic Window</b> -Harbor Freeway chapter 5	<b>Rideshare</b> -Downtown Interchange chapter 8	<b>The Hour of the Trucks</b> -The Freeway Canyon chapter 19	<b>Lane Change</b> -Avoiding the Harbor chapter 28	<b>Jam</b> -Greater L.A. chapter 35	<b>Drive-By</b> -Virtually Everywhere chapter 42	<b>SigAlert</b> -The Rim chapter 46
<b>Gabriel Balboa</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b> -Downtown chapter 6	<b>Budgets</b> -Skirting Downtown chapter 14	<b>The Interview</b> -Manzanar chapter 17	<b>Time &amp; a Half</b> -Limousine Way chapter 25	<b>Overtime</b> -El Zócalo chapter 32	<b>Working Weekend</b> -Dirt Shoulder chapter 39	<b>Deadline</b> -Over the Net chapter 43
<b>Arcangel</b>	<b>To Wake</b> -Marketplace chapter 7	<b>To Wash</b> -On the Tropic chapter 11	<b>To Eat</b> -La Cantina de Miseria y Hambre chapter 21	<b>To Labor</b> -East & West Forever chapter 23	<b>To Dream</b> -America chapter 33	<b>To Perform</b> -Angel's Flight chapter 36	<b>To Die</b> -Pacific Rim Auditorium chapter 47

*This chart, titled “HyperContexts,” appears in the novel before the main text.*

As my attention to the organization of *Tropic of Orange* above suggests, the plot of the novel is difficult to briefly summarize. Almost all of the action takes place in Los Angeles over the course of seven days—with a few forays into Mexico. Each main character is struggling through their personal conflicts, but there are some central crises that touch each of them. In L.A., the plot clusters around a homeless encampment set up on a major portion of the freeway after a horrific traffic accident; the incident is described with “the screech of tires, the groaning wail of the monstrous semi pulling 40,000 pounds of liquid propane

under pressure in its shiny stainless steel interior—its great twisting second-half tumbling and thundering over itself,” and on a smaller scale, “the snap of delicate necks, the squish of flesh and blood”; when the initial dust settles, one can see “hundreds of cars piled one onto the other in an almost endless jam” on both the north- and southbound sides, ten lanes total (55). When the semi-tanker at the center of the accident explodes, it sends a wall of fire up an embankment next to the freeway where a number of homeless people have their semi-permanent shelters (120). This community descends to the freeway, but instead of fleeing, they take up residence in the abandoned vehicles lining the road: “The vans and camper trailers went first; then the gas guzzlers—oversized Cadillacs...blue Buicks...A spacious interior with storage space was favored, while the exterior condition of a car was deemed of secondary importance” (121). Although there were scattered disputes over claims to living space, this is described as a “happy riot”; one character even compares it to the storming of the Bastille (122)—this reference positions the movement of these homeless Los Angelenos not just as a slight civil disturbance, but as a reconfiguration of the social order.

As the text moves forward, the anxiety that grows around this crisis concerns how it will end—with wall-to-wall media coverage and law enforcement circling, there certainly seems to be a sense that tensions are boiling. By the time the novel ends, a violent clash leaves the freeway deserted and a trail of bodies in its wake. These are not the only bodies that the narrative produces: an international drug-smuggling ring is indirectly responsible for the pileup on the freeway, as their attempt to bring cocaine into the country inside of

oranges leads to disaster when they are accidentally sold—people begin dropping all around the city of overdoses, including the driver of the car that began the chain reaction on the freeway (163). There’s also a child-trafficking ring that specializes in harvesting vital organs from toddlers and infants—which results, morbidly, in a group of wounded homeless men unknowingly roasting infant organs on marshmallow sticks (264). The seven characters we follow are affected by these events in different ways: Gabriel “Gabe” Balboa is a newspaper reporter investigating both the freeway encampment and the smuggling rings; Rafaela Cortes, Gabe’s housekeeper, must protect her son when he becomes a target of the organ-harvesting ring; Bobby Ngu, Rafaela’s husband, gets involved with human traffickers who demand he pick up his cousin from south of the border; Emi, an editor at a TV station who is also Gabe’s girlfriend, tries to keep a distance from these crises but they eventually claim her life; Buzzworm, a self-styled Angel of Mercy who provides guidance and access to social services for people in South Central L.A., is Gabe’s street-level source for stories; Manzanar Murakami, Emi’s grandfather, is an eccentric “conductor” of the sounds of the city; and, finally, there’s Arcangel, a 500-year-old mythical being presented as the symbolic embodiment of all indigenous peoples, the oppressed, and immigrants.

This discussion will pair off Emi and Buzzworm to explore how they represent contrasting reactions to the world of the novel *and* approaches to dealing with its overwhelming fragmentation and detachment. The text guides readers to consider them as foils, to recognize their essential differences and the few places where they do overlap. They exist on a spectrum: at one end, Emi

attempts to build up a wall around herself through isolation and only paying attention to things that affect her directly (and avoiding anything that's too off-putting); at the other extreme, Buzzworm's goal is to ensure the survival and prosperity of *everyone else* by making himself eternally available to assist anyone in need. The text drives readers to see *neither* of them as successful, and these failures indicate that some other approach, a more balanced one, has a greater chance of building lasting and meaningful connections, of bringing coherence to a chaotic world. Emi and Buzzworm's pasts, their privileges, and their perspectives make for strange partners when they have to work together, so before looking at when they connect, it makes sense to discuss each individually.

