

# **AFTER THE BOOM:**

## **APOCALYPSE AND ECONOMICS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE NEOLIBERAL PERIOD**

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After the Boom:  
Apocalypse and Economics in American Literature of the Neoliberal Period  
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*After the Boom* argues that the political rationality and economic practices that we refer to as neoliberalism have been so consequential for literary form in the United States as to justify marking a new literary period. Theorizing neoliberalism as a mode of sense-making that attempts to shape subjects who read all phenomena as economic, this project posits the literary as a site that exceeds and resists – even as it becomes entangled with – neoliberalism. *After the Boom* brings together four well-known yet starkly distinct U.S. writers – James Baldwin, Cormac McCarthy, Leslie Marmon Silko, and David Foster Wallace – to demonstrate that apocalypse is a formal structuring principle and an occasion for political critique central to American literature of the neoliberal period.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Dan Sinykin grew up in Minnesota. He lives in Ithaca, New York, and enjoys riding his bike around Tompkins County.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: James Baldwin's Apocalypse.....	26
Chapter Two: Evening in America.....	64
Chapter Three: Unreading the World.....	98
Chapter Four: Almost Magic.....	138
Conclusion:.....	182

## Introduction

“If the greatest free nation in the history of mankind has to get down on its knees in fear of something as abstract and arbitrary as these so called ‘free market forces,’ well, then we’re through”

– Hubert Humphrey, 1976

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”

– Unknown origin, misattributed to Fredric Jameson

Walter Benn Michaels thinks that neoliberalism has led to “a pretty sad time for the American novel” (“Real” 179). Writing in 2013 but reprising an argument that he has been rehearsing and refining for two decades, Michaels argues that novels such as *Beloved*, *Blood Meridian*, *Underworld*, and *The Plot Against America* participate in the “characteristic” move of the “neoliberal novel”: “the substitution of cultural difference...for class difference” (“Real” 185). Why does this make for a sad time? In 2011, Michaels argued that neoliberal novels “make the central problems of American society a matter of identity instead of a matter of money” during a period when wealth inequality has rapidly increased (“Model” 1023). Such novels should, according to Michaels, “thus be understood as elements in a larger discursive structure, one in which increasing appreciation of the values of identity is accompanied by increasing hostility to discrimination against identities, and in which the appreciation and hostility are both accompanied by indifference to the increasing economic inequality that has been the hallmark of

American society since the mid-1970s” (“Model” 1027). Further, “the focus on identity functions not just to distract people from the increase in inequality but to legitimate it” (“Model” 1027). Ultimately, Michaels laments, “neoliberalism has played almost no visible role in our cultural imaginary” (“Real” 177).

Michaels’ polemical point aims to “alter the political terrain of contemporary American life” (*Trouble* 7). He wants to shift the conversation from identity to inequality. But in his polemical zeal, Michaels offers an unsatisfactory either/or – either identity or economic inequality – that simplifies and falsely disentangles the two.<sup>1</sup> Further, he understands literature as only superficially different from other kinds of discourse. This allows him to subordinate whatever might be literary about literature to his goal of urging literary criticism away from identity politics and toward renewed attention to economic inequality. But literary criticism that evades the literary has missed what is central to literature. Literature does have a special place in neoliberalism, though not the one Michaels imagines. What makes literature different from other kinds of writing is, in part, its resistance to instrumental thinking, whereas neoliberalism strives to reduce all discourse to instrumental economic calculations. Formally, this means that literary texts produce meaning not through a series of logically linked propositions, but through figural and narrative signification. These alternative modes open literature to what Derek Attridge calls its “singularity,” illustrated in its “unsettling, intoxicating, moving, [and] delighting powers” (1).

Criticism that ignores the singularity of the literary instrumentalizes literature, according to Attridge, who goes on to note the parallel between the instrumentalization of higher education in recent decades and the instrumentalization of literary criticism (6-9). He writes, “The plethora of fashionable buzz-words that emerged in the world of education during the last two decades of the twentieth century – quality assurance, benchmarking, accountability, outcomes assessment,

performance indicators, and all the rest of them – are symptoms of an attitude toward teaching and learning, and toward what we can loosely call the aesthetic domain, that is far from new . . . but that is now . . . permeating more areas and activities than ever before” (6). We now recognize the practices of standardization described by Attridge as a component of neoliberalism, which works to determine the quantitative value of all spheres of life. Attridge goes on, “Although the majority of recent studies claiming a political function for literature to have appeared in recent years have situated themselves on the left, there is a sense in which many of them could be said to participate in an instrumentalized system of literary education, criticism, and publication” (9). We can hear echoes of Michaels’ own criticism of literary critics who focus on identity, who, he argues, imagine themselves on the left but in practice legitimate the right. Putting literature in the service of political economics, ignoring literature’s specificity at the expense of its outcomes, Michaels himself proves to be an exemplary neoliberal critic.

This dissertation argues that the economic crisis of the 1970s and the subsequent rise and institutionalization of neoliberalism established the conditions for a particular literary formation: the neoliberal apocalypse. To put it otherwise: an unlikely group of U.S. writers have, by turning to apocalypse, opened for us new ways of understanding the relationship between neoliberalism and literature. Neoliberalism’s instrumentalizing drive threatens literature’s specificity and, in response, major works of literature of the period internalize, thematize, and express this threat as apocalyptic in rhetoric, form, and genre. In the face of capitalist crisis and neoliberalism, these works insist that *we cannot depend on the future not being radically different from the present*, a difficult thought that undoes a fundamental premise of economics as a discipline (that tomorrow will be like yesterday and today) and that unsettles the orientation we must take for granted as citizens and consumers in contemporary state capitalism.

Apocalyptic narrative is a figurally dense mode with which to characterize the present. The first two chapters of this dissertation study writers – James Baldwin and Cormac McCarthy – whose texts make us rethink history by providing narratives shot through with the figure of silence as a tactic for surviving cataclysmic U.S. imperialism or with the notion that imperial capitalism is destined to be consumed by the violence it required for its institution. The way these ideas emerge are particularly literary: through intertextual references to slave spirituals and through allegory. The last two chapters consider literary accounts of neoliberal subjectivity. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Leslie Marmon Silko depicts characters for whom entrepreneurship trumps ethics and any other vision of human flourishing, a development that brings us to the apocalyptic brink. She models her novel loosely on a written text that disentangles subjects from neoliberalism through its resistance to instrumental modes of signification. In David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, characters suffer from debt and addiction, a trend so widespread that it leads us, again, to the apocalyptic brink. Again, as with Silko, Wallace’s literary text is meant to model disentanglement from neoliberal logics of market rationality.

Against Michaels’ complaint, then, that neoliberalism has been culturally invisible, I aim to show that neoliberalism is ubiquitously present in contemporary American literature – we just have not known how to see it. Though the texts I study in this dissertation – Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*, McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, and Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* – are saturated with the formal qualities of neoliberal apocalyptic writing, these qualities appear widely elsewhere in texts we might not expect. To take one of the authors Michaels highlights as supplanting class with identity (in *The Plot Against America*), Philip Roth’s 2001 *The Dying Animal* is a novel that does not seem to be about the economy. It tells the story of David Kepesh, an aging literature professor and cultural authority who revels in political

incorrectness and serially sleeps with his students until he falls in love. According to Paul Giles, the novel demonstrates how “the virtues of cultural nonconformity become a way of keeping alive the old spirit of American exceptionalism” (146). That is, for Giles, the novel retells a familiar narrative about American identity.

I might agree were it not for an unexpected passage near the novel’s end. Kepesh’s young love, Consuela Castillo, returns to him on New Year’s Eve, 1999, distraught because she has breast cancer. Together they watch “the New Year coming in around the world,” fireworks shows that Kepesh compares to the destruction of WWII and describes as “the mockery of the Armageddon” (144). Even though it is a mockery, Kepesh still imagines “people anticipating the worst as though the evening were one long air-raid drill” (144-45). But, according to Kepesh, “the disaster of the end will now never arrive”: “No bombs go off, no blood is shed – the next bang you hear will be the boom of prosperity and the explosion of markets. The slightest lucidity about the misery made ordinary by our era sedated by the grandiose stimulation of the grandest illusion” (145).

Why are people still “anticipating the worst” if the apocalypse “will now never arrive”? Could it be that these “people” around the world, viewed from a TV in the U.S., are anticipating precisely “the boom of prosperity and the explosion of markets”? This last phrase is ambiguous: it suggests sudden wealth production, but the next sentence recommends a destructive reading of “boom” and “explosion,” describing an economy – “the grandest illusion” – poised, as we know, at the far edge of the dotcom bubble, preparing to lay bare, once again, the “misery made ordinary” by neoliberalism. In Kepesh’s narrative, nuclear fear has given way to economic anxiety. The American exceptionalism Giles finds in *The Dying Animal* is haunted by the global anticipation of economic apocalypse – Kepesh has “a sense of the monied world eagerly entering

the prosperous dark ages” – glimpsed briefly before Kepesh supplants economic with mortal anxiety: “Consuela alone knows” what in fact is ending because she, cancerous, now understands “the closeness of death”: not the economy’s, that is, but her own (148). The ultimate rupture in the ongoingness of everyday life is death. On the novel’s last page, Kepesh leaves the reader, who begs him not to go, so he can take care of the dying Consuela. “She has to eat. She has to be fed” (156). Despite the reader telling him, “if you go, you’re finished,” Kepesh departs the world of signification.

Literary critics working on the late twentieth century have been slow to join Kepesh in his turn from the nuclear to the economic.<sup>2</sup> The Cold War remains the foremost model for periodizing post-WWII American literature.<sup>3</sup> I hope with this dissertation to inaugurate a new frame, to open discussion about American literature of the neoliberal period. With the remainder of this introduction, I will explain two of my central terms, *neoliberalism* and *apocalypse*, before situating my work among scholars of American literature and providing an overview of *After the Boom*’s chapters.

### *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is the extension of market values to all realms of life.<sup>4</sup> It names a movement within the discipline of economics that transformed the world in the 1970s. It began in the 1930s and 1940s as a reaction against collectivist strains in the economic thought of John Maynard Keynes and others, and under the shadow of totalitarianism. Early neoliberals – who tended to think of themselves as returning to classical liberalism even as they expanded and reinvented the concept – feared that socialist economic policies in England and the New Deal in the United States would lead to totalitarian governments like those of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. In

response, they advocated for a vision of individual freedom comprised, necessarily, of economic freedom. They championed the market's capacity to guide as many human decisions as possible. They believed – and their belief has become normalized as common sense – that a maximal reliance on economic rationality would lead to the best of possible worlds.<sup>5</sup>

When the global economy descended into a crisis in the 1970s, neoliberals, abetted, in the U.S., by a conservative revival and an energized and politically organized business community, took the opportunity to institute their ideas.<sup>6</sup> As Milton Friedman, the most famous neoliberal, reflected in 1982, “Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable” (xiv). Friedman and other neoliberal economists were enormously successful in making their vision appear inevitable and its ouster now seem impossible. But why does this matter for literature?

Friedman's success in fervidly marketing the inseparability of “competitive capitalism and freedom” opened the floodgates for the unprecedented rationalization of society, including the instrumentalization of all realms of life. This rationalization and instrumentalization relied on a notion introduced by Friedman's mentor, Friedrich Hayek, who, imagining a utopic society, wrote, “what is required is some apparatus of registration which automatically records all the relevant effects of individual actions and whose indications are at the same time the resultant of, and the guide for, all individual decisions” (95). Happily, Hayek felt he had found this apparatus in the form of the free market and its price mechanism. It would take Friedman's University of Chicago colleague, Gary Becker, to imagine how Hayek's market could, in practice, guide “all individual decisions.” Becker pioneered the concept of human capital, which conceives of people

as investments. He went on to extend economic rationality to the family (children as property, having children as a consumer choice), addiction (how might addiction maximize utility?), and education (an investment in one's human capital). The work of Hayek, Friedman, and Becker, to name only the most prominent figures, has led to the well-known and long-standing crisis faced by the humanities: how can a field of study that is at its root opposed to instrumental thinking justify itself before administrations governed by neoliberal logic? Further, how can literature itself survive with its singularity intact in a time of neoliberalism?

Before beginning to answer these questions, we must acknowledge that "neoliberalism" means different things to critics coming from different traditions. Part of why I can call Walter Benn Michaels an exemplary neoliberal critic when he fashions himself as against neoliberalism is because he and I have different understandings of the term. Though he never defines it, his work suggests that he thinks of neoliberalism as a collection of economic practices that restores wealth to the elite and exacerbates economic inequality. I have been discussing neoliberalism, as defined above, as the extension of market value to all realms of life. These two definitions track the two dominant interpretations of "neoliberalism" in the humanities today; they are related and reconcilable.

Of these two versions, one begins with Michel Foucault, the other with geographer David Harvey. Foucault, delivering prescient lectures in 1978-1979, argues that liberalism is "just a question of freeing the economy," whereas *neoliberalism* attempts "a general formalization of the powers of the state and the organization of society on the basis of the market economy" (118; 117). Where once the state and society were relatively autonomous from economic rationality, they are no longer. Political theorist Wendy Brown adopts and extends Foucault's analysis. Following Foucault, she argues that what distinguishes neoliberalism as *neo* is that it entails

“*extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social actions,*” which, she adds, has chilling consequences for liberal democracy (n.p., emphasis hers). Writing in 2003, she notes, “liberal democracy has provided over the last two centuries a modest gap between economy and polity,” before concluding: “It is this gap that neo-liberalism closes” (n.p.).

David Harvey, whose *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) has helped to popularize the term, differs from Foucault and Brown in his emphasis on ideology. Whereas Foucault and Brown understand neoliberalism as instituting new political formations that alter reality, Harvey, in the Marxist tradition, sees neoliberalism as a continuation of capitalist logic, a mystification that must be unmasked. Thus, though, for Harvey, neoliberalism “is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices,” ultimately, the “theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has...primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve” the restoration of upper-class power (2; 13). The term thereby loses specificity for Harvey. It names both the political rationality (for Harvey, the utopian ideology) and the full range of practices, which he calls “accumulation by dispossession” – i.e. privatization, commodification, and financialization – by which economic inequality increases and class power is restored (160-61).

Harvey’s characterization invites paranoid usage in which neoliberalism becomes the singular cause of all negative effects. It also misses the way in which daily practices have been remade in the image of the market. But he and Michaels are not wrong about neoliberalism’s effects on capitalism and inequality: the difference could be construed as that between macro and microeconomics, between thinking about aggregate change within systems and individual action. Both strands come to us from Hayek and Friedman, emphasizing different aspects of their work.

I can, then, agree with Michaels in his opposition to the effects of neoliberal practices on wealth inequality while pointing out that his own scholarship makes him a neoliberal.

Foucault, Brown, and Harvey each recognize neoliberalism as naming the political ethos that has dominated at least the U.S. and much of Europe since the 1970s. But, as my analysis of Harvey begins to suggest, anytime a term gains currency and a reputation for explanatory power it risks becoming evacuated of its specificity and erasing difference (c.f. “globalization”). Lauren Berlant, who herself uses the term, observes that “critics interested in the ways structural forces materialize locally often turn the heuristic ‘neoliberalism’ into a world-homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests” (15). Lisa Lowe cautions that an uncritical deployment of “neoliberalism” can reproduce the imperial erasure of colonial difference, rewriting the history of the non-Western present in exclusively Western terms (n.p.). Neither Berlant nor Lowe thinks we can discard the term, but both insist on reflection about its limits. I use it because it is the best term we have for designating the social, political, and economic transformations that have altered how we experience the world since the 1970s, while remaining vigilant of the risks it entails.

### *Apocalypse*

Though Harvey and Brown emphasize different aspects of neoliberalism, they both fashion its consequences as apocalyptic. Harvey writes, “If the preferred policy of ruling elites is *après moi le déluge*, then the deluge largely engulfs the powerless and the unsuspecting while elites have well-prepared arks in which they can, at least for a time, survive quite well” (153). Relying on the flood narrative, perhaps the oldest apocalyptic narrative of all, Harvey figures neoliberalism as an endtime with imagery that links capitalism to climate change. Brown, over the past decade

or so, has described neoliberalism's annihilation of democracy, prophesying that we stand "at the threshold of a different political formation" (n.p.). When the market governs in place of elected politicians, democracy has died.

Why apocalypse, why now? Apocalyptic writing has a history of appearing at times when hope seems foreclosed. Among the first apocalyptic texts, for instance, were those written by Jews who had lost hope in the jeremiads of their prophets when Greek occupiers in the second century B.C.E. put Judaism under existential threat. Cultural theorist Simon During, in *Exit Capitalism* (2010), captures the widespread sense among the far left that the neoliberal phase of capitalism is catastrophic, but that alternatives to it are unimaginable. He describes "the unprecedented degree to which the market, the media, finance capital, the state's disciplinary, educational, and welfarist apparatuses, its techniques of monitoring and surveillance, its formal political processes along with (in the United States especially) religion, the military apparatus, and the forces of material, intellectual, and cultural production have become technologically and ideologically integrated" (125). By During's count, "Since about 1968 this integration has become so thorough as to delegitimize any imagination of, let alone any widely endorsed work toward, an alternative system" (*ibid.*). He calls our present condition, "Capitalism without hope, hopeless capitalism, endgame capitalism," which he argues "has indeed become the final horizon of global society, and, bar paranoia, today is seriously threatened only by blind nature (that is to say, by pressures on the economic and political systems caused by endemic natural catastrophe)" and which marks "the end of historical hope" (*ibid.*). During's hopelessness is crystallized in what has become a popular shibboleth on the far left – "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" – which I took as one of this introduction's epigraphs and which forms the basis of theorist Mark Fisher's well-received book, *Capitalist Realism* (2009).

But During betrays his own claims of hopelessness by hoping that a turn to “perfection” and “honor” – words which, “pre-dating modernity,” have “not been wholly appropriated either by modern instrumentality and relativism or by that discourse and apparatus of abstract rights” – might open paths through which we could refuse and exit capitalism (158-9). Literary critic John McClure notices American writers making similar moves in the same period, post-1968, toward, in McClure’s terms, “postsecularism” and “neomonasticism,” though with a religiosity, however postsecular, that During does not share (23, 25). Apocalyptic writers take a different route. Like During, they turn to old language when contemporary resources seem exhausted, not, though, to attempt an exit from capitalism but to imagine its collapse. At the point at which change seems unimaginable, apocalypse enters, dialectically, to imagine radical change as the *only* possibility, to insist that *we cannot depend on the future not being radically different from the present*.

Apocalyptic writing is not serious, then, in the sense that it offers no practicable politics. Neither is it utopian: it is not in the business of building visions of superior societies. We could say that its utility (to deploy a neoliberal term) is difficult to locate. Apocalyptic writing wants, perhaps, to shake us, to unsettle our basic assumptions about the stability of the status quo, to imagine worlds not unlike ours in which the powers-that-be can fail and, in their failing, reveal our precarity.

The new apocalyptic writing of the neoliberal period is hardly limited to the far left. This introduction’s first epigraph comes from Hubert Humphrey, a moderate Democratic Senator who, when trying to pass legislation toward full employment in 1976, became an early opponent of institutionalized neoliberalism, saying to Congress, “If the greatest free nation in the history of mankind has to get down on its knees in fear of something as abstract and arbitrary as these so called ‘free market forces,’ well, then we’re through” (qtd in Cowie 278). The religious right – as

opposed, of course, to the business right – agreed. The 1970s saw the beginnings of the massive rise of a brand of evangelism linked to dispensationalism, a method of Biblical interpretation that anticipates the imminent apocalypse. Dispensationalist Hal Lindsey’s apocalyptic tract *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) claims “OVER 15 MILLION COPIES SOLD” and reports that *The New York Times* “called it the ‘no. 1 non-fiction bestseller of the decade’” (Lindsey front cover, back cover). For Lindsey, the global integration of states and markets threatens true Christianity, a threat he figures as culminating in the rapture, the return of Jesus Christ, and an extrapolation of the violence and death suggested in the Book of Revelation. Far more popular yet, *Left Behind* (1995), the first in a series of dispensationalist novels and movies, imagines life after the rapture, during the apocalypse, when the antichrist rises to power on the backs of those who the novel implies *really* run the world: international finance capitalists.

Apocalypticism, then, is a widespread cultural phenomenon in the United States of the neoliberal period. This dissertation focuses on literary writing not merely for the sake of space, but because literature, in its aspirational resistance to instrumentalization, provides an alternative to neoliberalism. In this, then, I am not so far from Simon During, though where he places his hope in honor and perfection, I am putting mine, however limited, however minor, in literature: not as a practicable politics, but as a refuge. As a refuge, though, literature might unfold political possibilities yet unforeseen. During and I agree that “humanities departments are worthwhile in part just because they can’t overcome a certain obsolescence” (viii). The authors I study in *After the Boom* span the political spectrum, but all engage neoliberalism’s encroachment on the literary and are motivated by the sense of crisis, of hopeless capitalism, that animates Harvey, Brown, and the writers of *Left Behind*. By turning to apocalypse, they open neoliberalism up to us to see with fresh eyes. But what do we mean, precisely, when we talk about “apocalypse”?

“Apocalypse” is a notoriously slippery concept, best understood as collecting multiple related features. It emerged as a diverse genre during the couple hundred years on either side of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, written by Jews and emerging Christians, as detailed by J.J. Collins in *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (1998). Though consisting of dozens of texts, one alone, the Book of Revelation, has had an outsize influence on literary history.

Written as a report by John of Patmos of the visions he was granted of the end of history, the Book of Revelation is a complex text suffused with arcane symbols and incredible violence. Three of its features have been most influential: the form of revelation; the theme of a cleansing cataclysm; and the political aim of resistance to empire. Apocalyptic revelation entails the disclosure of the truth of history. The cleansing cataclysm is a violent disruption of history that rids the world of injustice and institutes a new just society. Both revelation and the cataclysm it describes resist empire; John of Patmos wrote the Book of Revelation as a member of the small community of Jewish followers of Jesus who were oppressed by the Roman Empire, and the Book viscerally imagines the destruction of the Romans. In each of the texts I study, revelation and cataclysm remain at the narrative horizon – always-impending, just beyond reach, as in the image Baldwin leaves us with at the end of *No Name*: the image he sees “spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come” (474). Baldwin’s language of “the wrath to come” cites the King James Bible’s version of the Gospel of Matthew, 3:7, in which John the Baptist damns the Pharisees and the Sadducees (i.e. the religious establishment), and also cites Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, 1:10, an apocalyptic passage that anticipates “the imminent day of judgment” (*New Oxford* 2075).

Whereas Baldwin and Silko envision the outcome of cataclysm as the institution of a just society, McCarthy and Wallace do not. They differ in part because Baldwin and Silko write in

relation to collectivities – African American and Native American – and correspondent experiences that attest to their subjugation by U.S. imperial power, of which neoliberalism is the contemporary form. In other words, the specificity of the U.S. nation-state as the most powerful locus of the global neoliberal economy inflects each of these texts. Baldwin and Silko turn to histories alternative to white America for visions of a future just society, whereas McCarthy and Wallace – white male U.S. writers – see no imminent justice. Their visions are not determined by their identifications, but what they are able to see depends on the histories that they opt to access.

Because of the risk of hyperbole, apocalyptic writing can be embarrassing. With the exception of *Infinite Jest*, which alone among these texts is a satire that tries to imagine how to live on in the old world against the coming apocalypse, the texts in this study were received poorly: *No Name in the Street* marks for many Baldwin's decline, when, as Morris Dickstein narrates, his anger and radicalism displaced his aesthetic sense; Random House failed to sell the three thousand copies of *Blood Meridian* that it printed in 1985 and the novel went out of print; and *Almanac of the Dead* was panned as over-the-top and sensationalist in the mainstream press (Dickstein 184). Frank Kermode, whose *Sense of an Ending* (1967) is the best-known study of the influence of apocalypse on the literary, registers this embarrassment in one of his book's central claims: "although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve *imminence*, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as *immanent*" (6). Rather than impending as a worldly event (*imminence*), apocalypse becomes internalized, in Kermode's positing, as a logic operating within individuals (*immanent*).

Embarrassment over mistaken predictions of apocalyptic imminence has a long record of marking divisions in literary history. The earlier Gospels anticipate Jesus' imminent return, whereas the later Gospel of John and other gnostic writings respond to his continued absence by

turning to personal revelation. M. H. Abrams charts the transition from imminence to immanence within Romanticism in *Natural Supernaturalism*. Disillusioned by the failure of the French Revolution to inaugurate a final, just society, Romantic writers turned to the mind's power to transform the old world "into a new heaven and new earth, by means of a total revolution of consciousness" (334). Kermode argues that the same transition is at work in the late modernist writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Samuel Beckett. Literature of the neoliberal period marks, then, an embarrassing return to imminence. Kermode, in 1967, was writing at precisely the pivot from the postwar boom to the long downturn: his historical position occluded how this economic transformation has been consequential for narrative form. The Cold War obscured responses to economic developments by encouraging a "conviction concerning America's exceptional status" that "sustained the sense of continuity in the nation's geopolitical standing from 1945 to 1989" (Pease 8). This appearance of continuity, which persists in literary criticism of the period, has prevented the recognition that the economic crisis of the 1970s and the rise of neoliberalism has changed the conditions for cultural production enough to justify the naming of a *new* period, one whose signature discourse is apocalyptic. Writers of the downturn have been willing to risk embarrassment and the appearance of naiveté in positing, again, a worldly apocalypse as their narrative horizon.<sup>7</sup>

The Cold War did not obscure, but illuminated, a different kind of apocalyptic writing from that under discussion here: literature of nuclear apocalypse. In an essay that has been influential for nuclear criticism, Jacques Derrida argues that nuclear war could not be, properly speaking, apocalyptic, because it would be totally destructive, leaving no remainder from which to experience revelation.<sup>8</sup> The literary critic's task, then, as taken up by Daniel Grausom in *On Endings* (2011), is to imagine how the threat of total catastrophe alters literary form. Contrarily, I

trace the anachronistic return to classically apocalyptic writing in late-twentieth century literature as refiguring neoliberalism. Here, apocalypse retains its etymological sense of revelation, even if that revelation is perpetually deferred. Further, the texts studied in this dissertation demonstrate a classic apocalyptic paradox: both a deterministic sense of inevitability – that it is “*too late*” (as Don Gately dreams in *Infinite Jest*) to fix one’s fate – and the urgent sense of agency, that one might save oneself yet (934).

By bringing together apocalypse and economics, I overcome some of the limitations of both criticism on apocalypse and American literature and on economics and literature. Too often, the former limits itself to projects of classification that argue for why certain novels should be read as apocalyptic without putting forth reasons for why such classification matters.<sup>9</sup> Almost no studies consider the relationship between economics and late twentieth-century American literature.<sup>10</sup> Among the few that do, Michael Clune’s *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000* argues that “the way the economic works in [certain] aesthetic spaces has helped to make the idea of a purely economic world an object of cultural fascination” (4). He is interested in the production of utopic visions of the market, a market detached from society. In this, then, he and I work at opposite ends of neoliberalism’s cultural imaginary. The works I study are not fascinated but repulsed by the market.

In resistance (however politically impractical) to neoliberalism, apocalyptic writing from across the political spectrum in the neoliberal period moves dialectically from the foreclosure of hope to visions of radical instability and revelations of precarity. Literary writing gathers a special charge under the threat of instrumentalization. The literature I study in *After the Boom* makes one further move. Paradoxically, these texts, through signification, through meaning, turn us, finally, away from signification. They direct us like Ludwig Wittgenstein does at the end of

*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when he insists that anyone who has understood his book in the end surpasses the book and recognizes it as nonsensical: “He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it” (89). *No Name in the Street* offers *silence* as a black political strategy and a literary strategy – a turning from a certain audience, a certain refusal to speak – that calls on a tradition of tactical black silence that dates to slavery. *Blood Meridian* consumes signification with *violence*. *Almanac of the Dead* inscribes at its core a manuscript that frustrates attempts at sense-making with its *unreadability*, its resistance to reading. *Infinite Jest* elevates *cliché*, the figure for a word or phrase ruptured from its meaning, to resist linguistic and economic exchange in the neoliberal period. It is as if the world of signification has become so compromised under neoliberalism that these texts must beg us to leave it.

### “American”

“American” literature’s geographical and conceptual boundaries have changed dramatically in recent years through the work of scholars in the humanities. My methodology in *After the Boom* has been informed, implicitly, by much of this work. Writing during the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, Wai Chee Dimock argued that, by naming the literature we study “American,” “we limit ourselves, with or without explicit acknowledgment, to an analytic domain foreclosed by definition, a kind of scholarly unilateralism. Literature here is the product of one nation and one alone, analyzable within its confines” (3). Robyn Wiegman, self-reflexively analyzing the limits of what has come to be called transnational American studies, articulates the “*urgency of the central issue it raises*: how to recognize in both analytical terms and practices of knowledge production the fundamental internationalism of a world system of social and conceptual relationships such that the dominating role of the United States can be

defined but not overdetermined, interpreted but not reified, particularized but not exceptionalized” (206; emphasis Wiegman’s).

I take Dimock and Wiegman as models of disciplinary and methodological self-awareness, building from their work and the large body of transnational American studies scholarship.<sup>11</sup> But I have also learned to be aware and critical of the conceptual complexities of “America” from James Baldwin, whose little-observed turn from nationalism to internationalism in his 1972 essay *No Name in the Street* is the focus of my first chapter. Baldwin writes, “that part of the North American continent which calls itself, arrogantly enough, *America* poses as profound and dangerous a mystery for human understanding as does the fabled dark continent of Africa” (473). In a magnificently dense theorization of capitalism that opens the essay’s second part, Baldwin turns rhetorically with each mention of America to its global complicities: anyone, he writes, “who has worked in, or witnessed, any of the ‘anti-poverty’ programs in the American ghetto has an instant understanding of ‘foreign aid’ in the ‘underdeveloped nations’; “Nowhere is [the pattern of capitalizing on poverty] clearer than it is in America today, but what America is doing within her borders, she is doing around the world”; “American investments cannot be considered safe wherever the population cannot be considered tractable”; “For a very long time...America prospered – or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives” (405-6). Baldwin, in 1972, anticipates the transnational turn in American Studies. He also anticipates *The Dying Animal*, linking, as Roth does much later, the appearance of American prosperity to global misery and obliquely implying (“For a very long time...American prospered”) that prosperity’s end: a structuring assumption that modulates Baldwin’s tone and ideas, what I am calling this period’s apocalyptic sense.

Though my dissertation takes as its immediate objects of study texts published by U.S. writers between 1972 and 1996, it explores and lingers beyond these geographical and temporal bounds. My principal methodology for this exploration has been genealogical in that, with each text, I have pursued discursive ancestors that have led me afar in space and time. I track, for instance, the history of black apocalypticism as transmitted through Baldwin's citations of spirituals, which leads from American slavery to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral. McCarthy's rigorous historicism in *Blood Meridian* took me to his papers in the archives in the Wittliff Collection at Texas State University where I studied the mid-nineteenth century flux of the U.S. southwest and Mexican northern borderlands. To research Silko's sprawling *Almanac of the Dead*, I traveled to Chiapas, Mexico to learn about the indigenous societies and languages that pervade the novel, leading me to focus on the multilingual, at times unintelligible indigenous almanac at the novel's core, modeled on pre-conquest Mayan codices. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* troubles the national both by going bigger and smaller: the novel unites Mexico, the U.S., and Canada as the Organization of North American Nations, or ONAN, a pun that indicts as masturbatory the U.S.'s then-recent accomplishment of NAFTA; but the novel focuses on the small communities of a tennis academy and a halfway house.

That said, I return from these explorations to the geographical and chronological bounds that this dissertation takes as its period to make claims about its literature and its provenance in the U.S. In each chapter, I follow the text's discursive journeys back to its present of production and publication to demonstrate how the text intervenes in its contemporary moment. Baldwin and McCarthy make structural observations regarding the limits of, and precarity of, imperial capitalism; Silko and Wallace chart the precarity of the subject under neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism. All four envision the apocalyptic overturning of U.S. imperialism and capitalism;

such apocalyptic visions express, thematically, crises for politics, economics, and society, and, formally, for literature.

### *Overview*

After the Second World War, capitalism enjoyed twenty of its greatest years, a global boom. Beginning in the late 1960s, the boom transitioned toward a long global economic downturn of declining profitability and growth stagnation in which, as historian Robert Brenner amply demonstrates, we remain. This dissertation explores what happened to American literature after the boom. The long downturn created the conditions for the ascendance of neoliberalism and the ascendance of related economic practices and effects, of which this dissertation will focus on wealth inequality (c.f. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*), financialization (c.f. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*; Greta Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis*), and the expansion of credit/debt (c.f. Louis Hyman, *Borrow and Debtor Nation*).

Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, the economy fell into a crisis, and social and political thought was in flux. “It is in this decade that the problem arises of the overall transition to a neo-liberal economy,” as Foucault narrates: “The reasons, the immediate economic pretexts and incentives were of course the crisis, which appeared before 1973 in a pre-crisis characterized by a consistent rise in unemployment since 1969, a fall from credit balance in the balance of payments, and increasing inflation” (196). Both Wendy Brown and Greta Krippner argue that the U.S. state’s turn to neoliberalism saved it from a crisis of legitimacy, allowing it to bracket questions of allocation – who should get what? – in favor of questions of technocratic management of the economy – is the state allowing the market to govern? (n.p.; 140). The neoliberal turn only solidified itself after the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan

in the early 1980s. The early 1980s through 2001 saw the institutionalization of neoliberalism, a quickening in the growth of wealth inequality, and the rapid expansion of finance capitalism and credit/debt. With the bursting of the dotcom bubble in 2000, followed by 9/11, U.S. neoliberalism entered a new phase dominated by the sub-prime mortgage bubble and imperial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage bubble in 2008, which nearly brought global capitalism to a standstill, marks the beginning of the phase we live in now. I have limited this dissertation to the first two phases, beginning in the late 1960s and ending with 9/11, necessarily seen through the crisis of 2008. What can American literature tell us about the history of the present? How have we lagged behind some of our best writers, blind to, or dismissing, their registrations of neoliberalism until after 2008's revelatory cataclysm?

The dissertation is divided into two parts. Part One: The Precarious System focuses on neoliberalism's first phase – the late 1960s through the early 1980s – culminating with Cormac McCarthy's publication of *Blood Meridian* in 1985. Both *Blood Meridian* and James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* take as their central economic concern the precarity of capitalism itself.

*No Name in the Street*, written between 1967 and 1971 in New York, San Francisco, Hollywood, London, Istanbul, and St. Paul de Vence, is an elegy for Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. and a prescient analysis of global capitalism. Baldwin provides testimony to the work both Malcolm X and King performed before their deaths to address the inequities of global capitalism as class and racial injustice, work that, especially in King's case, is continually erased from history. In a blistering indictment of economic liberalism as a system "caught in a lie" that promises to raise well-being for all but that delivers, by its inherent structure, growing inequality, Baldwin transforms himself from a prophet of the jeremiad – the nationalist holding out hope for American exceptionalism in *The Fire Next Time* – to an apocalyptic visionary (404).<sup>12</sup> Not only

does he indict liberalism's proclivity for growing inequality, but he marks, at the moment of its founding, what will be distinctive in *neoliberalism*, observing that the U.S. state must enact its policies so as to maintain "that friend we all rejoice to have at Chase Manhattan" (463). Baldwin presciently sees the state as governing on behalf of investment banks, creating a precarious system bound to collapse in a cleansing cataclysm. Throughout, he suffuses his text with the apocalyptic language of slave spirituals. But it is when the sounds stop that Baldwin feels the greatest power. He presents silence as a source of black power in the face of neoliberal apocalypticism.

Baldwin's observation that "American investments cannot be considered safe wherever the population cannot be considered tractable" could serve as a précis for *Blood Meridian*. Cormac McCarthy's novel traces U.S. scalp hunters in northern Mexico in 1849, in the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War, as they work to clear the land of intractable Indians – i.e. to slaughter them for cash – so that the U.S. can pivot from settler colonialism to economic imperialism. The scalp hunters prove as bad for capital as the Indians they decimate, debauching cities, taking Mexican scalps that might pass as Indian, and destroying the industrial means of production. McCarthy's turn to the foundation of the U.S.'s contemporary imperial formation registers the apocalyptic violence inscribed in its origin. Published in 1985, the novel's apocalyptic vision indirectly marks another pivot: from the economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s to the flourishing of finance capital. I argue that *Blood Meridian*, when read through the moment of its publication, envisions the apocalyptic consequences of a financial capitalism that entails the destruction of bodies to create profitable ground. What remains, for McCarthy, after capitalism is the excess that fells it, the violent supraeconomic drive. McCarthy creates in the novel's epilogue

a figure “striking fire out of the rock which God has put there,” a creator and author-figure, positing the literary as an epiphenomenon of violence.

Part Two: The Precarious Subject addresses neoliberalism’s second phase – the early 1980s to 9/11 – when financialization caught hold, credit and debt boomed, inequality rapidly increased, and neoliberalism’s economic rationality became ever more institutionalized. In this Part, I focus on how the novels *Almanac of the Dead* and *Infinite Jest* figure the precarity of the neoliberal subject.

With *Almanac of the Dead*, Leslie Marmon Silko asks: what are the powers of literature to incite precarious subjects to revolt in a time of neoliberalism? Her answer centers on an enigmatic indigenous text, the eponymous almanac at the novel’s heart. Literary critics tend to isolate coherent fragments from the almanac to argue that it offers a model for political change through the power of storytelling. Reckoning with as much of the almanac as Silko provides, I present its varieties of unreadability, material and linguistic, arguing that it is this unreadability that Silko posits as powerful. Adapting Foucault’s insight that American neoliberalism functions “as a principle of intelligibility,” I theorize neoliberalism through Silko’s novel as a form of reading, a process of sense-making through which all worldly phenomena become economic. Responding to the neoliberalization not only of the U.S. but also, following the IMF-imposed structural adjustment plan of 1982-1984, of Mexico, where much of her novel takes place, Silko portrays a world where labor has given way to entrepreneurship, in accord with Gary Becker’s theory of human capital. Silko’s characters monetize limit-cases: state policing (via insurance); human bodies (via black markets for organs); torture (via snuff films); suicide (via art). Silko’s almanac battles neoliberalism’s reading practices through its unreadability: its fragments of indigenous languages and its persistence as a material object transmit, for Silko, the power to

gather precarious subjects for the apocalyptic overturning of Western imperialism. Hers is a radical vision of the distinction of literary value in response to the proliferation of economic rationality.

In the early 1980s, U.S. consumers surprised policymakers, who had deregulated credit markets, by proving insatiable in their appetite for debt (Krippner 103). This insatiable appetite provides the necessary condition for David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, in which this appetite becomes an apocalyptic risk for the nation-state whose citizens, if exposed to a too-desirable film (called *Infinite Jest*), consume themselves to death. In *Infinite Jest*, as in U.S. culture in the early 1990s with its proliferation of 12-Step Programs, everyone is an addict, a generalization I link to the debt boom, financialization, and the transformation of the U.S. citizen from exhibitor of the "Protestant ethic" to "professional shopper" (Jameson 217). To cure the addict, *Infinite Jest* turns to Alcoholics Anonymous, emphasizing especially its use of cliché. For Wallace, cliché, like "a coin so battered by use as to be defaced," escapes both the linguistic and economic realms of circulation that sustain the addict (Partridge xi). By adopting a cliché subjectivity – an orientation to the world governed by a body of clichés – Wallace's characters work to escape addiction and become "believers" whose faith in cliché entails subscribing to "the ethos of belief in and of itself" (Konstantinou 90). But the same transformation turns these characters into ideal subjects of the debt economy, imagining their recovery as forever repaying a "cosmic loan" (344). *Infinite Jest* illustrates these subjects of the debt economy as precarious, asking in the end whether precarity makes the belief in belief itself that sustains their recovery and their role in the debt economy untenable.

In a brief conclusion, I consider *After the Boom*'s methodological implications for literary studies. Proposing we understand neoliberalism as a coming-to-self-consciousness of liberalism,

I figure *After the Boom* as the last in a series of unwritten studies on the dialect of capitalism and literary form.

## Chapter One: James Baldwin's Apocalypse

Martin Luther King, Jr. was dead, the civil rights movement was over, black nationalism was ascendant, and James Baldwin had changed his mind about “that part of the North American continent which calls itself, arrogantly enough, *America*” (473, emphasis his). Where he had once emphasized the distinctiveness of United States history in the hope that the nation-state could serve as a moral exemplar to the world, he now, as this quote shows, saw the U.S. as one particularly self-satisfied nation-state among many. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), he calls for a moral revolution in which each American would radically transform as an individual and thereby save the U.S. from racial warfare. A decade later, in *No Name in the Street* (1972), he delivers a structural analysis of the failures of economic liberalism (then becoming neo) that, as I show, determine a shift in his literary career, transforming him from a prophet of the jeremiad – the nationalist holding out hope for American exceptionalism<sup>13</sup> – to an apocalyptic visionary. Beginning my dissertation with Baldwin, I demonstrate that his prescient sensitivity, in 1972, to economic crisis heralds the start of a new period in U.S. economic and literary history.

### *Introduction*

At the end of *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin anticipates his book's poor reception in the U.S. because of its harsh judgments of the country. In his own defense, he writes,

“A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them.

And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind: it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come” (474).

This is a striking departure from the rallying cry that ends *The Fire Next Time*, which dreams that “we may be able, handful [of relatively conscious blacks and whites] that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world” (347). Whereas, in *Fire*, Baldwin uses “we” to include himself as part of an interracial nation, in *No Name* he distances himself from the “people,” by which he means white Americans. His old “we” signaled a collective call-to-arms; now his anticipation of mockery forgoes the possibility of being heard, resigned instead to witnessing “the wrath to come.”

The difference is that between Jeremiah and John of Patmos. Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet from the sixth and seventh centuries BCE who lambasted his fellow Israelites for their sins but called them to return to their principles and fulfill their destiny as a nation. He lends his name and his form to the jeremiad, a classic American genre, of which Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* is exemplary of the African American variation.<sup>14</sup> John of Patmos was a first century CE Jewish follower of Jesus who, from exile on the island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey, wrote the Book of Revelation, a scathing indictment of the Roman empire that envisioned its destruction as the end of the world and the inauguration of a Christian paradise. From Jeremiah to John, focus turns from an interrogation of a nation’s morality to that of imperial subjugation. Baldwin wrote much of *No Name*, similar to John, from self-imposed exile in Turkey. He quotes “the wrath to come” from the King James Bible, Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, 1:10, a

passage discussing Christ's return and the final judgment. Baldwin has given up the jeremiad to envision apocalypse.

If black Americans "have always seen" this wrath threatening white America, Baldwin insists, in the epilogue to *No Name*, that such wrath is now imminent. Responding to the recent massacre at Attica prison, in which state police gunned down twenty-nine inmates and ten hostages, Baldwin writes, "There will be bloody holding actions all over the world, for years to come: but the Western party is over, and the white man's sun has set" (475). With the phrase "holding action," which, defined by *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military*, means, "an action designed to hold the enemy in position, to deceive him as to where the main attack is being made," Baldwin figures a global race war in which Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, are leaders of a collapsing empire. "Mr. Nixon has congratulated Mr. Rockefeller," Baldwin writes, "who has congratulated the police: so much for that" (*ibid.*). But Baldwin could not have known the content of the conversations between Nixon and Rockefeller, which were only released in 2011. Rockefeller told Nixon the massacre had been a "beautiful operation," while Nixon said he backed Rockefeller "to the hilt" and demonstrated an avid concern in the racial make-up of the victims, apparently hoping they were all black ("40 Years").

Baldwin's racial analyses are motivated by novel economic insights. At various points in *No Name*, he prepares us to read "the Western party" and "the white man's sun" as constituted, more than ever, by the de facto governance of free market capitalism. When he writes, in the epilogue, about the "American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis," he means a crisis for the economy and the nation-state as a political formation that has become increasingly entwined with economic forces, subtending the racial crisis. "An old world is dying," Baldwin proclaims, "and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to

be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives” (*ibid.*). In what follows, I demonstrate how Baldwin’s economic observations and theorizations lead him to break dramatically from his past, both in terms of his stance toward the United States and his aesthetic, formal decisions. Taking to the ancient discourse of apocalypse, refracted through African American history, Baldwin finds not only visions of catastrophe, but revelatory insights for black Americans struggling to birth a new politics after the civil rights movement, at the core of which Baldwin proffers silence as a strategy for black survival.

### *Critical Context*

Baldwin considered *No Name in the Street* his sequel to *The Fire Next Time* (Leeming 310). It was his first book-length essay publication in nearly a decade, a self-consciously ambitious text that claimed to intervene not only in a crucial moment for black politics, but for world history. Yet its fate has been neglect. In *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin* (2014), Consuela Francis notes that *No Name* received, when it was published, “at best, mixed reviews” (112). She observes that critics commonly felt “that Baldwin tries too hard in this collection to mimic the anger of the ‘younger generation,’ by which they mean...black nationalists” (112-3). The notion that Baldwin’s “anger” diminished his aesthetic sensibility became a common trope to describe the trajectory of his career, and contributed to the obscurity of his later work for more than two decades. In 2002, literary critic Morris Dickstein reproduces the familiar argument, writing, with regards to later Baldwin, that “as his anger took hold...as success and acclaim freed him to vent his bitterness, his prose turned preachy” (145; 184). Dickstein pinpoints where he thinks Baldwin went wrong: “The best response to color is to be color-blind, to grant blacks a full measure of

humanity. This was a simple message, but eventually Baldwin would find it almost impossible to sustain” (184). By constructing a narrative in which Baldwin’s emotions corrode his work, critics, for many years, missed how Baldwin’s aesthetic decisions developed in response to changing material conditions. While these critics blame Baldwin for allowing politics to contaminate his art, they themselves establish a normative standard that does not prohibit political art, but circumscribes *which* politics produce *acceptable* art. As long as Baldwin was writing within the American tradition of the jeremiad, his work was valuable, but once he departed from nationalism and exceptionalism<sup>15</sup> and criticized the U.S. to its foundations, his art became too consumed by “anger.”

The last fifteen years have seen what scholars have called a “renaissance” in Baldwin studies (Francis 126; Kaplan and Schwarz 2). Much of the renewed attention to Baldwin has explicitly resisted the well-worn narrative of his artistic decline, reevaluating and, in a number of cases, evaluating for the first time, his less studied works.<sup>16</sup> Despite the salutary redirection, almost none of these publications provides a sustained analysis of *No Name in the Street*.

Of recent scholarship, the edited collection *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (2011) has been most attentive to *No Name*. The collection implicitly participates in the long-standing transnational turn in American Studies and the more recent turn in American literary studies to situate American literature in a global context by, as the title suggests, highlighting one of the “putative oppositions in Baldwin’s life and writing: that between American Baldwin and Baldwin the expatriate, the Baldwin preoccupied with those ‘other’ lands that lay beyond the United States” (3-4).<sup>17</sup> These critical turns emerged in response to the repositioning of the United States, and the nation-state in general, after the Cold War and with the hastening of globalization. Adopting a global perspective has brought *No Name* – which, in keeping with its eschewing of

the jeremiad for apocalypse, pivots in its framing from the national to the international – into the forefront of the critical discussion.<sup>18</sup>

In their introduction to the collection, Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz recognize that, “By the time of *No Name in the Street*, [Baldwin’s] emphasis on American exceptionalism had diminished...and he was more inclined to understand ‘the American crisis’ as a manifestation of what he came to identify as the ‘global historical crisis’ in an entire racial order” (17). They further write, outlining an arc that I have been tracing, that from *The Fire Next Time* to *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin’s “prophetic voice shifts from Jeremiah to Job” (23). (Baldwin takes his title and his epigraph from an apocalyptic passage in the Book of Job that envisions not only the annihilation of a people, but that people’s oblivion, the destruction of the memory of its names.) Cheryl A. Wall takes up this shift in her essay from the collection. In a neat inversion of the old narrative about *No Name*, Wall argues that “Baldwin’s [early career] rhetoric could resonate with that of numerous pro-U.S. Cold War intellectuals,” because of what Wall terms Baldwin’s “‘strategic American exceptionalism’” (36). But, she continues, “By the time he wrote *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin recognized the error, the futility of adopting this rhetorical strategy” (36). At the time of its publication, one characteristically puzzled reviewer asked, dismissively, how has “one of the most sensitive writers in the Western world...come to this?” (Ford 102). Forty years later, critics have begun to consider Baldwin’s canniness in response to historical developments, confirming Kevin Gaines’ observation that “historically we might only now – belatedly – be catching up with” Baldwin (Kaplan and Schwarz 2).

But the puzzled reviewer’s question remains. We can now see that Baldwin, in *No Name*, was learning from his earlier mistakes and responding to his historical moment; but the contours of his intervention remain largely undrawn. I build on this recent Baldwin scholarship by adding

what I will show is the central motivating development for Baldwin's transformation: his turn to structural analyses of U.S. domestic and global economics. With incredible prescience, Baldwin theorized, at the moment of its appearance, the significance of the fiscal crisis for the black urban underclass in the U.S. as it intersected with the beginning of the long global economic downturn that followed the long postwar boom. For Baldwin, these insights bring dramatic consequences for literary form. Baldwin's positing, in *No Name*, of an always-impending end as his narrative horizon in response to economic observations signals, as discussed in the Introduction, a broader sea change in American literature writ large. The U.S. fiscal crisis and the global downturn usher in a new literary period.

*"That friend we all rejoice to have at Chase Manhattan"*

Toward the end of *No Name in the Street*, in the middle of a long paragraph about Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, Baldwin writes, "To study the economic structure of this country, to know which hands control the wealth, and to which end, seems an academic exercise – and yet it is necessary, all of it is necessary, for discipline, for knowledge, and for power" (462). This comes about thirty pages after Baldwin's postmortem for the civil rights movement, where he writes, "the question of civil rights" has been "rendered moribund" (434). Looking back to 1968, reflecting that five years had passed since the March on Washington, Baldwin observes that "the people no longer believed in their petitions, no longer believed in their government" (440). From the vantage of '68 (at least as refracted through '72), Baldwin views the civil rights movement as a failure, remarking that "it seemed clear that we had merely postponed, and not at all to our advantage, the hour of dreadful reckoning" (*ibid.*). To understand Baldwin's pivot from politics (the pursuit of civil rights) to economics, which entails, as we see in this last quote, envisioning

apocalypse, we need to know about the economic world of the 1960s and early 1970s. We will discover that Baldwin was uncannily prescient in his economic analyses, weaving these together with analyses of domestic and global politics of empire and with quotidian experiences of racism and police brutality to produce a text that speaks to a moment that remains – as revealed most recently by the Ferguson riots – contemporaneous with us.

The postwar economic boom that lasted from 1945 to 1965 created unprecedented wealth in the U.S. and globally, largely driven by technological advances and the rise of the vertically-integrated corporation. Blacks migrated in vast numbers from the south to work manufacturing jobs in northern cities. But, beginning in 1965, these economic gains quickly eroded. According to Robert Brenner, “During the brief period between 1965 and 1973, the advanced capitalist world was suddenly projected from boom to crisis” (99). As German and Japanese manufacturers caught up with the U.S., global supply outpaced demand, creating a profitability crisis. Brenner writes, “Between 1965 and 1973, U.S. manufacturers sustained a decline in the rate of return on their capital stock of over 40 per cent.... Well before the oil crisis, then, the advanced capitalist economies as a whole were facing a significant problem of profitability” (99). Revising our chronology of globalization, Brenner marks the mid-1960s as when U.S. markets, under pressure from Germany and Japan, “dramatically and suddenly” opened to the world (113). Baldwin was apt to turn, at this moment, from a national to an international framework for his thought.

The consequences of these global economic developments for the U.S. form what is, by now, a familiar story. International competition led to deindustrialization, manufacturing jobs disappeared from the cities “eroding [their] economic base,” and “rapid suburbanization...left much of the central city impoverished” (Harvey 45). The simultaneous erosion of the tax base and the decline of corporate profitability created fiscal and social crises for large U.S. cities.

Meanwhile, blacks continued to migrate north, into the cities, through the end of the 1960s, increasing the population at a time when opportunities were decreasing (Wilson 111). Lyndon Johnson chose this moment to begin to escalate the Vietnam War, which would require inordinate capital. According to Greta Krippner, “Considered in historical perspective, the event that established the contours of the fiscal crisis of the U.S. state was the Vietnam War. Most critically, an escalation of the conflict in Southeast Asia coincided with an expansion of domestic anti-poverty social programs – President Lyndon Johnson’s ill-fated policy of ‘guns and butter’” (92). Anticipating structural critiques of non-profits organizations that demonstrate how these groups reproduce the material conditions they intend to ameliorate while producing great wealth for the entrepreneurs who run the groups,<sup>19</sup> Baldwin writes about the War on Poverty in *No Name*: “Anyone...who has worked in, or witnessed, any of the ‘anti-poverty’ programs in the American ghetto has an instant understanding of ‘foreign aid’ in the ‘underdeveloped’ nations. In both locales, the most skillful adventurers improve their material lot; the most dedicated of the natives are driven mad or inactive – or underground – by frustration; while the misery of the hapless, voiceless millions is increased – and not only that: their reaction to their misery is described to the world as criminal” (405). Baldwin presents the irony of anti-poverty programs, which, because they work within an economic system designed to increase inequality, cannot but exacerbate poverty. At the same time, Baldwin shows how this economic logic works both domestically and globally, exposing how even the best U.S. intentions are compromised by complicity in capitalism as a global system structured to maintain the status quo.

In sum, structural economic developments at global and national scales created, starting in the mid-1960s, a situation in which central cities in the U.S. were populated largely by blacks who faced “unemployment, underemployment, inferior education, inadequate housing, and

police brutality” (Wilson 137). These developments, meanwhile, also created an unprecedented degree of class division within black America. Thanks to the postwar boom and the successes of the civil rights movement, especially the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a substantial black middle class emerged. While the period saw “advances in jobs, civil rights, and other areas” for some blacks, “the quality of black urban life – poor housing, rat infestation, crime, high infant mortality rates, disease, poor public education – continued to deteriorate” (Marable 91). The civil rights movement had improved material conditions for middle class blacks, while leaving the black underclass worse off than it had been before. The legacy of the civil rights movement and other “oppositional solidarity movements” from the 1960s led Lisa Lowe to comment that “the limits of such [social] transfigurations are reached if the struggle is confined to the question of political rights, precisely since the history of citizenship was underwritten by economic, racial, and gender inequalities” (15). Intensified class tensions in the mid-to-late 1960s put pressure on the civil rights movement. Malcolm X, whose analysis began with the urban poor, had foreseen this eventuality for some time; Martin Luther King, Jr. began emphasizing economic injustice more and more after 1965, influencing his decision to denounce the Vietnam War; Baldwin, as we have seen, declared that civil rights had been “rendered moribund.” Class tensions troubled Baldwin personally, leading him to feel that, with his wealth and fame, he had betrayed his people, a dynamic I take up in the latter half of this chapter.

Despite the widespread sense in the late 1960s that the politically urgent project for black America had shifted from civil rights to economic justice, contemporaries lacked the structural overview that I have been able to reconstruct with the benefit of hindsight. Describing the Gary Convention of 1972, “the largest black political convention in U.S. history,” Manning Marable writes that, “What almost no nationalists and only a very few [black elected officials] recognized

*before* maneuvering for political power were the many structural crises which confronted America's major cities" (121, emphasis his). Baldwin makes available, in *No Name*, through his complex syntax, digressive style, and access to ancient apocalyptic discourse, a framework for thinking through the interpenetrations of economics, politics, culture, and literature that remains urgently relevant today.

Having explained the history that led Baldwin to insist on the necessity that we "study the economic structure of this country," I turn to his analysis of that structure in *No Name*. The book is divided into two long essays – "Take Me to the Water" and "To Be Baptized" – and a short epilogue. After a few brief recollections from his childhood and the description of a strange encounter with an old friend in Harlem after King's death, "Take Me to the Water" revisits Baldwin's time in Paris between 1948 and 1957 and his return to the U.S., in 1957, to pay "his dues" and take part in the growing civil rights movement by traveling through the South (383). "To Be Baptized" leaps forward to 1968, then jumps around the 1960s and very early 1970s, remembering slain black leaders, especially Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and King, narrating Baldwin's attempt to free his friend Tony Maynard from prison, and, finally, focusing on Baldwin's relationship to the Black Panthers and the new black politics. On the whole, the book takes advantage of the "hybridity of the essay," which is "capacious enough to incorporate other genres. Letters, autobiography, and oratory feature in Baldwin's work" (Wall 40).<sup>20</sup> Central to *No Name*, as I have been arguing, and as has been overlooked in the criticism, is its turn to apocalyptic discourse in response to Baldwin's also overlooked economic analyses.

The temporal gap between the two essays marks the economic crisis that, as I outlined above, ruptures the civil rights movement. As if to mark this rupture, Baldwin begins "To Be Baptized" with a four-page structural analysis of capitalism in relationship to power, the

distribution of wealth, and the economic system's eventual apocalyptic undoing. Nowhere does Baldwin more clearly establish his transformation from being a prophet of the jeremiad to an apocalyptic visionary.

“All of the Western nations have been caught in a lie,” he writes to open the essay, “the lie of their pretended humanism” (404). Immediately, we see that Baldwin's analysis is global in scope. He credits Malcolm X for making “increasingly articulate the ways in which this lie, given the history and power of the Western nations, [has] become a global problem, menacing the lives of millions” (*ibid.*). To clarify what he means by this “lie,” Baldwin turns, surprisingly, perhaps, to a literary text, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, quoting a character who reacts to the rise of railroads with cynicism, saying, “the wagons that bring bread to humanity, without any moral basis for conduct, may coldly exclude a considerable part of humanity from enjoying what it has brought; so it has been already” (*ibid.*). In Baldwin's reading of this quote, it becomes clear that what he means by the “lie” is the false promise that economic liberalism – the uninhibited work of free markets – will produce wealth for all, when in fact it has produced wealth for a few and “misery” for most. It is a question of who counts as “humanity”: in Dostoevsky's first use, it is an exclusionary term with pretensions to universality; in his second, it self-consciously addresses the exclusions of the first. By noting the system's lack of “any moral basis for conduct,” Baldwin – through Dostoevsky – highlights the contradiction between liberalism's moral claims toward bettering all (“bring[ing] bread to humanity”) and capitalism's amoral exigencies.

Baldwin lingers on the problem of exclusion. He extends Dostoevsky's thought, writing, “it was on this exclusion that the rise of this power inexorably depended”: that is, Baldwin takes Dostoevsky's speculation about the consequences of railroads and conceives it – exclusion in the name of inclusion – as structurally necessary to “this power,” or capitalism, from the start (*ibid.*).

No doubt the history of slavery is among Baldwin's thoughts. In the same sentence, after a semi-colon, Baldwin goes on to theorize the implications today of this originally inscribed exclusion: "now the excluded – 'so it has been already' – whose lands have been robbed of the minerals, for example, which go into the building of railways and telegraph wires and TV sets and jet airliners and guns and bombs and fleets, must attempt, at exorbitant cost, to buy their manufactured resources back – which is not even remotely possible, since they must attempt this purchase with money borrowed from their exploiters" (*ibid.*). With his attention to "land," Baldwin recognizes, and recognizes as ongoing, what, in Marxist terms, is called "primitive accumulation," which is the process by which capitalism, to have capital in the first place through which to profit, must initially take land, usually by expelling the population living on it or by purchasing the land from beneath that population's feet. Baldwin's litany of goods highlights that most of the resources are used to support communication technology or war, profiting the elite few. Then, the excluded become necessarily included in the sense that they become coopted into commodity exchange, required to buy the goods "robbed" from their land – Baldwin marks capitalism as criminal – at an inflated price. To pay this price, the excluded must go into debt, borrowing from "their exploiters," establishing a new, fiduciary relationship of dominance and submission. It is at this point that Baldwin critiques anti-poverty programs to show that, once capitalism has established itself, "benevolent" organizations that work within the system only serve, according to Baldwin, the consciences and pocketbooks of the dominant. To be brief, Baldwin argues that capitalism is a global system that depends on radical inequality from the outset, and is designed to exacerbate that inequality – even as its proponents make egalitarian promises about universal well-being.

Baldwin's concern, clearly, is with the excluded, and he turns next to consider how they could respond to this dispiriting condition. He begins with a double-bind. "If they attempt to

work out their salvation – their autonomy – on terms dictated by those who have excluded them, they are in a delicate and dangerous position, and if they refuse, they are in a desperate one: it is hard to know which case is worse” (404-5). Baldwin suggests that both reform (working within the “terms dictated” by those in power) and revolution (“if they refuse”) are too risky (“delicate and dangerous” and “desperate”). Baldwin’s alliterative adjectives are vague, but he is clear that the excluded have little freedom to practice their agency and achieve autonomy.

What, then? Baldwin writes, “for power to truly feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power – or, more accurately, an energy – which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control” (406). He quickly goes on to elaborate what this cryptic “energy” that power can neither define nor control might be and how it will come to pass. To do so, he turns his attention to “the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity [that cost millions of people their lives]” (*ibid.*). These, the wealthy and powerful, “cannot, or dare not, assess or imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why their victims are revolting. They are forced, then, to the conclusion that the victims – the barbarians – are revolting against all established civilized values – which is both true and not true – and, in order to preserve these values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction” (*ibid.*). Baldwin’s first move, here, is psychological: he calculates that, for the well-off, it would cost too much – notice Baldwin’s economic language (“price paid,” “afford”) – and threaten the very benefit of one’s comfort to recognize the suffering on which that comfort depends. The rest of the passage explains the practical consequences of this disavowal, though the explanation relies on Baldwin’s expectation

that his audience will know the subtext, what he means when he says the “victims are revolting.” Across the mid-to-late-1960s, American’s excluded confronted the well-off through a series of urban riots, which, according to William Julius Wilson, “constituted the most massive and sustained expression of lower-class black dissatisfaction in the nation’s history” (21). Because the well-off, in Baldwin’s theorization, cannot understand the suffering that motivates people to riot, they respond by distancing themselves from “the barbarians” and by electing politicians who vow to crack down on the black underclass, such as Richard Nixon, who campaigned, in 1968, on the promise of bringing to the nation “law and order.”

“This,” says Baldwin, meaning this disavowal and subsequent “cruelty,” “is a formula for a nation’s or a kingdom’s decline” (*ibid.*). The disavowal prevents the powerful from being able to “define” the energy that manifested in the urban riots, and the election of politicians like Nixon, according to Baldwin, only intensifies this indefinable and uncontrollable energy. He prophesies, “it is ultimately fatal to create too many victims” (*ibid.*). In the end, “the victor,” by which Baldwin indicates the U.S. empire, will “simply become the prisoner of the people he thought to cow, chain, or murder into submission” (407). Baldwin, following the logic he inherits from apocalyptic writing, envisions this revolution as less a matter of the people’s agency, which he earlier dismissed, and more a matter of an inevitable, impersonal process – “a formula.” Thus, he advocates less action than endurance: “the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they *can* endure everything” (*ibid.*). In the meantime, the excluded must begin “to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built” (*ibid.*).

In these few pages that open “To Be Baptized,” Baldwin develops an ambitious theory of capitalism to explain the material conditions of the contemporary black underclass in the U.S. as linked with global poverty. I want to emphasize Baldwin’s timeliness. He identifies the structural

underpinnings of black urban poverty and links it to global inequality at precisely the moment when capitalism's long postwar flourishing ended and our present period of rising inequality began. Writing a literary essay allows him the latitude to leap between Dostoevsky, economic analysis, and apocalyptic visions. Later in *No Name* he will link endurance to silence, toward a new black post-civil rights politics.

In one of the closing sections of *No Name*, Baldwin returns to the analysis with which he opens "To Be Baptized," but this time with considerably more concrete details. These details locate government repression and violence against blacks and extend Baldwin's economic critique toward what would soon be called neoliberalism.

Baldwin begins this analysis with the Black Panthers. He describes how the Panthers established community programs to provide food for children at school and how they set up a "Liberation school," requiring that "all adult Panther members take Political Education classes" (462). This is where Baldwin insists on the necessity of studying "the economic structure of this country" (*ibid.*). After emphasizing the importance of these programs, Baldwin considers the response the Panthers received from the U.S. government. He writes, "Those who rule in this country now – as distinguished, it must be said, from governing it – are determined to smash the Panthers in order to hide the truth of the American black situation" (*ibid.*). Baldwin was not exaggerating. As told by Manning Marable, "By July 1969, the Panthers had been targeted by 233 separate actions under the FBI's COINTELPRO, or Counter Intelligence Program. In 1969 alone, 27 Black Panthers were killed by the police, and 749 were jailed or arrested.... In [FBI director J. Edgar] Hoover's words, any illegal acts of suppression were justified, because the Panthers were 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country'" (109-10).

Sensibly, Baldwin suggests that the government needed to “smash” the Panthers because they, the Panthers, made visible “the truth of the American black situation,” a situation which the government had “no intention of changing” (462-3). To get across the radicality that would be required to solve the problem of the black underclass, Baldwin writes, “any real commitment to black freedom in this country would have the effect of reordering all our priorities, and altering all our commitments, so that, for horrendous example, we would be supporting black freedom fighters in South Africa and Angola, and would not be allied with Portugal, would be closer to Cuba than we are to Spain, would be supporting the Arab nations instead of Israel, and would never have felt compelled to follow the French into Southeast Asia” (463). What Baldwin writes here follows his earlier analysis. The black underclass is not simply a domestic problem but is a problem rooted in global capitalism. To solve it, argues Baldwin, would require total, anti-capitalist upheaval. The implicit link between all the countries and conflicts Baldwin names is that the U.S. supports who it does because it pursues its economic interests.

Baldwin makes this implicit link explicit in the subsequent sentence: “But such a course would forever wipe the smile from the face of that friend we all rejoice to have at Chase Manhattan” (*ibid.*). This is a remarkable observation. Baldwin posits Chase Manhattan, an investment bank, as responsible for U.S. foreign policy, anticipating what will come to be known as *neoliberalism*: the U.S. must keep investment banks happy – smiling – by using its military power to maintain stable conditions for finance capitalism. As described in more detail in the Introduction, I follow Wendy Brown in defining neoliberalism as a political rationality in which market values are extended to all realms of life, which implies, as a corollary, that politics cedes its terrain to economic interests and democracy gives way to corporate governance. I take up the

implications of Baldwin's observation more extensively in the following chapters of the dissertation.

Baldwin closes this section by returning, again, to apocalyptic prophecy. Immediately following the line about Chase, he writes, "The course we *are* following is bound to have the same effect [of wiping the smile from the face of our friend at Chase], and with dreadful repercussions, but to hint such things now is very close to treason. In spite of our grim situation, and even facing the possibility that the Panthers might be smashed and driven underground, they – that is, the black people here – yet have more going for them than did those outnumbered Christians, running through the catacombs: and digging the grave, as Malcolm put it, of the mighty Roman empire" (463). Baldwin, this time in shorthand, again asserts that the continued pursuit by the powerful of global capital will ultimately, and imminently, undo global capitalism: *reductio ad absurdum*. He parallels American blacks, after the civil rights movement, to early Christians, and the U.S. to "the mighty Roman empire," parallels that invoke the anti-imperial apocalyptic tract, written by one of those persecuted early Christians, the Book of Revelation.

I have until now focused on the historical and economic content of Baldwin's text. For the rest of this chapter, I turn my attention to the implications of this content for *No Name's* literary form, beginning by accounting for the significance, for Baldwin, of turning to apocalyptic discourse.

### *Apocalypse and Form*

Apocalyptic writing is an ancient discourse, dating to the first few centuries BCE. By calling on the apocalyptic tradition, Baldwin gathers accumulated meaning from that tradition's history and stages encounters between his present and past moments when apocalyptic writing expressed

latent crises. Namely, whether we consider the Jewish people after the Babylonian exile, early Christians after Jesus's death and the destruction of the second temple, or American slaves after the Middle Passage, apocalypse expresses a crisis of cultural discontinuity and imperial subjugation. The end of the civil rights movement, the deaths of black leaders, and incipient economic crises created conditions ripe for apocalyptic writing. As discussed in detail in the Introduction, I focus on three central features of apocalyptic writing: the form of revelation; the theme of a cleansing cataclysm; and the political aim of resistance to empire.

Baldwin's title itself, as a phrase, is a citation from the Book of Job. Baldwin uses the passage from which it comes as an epigraph. One of Job's interlocutors, Bildad, describes the fate of the wicked, of those "who do not know God":

His remembrance shall perish from the earth  
and He shall have no name in the street.  
He shall be driven from light into darkness,  
and chased out of the world.

(18:17-18)

This passage prophesies not merely the destruction of the wicked, but, further, the annihilation even of any memory of the wicked, who will be consigned to oblivion. The Book of Job might be referring to the Babylonian empire; Baldwin certainly refers to the economic empire of the Western nations. Religious scholar Amos Wilder suggests that "apocalyptic meaning can come through only in enigmatic ciphers drawn from outside the immediate cultural heritage. In the case of Israel with the loss of continuities incident to exile, [a colleague of Wilder's] finds the Book of Job paradigmatic" (444). Wilder argues that the strange disruption expressed through apocalyptic writing requires distance from "the immediate cultural heritage," by which Wilder

means the dominant culture, a distance that is in the case of the Book of Job exilic. Baldwin, in *No Name in the Street*, marks blacks as distant from dominant culture from its origins through the structures of exclusion that I looked at in the previous section. Such exclusion is a form of exile. Baldwin's allusion to exile also reminds us that he wrote the text from self-imposed exile in Turkey and France. Baldwin's title situates black Americans as exiles from the Promised Land, while indicating the prophetic fury, railing against injustice and calling forth cataclysm, that Baldwin will claim as his own.

The Babylonian exile instigated first the prophetic tradition that includes Jeremiah, and later the apocalyptic tradition that emerges from fragments of the prophets and passages like the one above from Job, through the first full-fledged canonical apocalypse in the Book of Daniel, to the Book of Revelation. The history of this transition helps explain the nuances that Baldwin summons in his textual encounter with Jewish literary tradition.

Jeremiah wrote against the Babylonian enforcement of Jewish exile from Israel, with the major deportation occurring in 586 BCE. While Jeremiah and other prophets occasionally hinted at apocalypse, they ultimately, like Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, called on the Jewish people as a collective nation to return to its foundations, which would lead to reclamation of the Promised Land. Two hundred and fifty years later, after Alexander the Great conquered the Persians in 332 BCE and the Greeks began to Hellenize the Jews, many Jews became discouraged about the promises of the prophets. History was not unfolding like the prophets had promised it would: when would the Jews achieve their promised kingdom? According to Geza Vermes, "the real trouble started when [the Greek politician] Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) officially promoted a Hellenizing programme in Judaea that was embraced with eagerness by the Jewish elite" (51). At this time, the Qumran community formed as an apocalyptic Jewish

sect, as discovered through the Dead Sea Scrolls; and one of the early apocalypses, the Book of Daniel, was written. As seen here, the threat of cultural extinction, whether by extermination or assimilation, is a frequent instigator for apocalyptic thinking.<sup>21</sup> Disillusioned, concerned about their survival, Jews began to imagine that God would imminently intervene, often in far more dramatic ways than in the older prophecy, destroying their enemies and finally establishing, once and for all, the new Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> If the early Jewish apocalypses responded, in the long view, to the Babylonian exile and more contemporaneously to Antiochus's oppressive regime and his desecration of the second temple, Baldwin responds, in the long view, to the Middle Passage and the discontinuities it incurred and, more contemporaneously, to the sense of loss and cultural dislocation that emerged from all the deaths and disappointments of the 1960s and which led him to believe himself a survivor. Baldwin's literary trajectory compresses that of several hundred years of Jewish history into a decade.

In addition to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions, Baldwin draws on the African American apocalyptic tradition, which developed out of the experience of slavery. The mutations that African Americans thus made to the tradition led Maxine Lavon Montgomery, in her book-length study of the subject, to argue that African American apocalyptic writers "are not imitators of an apocalyptic tradition spawned by whites" and that investigations into this tradition "must therefore begin with a consideration of the forms of cultural expression indigenous" to African Americans (2). Black slaves mixed Biblical theology, which they learned in the Americas, with cultural elements transmitted from prior to the Middle Passage to develop the vernacular genre of the spiritual.<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois famously closes *The Souls of Black Folk* with a chapter on the spirituals, or in his terms, the Sorrow Songs. After quoting two apocalyptic spirituals, he writes, "Through all the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things"

(213). The spirituals became a unique African American expression of the desire for social justice. They tended to select elements from Christianity that most spoke to their experience as slaves. Melvin Dixon writes, “Using the Bible as a source of myth and history, [slaves] came to identify with the children of Israel” (15). The spirituals lean on, especially, the exodus narrative, in which Moses guides the Israelites out of slavery, and the Book of Revelation’s visions of the end of an unjust empire. But, Dixon continues, slaves remade the old stories: “they went one step further: they viewed their quotidian experiences as capable of producing apocalyptic change” (*ibid.*). Baldwin inherits this amplification of the quotidian in his analysis of the Black Panthers and in his assertion, to which I will return, of the power of silence.

The spirituals are integral to the history of black Christianity, including the emergence of the Afro-Protestant holiness churches, such as the one where Baldwin served for three years as a child preacher.<sup>24</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that Baldwin uses quotes from a “slave song” and a “traditional” as the epigraphs to “Take Me to the Water,” the first essay in *No Name*. The first speaks in the voice of Samson, from Judges 16, singing, “If I had-a-my way / I’d tear this building down” (353). Samson, an early Jewish leader, called on God to give him the strength to destroy a building, killing himself and his oppressors in the process. As a slave song, it expresses black desire to destroy the edifice that upholds slavery; used as Baldwin’s epigraph, it expresses Baldwin’s desire to destroy white America, which maintains and depends on a black underclass, even at the expense of his own life. The second epigraph – “Just a little while to stay here / Just a little while to stay” – conveys the singer’s anticipation that her arrival in heaven is imminent. Taken together, these epigraphs frame *No Name* as a text invested in, and continuing, the African American apocalyptic tradition, in which yearnings for the cataclysmic destruction of empire and revelations of imminent paradise are remade to the specifications of black life in the Americas.

On the second page of *No Name*, Baldwin relates a memory of his grandmother, who he notes “had been born in slavery,” to ensure that his readers recognize the centrality of slavery to those specifications (354). He remembers that when she died, she gave him a gift, a box meant for candy, but which contained instead, to the little boy’s disappointment – it “broke [his] heart” – needle and thread. This odd anecdote hints at what Baldwin would come to learn about African American inheritance. While slavery, like Baldwin’s grandmother, had passed, and should have, like the little box with candy, opened onto a sweeter period, in fact the younger generations have inherited from their forebears tools to face different yet persistent challenges.

Elsewhere, Baldwin directly links the experience of his grandfather in slavery to his inheritance of apocalyptic thought. According to Baldwin’s friend, William Styron, “Jimmy once told me he often thought the degradations [during slavery] of his grandfather’s life was the animating force behind his father’s apocalyptic, often incoherent rage” (43). In the essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin remembers how his father’s apocalyptic thinking then became his own inheritance: “it seemed to me . . . that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world [the Harlem riots of 1943] had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father’s vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along” (63). If from his grandmother, Baldwin gained needle and thread, from his father and grandfather he inherited the apocalyptic vision to sew a tapestry of destruction followed by the arrival of a new Jerusalem.

Within its sweeping purview, *No Name* moves from slavery to Attica. Baldwin’s use of the African American apocalyptic tradition encourages, through the history gathered in its form, the recognition that the late twentieth-century black underclass is not an ahistorical condition, but

continuous with, and manifesting the legacies of, U.S. slavery. Much as the early Jews, after centuries of failed promises of freedom, drew on fragments of apocalyptic discourses from their past to express the desire for freedom now, Baldwin responds to the perpetually dashed hopes of American blacks by drawing from fragments of African American apocalyptic discourse in his own full-fledged apocalypse.

### *Baldwin as Apocalyptic Visionary*

So far I have established that Baldwin, in *No Name*, adopts the apocalyptic tradition in response to his insights regarding economic crisis. What does this look like for the structure of the text? Baldwin structures his text as a spiritual autobiography (after Augustine's *Confessions*<sup>25</sup>) that is preoccupied with authorizing Baldwin as an apocalyptic visionary whose voice and politics are relevant to a new generation of U.S. blacks. His apocalyptic turn, especially as it coincides – not coincidentally – with the rise of black nationalism, entails his pivot away from a white or interracial implied audience and toward a black one. In what follows, I trace Baldwin's self-authorization, attending to how Baldwin uses the organizational structure of his essay to produce theoretical links between times and distant places. He revises, for instance, his earlier narratives about his time in France to draw implicit parallels between France after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu ended its occupation of Vietnam and the U.S. in the midst of its Vietnam War, developing a comparative empire analysis. For Baldwin, his authorization as a relevant black voice necessarily moves through King. And though Baldwin shows the highest regard for King, his engagement with the slain leader is neither hagiographic nor uncritical, asserting, as he does, that King's strategy of "petitioning" the government for political gain had lost its force (440). At King's

funeral, Baldwin experiences the power of silence, which he later advances as a black political strategy for apocalyptic times.

Baldwin frames *No Name* with personal accounts surrounding King's death. Baldwin's placement of these two accounts, coming toward the text's beginning and its end, cast across *No Name* questions about the future of black politics, and Baldwin's place in this future. The first of these accounts disrupts the essay's early chronological flow, leaping far ahead from Baldwin's childhood. Baldwin relates how he returned to the Bronx to give a childhood friend the suit that he wore during his last appearance with King and again at King's funeral. The suit had become, for Baldwin, "too heavy a garment": he "could not put it on, or look at it, without thinking of Martin, and Martin's end, of what he had meant to me, and to so many" (360). In Cheryl A. Wall's words, the suit becomes "the martyr's robe, the emblem of suffering," and, I would add, it becomes the emblem of King's legacy (45). Having read in the newspaper that Baldwin could no longer wear the suit, a childhood friend, with whom he had not been in touch, contacted Baldwin to ask if he could have it.