The gulf between Emi and Buzzworm extends to even the physical locations where they are introduced: the location of Emi's first chapter is given as "Westside," indicating that she is in an area known for its cluster of posh, trendy neighborhoods, such as Beverly Hills, Bel Air, and Santa Monica. Emi and Gabe are having lunch, and they are conspicuously out of their element, surrounded by "studio types" (21); Emi teases Gabe about trying to "blend in," suggesting that he order a fancy drink to sound like he belongs (20). In her head, though, Emi knows that they can never *really* fade into the background of the café, as the normal clientele is predominantly white—Emi is Japanese-American, and Gabe is Mexican-American. She doesn't bring this up right away, though, and just lets the thought percolate in her head instead of verbalizing it (20-21). One of Emi's major anxieties is how she is perceived due to her ethnic heritage, and during her lunch with Gabe she flashes back to a conversation with her mother where mom

scolded her for her manner of speaking, saying, “[No] J.A. talks like that” (21). Emi’s flatly absurd response indicates that she will consider anything in favor of capitulating to her mother’s demands: “Maybe I’m not Japanese American. Maybe I got switched in the hospital” (21).

Emi frequently pushes back against the expectations others place on her due to her heritage, not wanting her sense of self to be tied up in that complex history; paradoxically, however, she is also very protective of this part of her identity. In a memorable scene, Emi rails against the idea of “cultural diversity” for the way it diminishes her experience. Emi and Gabe are having lunch at a sushi restaurant—the setting neatly contrasts with how out-of-place they felt at the trendy Westside diner earlier in the novel. The cuisine and décor make Emi comfortable; she “masticated and moaned” at how good the food is: “Albacore, wasabi, shoyu, vinegared rice. To die for” (124). She teases Gabe about his “conservative offering,” since he’s not much into sushi: “You might as well eat in any supermarket deli. My *mom* makes those” (124). This is a slight dig at her mother’s culinary skills, but the scene shows Emi as comfortable in her own skin, comfortable with her heritage—she doesn’t just discuss the traditionally Japanese cuisine, but also the skill her father and other Japanese-American men she knows have at gardening—in a way she certainly was not when she and Gabe were the only people of color at the other eatery. While she likes some of the modern accessories at the restaurant that separate it from places that are “too Zen” (125), such as the TV at the bar—more on Emi’s connection to the media and technology below—Emi makes Gabe uncomfortable when she begins to

“people watch.” Emi begins to wax sarcastically to Gabe about the “multicultural mosaic” in the room, “you and me and the gays at the end of the bar and the guy with a turban...There’s even white people here” (127)—when she says this, a woman sitting next to Emi, who is white, glares at her and tension slowly begins to build.

In Emi’s first chapter, we’re told that she likes to be “obnoxious” around Gabe and push his buttons, and one of her favorite things is to “[try] and be antimulticultural around him” (21). It’s presented as a game in this early scene, but as Emi works to agitate the woman sitting next to her, it becomes clear that she has deep-seated issues with cultural appropriation: she says, “Gabe, it’s all bullshit...Cultural diversity is bullshit”; she defines “cultural diversity” as “a white guy wearing a Nirvana t-shirt and dreds” (128). When her neighbor at the bar speaks up—she first asks Emi to “calm down” (128) but eventually gets bolder—she defends multiculturalism:

I happen to adore the Japanese culture. What can I say? I adore different cultures. I’ve traveled all over the world. I love living in L.A. because I can find anything in the world to eat, right here. It’s such a meeting place for all sorts of people. A true celebration of an international world. It just makes me sick to hear people speak so cynically about something so positive and to make assumptions about people based on their color.

Really, I’m sorry. I can’t understand your attitude at all. (129)

The speaker doesn’t know it at first, but these words perfectly encapsulate the problem Emi has with the phrase “cultural diversity” and the way it diminishes



her. This anonymous sushi patron speaks of loving Japanese culture but has scaled down the entirety of the Japanese and Japanese-American experience to food: her favorite part of L.A. is that she can “find anything to eat right here.” She demonstrates no understanding of the lived experience of Japanese-Americans; the elements of Emi’s heritage that she enjoys are a commodity she can purchase, eat, and then walk away from.<sup>5</sup> As Emi summarizes, “It’s just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card” (128). She punctuates their conversation by pointing out that the woman has chopsticks in her hair, and asks if she would consider wearing forks instead: “Or would you consider that...unsanitary?” (129).<sup>6</sup>

In the middle of this exchange, Emi turns to Hiro, the sushi chef, and intones, “See what I mean, Hiro? You’re invisible. I’m invisible. We’re all invisible” (128). As I mentioned above, there’s an apparent paradox here: elsewhere in the text, Emi is extremely guarded about her heritage, pushing back against the expectations her mother and others place on her to act and carry herself as “more Japanese-American.” And yet, in moments like this, she’s very protective of her

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<sup>5</sup> Although it is never addressed directly in the text, the fact that a large portion of the novel takes place in South Central L.A. brings to mind another surge in cultural appropriation from the 1990s: the embracing of hip-hop culture, especially elements of gansta rap, by white youth—especially white men. There’s an element in that impulse that reflects the discussions of sincerity and authenticity from my Introduction, in that there was an urge to be a part of something “real” (i.e., life on the streets), but in reality white audiences were only interested in limited aspects of what it means to be black in America. A recent look at this phenomenon, Nicole Phillips’ “Modern Blackface: The Cultural Appropriation Of Rap,” looks at how the influx of a white audience changed the landscape of hip-hop, interestingly focusing on how in some corners it became a satire of itself to meet the expectations of white America.