To bring his old friend the suit, Baldwin crosses the long distance that has grown between them: socioeconomic distance, which Baldwin expresses as the distance across New York City. "Naturally, the car which picked me up that particularly guilty evening was a Cadillac limousine about seventy-three blocks long, and, naturally, the chauffeur was white. Neither did he want to drive a black man through Harlem to the Bronx" (361). Baldwin, who grew up poor in Harlem and went to high school in the Bronx, is returning home ostentatiously, as a wealthy man. "Here we were, then, this terrified white man and myself, trapped in this leviathan, eyed bitterly, as it passed, by a totally hostile population. But it was not the chauffeur which the population looked on with such wry contempt: I held the suit over my arm, and was tempted to wave it: *I'm only*

*taking a suit to a friend!*" (*ibid.*). We learn more from this passage about Baldwin, imagining – or projecting – what blacks in Harlem and the Bronx think of a black man in a limo, than about those blacks themselves. Baldwin's return home confronts him with his own wealth, and he feels guilty. Wall observes that "the adjective 'guilty' recurs five times in one paragraph," and always with regard to Baldwin himself (43). When he gets the phone messages from his old friend, his first thought is, "the guilt of the survivor is a real guilt," which leads him to describe how he has "made it" and could "sign a check anywhere in the world," meaning "that [he] had betrayed the people who had produced [him]" (359). When he arrives at his friend's house, he thinks, "they couldn't be blamed for feeling *He thinks he's too good for us now*" (361).

In 1968, when King was killed, the economic gap between the black underclass and the black middle class was larger than ever before, and black politics was in the midst of becoming transformed by that fact, from the civil rights movement to Black Power and black nationalism. King's death cemented that transition. Baldwin, who had earned his fame and his wealth as a prophet of the power of interracial love, found himself suddenly in an uncomfortable position. Because of his socioeconomic status, he was in the wrong political camp, and he felt, it appears, extremely guilty about this, a guilt that manifests in how he imagines others see him. His sense of alienation was not solely class-based; he also felt alienated as – again trying to imagine how his old friend saw him – "an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak" (363). Baldwin's alienation by class and sexuality were linked through the tendency for black nationalists to use masculinist, heterosexist discourse, at times explicitly taking aim at Baldwin's sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

Baldwin's encounter with his old friend becomes increasingly uncomfortable. Despite his guilt over his wealth and his sexuality, Baldwin feels that he has special access to the truth of the

black situation. He writes, “what I could not understand was how nothing seemed to have touched” his old friend, namely, that, “we are living through what our church described as ‘these last and evil days,’ through wars and rumors of wars” (*ibid.*). This last phrase comes from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where “wars and rumors of wars” are signs of the apocalypse. Baldwin decries the Vietnam War, telling his old friend, “black people certainly had no business there, aiding the slave master to enslave yet more millions of dark people, and also identifying themselves with the white American crimes: we, the blacks, are going to need allies, for the Americans, odd as it may sound at the moment, will presently have none” (364). Here, Baldwin shows himself working through the voice that he establishes for himself throughout *No Name*, linking the U.S. to the world, U.S. blacks to the global poor, identifying (“we”) with blacks, and prophesying a racial apocalypse. For years, Baldwin had used “we” strategically in his writing; it “played a critical role in Baldwin’s strategic American exceptionalism. It enabled him to claim a citizenship that had not been fully granted” (Wall 44). But now Baldwin has given up his former strategy and speaks as a black writer to a black audience. When Baldwin’s old friend responds to Baldwin’s critiques of the Vietnam War by saying, “let me stand up and tell you what I think we’re trying to do there,” Baldwin explodes: “‘*We?*’ I cried, ‘what motherfucking *we?* You stand up, motherfucker, and I’ll kick you in the ass!’” (364). He cannot abide the use of his old tactic “sans critique,” being grammatically coerced into “common cause” with white America in Vietnam (Wall 44).

After his outburst, Baldwin is left with a dilemma. What good is his apocalyptic vision if he cannot communicate it to his people? To give this problem literary heft, Baldwin returns to the suit: “For that blood suit was *their* suit, after all, it had been bought *for* them, it had even been bought *by* them: *they* had created Martin, he had not created them, and the blood in which

the fabric of that suit was stiffening was theirs” (364-5, emphasis his). King’s legacy is theirs: it belongs to the black masses. Baldwin hands over the suit. Now, to convey his vision – of economic injustice, of a new black politics, of apocalypse – that he knows is urgent, Baldwin must regain his authority in relation to blacks. *No Name* continues by following Baldwin into his past, to France during the Algerian uprising, to the American South during the early years of the civil rights movement, and to the deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and King, building his vision, and his authority as the one to tell it.

Baldwin revises his earlier accounts of his time in France to fit his changing views, while, at the same time, preparing his reader to recognize world-historical parallels, which he highlights as literary formal parallels in *No Name*, between France in the mid-1950s and the U.S. in the late-1960s.<sup>27</sup> These parallels help complete his theory of the production of a revolutionary black underclass that I presented above in relation to his economic analysis.

Writing from Paris while he lived there, in the mid-1950s, Baldwin, in “Encounter on the Seine,” describes how the encounter between the “American Negro” and the “French African” leads the American to reflect upon his difference and distinction *as* an American: “They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years” of black history in the Americas (89). He still believes that white America will confront and accept this black history, which will “bring Americans,” white and black together, “at last their own identity” (90). In 1972, Baldwin admits, “Not only was I operating within the American frame of reference, I was also a member of the American colony, and we were, in general, slow to pick up on what was going on around us” (375). Nevertheless, he declares, in retrospect, and in a pointed reversal of his conclusion from “Encounter on the Seine,” that “the Algerian and I were both, alike, victims of this history [of European colonialism], and I was still a part of Africa, even though I had been

carried out of it nearly four hundred years before” (377). The old gulf of “three hundred years” has been bridged by Baldwin’s recognition of the shared history of European colonialism.

He builds on this recognition of shared history in practicing comparative empire analysis. He writes, “The French were still hopelessly slugging it out in Indo-China when I first arrived in France, and I was living in Paris when Dien Bien Phu fell” (367). The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was the final turning point that led to the end of the French occupation of Indochina, which itself instigated uprising against French colonial rule elsewhere, marking, broadly, the end of French imperialism. Baldwin immediately turns from the distant Battle of Dien Bien Phu to domestic life in Paris. “The Algerian rug-sellers and peanut vendors on the streets of Paris then had obviously not the remotest connection with this most crucial of the French reverses; and yet the attitude of the police, which had always been menacing, began to be more snide and vindictive. This puzzled me at first, but it shouldn’t have. This is the way people react to the loss of empire – for the loss of an empire also implies a radical revision of the individual identity – and I was to see this over and over again, not only in France” (*ibid.*). Baldwin does not immediately link the French loss of Indochina to the Algerian uprising; he adds an intermediary step: police brutality. He argues that empires, as a class, respond to their diminution by intensifying their domination at home through sanctioned police violence. When Baldwin writes that we would see this pattern “over and over again, not only in France,” his implication clearly indicates his parallel discussion of U.S. empire in “To Be Baptized.” Baldwin suggests that the U.S., against its losses in Vietnam and its coincident economic downturn, responds to imperial decline the same way France did: with police brutality. This parallel helps explain Baldwin’s theory that the end of U.S. empire will produce a revolutionary black underclass, especially with his attention to the Black Panthers, who explicitly organized to defend blacks against police violence. Baldwin’s brilliance is to

think U.S. empire through the history of empire and the U.S. black situation through the history of imperial subjugation, supplemented by his experience of police brutality on the ground. This allows him to recognize that if the French empire, like all empires, could come to end, so could that of the U.S.

In 1957, several years into the civil rights movement, Baldwin realized from France that he “could no longer sit around in Paris discussing the Algerian and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues,” he writes, “and it was time I went home and paid mine” (383). He closes “Take Me to the Water” with a long section on his journey across the American South, which he figures as a descent into hell. This serves to further his self-authorization in two ways: it demonstrates his long, personal involvement in black politics; and it calls, formally, on the apocalyptic trope in which the author-visionary takes an “otherworldly journey,” often to hell (Collins 7). “I felt,” he writes about his arrival in the South, “as though I had wandered into hell” (386). He describes a white man pointing him to a colored entrance as “a guide in hell” (398). As he catalogues what he sees, he writes, “The land seems nearly to weep beneath the burden of this civilization’s unnamable excrescences...over all there seems to hang a miasma of lust and longing and rage” (395). And terror: “I doubt that I really knew much about terror before I went South” (388). Baldwin’s South seems like T. S. Eliot’s waste land; Baldwin repeats Eliot’s citation of Dante: “the terror I am speaking of has little to do with one’s specific fears for oneself: it relates to Dante’s *I would not have believed that death had undone so many*” (389, emphasis his). By figuring his experiences in the South as a descent into hell, Baldwin dramatizes the lengths he has gone, following the path of many previous apocalyptic visionaries, including Jesus Christ, for other collectivities, to understand, and thus be able to speak for, the black masses.

Leaping ahead more than a decade, “To Be Baptized” begins with Baldwin’s extended economic analysis. Yet he still has not completed his self-authorization. Midway through “To Be Baptized,” he inscribes another parallel into *No Name*, matching his class-crossing drive through New York with a class-crossing drive through Los Angeles. Now he can rewrite it without the embarrassing outburst, reconceptualizing his relationship to wealth. In the first place, he is in L.A. to write a screenplay about Malcolm X, the leader who most resonated with the black underclass. Baldwin leans on that simple fact to give him credit. Nevertheless, as in New York, he is staying in a wealthy part of town, namely “the Beverly Hills Hotel” (428). But he makes a point of emphasizing that, while “people have their environments...the Beverly Hills Hotel was not mine” (*ibid.*). Instead, he turns to Watts. “The drive from Beverly Hills to Watts and back again is a long and loaded drive – I sometimes felt as though my body were being stretched across those miles” (429). Despite the drive being “long and loaded,” he no longer imagines being viewed by a “hostile population”; rather, he feels himself pulled, “stretched” toward the black underclass. He has replaced “guilt” with “helplessness” (*ibid.*). He knows that his wealth cannot solve the crisis; in fact, through his earlier economic analysis, we know that he knows that his wealth is useless to his political vision. Echoing that analysis, he writes, “everything that might have charmed me merely reminded me of how many were excluded, how many were suffering and groaning and dying” (430). His wealth highlights, for him, his complicity in the structural exclusions of capitalism. What he brings is a theorization of that complicity, a vivid account of how U.S. wealth depends on the misery of the black underclass, which he continues and extends in the context of Watts. “The truth is that this country does not know what to do with its black population now that the blacks are no longer a source of wealth, are no longer to be bought and sold and bred, like cattle; and they especially do not know what to do with young

black men, who pose as devastating a threat to the economy as they do to the morals of young white cheerleaders. It is not accidental that the jails and the army and the needle claim so many” (432). Baldwin’s prescience is again on display. In 1972, mass incarceration was barely in its infancy, but in the coming decades would become the most prominent technique by which the U.S. managed young black men from the black underclass. Though he refrains from claiming a total identification with the black underclass, Baldwin, in L.A., confidently asserts himself, in contrast to the parallel scene in New York, as a conflicted yet steadfast voice on the underclass’ behalf.

Toward the end of “To Be Baptized,” Baldwin writes about King’s funeral. This section closes the frame that opened early in “Take Me to the Water” with his account of giving the suit that he had worn to the funeral to his old friend. In between, Baldwin has shown us how he spent time with Algerians in Paris and journeyed through the American South as hell, he has told us where he was when Medgar Evers and Malcolm X were killed, he has taken us to Watts, he has analyzed economic (neo)liberalism as a hypocritical system doomed to fall and, thanks to this analysis, throughout he has structured his narrative with the always-impending apocalyptic end of U.S. empire. Baldwin now comes to bear witness to the life and death of the great black leader who had joined, in 1968, in Baldwin’s words, “so many of us, cut down, so soon” (449).

“I went to Atlanta alone,” he writes, about the funeral, “I do not remember why” (448). After pushing through crowds, Baldwin makes it into the church. “The atmosphere was black, with a tension indescribable – as though something, perhaps the heavens, perhaps the earth, might crack. Everyone sat very still” (*ibid.*). Baldwin’s description recalls a tense and climactic moment from the Book of Revelation, after the first six seals have been opened and have caused destruction and death on earth: “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in

heaven” (Rev. 8:1). Baldwin describes “the long, dark sister, whose name I do not remember,” who sang for the service, and whose “song rang out as it might have over dark fields, long ago; she was singing of a covenant a people had made, long ago, with life, and with that larger life which ends in revelation and which moves in love” (449). Again, Baldwin bridges slavery (“dark fields, long ago”) with apocalyptic freedom (a “covenant...with life...which ends with revelation”) in the present. Then it is over and Baldwin finds himself outside, writing, “I had not been aware of the people when I had been pressing past them to get into the church. But, now, as we came out, and I looked up the road, I saw them. They were all along the road on either side, they were on all the roofs, on either side. Every inch of ground, as far as the eye could see, was black with black people, and they stood in silence. It was the silence that undid me” (450). He had entered the church alone, as an individual, but leaves to be awed – undone – by the collective black silence in response to so much death and destruction on earth. His account echoes the uncanny silence that marks a brief pause in the Book of Revelation’s bloodshed. *No Name in the Street* is Baldwin’s attempt to bear witness from that enigmatic silence. “With Evers, Malcolm, and King gone,” Baldwin believed, “I’m the last witness...that’s my responsibility. I write it all down” (Leeming 310). In writing, he ultimately returns to the silence that undid him as the center of his new political vision.

After Baldwin’s narration of King’s funeral closes the frame that began with the story of the suit, *No Name* opens to Baldwin’s contemporary moment. Having mourned the past, he looks to the future. He takes the Black Panthers as a point from which to provide his own commentary, his own vision, on the future for U.S. blacks. He describes how petty capitalists – landlords and storekeepers and insurance companies – “bleed the ghetto,” how the police are deployed “not for the protection of the ghetto but for the protection of American investments there,” and how the

“administration, increasingly, can rule only by fear: the fears of the people who elected them, and the fear that the administration can inspire. In spite of the tear gas, mace, clubs, helicopters, bugged installations, spies, *provocateurs*, tanks, machine guns, prisons, and detention centers, this is a shaky foundation” (453-4; 457). Baldwin, here, gives flesh to his thesis that, when faced with the loss of military and economic power, empires turn inward in their domination. Baldwin, too, comes in the end to place the black underclass at the center of his vision. He depicts a world in which the black underclass lives under economic subjugation, enforced by militarized police. It is a world with “a shaky foundation,” trembling before apocalypse.

Against these circumstances, Baldwin takes solace in “history,” from which, he says, “the rulers of empires assuredly learn the least. This unhappy failing will prove to be especially aggravated in the case of the American rulers...who do not know what the passion of a people can withstand or what it can accomplish, or how fatal is the moment, for the kingdom, when the passion is driven underground” (*ibid.*). Baldwin closes this section with his clearest – while still enigmatic – vision for a black future: “The government cannot afford to trust a single black man in this country, nor can they penetrate any black’s disguise, or apprehend how devious and tenacious black patience can be, and any black man they appear to trust is useless to them, for he will never be trusted by the blacks. It is true that our weapons do not appear to be very formidable, but, then, they never have. Then, as now, our greatest weapon is silence. As black poet Robert E. Hayden puts it in his poem to Harriet Tubman, ‘Runagate, Runagate’: *Mean mean mean to be free*” (457-8).

Baldwin uses the words “disguise,” “devious,” “patience,” and, earlier, “underground” to describe black tactics; these words help us understand what Baldwin means by naming “silence” as the “greatest weapon.” This silence is a turning-away from whites, a masking, a dissimulation,

and a willingness to watch and wait for the end to come. Baldwin's phrase "then, as now," and his allusion to Harriet Tubman remind us that silence has long been a central tactic for black survival in America, amid slavery to avoid the lash, or to find joy in life beyond the eyes of the whites, or to plot revolution or escape, and beyond through Jim Crow to the present. This kind of silence – silence toward one's oppressors – has long characterized the black vernacular with "its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character: it is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the black group itself" (O'Meally 3). We can see now that Baldwin has structured the entirety of *No Name* around this figure of silence. In his form of address, his uses of pronouns, and the spirituals he cites as epigraphs, Baldwin has practiced all along the silence he advocates here. "It was the silence that undid me"; "our greatest weapon is silence." Baldwin takes the silence he felt at King's funeral, the apocalyptic power he felt in it and in the black collectivity, and transforms it into the "greatest weapon."

### *Conclusion*

Baldwin published *No Name in the Street* in 1972. That same year, President Nixon, in a radio address, said that what many were calling an "urban crisis" he preferred to think of as an "urban opportunity": he went on to trumpet how his administration had "spent more than two-and-a-half times as much on fighting crimes this year as four years ago, and eleven times as much on fighting drug abuse" (Nixon). The previous year, 1971, Nixon declared a war on drugs.<sup>28</sup> In 1973, he declared the urban crisis over. Today, material conditions for the black underclass are worse than in 1973.<sup>29</sup> Across the same period, the U.S. prison population climbed an astonishing six hundred percent, from 400,000 to 2,400,000. A disproportionate number of those incarcerated are black men, solving the problem that Baldwin identified in 1972, "that this

country does not know what to do with its black population now that the blacks are no longer a source of wealth” (432).

Baldwin turns to economics at the moment that economics, with the end of the postwar boom and the beginning of the long downturn, becomes the central site of political and cultural struggle, a situation that persists today. He responds to economic crisis in a peculiar way: with a literary text. I have demonstrated how his economic insights dramatically affect his literary form. His structural analysis of capitalism as a system that will, regardless of human agency, inevitably destroy itself invites his participation in the apocalyptic tradition, his inscription of an always-impending apocalypse as the narrative horizon. Apocalypse reframes Baldwin’s analytical geography, turning him from focusing on the U.S. as an exceptional nation-state to the U.S. as intimately linked transnationally to the globe through economy and empire, and thus susceptible to the risks that all empires have faced. Yet apocalypse also opens Baldwin to a tradition of black resistance different from the jeremiad. In return, he advances silence as a tactic for black apocalyptic resistance. Baldwin’s silence is a silence toward the powerful, transforming, in *No Name*, Baldwin’s tone and his form of address from his previous works. But his silence is also that which erupts with the opening of the seventh seal, marking a tense and enigmatic hiatus, after bloodshed and before the final end. Baldwin invites blacks to linger with the power of silence, and to appropriate it as a weapon.

In its relations between economics and literary form, *No Name in the Street* is exemplary of what I have termed *American literature of the neoliberal period*, ushered in by the collapse of the postwar boom. The economic conditions to which Baldwin responded in 1972 continue to obtain today, marking, as the rest of the dissertation argues, a coherent literary period. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, this period was dominated by global economic crisis,

manifesting itself in rapid inflation and rising unemployment rates. My next chapter, like this one, centers on the relationship between systemic economic crisis and literary form; yet it builds on the argument I have set forth here by turning to 1849, the moment when the U.S. pivots from settler colonialism to economic imperialism, thus charting a yet deeper history of the economic conditions that lead, eventually, to the crisis of 2008. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, the object of the next chapter's study, like *No Name in the Street* responds to economic crisis with an apocalyptic vision, grounded in economic analysis, positing as its narrative horizon an always-impending end. For McCarthy, this end results from a metaphysical and violent drive, a drive that not only enables and will destroy U.S. economic imperialism, but subtends the literary itself.

## Chapter 2: Evening in America

### *Introduction*

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* traces U.S. scalp hunters in northern Mexico in 1849, in the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War, as they work to clear the land of intractable Indians – i.e. to slaughter them for cash – so that the U.S. can pivot from settler colonialism to economic imperialism. The scalp hunters prove as bad for capital as the Indians they decimate, debauching cities, taking Mexican scalps that might pass as Indian, and destroying the industrial means of production. McCarthy's turn to the foundation of the U.S.'s contemporary imperial formation registers the apocalyptic violence inscribed in its origin. This violence is apocalyptic because it is cataclysmic and revelatory: through mass destructions, it unravels national narratives and reveals their pretensions as subtended by the very violence that undoes them.

Though this violence emerges, for McCarthy, in a concrete historical moment, it persists as a structural condition of U.S. imperial capitalism and thus detaches from its historical moment to always threaten this capitalist formation. Through a temporal logic implicit in the novel's title, *Blood Meridian* foregrounds the threat this violence presents for the moment of its publication. Published in 1985, the novel's apocalyptic vision indirectly marks another pivot: from the economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s to the flourishing of finance capital. *Blood Meridian*, when read through the moment of its publication, envisions the apocalyptic consequences of a financial capitalism that entails the destruction of bodies to create profitable ground. What remains, for McCarthy, after capitalism is the excess that fells it, the violent

supraeconomic drive. McCarthy creates in the novel's epilogue a figure "striking fire out of the rock which God has put there," a creator and author-figure, positing the literary as an epiphenomenon of violence (337).

In an essay about *Blood Meridian* from *The New Yorker*, Joshua Rothman states that "the best writer on the apocalypse is Cormac McCarthy" (n.p.). Harold Bloom begins his introduction<sup>30</sup> to the Modern Library Edition of the novel by writing, "*Blood Meridian* seems to me the authentic American apocalyptic novel" (v). This chapter provides the account that Rothman and Bloom leave implicit, clarifying, expanding on, and authenticating the claims that posit *Blood Meridian* as an exemplary apocalyptic novel.

### *Blood Meridian*

The strange title of McCarthy's 1985 novel – which is, fully, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* – hints at the apocalyptic vision awaiting its reader. "Meridian" means both a line of longitude and, common in the mid-nineteenth century when the novel takes place though now obsolete, the time when the sun reaches its peak, or noon. Figuratively, "meridian" means the "point or period of highest development or perfection, after which decline sets in; culmination, full splendour" (*OED* "meridian," 4.b.). *Blood Meridian*, then, suggests a perfectly violent time and place: in this case the southwestern United States and northern Mexico in 1849 and 1850. Yet, if *Blood Meridian* invokes a zenith, then *The Evening Redness in the West* sounds like an elegiac end.

At about its midpoint, the novel expands on the significance of its title. A gang of scalp hunters under contract with the state of Chihuahua is camped for the night "in the ruins of an older culture," the Anasazi, who built impressive cities and then mysteriously disappeared

(McCarthy 139; *Handbook* 128). Judge Holden, the gang's most loquacious member and an amateur anthropologist, tells a parable to his fellow scalpers in reference to the Anasazi, at the end of which he generalizes to the whole of humanity. "The way of the world," says Holden, "is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day" (146-7). Holden takes the example of the Anasazi as a single case of a general truth: that, as compared to the cycles of the natural world, human civilizations suddenly end upon reaching their "meridian." Setting aside the universality of the claim, we can recognize how the language of the passage speaks directly to the novel's title and, so, to the story it tells. In an earlier draft of this passage, McCarthy notes, "(meridian = evening / as in title)" ("Early"). The note highlights what is strange: McCarthy uses a metaphor from the natural world – the movement of a day – but denaturalizes it by excising the afternoon, by making noon become immediately night. The fusion of *Blood Meridian* and *The Evening Redness in the West* – Holden's "at once" – marks temporal collapse at multiple levels: of the quotidian distance between noon and evening; of the chronological distance between the mid-nineteenth century and the years of the novel's genealogy and publication, 1975-1985; and of the distance between mid-nineteenth-century U.S. scalp hunting in the southwest borderlands and the contemporary imperial capitalism this practice worked to institute.<sup>31</sup>

The title opens peculiar questions. In what sense did the U.S. peak in the years the novel spans, between 1833 and 1878? What sense does it make to suggest the nation's decline when, in 1985, when the novel was published, it seemed to many as strong as ever? *Blood Meridian* follows its protagonist, "the kid," from birth to death, as he moves west, joins first a band of filibusters who intend to invade Mexico, then a gang of scalp hunters paid with hopes of

exterminating the Apaches, before finally, after many years, meeting his end in an encounter with Judge Holden. The novel centers on the intersection of the U.S., Mexico, and Indians from both sides of a border they did not recognize, in the years 1849 and 1850. After the U.S. – Mexican war, the U.S. faced pressing questions regarding its empire. Would it continue settling new lands by force, as the filibusters hoped? Or would it turn its focus to the economic penetration of foreign lands?

Archival work and my reading of new historical studies have led me to recognize *Blood Meridian*'s scalp hunters as agents for the U.S. consul, Bennet Riddells, inscribed in the novel as Riddle: McCarthy has hidden his meticulous historicism in this quizzical pun. With attention to the history of the southwest (or, for Mexico, northern) borderlands and the novel's genealogy in travelogues and historical romance, I show how the scalp hunters serve as ignorant actors in the institution of U.S. imperial capitalism, marking a pivot in U.S. history. (Most accounts of the history of U.S. empire date the origin of U.S. economic imperialism to the early twentieth century,<sup>32</sup> after the wars of 1898; *Blood Meridian* invites the revision of that origin to 1849, more than forty years before Frederick Jackson Turner declared the closure of the frontier and the U.S. turned its attention to Asian markets.) The novel aspires to grander claims than this particular historical intervention. As my reading of its title hints, the novel figures the scalp hunters as a violent force inscribed in the origin of U.S. imperial capitalism, an original violence collapsed into, and threatening, the novel's contemporary historical moment. The 1970s and early 1980s were witness to a crisis for capitalism, a fact sometimes obscured by the persistence of the Cold War. *Blood Meridian* emerges from this crisis to prophesy the unraveling of capitalism's order and the return of violence, to denounce Ronald Reagan's *Morning in America* and to see, instead, the onset of an American – including, for all its attention beyond the border, Mexican – night.

*On Economics, on Criticism, on Progress*

Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* has popularized a conception of postwar history dominated not by Cold War politics but by a shift in capitalism: from the postwar boom to post-1970 turbulence.<sup>33</sup> This conception has long flourished in the disciplines of history and sociology<sup>34</sup> but has yet to migrate to literary criticism of the period. The last twenty years have, however, seen the rise of literature and economics as an emergent field, with landmark studies by Catherine Gallagher, Deidre Lynch, Ian Baucom, and Mary Poovey, all of which theorize the relationship between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel and the credit economy. These scholars have built a foundation from which to theorize late twentieth-century literature. Unlike novels from these earlier centuries, which "taught economic subjects to accept the uncertainties of an economy dependent on credit," *Blood Meridian* responds to crisis by laying bare "the risk and violence that capitalist ideology must constantly labor to conceal" (McClanahan n.p.).<sup>35</sup> Yet 1985, and thus *Blood Meridian*, marks a transitional moment, when finance capital took hold and masked the severity of capitalism's crisis until 2008. From our post-2008 perspective, we can best encounter *Blood Meridian* as a novel of capitalist crisis. In so doing, we will be able to see how McCarthy takes up, as Ian Baucom suggests scholars do, the accumulation, intensification, and reassertion of capitalism's past in the present (30). Baucom argues that "our long contemporaneity" dates to the late eighteenth-century, pointing to the massacre of one hundred and forty-two slaves who were thrown overboard from the Zong slave ship when they became more valuable as insurance claims than as living slaves (8). The monetization of slave bodies and the violence of their transformation into a type marks, according to Baucom, an inauguration of our ongoing moment (11). *Blood Meridian* indexes a repetition: scalp hunting speculates on

human bodies that must be slaughtered to profit. The U.S. imperial economy, then, is founded on the speculation of bodies, a speculation that, as Baucom argues and to which *Blood Meridian*'s temporal collapse attests, does not end with this founding but continues to ground economic imperialism in the novel's 1885 and our 2014. Yet McCarthy's novel also indexes a difference: it posits the threat that emerges when the violence of this speculation escapes imperial control.

To McCarthy studies, I offer a new account of *Blood Meridian*'s scalp hunters, moving beyond the recognition that Manifest Destiny entailed repressed violence to show how the novel transforms our understanding of the U.S. progress narrative, engaging with a critical pivot in U.S. history. For heuristic purposes, the scholarship on *Blood Meridian* can be divided into that which takes the novel's relationship to history as central and that which finds this relationship secondary, if not irrelevant.<sup>36</sup> The latter camp includes essays by Denis Donoghue and Harold Bloom, who, in the late 1990s, during the waning of the culture wars, found in *Blood Meridian* an aesthetic triumph, one that disregards the pious moralisms of the day. Bloom's extravagant praise – he claims that “no other living American novelist, not even Pynchon, has given us a book as strong and memorable as *Blood Meridian*” – helped propel the book to fame (v). An early and influential article by Dana Phillips contends that “knowing that Glanton and other members of his band are not pure fictions may excite some readers. I doubt, however, that this knowledge offers any real hermeneutic advantage” (436). Phillips argues, instead, that the novel envisions a world in which humans exist on the same ontological plane with rocks and all else. More recently, Amy Hungerford has read *Blood Meridian* in light of trends in American religion since 1945 and American literature's response to those trends through the expression of what she calls postmodern belief, or “belief without meaning” (49).<sup>37</sup>

The historicist argument usually contends that the novel's violence serves to critique Manifest Destiny and American imperialism. Mark Eaton offers a strong version of this argument.<sup>38</sup> Taking up the then-recent transnational turn in American Studies and attending to the geography of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Eaton concludes that *Blood Meridian* is "McCarthy's attempt to contest in his work the official story of Manifest Destiny"; that it "is a record of forgotten atrocities committed in the name of nationhood"; and that, "Remembering the dead becomes...a way of coming to terms with how the West was won" (157; 158; 164). Yet Eaton's attention to geography is not careful enough. The bulk of the novel concerns the scalp hunters fighting not, in fact, for Manifest Destiny, which had been accomplished, nor for U.S. nationhood, nor the West – as they do their killing in Mexico, for Mexican pay. This chapter provides a nuanced account of the novel's interventions in a decisive – and forgotten – moment in the history of U.S. imperial capitalism.

*Blood Meridian* is a deeply researched account of the moment when the U.S. pivoted from settler-colonialism to economic imperialism. The scalp hunters play a precise role, serving northern Mexican and U.S. elites in making northern Mexico safe for capital. Yet we cannot understand the work of violence in the novel unless we recognize how it pits this violence against ideas of progress central to the American imaginary, from John Winthrop to Ronald Reagan. Understanding capitalism's imposition of order as a method of sense-making that is perpetually threatened by a constitutive violence, the novel reserves special hostility for the notion of progress.

McCarthy almost chose to be explicit in the novel's rejection of progress, considering the following as an epigraph before deciding, typically, for more discretion: "There is a deep truth in what the school of Schopenhauer insists on – the illusoriness of the notion of moral progress.

The more brutal forms of evil that go are replaced by others more subtle and more poisonous” (“Holograph”).<sup>39</sup> The novel takes pains to demonstrate the triumph of violence against specific forms of mid-nineteenth century ideologies of progress, including: *the tent preacher* (Reverend Green), a figure of mid-nineteenth century postmillennialist fervor, a form of Christianity in which the moral improvement of man will result in a state of perfection that will institute the millennium and initiate Christ’s return;<sup>40</sup> *the filibuster* (Captain White) who takes upon his own initiative to annex foreign lands by force in the name of the progress of the U.S. empire and, in this novel, the morally superior Anglo-Saxon race; and *the sentimentalist woman* (Sarah Borginnis) who believes in moral improvement as a force for social progress.<sup>41</sup> Each becomes an object of mockery in the novel, a novel that suggests the persistence of bloodshed with one of its three epigraphs, which notes a newspaper article telling of a “300,000-year-old fossil skull” that “shows evidence of having been scalped” (xix). Yet the unchosen epigraph notes that violence changes its form over time. *Blood Meridian* ends with the break-up of the scalping gang, the death of the kid, and the enclosure of the West. The “more brutal forms of evil” give way, would be the implication, to “more subtle and more poisonous” forms of imperial economic violence.

### *The War of a Thousand Deserts*

“What do you think of the treaty?” Captain White, recruiting a band of filibusters early in the novel, asks the kid (33). He refers to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the war between the United States and Mexico and annexed to the U.S. all or parts of what became eight states. Historian Brian DeLay writes that, though divisive at the time, “the war with Mexico helped make the United States a world power, made possible the eventual American dominance of the Pacific basin, and through the immense and varied resources of the conquered territory,

would contribute in perpetuity to the prosperity and might of the United States” (*War* 263). The acquisition of the new territory also forced the U.S., which had achieved continental breadth, to wonder where it would grow next.

For Mexico, the war was a bitter, though not entirely unexpected, disappointment. Only several decades earlier, in 1821, Mexico had emerged from an exhausting eleven-year war for independence from Spain in political and financial turmoil.<sup>42</sup> The national situation did not improve in subsequent years. “Between May 1833 and August 1855 the presidency changed hands thirty-six time.... [T]he three chaotic years preceding war with the U.S. [have been] characterized,” writes David Weber, “as ‘the most turbulent period of Mexican history’” (32). The instability in Mexico City resulted in the neglect of its immense northern frontier, which had been enjoying a tenuous if imperfect peace with Apaches, Comanches, Kiowas, and Navajos (DeLay, *War* 155). New Spain had built across the north a series of presidios, which “were military institutions, but perhaps more to the point they served as centers of commerce and diplomacy with independent Indians (DeLay, *War* 3050). Under the Mexican state these presidios crumbled. The deterioration of the presidios coupled with the decision by Chihuahua and Sonora, in the northwest, under financial duress, to end in 1831 a long-standing ration program and cut off aid to Apaches made the region vulnerable to renewed raiding. The Apaches and Comanches, no friends with one another, and each internally heterogeneous, began for their own complex reasons to begin raiding northern Mexico extensively in the early 1830s.

What followed were several decades of intense and devastating warfare across the region. DeLay, whose recent book is the best synthesis of the sources on this warfare – which is the immediate context of *Blood Meridian* – calls it “the War of a Thousand Deserts,” because of the “creation of man-made deserts where once there had been thriving Mexican settlements” (162).

He writes, “The conflicts intensified through the 1830s and 1840s, until much of the northern third of Mexico had been transformed into a vast theater of hatred, terror, and staggering loss for independent Indians and Mexicans alike” (155). Numerous contemporary accounts attest to the devastation, the crumbling presidios, the desecrated churches, and the abandoned villages that comprise the setting for *Blood Meridian*. By 1849, when the historical Glanton gang joined the war as mercenaries – in part funded by U.S. money that had traveled to Mexico City by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and then been sent by the Mexican Congress to northern states to pay for the war against independent Indians<sup>43</sup> – the scalp hunters were stepping into the later stages of a prolonged series of conflicts.

### *Genealogy*

*Blood Meridian* is cobbled together from dozens if not hundreds of sources on this period.<sup>44</sup> McCarthy spent years researching and revising the novel for historical accuracy. He even asked himself at one point if he should “footnote the novel?” (“Photocopy”). This source work shapes the novel’s engagement with the War of a Thousand Deserts and North American history more broadly. A brief account of several of the novel’s most important sources will allow us to see how it appropriates mid-nineteenth century genres, which yields surprising insights about its relationship to older forms. Such an account will also prepare us to see better the novel’s particular vision of U.S. imperial engagement in Mexico: both through filibustering as an attempt at ongoing settler-colonialism, and through scalp hunting, considered as a strategy for clearing the land to develop its natural resources in an ever-expanding capitalist economy.

Many of the details in *Blood Meridian* originate in contemporary travelogues by people passing through northern Mexico in the 1840s, such as British explorer George Ruxton, and John

Woodhouse Audubon, son of the famous ornithologist John James Audubon and himself a gifted naturalist. These travelogues attune us to the vast sections of *Blood Meridian* devoted to landscape writing, many more pages, in fact, than the novel gives to either depictions of violence or Holden's speeches. Many of these passages detail the wartorn countryside as an apocalyptic wasteland, yet others poetically catalogue flora and fauna. For instance, the scalpers "passed through a highland meadow carpeted with wildflowers, acres of golden groundsel and zinnia and deep purple gentian and wild vines of blue morninglory and a vast plain of varied small blooms reaching onward like gingham print to the farthest serried rimlands blue with haze and the adamantine ranges rising out of nothing like the backs of seabeasts in a devonian dawn" (187). We hear in this passage the transformation of a traveling naturalist's catalogue into the lyrical memorialization of a pastoral landscape, imagined in association with an even earlier ("seabeasts," "devonian") time. Yet, as Audubon and others like him knew, the presence of these travelers marked the beginning of this pastoralia's end, an end inscribed in the travelogues by their cataloguing of not only flora and fauna, but of natural resources, too. George Ruxton writes, "My impression is, that the mines of Mapimi," through which the scalp hunters of *Blood Meridian* pass, "if properly worked, would be the most productive in the country" (2470). Again and again, these travelogues, written by citizens of the United States or Great Britain, highlight the extravagant wealth waiting in northern Mexico for the extermination of the Indian threat.

When the U.S. government sent John Russell Bartlett to survey the new border created by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, he too saw the land opposite the U.S. as extremely valuable. McCarthy leans heavily<sup>45</sup> on Bartlett's long but lively,<sup>46</sup> "Personal Narrative of Explorations & Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua: Connected with the United

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**THE SCALP BUSINESS ON THE BORDER,  
 1837~1850**

ACCOUNTS OF THE "HAIR-RAISING" EXPLOITS OF TWO OF HISTORY'S  
 BLOODIEST BARBERS, KIRKER AND GLANTON

By RAY BRANDES AND RALPH A. SMITH

## II. JOHN JOEL GLANTON, LORD OF THE SCALP RANGE

By RALPH A. SMITH

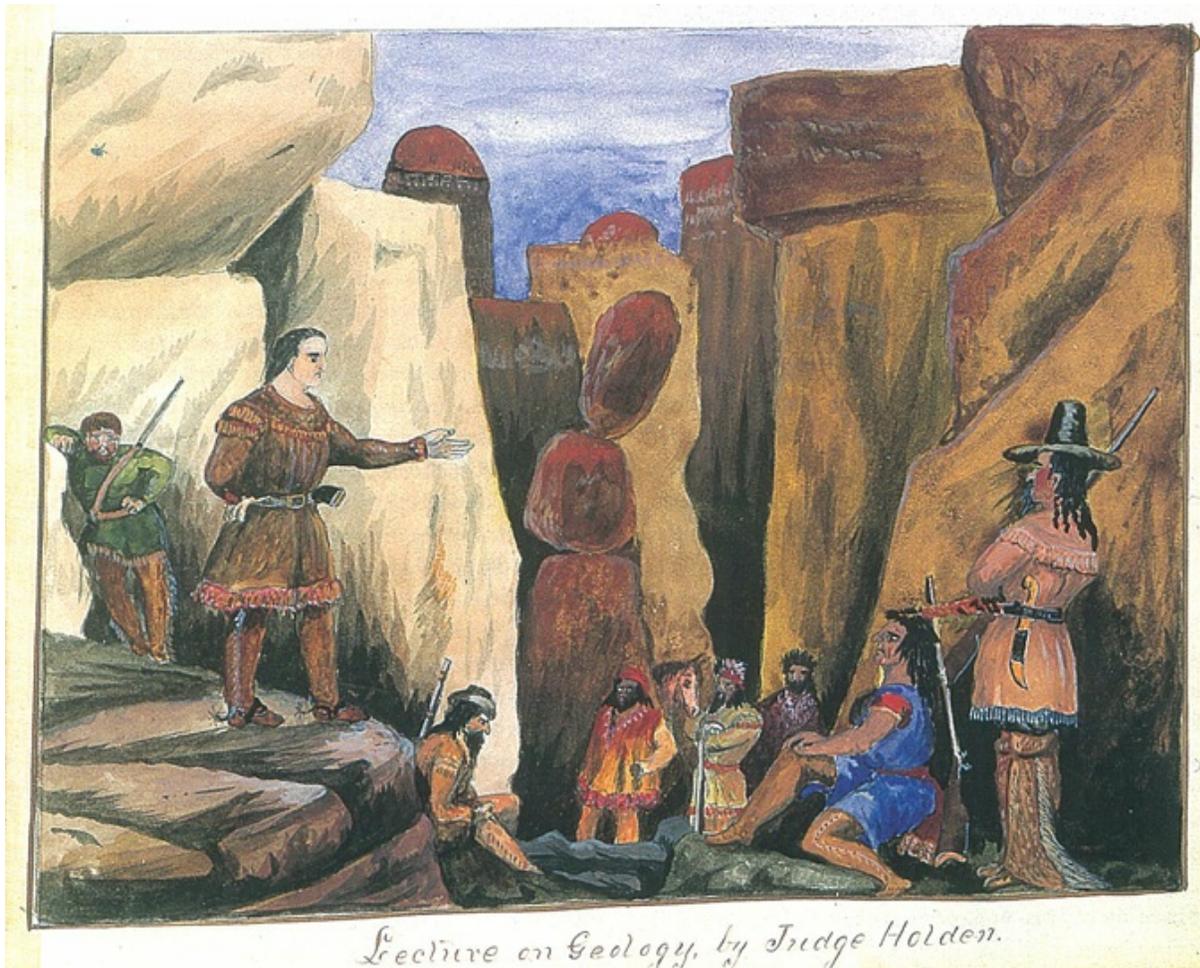
JOHN JOEL GLANTON LIVED LITTLE MORE THAN THREE DECADES and played a significant part in the South-western drama for only one year. But that was long enough for him to become known as one of the most fearsome professional Indian fighters in North American history and one of the most notorious scalp hunters of the Mexican-American borderlands. Five feet and eleven inches tall and thick-set, Glanton had hazel eyes, a dark complexion, and black hair which fell over his broad shoulders in long snaky curls. Dressed like a Mexican herder in leather clothes and sometimes with a blanket across his shoulder, he rode superbly and was usually mounted on one of the best horses in Northern Mexico. Armed with good weapons, including a Bowie knife, Glanton was indeed a "lord of the scalp range" in the days immediately following the Mexican War.

In the last week of May, 1849, Glanton set out from Chihuahua City, going northward in a party under Major Michael H. Chevallié. Only hours before, Chevallié had entered the first contract signed under the Fifth Law of May 25 to scalp hostile Indians for Governor Angel Trias of Chihuahua at the rate of \$200 per warrior and to deliver Indian captives at \$250 per adult male and \$150 per squaw or child under fourteen. So anxious were the Chihuahuan authorities to attract men, fond of adventure, into the Great Scalp Hunt that they had enlisted Glanton and his companions on terms which went beyond the literal words of the Fifth Law. Glanton and his men soon found that the bounty program was even more liberal in administration, for children's scalps were not only accepted but were sometimes bought at the same price as adults. After striking an Indian camp near Agua Nueva, Chevallié's party re-entered Chihuahua City on June 4 with five scalps and four live boys under fourteen. An examining committee passed on the scalps and the municipal council ordered the state treasurer to pay \$1,500 to Chevallié, less \$500 advanced to finance his campaign.

For specific details about the actions of the Glanton gang, McCarthy consulted the greatest scholar of the scalp hunters, Ralph A. Smith. Smith's essay, "John Joel Glanton, Lord of the Scalp Range," reads like a condensed outline of the scalp hunting section of *Blood Meridian*. Smith presages McCarthy's aestheticization of war, writing, "In the turbulent years between the Texas Revolution and the Gadsden Treaty, the unprotected frontiers of northwestern Mexico was the scene of high and sanguinary carnival" (9).

States and Mexican Boundary Commission, During the Years 1850, '51, '52, and '53.” Bartlett’s text ends with an extensive discussion of the possibilities of exploiting the region’s natural resources on both sides of the border, but especially in Chihuahua and Sonora, the states where most of *Blood Meridian* takes place. Bartlett writes that “the mineral wealth of Chihuahua is not surpassed, if equalled, in variety and extent by any State in the world” (13058). He encourages the United States to follow through with its plans to develop a railroad through northern Mexico, portions of which seem “almost graded by nature for a railway” (14914). Likewise, one of Bartlett’s contemporaries writes, “the construction of a railroad should afford the means of actually redeeming the country to possession, which Spain never has accomplished, and Mexico never can accomplish” (Wilson 4431). One of several motivations for the Gadsden Purchase in 1854 of these northern regions of Sonora and Chihuahua was to build a railroad, though none would arrive until 1877. Bartlett’s boundary survey and the travelogues lend *Blood Meridian* a preoccupation with enclosure: the establishment of boundaries and the privatization of land for capital investment. The scalp hunters not only enter a war between peoples, but a war over the land and its division and use. In place of “golden groundsel and zinnia and deep purple gentian,” the “highland meadow” and “vast plain” will soon feed cattle and grow monocrops.

Samuel Chamberlain’s autobiographical romance *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* is the most significant source for *Blood Meridian*. Like *Blood Meridian*, *My Confession* is the tale of a violent teenager who heads west, first to St. Louis, then to New Orleans, Texas, and northern Mexico, before ending up with the Glanton gang and finally in a peculiar feud with a formidable man named Judge Holden. More revealing, though, than the plot itself is how *My Confession* transmits to *Blood Meridian* a foundation in the genre of the historical romance.



Samuel Chamberlain depicts Judge Holden lecturing fellow scalp hunters on geology (312)

Early in his memoir – which like many memoirs deviates from the historical record and at times looks little different from a novel – Chamberlain tells of his youthful reading of the Bible and “the usual books of a Sabbath School Library. Then,” consequentially, “I got hold of Scott’s immortal works. What a glorious new world opened before me! How I devoured their pages and oh how I longed to emulate its horrors” (27). Historical novelist Walter Scott was easily the most popular writer in the antebellum United States, with “some five hundred thousand volumes” in print (Horsman 161). Chamberlain proceeds to emulate Scott’s horrors, turning northern Mexico into the setting for a historical romance. The Comanches, for instance,

“certainly made a most gallant appearance, and reminded me of the description in *The Talisman* of the reception the Saracens gave to him of the Lion Heart,” referring to a Scott novel.

*Blood Meridian* inherits the historical romance’s underlying logic, how “past events were no longer understood merely as illustrations of moral laws. Instead, their meaning was now derived from their place in a historical process.... What makes [past events] part of a historical novel is a story in which history functions as a transformative force and is interpreted on the basis of a historical law” (Fluck 121). For Walter Scott, historical law worked through “a sequence of stages from savagery, barbarism, and a pastoral agricultural state to modern commercial society,” a development he regards ambivalently (Fluck 121). *Blood Meridian* is less enthusiastic about this progression. The setting of a terribly violent war becomes the occasion for a historical romance whose central figures – a gang of scalp hunters – serve, in an ironic revision of the mid-nineteenth century romance, as evidence of the perpetuity of violence and as agents who unintentionally work to usher in a new age of technological modernity and the ideology of progress.

### *Filibustering*

I turn now to *Blood Meridian* to clarify precisely the history it engages. The kid first arrives in Mexico with a band of filibusters; after Comanches destroy the band he joins Glanton’s scalp hunters. These two forms of armed intervention in northern Mexico – filibustering and scalp hunting – represent two different forms of mid-nineteenth century U.S. imperialism. Accordingly, the novel adopts different tones toward each: during the filibustering episode, a mocking irony; and an earnest seriousness for the scalpers.

While recruiting the kid, Captain White utters a classic imperial line. “We are to be instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” (34). Beginning around 1848, the recruitment of militias from within the United States to invade Mexico became popular and was known as filibustering. The filibusters united the belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and Mexican weakness with liberatory pretension as an opportunistic play for land. In the novel, Captain White delivers a speech, at length, that reflects the conditions of northern Mexico as seen through a filibuster’s eyes, which serves as an oblique history lesson for both the kid and the reader.

After lamenting the kid’s ignorance of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Captain White explains that the soldiers who fought in the war “were sold out” (33). White states a common opinion among many Americans, especially Democrats, who believed the U.S. should have annexed more of Mexico. (Many Whigs believed the U.S. should have taken none of Mexico.) The treaty, and the acquisition shortly before of the Oregon territory, forced to the foreground a dilemma at the heart of what it meant to be “America.” “The American experience,” argues Edward Said, “was from the beginning founded upon the idea of an *imperium* – a dominion state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power” (9). After reaching the Pacific, where could America grow? Reginald Horsman states the problem cogently. “After the Mexican War,” he writes, “it was clear that if American expansion was to continue into populous areas it either had to be through colonial rule or economic penetration,” but regardless of which, “Americans were determined to participate fully in shaping the economic future of not only the American continent but of the world” (247). Filibusters stood at the front of those who opted to extend American imperialism through settler-colonialism, that is, the project of settling foreign land as a step toward annexation.

“We fought for it,” says Captain White, about Mexico. “Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didnt give it back” (33). Yet, White does not accept the current boundaries as the end of the story. Despite the “mollycoddles in Washington,” he says, “I dont think there’s any question that ultimately Sonora will become a United States territory. Guaymas a U S port” (34). White’s belief is ubiquitous in the travelogues and primary accounts from the borderlands of that time. Robert A. Wilson writes, “Once in ten years [the United States] requires a portion of the wild land nominally belonging to Mexico, and once in ten years she must take it” (1400). Similarly, A. B. Clarke writes that Chihuahua and Sonora “will doubtless before long be settled by Americans” (73). The expansionist desire even went up to White’s “mollycoddles in Washington.” Before settling on a purchase of the land in Chihuahua and Sonora just south of the Gila River, Gadsden tried to purchase most of Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas and the entirety of Baja California (Arguello, “Interesa” 1). A few years later, President James Buchanan tried again to buy Sonora and Chihuahua, and when he failed he suggested in his State of the Union address that the U.S. occupy those states (*ibid*). We have become accustomed to recognizing the U.S.—Mexico border as it presently exists, but *Blood Meridian* testifies to the instability of that border in 1849.

The aptly named Captain White makes very clear that his vision of himself as a liberator depends on his ideas about race. “What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better.... We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right. Other come in to govern for them” (34). White represents many contemporary Americans who viewed the turbulence of the Mexican government not as the result of the difficult legacy of Spanish colonialism or internal class

divisions, but racial inferiority. “By 1850,” writes Reginald Horsman, “American expansion was viewed less as a victory for the principles of free democratic republicanism than as evidence of the innate superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon.... [T]he Mexicans who stood in the way of southwestern expansion were depicted as a mongrel race, adulterated by extensive intermarriage with an inferior Indian race” (1; 210). White plainly links his racism to his settler-colonialist project. He argues that “unless we act, Mexico – and I mean the whole of the country – will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no” (35). In White’s construction, filibustering is not an aggressive act against a sovereign nation, but the liberation of an inferior people from themselves and the otherwise inevitable encroachment of “toadeaters” (34).

Throughout Captain White’s speech we find evidence of the opportunistic goal toward which his racial ideology is directed. He describes the setting that the reader will shortly encounter, how the northern Mexicans have “given up their crops and livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned” (33). He promises the kid that, “There will be a section of land for every man in my company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation” (34). Here White echoes the discourse of natural resources laid to waste by independent Indians that we have seen in the travelogues that McCarthy consulted. Brian DeLay explains that, “Americans saw [in northern Mexico] perversion and opportunity: perversion because Mexican settlers seemed to be reversing the arc of history by falling back before Indians, and opportunity because, characteristically, Americans thought they could do better” (*War* 202). Beneath the racist cant are dreams of incredible wealth. But DeLay highlights something missing from Captain White’s speech: the captain’s imperial plan requires a minimization of the Indian threat. When he mentions Indians, he does so to shame the Mexicans: “a heathen horde rides over the land

looting and killing with total impunity. Not a hand raised against them. What kind of people are these?” (33).

Captain White’s speech to the kid serves several purposes for the novel. For one, it provides the historical context for what comes next, if slanted through mid-nineteenth century racist ideology. Readers gain a picture of the War of a Thousand Deserts from a contemporary Anglo-American’s perspective in the aftermath of the U.S. – Mexican War. The speech also indicates that the dilemma of American imperial expansion will inform the novel’s depictions of armed United States citizens in northern Mexico. Finally, the speech provides the novel with the opportunity to mock an ideology of racial superiority that conceives of Anglo-Saxons as agents of progress. The filibusters assume wholly that “America” is robust, eternal, and pure. *Blood Meridian* will prove White’s filibusters to be fragile, finite, and impure.

The filibusters set out across the border into difficult, barren country. Before long, men of the company are dying, the animals failing (46-7). The novel ironically describes them as, “these elect, shabby and white with dust like a company of armed and mounted millers wandering in dementia” (48). Captain White’s confident rhetoric, his sense of Americans as chosen, has encountered a reality that mocks his pretensions of superiority, that makes him and his company look mad. Soon the Comanches, who White dismissed, appear in an astonishing and itself racist scene to annihilate the filibusters, called here “the unhorsed Saxons,” as if to ridicule their racist ideology. The Comanches attack “like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke”: a scene of apocalyptic cataclysm (53). In fact, we have a remnant, a resurrection. “With darkness one soul rose wondrously from among the new slain dead and stole away in the moonlight”: which is, of course, the kid (55). He survives to make a punch line of the filibusters and their pretentious

ideology. After encountering Captain White's head in a jar, the kid says, "Somebody ought to of pickled it a long time ago. By rights they ought to pickle mine. For ever takin up with such a fool" (70). He also survives to participate in a very different, indirect, and unusual form of U.S. imperialism: scalp hunting.

### *Scalp Hunting*

As much as *Blood Meridian* mocks filibusters, it takes scalp hunters seriously. Compared to the pontificating Captain White, Captain Glanton of the scalp hunters is a terse man, capable of intense cruelty. We first see him test Colt revolvers by shooting a cat, a goat, and a chicken (82). Shortly thereafter he executes an old woman for her scalp (98). Yet, later the novel will describe him as "equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour" (243). These words could come from a description of the hero in a Louis L'Amour pulp Western, and in an exaggerated sense, the quiet, cruel, racist, yet complete Captain Glanton is such a hero. Like Western heroes, Glanton occupies an ephemeral role in a moment of national transition that will mark the end of the code by which the hero lives; in Glanton's case, he inadvertently helps usher in the new age. The novel suffuses the scalp hunters with ambivalence: they are at once apocalyptically horrible, committing cataclysmic violence, and crowned with nostalgia for a life before modernization, before capitalism, a life closer to nature, when no gap existed between a man's actions and his code and he was "complete at every hour."

The scalp hunters serve as agents – truly mercenaries – in a much larger story, and *Blood Meridian* persistently portrays them as such. Both the judge and the narrative voice describe the scalpers as instruments of destiny, working for a higher agency about which they are ignorant. Holden, our satanic misinterpreter, reveals this agency as deified war; literary critics have named

the agency nature, or Schopenhauerian will, or the whims of the author.<sup>47</sup> In the next few pages I will show that the novel provides a bevy of details to make evident that they function, also, as instruments for the higher agency of government interests and moneyed powerbrokers with particular agendas for northern Mexico. For U.S. and Mexican businessmen to capitalize on the wealth of resources in the region, they need it made safe for capital by the extermination of the independent (and while they are at it, any) Indians. The scalp hunters work, ironically, as a force to make the region safe for capital; but, in the end, they exceed their economic role and in a further irony prove as bad for business as the Indians they were supposed to kill.

The United States, Mexico, and independent Indians each had distinct agendas for northern Mexican land in the mid-nineteenth century. We have seen how filibusters came down from the U.S. in the attempt to settle land, but they represented a less than common plan for U.S. imperialism. According to Reginald Horsman, “A minority argued that [ongoing colonization] meant that Americans would have to settle other regions, act as a ruling elite, and create a colonial empire or sister republics, but the majority thought that a vigorous commercial penetration of the globe would create immense wealth” (274). Or, as U.S. – Mexican War hero Alexander Doniphan more bluntly put it, “Chihuahua would ‘buy American’ at gunpoint” (Howe 760). The U.S. realized that, with the development of new technologies and the expansion of global markets, it could extend its empire more easily through capitalism than settler-colonialism. Major advances in transportation and communication, in the forms of railroads and telegraph wires, transformed the U.S. at this time from “an aggregate of local economies into a nationwide market economy” (Howe 118). These new technologies supported “the period of the most rapid urbanization in American history” (Howe 526). In turn, “Economic investment by U.S. citizens in Mexico increased after 1848, especially on the frontier” (Stout xiii).

Mexican historian Ana Rosa Suarez Arguello argues that, given the role U.S. businessmen played during this period in growing their capital through the Mexican economy and, she notes, with the help of local Mexican business men, “es casi imposible explicar por qué ha sido ignorado” [it is almost impossible to explain why it {the role of U.S. businessmen} has been ignored] (*Batalla* 12). In northern Mexico, though, as we have seen in travelogues, aspiring imperial businessmen had a problem: the region was at war. The war was usually depicted as the aggression of the Indians: the U.S. could at least do business with the Mexicans.

Mexican businessmen and the northern Mexican state governments also wanted to eliminate the Indian threat so as to develop capital. During the 1830s, politicians from three northern Mexican states wrote works that, according to Brian DeLay, “pivot on the same theme: their states could be enormously productive if only Indian raiders could be kept in check” (*War* 3105). Years later, “the Border Commission sent out by Mexico in 1873 declared that one of the greatest damages resulting from these raids had been the suspension of every kind of industry and the lack of confidence in beginning afresh arising from the insecurity of the fruit of their labors” (Rippy 389). When northern states financed scalp bounties that drew Anglo-Americans across the border, they highlighted a class tension. While wealthy businessmen needed to eliminate the Indians, villagers were not pleased to see the same people who had recently pillaged their land return. Indeed, “To patriotic Chihuahuans, these well-armed, well-mounted intruders riding over their land so soon after the Mexican War were camouflaged Yankee imperialists” (“Scalp Hunt” 119). *Blood Meridian* raises this tension to its peak when Glanton and his gang begin to slaughter entire Mexican villages for their scalps.

Meanwhile, the different raiding Indians – the internally heterogeneous Apaches, Comanches, Kiowas, and Navajos – had their own complex agendas for northern Mexico, not

least of which were also economic, though nevertheless hostile to capitalism. DeLay writes about “the economic context on the southern plains and the markets it intersected with – markets that could make raiders insatiable by turning captives, mules, and horses into almost anything they wanted” (*War* 1941). Yet, as evidenced in *Blood Meridian* by the scene in which the Comanches massacre the filibusters, the independent Indians could be roused to raid for non-economic purposes: “Comanches and Kiowas united their broader communities in the [raiding] enterprise in part by submerging economics in a discourse about honor, pity, and, especially, revenge” (DeLay, “Independent” 48). From the perspective of Mexican and U.S. capitalists, these Indians needed to be expelled or, more often, exterminated to allow economic development.

Given the financial and organizational difficulties confronting the Mexican state, “Northwesterners...looked to the market to do what government could not or would not do”: they hired scalp hunters (DeLay, *War* 3320). The scalp market rose and fell during the War of a Thousand Deserts, but it received a boon from the money that came from the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and “soon scores of mercenary outfits were doing across the north what [famous scalp hunter] James Kirker and others had done” (DeLay, *War* 5994). Significantly for *Blood Meridian*, “On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1849, Chihuahua adopted the *Ley Quinto* (Fifth Law), under which the state paid for scalps as late as 1886” (Smith, “Scalp Hunt” 17). About this time, the kid falls in with Glanton.

*Blood Meridian* makes a point of reflecting the historical role of the scalp hunters in the larger story of conflicting interests in northern Mexican land. The novel’s Glanton gang receives funding from both the Chihuahuan state under governor Angel Trías and U.S. consul Bennet Riddells, though known in the novel only as Riddle. In fact, we could say that the mystery of *Blood Meridian*’s higher agency is resolved through a Riddle. Just before they join the gang, the

kid's companion, Louis Toadvine, says, "His name is Glanton.... He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head" (79). On the next page the gang rides to the edge of Chihuahua "where the governor gave them his blessing and drank their health and their fortune in a simple ceremonial" (80). Soon after, during the scene in which Glanton tests the Colt revolvers on animals, he tries to haggle over the price of the guns, to which the merchant replies, "Mr Riddle thinks that it's a fair price" (83). Glanton replies, "Mr Riddle aint payin it," upon which the merchant corrects him, "He's putting up the money" (83). As Ralph A. Smith notes, "Benjamin Riddel [yet another variation], U.S. consul in Chihuahua, old friend of Yankee scalp hunters and proprietor of the American hotel...had staked him to \$2,500" ("Glanton" 9). From the beginning of the scalp hunting portion of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy presents the details that demonstrate who the Glanton gang ostensibly serves: the state of Chihuahua, which pays for the scalps, and the U.S. consul tasked to support U.S. business interests, who supplies the start-up funds for new Colt revolvers. This money implicates the scalpers in the War of a Thousand Deserts and the project to exterminate Indians to make the land safe for capital.

On the warpath, the scalp hunters are well-received by the Mexican elite. Riding through the "wretched town" of Corralitos, "Glanton and the judge with the Brown brothers" eat dinner with "General Zuloaga" and spend the night at his hacienda (88-9). Zuloaga would later become president of Mexico and an opponent of Benito Juárez's populist reforms. McCarthy would have known, through Bartlett, that Riddle, as U.S. consul, had worked with the elite in Corralitos to defend its mines against the "persecutions" of the Indians (12871). From Corralitos, the gang rides to the desolated mines of Santa Rita del Cobre, "abandoned these dozen years past when the Apaches cut off the wagontrains from Chihuahua and laid the works under siege" (113). The

novel lingers over mining words, emphasizing waylaid capital as the gang “rode past the slag and rubble and the dark shape of shaft mouths and they rode past the smeltinghouse where piles of ore stood about and weathered wagons and orecarts bonewhite in the dawn and the dark iron shapes of abandoned machinery” (114). According to Ralph A. Smith, the mine had been owned and operated by American Robert McKnight and Frenchman Stephen Cuicier (“Scalp Hunters” 7). Scalp hunter James Kirker, who had once worked for the mine, proceeded “to castigate the Apaches threatening the holdings of his former employers.... Kirker scouted the valley of the upper Gila, and in a surprise attack fell upon a village containing about two hundred and fifty Apaches” (*ibid.*).<sup>48</sup> McCarthy rewrites this battle as Glanton’s. The gang leaves Santa Rita and proceeds to massacre Apaches in a surprise, morning attack (155-6). If the scalp hunters’ initial funding tells us for whom they work, their journey, moving between wealthy haciendas, sites of desolated capital, and massacres of Indians, indicates how they follow their appointed destiny.

I have interpreted *Blood Meridian*’s scalp hunters as ignorant agents in the service of capitalism, performing what in Marxist terms is called “primitive accumulation,” or the securing of land for the origin of capitalist development. Yet *Blood Meridian* is no Marxist parable: after they receive their payment for the Apache scalps, the gang exceeds their economic imperative, going mad and wreaking havoc across the region, as if the realization of their role in a market economy unleashes a force opposed to capitalism, attempting to expose it as absurd not because it develops internal contradictions, but because from the outset it tries to harness a violent irrational force that denies enclosure. *Blood Meridian* charts how this force, in its excess, destroys the capitalism it was meant to institute.

*Apocalypse: the Violence that Exceeds and Destroys*

When the Glanton gang returns to Chihuahua with scalps from the Apache massacre, the city throws “a hero’s welcome” and the gang’s patrons – Trias and Riddle – host a dinner “in their honor that evening at the Riddle and Stephens Hotel” (165; 167). The scalpers take their pay and begin an extended debauch of the city, quickly nullifying any benefits of their slaughter in the minds of the townspeople. “Mr Riddle, who was acting consul in the city, descended to remonstrate with the revelers and was warned away.... Charcoal scrawls appeared on the limewashed walls. Mejor los indios [Better the indians]” (171). After the debauch, they leave the city to procure more scalps, but something has changed. Before they only slaughtered en masse those, the Apaches, for whom they had a contract. This time out they begin by killing every member of a peaceful band of Tiguas “so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased” (174). Members of the gang wonder at the change. Toadvine, after conferring with the kid, says “Them sons of bitches aint botherin nobody” (173). But on they ride. Soon after, the gang finds itself in a bar fight in which they kill thirty-six Mexican citizens. Afterward, in the smoking room, Glanton commands, “Hair, boys.... The string aint run on this trade yet” (180). As if once they possess Mexican scalps they cannot turn back, the scalpers go on to massacre a series of Mexican villages. They return to Chihuahua “filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted.... Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton’s head.... They rode out...infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun” (185). Harold Bloom calls this last sentence “the visionary center of *Blood Meridian*,” and observes that the gang has “broken away from any semblance of order,” and that “from this point on the filibusters<sup>49</sup> pursue the way down and out to an apocalyptic conclusion” (xi). The passage describes the scalp hunters

as smitten and half-mad (“fond”) with their departure toward the titular “evening” and its “pandemonium.” Glanton soon goes fully mad, ties a Mexican flag to the tail of a donkey and whips the animal into a fury so it drags the flag through the mud (193). Chased out of town, the gang disrupts “a conducta of one hundred and twenty-two mules bearing flasks of quicksilver for the mines,” leaving most of the mules dead at the bottom of a cliff and the mercury dashed (194). Whatever help they had offered to the mining industry they have now negated. The “Americans” are described as “dark and smoking and apocalyptic” and Glanton becomes figured as one of St. John’s horsemen of the apocalypse: “the horseman rode...like some storied hero toward what beast of war or plague or famine with what set to his relentless jaw” (190; 272).

The Glanton gang begins as a tool of primitive accumulation, but transforms into an irrational, apocalyptic force that performs a *reductio ad absurdum* on the capitalism – specifically the U.S. imperial capitalism – it was supposed to institute. They reject Riddle, they slaughter peaceful Tiguas and Mexican citizens, they destroy the necessary tools of mining. The scalpers become, like the filibusters but on a grander scale, an opportunity for *Blood Meridian* to mock a system with pretensions of progress. U.S. economic expansion was to be the form of “the more potent flame which the Anglo-Saxon seems just now disposed to shed over benighted Mexico” (Ruxton 93). The scalp hunters seem to transform at the party thrown in their honor by their patrons and upon the distribution of their pay, as if the consummation of their participation in the markets of capitalism itself unleashes the latent force in what the novel describes as “that communal soul,” “a thing that had not been before” (152). The novel earlier notes that they do not understand exchange, the basis for market capitalism. “The Americans might have traded...but they carried no tantamount goods and the disposition to exchange was foreign to them” (121). Once they have money, they refuse to use it by the rules of the market, repeatedly

paying in absurd excess (200; 266-7). They exceed the logic of capitalism, and this excess, I argue, has implications for how we think about capitalism itself: the violence figured by the scalp hunters institutes capitalism's order, lies at the origin of its sense-making, and haunts the world it has created with the threat of a return to chaos.

### *Apocalyptic Violence and the Literary*

In a cryptic epilogue, McCarthy writes the act of writing into the novel. The epilogue features a man who is "progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground" (337). He "chucks" an implement "with two handles" into the holes, "striking fire out of the rock which God has put there"; he is followed by "the wanderers who search for bones and those who do not search" (*ibid*).

Critics are divided over two possible readings of the epilogue. In one, the implement the man wields is a posthole digger with which he is preparing the enclosure of the western plains. In the other, the man is a Prometheus, or a Gnostic revealer, or the author himself, bringing God's fire – culture, or goodness, or the magic of literary art – to the masses who follow. The epilogue invites both readings. The implement resembles a posthole digger, and the man appears to be spacing holes for the construction of a fence. McCarthy supports this reading in his margin notes from an earlier draft where he writes, "CODA – the post / fencehole / digger: fence as symbols of fear It is an embryonic wall" ("Holograph").<sup>50</sup> This reading makes sense with the novel's plot: after the destruction of the Indians, capitalism erects its infrastructural order. Yet the phrase, "striking fire out of the rock which God has put there," invokes Prometheus or Gnosticism and exceeds the rationalization of the west.

Prometheus' fire, stolen from the gods for humans, symbolizes culture. In the epilogue, this fire requires the enclosure that it exceeds. But McCarthy offers greater specificity through a simile. The wanderers who follow the man "move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet" (*ibid.*) Escapements and pallets are found in clocks and typewriters; they allow time and writing to go forward, catching them from falling back. Likewise, the wanderers "haltingly" make "progress," a loaded word in this novel: they "appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one across that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality, as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it" (*ibid.*). The key words are "appear," "seems," "as if." Each hole owes its existence not to the one before it, but to the agency of the man; the wanderers are thoughtless when we understand them as textual creations, their apparent reflectiveness resulting from the art of writing. Time and writing, like the fencing of the west, produce an illusion of progress and sequence and causality. Time and writing and the fencing of the west produce an illusion of order.

The man striking God's fire from the rock and the halting wanderers who move as if by escapement and pallet serve as figures for the act of writing, specifically, in this instance, literary writing. (McCarthy famously has always written on a typewriter<sup>51</sup>.) The novel inscribes writing as an act of enclosure in tandem with U.S. imperial capitalism, ordering the world, participating in the fencing of the west. Yet, as capitalism entails a violence that undoes it, literary writing, God's fire from the rock, exceeds enclosure: McCarthy shows us the chaos that subtends what order he creates.

1985

I return, now, to the strange temporal logic of the novel's title with which I began. In Holden's gloss, the two options, meridian or evening, are linked by the uncanny excision of the afternoon, by his claim that "in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night" (146). This excision also marks the temporal collapse between the novel's setting and its publication date. How, then, should we read the novel's implications for 1985?

McCarthy began working on the novel at least as early as 1975; it reached near-final form by 1982. The years of its genealogy ripened the conditions for predicting U.S. decline: the superpower had recently lost a war to a small Southeast Asian country; its president had resigned in disgrace; and, most importantly here, throughout the period the U.S. fell ever deeper from the heights of the post-World War II golden age of productive capitalism into an economic crisis with its roots in the mid-to-late 1960s.<sup>52</sup> To put the problem crudely, capitalism needed to expand and regain profitability, but, by 1973, had reached a point where no one could imagine how.<sup>53</sup> In the short term, policymakers allowed inflation to mask the crisis of capital scarcity (Krippner 63-64). Soon, though, decline would open onto transformation.

In her recent *Capitalizing on Crisis*, Greta Krippner explains how the U.S. state solved its various crises of the late 1960s through early 1980s by stumbling into the spiraling expansion of credit that spurred financialization, an accidental byproduct of deregulation, the emergence of transnational capital flows, and the turn to the market to solve political problems. These same mechanisms created what David Harvey calls a neoimperial "accumulation by dispossession" (160). This dispossession is not effected by scalp hunters but by economic agreements. "In 1984 the World Bank, for the first time in its history, granted a loan to a country in return for structural neoliberal reforms" (Harvey 100). The country was Mexico, and the reforms transformed it,

beginning a decade of mass dispossession, migration to cities, the rapid rise of crime and violence, and the emergence of the cartels<sup>54</sup> that have laid waste to northern Mexico, the land of *Blood Meridian* – conditions that McCarthy would explore in *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor*. As a Mexican man tells the scalp hunters in a forlorn cantina, “This Mexico. This is a thirsty country. The blood of a thousand Christs. Nothing” (102).

The temporal collapse inscribed in *Blood Meridian*'s title marks not only the nearness of 1849 to 1985, but also how each peak contains its own instantaneous undoing: progress entails its mockery; capitalism entails destruction; U.S. financial wealth entails Mexican dispossession. The novel adds that this mockery and destruction cannot be contained, that they exceed their imperial purposes and turn back on the empire.

In the meantime, financialization and the sudden widespread availability of previously unheard-of amounts of credit created the illusion of a resurgent U.S. economy.<sup>55</sup> 1985 forms a pivot in American literary history. The previous year Jay McInerney could have a character say, “The new writing will be about technology, the global economy, the electronic ebb and flow of wealth” (65). Andrew Hoberek looks at another major U.S. novel from 1985, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, to argue that it “functioned to obscure the actual decline of the postwar boom with anecdotes of well-off boomers who were, also, champion consumers” (xx). The reason these boomers could appear well-off was because of the rise of finance capital.

As I asked at the beginning of this essay, what sense does it make to suggest the nation's collapse when, in 1985, when the novel was published, it seemed to many as strong as ever? Did financialization moot McCarthy's doomsaying? *Blood Meridian*'s response to the global economic crisis of its time, its tale of the origins and ends of American imperial capitalism, its insistence on an imminent American dusk was less misguided than appears at first. Krippner

concludes her investigation into the American economy since 1970 with the observation that “the policy regime associated with financialization *suspended* rather than eliminated scarcity” – a fact we learned with painful certainty in 2008 (139). Indeed, as Krippner notes, “we now know that financial exuberance rested on exceedingly fragile economic, as well as normative, foundations” (149). Fragility, in the end, lies at the heart of *Blood Meridian*: the fragility of economic and normative foundations, of human bodies, of nation-states. This is what *Blood Meridian* tells us about 1985: the apparent American economic resurgence through financialization and the refound faith through Reagan in American progress rested on chaos, a violence always ready to consume us.

### *Conclusion*

At the beginning of *Blood Meridian*'s twenty-third<sup>56</sup> and final chapter, the kid (who has become, in a speeding-up of time, “the man”) meets a veteran of the bison hunts that nearly extinguished the species in the late nineteenth century. The veteran describes “the hides pegged out over actual square miles of ground and the teams of skimmers spelling one another around the clock and the shooting and shooting weeks and months till the bore shot slick and the stock shot loose at the tang and their shoulders were yellow and blue to the elbow and the tandem wagons groaned away over the prairie twenty and twenty-two ox teams and the flint hides by the ton and hundred ton and the meat rotting on the ground and the air whining with flies” (316-7). The veteran, further, reports, “between the Arkansas River and the Concho there was eight million carcasses for that’s how many hides reached the railhead” (317). In this chapter’s heading, McCarthy describes these bison as: “The millennial herds” (316). McCarthy makes a pun of

“millennial,” marking the millions of dead bison and the apocalyptic quality of such destruction, which, ironically, does not bring the new Jerusalem (as does the biblical millennium).

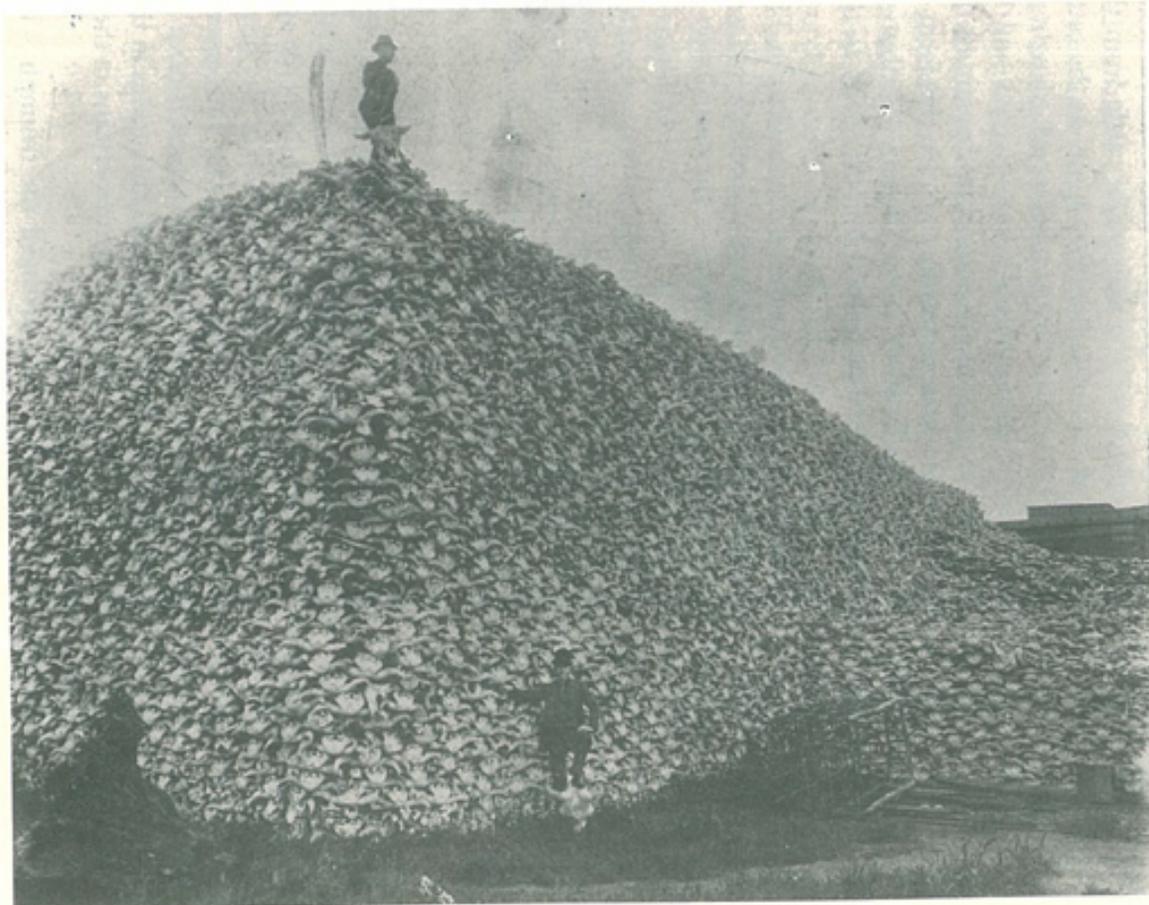


Figure 5.5. Bones at the Michigan Carbon Works, Detroit. Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library.