<sup>6</sup> Critics have looked extensively at the effects of globalization and multiculturalism in studies on the novel. See Rody (2004), Lee (2007), and Mermann-Jozwiak (2011).

heritage, lashing out at others for the way they appropriate and commodify it. The solution to this knot has to do with the fact that these intrusions on Emi's sense of self share the same nature: they both carry the danger of determining her life for her, or dictating how she *should* act or how she *should* be happy with the way others use her heritage for their own enjoyment. If she gave in, the result would be the same: she becomes invisible, just another piece of the background. These anxieties cause Emi to close herself off, to make the decision that *she* will be in control of *her* narrative, *her* identity, without letting anyone else in to have an effect on her; it's a lonely existence (she even keeps distance between herself and Gabe, always having a sarcastic quip ready or being willing to push his buttons to the limit), and one that the text presents as unproductive for facing the challenges of the world around her.

Another element of Emi's character that demonstrates her desire for autonomy is her obsession with progress and the future, especially the way she fauns over the wonders of modern, digital technology. In the first conversation we find her engaged in, she rolls her eyes at something being "passé" twice: first, she expresses how boring Gabe's favorite black-and-white noir movies are—"Next step is high-def...Colorize 'em all" (19)—and later worries that the food she and Gabe have ordered has already gone out of style on its way to the table (24). If something isn't the latest-and-greatest, if it isn't cutting edge, she isn't interested. In the same scene, she pokes fun at Gabe's paper calendar and organizer, telling him she'll get him an electronic scheduler, because "[this] is what the future is about. A paperless existence" (23). Emi prides herself in not

being tied down to the physical world that can age and go out of style; she's always looking forward to the next big idea, and is fine with having all of her data stored on microchips. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find out later in the text that she's involved in the media: she works for a TV station where she edits segments for broadcast on the news. She tells us, "I take a show, speed it up electronically, and if that's not enough, we slash and burn...Cut. Cut. Snip. Snip...get everything to wrap around the commercials" (126). Emi doesn't see herself as an artist or a craftswoman; she knows her work is, in the end, "about selling things," about making advertisers happy (126). It's important for our purposes, though, to notice that Emi's job involves taking different pieces of a narrative, moving them around, and putting them back together into a story for *convenience's* sake; it's a representation of how she deals with her own life as well, picking and choosing which parts of her experiences to embrace and which to reject, crafting a sense of self that requires intense attention in order to retain its integrity and coherence.

Although the order of the chapters in *Tropic of Orange* can sometimes seem haphazard, the placement of Buzzworm's first chapter immediately after Emi's works logically with the way the two are presented as foils. Buzzworm is introduced moving through his neighborhood in South Central L.A., the part of the city most unlike the Westside where we first meet Emi; it's diverse, it's economically depressed, and—especially considering the early 1990s history of L.A.—in a state of conflict and ruin.<sup>7</sup> Buzzworm is in the middle of his morning

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<sup>7</sup> Although it's never explored in any detail during the novel, the 1992 L.A. riots loom throughout the background of the story, especially seen in the media coverage of the various crises around the city, the militarization of the police, and

session of being an “Angel of Mercy,” which involves “walking the hood every day, walkin’ and talkin’, making contact” (26). He is described as a “walking social services”—he tours South Central during his waking hours handing out his business cards, offering guidance and advice, such as the conversation we find him engaged in at his first chapter’s opening, trying to convince a gang member to give up his life of crime: Buzzworm tells the young man, “Anybody can lay down and die. Survivin’s the hard part.” He retorts, “I’s survivin’. Everybody in the hood survivin’...Fuck that survivin’ shit”; Buzzworm tries to reason with him, telling him that living takes “some courage. Takes some sense”—before he breaks their convo off, the young guy says, “Sense. Shit. You don’t make no sense” (25-26). Many of Buzzworm’s attempted interventions end like this, but it doesn’t deter him from using his knowledge and experiences to help others. If he can’t help someone directly, he puts them in touch with someone who can, such as the grieving mother of that same young gang member—killed due to an apparent overdose—whom he directs to a support group, since he can’t fully understand what she’s going through (104). The stakes in Buzzworm’s world are quite different than in Emi’s. She is excited for her station’s Disaster Movie Week, where they show a different film featuring death and destruction every night (24). Buzzworm has no need for this, as he watches people deal with death and devastation on a daily basis. While Emi is obsessed with the future and what’s

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the racial tensions that simmer throughout. See Itagaki (2016), who writes about the brutal *aftermath* of the riots, which left thousands of people homeless or without jobs, and parts of the city still showing signs of the violence and devastation—and those are parts are “disproportionately” sections of the city populated by “people of color, recent immigrants, and the poor” (2), such as Buzzworm’s South Central.

coming next, Buzzworm is interested in the long history of everything around him; understanding this gives us insight into why he is so dedicated to people in his neighborhood. Of all the parts of his neighborhood that signify the passage of time, Buzzworm is most interested in palm trees. He tells some folks on his daily rounds, “You understand the species of trees in your neighborhood, you understand the nature of my work” (31); the text couldn’t be any clearer that a close reading of Buzzworm’s thoughts on the palm trees is essential to analyzing his character. We’re told that Buzzworm “really knew his palm trees,” and can identify the different species on sight (30), while most people didn’t know much about them except that they made good signposts to “mark the house where they lived” (31). Buzzworm admires palm trees for their longevity, their fortitude, and the knowledge they have stored in their trunks: they’re standing out in the middle of a desert and basically don’t need water and yet each tree “knows the time for everything. Knows to put out flowers and fruit when the time’s right, even though out here don’t seem like there’s any seasons to speak of”; they function like watches, “markin’ time” (31). Although Buzzworm doesn’t mention this fact, the species of the two palms he is discussing in this scene is significant: he identifies them as “Phoenix Canariensis,” the Canary Island palm (31)—which means it’s a transplant, not native to southern California.