Before the plains could be enclosed with barbed wire, they had to be cleared of millions of bones. *Blood Meridian* depicts these “bonepickers”: poor families trying to make a living by gathering the bones “into windrows ten feet high and hundreds long or into great conical hills,” destined for a fertilizer plant in Michigan (318; Isenberg 160).<sup>57</sup> Andrew Isenberg provides an image of bison bones that have arrived from the plains to the “Michigan Carbon Works” (161)

The market for bison robes, which motivated the mass slaughter of the bison, coincides with the span of the novel. “Beginning in the 1830s...and continuing until the 1870s, the bison’s skin became the most marketable resource on the plains” (Isenberg 105).<sup>58</sup> The diminution of the bison herds from thirty million to a few hundred signifies two phenomena beyond itself: the final

enclosure of the plains Indians on reservations and the enclosure of the land of the west within barbed wire (Isenberg 12; Isenberg 128; Gwynne 276). The U.S. government understood “the extermination of the bison as a means to force Indians to submit to the reservation system” (Isenberg 3).<sup>59</sup> McCarthy’s inclusion of the bison hunts at the end of his novel is fitting, bringing *Blood Meridian*’s story of violence and enclosure in the name of capitalism to an end. The bison hunts complete the Glanton gang’s work and prepare for the epilogue’s posthole digger, fencing the west with barbed wire. With the Indians and the land enclosed, capitalism can proceed. But *Blood Meridian* presents capitalism as ever threatened by the violence that enclosure represses, a violence that the novel channels for the literary.

In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, the bison return, “just as the Lakota and other Plains medicine people had prophesied” (758). This return marks the return of the violence repressed by enclosure: Indians rise up from their reservations to erase the borders that mark the land and to overthrow capitalism and colonialism in the Americas. Whereas McCarthy’s bison are millennial only ironically, Silko’s millennial bison call forth an apocalyptic rebirth. Set in the late twentieth century, *Almanac of the Dead* addresses a novel form of enclosure: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as a political rationality that extends the logic of the market to all realms of life, works to dissolve common goods in the name of private enterprise both in economic practice and in the perception of everyday life. As such, Silko attends to the ramifications of neoliberalism for subjectivity. The next chapter turns to *Almanac of the Dead* to build on my analyses of texts that attend to capitalism as a system while shifting focus to capitalism’s subjects.

## Chapter Three: Unreading the World

### *Introduction*

In Chapter One, I presented James Baldwin's prophesy in which the disavowals of the wealthy – the impossibility of their recognizing the misery on which their wealth depends – will foster the growth of a revolutionary force that will be ready to claim control when, in Baldwin's vision, capitalism and the Western nation-states collapse. In Chapter Two, I traced how Cormac McCarthy figures a violent drive at the origin of the contemporary U.S. imperial formation, a drive always ready to disrupt and undo capitalism. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* imaginatively charts the emergence of such a revolutionary force and the disruption and undoing caused by such violence. But whereas Baldwin's and McCarthy's texts encourage abstract and systematic reflections on capitalism, Silko's novel allows for a turn to the subject. Across hundreds of pages, *Almanac of the Dead* depicts a large cast of characters from the length of the Americas – from Argentina to Alaska – who live at the brink of the collapse of capitalism as a social order. Central to this collapse, for Silko, is the tension between the long history of Western colonialism in the Americas and the short history of neoliberalism. Bringing together these histories, *Almanac* occasions an analysis of neoliberalism as a colonial strategy with uneven consequences across different sites and social strata. Further, *Almanac* displays neoliberalism as enacting a process of subjectivization. That is, *Almanac* puts on display how neoliberalism as an abstract political rationality becomes concretely situated in the minds and worldviews of the novel's characters. I theorize this process as one of learning how to read the world in a certain

way. I demonstrate how *Almanac of the Dead* imagines itself as a text designed to allow its readers, as neoliberal subjects, to *unread* neoliberally, to disarticulate themselves from neoliberalism.

### *Almanac*

At the close of the first part of *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a Yaqui woman named Lecha remembers the remarkable tale her grandmother, Yoeme, had told about an indigenous people who, facing extinction, decided to send four children north in an attempt to save a book that described “who they were and where they had come from” (246). The children’s elders told them the book holds “all the days of their people. These days and years [are] all alive, and all these days [will] return again” (247). The book has extraordinary powers to revive not only the days and the years, but the tribe itself. “The people knew if even part of their almanac survived, they as a people would return someday” (246). Yoeme’s narrative takes place “after the occupation by the invaders,” implying that this is a story about the aftermath of early European colonization of the Americas. Yoeme describes the children passing through apocalyptic terrain: “The children saw few birds or rodents and no large animals because the aliens had slaughtered all these creatures to feed themselves and their soldiers and their slaves.... [A]s the children continued on, they began to find entire villages that had been abandoned, where the people had not even bothered to carry grinding stones or cooking pots with them” (247-8). Eventually, the children come to a village with water where they rest, falling into the company of “a hunchbacked woman” with hostile designs (248).

Suffering from hunger, the children stop to eat with the woman, who cooks them a pot of stew. Secretly, the eldest girl slips a page of the book they are tasked to save – made, as it is, of

“horse stomach” – into the “simmering vegetable stew”: “The thin, brittle page gradually began to change. Brownish ink rose in clouds. Outlines of the letters smeared and then they floated up and away like flocks of small birds” (249). Thanks to the addition of the page, the stew is unusually sustaining, allowing the children to recover their strength quickly. As it turns out, the woman had had designs to cannibalize the children, which are thwarted by the consumption of the book.<sup>60</sup> As Yoeme says, “‘if the eldest had not sacrificed a page from the book, that crippled woman would have murdered them all right then, while the children were weak from hunger’” (253). Instead, the book survives and becomes, years later, central to the late twentieth-century revolution that begins to unfold across the pages of the novel to which the pre-columbian book lends its name.

The book the children save is the novel’s eponymous almanac. Silko found inspiration for the almanac in three extant pre-columbian Maya screenfold books. She writes about them in an essay devoted to the topic: “Fragments remain of only three of the Maya almanacs; they are all incomplete. The codices, as they are called, are named for the cities where the fragments were located: Madrid, Dresden, and Paris” (1572). These fragmented codices served as the genesis of Silko’s novel. “By the end of 1981,” she writes, “I was working on sections that I hoped would fit together much as the old Maya almanacs had fit together. I already knew I would call this book *Almanac of the Dead*” (1619). It would take her a decade to complete it. At the heart of the novel is Silko’s fantasy of a fourth codex that remains in indigenous hands.<sup>61</sup> Saved by the four children, it survives across generations, passing eventually from Yoeme to Lecha, who, when the novel begins, has returned home to Tucson, Arizona “to transcribe the notebooks” by typing them into a “word processor” (21). The notebooks that comprise the almanac have changed substantially over the years – having been damaged and overwritten and added to – and many of

the passages reproduced in the novel are challenging or even impossible to make sense of, prompting the question: how are we to read the encoded, translated, materially degraded, and serially recomposed almanac that gives the novel its title?

From the beginning of its tumultuous history, in Yoeme's story above, the almanac creates problems for determining how to read it. On the one hand, we learn that the almanac's power consists in its containing stories about "who [the people] were and where they had come from," which have the power to resurrect the people. On the other, the children "had been told the pages held many forces within them, countless *physical* and spiritual properties to guide the people and make them strong" (252, emphasis mine). In fact, the almanac's key quality in Yoeme's story is not what it says – the eldest girl "could no more read the writing than she could understand the language of the hunchbacked woman" – but that, when eaten, it provides unexpected sustenance (249). Yoeme's story produces a tension between the almanac's language and that language's material substrate. After the eldest girl drops the page in the stew, the letters, identified in terms of their materiality as ink, fly away and it is the material qualities – the fact that the page is made of horse stomach and is surprisingly nutritious – that save the young refugees.

What are we to make of this flying away of language? It introduces the difference between book and text: after a point, it no longer matters what the almanac says; rather, what matters is the physical object *as matter* that maintains an enigmatic and sustaining alterity *for* the people through the devotion given to it *by* the people. Yet that object is an almanac that persists and when Silko's novel begins a character is digitizing it, separating language from the book in a way that asks us to reconsider that language as a text and to ask: what lies in the gap between book and text? How, I ask again, do we read the almanac?

This is the question that motivates this chapter. Learning how to read the almanac teaches us how to read Silko's novel, which requires addressing the relationship between the long history of European colonialism in the Americas and the short history of neoliberalism and that between neoliberalism and reading. Reading the almanac requires attending to the gap between book and text and to layers of mediation: to the almanac's history, its physical condition, its digitization. By learning how to read the almanac we learn what Silko imagines as the role of literature during neoliberalism: that a certain kind of unreadability – a resistance to the putative reader's attempt to produce meaning or interpret or make sense, metaphorized in the flying away of language and the eating of the page – allows for the disarticulation of the reader from neoliberalism's attempt to forge subjects who read everything as economic. *Almanac of the Dead* responds to neoliberalism by displaying the almanac's unreadability and envisioning, at the almanac's instigation and as the novel's narrative horizon, an ecological and indigenous political revolution across the North American continent, figured as a cataclysmic and revelatory apocalypse.

### *Reading and Colonization*

As a novel that takes its title from an almanac that instigates a revolution, *Almanac of the Dead* is preoccupied with its own political ramifications. Intertwined with the question of how to read the almanac is the question: what is the power of a book or text to transform political reality? How has this question played out in *Almanac*'s reception history? Its reception has been divided. Immediate reviews in the mainstream press panned the novel, with *Entertainment Weekly* calling it “the windiest kind of bombast served up in the name of ‘multiculturalism,’” and *The New Republic* describing its revolutionary vision as “naïve to the point of silliness” (n.p; 41). Academics working in Native American Studies, on the other hand, have lauded it, calling it “a

supreme Native novel of innovation” and “one of the most important books of this century” (Teuton 117; Womack 233). Reportedly the novel circulated in Chiapas, Mexico in the summer of 1993, months before the Zapatistas would stage an insurrection, taking several Chiapan cities by force in explicit resistance to the initiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Collier 1). After the insurrection, Silko wrote, “Of course, the two old Yaqui women in my novel *Almanac of the Dead* possess large portions of a fourth Maya book, which survived the five-hundred-year war for the Americas. Recently this old almanac of their correctly predicted the Zapatista uprising,” slyly crediting herself for presciently depicting an insurgency based out of Chiapas (1782). As this quick overview shows, though the novel has been successful among readers marginal to mainstream society, it has had little popular currency, leading Craig Womack to write, “the importance of Silko’s novel is so glaringly obvious that no one can see it, and whether American consciousness is voluntarily altered by choice rather than involuntarily by disaster is a frightening question that no one wishes to face” (256).

Turning from *Almanac*’s reception to its production, from its effects to its form, this chapter investigates how the novel’s preoccupation with its political ramifications shape it. By titling *Almanac* after an imagined fourth Maya codex, Silko inscribes her novel in a long history of the relationship between literature and politics in the Americas. Central to that history, for Silko, is an event that took place on July 12, 1562 in the town of Maní in what we now call the Yucatán peninsula. On that day a Franciscan bishop named Diego de Landa “forcibly gathered” hundreds of the local Maya for an *auto de fé*, a punishment for heresy under the Spanish Inquisition (Chuchiak 613). As Bruce Love notes, “the cataclysmic onset of Spanish rule and the Franciscan zeal for religious conversion forced native religion underground. Possession and use of hieroglyphic books was punished by torture and death” (5). On July 12, 1562, however, before

the gathered Maya, Bishop Landa punished not their bodies but their religious objects and their texts. He built “a large bonfire in the central plaza” and “ordered more than 20,000 idols and other ritual paraphernalia tossed into the fire. Along with the idols went forty Maya codices” (Chuchiak 613-14). This was the most infamous burning of what *Almanac*’s Maya revolutionary Angelita La Escapía, describes as “the great libraries of the Americas” (315). In Landa’s own words, he tells of how the Maya “used certain glyphs or letters in which they wrote down their ancient history and sciences in their books; and by means of these letters and figures and by certain marks contained in them, they could read about their affairs and taught others to read about them too. We found a great number of these books in Indian characters and because they contained nothing but superstition and the Devil’s falsehoods we burned them all; and this they felt most bitterly and it cause them great grief” (124). The history of indigenous writing in the Americas has been rendered radically incomplete by this loss. Yet a remnant survives, which allows a fragmentary – if already post-apocalyptic – history.<sup>62</sup> Along with the three extant Maya codices, the *Books of Chilam Balam* and the *Popol Vuh* persist today and record Maya language and writings as produced by Maya after European contact in Latin script. Silko draws on each of these as source material for *Almanac*.

“Books,” Silko writes, “have been the focus of the struggle for the control of the Americas from the start” (“Books” 1873). In the introduction to her book of essays, *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of The Spirit*, Silko marks Landa’s book burning as the beginning of a history of the role of books in the colonization of the Americas. Native writing signaled that Natives possessed humanity, which made conquest more difficult. The colonists needed “to be rid of all evidence that Native American cultures were intellectually equal to European cultures; they could then argue to the pope that these indigenous inhabitants were not fully human and that

Europeans were therefore free to do with them and their land as they pleased” (“Introduction” 178). Silko goes on to chart the continuing colonial function of books. After Landa, she writes, “The books were destroyed and the people who knew how to make the books were destroyed. Soon the only books of Native American life were written and made by non-Indians, who continued to portray indigenous people as subhumans. The United States government used books in their campaign of cultural genocide. Thus the representation or portrayal of Native Americans was politicized from the very beginning and, to this day, remains an explosive political issue” (178). But, for Silko, the power of books cuts both ways. She begins her essay on the Maya codices by writing, “*Books were and still are weapons in the ongoing struggle for the Americas*” (1749, emphasis Silko’s).

Implicit in Silko’s statements and her recourse to history is a theory of the relationship between reading and power. For centuries, colonizers relied on books to produce readings that devalued indigenous peoples and depicted them as destined to vanish. On the other side, reading indigenous writing maintained and reproduced indigenous modes of reading the world. I define “reading” as the process of producing meaning from experience. I use the term in the restricted sense to mean the practice of reading written language and in the general sense to mean any act in which meaning is produced from experience. What Silko recognizes in her emphasis on Landa and book history is the power that resides in books as a transfer point through which reading in the restricted sense transforms reading in the general sense: that is, Silko calls books “weapons” and locates them at the heart of “the ongoing struggle for the Americas” because she recognizes that books are tools for producing readings of the world that can subvert – or shore up – colonial control. Thus books become a key site of political struggle. Landa was frightened by the fact that the Maya “could read about their affairs and taught others to read about them too” (124). Landa

makes the power of reading in the scene of (anti)colonial struggle especially clear when he goes on to contradict himself, writing, “We found a great number of these books in Indian characters and because they contained nothing but superstition and the Devil’s falsehoods we burned them all” (*ibid.*). Given that Landa could not read “Indian characters” he could not have known whether the books “contained nothing but superstition,” but the fact of their alterity and the evidence of their dissemination compelled Landa to burn every one he could find.

Silko’s recognition of the subversive power of books rests on this history of indigenous writing, which she inscribes into *Almanac*. Set mostly in Tucson, Arizona and Chiapas, Mexico in the near future as imagined from 1991, the seven-hundred-and-sixty-three page novel depicts the development of a broad-based revolutionary network (including a traveling Hopi sage, Yaqui drug and arms traffickers on the U.S.-Mexico border, an army of the homeless, and indigenous militants in Mexico) alongside the rearguard actions of counterrevolutionary elites and employees of the U.S. and Mexican states (including politicians, judges, and police officers) as the Western hemisphere’s political, economic, and ecological order moves toward an apocalypse prophesied by the ancient almanac. Throughout, two Yaqui women, the twin sisters Lecha and Zeta, transcribe and digitize the almanac; as they do, readers gain access to it. The first section appears on pages 135 and 136, introduced with this preface: “Old Yoeme had given Zeta the smallest bundle of loose notebook pages and scraps of paper with drawings of snakes. Yoeme had warned Zeta not to brag to Lecha, but the notebook of the snakes was the key to understanding all the rest of the old almanac” (134).<sup>63</sup> Among these loose pages and scraps, we read a poem under the heading “*Spirit Snake’s Message*” that includes the lines “*What I have to tell you now is that / the world is about to end*” and a curious seven point list, as follows:

1. almanakh: Arabic
2. almanac: A.D. 1267 English from the Arabic

3. almanaque: A.D. 1505 Spanish from the Arabic.
4. a book of tables containing a calendar of months and days with astronomical data and calculations.
5. predicts or foretells the auspicious days, the ecclesiastical and other anniversaries.
6. short glyphic passages give the luck of the day.
7. Madrid  
     Paris     Codices  
     Dresden

Without prior knowledge of the Maya codices, this list would remain puzzling. Those initiates, however, will recognize Madrid, Paris, and Dresden as the names of the three extant codices<sup>64</sup> that survived the purges of Landa and the Inquisition. They consist of “screenfold pages with glyphs and pictures” that contain, as the novel attests, “calendrical computations, divination and prophecy, prescriptions for rites and ceremonies, and history” (Love 5). Made from the inner bark of fig trees, they were written in Maya hieroglyphic script and pictures and used by Maya priests for religious and astrological purposes (Bricker 111; 841). Each codex “was a sacred manual that conferred great status upon its owner. It empowered the Maya priest to see, as if through a crystal, the orderly workings of the universe” (Love 7). The codices encrypted for their Maya audience a Maya reading of the world that Silko recreates as frightening for colonists with Yoeme’s poetic gloss that predicts the world’s end. As we work to read the novel’s almanac, it confronts us with the challenge of thinking how to reconcile the hermeneutic tradition and political power of the codices with the reading practices and political context of the late twentieth century. Reading it, at this early point, remains a problem even for Zeta. That the almanac takes the form of loose pages and scraps of paper in notebooks that include “Yoeme’s scrawls in misspelled Spanish” hints at how far the almanac itself has fragmented and changed over time (134). Trying to make sense of it, Zeta finds herself “disappointed”: it “did not seem to be the ‘key’ to anything except [Yoeme’s] madness” (*ibid.*). Silko calls on the political history of indigenous writing, indicating that we should understand the almanac as an anticolonial weapon,

but what about it allows it to remain powerful in the present? Further, what does it mean to claim, as Silko does, that a mass-marketed novel in the late twentieth century fits “together much as the old Maya almanacs fit together”? (*Yellow* 1619).

Silko’s engagement with an indigenous history of anticolonial writings and performances extends beyond Maya books, making clearer her project. In *Almanac*’s final fifty pages, many of its characters gather at an “International Holistic Healers Convention,” where they prepare for the imminent apocalypse. One of the convention’s featured speakers is Wilson Weasel Tail, a “poet lawyer” (713). His first speech engages legal history<sup>65</sup> and his second invokes and rewrites the history of “the Paiute prophet Wovoka” and the religion he popularized, which centered on the Ghost Dance (721). James Mooney, in his landmark book *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, writes that Wovoka “fell asleep in the daytime and was taken up to the other world. Here he saw God, with all the people who had died long ago engaged in their oldtime sports and occupations, all happy and forever young.... After showing him all, God told him he must go back and tell his people...that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people” (772). Wovoka’s Ghost Dance religion quickly spread to Native tribes across much of the United States. It links anticolonial resistance with the return to an indigenous practice – a specific dance – that connects living Natives to their ancestors. This practice had its roots with a particular Native tribe. Gregory Smoak notes, “What was an old belief for Newe people became, in the 1870s and 1890s, a bridge to other American Indian peoples, the basis of two pan-Indian religious movements, and a powerful statement of a shared American Indian racial identity” (3). The return to the Ghost Dance is not simply a return, but something new, invented (or revealed)

by Wovoka: not least, the banding together of distinct tribes as Indians. Wovoka's Ghost Dance exhibits not the purity of pre-columbian tradition but resistance to European colonization and the insistence on the need for a radically different worldview, one that has emerged out of traditional practices, yet in conversation with colonialist discourses, including Christianity. Wovoka shows a special debt to the Book of Revelation, in which the visionary ascends to heaven, receives from God a revelation about imminent and radical change, and returns to disseminate the revelation.

The Ghost Dance religion is usually thought to have ended in 1890 with the massacre of Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee, but Wilson Weasel Tail rewrites this history. Referring to the anthropologist James Mooney as Moody, Weasel Tail tells those gathered at the convention that, "Moody and the other anthropologists alleged the Ghost Dance disappeared because the people became disillusioned when the ghost shirts did not stop bullets and the Europeans did not vanish overnight. But it was the Europeans, not the Native Americans, who had expected results overnight" (722). The narrator goes on to add, "Moody and the others had never understood the Ghost Dance was to reunite living people with the spirits of beloved ancestors lost in the five-hundred-year war" (722). Wilson Tail then recites a poem, of which the following is an excerpt:

"We dance to remember  
we dance to remember all our beloved ones  
...  
We dance because the dead love us,  
they continue to speak to us,  
they tell our hearts what must be done to survive" (*ibid.*)

Continuing his performance, through which he has his audience "eating out of his hand," Weasel Tail pronounces that, "The Ghost Dance has never ended, it has continued, and the people have

never stopped dancing; they may call it by other names, but when they dance, their hearts are reunited with the spirits of beloved ancestors...as the living dance, they are joined again with all our ancestors before them, who cry out, who demand justice, and who call the people to take back the Americas!” (724).

Like all apocalyptic movements, the Ghost Dance religion came to a point at which its prophesy of an imminent revelatory cataclysm no longer seemed to be forthcoming. But Weasel Tail argues that this view betrays the short historical memory of the “Europeans” and that Native Americans have persisted in awaiting the apocalypse. Weasel Tail emphasizes how the Ghost Dance gathers the history of oppression into the present through reuniting the spirits and voices of the dead with the living. This attention to history culminates in his call for “justice” and the reclamation of the Americas. Like the U.S. cultural nationalisms of the late 1960s, Weasel Tail invokes a collective history of oppression to unite a heterogeneous group as a single people and to call for the radical overturning of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism through art and performance – art and performance that performatively creates and defines the people it calls to unify. *Almanac* extends this tradition that runs through Wovoka and the cultural nationalisms by envisioning a capacious collectivity that not only includes the Indians that Wilson Tail hails, but, through another apocalyptic visionary, the Barefoot Hopi, class-based unification: the “haves, whatever colors” against the “have-nots” (738).

*Almanac* turns to the Maya codices and indigenous anti-colonial performance, then, as a historical ground from which to build and characterize an oppositional people that has come, by the late twentieth century, to be defined at the intersections of race and class. Critics tend to read the novel’s relationship to the almanac as such, emphasizing the few fragments from the almanac that tell coherent stories to argue that the novel, ultimately, strives through storytelling to build a

broad-based, radical, collective political identity toward the overthrow of Western colonialism and capitalism. But *Almanac*'s almanac is too enigmatic for this account. The strange unreadability of the almanac directs us to think about the limits of storytelling as a political strategy during neoliberalism, and to attend to the complex mediations – the ways in which the book's or text's journey to its reader is indirect – of both the almanac and the novel.

### *Reading and Neoliberalism*

I define neoliberalism as a mode of reading in which all phenomena become economic. In this, I build on Wendy Brown's account of neoliberalism – discussed in the Introduction – as a political rationality in which market values are extended to all realms of life. Reframing neoliberalism as a mode of reading makes available the process of subjectivization. That is, it helps answer the questions: what does it look like to be a neoliberal subject? how does one become a neoliberal subject? Neoliberal subjectivization is the process by which subjects internalize neoliberalism's practice of reading everything as economic. Reframing neoliberalism as a mode of reading allows us to see how Silko posits reading in the restricted sense of reading written language as a privileged site for engaging neoliberalism's generalized reading.

If any single individual were responsible for instituting neoliberalism as a mode of reading it would be the recently deceased University of Chicago economist Gary Becker. In the 1950s and 1960s, Becker developed a theory of "human capital" that conceives of the various skills, tendencies, and dispositions of a human being as economic attributes. He went on to read phenomena as varied as criminal justice, family life, personal taste, and addiction as principally economic. In an essay published in 1996, he writes, "The extension of the utility-maximizing approach to include endogenous preferences is remarkably successful in unifying a wide class of

behavior, including habitual, social, and political behavior. I do not believe any alternative approach – be it founded on ‘cultural,’ ‘biological,’ or ‘psychological’ forces – comes close to providing comparable insights and explanatory power” (4). In other words, Becker asserts that economics is unquestionably the best academic discipline from which to think about the broadest questions of human life and behavior. He won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1992. His work has been extraordinarily influential. Its effects are evident in the relative privilege of economics departments within universities and in countless aspects of contemporary everyday life.

Bridging the gap between neoliberal theory and popular practice, Michel Feher, Randy Martin, and Maurizio Lazzarato have each provided accounts that make subjectivization central to neoliberalism. Feher writes, “the rise of human capital as a dominant subjective form is a defining feature of neoliberalism” (24). For Feher, the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism entails a shift in which, as categories that shape subjective experience, the entrepreneur replaces the laborer, self-esteem replaces satisfaction, and credit replaces profit.<sup>66</sup> Martin focuses on financialization, arguing that “risk will replace labor as something taken rather than given, as a venture rather than an appropriation of one’s effort” (35). Lazzarato, in turn, highlights the importance of debt to neoliberalism, which I will explore in detail in Chapter Four. According to Lazzarato, debt “functions as a mechanism for the production and ‘government’ of collective and individual subjectivities,” producing subjects whose lives are saturated by the morality of the “promise” to repay debts and the “fault” of “having entered into it” (29; 30). All three agree that neoliberalism compels “that one *take upon oneself* the costs and risks externalized by the State and corporations” (Lazzarato 51, emphasis his). Lazzarato and Martin emphasize the negative consequences of this externalization for the vast majority of neoliberal subjects who are not wealthy: “to become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as

well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only – far from it – those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health care system, housing shortages, etc.” (*ibid.*).

The precarity of the neoliberal subject reveals that neoliberal subjectivization obtains – subjects become risk-taking entrepreneurs who read the world economically – because material conditions necessitate it. This is where political theory and economic practice meet. As Martin writes, “While governments promoted privatizations, both public and private sectors advanced that idea that no one can solve your problems but yourself” (112). The economic crises that persisted from the late 1960s through the early 1980s – the setting for Part One of this dissertation – prepared the ground for the institution of neoliberal subjectivization and its concomitant economic policy. As Greta Krippner puts it, “with the deterioration of economic performance beginning in the 1970s, policymakers sought to depoliticize economic policy by returning to the market aspects of policy implementation formerly attributed to the state” (108). In other words, political decisions were left to the free market, but “the market was not a very effective source of restraint, and transferring control to the market ultimately served to loosen rather than restrict credit, propelling financialization to its most intense phase before bringing it to what appears to be a precipitous end” (Krippner 137). This returns us to *Almanac of the Dead*.

The decade that Silko spent writing *Almanac of the Dead* coincides with the rapid neoliberalization of the Mexican economy. “Between 1982 and 1991,” observes Nora Lustig, “the Mexican economy underwent a profound change...external trade was liberalized, markets were deregulated, and ownership restrictions removed” (v). Since the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, Mexico had been famous for its institutionalized populism and economic protectionism. Yet, beginning with its debt crisis of 1982,<sup>67</sup> neoliberalism rapidly progressed

such that by 1991 Mexico had become “an open economy in which the state’s interaction is limited by a new legal and institutional framework. Under the new model, the tendency is for the market to replace regulations, private ownership to replace public ownership, and competition, including that from foreign goods and investors, to replace protection” (Lustig 1). These economic changes benefited Mexico’s elite, as well as transnational financiers, but produced deleterious effects for Mexico’s greater population. As Lustig notes, “in the 1980s, real income fell, poverty rose, and social indicators deteriorated. Some of this damage, such as the contraction in investment in physical and human capital, may produce lasting effects” (10). Note how Lustig, writing for the Brookings Institution, a U.S. political policy think tank, uses the phrase “human capital,” which shows how Becker’s theory has become normalized among policymakers and politicians. This, then – the neoliberalization of Mexico’s economy and political structure, the enrichment of the elite, and the impoverishment (and damage to the “human capital”) of the poor – is the background against which Silko set much of her novel in Mexico or at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Two of the groups most severely impacted by Mexico’s neoliberalization appear as revolutionaries in *Almanac*: peasants from the southern state of Chiapas, and Yaqui Indians in the northwest or in diaspora. In Chiapas, already one of Mexico’s poorest and most indigenous states, poverty more than doubled between 1984 and 1989 (Lustig 204). Meanwhile, the Yaquis became “worse off than any other social group in the northwest.... In symbol and in fact, while Yaquis own considerable land, they are at the mercy of outside financiers. In short, the loss of their economic autonomy lies at the root of their current dependency” (Hu-Dehart 217). Taking the social and economic devastation of the Mexican peasantry as a starting point for *Almanac*, Silko features indigenous Chiapan revolutionaries and several leading characters – Lecha, Zeta,

and Calabazas – who are Yaqui Indians who have left the violence and economic colonization of their Sonora homeland to live in Tucson, Arizona.

For all I have focused on *Almanac*'s intertextuality with ancient Maya texts, the novel is firmly located in the late twentieth century, highly attuned to entrepreneurs and markets. The opening scene takes place at Lecha's and Zeta's ranch on the outskirts of Tucson, where "pistols, shotguns, and cartridges [are] scattered on the kitchen counters, and needles and pills all over the table" (20). Zeta runs a smuggling business that ships drugs and arms across the border. Her nephew Ferro and his associate Paulie, who work for Zeta, are cleaning and ordering the guns. Lecha, who, in the opening scene, is injecting Demerol, has just returned to Tucson after having traveled the country as a television talk show psychic; though ostensibly she has come to work with the almanac, she will continue to work as a freelance psychic with a strict pay-scale, adding her worknotes to the almanac itself (174-77). The scene's two other characters, Sterling and Seese, have both recently arrived at the ranch as outcasts from their previous communities (the reservation and a cocaine cartel, respectively). They take undefined jobs working for Zeta and Lecha from positions of precarity (19-30). The novel emphasizes these economic determinants. It begins with a scene of entrepreneurial business and precarious work.

Indians in the early twentieth century, according to the Laguna Pueblo character, Sterling, maintained a degree of distance from the U.S. economy, despite the fact that the poverty endemic to Indians resulted from U.S. colonization and legal and economic oppression. "Sterling had been a boy during the Depression, but it had made little or no impression on people at Laguna...in those days people had no money in banks to lose.... But winters those years had been mild and wet for the Southwest. Harvests had been plentiful, and the game had been fat for winter. The Laguna people had heard something about 'The Crash.' But they remembered 'The

Crash' as a year of bounty and plenty for the people" (40-1). Whereas in the early twentieth century, poverty allowed Indians a distance from the vicissitudes of the U.S. economy that could manifest as an inversion ("the Crash" as bountiful), by the late twentieth century, Indian poverty, under neoliberalism, produces for Silko's characters a compulsion to engage in the U.S. economy, albeit often through its black markets, as entrepreneurs. Zeta, the smuggler, responds early in her career to accusations of violating "the Indian Way," by wondering "if the priests who told the people smuggling was stealing had also told them how they were to feed themselves now that all the fertile land along the rivers had been stolen by white men" (133). Pushed out of her fertile Sonora farmland by privatization and into diaspora, Zeta becomes an entrepreneur out of material necessity. Nevertheless, she does so with gusto. "As soon as Zeta had become acquainted with the people [that her former smuggling employer] worked with in Mexico, she had saved up a bankroll to work a few deals of her own," (127). Soon she runs her own business.

Zeta responds to privatization and the opening of markets by becoming an entrepreneur in *illegal* markets, which she understands as a subversive act. Intuiting the contradiction between free trade across borders but lack of free movement, Zeta notes, "The people had been free to go traveling north and south for a thousand years, traveling as they pleased, then suddenly white priests had announced smuggling as a mortal sin because smuggling was stealing from the government" (133). Zeta refuses to accept that what she does is stealing, arguing that, "There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land never had clear title" (*ibid.*). Not only does Zeta refuse to see her smuggling as stealing, but she sees it as actively engaging in war with the U.S. and Mexican governments. "All the laws of the illicit governments

had to be blasted away. Every waking hour Zeta spent scheming and planning to break as many of their laws as she could. War had been declared the first day the Spaniards set foot on Native American soil, and the same war had been going on ever since” (133). Only at the end of the novel do we learn that, “For years Zeta had been buying and stockpiling weapons in old mine shafts” in preparation for the revolution (740).

Zeta enthusiastically takes on traits of neoliberal subjectivity – risk-taking for economic gain, entrepreneurial canniness. Yet her example suggests that neoliberal subjectivization can be partial, can be used against neoliberalism. Silko, through Zeta, posits neoliberalism as continuous with, yet an intensification of, the history of colonization in the Americas, and it is through the identification of this continuity that Zeta maintains a political consciousness that distances her from reductively reading the world economically. She learns to read the world economically to make money, but because she sees herself working within the framework of colonization and sees herself as part of a tradition of colonial difference from the West, a West now attempting to assimilate Indians to itself through entrepreneurship, she can maintain a doubleness: neoliberal subjectivity alongside revolutionary consciousness.

We can turn to Zeta’s twin, Lecha, for a surprising example of an Indian character who comes closer to assimilating to neoliberal subjectivity, to reading the world in predominantly economic terms. Lecha has a psychic “gift” for locating dead bodies that, as soon as she comes to terms with it, she uses to help police departments for a fee (138-9). This leads to her working freelance for private individuals, then as a psychic on television talk shows. Silko emphasizes in each instance the priority for Lecha of her economic incentive. “Lecha had never felt she owed anyone the truth, unless it was truth about their own lives, and then they had to pay her to tell them” (142). When a producer meets with her to arrange her first appearance on a talk show, she

begins by responding, “Business first...I want to know how much this TV show will pay me” (145). Lecha discovers that she “had been born for television talk shows. She had learned to read the reactions of talk show hosts and the audiences immediately” (147).

Michel Feher argues for self-appreciation – meant both as feeling good about oneself and developing oneself as human capital – as a central facet of neoliberal subjectivity. Silko portrays Lecha’s attitude toward herself as a psychic as exemplary of such self-appreciation, especially with regards to human capital. Lecha understands her skill for reading the talk show host and the audiences above as key elements of her human capital: elements of herself that make her a good economic investment. Feher writes, “the subjects that [neoliberalism] defines seek to appreciate and to value themselves, such that their life may be thought of as a strategy aimed at self-appreciation” (28). Lecha recognizes that her “high Indian cheekbones and light brown skin give her an exotic quality that television...desperately needs,” finding the economic value in her ethnicity (141). Early in her time as a TV psychic, she spends her mornings “shopping for the appropriate clothes” in “fancy department stores” to develop her part, embracing herself as a performer. “It was all an act,” Silko writes, “the way Lecha would lower her voice and say she regretted what she was about to say, then reveal the location of the victim” (146).

Her decision to leave the TV talk show business and return to Tucson results from an economic calculation. “Lecha takes pride in knowing when to fold her cards. She is no gambler. She only goes for the sure things. The TV talk show circuit had been one of those sure things. But nothing lasts forever; she laughs to herself. The fascination the United States had had for the ‘other’ – the blacks, Asians, Mexicans, and Indians ran in cycles” (142). Though she denies being a “gambler,” Lecha’s poker metaphor reveals that she is precisely a gambler, though one who plays it safe, getting out while ahead. Gamblers are those who speculate and take risks for

economic gain. Randy Martin argues that neoliberalism “insinuates an orientation toward accounting and risk management into all domains of life,” such that all times “are subject to the culture of measurement” (43). Feher adds that “rather than a *possessive* relationship as that of the free laborer with his or her labor power, the relationship between the neoliberal subject and his or her human capital should be called *speculative*” (34). Lecha speculates that the current vogue for ethnic others – on which her human capital largely depends – is ready to wane, leading her to make an economic decision to get out of the business.

Behind Lecha’s performances, and behind her adoption of neoliberal subjectivity, lingers the knowledge that “her abilities had been a gift from old Yoeme,” her Yaqui grandmother who had given her the almanac (147). That is, the fact that Lecha’s psychic powers are *real* links her to an oppositional tradition that gnaws at her and eventually leads her to Tucson, to do justice to the almanac. But her work on the almanac strangely doubles as a continuation of her work as a freelance psychic. She employs a woman named Seese to “type up each and every letter” of the almanac, which for Lecha includes her (Lecha’s) own notebooks (174). “Lecha wants her personal notebooks transcribed and typed because it is necessary to understanding the old notebooks Yoeme left behind. Lecha tells Seese not to be disappointed. The old notebooks are all in broken Spanish or corrupt Latin that no one can understand without months of research in old grammars. Lecha had already done translation work, and her notebooks contained narratives in English” (*ibid.*). Lecha passes off her personal notebooks as translations of the almanac, which is strange because the novel then offers two-and-half pages from those notebooks, which show that Lecha’s text consists of clues and observations for her freelance work, with passages like: “The computer posits models of possible routes taken by the abductor and victim” and “The abductor drives the victim west and then north into the desert foothills” (175). This section of the novel

closes with an odd exchange between Zeta and Lecha. Zeta says to Lecha, ““You are going to copy her book,” to which Lecha replies, “her eyes dream and distant, ‘You could say “her book,” but of course, the book will be mine”” (177). Lecha’s fixation, here, on ownership and the fact that her “translations” are in fact her work notes betray the depth to which neoliberal subjectivity has saturated Lecha’s character. By illustrating the effects of neoliberalism on twin sisters, Silko demonstrates the granularity of neoliberalism’s unevenness as a colonial strategy: even between twin sisters, one adopts neoliberal subjectivity while maintaining a sense of herself as doubled, as also an anticolonial, anticapitalist revolutionary, while the other more fully embraces herself as a neoliberal subject, even blurring the lines between her entrepreneurial work and the ancient almanac meant to overturn neoliberalism along with all else.

Attentive to class, *Almanac* concerns itself with depicting the entrepreneurship not only of the poor, but also of the rich. Silko’s wealthy characters monetize what we would imagine at the limit of what could possibly be monetized: state policing (via insurance); human bodies (via black markets for organs); torture (via snuff films); suicide (via art). These markets participate, some of them illegally, in privatization. Privatization is the process by which the state cedes control of, or makes available, previously communal or non-saleable goods to the market, which “involves the re-imagining of property, such as converting water, education, and other resources and processes held in common and supplied collectively into commodities controlled by private enterprises and sold at ‘market prices”” (Greenberg 247). Such privatization boomed in the 1980s. In terms of numbers, in Mexico, “From 1983 on, public enterprises were privatized, closed, merged, or transferred from federal to state or regional entities. From the more than 1,000 public enterprises at the end of 1982, there were only 269 in mid-1991,” when *Almanac* was published (Lustig 105).

Menardo, a central character, sells insurance in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico. Like most Mexicans, he is mestizo, with Spanish and indigenous heritage. As a child, he loved listening to his indigenous grandfather tell stories “the stories right up until the sixth grade when one of the teaching Brothers had given them a long lecture about pagan people and pagan stories” (258). Menardo internalizes colonialism’s racism, disavowing his indigenous heritage and inventing a story to explain the appearance of his characteristically indigenous nose. Silko links Menardo’s vanity and his internalization of colonialism to his business success, moving, in the space of one short paragraph, from his explanation of his nose to the assertion that, “Menardo had risen quickly in the insurance business because he knew exactly what people wanted to hear” (260).

Before long, Menardo starts his own insurance company, Universal Insurance. Following its title, the company proceeds to insure against more and more risks, tending toward insuring against every eventuality. “Insurance was the new tool of the trade. What Menardo offered were special policies that insured against all losses, no matter the cause, including acts of God, mutinies, war, and revolution” (261). To fulfill its promises, Universal Insurance becomes “the first insurance company to employ a private security force to protect clients from political rest” (*ibid.*). From a private security force, the company builds to owning “its own private air force” (292). Finally, Universal Insurance displaces a central function of the state: maintaining a police guard to enforce social stability. Silko ventriloquizes commercial rhetoric, writing, “Whenever revolution, mutiny, uprising, or guerilla war might strike, Universal Insurance *would be there* to offer complete protection to clients. No need to depend on poorly equipped government forces” (292).

As Universal Insurance becomes universal, privatizing the state's police function on behalf of large corporations, Menardo himself takes the idea of totalizing protection against risk onto his own body. He becomes obsessed with wearing a bulletproof vest at all times. Feeling the need to prove to himself that his bulletproof vest will keep him safe, he asks his servant, an indigenous man named Tacho, to shoot him in the chest with a pistol. Tacho does, and the vest fails, and Menardo dies.<sup>68</sup> Silko clear that Menardo's death is allegorical: the event happens in a section titled "How Capitalists Die" (509). Just after the shooting, Tacho remembers indigenous teachings about "the eventual disappearance of the white man," adding that, "A great many fools like Menardo would die pretending they were white men" (511). Menardo crystallizes, on his body and in his character, a narrative in which the attempt to extend the monetization of risk to its totalizing end – and I note that the totalizing extension of monetizing risk through insurance played a central role in the 2008 financial crisis – leads, in Silko's vision, to death: for one man, for a civilization.

What Menardo does for insurance, a character named Trigg does for the human body. Trigg is a wheelchair-bound entrepreneur based in Tucson who owns and operates plasma donor centers, but who always looks to expand business. "The health care industry is a sleeping giant, Trigg said. His plasma donor centers had got Trigg thinking about alcohol and drug treatment centers. There were millions and millions to be made from treatments for people addicted to alcohol and other drugs" (382). Trigg thinks neoliberally, imagining how to capitalize on and privatize addiction. In the meantime, he discovers "a whole new market beyond plasma and whole blood. Trigg wanted to use the plasma donor centers to obtain donor organs and other valuable human tissue" (389). He enters the organ and tissue business in two ways. He buys "a great deal [of corpses] in Mexico where recent unrest and civil strife had killed hundreds a week.

Mexican hearts were lean and strong” (404). He also murders homeless people by taking their blood plasma while performing oral sex on them until they die, and then selling their body parts (443-5).<sup>69</sup> Like Menardo, Trigg profits from civil unrest. We might imagine Trigg harvesting the corpses of those killed by Menardo’s forces. In the 1980s, Mexican civil unrest and the rise of the homeless population in U.S. cities both resulted from transfer of political decisions regarding allocation to the market, which stripped away social programs, increased income inequality, and enforced the neoliberal prescription that precarious subjects become their own entrepreneurs. For those who fall through the cracks or who die resisting, Trigg has found a purpose. Silko suggests that the market does, in effect, find ways to solve its own problems: profiting off the bodies that it has made disposable.

The high art market, too, has found ways to monetize corpses in *Almanac*. When a photographer named David learns that his friend Eric has committed suicide, he (David) hurries to the scene to photograph the body: “David didn’t just snap a few pictures. He had moved reflectors around and got the light so Eric’s blood appeared as bright and glossy as enamel paint” (108). The subsequent art show becomes an “outrage” that “[e]veryone wanted to see” (*ibid.*). The sensationalism of the stunt draws attention that creates value, which David’s agent knows how to “sell”: “He had issued a press release when Eric’s family went to court for the injunction” (*ibid.*). The lawsuit is ostensibly good for David because, “If the negatives were later awarded to the family or destroyed, the prints would increase in value” (*ibid.*). Though David’s agent assures him that his success is “assured,” we learn much later that the lawsuits come back to undo David financially. “Suddenly it was as if all the work David had done to create the Eric series had been destroyed, because all the sets of limited-edition prints had been sold and less than \$10,000 remained after the lawyers had been paid” (553). If the series cannot support David

financially, then his “work” has been “destroyed”: Silko emphasizes that for David, and for the high art world, art is not about aesthetics, but economics.

Menardo, Trigg, and David read civil unrest, homelessness, and suicide as economic opportunities. Aggregately, Silko depicts a world in which most subjects read most phenomena in economic terms. This world tilts into apocalypse about two-thirds of the way through the novel. Menardo’s servant Tacho prophesies the apocalypse; looking into an opal, he “watch[es] great cities burn; torches of ruby and garnet mushroom[] hundreds of feet into the sky” (481). Lacking an opal, Menardo watches the unraveling on TV, where he sees that, “Without money or jobs even the U.S. was suffering crippling strikes as well as riots and looting.... Almost overnight, the people had discovered all their national treasuries were empty and now everywhere there were riots” (482). Before long, Menardo hears “[r]umors [that] say United States troops will soon occupy Mexico to help protect U.S.-owned factories in Northern Mexico as well as the rich Mexico City politicians on the CIA payroll since prep school. There are shortages of cornmeal and rioting spreads. Rumors say the richest families have already opened bank accounts and purchased homes ‘in the North’” (506).

Against this backdrop of economic crisis, Silko’s narrative traces an arc whose trajectory gathers individuals together as a collective. Roy, alias Rambo, a homeless veteran in Tucson, organizes an army comprised of the homeless. In his analysis, “Communism had killed itself. Now the United States faced a far greater threat – the danger from within – government and police owned by the fat cats. Roy had seen for himself women and children hungry, and sleeping on the streets. This was not democracy. Police beating homeless old men was not the United States of America. Something had to be done, and Rambo and his army would do it” (393). Simultaneously, indigenous peasants in Chiapas form the “Army of Justice and Redistribution”

who criticize the foundations of capitalism and Western democracy. A colonel in the army, Angelita La Escapía, observes, “Change was on the horizon all over the world. The dispossessed people of the earth would rise up and take back lands that had been their birthright, and these lands would never again be held as private property, but as lands belonging to the people forever to protect” (532). Whereas Roy sees neoliberalism as an aberration from democracy, La Escapía understands neoliberalism as the radical extension of capitalism, a logic that begins at the root of capitalism: the privatization of land. Eric Cheyfitz writes, “Property, in concept and fact, is the foundation of Western capitalist democracies, in the history of which land is the fundamental form of property” (9). Historically, capitalism and indigenous peoples come into conflict on this point, because, as Cheyfitz comments, “Traditionally, land is the absolute resource of the Native community,” where land is understood not as property but as kin (9).

*Almanac of the Dead* builds a vision of a vast and varied resistance movement that rises with the collapse of capitalism to transform the world anew. Both native and non-native activists understand the conflict as fundamentally about class rather than race, even as race becomes folded into class by capitalism (406; 738). Across the last couple hundred pages of the novel, a traveling activist called the Barefoot Hopi advocates for the free flow of bodies across the borders of nation-states and prison walls (618-19), eco-terrorists dynamite the Glen Canyon Dam (727), Awa Gee, a Korean hacker, brings down what Silko, with her finger on the pulse of 1991, calls “Arpanet, Internet, Milnet” (686-88), Zeta readies the stockpile of weapons that she has gathered for decades for the arrival of the Army of Justice and Redistribution (740), and the earth itself, according to the Barefoot Hopi, is about to revolt: “All the riches ripped from the earth will be reclaimed by the oceans and mountains. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions of enormous magnitude will devastate the accumulated wealth of the Pacific Rim. Entire coastal peninsulas

will disappear under the sea; hundreds of thousands will die,” and on around the globe, a prognosis that reads, today, like scientific predictions of climate change (734).

At the moment that neoliberalism, as a mode of sense-making that shapes subjects who read all phenomena as economic, obtains hegemony, the material conditions required for such a mode of reading to be coherent – capitalism as a system that structures society – unravel. What happens to reading (texts, the world) when capitalism unravels and neoliberalism becomes incoherent? Silko frames her novel with an answer to this question. *Almanac* begins and ends with Sterling, the Laguna Pueblo man who comes to Tucson to work for Zeta and Lecha after he is banished from his reservation. When the novel begins, Sterling reads popular magazines such as *True Detective*, *Police Gazette*, and *Reader's Digest* from which he takes and internalizes pop-psychological advice (26; 23). He believes, for instance, in the phrase “Laughter, the Best Medicine”; he tries not to think about his difficult past because the magazines recommend considering negative past events “‘irreparable’ and ‘better forgotten’”; in the end, to Sterling, the magazines “all seemed to be in agreement: to cure depression one must let bygones be bygones” (23; 24; 36). This squares well with Lazzarato’s assertion that, for neoliberal subjects, “the memory that must be created is not one for conserving the past, but a memory of the future” – a future, that is, in which the subject can further appreciate himself as human capital, allowing him to continue to pay his fiscal debts, while forgetting his cultural debts (45).

*Almanac*’s closing sequence features Sterling as he returns “home” to the reservation. He remembers how, as a good neoliberal subject, he “had always worked hard on self-improvement. He had never paid much attention to the old-time ways because he thought the old beliefs were dying out” (762). After witnessing the world of Zeta and Lecha, and living at the brink of a new world, Sterling’s reading habits have changed. “The magazines referred to a world that Sterling

had left forever, a world that was gone, that safe old world that had never really existed except on the pages of *Reader's Digest* in articles on reducing blood cholesterol, corny jokes, and patriotic anecdotes" (757). Now, Sterling tries "to remember more of the stories the old people used to tell" (759). Tucson has "changed" him (762). He feels "haunted": "Sterling saw them over and over in dreams, ghost armies of Lakota warriors, ghost armies of the Americas leading armies of living warriors, armies of indigenous people to retake the land" (*ibid.*). Most important for Sterling is the reappearance of a stone snake on the reservation: the novel's final line has Sterling with the snake, which "was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (763).

Sterling's experience with the stone snake links back to the almanac, from which "the notebook of the snakes is "the key to understanding all the rest" (134). In that notebook, the "*Spirit Snake's Message*" culminates with the prophecy: "*What I have to tell you now is that / this world is about to end*" (135). Sterling's story is a miniature and inverted bildungsroman in which he learns to disarticulate himself from neoliberalism's mode of reading the world. Silko structures this story as the novel's frame. But his process of disarticulation remains enigmatic. What about Sterling's experiences in Tucson with Zeta and Lecha transform him? The novel itself directs us – through the figure of the snake, through Zeta's and Lecha's perpetual return to Yoeme's notebooks, through the novel's title – to the almanac.

### *Unreading the Almanac, Unreading the World*

Why make central an ancient Maya book in a novel about entrepreneurs and economic crisis? The centrality of the book indicates neoliberalism's colonial aspirations to read everything as economic as continuous with the history of colonialism in the Americas. And it locates as a

privileged site of resistance the intersection where indigenous history and books meet. How does this resistance work?

In asking how this resistance works, I am asking, again, how do we read the almanac?

Most academic critics have read the almanac as a depository of stories toward readings of the novel that emphasize politics at the expense of literary form. These readings highlight a few passages from the almanac that can be read programmatically, in which the dissemination of stories works as a mystical political force that will induce the apocalypse. This, understandably, is a seductive notion to critics of a certain type. It gives a sense of political power to those working in humanities departments. Here is one of the key passages from the almanac: “One day a story will arrive in your town. There will always be disagreement over direction – whether the story came from the southwest or southeast. The story may arrive with a stranger, a traveler thrown out of his home country months ago. Or the story may be brought by an old friend, perhaps the parrot trader. But after you hear the story, you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters” (578). The dissemination of stories promises to instigate an uprising through the subversive transformation of consciousness. Yoeme confirms that “power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place” (581).

Critics use this notion of storytelling to read the novel as exposing political truths or to theorize political strategies. Jane Olmsted, for instance, reads the novel as “exposing the currents of U.S. culture that encourage self-interest over care for others” (465). Rebecca Tillett argues that the novel’s “foregrounding of the lengthy history of colonialism in the Americas exposes the violent, repressive, and exploitative means by which empires, including the contemporary empires of global capital and corporate enterprise, are established and maintained” (331). Ann

Brigham brings concepts from geography to the novel to consider how “constructions of geographic scale contribute to both the survival and overthrow of colonialist capitalism” (306). Several essays use *Almanac* as a model of political organizing in the face of the rise of the transnational capitalism of the 1980s. Channette Romero asserts that *Almanac* “attempts to overcome the limitations of the American Indian Movement” through “the promotion of cross-cultural connections” (623; 624). Eva Cherniavsky and Laura Shackleford both see the novel as developing a resistance movement that transcends identity politics. Cherniavsky writes that, “the novel’s insurgent peoples evade” identity politics “to open up a front as broad and mobile as the flows of global capital itself”; Shackleford claims, “Subjecting global capitalist networks to its own networking logic, the novel attempts to reverse the former’s suppression of historical time...developing an analogous model of transnational, material modes of resistance.... This transnational subaltern model of resistance adeptly circumnavigates *both* a nationalist, essentialized conception of identity as grounded in place and a liberal multicultural identity politics” (121; ¶13). Each of these essays turns to the novel for political analysis and, in their tone, risks triumphalism, a sense that by identifying a political vision in the novel, substantial political work has been done.

These political emphases are consequential for how the essays read the ancient almanac. According to Catherine Rainwater, “We watch as the world seems to conform to Silko’s story, just as the story reflects the shape of things intimated by Yoeme’s notebooks” (141). Yvonne Reinecke asserts that “the novel functions much like the notebooks of the almanac contained within the narrative itself. Repeatedly, the novel highlights the resurgence and emancipation of the colonized and the repressed” (71). T. V. Reed makes the identity between the almanac and the novel most explicit, writing, “*Almanac of the Dead* is the almanac the characters in the novel

seek to restore” (34). Channette Romero notes “the important political and spiritual work both the almanac and *Almanac of the Dead* are hoping to accomplish by engaging the audience / reader in a similar storytelling process” (631). In these readings, the almanac’s “proliferating storytelling,” which transforms the world within the novel, serves as the model for the novel’s own storytelling, which, thus, ought to transform the world beyond the novel (Donnelly 249).

But only very few passages from the almanac are readable as such. By fixating on politics at the expense of form, these critics miss the insights particular to the novel as literary in favor of those that could equally be achieved through a political pamphlet. These readings implicitly endorse a culturalist political strategy that relies on discourse – storytelling – to effect change. Their political insights, however sophisticated, fail to account for the complexity of the almanac at their source. I, too, am providing a political reading of the novel – it demands to be read as political – but one that hopes to improve on these previous readings by attending to problems of mediation and literary form.

To give a better sense of what the almanac is like, I will reproduce a substantial excerpt:

“Death Dog traveled to the land of the dead where the God of death gave him the bone the human race was created with.

Scorpion uses his tail as a noose to lasso deer. Scorpion is a good hunter. He has a net bag in which he carries his fire-driller and fire-sticks.

The sign of the human hand = 2. The hand that holds the hilt of the dagger is plunged into the lower body of the deer.

Those cursed with the anguish, and the despairers, all were born during the five ‘nameless’ days.

On the five nameless days, people stay in bed and fast and confess sins.

Black Zip whistles a warning. He is the deer god.

In the year Ten Sky, the principal ruler is Venus.

Big Star is a drunkard, a deformed dog with the head of a jaguar and the hind end of a dog with a purple dick. He staggers like Rabbit, who is also a

drunkard. Nasty, arrogant liar! Troublemaker and experimenter in mutual hate and torture!”



Venus. Color: red. Direction: east. Herald of the dawn and measurer of night.

Envious Ribald;

Sin in his face and in his talk; he had no virtue in him.

He is without understanding.

He had no virtue in him. Mighty carnivorous teeth and a body withered like a rabbit.

Deities return. Better get to know them.

Venus of the Celestial Dragon with eight heads; each head hurls shafts of affliction down on mankind. Europeans call Venus ‘Lucifer, the Bright One,’ who fell from grace long ago. Venus resides in darkness until he rises as Morning Star. Dog-face partially blackened, a fish in his headdress, he swims up from the dark underworld.

Error in translation of the Chumayel manuscript: 11 AHU was the year of the return of fair Quetzacoatl. But the mention of the artificial white circle in the sky could only have meant the return of Death Dog and his eight brothers: plague, earthquake, drought, famine, incest, insanity, war, and betrayal” (571-2)

These passages are not nonsense, but they do resist reading. Some reproduce or refer to Maya or Aztec myths, separated from the contexts that make them meaningful; others have no apparent provenance beyond Silko’s imagination. They cannot easily be read as stories, nor do they easily support political theorization. And the almanac only becomes more difficult to read the more we learn about it. Over the centuries, it has become a pastiche of Laguna Pueblo prophecy, historical fragments that mimic the Maya *Books of Chilam Balam*,<sup>70</sup> commentaries on both the Maya codices and the *Books of Chilam Balam*, delusions, snippets of Western texts, and forgeries. The almanac remains open to revision and contribution into the present. Lecha records a story that Yoeme tells from her youth about Geronimo, which becomes “the first entry that had been written in English” (130). Only after reading Yoeme’s story in the novel do we learn that Lecha

has written that same story in the almanac: at this moment, the almanac overlaps with *Almanac*, advancing the question: how does our reading of the almanac guide our reading of the novel?

I end with an answer to that question, but first I continue to address the problems that the almanac presents for those who try to read it. The almanac comes to Lecha and Zeta in poor physical condition. “For hundreds of years, guardians of the almanac notebooks had made clumsy attempts to repair torn pages. Some sections had been splashed with wine, others with water or blood. Only fragments of the original pages remained; those of ancient paper had yellowed, but the red and black painted glyphs had still been clear” (569). As the quality of the almanac deteriorates, it becomes, naturally, less and less readable: “the strange parchment got drier and more curled each season until someday the old almanac would reveal nothing more to an interpreter” (245). Surely for this reason Lecha is digitizing it.

But what does she find on the fragments to digitize? “There was evidence that substantial portions of the original manuscript had been lost or condensed into odd narratives which operated like codes” (569). These “odd narratives” include the fragments I quoted above, which neither Lecha nor Zeta can read. Not only has the almanac been condensed into codes, but much of what has since been added is untrustworthy, either because it originates in delusions or has been taken from Western texts or might be a forgery: “The great deal of what had accumulated with the almanac fragments had been debris gathered here and there by aged keepers of the almanac after they had gone crazy. A few of the keepers had fallen victim to delusions of various sorts”; “Whole sections had been stolen from other books and from the proliferation of ‘farmer’s almanacs’ published by patent-drug companies and medicine shows that gave away the almanacs as advertisements. Not even the parchment pages or fragments of ancient paper could be trusted; they might have been clever forgeries, recopied, drawn, and colored painstakingly” (569-70).

One begins to get the sense that the point is that we are not supposed to be able to read the – materially degraded, encoded, contaminated, and potentially forged – almanac. Silko builds an elaborate series of mediations that construct the almanac as resistant to interpretation. Yet Lecha retains deferred hope that the almanac holds the key to understanding the world. ““Once the notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will foresee the months and years to come – everything”” (137). I highlight that Lecha does not say she will figure out how to *read* the almanac; rather, she says she will figure out how to *use* it. Perhaps, as in the narrative with which I began this chapter in which the almanac’s letters fly away and the girl eats the mute page, the almanac serves purposes beyond that of making sense.

Silko models her difficult almanac in part after the Mayan *Books of Chilam Balam*, alluded to in the almanac itself. The texts of the *Books* “are by no means purely Mayan. They have been shaped by almost a thousand years of cultural confrontation” (*Ancient xi*). For this and other reasons, “They are exasperatingly difficult to translate and interpret.... They are composed in archaic and elliptical language. Their chronology is obscured by esoteric numerological, astrological, and religious assumptions. The orthography of surviving texts leaves a great deal to be desired. But most of all the *Books* reflect a worldview and a sense of history that are distinctively Mayan” (*Ancient xi*). As such, Munro S. Edmonson, the translator of one of the *Books*, concludes that “these texts are purposely obscure. They are not intended to make sense to others – and they don’t” (xiv). Historically, indigenous peoples have used esoteric texts and cultural practices as anticolonial weapons, including the Maya codices, the *Books of Chilam Balam*, and the Ghost Dance. These texts and practices remained unreadable to the colonists in power and provoked, in response, violence: Landa, frightened, burned books; the U.S. military massacred ghost dancers at Wounded Knee.

How, then, I ask one last time, should we read the almanac?

Should we read it?

### *Reading and Apocalypse*

The almanac in its unreadability – its strategies of resistance to interpretation – adapts the history of indigenous anticolonial writing for the neoliberal present. It refuses to participate in a regime of meaning colonized by economic rationality. It turns our attention to material conditions. In the earliest story about the almanac, its letters lift from the page, take shape as clouds, and fly away, leaving the mute page to sustain the four children. Centuries later, its unreadability draws our attention to its degradation as a physical object. It also brings the apocalypse. The almanac's link between attending to materiality and instigating the apocalypse reveals a relationship between the almanac's form and the arc of the novel's narrative.

Concerned as *Almanac* is with economics, the novel offers no economic cause for the hemispheric crisis that unfolds across its pages, crediting the apocalypse to the realization of the almanac's prophecies. The relationship between *Almanac* and the almanac is condensed in this attribution. *Almanac* is a literary text, differentiated as such from a political pamphlet, an economic treatise, or a Maya codex. Of the features of the literary, salient here is how it exceeds the instrumentalization performed by economic rationality. That is, a literary text cannot be read reductively as economic without stripping it of that which makes it literary. Neoliberalism, then, as an attempt to read everything as economic, to create a world in which such reading is normal, existentially threatens the literary. In *Almanac*, Silko depicts such a world: but the almanac, unreadable by any of the characters, exceeds economic rationality. As such, the tension between

the unreadability of the almanac and the normalization of neoliberal reading erupts in the novel as apocalypse, a sublimation of the crisis created by neoliberalism for the literary.

According with apocalyptic tradition, *Almanac* presents a challenge for its characters: it is too late to avoid cataclysm, yet there remains time to save oneself. While apocalypse expresses the neoliberal crisis for the literary, it also occasions a crisis for subjectivity. How can subjects who have internalized neoliberalism to a lesser or greater degree – such as Zeta, Lecha, and Sterling – respond when the material conditions that enable neoliberalism unravel? Here again we find the almanac. As the site that exceeds neoliberalism, it remains – it grounds the post-apocalyptic remnant – after neoliberalism. In the penultimate section of the novel, before Silko leaves us with Sterling, Lecha uses the almanac’s fragments to imagine the future (755-6). Lecha began as a subject thoroughly entwined, through her entrepreneurial work as a talk show psychic, with neoliberalism. As the novel ends, she has fully joined the broad revolutionary network that rises from the West’s collapse, driving “to the secret headquarters where Wilson Weasel Tail and the others were making preparations” (754). The almanac’s unreadability, its colonial difference, its alterity from neoliberalism and its link to indigenous history allow it to serve as a cipher through which subjects – notably Lecha and Sterling, with whose transformations the novel ends – transform from neoliberals to revolutionaries.

Such transformations of subjectivity require reorienting oneself after the coordinates of the world have been erased. The almanac, by directing us from meaning to material conditions invites us to linger in this erasure, deferring the reconstitution of subjectivity. Apocalypse is the moment when unreadability unravels the structure of reality, revealing mute materiality. The almanac has prepared us for this revelation from its beginning, with the flying away of language. Language’s flight links the almanac as the children knew it to the pastiche that Lecha and Zeta

keep and digitize: this flight links the book to the text through the refusal to mean. Having flown, language in its absence leaves us with the blank page, the crumbling object. Translated into the novel's neoliberal present, language's flight asks us to turn from neoliberalism as a mode of reading the world to its material implications: from the neoliberal soul to the mute neoliberal body. Neoliberalism is not only a political rationality, but also a set of concomitant economic practices with material consequences, including enriching the rich and impoverishing the poor. The almanac's formal turn *from an object to be read to an object* replays itself thematically as neoliberalism's turn *from a mode of reading to the cataclysmic collapse of the material conditions* for survival for the novel's world's subjects: the poor rise and the earth itself rises – through earthquakes and tidal waves and drought and heat – in rebellion (756).

### *Conclusion*

The institutionalization of neoliberalism in the 1980s created a crisis for the literary as a mode of writing. With *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko responds to this crisis by turning to the history of pre-columbian indigenous books as weapons of anticolonial resistance. Adapting that history for the present, she imagines a fourth Maya codex whose cultural difference and unreadability structure the novel. The almanac's unreadability becomes a figure in which the crisis for the literary, the turn away from neoliberal subjectivity, and the revelation of materiality crystallize, manifesting as apocalypse. Silko's novel offers much more than the stories on which critics have focused their attention. Attending to form reveals how *Almanac* turns to apocalypse to express the crises of its historical moment, binding them with the long history of colonization in the Americas – an expression that emphasizes the power of resisting meaning when everything is read as economic.

Central to neoliberalism, but missing from *Almanac of the Dead*, is debt. How does debt affect subjectivity? How does the literary respond to the debt economy? The next chapter takes up these questions through David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Different as *Infinite Jest* and *Almanac of the Dead* are – in style, structure, politics – they share in responding to neoliberalism and as such demonstrate surprising affinities. Both are long novels that take as their titles imaginary cultural objects – the almanac, a film – that contain an enigmatic power to induce the apocalypse. Reading them together draws the contours of a new literary history of neoliberalism.

## Chapter Four: Almost Magic

“It is my contention that *clichés* function as beacons  
in this vagueness, instability, and uncertainty”

*On Clichés*, Anton Zijderveld

"The word addiction emerged from the Latin word *addico*, and is translated as, “of a judge, especially the praetor, to award a debtor as a slave to his creditor” (“*addico*,” 1968, p. 11, def. 2a). In a more general sense “to give oneself up too slavishly” (def. 3)... According to the Roman law, an *addictio* was a person who was enslaved through a judicial procedure. In the time of the Roman Empire, when a debtor could not repay his or her debt, creditors could recover their losses using a legal procedure. In that procedure, if proven that the debtor lacks the means to repay, the praetor, or the justice, could turn the debtor into a slave.”

*Revisiting Addiction Using Depth Psychology*, Gil Simsic

TJA  
COT.

### Preliminary Throat-Clearings

Dedication: For Fenton Foster, RIP(P!)

[Rest In Peace(Please!)]

Epigraph: 'Sorrow brings forth' -- Blake, 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell.'

#### Points of Interest:

'**Addict** -- ( ) tr.v., To devote or give (oneself) habitually or compulsively. Used with to. -- n. ( ) One who is addicted, especially to narcotics [Latin addictus, "given over," one awarded to another as votary or slave, past participle of addicere, to award to.] American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College Edition.

'**Addict** -- ( ) ppl. a. Obs. [ad. L. addict-us assigned by decree, made over, bound, devoted; pa. pple. of addicere, f. ad to + dicere to say, pronounce. Now replaced by ADDICTED.]

1. Formally made over or bound (to another); attached by restraint or obligation; obliged, bound, devoted, consecrated.

1533 Agst. Rastell. 217 As the Spirit of God is bound to no place, even so is he not addict to any age or person.

2. Attached by one's own inclination, self-addicted to (a practice); devoted, given, inclined to.

1640 Homilies II. V. 301 Neither would we at this day be so addict to superstition, were it not that we so much esteemed the filling of our bellies.

**Addict** -- ( ) v. [f. ADDICT a.; or on analogy of of vbs. so formed.]

1. To deliver over formally by sentence of a judge (to anyone). Hence fig. to make over, give up, surrender.

1586 Hollinshed ii. 61/2 With what limitation a prince may or may not addict his realme feodarie with another.  
1592 tr. Junius on Apocal.vi. 7 That God will addict the fourth part of this world...unto death and hell.

2. refl. To bind, attach, or devote oneself as a servant, disciple, or adherent (to any person or cause). Obs.

1655 FULLER Ch. Hist III.208 We sincerely addict ourselves to Almighty God.

3. To attach (anyone) to a pursuit. Obs.

1660 T. STANLEY Hist. Philos 22 He addicted the Citizens to Arts.

**Addiction** -- ( ) [ad. L. addiction-em, n. of action f. addic-ere; see ADDICT.]

1. A formal giving over or delivery by action of government or sentence of court. Hence, a surrender, or dedication of anyone to a master.

1751 CHAMBERS Cycle., Adjudication is more particularly used for the addiction, or consigning a thing sold by auction, or the like, to the highest bidder.

2. The state of being (self-) addicted or given to a habit or pursuit; devotion.

1675 E. PHILLIPS in Shaks. Cent. Praise 360 His own proper Industry and Addiction to Books.

In an early draft of *Infinite Jest*'s dedication page, Wallace proposed including definitions of "addict" and "addiction." These were later cut.

## *Introduction*

Early in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), set in the near future, readers encounter a description from the perspective of a medical attaché serving on a Saudi legation to the United States: "of the idolatrous West's most famous and self-congratulating idol, the colossal Libertine Statue, wearing some type of enormous adult-design diaper" (33). To raise revenue, the novel's U.S. has chosen to subsidize time; much of the novel takes place in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.<sup>71</sup> As a symbol of subsidization, the Statue of Liberty "holds aloft" the given year's product in place of her torch (367). Satirically unsubtle, the image crystallizes the collapse of the political into the economic. Specifically, the light of liberty (the torch) has been supplanted by a commodity (an adult diaper). Freedom has become the freedom of capitalist consumption.

In the year of *Infinite Jest*'s publication, 1996, Fredric Jameson could write that, with the ascendancy of neoliberal "master thinkers like [Friedrich] Hayek, it has become customary to identify political freedom with market freedom" (247). Likewise, Michael Clune describes the period from 1945 to 2000 as a time when "Americans were captivated by the impulse to replace relations to governments, to traditions, to cultures, with a relation to market price. The specter of a purely economic world casts a shadow over the history of this period," which is especially true after Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 (1). The market achieved its consecration as delivering us into the "end of history" with the fall of the Soviet Union, just as Wallace was beginning to draft *Infinite Jest*.<sup>72</sup> Wallace scholar Lee Konstantinou asserts that, "It is against this sort of teleological talk – the total triumph of the market, the utter collapse of all alternative visions – that the career of David Foster Wallace must be situated" (83). As the image of the diapered "Libertine Statue" makes clear, *Infinite Jest* is not sanguine about the "triumph of the market."

The novel's narrator describes the recent "post-Soviet" past as a time when "the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue," a fatigue marked by the fact that the commodity that subsidizes the novel's central year is an adult diaper (403). To ensure readers get the point, the focalized voice of the medical attaché notes that the Statue of Liberty in an adult diaper is "a hilariously apposite image popular in the news photos of so many international journals" (33). Not only has freedom given way to the commodity, but to a specific commodity that highlights how the United States, in its submission to the market, has succumbed to fatigue, old age, and incontinence.

The Statue of Liberty's incontinence is "apposite" as, in the novel, the U.S. has become a nation of addicts, unable to control the desire to consume drugs and entertainment. By enshrining the commodity in place of freedom, the U.S. has given itself over to the short-term pleasures of consumption. At the heart of the novel's satire is a film – called *Infinite Jest* – so entertaining that anyone who watches it becomes a vegetable, capable of doing nothing but watching the film until he dies. To further the joke, Wallace has the U.S. join with Canada and Mexico to become the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N., a pun on Onan, the Biblical figure killed for "spilling his seed," giving us the term onanism for masturbation. Throughout the novel, Québécois insurgents attempt to acquire the film to bring "O.N.A.N.'s self-destructing logic to its final conclusion" (725). *Infinite Jest*'s narrative horizon is apocalyptic; its premise is that the U.S. nation's devotion to short-term pleasure makes it vulnerable to cataclysm by entertainment, or, to put it onanistically, death by self-pleasure.

We have a name for the condition *Infinite Jest* satirizes, in which the freedom to consume subsumes political freedom: neoliberalism. Wallace's novel makes "the addict" neoliberalism's central character. As noted in the definitions that Wallace thought to include on *Infinite Jest*'s

dedication page, but which were cut at the advice of his editor, the word “addict” comes from the Latin for “given over”; the definitions often use variations on the words “bound” and “devoted.” As a central character of neoliberalism, “the addict” has given himself over – is bound and devoted – to the short-term pleasure of consumption. In this, *Infinite Jest* generalizes “the addict,” extending the scope of its denotation from those addicted to drugs and alcohol to all U.S. citizens; this generalization is a central feature of neoliberalism. Become a consumer by identity, the addict returns by a sense of compulsion to the market. The addict’s compulsion entails debt: this link is ancient. The second epigraph to this chapter explains how, in ancient Rome, the debtor became an addict in the sense of a slave given over to the master to whom he was indebted. Under neoliberalism, the debtor is the inverse of the entrepreneur: “to become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only – far from it – those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health system, housing shortages,” all of which are bound up in debt (Lazzarato 51). The previous chapter and this one complement one another, revealing the literary ramifications of these two sides of neoliberalism’s coin: “the entrepreneur” for Silko and “the debtor” in the form of “the addict” for Wallace.

That Wallace chooses the literary novel as the form with which to address “the specter of a purely economic world” is apt, as the category of the literary has a long history of setting itself against conceptions of market value.<sup>73</sup> Mary Poovey analyzes the disentanglement of the literary and the economic from one another in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, noting that “it was not until Literature was declared to be a different *kind* of imaginative writing that a secular model of value completely at odds with the market model was articulated,” which, she argues,

happened for the novel by the third quarter of the nineteenth century (2, emphasis Poovey's; 20). By the last quarter of the twentieth, with economic value colonizing all other forms of value, the literary emerged as a threatened bastion of non-market value, a threat that has only exacerbated in subsequent years, evident in the pressure that market value continues to put, increasingly, on humanities departments to justify themselves economically or face cuts or closure. Literature, meanwhile, sold on the market is hardly autonomous from market value, a tension that manifests variously in *Infinite Jest*, not least in Wallace's desire to subtitle it: "A Failed Entertainment" – because a successful entertainment would be too complicit with market logics – a subtitle his editor, who fervidly marketed the book, rejected (Max 200).

Like Silko, Wallace responds to neoliberalism by turning to apocalypse. Whereas the eponymous almanac in Silko's novel instigates the apocalypse through its resistance to reading, opening space for a revolution against neoliberalism, Wallace's eponymous film ushers in the apocalypse through its addictive consumability. Known in the novel as the Entertainment, the film *Infinite Jest* crystallizes, for Wallace, the apocalyptic threat of neoliberalism. Successful entertainment, according to Wallace's logic, encourages the addict's consumption and leaves no space from which the addict can extricate himself from the totalizing colonization of economic rationality: easy consumption abets neoliberalism's debt-driven economy, hence Wallace's impulse to subtitle the novel a failed entertainment. Apocalypse, then, signifies in two registers: as the imagined result of neoliberalism's hegemony; and as a response to the existential endangerment of the category of the literary.

Wallace defended the literary in what has become an oft-quoted passage, which Stephen Burn calls "an implicit outline of *Infinite Jest*'s project": "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things

about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize that we still *are* human beings now. Or can be" (18; 26, emphasis Wallace's). He continues the thought by asking, "how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price?" (27). Wallace speaks (the quote is from an interview) as if the "human being" is a natural category, clear and timeless even as we become dehumanized by contemporary conditions, a category in part defined by "stuff that doesn't have a price." Yet, as Wallace implicitly acknowledges, this human being has been made legible in large part by fiction (it is what "fiction's about").<sup>74</sup> In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace sets himself the task of dramatizing – making legible – a subjectivity that escapes the logic of price against a neoliberal world.

Beginning with "the addict" as neoliberalism's principal character, Wallace looks to Alcoholics Anonymous, an institution meant to cure addicts, to imagine a character type with a subjectivity that resists addiction, consumption, and debt. Wallace scholar Lee Konstantinou calls this type "the believer" who maintains an "ethos of belief in and of itself" (85; 90). The key to the shift from one to another, the trick by which subjects transition from the addict to the believer – and, thus, the centerpiece of Wallace's literary vision – is cliché. Wallace identifies cliché as central to AA and elevates it as his novel's privileged literary figure. As a figure and the mechanism that allows addicts to become believers, cliché bridges *Infinite Jest's* thematic project of imagining a subjectivity that resists neoliberalism with the novel's literary form. It is precisely the literary's foregrounding of form, I argue, that differentiates it from both neoliberalism and entertainment and makes it fitting as a site of resistance against neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, which attempts to forge subjects who read all phenomena as economic, makes

content fungible, available for exchange from one context to another, by dismissing the singularities of form. Quantification everywhere replaces qualification at the behest of the market. *Infinite Jest* is “a failed entertainment” because, like literary fiction categorically, it resists its story’s fungibility by foregrounding form: one cannot retell the story of *Infinite Jest* as content without losing what makes it *Infinite Jest*. And central to what makes *Infinite Jest* itself is its privileging of the figure of cliché.

*Infinite Jest* presents cliché as a word or phrase that has come, from repeated use, to fail to have meaning. The novel’s addicts struggle to accept a therapeutic strategy that depends on cliché. As one addict, early in recovery, thinks, “the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radarange at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language that she has to have Blind Faith in” (366). Yet Blind Faith – capitalized to mark its own status as a cliché – is what the novel asks its characters to have in cliché. I argue that cliché’s failure to mean serves to disrupt the spirals of consumption and exchange that comprise “the addict”: cliché’s resistance to linguistic exchange, its rupture of the relationship between word and meaning, allows subjects to resist the economic exchange that subtends addiction, a capacity of cliché so surprising that one character calls it “almost magic” (271). Yet what is “almost magic” about cliché as a ground for subjectivity makes, as I show, “the believer” an ideal subject of the debt economy – whose financial markets’ production of capital is itself “almost magic.” The long, slow closing 173 pages of *Infinite Jest* reveal that “the believer” is a subject in crisis, not, as some argue, redemptive, not utopic, but hanging precariously between the survival granted by belief and the disposability that threatens life under the neoliberal debt economy.