Buzzworm sees the work he does as akin to the palm trees: he’s a sentinel, watching over the neighborhood and trying to keep an eye on any crisis or trouble that pops up around him. He wears at least three watches at all times and is fascinated by their history; people around the neighborhood know this, and

they always ask him, “Hey, Buzz, what time’s it?” Instead of letting them know the hour, he’ll remind them of something they can do to take care of themselves, such as: “Time you dropped in get tested for TB. Epidemic’s in town, just to let you know” (27). Buzzworm imagines the palm trees as tapped into the messages floating around the airwaves, and thinks that if maybe “he put his ear to the trunk of a palm tree, he could hear the radio waves descending from the scraggly fronds at the top” (30). Buzzworm is constantly connected in the same way: he always has a Walkman on and surfs up and down the dial listening to everything he can, even the languages he doesn’t understand—he believes this habit helped him quit smoking and all of his other addictions, that “the sound waves bouncing around the brain cells, massaging the nerves” produces a soothing effect at the same time they teach him about the world around him (29). Finally, it’s telling that the palm trees in the area are transplants because Buzzworm and the people around him are transplants, too: the African-American, Hispanic, and Korean populations of South Central L.A. are not natives, but they need to learn to adapt to the harsh conditions just like the trees; Buzzworm ponders this in his head: “Suppose we could all learn something from a palm tree that knows the seasons better than us” (31).

There is a substantial difference between the conditions the palm trees must survive and what the people of Buzzworm’s neighborhood must endure, though: the palm tree’s challenges are natural and environmental; the plight of Buzzworm and his neighbors is entirely man-made. Throughout the novel, Buzzworm flashes back to interactions he has had with government bureaucrats

who treat the residents of South Central with indifference (if they're lucky) and targeted policies meant to depress their opportunities and take advantage of their lack of social capital (which is much more common). He recalls a neighborhood meeting to discuss the widening of the freeway, where a bunch of bureaucrats promised a concerned elderly woman that the project "Wasn't gonna affect her" (82). This promise wasn't a lie, but it *was* part of their master plan of manipulation: instead of buying out locals and widening the freeway immediately, they delayed the project and began to systematically neglect the area to lower property values, fill the streets with crime, and force all of the current residents to move out—that way, they could buy up everything cheaply, and technically the widening of the freeway (when it eventually does happen) wouldn't affect that poor woman, as she would have either moved away or died.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the characters we have focused on elsewhere in this dissertation, Buzzworm is keenly aware of the political and social forces that work to dictate the conditions and course of the lives of him and the people around him. This awareness feeds into the attention he pays to others as opposed to the attention he pays to cultivating his own sense of self: he wants to make sure those around him, the most vulnerable and least powerful, have the resources to take control of their own lives. Towards the end of his first chapter, Buzzworm describes the moment where he realized all of this. He had his epiphany when he "got taken for a ride on the freeway"—the same stretch of freeway that encroaches on his

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<sup>8</sup> See Wald (2013) for a much more detailed discussion of spatial justice, gentrification, and mobility—with a special focus on how technologies of transportation (like the freeway) provide both physical and socioeconomic mobility for some but oppresses others.

neighborhood. He describes this section of the road as “a giant bridge,” since it carries drivers and passengers over his part of the city and, if drivers want to, they can “just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever” (33). We can feel it slowly dawning on him, even though Buzzworm doesn’t express it: that is exactly why the freeway was built where it was, because no one cared what goes on beneath it. He does notice one familiar sight out the window, though, and that’s the palm trees: “Only thing you could see that anybody might take notice of were the palm trees. That was what [they] were there for. To make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed” (33). Buzzworm has already likened himself to the trees, and this seals our understanding of his self-determined purpose: to work tirelessly to ensure that others can survive and thrive *and* to bring attention to his friends and neighbors. He imagines the trees need the lives of the people down below in order to grow so tall, no matter if the people were “poor and crazy, ugly or beautiful, honest or shameful”; he calls the lives of the people below the freeway “the great fertilizer” (33). At this point it’s abundantly clear that he’s speaking about himself: Buzzworm doesn’t just appreciate the people around him, he sustains himself with them.

Buzzworm’s absolute reliance on helping others makes him nearly the polar opposite of Emi, who, as we saw above, takes every step possible and uses all her energy to clearly define the boundaries of her self. Not surprisingly, the two characters that have the least in common are thrust together in the most high-pressure situation in the novel and must try and cooperate to make things