*Infinite Jest* tells three stories that meet at its narrative horizon. One takes place at an elite tennis academy – Enfield Tennis Academy – and features the Incandenza family. The father and founder of ETA, James Incandenza, pursues a career in film that culminates with *Infinite Jest*. He kills himself shortly after finishing the film, several years before the novel’s present. This story centers on James’ middle son, Hal Incandenza, a tennis prodigy who suffers from an addiction to marijuana, as he copes with the pressures that accompany his talent. Hal and the other students at ETA attempt to come to terms with a world in which they are trained to survive, those who make it, not only as professional athletes, but as commodified entertainers. The second of the novel’s stories takes place at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, a halfway house located down the hill from ETA. Recovering addict Don Gately is this story’s protagonist. Gately works as a counselor at Ennet House; as viewed from Gately’s post, the novel catalogs Ennet House’s addicts. In a pivotal scene, Gately is shot while defending the House’s residents; he spends the last few hundred pages of the novel lying in a hospital bed, struggling to refuse Demerol, the drug to which he is addicted. Ennet House residents know ETA as a “snooty tennis prep school” for “blond gleaming tennis kids,” while the kids at ETA know Ennet House as that “wretched halfway-house thing for wretched people” (197; 195; 633). These two institutions allow Wallace to explore neoliberalism’s ramifications on the elite and the working class, poor, and criminalized.<sup>75</sup> The third story concerns the race between the U.S. government and Québécois insurgent groups to acquire the master copy of the film *Infinite Jest*. As the novel progresses, agents from both groups converge on ETA and Ennet House. At the novel’s horizon, just beyond the text, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, apparently under duress from Québécois insurgents, disinter James Incandenza’s corpse to find the film’s master copy, implicitly leading to the film’s dissemination and the subsequent apocalypse.

Across the first half of the novel, two spies in pursuit of *Infinite Jest* – one Québécois, one from the U.S. – debate the film’s implications. I begin with this debate to demonstrate how the novel articulates the centrality of “the addict” in relation to the economy, the nation, and subjectivity. The novel thematizes and theorizes its preoccupation with neoliberalism, which I trace before turning to its techniques, formal and thematic, toward resistance.

### *Marathe and Steeply*

How is it possible that a nation could become apocalyptically threatened by the risk of indulging too much in an attractive commodity? Rémy Marathe of the *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*, or Wheelchair Assassins, a Québécois insurgent group, and Hugh Steeply, an agent for the United States’ Office of Unspecified Services – both of whom attempt to acquire the master copy of the Entertainment during the novel’s second half, bringing them to ETA and Ennet House – discuss this question at length. Marathe answers the question three times, through three different terms: worship, appetite, and *utilitaire*, that is (in economic language) utility, or pleasure.

Marathe first asks, rhetorically, “Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith?” (107).<sup>76</sup> Turning, then, to his conclusion, he asks, “What is this temple, thus, for U.S.A.s? What is it, when you fear you must protect them from themselves, if wicked Québécois conspire to bring the Entertainment into their warm homes?” (107-8). Marathe suggests that we are all believers, but that “U.S.A.s” worship at the temple of the short-term pleasure of the commodity, making them incapable of refusing pleasure even when it kills them.<sup>77</sup>

When they continue the conversation two hundred pages later, Marathe speaks in terms of “appetite”: “This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose – this

*appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death” (319). The Entertainment itself, according to Marathe, is merely the occasion for revealing underlying conditions: “forget for a moment the Entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible” (318). Both above, in terms of worship – ““Who teaches your U.S.A. children how to choose their temple?”” – and here with appetite – ““The U.S.A. drive for spectation, which your culture teaches”” – Marathe emphasizes the role of national pedagogy in producing subjects who succumb to the danger of the commodity and who, thereby, to his mind, are already dead (107; 318). By urging readers to think about underlying conditions and national pedagogy, by asserting that “someone sometime let you [U.S.A.’s] forget how to choose, and what,” Marathe invites us to ask how and why, exactly, such a situation came to pass. What happened such that the U.S.A. trained its citizens to have an appetite to consume commodities to the point of self-destruction?<sup>78</sup>

Historical conditions obtained beginning in the early-to-mid 1980s that make Marathe’s questions and *Infinite Jest*’s premise legible: namely, the unleashing of “the endless expansion of credit” (Krippner 57). In the late 1960s, the global economy began to suffer from the overproduction of commodities, which led to a global economic crisis. By the early 1980s, the economy managed to evade “serious repression or depression” only because “governments of the advanced capitalist world, led to an ever-increasing extent by the U.S., made sure that titanic volumes of credit were made available to soak up the surplus of supply” (Brenner xxiii). The flip side of this new credit “was the unprecedented growth of debt of all types” (Brenner 158). Within the U.S., this flood created the conditions for the economy to become ever more dependent on expanding credit and debt in a structural spiral. The policymakers who planned the deregulation in the late 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s that made the unprecedented credit available expected that consumers’ appetite for credit would reach a natural limit when the price

of credit became too high. To their surprise, the flow of credit was not constrained “by any reluctance on the part of borrowers to meet its high price” (Krippner 83). Once “the taps on credit were opened wide,” once “capital was available in a potentially *limitless* supply,” nothing “functioned to choke off the seemingly limitless demand for credit” (Krippner 83, emphasis hers; 103). U.S. consumers, beginning in the 1980s, proved to have an insatiable appetite for credit. It is this appetite that makes possible *Infinite Jest*’s anxiety about an insatiable appetite for short-term pleasure through the consumption of commodities, an anxiety mediated through the figure of the addict.

What about the other half of Marathe’s question, about pedagogy? Policymakers’ surprise at consumers’ demand for credit marked a dramatic change in the U.S. ethos. Jameson expresses it well when he notes his awe at “the success with which consumer America had overcome the Protestant ethic and was able to throw its savings (and future income) to the winds in exercising its new nature as the full-time professional shopper” (271). But this transformation did not occur spontaneously; public policy and the discipline of economics encouraged what the new economy needed. The change from the Protestant ethic’s saver to the debt economy’s spender was helped along by “discourses such as Public Choice Theory...which have attempted to remodel a vast range of social relationships...as retail transactions, promoting a consumer mentality as the only mode of active and empowered subjectivity available” (Gilbert 17). Marathe turns our attention to economic discourses with his third term, after worship and appetite: *utilitaire*.

In his final conversation with Steeply, Marathe says, “*utilitarienne*. Maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure: result: what is good. This is the U.S.A. of you” (423). Marathe concisely defines utilitarianism, which, in the context of consumer capitalism, acknowledges the dominant economic discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, epitomized by the work of its leading proponent, the

recently deceased Gary Becker. Becker argued that “extended utility functions,” calculations of how to maximize pleasure, are “the foundation of behavior” (5). Critically, he fought to extend “the definition of individual preferences to include personal habits, peer pressure, parental influences on the tastes of children, advertising, love and sympathy, and other neglected behavior” (4). In other words, he subsumed all the above within economic rationality, making them, through his discourse, principally economic phenomena, because he did “not believe that any alternative approach – be it founded on ‘cultural,’ ‘biological,’ or ‘psychological’ forces – comes close [to economics in] providing comparable insights and explanatory power” (*ibid.*). In a sentence, he dismisses the humanities, the hard sciences, and the social sciences. For this work, Becker won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1992, when Wallace was in the middle of writing *Infinite Jest*. Indeed, the prize recognized how Becker’s thought had remade the world; Jameson wrote, the previous year, that “Becker’s model seems to me impeccable and very faithful indeed to the facts of life as we know it” (269). Becker was the guiding force in the colonization of all discourses by that of economics.

Yet Marathe argues that the existence of the Entertainment reveals a contradiction within economic utilitarianism. He wants to know how U.S. consumers are supposed to calculate their “long-term overall pleasure,” to which Steeply responds with the phrase *enlightened self-interest* (248). Steeply rebukes Marathe by arguing that the U.S. education system teaches ““how to make knowledgeable choices about pleasure and delay and the kid’s overall down-the-road maximal interests,”” which leads Marathe to point out the obvious, namely: ““Why make a simple Entertainment, no matter how seducing its pleasures, a *samizdat* and forbidden in the first place if you do not fear so many U.S.A.s cannot make the enlightened choices?”” (429; 430). In other words, the Entertainment proves Steeply’s theory of education anachronistic, but representative

of one half of the contradiction. Economic utilitarianism depends on the assumption that rational consumers calculate their long-term best interest, yet the debt economy requires that consumers prioritize short-term pleasure, which, this last point, requires a brief explanation. With the rise of credit and the high interest rates of the late 1970s and 1980s, manufacturing was driven out and finance was encouraged; finance then could take consumers' surprising appetite for credit and make it the source of its profits such that the spiraling of limitless credit became necessary to the functioning of the economy. To keep the economy running briskly, then, the U.S. was required to encourage continuous borrowing, consumption, and gratification of short-term pleasure, even as this fueled the contradiction of educating its populace toward long-term planning. "In short," as Greta Krippner writes, "under financialization, the endless expansion of credit, increased volatility in the economy, and the growth of financial activities became locked in a tight embrace" (57). It is this contradiction – between the promotion of short-term pleasure and the discourse of long-term planning – that prompts Marathe, whose group intends to provoke a U.S. apocalypse with *Infinite Jest*, to ask as an implicit threat: "can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time?" (318). And it is this contradiction that crystallizes in, and is mediated through, the figure of "the addict."

*Addiction: A Tale of Two Institutions*

In an early section on Ennet House, *Infinite Jest*'s narrator lists a number of "exotic new facts" that introduce the reader, presumed unfamiliar, to recovery culture (200). One such fact is, "That gambling can be an abusable escape, too, and work, shopping, and shoplifting, and sex, and abstention, and masturbation, and food, and exercise, and meditation/prayer" (202). Yet this "fact" was likely familiar to most of the novel's audience in 1996. During the 1980s and 1990s,

“a new category of ‘process’ addictions [e.g. to gambling or sex] broadened the disease model’s scope to include virtually everyone in the U.S.” (Travis 52). Even those opposed to thinking of addiction as a disease – most notably, again, Gary Becker – had by the late 1980s expanded the concept of addiction until it covered nearly everything: “People get addicted not only to alcohol, cocaine, and cigarettes, but also to work, eating, music, television, their standard of living, other people, religion, and many other activities” (Becker 50). The end of the twentieth century, argues Trysh Travis, saw the rise of “an epistemological and moral framework” that “understood the totality of the world and the self as manifestations of or resistances to addictive ‘diseases’ broadly defined” (58). The generalization of addiction by the late 1980s results, I contend, from the rise in the early 1980s of the debt economy. As citizens became consumers encouraged to satisfy their pleasures immediately, *excessive* pursuit – however that may be defined – of such pleasure became pathologized: an outcome of the economy’s contradictory need for consumers who simultaneously prioritize the desire to consume commodities today *and* the ability to consume into the future.<sup>79</sup> Alcohol and drugs remained foremost among addictions. As David Musto writes, “A sustained and growing media campaign against substance abuse reached a peak in September 1989 as measured by a *New York Times* poll, when the drug issue surpassed all other causes for concern in the United States” (3760). The characteristic figure, then, of both *Infinite Jest* and the U.S. 1990s was “the addict.”

*Infinite Jest* details at length how ETA and Ennet House attempt to train their respective denizens away from the subjectivity of “the addict” and toward that of “the believer.” It is a novel of education, for its characters and its readers. I agree with Paul Giles’ notion that Wallace is “at some level a moralist and a pedagogue” (6). Importantly, not all addictions are the same. The predominantly wealthy white youth at ETA become addicted to tennis and marijuana, while

the poor, the people of color, and the queers who populate Ennet House use heroin and pain pills, among other substances.<sup>80</sup> Neither are all recovery approaches equally successful. *Infinite Jest* rejects formal education as a solution to addiction by making the narrative of ETA's protagonist, Hal Incandenza, a failed bildungsroman: a narrative of an individual's education meant toward his successful integration in society that leads, instead, to radical isolation. Ennet House, on the other hand, very nearly succeeds, at least in rehabilitating its residents so that they become functional participants in the debt economy.

*ETA: the Failed Bildungsroman*

ETA's seventeen-year-old (in the Y.D.A.U.) Hal Incandenza is "a lexical prodigy" and "a late-blooming prodigy and possible genius at tennis" (155). The novel tracks his progress as he withdraws from an addiction to marijuana, which leads, in the novel's final 130 pages, to stasis, a loss of motivation, and a burgeoning gap between what he thinks he is saying and doing and how others perceive him. Wallace stated in an interview that he "wanted to do something with sport and the idea of dedication to a pursuit being kind of like an addiction" (*Conversations* 64). Late in the novel, when Hal is pondering his loss of motivation, he understands his former pursuit of high-level tennis as such: "The original sense of *addiction* involved being bound over, dedicated, either legally or spiritually. To devote one's life, to plunge in" (900). Much earlier in the novel, we read a transcript from *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, a short film narrated by Hal in which he describes in second-person his life of tennis as an addiction: "Here is how to take nonnarcotic muscle relaxants for the back spasms that come from thousands of serves to no one." "Here is how to weep in bed trying to remember when your torn blue ankle didn't hurt every minute." "Here is how to sweat." "Be a Student of the Game. Like most clichés of sports, this is profound.

. . . It's all educational" (174-6). What is strange about this kind of addiction to tennis is that it is the opposite of addiction as popularly understood. Addiction to tennis looks more like the hard work and long-term planning of the Protestant work ethic than the surrender to pleasure urged by consumer culture.

In fact, ETA's head coach, Gerhardt Schtitt, understands his athletes' devotion to tennis precisely in opposition to immediate pleasure. Tennis, for Schtitt, is "about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self – the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will – to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law)" (82-3). Further, "the well-disciplined boy begins assembling the more abstract, gratification-delaying skills necessary for being a 'team player' in a larger arena: the even more subtly diffracted moral chaos of full-service citizenship in a State" (83). Schtitt's vision of tennis repeats Marathe's argument that nations must train their citizens to manage their appetites; unsurprisingly, then, Schtitt's idea of tennis encounters and attempts to resist "a nation that's forgotten privation and hardship and the discipline which hardship teaches by requiring[.] A U.S. of modern A. where the State is not a team or a code, but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears, where the only public consensus a boy must surrender to is the acknowledged primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness" (83). Think of the commodified Statue of Liberty. Where politics has collapsed into economics and freedom has become the freedom to consume, Schtitt's civic pedagogy is anachronistic. ETA, beyond Schtitt, understands well its role in a market society, mandating a "six-term Entertainment Requirement because students hoping to prepare for careers as professional athletes are by intension training also to be entertainers" (188).

Students at ETA are trapped at the crux of *Infinite Jest*'s U.S.'s contradiction: the school trains them to resist short-term pleasure for the long-term goal not of becoming citizens of the civic state, but professional – and commodified (“the *Billboard Who Walks*”) – entertainers (676, emphasis Wallace’s). They suffer years of physical and psychological pressure, which the novel spends extensive pages cataloguing, in pursuit of a goal very few of them will attain, and which if they do attain will lead to a life of more intense physical and psychological pressure (109-121; 676-682). One thing tennis shares with marijuana as an addiction, for Hal, is how it helps “to avoid thinking about any of this by practicing and playing until everything runs on autopilot and talent’s unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself” (173). But after he gives up marijuana he, as mentioned above, slips into the paralysis of withdrawal and begins to dissociate: how he thinks he is presenting himself to the world is not how he is perceived.

As a bildungsroman, Hal’s narrative fails spectacularly. Criticism on the novel has been preoccupied with the question: what happens to Hal? The novel begins with a scene that takes place one year after it ends, in which Hal’s dissociation has intensified. He describes what is by now, “The familiar panic at feeling misperceived” (8). He says, “I cannot make myself understood,” believing he is speaking “slowly and distinctly.” The officials hear what Hal thinks are his words as “Subanimalistic noises and sounds.” They insist that Hal “is damaged” (14). He is restrained in a stretcher and taken away in an ambulance (15-16). Though Hal insists emphatically, “I read,” and describes the breadth of his education, neither his book-learning nor his tennis training have formed him into an individual who can function in the world; they have accomplished the opposite (12). The novel begins with Hal’s breakdown as if to promise an explanation that never comes. I suggest that in a world in which the political has collapsed into the economic, and in which the middle class has disappeared into the wealthy and the poor, the

bildungsroman as a form, which has charted tensions of incommensurability between societies and their individuals for more than a century,<sup>81</sup> itself becomes unintelligible. When society has lost any civic sense, what could it mean for an individual to join it? Hal's initial breakdown is the spectacular breakdown of a genre. The novel's elite boy's education leads him to the opposite of integration within bourgeois civil society: it leads him to radical isolation. The novel turns its reader's attention, then, from the upper-middle class to the working class. The words that close the scene of Hal's breakdown come from a hypothetical "blue-collar" worker who Hal imagines will ask him: "So you then man what's *your* story" (17). The stories *Infinite Jest* hopes will save us are not Hal's, but rather the testimonials of Alcoholics Anonymous.

#### *Two Competing and Antithetical Discourses*

One of *Infinite Jest*'s addicts clearly poses all addicts' problem: "how come I can't stop, if I want to, is the thing" (178). Two competing and antithetical discourses dominated the response to this question in the 1980s and 1990s, as they do, also, in *Infinite Jest*: that of economic rationality, and of disease. Talk of addiction to entertainment in the novel tends to use the former. About *the* Entertainment, for example, M. Fortier of the *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* theorizes, "There could be no index of diminishing satisfaction as in the econometrics of normal U.S.A. commodities" (727). Addiction to drugs and alcohol tends to use the discourse of disease as originally promulgated by Alcoholics Anonymous. A new denizen of Ennet House asks, "'So this purports to be a disease, alcoholism? A disease like a cold? Or like cancer?'" (180). The extension of economic rationality to explain addiction demonstrates how far the economic discipline has come in remaking the world in its image, but, in *Infinite Jest*, the discourse of

disease, by refusing to understand addiction as a rational problem, opens the possibility of escape from addiction through cliché.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, having enjoyed a decade in which his ideas of human capital and economic rationality became reality, Gary Becker looked for the most extreme test case that might challenge the fundamental rationality of *homo economicus*. In the dominant figure of “the addict” he found his challenge. He published an essay in 1988 titled, “A Rational Theory of Addiction,” which begins: “Rational consumers maximize utility from stable preferences as they try to anticipate the future consequences of their choices. Addictions would seem to be the antithesis of rational behavior” (50). Yet, with his co-author, he writes, “we claim that addictions, even strong ones, are usually rational in the sense of involving forward-looking maximization” (50). To maintain this thesis, Becker must perform rhetorical sleights of hand, which, when pressed, reveal a rift deep in the rational economic subject.

At pains to show how his theory conforms to common sense, Becker notes, “our model recognizes that people often become addicted precisely because they are unhappy. However, they would be even more unhappy if they were prevented from consuming the addictive goods” (67). Unhappy now or unhappy in the future? Or both? In the introduction to his collection of essays on addiction, published, like *Infinite Jest*, in 1996, Becker fleshes out the problem with an anecdote. “A young man may drink heavily because he does not anticipate that he will become addicted” (9). If, unhappily, he becomes addicted, “He might decide to fight his addiction by joining Alcoholics Anonymous and in other ways; and, on the other hand, continuing to drink heavily could be a way of maximizing utility if his preferences ‘shifted’ greatly in favor of alcohol” (9). The man’s decision must hinge, for Becker, on his calculation of future happiness: yet, his future happiness depends on whether or not he quits drinking. This paradox manifests in

Becker's scare quotes around the word *shifted*. First, for Becker, as quoted above in the opening line to his essay on addiction, preferences are stable, they are not supposed to shift. Second, this *shift* marks the switching point at which the man can no longer imagine a future happy enough that it would be worth it to stop drinking. But, again, he might need to stop drinking to be able to imagine a happy future. Becker's *shifted* signals a chicken-and-egg game: if he stops drinking, he might imagine a happier future, but he cannot imagine a happier future unless he stops drinking.

Further, if the man decides to continue drinking, might this not also suggest a failure of forward-thinking? Curiously, Becker seems to contradict his own foundations by saying so: "Our analysis implies the common view that present-oriented individuals are potentially more addicted to harmful goods than future-oriented individuals" (57). Becker might defend himself by arguing that present-orientation and forward-thinking are not mutually exclusive, that "the addict" is precisely the present-oriented forward-thinker who imagines maximal happiness as day after day of consuming the addictive goods.<sup>82</sup> Regardless of whether Becker's theory holds, the tensions underlying Becker's *shift* and between present- and future-orientation should by now be familiar. "The addict" is the figure in whom the debt economy's contradiction – requiring, in Becker's terms present- *and* future-orientation simultaneously – condenses, the figure who prioritizes the happiness of today's consumption over future happiness; the professional shopper replaces the Protestant work ethic's saver; debt finances the economy. Becker's work attempts to naturalize addiction as an issue of rationality and preferences – individuals become addicted because they are unhappy and prioritize the present – obscuring the reasons *why* they are unhappy and prioritize the present: e.g. poverty or gross inequality or perpetual debt. Perhaps once everyone has become "the addict," *homo economicus* as rational consumer should be put to rest.

The characters in *Infinite Jest* who most successfully escape addiction's economic logic adopt Alcoholics Anonymous' conception of addiction as a disease.<sup>83</sup> Though hundreds of the novel's pages hover around a halfway house governed by AA's 12-Step Program, critics have yet to address the relationship between AA and *Infinite Jest* more than in passing. AA's centrality to the novel is acknowledged, oddly, on its copyright page where, after the standard disclaimers, we learn, "Besides Closed Meetings for alcoholics only, Alcoholics Anonymous in Boston, Massachusetts also has Open Meetings, where pretty much anybody who's interested can come and listen, take notes, pester people with questions, etc. A lot of people at these Open Meetings spoke with me and were extremely patient and garrulous and generous and helpful. The best way I can think of to show my appreciation to these men and women is to decline to thank them by name" (x). This is a way for Wallace both to explain how he learned so much about recovery culture without being an addict (which he was and here dissimulates)<sup>84</sup> and to credit himself for the lengthy research that went into the novel. In a note to his editor, he insisted on the importance of this passage: "The AA disclaimer is very important to me and is absolutely *required*" (*Infinite Jest* Editorial).

Critics' have hesitated to consider AA in part because of its reputation. Wallace scholar Eric A. Thomas, for example, writes that "what's difficult for the critic is that AA is thoroughly anti-intellectual, not exactly susceptible to close reading and unpacking, given its adamant simplicity" (290). Trysh Travis, whose recent book on recovery culture attempts to make it "a legitimate subject for sustained scholarly analysis," argues that prejudice against AA is endemic to social scientists and humanists, "whose lack of knowledge of and incuriosity about recovery is often so complete as to seem decidedly willful" (8). I attend in the next few pages to the history

and discourse of what, focalized<sup>85</sup> through one recovering addict, the narrator calls “this slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings” (350).

Ennet House residents “have to be seen at a designated AA or NA meeting every single night of the week or out [they] go, discharged” (345). A number of the novel’s scenes thus take place in AA meetings, and most of these feature AA testimonials. These testimonials all share a “three-part structure,” which “mimics that of Christian conversion narrative”: the sinful life of the addict; the revelation of hitting bottom; and the redemption of AA (Travis 131). AA codified this structure early in its history. Its central text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, better known as the Big Book, spends roughly two-thirds<sup>86</sup> of its nearly six hundred pages relating forty-two testimonials, which provide the model for Wallace’s homages (or parodies). Bill W., AA’s cofounder and the leading force behind the Big Book, felt that “the collection of first-person ‘witnesses’ would form the ‘heart of the book’ and allow the kind of emotional connection that brought alcoholics together” (Travis 126). One scene, relatively late in *Infinite Jest*, dramatizes the shift from ETA and its failure to escape addiction to the embrace of the AA testimonial with its structure, special cant, clichés, and allowance for “emotional connection.”

The ten-page scene is split into two linked halves: the first narrates Hal watching one of his father’s films in which AA is allegorized and criticized; the second half jumps to Joelle van Dyne – Hal’s older brother Orin’s ex-girlfriend, an actress in many of Hal’s father’s films, a cult radio personality (“Madame Psychosis”), an addict, denizen of Ennet House, and eventual love interest of Ennet House’s hero and leading man, Don Gately<sup>87</sup> – Joelle van Dyne who attends a Cocaine Anonymous meeting and finds herself moved by the testimonial she hears. No other scene in the novel so explicitly links ETA and Ennet House. Between, and linking the two halves, is a paragraph voiced by the narrator who observes that Hal’s father’s film betrays a

common trope, which is how “many not-yet-desperate enough newcomers to Boston AA see Boston AA as just an exchange of slavish dependence on the bottle/pipe for slavish dependence on meetings and banal shibboleths” (706). This observation serves as a transition from ETA to Joelle van Dyne, a pivot between the two worlds, about whom “it remains to be determined” whether she “is one of these people who’ve come into AA/NA shattered enough to stick” (707). The scene’s last three pages relate a working-class black man’s testimonial. He “gets right to his Bottom,” which, “predictably, occurred on a payday. This check just *had* to go for groceries and rent” (708). But instead of meeting his wife and daughter “after work right off the bus stop at Brighton Best Savings” so they could “‘help’ him deposit the paycheck right then and there,” he purchased a vial of crack cocaine and spent the night high (708). When he returned home the next morning, his family had left and he found the meager remains of what they must have eaten – the last scrapings of “charity peanut butter on biscuits washed down with tapwater and a grimace” (709). He considered killing himself, but checked into a shelter instead where that same night they served him a peanut butter sandwich, which “became his Higher Power” (710). He finishes by declaring his sobriety, which he achieved thanks to “Giving Up and joining the Freeway Access Group and getting Active and taking the voluntary suggestions of the Fellowship of Cocaine Anonymous” (710-1). Hearing the man’s testimonial convinces Joelle: “It’s the first time she’s felt sure she wants to keep straight” (710).

This scene serves as a distillation of the novel’s pedagogical trajectory. It moves from ETA and the inability to see beyond the logic of exchange, in which AA substitutes addictive meetings for addictive substances, and in which the circulation of clichés (“banal shibboleths”) replaces the circulation of money and drugs, to the transformative power of AA. The power of AA’s testimonials comes from the kind of group belonging manifest in scripted cant like “getting

Active and taking the voluntary suggestions of the Fellowship” and, strangely, from their use of clichés. Wallace emphasizes clichés by capitalizing them: Bottom, Higher Power, Giving Up, Active, Fellowship. AA’s program depends on its condemnation, in opposition to Becker, of rationality, its insistence that addiction is a *disease* that requires, for its cure, reliance on a Higher Power. Gately notes at the end of hearing a different testimonial that, “Boston AA’s real root axiom” is: “check your head at the door” (374). As a new Ennet House denizen asks, “I dismantle my life and career and enter nine months of low-income treatment for a *disease*, and I’m prescribed prayer?” (180, emphasis in original).

*Infinite Jest* presents AA as directing its members away from Becker’s rational economic model for thinking about addiction and toward embracing irrationality and cliché. The addict, as a neoliberal character produced by an economy that requires subjects who compulsively satisfy their short-term pleasures, must extricate himself from this economy to cure his addiction.

AA’s entanglement with the market emerges from its origins. In fact, the rhetoric of AA’s foundation myth suggest that AA was birthed as much from alcoholism as from the volatility of the market. The Big Book begins with AA’s origin story: “Bill’s Story” – the testimonial of AA cofounder Bill W. On the top of its second page, we learn that, as a young man in the 1920s, Bill W.’s work took him to “Wall Street” where “little by little [he] became interested in the market” (2). A few lines down in the same paragraph, Bill W. writes, “Though my drinking was not yet continuous, it disturbed my wife” (*ibid.*). Succumbing as much to alcohol as to the speculative mania of the 1920s, Bill W. laments, “The inviting maelstrom of Wall Street had me in its grip. Business and financial leaders were my heroes. *Out of this alloy of drink and speculation*, I commenced to forge the weapon that one day would turn in its flight like a boomerang and all but cut me to ribbons” (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). Bill W. metaphorically binds alcohol and the

market as an alloy and the source of his despair. His narrative continues to parallel the market and substance abuse: “The great boom of the late twenties was seething and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life”; “A morning paper told me the market had gone to hell again. Well, so had I” (3; 8). The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression form the condition for the creation of Alcoholics Anonymous. Conceiving of alcoholism as a disease fit well with Bill W.’s sense of lost agency at the hands of both alcohol and the market, evident in the language he uses to describe *the alcoholic* later in the Big Book: “Is he not a victim of the delusion that he can wrest *satisfaction* and *happiness* out of this world if he only *manages* well?” (61, emphasis mine). Here the alcoholic’s delusion is the same as that of the market’s rational actor: sound management should allow for moderation in drinking and success with the market. Debating the Big Book’s composition at the end of the Depression, AA cofounder Bob Smith wrote to Bill W., “Have to use disease – sick – only way to get across *hopelessness*” (Travis 34). As Travis comments, “This rhetorical functionality, ultimately, is what sold the cofounders on disease” (*ibid.*).

The cure “*was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than*” oneself and of handing one’s agency to that Power (14, Bill W.’s emphasis). This cure became more than simply a cure, though; it became the basis for new utopic community. The closing lines of Bill W.’s testimonial profess, “Most of us feel we need look no further for Utopia. We have it right here and now. Each day my friend’s simple talk in our kitchen multiplies itself in a widening circle of peace on earth and good will to men” (16).<sup>88</sup> This Utopia is built around both sobriety and resistance to the market. Travis argues that “AA is best understood as a ‘gift economy,’ a community self-consciously organized around modes of exchange that evade the logic and norms of market capitalism” (92).

Wallace, too, saw AA as a gift economy, an idea he worked out in the margins of his copy of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*. Wallace underlined Hyde's definition of capitalism as a system that "asks that we remove surplus wealth from circulation and lay it aside to produce more wealth" as opposed to gift economies that strive "to cease turning so much surplus into capital, that is, to treat most increase as a gift" (37). Gift economies were attractive to Wallace both as an addict and as a writer. He underlined the following passage on the artist's relationship to the market: "The costs and benefits of tasks whose procedures are adversarial and whose ends are easily quantified can be expressed through a market system. The costs and rewards of gift labors cannot. The cleric's larder will always be filled with gifts; artists will never 'make' money" (107). In the margin beside this passage, Wallace wrote, "Artists take gifts; they don't 'make' money" (*ibid.*). Twenty pages later, beside a long quote from Meister Eckhart, Wallace wrote, "AA's = those driven mad ~~by~~ w/fear by the paradigm of scarcity in a commodity/capitalist economy: require return to basically 1<sup>st</sup>-century communism of spirit" (127). In this marginalia, we find Wallace constructing the link between AA, the literary, and resistance to capitalism as a mode of exchange. With *Infinite Jest*, this construction becomes central: theme (AA) and form (the literary) meet at the utopic ambition to escape capitalism, however briefly or partially, and to participate instead in gift economies.

But believing in one's own utopic ambition does not make the dream true. Artists may imagine that they do not receive capital in exchange for their art, but gifts, and members of AA may imagine that they participate in a utopic enclave autonomous from capitalism, but the histories of literature and AA reveal a more complicated relationship with market economies. I bracket the former and turn to the latter: a brief history of AA's relationship to capitalism paves

the way for understanding how Wallace's appropriation of AA in *Infinite Jest* does not end with "1<sup>st</sup>-century communism of spirit" but with an individual's fight to survive in a precarious world.

After its beginning in the late 1930s, "membership in Alcoholics Anonymous increased steadily during the early 1940s, skyrocketed after the Second World War, and exceeded 100,000 by 1950" (Travis 36). This maps onto the rise of the U.S. boom economy. Yet, as Travis notes, "a significant portion of early AA literature devotes itself to denigrating the beliefs and practices dedicated to mass-producing the productive capitalist citizen known as the 'self-made man'" (65). Why would a group founded on anti-market rhetoric flourish during some of the best years in the history of the U.S. economy? What Travis misses, looking back at the 1940s from the twenty-first century and its neoliberal championing of the entrepreneurial self, is how the large corporations and bureaucracies that dominated the postwar economy demanded selves who effaced their own agency. Andrew Hoberek argues that mid-century discourses of "constrained agency" express transition of the middle class from "small-property ownership to white-collar employment" (8). In this, large corporations could not have found a better friend than AA. Bill W. writes in his testimonial that, to be cured, "a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light" (14). This surrender of agency accompanied a mandate to work. Bill W. writes of the addict, "if he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank he would surely die" (15). Working, then, is a matter of life or death. AA's description of the Higher Power itself, in the Big Book, at one point trains addicts to submit to the postwar economy: "We had a new Employer. Being all powerful, He provided what we needed, if we kept close to Him and performed His work well" (63). The Higher Power can be many things, not least the large corporation. Economic leaders quickly recognized AA's potential and played an active role in its postwar expansion. "In a 1946 speech that was heavily

publicized within the business community, [biostatistician E. M.] Jellinek had noted that 29.7 million work days were lost each year to alcoholism” (Travis 44). R. Brinkley Smithers, “heir to the IBM fortune,” listened to Jellinek and began a “campaign aimed at getting business and industry leaders to ‘Save the man, save the investment!’” (*ibid.*). Already in this slogan we can see the beginning of Gary Becker’s concept of the human being as human capital, with AA as the mechanism of economic appreciation.

The U.S. economy changed dramatically in the forty years between 1950 and 1990. It fell into a perpetual crisis in the early 1970s that has been well-masked by the discovery of the debt economy and the rise of finance in the early 1980s. AA also changed, not so much in substance, but in extent. It continued to grow, becoming integrated with both the U.S. state and medical and insurance agencies through legislation, creating what one of the early legislators in support of this growth would later call an “alcohol and drug industrial complex” (qtd in Travis 46). In the mid-1980s, “a dearth of medical patients combined with lower rates of reimbursement per patient meant that converting under-utilized facilities into specialized alcohol treatment wards became an attractive option for many hospitals” (Travis 48). Such, precisely, is the case with Ennet House, which “leases a former physicians’ dormitory in the Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital Complex” (135). The hospital building “itself striped of equipment and copper wire, defunct, Enfield Marine stays solvent” by leasing to Ennet House and other “state-related health agencies and services” (194). AA and 12-Step Programs, as mentioned above, reached their peak in the late 1980s and 1990s; as one of *Infinite Jest*’s footnotes self-consciously recognizes, “At the zenith of the self-help-group movement in the B.S. [Before Subsidization] mid-1990s, there were estimated to be over 600 wholly distinct Step-based fellowships in the U.S.A.” (996).

Discursively (“Save the man, save the investment!”) and materially (integrating with the health care industry through government subsidy), AA has become ever more entwined with not only market economies, but market economies in the contemporary form of neoliberalism. This intertwining gives the lie to Wallace’s vision of AA as a utopic gift economy – a tension that surfaces in *Infinite Jest* and to which I turn in this chapter’s final section. But a crucial step in my argument remains only sketched and requires fleshing out. A rhetorical analysis of cliché – an exploration of how cliché resists meaning – demonstrates how and why *Infinite Jest* elevates the figure as a tactic of resistance against neoliberalism and makes it the trick (“almost magic”) to the transition from a capitalist economy to gift economies, from the addict to the believer.

*Cliché: A Rhetorical Analysis*

One day at a time.

Easy does it.

First things first.

Ask for help.

It works if you work it.

Grow or go.

Keep coming back.

Turn it over.

Fake it till you make it.

Getting in touch with your feelings.

Abiding in the present.

The above list is a small selection of AA clichés from *Infinite Jest*. To break addiction’s spiral of consumption, Wallace’s characters turn to cliché. Many of the characters find this turn counterintuitive, frustrating, even insulting. As one says, indignantly, ““So then at forty-six years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés.... To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés”” (270). In response, the aforementioned Don Gately, leading man, hero, an alumnus who works as staff at Ennet House, thinks, if only he can “buy these poor yutzers some time, some thin pie-slice of abstinent time, till they can start to get a whiff of what’s true and deep, almost magic, under the shallow surface” (271). Why turn to the much-maligned figure of cliché to fight addiction? What about cliché is “true and deep, almost magic”?<sup>89</sup>

Elsewhere, Gately provides a definition of cliché in relation to addiction, contending that “clichés are (a) soothing, and (b) remind you of common sense, and (c) license the universal assent that drowns out silence; and (4) silence is deadly, pure Spider-food, if you’ve got the Disease” (278).<sup>90</sup> Notice that in each of Gately’s cases, clichés induce an affect or behavior, they sooth or remind or license; in none of these cases do they mean. For futher help, we can turn to Eric Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Clichés*, where he defines cliché as “an outworn commonplace; a phrase, or short sentence, that has become so hackneyed that careful speakers and scrupulous writers shrink from it because they feel that its use is an insult to the intelligence of their audience or public: ‘a coin so battered by use as to be defaced’” (xi). As a defaced coin no longer represents exchange value, a cliché no longer produces meaning, or linguistic value. Cliché is a word or phrase that, through repeated use, has had its meaning effaced; removed from the realm of circulation through which it produces meaning, cliché becomes instead a figure that functions through its meaningless use. As such, it is an ideal figure for transferring subjects from their imbrication in neoliberal capitalist logic to the logic of the gift economy.

The relationship between economic and linguistic exchange, as Jean-Joseph Goux recognized a number of years ago, is not a matter of chance: rather it comprises “*a mode of symbolizing* that is both economic and significant,” where significant means productive of meaning (4, emphasis Goux’s). Mary Poovey’s work, discussed in this chapter’s introduction, allows us to see Goux’s claim as itself historical. From the early nineteenth century, the literary has defined itself against economic value. This distinction has become increasingly threatened since 1945, and from multiple fronts. Postmodernism famously collapsed the distinction between high and low art such that all putatively postmodern art embraced its commodification, sharing, in Jameson’s words, “a resonant affirmation, when not an outright celebration, of the market as such” (305). Meanwhile, neoliberalism, as I traced through Gary Becker, worked to subsume all discourses within the economic. We can read Goux’s homological link between economic and literary value, written after 1973, as representative of the danger to the distinction between the two types of value. Wallace, sensitive to this danger from both sides, from both postmodernism and neoliberalism, defends “narrative art that understands itself as being about considerations more important than popularity and balance sheets,” art that “can transfigure” (53). He finds, then, in cliché, a figure that produces illogic, that resists rationality, that, because it is a defaced coin, escapes from exchange; he finds a figure whose uncanny ability to break from the dominant neoliberal logic of the day, a logic that produces “the addict,” he must describe as *almost magic*.