work. Gabe had been covering the homeless encampment on the abandoned freeway as a human-interest piece, but he has to travel to Mexico to investigate the smuggling rings; he asks Emi to sit in for him and take notes, and she reluctantly agrees. Emi and Buzzworm's physical proximity obviously doesn't immediately lead to them seeing eye-to-eye: their reactions to the crises overrunning the city are quite different and rooted in the way they see themselves in relation to others. The human cost of the event doesn't seem to impact Emi at all—like most things, she views it through the lens of her relation to the media, as that allows her to keep it at a distance and out of her own story. When Gabe's still on the freeway, she expresses jealousy that he's "down in the middle of a true current event"; she can tell it's an important moment not because of how many people are affected, but because it's "pre-empting *The Simpsons*, *Married With Children*, and *Margaret Cho*" (163). In a turn of phrase that gets very close to an oncoming cultural phenomenon, Emi tells Gabe that he is "the reality on TV," and asks where the event ranges on "the Richter scale from natural to human" (163). This last comment is probably the most callous Emi gets in the book, asking Gabe to rate the suffering he sees as if it were some sort of game. Earlier in the novel, before the extent of the accident was known, she is described as feeling "a little adrenaline high for real-life horror. Maybe because it was disaster movie week" (59-60). Emi is so engrossed in the films being shown on her network that she views real-life events through the same sort of lens. However, she decides to avoid the accident scene for as long as possible since "the thought of seeing mangled bodies in a car wreck suddenly churned about in

her stomach. She could always see it on TV” (60). The idea of the tragedy might excite her, but she’d much rather view it from a distance—a luxury she won’t have later in the story. Emi’s perspective is clear: her sense of self, the one she’s taken great care in constructing, doesn’t include what’s happening down on the freeway, so she does everything possible to keep her distance.

We know from everything we’ve learned about Buzzworm so far that he will do everything possible to make sure the people on the freeway are heard, in the hopes that people don’t get the wrong impression of them or misunderstand their plight. He hijacks the cameras from Emi’s news van and begins to broadcast from the freeway, at first just giving the people living there an outlet from which they can tell their stories, almost as if it’s a talk show: “Let’s welcome: Smokey, Pick-n-Save, and Pollyanna!” (177). The complexity of the production seems to grow by the minute, as Emi and her production crew notice that Buzzworm is using cue cards, taking questions from an audience, and pitching new ideas: “How about a cookin’ show?” (177-178). He throws to commercial breaks by reminding viewers: “Second Baptist is collecting your donations” (180). Emi’s network is initially furious at this, but then they see the ratings, telling her (since they believe she’s responsible): “*You got the go-ahead! Momentum is building. Phones won’t stop. Who is this Buzzworm? Man’s synonymous with telegenic. We might be 75% and climbing!*” (178, italics in original). The question “Who is this Buzzworm?” is a question that’s hard to answer except by describing what he *does*, since Buzzworm has spent so little time working on cultivating who he *is*. This does not undermine his good deeds, but as we watch the network turn him

into a caricature—they quickly create a logo with a cartoon character “complete with Walkman and watches and palm trees batiked onto his dashiki” (180)—we’re reminded that his lack of attention paid to defining himself allows others to fashion him as a character that fits their needs. Emi’s pulling away from others is more apparently unhelpful for the cause of the community, but what’s going on with Buzzworm is more subtle: as his celebrity grows, his attention begins to wander from other things he should have kept an eye on, and he doesn’t see the much more fatal disaster coming.

Throughout the entirety of the situation on the freeway, Buzzworm’s attention is frequently drawn to the outskirts of the encampment: “The entire LAPD was lined up on either side of the Harbor Freeway readyin’ up to catch any homeless wantin’ to flee the canyon...a bunch of buzzards” (139). Buzzworm’s own personal history as a Vietnam veteran predisposes him to be on the lookout for brewing signs of violence and chaos, and he sees it all around him; unfortunately, he’s having trouble locating “the line,” the invisible boundary that, once stepped across, puts you at the mercy of the enemy.<sup>9</sup> Without knowing where the line is, you don’t even know who these enemies are (he’s speaking about the line in L.A. at the moment, but he compares it explicitly to the difficulty in identifying enemies during guerilla combat in Vietnam); but once you step across the line, you can be “implicated, arrested, jailed, [or] killed” with impunity

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<sup>9</sup> Although not especially relevant to this particular conversation, a large portion of the critical work done on *Tropic of Orange* considers borders and boundaries, although these are almost always borders between nations and cultures, and most often has to do with the narratives of immigration other characters in the text go through (such as Bobby, Rafaela, Arcangel). See Molly Wallace (2001), Delgado (2017), and Jansen (2017).

(217); stepping back from the line, though, just causes him to be “invisible” (echoing Emi’s anxiety from earlier in the text). Buzzworm has dedicated his whole life to demarcating “the line” and moving as many people away from its danger as possible: as an “Angel of Mercy,” he’s tasked himself with retrieving people who are toeing it or crossing it. He has taken on the responsibility of shouldering everyone else’s burdens, of trying to resolve everyone’s problems—without giving much thought to taking care of himself. He’d be “invisible” if he stepped back from the line because Buzzworm not living at the border of life and death is someone no one has ever known. These are the real dimensions of the immense gulf between Buzzworm and Emi: the cutting/editing style she uses to organize her sense of self is so individualized that it comes across as solipsistic; on the other side, Buzzworm’s self is so spread out—involving the livelihoods, conflicts, and health of everyone in his community—that he comes off as disturbingly diffuse and unsustainable, with nothing to fall back on. The mistakes Emi and Buzzworm make grow out of a misunderstanding about the lines they draw between themselves and others. Emi’s are brick walls through which nothing can penetrate. Buzzworm, even with all his obsessions with lines, chooses to ignore the boundaries between individuals in his community. We can feel comfortable categorizing these as “mistakes” due to how the text ends: Emi is shot while sunbathing on top of her news van as the chaos of the battle between a militarized police force and the homeless finally erupts (237); her ultimate fate is unknown, but her final words in the last chapter focusing on her—“Abort. Retry. Ignore. Fail...” (252, ellipses in original), a common set of options presented to a

user when a computer program suffers a fatal error—suggests she does not make it. Buzzworm might survive the aftermath, but many of his friends do not.

In a departure from the texts we have read so far, neither Emi or Buzzworm stand as thorough, productive examples of undermining the fragmentation and detachment that pervades the novel, which in *The New Sincerity* is what the texts assume the reader is searching for. That is not to say that the characters are entirely *un-relatable*—Emi’s discomfort with others dictating how she should act or think based on her heritage can certainly build a connection with any reader who feels the same anxiety; Buzzworm’s impulse to help those around him, to the point of exhaustion, is certainly admirable. However, as I have indicated above, their examples are not replicable or transferable; they are so extreme as to potentially turn readers off—and the fact that their efforts (Emi’s to stay isolated and Buzzworm’s to save everyone) fail is the text prodding readers, guiding them to think otherwise. But the novel does not end with Emi’s death and the clearing out of the homeless encampment; we get one final chapter with Buzzworm, and the slight changes he makes—to the way he carries himself, to the way he makes himself available, and to his attitude—demonstrate the growth of the *potential* and *opportunity* that *The New Sincerity* often latches onto.

Buzzworm’s final chapter—the second-to-last in the book—sees him returning home, carrying out his household chores, and, surprisingly, going about his daily business as if nothing had happened—we’re told he “gritted his teeth...Took a deep breath” and then hit the pavement again trying to make a

difference (265). But there are very subtle hints that Buzzworm has reassessed how he conceptualizes his relationship to the world around him—and in just a few paragraphs, he makes a turn that moves towards emphasizing how crucial it is to strike the right balance between cultivation of the self through careful attention to your own needs and desires *and* caring for others. The biggest change he makes is throwing away his Walkman—as we have seen above, he had continuously been plugged into the radio waves of the city. It was always on, but didn't need to be loud, “just there, soft in the background, like an inner voice” (29). When he took the earphones off, it “meant he was unplugged from his inner voice” (29-30). Although wanting to gain new perspectives is an important part of his vocation, the fact that dozens of radio stations took the place of Buzzworm's “inner voice” illustrates the flimsiness of his own conception of self that he's given up for the service of others. Earlier in the text, Buzzworm becomes frustrated that others don't share his viewpoint; he dejectedly concludes, “If they didn't see it, they didn't see it” (190). What never crosses his mind, but which should be clear to us now, is that they had trouble seeing his perspective because it's not as well defined as he imagines— without the headphones, he should start to hear his own voice again, making it clear to *himself* what he thinks and what he values—he can then share that with others, and he'll finally be able to really connect, as opposed to being a mobile social services kiosk.

Ditching the Walkman also allows Buzzworm to get his “coordinates” back, in that he can start locating where *he* is again through careful reflection and choices; however, he doesn't end the book in any sort of state similar to Emi's

bubble. On his final page, Buzzworm reflects on the last radio show he listened to before getting rid of his Walkman forever. It was a science fiction/conspiracy show called *Hour 25* (similar to *Coast to Coast AM*), and on this episode the host was talking about something called “mythic realities.” With so much on his mind, Buzzworm can’t remember if this term refers to “everyone gets plugged into a myth and builds a reality around it” or the other way around: “Everybody gets plugged into a reality and builds a myth around it” (265). The former is a description of the subjectivization that happens under the thumb of structures of power: each person is handed a story about who they are, and they construct their relationship to the world around them using the contours of this myth. The latter describes what both Emi and Buzzworm were doing in the course of the novel leading up to Emi’s death and the destruction around it: leaning heavily into their own conceptions of self without taking the time to consider the consequences.

Buzzworm brushes both of these to the side, saying, “Things would be what he and everybody else chose to do. It wasn’t going to be something imagined” (265). The new approach that is suggested here—but never laid out bare on the page, even in the subtle way we have seen it in other texts—is separated from all that has come before due to the fact that the previous conceptions were “imagined.” Buzzworm has lived out the real-world consequences of staking his claim to a conceptualization of the self that is mythical and metaphorical (think about how he thought of himself as in-tune with nature through his radio waves, or how he shared essential properties with

the palm trees), and his vow at the end of the text is to find something more grounded and—perhaps even more importantly—something that involves “everybody else.” Buzzworm cannot shake what he still knows to be true, despite all that has happened: that in order to thrive, he must foster connections with those around him as he begins to sketch out the boundaries of his self. But “he” comes before “everybody else” in this sentence, a very subtle lexical clue that he has interiorized the importance of tending to himself as well as others. *Tropic of Orange* has an open-ended conclusion, with Buzzworm never getting to demonstrate these ideas in action—will it change the way he deals with the people he’s trying to help in his neighborhood? Will it bolster his position as an activist—now that he can begin to develop a more relatable perspective—speaking truth to power and driving at the forces that oppress his neighborhood? Readers can only speculate, which comes off as a bit frustrating—something felt at the conclusions of the other texts examined here as well—but which is fitting for the last text I discuss in relation to *The New Sincerity*; as my conclusion below indicates, there is a lot of work still to be done.



## Conclusion – What’s Next for The New Sincerity?

In my Introduction to this dissertation and in Chapter 1, I made clear that The New Sincerity (or “the new sincerity”) has taken on many forms and has been identified and demarcated in different ways by the critics, thinkers, and figures that have touched it so far. The purpose of my study was to define The New Sincerity in precise terms like it has never been before—which included looking into its intellectual, historical, and cultural roots—and to make it clear how this provocative interpretative mode relies on a complex paradigm between reader and text, both of which follow an impulse to elevate coherence, connection, and clarity over fragmentation, detachment, and obfuscation. The three primary texts I have explored each approach this slightly differently, even if they all share the same basic impulse to condition and guide their readers to connect and be attracted to moves made in the fictional worlds to combat the forces of detachment and fragmentation that have become dominant motifs in literature, other cultural production, politics, economics, and various spheres of life. *Infinite Jest*, for all of its (literal) weight and its narrative and structural complexity, finds its thematic center in the isolated moments where Don Gately suffers in his hospital bed; using techniques borrowed from Alcoholic Anonymous and then tinged with his own personal memories of enduring the most difficult parts of his life, Gately builds a wall around the smallest stretch of time he can imagine—each of his heartbeats—and continuously rededicates himself, with each beat of his heart, to abiding. In *Drown*, our most recognizable protagonist, Yunior, bears the crushing weight of his difficult life on his back, and

has every right to feel aggrieved due to the misfortunes that have befallen him: an absent father (that turned into an abusive father when he was around), growing up in poverty in two different countries, living under the thumb of institutionalized racism and xenophobia that target him and his community. Yunion could despair, he could lash out—we would understand why either of these would happen, even if that would make a very tragic story. Instead, Yunion is provided with an example of how empathy can be used to gain a semblance of control over one's life—or at least what one's life story is used for. And finally, in *Tropic of Orange*, we see a progression that acknowledges the importance of both building a sense of self through controlling your own personal limits *and* looking outwards to others as a way to build lasting connections and combat fragmentation; however, Yamashita's book makes it clear that it is possible to veer too far in either direction, that one can be too self-absorbed and also too other-absorbed. Falling somewhere in the middle is an important balance to find in order to ensure self care and a healthy place within a community.

There is still much more work to be done regarding The New Sincerity in American literature, especially in regards to continuing to carefully explicate the dual-pronged paradigm that requires both the reader to come to the text primed to search for and react to texts that value coherence, stability, and connection, *and* for the text to carefully condition the readers to locate where the default mode of confrontational and cynical literature—most often associated with postmodernism—is undermined by the subtler, more intimate moments that reach out to readers for a connection. This assumes a lot about these texts,

primarily that the texts themselves have absorbed the anxieties and attitudes that I ascribe to the careful readers of literature imagined in Chapter 1. I believe it's still worth it to emphasize that The New Sincerity is not *simply* a collection of features that can be identified in a text (although the texts I've read in this dissertation share many features and rhetorical strategies), and The New Sincerity is not *simply* the attitude or approach a reader takes to literature in response to an overwhelming sense of detachment and fragmentation (although this is an essential part of it and cannot be skipped over); The New Sincerity is the interpretative mode that develops when these two elements come together. It's important to note that this does *not* imply an intentionality or a specific purpose on the reader's part: one can read and react without meaning to, so certainly the connections described above could be made without the reader setting out to build them; additionally, what the reader *does* with what they discover or get out of a text is entirely up to them—The New Sincerity is not dependent on readers acting in a particular way outside of the text; our study here is concerned with what happens between them and the text.

A question that comes up quite frequently is: *what's "new" about The New Sincerity?* I think I have answered that through my explorations into the concept's intellectual history, the historicizing of its origins, and my examinations of the literary texts above: throughout its history, "sincerity" has most often been used to refer to purity, a clarity of purpose, or a congruence between a person's inner self and their outward expression to others—this final one, at least until it was superseded by authenticity in the twentieth century, was often seen as a moral

category that distinguished upright and ethical people. The New Sincerity of course gathers influence from all of these threads, but the term has rarely—if ever—been used to describe an interpretive strategy, a collection of impulses and strategies for reading literary texts. A related question crops up here: when does The New Sincerity stop being so “new”? This is a fair question, especially since I have taken pains to detail the specific historical conditions that set the stage for The New Sincerity to emerge in the 1990s—as each new year goes by, that decade slips even further into the past, and to try and argue that the historical context of, say, 1996 is more or less the same as 2018 would be patently absurd. I would not advocate for an alteration of terms at this point, or probably ever—New Criticism continues to be deployed and studied to this day, and I think that’s a good parallel to why the “newness” of the idea does not matter: it’ll be The New Sincerity in 2020, and it will be in 2035 as well, even as its genesis fades further into the past.

One final question that I believe warrants asking and answering, especially since it opens up avenues for future research, is whether or not reading with The New Sincerity is an application worth bringing to bear on works of literature outside of the 1990s (my dissertation itself has even a smaller scope, with all three major works being published in 1996—Wallace and Díaz—or 1997—Yamashita). I believe that such studies have a great deal of promise, but that they require their own rigorous historicizing to identify the attitudes and proclivities that readers bring to bear on literary texts—certainly, there are different degrees and different waves of these feelings that have percolated to the

top of American culture since the 1990s. I am thinking of watershed moments like 9/11—an event that caused a number of commentators to dismiss irony as not just used up, but inappropriate and useless in the new world 9/11 had created (see Beers, writing just two weeks after the attacks, who does not necessarily agree with this sentiment but summarizes the many critics who do). A related query is whether The New Sincerity is a valid approach to literature from other periods of literary history, or whether it's an exclusively American experience. I think it would be unreasonable to argue that the sense of fragmentation and detachment that is felt during postmodernity is *unlike* anything else that has been seen before—certainly, as long as a text conditions and guides its readers in the way detailed above and readers are receptive to it, I would feel comfortable calling it The New Sincerity. Although I am not an expert outside of recent American literature, I am confident that looking at other national literatures and periods would lead to fruitful study, even if the terminology and historical context were different.

New forms of media that were just getting started in the 1990s bring up interesting questions having to do with subjectivity—in the vein of Chapter 1 of this dissertation, a study focusing more on the first two decades of the twenty-first century and looking at the rise of social media would bring up some fascinating issues. So many different forms of social media ask users to present what they believe to be an authentic version of themselves—each app and platform has its own version of a “timeline” where users organize their posts for others to see—which ostensibly reveals important things about their character.

However, the lingering question here is: if *you* get to choose every bit of information doled out to every other user, how much does that image reflect your *true* self? Is social media redefining what it means to be a subject in the digital age (which has already done that at least once before, according to the theories of posthumanism)? It's easy to take for granted while reading literature that characters are laid bare on the page, faults and all (unless they are unreliable, which I don't believe the characters in my study above are), but it's a trickier situation when dealing with real people. The culture of the internet in general—starting with social media but extending to forms of media such as streaming video, podcasting, and blogging, and such subcultures and practices as the dark web, trolling, and surveillance—is a rich field overall. Only one of the texts analyzed above, *Tropic of Orange*, deals with the realities of the internet in general (*Infinite Jest* imagines forms of on-demand media, but it's as fully realized as what we see in Yamashita's book), and—being from 1997—it's in its infancy compared to today. Ed Park's novel *Personal Days* is the best candidate I can imagine for a study in this direction—in one sense, it's a classic workplace drama, with intrigue and scandal surrounding corporate restructuring; but so many of the rumors and important tidbits are shared through email and the office intranet that there's something to be said about how the messages are delivered and read and how that affects what they mean and how it conditions readers to interpret the fragments of information being passed around digitally.

Sticking with the theme of technology and progress for a moment: George Saunders was an author whose work was considered for further exploration in

this dissertation, but in the end it did not fit the arc of my discussions; however, his fiction still deserves an intense analysis with The New Sincerity in mind, as his stories reflect anxieties about how our modes of expression and our conceptions of self are rapidly changing as our reliance on technology increases. One story in particular to start with could be “Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz,” which includes characters who have become addicted to virtual reality and the way it allows them to inhabit selves that are unavailable to them in the real world; a related technology allows people to erase memories, to “offload” them to a hard drive, and the narrator uses it on himself in the end to forget his greatest regrets. The story asks: if you erase the stories that make you *you*, do you become a different person? Saunders has a number of other stories that blur the edges of self due to either technology, commerce, or a mixture of both, and lengthy discussions could come of them.

I have written about privilege and circumstance a number of different times in this dissertation. In *Infinite Jest*, Gately has been dealt a bad hand in a number of ways, but the deterministic systems he lives under are not discriminatory—as imagined in the text, they treat everyone fairly in the sense that they doesn’t single any one group out for oppression; everyone gets the same amount of pressure to conform. *Drown* and *Tropic of Orange* deal with this quite differently: we see numerous examples in these texts of characters being targeted for their race, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics; the systems highlighted in these texts use discriminatory tactics that Gately, as a white man, would never have to deal with. However, each of our characters

shares a basic understanding of their situations, as they all have their mental faculties intact. What would a reading with *The New Sincerity* make of someone who has begun to lose control of the basic way they comprehend the world around them? A novel like Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* opens up such discussions in a way that could present productive challenges for the field. In it, a young woman named Veblen hops from menial job to menial job, unsatisfied with the way her life is going in many regards (not very different, in some ways, from other characters we've seen), but she does have a passion for translating esoteric Norwegian texts—also, when she's alone and no one is watching, she befriends and speaks with neighborhood squirrels. This is a habit that she picked up as a girl that was worked out of her after years of therapy and treatment, but it's returned as her life becomes more stressful (her wedding is approaching, and her fiancé works in the cutthroat medical technology industry). Does Veblen's story get excluded from discussions of *The New Sincerity* since her sense of self is clouded by her mental illness? This is not an easy question to answer, and a multilayered approach coinciding with theories of disability studies could open up a powerful thread here.

One other aspect that the texts explored in this dissertation share, something I've brought up a few times throughout, is that they feature open-ended conclusions—each has loose ends left hanging, and we are never privy to how our characters feel, how they react, or how they change their lives after making essential decisions about how they will handle their new understanding or a new strategy they've developed for organizing their experience. Don Gately



is ripped out of his near-coma state when a medical emergency threatens his life; Yunior walks away from Nilda's apartment and tells us he went home, without ever talking to anyone (even his readers) about how he feels; and while we see Buzzworm pound the pavement the day after the massacre on the freeway, we don't see how his interactions with his community change—if they even do—now that he has decided to let his own inner voice develop (on top of that, Emi's life still technically hangs in the balance at the end of the novel—we're never told whether or not she survives). I believe these ambiguities are an apt note to end on, because the study of The New Sincerity in American literature is still a young field, and I do not believe this dissertation is the final word on it in any way. Although some perceptions of The New Sincerity are still tied up in the simplest understanding of the word "sincerity," it is about so much more than simply being frank and expressing ideas without irony. There are still many further discussions to be had about what it is and what it isn't, where its limits lie, and how it interacts with other literary trends and movements. I believe an important part of working in this burgeoning field is to celebrate that the borders are constantly in flux, much like the borders around the self that our characters are working so hard to define; working at the outset of the field's expansion creates innumerable opportunities for research, debate, and the synthesis of diverse ideas and theories for years to come.

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