As a subject of the debt economy, “the addict” is trapped in a spiral of consumption, with a felt need, in the pursuit of happiness (or maximizing utility), to return with ever more haste to the realm of economic circulation, to shopping malls or drug dealers or visual entertainment. Cliché, by departing from circulation, cures “the addict.” To effect this cure, though, “the addict” must internalize cliché, making its logic her own.<sup>91</sup> To this end, *Infinite Jest* locates cliché within

Ennet House and the institution of Alcoholics Anonymous, which serve the process of subject formation.<sup>92</sup> Don Gately, for example, thinks to himself, “You just have to Ask For Help and like Turn It Over, the loss and pain, to Keep Coming, show up, pray, Ask For Help. Gately rubs his eyes. Simple advice like this does seem like a lot of clichés” (273). Gately considers the addict who is indignant about having to learn to live by clichés, and decides that “the thing is that the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say” (*ibid.*). Later, in a long AA scene, Gately remembers his own process of becoming a subject of cliché, narrating how “you sweep floors and scrub out ashtrays and fill stained steel urns with hideous coffee, and you keep getting ritually down on your big knees every morning and night asking for help from a sky that still seems a burnished shield against all who would ask aid of it – how can you pray to a ‘God’ you believe only morons believe in, still? – but the old guys say it doesn’t yet matter what you believe or don’t believe, Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you’re told” (350). To escape addiction and live by cliché requires the quotidian institutional work of showing up, doing chores, and listening to testimonials, all of which works to create a subject who responds “like a shock-trained organism” to cliché. This biological rhetoric resonates with a claim made by the author of *On Clichés*, the only book-length study on cliché in English,<sup>93</sup> Anton Zijderveld, who argues that “clichés are able to trigger speech and behavior in a kind of behavioristic stimulus-response mechanism” (13). Gately provides a further example of this phenomenon with his relationship to his Higher Power. Despite his doubts, “he takes one of AA’s very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the AM and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean” (443). By performing rituals, regardless of belief, Gately

stays clean: behavior provokes response, with the assistance of cliché. Yet the cliché subjectivity does require a *kind* of belief, which keeps “the addict” coming back to AA; this is belief that Lee Konstantinou writes is not “toward some aspect of the world but [is] rather the ethos of belief in and of itself” (90). Konstantinou argues that Wallace creates an “ethical countertype” to the “incredulous ironist” through this kind of a belief, a subject he calls “the believer” (85). I adopt Konstantinou’s term, with the addition that “the believer” instantiates the subjectivity of cliché. Cliché, then, solves two problems for *Infinite Jest*. It allows “the addict” to escape the realm of circulation by transforming her into “the believer.”

Cliché also solves a third problem for the novel. *Infinite Jest* betrays an anxiety about the differential structure of linguistic reference, made famous by Ferdinand de Saussure, or what the narrator calls “the referential murkiness and inelegance of verbal systems” (154). This anxiety manifests in several key ways. For example, Wallace editorializes the standard disclaimers about the fictionality of the novel’s characters on its copyright page, writing, “Any apparent similarity to real persons is not intended by the author and is either a coincidence or the product of your own trouble imagination,” and, “Where the names of real places, corporations, institutions, and public figures are projected onto made-up stuff, they are intended to denote only made-up stuff, not anything presently real” (x). While Wallace is having fun, and responding to the burn of having lost a publication deal under threat of a lawsuit for representing real persons in previous fiction,<sup>94</sup> he also displays more than typical anxiety about the collapse of the fictional signified into a real world referent. Poovey argues that “fiction” emerged as a category from the desire to distinguish the literary from the economic and we might read here another instance of Wallace’s resistance to that collapse (7).<sup>95</sup>

*Infinite Jest*'s anxiety manifests, further, as the trigger that sets into motion the events that comprise the central turning point in the ETA narrative. Students at the school play a game called Eschaton in which they simulate nuclear war. They play on an outdoor expanse "equal to the area of four contiguous tennis courts," which serves as the game's map, representing the world (322). During the novel's long Eschaton scene, toward its (the scene's) end, at a tense moment, one of the players declares that, given that it has begun to snow, and that "the snow totally affects blast area and fire area and pulse-intensity," the gamemaster must recalculate "damage parameters" (333). The player's confusion of the real world with the map leads to a screaming match – "It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick!*"; "The real world's what the map here *stands* for!"; "Real-world snow isn't a factor if it's falling on the fucking *map!*" – and leads, also, to another player firing a tennis ball, which represents a "5-megaton thermonuclear warhead," at a third player's head (333-4). The game breaks down while the players brawl, with consequences for the trajectories of major characters in the ETA narrative through the rest of the novel.

The copyright page and the Eschaton scene manifest anxiety about fiction's collapse into reality (the former) or reality's intrusion into fiction (the latter). Yet Wallace's fiction is perhaps most famous for its anxiety about irony, or the slippage between signifiers (words) and signifieds (meanings). Hal Incandenza tells his brother Mario, late in the book, "I think at seventeen now I believe the only real monsters might be the type of liar whom there's simply no way to tell"; in other words, monsters crystallize the impossibility of stabilizing the relationship between words and meanings (774). Mario would be the opposite, the character in whom Wallace invests strict sincerity, and who is drawn to sincerity, which moves him to think fondly of Ennet House over against the cynicism he feels at ETA: "Mario's felt good both times in Ennet's House because

it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside" (151). *Infinite Jest*'s anxiety over irony leads again from ETA to Ennet House; as Gately observes, "An ironist in Boston AA is a witch in church. Irony-free zone" (369). I submit that cliché is the figure through which Ennet House (purportedly) evades irony. Through cliché, Ennet House abandons Saussure's differential model of language for late Wittgenstein's model of use, which, like Zijderfeld's theory of cliché, functions behavioristically, by stimulus and response.<sup>96</sup> Let me put it another way. Goux writes, "Metaphors, symptoms, signs, representations: it is always through replacement that values are created" (9). Cliché is none of the above and functions not by replacement and creates no value. Cliché evades the relationship between signifier and signified, word and meaning, working not by exchange within a differential system, but by instigating behavior, by creating "the believer" who believes in nothing in particular, simply "the ethos of belief in and of itself."

*Infinite Jest*'s solution creates new problems. Its embrace of cliché involves ambivalence. Gately recognizes that Boston AA's axiom, *check your head at the door*, "is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist" (374). Cliché might cure "the addict" and create "the believer," but at what cost? The novel is most productive in these tensions: between invention and cliché, between "the addict" and "the believer." The novel spends much of its last one hundred and seventy-three pages with Don Gately as he hovers between his present and his past, between these two subjectivities. The tension between *Infinite Jest*'s style and the celebration of cliché expresses a conflicted subjectivity, whose conflict must return us to material conditions, to, that is, the debt economy. The debt economy requires spiraling consumption, but it also requires credulity. The profitability of finance functions through "an ethos of belief in and of

itself.” The creation of the debt economy’s fictitious capital is “almost magic.” I argue, thus, in conclusion, that in tandem with “the addict,” “the believer,” despite apparent hostility to market exchange, constitutes an ideal subject of the debt economy.

### *Debt and the Precarious Subject*

Don Gately is in debt. He is “paying off restitution schedules in three different district courts” (277). To keep most of his criminal cases “Closed Without Finding,” he is “making biweekly reparation payments out of the pathetic paycheck” he earns (463). Debt, along with the culture of AA, compels Gately to work and places him in peonage to the state. Gately is only one of *Infinite Jest*’s myriad addicts, recovering to become believers, who have been captured into peonage. Debt penetrates AA’s utopic community, preventing its autonomy from the market. How does “the believer,” grounded in cliché’s resistance to exchange, respond to debt’s intrusion? Gately responds to his actual debt by imagining AA as a system of figural debt: “Sobriety in Boston is regarded as less a gift than a sort of cosmic loan. You can’t pay the loan back, but you can pay it *forward*, by spreading the message that despite all appearances AA works” (344, emphasis Wallace’s). During the postwar years of the large corporation, members of AA could imagine their Higher Power as an omnipotent Employer who, if they worked well, would take care of them. Under the debt economy, the Higher Power has become the omnipotent Creditor.<sup>97</sup>

What does it mean, here, then, that AA “works”? It works, for one, by “the coupling of economics and ethics, work and work on the self”: paying a loan (economics) becomes paying it forward (ethics) (Lazzarato 75). AA’s “believer” retains the present-orientation of “the addict,” but redirects it from pleasure to the repayment of debts. In *The Financialization of Daily Life*, Randy Martin writes, “To feel free of obligation and to reduce unsecured debt, one must repeat

the following: ‘one day at a time’” (95). AA works, in *Infinite Jest*, by creating “the believer” who believes in the power, “despite all appearances,” of cliché, who displaces “the addict,” but who, in the process, becomes a perpetual and unquestioning debtor.

If *Infinite Jest* hopes, pedagogically, to provide models for its readers for how to change from “addicts” to “believers” and, thus, to become good subjects of the debt economy, this, in and of itself, is nothing new. Several excellent scholarly studies have, in recent years, shown how “fiction taught economic subjects to accept the uncertainties of an economy dependent on credit” thus “making possible the faith and credulity on which the modern economy depended” (McClanahan n.p.). Most of these have focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, tracing the emergence of the subject of finance capitalism.<sup>98</sup> Ian Baucom, in *Specters of the Atlantic*, argues that the flourishing of finance capital in the late eighteenth century – condensed in the speculative profit garnered through the massacre of insured slaves on the *Zong* slave ship – instituted “our long contemporaneity” (8). Adopting Giovanni Arrighi’s theory that capitalism cycles between finance and production, intensifying with each turn,<sup>99</sup> Baucom argues that the “hyperfinancialized” late twentieth century “accumulates, repeats, intensifies, and reasserts the late eighteenth” (30). I bring in Baucom to demonstrate that *Infinite Jest* participates in the novel’s long history with credit (and debt) and to make clear how Wallace’s novel marks a dramatic change in that history, expressive of the debt economy of the late twentieth century, particularly with regards to time. In the eighteenth century, as Baucom writes, “The time it took to complete the vast triangular circuit of the [slave] trade dictated that merchants must conduct much of their business on credit. But for such a system of credit to operate both a theory of knowledge and a form of value which would secure the credibility of the system itself had to be in place” (17). Enter the novel. The system of credit, as Baucom writes, “demands a

phenomenology of transactions, promises, character, credibility,” which is precisely what the novel can give. But late twentieth century finance capitalism no longer takes considerable time to complete transactions; transactions have become instantaneous. Transactions have also become – with the invention of a series of more complex financial tools thanks to the rise of computing, deregulation, and the consequent turn to finance – abstract and nearly impossible to understand. We know by now what kind of subject this economy demands. It demands precisely Konstantinou’s “believer” who maintains “the ethos of belief in and of itself.” Whereas the late eighteenth-century economy required belief in the good faith of other persons – required, that is, credible *characters* – the late twentieth requires belief in nothing so much as the almost magical way that abstract models and novel financial instruments create capital.

Beyond *Infinite Jest*, my analysis of the relationship between Konstantinou’s “believer” and finance capitalism allows us to rethink the late twentieth-century U.S. novel. Konstantinou joins a series of recent literary criticism that characterizes the post-1970 U.S. novel as working through “a postsecular renegotiation of the religious,” or as endorsing, in terms strikingly similar to Konstantinou’s, “postmodern belief,” “belief without meaning” (McClure 9; Hungerford 1).<sup>100</sup> For Amy Hungerford, “belief without meaning becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief” (1-2). Konstantinou’s ethos and the reclamation of literary authority meet in *The Believer*, a monthly literary journal published by Dave Eggers’ McSweeney’s Publishing, a periodical to which Konstantinou contributes. Eggers himself, in Benjamin Widiss’ reading of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, through his memoir’s ending in which he is figurally crucified, “positions the book *as* his body, held in the reader’s hand like a communion wafer,” blurring belief in and of itself and belief in the literary (128).

If we step back from this body of criticism and set it beside the recent work, mentioned above, on the relationship between the novel and the credit economy by Catherine Gallagher, Deidre Lynch, Ian Baucom, Mary Poovey, and Annie McClanahan, among others, and if we see this juxtaposition in light of my analysis, we achieve a startling insight about the post-1970 U.S. novel. The post-1970 U.S. novel, *as presented by Konstantinou, Hungerford et. al.*, produces the ideal subject of the neoliberal debt economy and reflects a change in the nature of meaning. Marc Shell writes, regarding the history of money and literary form, “the new forms of metaphorization or exchanges of meaning that accompanied the new forms of economic symbolization and production were changing the meaning of meaning itself. The participation of economic form in literature and philosophy, even in the discourse about truth, is defined...by the tropic interaction between economic and linguistic symbolization and production” (4). The abstraction of late twentieth-century finance capitalism transforms meaning itself into substrateless belief. Following Hungerford and *The Believer*, then, belief in the literary begins to look, perversely, with an irony only possible after postmodernism “destroyed” the “seminautonomy of the cultural sphere,” like a form of fealty to the debt economy (Jameson 48).

But my analysis throughout this dissertation proves the relationship between the post-1970 U.S. novel and economics more complicated. In these novels, belief in the literary does not hang on meaninglessness, but endorses – through both imagined subjectivities and literary form – resistance to neoliberalism’s attempt to make everything legible as economic. These novels’ resistance to meaning turns our attention to material conditions. I close by showing how *Infinite Jest*, like the novel of the neoliberal period in general, does not simply endorse “the believer” but is, finally, fraught, expressing a subjectivity in crisis, trapped between debt and addiction, living

in a world threatened by apocalypse. This figure, who subtends “the addict” and “the believer,” I call “the precarious subject.”

The precarious subject (as defined with help from the *OED*) is “held at the pleasure of another; uncertain,” “dependent on chance; insecure,” and “exposed to danger” (“precarious” 1.a.; 1.b.; 4). If spiraling consumption is one side of the debt economy’s coin, precariousness is its other. As Maurizio Lazzarato writes, “In the debt economy, to become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only – far from it – those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health system, housing shortages” (51). The state, in the debt economy, externalizes responsibility, moving, for instance, from welfare to workfare, shifting the expense of social services to ever more local sites. We can see the extraordinary boom of recovery culture in the late 1980s and 1990s, then, as, in addition to the debt economy’s extension of the logic of addiction to all spheres of life, the localization of care to the self (of self-help) and to small communities like AA.

*Infinite Jest* teems with the debt economy’s castoffs, its precarious subjects, characters who float in and out of shelters like Ennet House and whose lives are always endangered. They become addicts or believers, but first they are precarious. The novel lingers, for instance, on Poor Tony Krause, a transgender heroin addict who suffers a series of misadventures, describing at length his withdrawal while living first in an “Empire Displacement Co. dumpster” (the name makes obvious suggestions) and later in “an obscure Armenian Foundation Library men’s room” stall (301). “He weighed fifty kilos and his skin was the color of summer squash. He had terrible shivering-attacks and also perspired. He had a sty that scraped one eyeball as pink as a bunny’s. His nose ran like twin spigots and the output had a yellow-green tinge he didn’t think looked

promising at *all*. There was an uncomely dry-rot smell about him that even he could smell” (*ibid.*). His condition only gets worse from there. Eventually, Marathe’s *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* apprehend Krause and use him as a test-subject, making him view the Entertainment, which will, as we know, kill him (845).<sup>101</sup> *Infinite Jest* holds up Poor Tony Krause as an exemplar of the precarious subject’s disposability.

Don Gately, though, is the precarious subject whose near-success with AA allows him to teeter between “the addict” and “the believer,” and who, in becoming the centerpiece of *Infinite Jest*’s long, anticlimactic denouement, becomes the novel’s model of “the believer”’s limits and of subjectivity’s crisis. The greater part of the novel’s final 173 pages describes Gately’s life as experienced from a hospital bed, desperately trying to refuse the prescription painkillers to which he is addicted. He has been hospitalized after being shot while in the process of protecting Ennet House’s residents from attack. The narrative moves between describing the intense physical pain of Gately’s present and the psychological pain of his past; Gately, that is, “lies there pinwheel-eyed from pain and efforts to Abide via memory” (918). He comes to recognize that “everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present” (861). Gately resides, until novel’s end, in the tension between AA’s cliché of Abiding as a “believer” and memories of his past as an “addict.” Specifically, he relives, through the scene that ends the novel, a near-fatal drug binge that leads to the torture and death of his partner-in-crime, Gene Fackelmann. In fact, Gately and Fackelmann worked together as debt collectors for black market gambling, and their binge results from a confusion over a bet that Fackelmann capitalizes on as the collector and uses to purchase an inordinate quantity of drugs. When the money’s rightful owner discovers what his debt collector has done, he sends lackeys to torture and kill Fackelmann, lackeys who inject the already-bingeing Gately with enough drugs to make him black out.

As he lies there in pain, Abiding via memory, Gately asks himself, “what if God is really the cruel and vengeful figurant<sup>102</sup> Boston AA swears up and down He isn’t, and He gets you straight just so you can feel all the more keenly every bevel and edge of the special punishments He’s got lined up for you?” (895). Here is the crux of the crisis for the debt economy’s subject; this is where we learn what *Infinite Jest* teaches us about the contemporary self. Subjectivity’s crisis resides in the question of whether precariousness, for even the most heroic among us, makes being a “believer” untenable. Does the Higher Power, the Creditor, the Market, make life too difficult to maintain belief in the almost magical world of finance capitalism?

*Infinite Jest* leaves us to hang in this question. We do not learn whether Gately resists his addiction. We know that his condition worsens, that “the poor son of a bitch was burning down” (973). The novel’s last line locates Gately after he wakes up from his binge with Fackelmann: “he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” (981). The image reveals Gately, in the rain, beside the ocean, as small and vulnerable, as, that is, precarious.

#### *Coda: Apocalypse*

With obscure, nearly-hidden hints, *Infinite Jest* would lead us to believe that the apocalypse will happen just beyond its narrative’s frame.<sup>103</sup> Hal, in the opening scene, which takes place one year after we leave Gately in the hospital, remembers, from sometime in the missing year, digging up his dead father’s head – the purported location of the master copy of the Entertainment – with Gately. In the hospital, Gately has a prophetic dream that matches and adds to Hal’s memory. In it, Hal and Gately are digging up the head “to divert” a “Continental Emergency,” but when they find the head they learn they are: “*Too Late*” (934). The narrator tells us in a footnote that, “the

Glad Flaccid Receptacle Corporation, Zanesville, OH” – which brings us the Year of Glad in which Hal suffers his breakdown at the University of Arizona – is “sponsor of the very last year of ONANite Subsidized Time” (1022). These clues suggest that, with the dissemination of the Entertainment, the United States will suffer an imminent catastrophe.

I began with the image of the Statue of Liberty wearing an adult diaper. In *Infinite Jest*'s telling, the collapse of political freedom into market freedom is apocalyptic. It faces this threat as a literary text. Yet, though some would read the novel as redemptive, it expresses unease about the fate of the literary and, as a consequence, the fate, in Wallace's words, of the “fucking *human being*.” It raises up cliché in an attempt to save both from addiction's spiral of consumption, but it is most profound where cliché is in tension with inventiveness, an expression of subjectivity in crisis. The literary cannot resist neoliberalism by giving us “the believer,” a subject who, in the end, serves the debt economy. Rather, in *Infinite Jest*, the literary resists economic rationality's total colonization by presenting us with the precarious subject. In classic apocalyptic fashion, the novel leaves us with a paradox, two mutually exclusive realities we must hold together: the inevitability of imminent catastrophe at the hands of neoliberalism; and the possibility that we might, out of the crisis of the literary, find a way to live on.

## Conclusion

What might it look like to live on after neoliberalism? What subjectivities might lead us out of the neoliberal present and into a different, perhaps less economically-oriented, future? What can the literary teach us about how to live in the time to come? What do we do with the resistance to meaning I have traced in literary form and figures?

*After the Boom* has eschewed these questions because the texts it takes as its objects of study largely eschew them. Inscribing themselves in a tradition that dates to the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, these texts take the end of the world as we know it as their narrative horizon and leave what lies beyond to speculation. Apocalypse, for these texts, expresses crises incited by neoliberalism for both life made precarious by capitalism and the literary as a mode of writing that exceeds economic rationality. As apocalyptic, these texts imagine an end to neoliberalism's empire that is cataclysmic and revelatory. That is to say, these texts and my arguments built from them aspire to illuminate the present and imagine its limits. Each text envisions the point at which neoliberalism reaches its limit and collapses. The texts in Part One theorize that point as arising from structural inequality or violence. The texts in Part Two chart the limits of the literary's capacity to enable subjectivities that resist neoliberalism. I have argued for form as a mode of resistance, one largely limited to the reactive politics of resistance rather than imagining worlds otherwise. These limits are a virtue. They have allowed me to establish the contours of the encounter between economics and the literary in American literature of the neoliberal period.

Yet each chapter glances beyond its apocalyptic horizon. The Book of Revelation itself offers only a glimpse at its end of what comes after the destruction of the Roman Empire. In its final paragraphs – the final paragraphs of the Christian Bible – it envisions a utopian society as a new Jerusalem that descends from heaven. But John’s description of this Jerusalem is surprising: he devotes most of these few paragraphs to detailing the architecture of the city, numbering its gates, noting its jeweled ornamentation, and measuring its walls (21:10-27). In other words, the Book of Revelation ends with a turn to material conditions. Likewise, the figures in each chapter of *After the Boom* that serve as ciphers of revelation – silence, violence, unreadability, and cliché – indicate a shared literary and political turn away from meaning and toward the material, the ecological, the planetary. Against a world in which the economic logic that subtends neoliberal capitalism’s exchange and circulation has contaminated linguistic exchange, the texts attended to in this project would have us turn away from linguistic exchange itself. Baldwin proposes silence as a black political and literary strategy, a silence that is a turning away from neoliberalism in the form of white supremacy and toward the material power of the collective, which Baldwin felt at King’s funeral. McCarthy directs us to see through neoliberalism’s pretense of progress to the violence at its root. Silko’s unreadable almanac presents itself to its reader as a physical object; meanwhile, its material effects in the novel’s world unravel the conditions by which capitalism allows neoliberalism to be legible, replacing capitalism not with a new system, but, first, with the earth’s uproar. Wallace draws out the limits of AA and cliché as a figure of resistance in a world in which debt thoroughly structures life, pointing us to this world’s ubiquitous material precarity. The collective, the slaughtered body, the book, the indebted subject. It is to these that these texts turn us in response to the questions with which I began this conclusion.

*After the Boom* opens new questions for American literary studies. Perhaps foremost are those posed at the beginning of this conclusion, regarding the future. As just noted, the texts in this project gesture toward a turn to the material, but they stop there. Might the literary open a space to imagine futures other than neoliberalism? A tradition from Kant through Adorno to Fredric Jameson and Robert Kaufman argues that the specificity of the aesthetic makes possible not only new art, but new orientations to the social and the political. For Kaufman, the aesthetic's capacity for enabling novelty is especially relevant today when "critical negativity seems at least temporarily to have been integrated into late capitalism" (723). *After the Boom* reveals a critical negativity through literary form that regains powers of resistance, yet which would be complemented by projects on the encounter between neoliberalism, the literary, and the future, which could grasp what remains of the literary's limited autonomy to imagine life otherwise. As Wittgenstein writes toward the end of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (68, emphasis his). Neoliberalism functions to limit our collective world to the economic. The literary offers space to reclaim language that expands our world or worlds. Critics have found archives productively correspondent to such a project in speculative and post-apocalyptic fiction. *After the Boom* offers to this work its account of how apocalypse emerges from neoliberalism, how literary form can be a mode of resistance, and how we might begin to formulate a literary turn from language to matter, from meaning to use.

Though *After the Boom* has theorized the relationship between economic practices (such as finance capitalism and the production of credit and debt) and American literature, it has, by necessity, had to leave many economic developments of the last fifty years beyond its scope. Of these, perhaps the most relevant is the transformation of the publishing industry. What are the

implications of changes in corporate America for literature? How has the consolidation of the book markets by the Big Six (or, as of late 2013, the Big Five) publishers, which has been matched by the proliferation of small literary presses, altered the conditions for literary production? How do perpetual, if exaggerated, apocalyptic statements about the end of literature relate to developments in the publishing industry, and how does this inflect, in turn, literature?

Archival research has piqued my interest in these questions. To complete my second chapter, I worked with Cormac McCarthy's papers in The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, where I gathered details from the three decades during which McCarthy labored in near-obscure, his books going out of print, until the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, a novel that stylistically and structurally departs from his earlier work. What happened at Random House between 1985 and 1992 that guided McCarthy to transform himself from a cult writer to a best-selling author? To complete the fourth chapter, I worked with the David Foster Wallace Papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin. I read Wallace's correspondence with his agent and his editor, in which he expresses his fears that his novel *Infinite Jest* will fail to live up to Little, Brown and Company's publicity hype. How do these fears and the publisher's own economic demands inform the novel's vast ambition to assay the capacities of literary fiction in late twentieth-century America? James F. English's study of the impact of prizes on contemporary literature, *The Economy of Prestige*, serves as a model for the kind of projects that could emerge from these questions. *After the Boom* makes clear, further, the importance of situating institutional developments in their economic contexts when linking such developments to literature and literary form. My analysis in *After the Boom* offers a new methodology for bridging historicist with formalist accounts of literature and economics.

The dialectic relationship I have charted between neoliberalism and the literary extends beyond the neoliberal period and beyond American literary studies. First, I draw a parallel: the literary emerges as a category during Romanticism when poets declare literature a different kind of writing from any other; we might say, the literary emerges at the moment of literature's self-consciousness of itself as literature. But that moment of self-consciousness allows us to see that the literary – non-instrumental imaginative writing – has a pre-Romantic history. Neoliberalism emerges as a category during the late twentieth century when economists declare that economic rationality extends to all realms of life; we might say, neoliberalism emerges at the moment of liberalism's self-consciousness as a philosophy of life. But that moment of self-consciousness allows us to see that neoliberalism has a pre-neoliberal history. Liberalism had already implicitly charted what neoliberalism makes explicit. Immediately, a project proposes itself: are liberalism and the literary necessarily entwined from the beginning? Because classical liberalism and the literary emerge simultaneously, with Thomas Malthus and Adam Smith, on the one hand, and Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, on the other. Does the literary exist as a self-conscious category against liberalism's formalization of capitalism's instrumental logic?

The literary's apocalyptic response to neoliberalism is only the end of many earlier, but as yet unwritten, stories. *After the Boom* establishes the centrality of literary form to these stories. I am making a distinction internal to the concept of form. The foregrounding of literary form, I contend, is a distinguishing feature of the literary as such, marking its objects as singular. It is at the point that neoliberalism erases such form for semantic content that the literary responds with apocalypse. Yet such erasure has a history proper to capitalism, which privileges the fungible and destroys that which is singular. *After the Boom*, then, is a later volume of an unwritten series on literary history as a dialectic between capitalism and literary form.

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<sup>1</sup> For a nuanced account of the rise of “identity,” see Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hoberek, in *Twilight of the Middle Class*, does the work of reframing our understanding of American literature from the 1950s and 1960s to make visible its engagement with the economy and questions of class. In so doing, Hoberek departs from the large body of scholarship that sees class as less important than the individual, the psyche, the political, or identity as categories of analysis for literature of the period.

<sup>3</sup> Especially influential have been Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988) and Alan Nadel’s *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995). The last few years have seen the publication of studies that periodize the 1990s as after the Cold War but before 9/11, including Samuel Cohen’s *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (2009) and Philip E. Wegner’s *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001*, and studies that return to the Cold War, including Andrew N. Rubin’s *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* and Timothy Melley’s *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*. A number of studies have been published in recent years that take up the related topic of nuclear technology, including Daniel Cordie’s *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism, and United States Fiction and Prose* (2009), Daniel Grausam’s *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (2011), Paul Williams’ *Race, Ethnicity, and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds* (2011), and David Seed’s *Under the Shadow: The Atomic Bomb and Cold War Narratives* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> I am drawing on Wendy Brown’s definition in “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy”

<sup>5</sup> For accounts of this history, see Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression*, Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, and Daniel T. Rogers, “The Rediscovery of the Market” in *Age of Fracture*,

<sup>6</sup> See Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* and Sean Wilentz’ *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*

<sup>7</sup> As with Abrams’ Romantics, so with my archive I understand that the creative process “has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas,” which puts me in conversation with literary critics writing on the relationship between literature and religion in the late twentieth century, of whom the most prominent are John McClure (*Partial Faiths* (2007)) and Amy Hungerford (*Postmodern Belief* (2010)) (13). Both argue that late twentieth-century American literature responds to the popular growth of religion in the U.S. and resists thoroughgoing secularism. For McClure, postsecularism opens “a new way of configuring the terrain of contemporary fiction,” featuring “new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being” which are “dramatically partial and open-ended” (ix). This “postsecular religiosity...wants nothing to do with the comprehensive maps and scripts that are essential to sacred systems of domination” (11). Instead, McClure depicts postsecular American literature as participating in a broader political project that is progressive, dialogic, engaged in a pluralistic public sphere, and eschews violence (17). Like McClure, I recognize my texts’ adoption of apocalyptic religiosity as partial and open-ended, but with very different political visions. These texts tend to depart from traditional American political positions altogether under the pressure of a sense of imminent shattering of paradigms, rejecting pluralism in its liberal multicultural form, rejecting the efficacy of a public sphere that has failed by exclusion or inability to confront structural change, and remaining open to the possibility of violence in response to violence, or, in the case of McCarthy, understanding violence as always at the origin of capitalism, and always ready to erupt. No coherent political solution emerges from these texts, but they all agree that our present politics are inadequate to our challenges. Hungerford does not address politics. Rather, she depicts both creative writers and literary critics taking up the rise of religiosity in the U.S., “especially starting around 1960,” as “the means for literature’s salvation” (xx). More pointedly, she argues that what makes late twentieth-century literature distinctive “is the way some of the most prominent writers of the time use language as a religious form to salvage what they see as threatened literary authority” (xx). The endpoint of such salvaging, for

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Hungerford, is postmodern belief, that is, an exploration of “what it might mean to believe in meaninglessness” (1). Hungerford and I stand in substantive disagreement, then, as I argue that, over the same period of time and for some of the same texts, authors engage religion and claim literary authority not to explore meaninglessness, but because they sense a political and economic urgency to the times.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida’s essay is “No Apocalypse, Not Now: (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)”

<sup>9</sup> Studies on literature and apocalypse include Thomas O. Beebee, *Millennial Literatures of the Americas, 1492-2002*; James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, Joseph Dewey, *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Tempter in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age*; Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War*; Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*; David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature*; John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsburg, and Burroughs*; Zbigniew Lewicki, *The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature*; Laskshmi Mani, *The Apocalyptic Vision in Nineteenth Century American Fiction: A Study of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville*; John R. May, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*; Timothy Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse*; Douglas Robinson, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature*; Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*; David J. Leigh, *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*; Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction*.

<sup>10</sup> Important studies of literature and economics include Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance, Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*; Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace and The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*; Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*; Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form*; Annie McClanahan, “Character Economies: Credit Scoring, Personification, and National Debt”; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*; Mark Osteen and Martha Woodhouse, eds., *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*; Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain*; and Marc Shell, *The Economy of Language and Money, Language, Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era*. For studies influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s and John Guillory’s sociological approaches to literature, which consider the circulation of literature as commodities with cultural capital, see Evan Brier, *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction*; James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*; and Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*.

<sup>11</sup> For studies that explore “alternative geographies,” (Dimock, “Introduction” 3) see Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides*; Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents*; Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet*; and Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature*. For a sampling of transnational American studies, see Lauren Bieger, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz, *The Imaginary and Its Worlds*; Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, eds., *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*; Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*; Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*; Donald E. Pease, *National Identities and Postnational Narratives*; Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies*; John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*

<sup>12</sup> He thereby predicts Thomas Piketty’s thesis – a thesis that has only become more evident since 1970 – forty years ahead of its time.

<sup>13</sup> In the collection *James Baldwin: American and Beyond*, both Vaughn Raspberry and Kevin Gaines, in separate essays, argue for more nuanced accounts of Baldwin’s earlier writings that do not single-mindedly cast Baldwin as working within the framework of Cold War American exceptionalism. Raspberry reminds us that Baldwin emphatically observed that “postwar racial progress was neither the

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product of progressive racial attitudes nor even the outcome of the heroic struggle of civil rights protestors and anticolonial radicals, as much as a series of concessions by the federal government that ultimately served to secure its dominance over the Communist bloc” (101). Gaines looks to Baldwin’s early essay “Princes and Powers” to argue for situating Baldwin in a transnational milieu.

<sup>14</sup> See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (1978) and David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad* (2005).

<sup>15</sup> See Note 1

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the “renaissance” in Baldwin Studies, see Caplan’s Schwarz’s introduction to *James Baldwin: American and Beyond*. Important publications include Dwight A. McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (1999); D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Re-Viewing James Baldwin* (2002); Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said* (2002); Douglas Field, *Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (2009); Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade*; and D. Quentin Miller, “A Criminal Power” (2012).

<sup>17</sup> With regards to American literary studies, I am especially thinking of Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents*; Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (eds.), *Shades of the Planet*; Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides* (2009); and Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011). For a sampling of transnational American studies, see Lauren Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz (eds.), *The Imaginary and Its Worlds* (2013); Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, (eds.), *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (2011); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2005); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* (1993); Donald E. Pease, *National Identities and Postnational Narratives* (1994); Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, (eds.), *The Futures of American Studies* (2003); and John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* (2000).

<sup>18</sup> Along with Cheryl A. Wall’s substantial treatment of *No Name in the Street* in “Stranger at Home: James Baldwin on What It Means to Be an American,” essays by Kevin Birmingham, Kevin Gaines, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska touch on *No Name*, or use passages from the text as a jumping-off point for inquiries elsewhere in Baldwin’s oeuvre.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Complex* (2009), edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

<sup>20</sup> In *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade*, Magdalena J. Zaborowska also describes *No Name* as participating in a “hybrid genre,” which she describes as “part confession and diary, part political essay, and part a mock picaresque” (202).

<sup>21</sup> A recent survey of apocalyptic thinking in America similarly suggests, “It is the threat of losing one’s cultural identity – not fears of personal mortality or mere desperation – that elicits the apocalyptic impulse” (Gilles 178)

<sup>22</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* describes the transition from older prophecy to apocalypse. Noting that several of the prophets anticipate a “cataclysmic event of cosmic proportions” that seem to have inspired the later apocalypics, it proposes, “A clue to the relationship of apocalyptic writing to prophecy may be found in Daniel 9, where Daniel is presented as studying the book of Jeremiah and receiving an angelic interpretation of its significance. As suggested by the presentation of Daniel as a technically trained sage, the authors of apocalyptic books were perhaps themselves learned scribes who studied and appropriated aspects of the prophetic tradition and combined them with other influences in their attempts to understand the nature of the cosmos and the course of history” (964). Baldwin, like Daniel, participates in the cultural transmission of prophecy, studying Jeremiah and Daniel and appropriating them to understand his own time.

<sup>23</sup> Melville Herskovitz provide one of the earliest accounts that argues for the transmission of elements of African culture across the Middle Passage through the spirituals. His work is taken up by Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* and Amiri Baraka in *Blues People*, among many others.

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<sup>24</sup> For more on Baldwin's relationship to Afro-Protestant holiness churches, see Hardy, *James Baldwin's God*.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin opens *No Name* with a discussion of how he learned first learned words that mimics the famous early scene from Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine learns words by hearing them spoken while adults point to objects. Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* with a critique of this scene from *Confessions*.

<sup>26</sup> Eldridge Cleaver infamously writes a homophobic rant against Baldwin in *Soul on Ice*. Amiri Baraka writes against Baldwin in his short essay "Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots," with homophobic undertones. Zabarowska treats this aspect of *No Name in the Street* in depth in her chapter on that book in *James Baldwin's Turkish Period*.

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan and Schwarz recognize this revision, writing that, by 1972, Baldwin's "perspective had changed. In 1959 he had suggested that Algeria, or colonial matters more generally, had worked as a catalyst to heighten his commitment to the civil rights movement at home. In this later telling, with a sharper 'Third World' inflection, he indicated that during his time in Paris, twenty years before, colonial politics had in fact created in him a more powerful *identification* with the colonized throughout the world" (15).

<sup>28</sup> Nixon made this announcement on June 17, 1971, in his "Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control." <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3048>

<sup>29</sup> The statistics to support this are ubiquitous. Helpful graphs can be found at this link to a *Washington Post* article from 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/08/28/these-seven-charts-show-the-black-white-economic-gap-hasnt-budged-in-50-years/>

<sup>30</sup> Bloom's introduction was originally published in his book *How to Read and Why*.

<sup>31</sup> My thanks go to Wai Chee Dimock for this formulation.

<sup>32</sup> Amy Kaplan describes the tendency to tell "a developmental narrative that moves from continental national expansion in the nineteenth century to formal colonial annexation at the turn of the century to the neo-colonial exercise of military and economic might in the twentieth. This overarching narrative has defined the so-called Spanish-American War of 1898 as a watershed...a radical shift to a new stage of 'Open Door' policy of economic expansion" (17). John Carlos Rowe provides an exception to this tendency, writing, "From Captain David Porter's effort to annex the Marquesas Islands for the United States in 1812...U.S. imperialism has primarily been as intent on commercial, technological, and human as on territorial control" (9).

<sup>33</sup> My use of "boom" and "turbulence" refers to Robert Brenner's *The Economics of Global Turbulence: From Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005*.

<sup>34</sup> I am thinking, especially, of works by Giovanni Arrighi, Robert Brenner, Jerry Davis, and Greta Krippner.

<sup>35</sup> I am here borrowing Annie McClanahan's insights into Sam Raimi's film *Drag Me to Hell*.

<sup>36</sup> Vereen Bell published the first academic criticism on *Blood Meridian* in 1988 as a chapter of his book, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. This wide-ranging chapter introduces several themes that the criticism will continue to address, including: the novel's relationship to Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis," and to the Enlightenment; how the novel exposes us to normally-repressed evil; several of the many proper names with which Judge Holden has been compared (Ahab, Kurtz, Satan, God, Nietzsche); and the idea that the natural world is one of the novel's protagonists. In 1992, Leo Daugherty introduced a reading of the novel as principally indebted to Gnosticism. John Sepich published his excellent genealogical work, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, in 1993. That same year saw the first academic conference on Cormac McCarthy and the origins of the Cormac McCarthy Society, which has supported much of the criticism that has since been written on *Blood Meridian*. Stephen Frye published a helpful, even-handed account of *Blood Meridian* in 2009, as a chapter in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, which serves as the best introduction to the criticism.

<sup>37</sup> Hungerford argues that McCarthy adopts Old Testament syntax and the form of the parable to approximate the authority of scripture, but that here there is no underlying meaning. This leads her to

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make a dramatic claim. She writes, “To flaunt that selective agency [McCarthy’s as author] is the point of the novel’s violence” (*ibid*). To see the novel’s violence as such requires bracketing many of the novel’s details and much of its plot in favor of focusing on Holden’s speeches and a dehistoricized view of the scalp hunting massacres. Hungerford’s omissions become apparent through a strange mistake. After she makes hay of Harold Bloom’s capitalization of “the kid” where the novel leaves it lowercase, Hungerford describes *Blood Meridian*’s Angel Trías, a historical governor of Chihuahua, as “the Governor of Chiapas,” a different state at the other end of Mexico (1742).

<sup>38</sup> See also Neil Campbell, Robert Jarrett, and Sara Spurgeon. For an account of how the novel uses Yuma mythology, see Stacey Peebles’s insightful “Yuman Belief Systems and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*”

<sup>39</sup> McCarthy cites this as Henry James, though in fact this passage comes from an address William James gave to Harvard Divinity students in 1884 with the title, “The Dilemma of Determinism.”

<sup>40</sup> For more on the relationship between nineteenth-century postmillennialism, revivalism, and notions of American progress, see Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium* and Chapter Eight of Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought*.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the relationship between nineteenth-century sentimentalism, moral improvement, and empire, see Amy Kaplan’s *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* and Chapter Seven of Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought*.

<sup>42</sup> See Brian DeLay’s introduction to *War of a Thousand Deserts*.

<sup>43</sup> As part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States paid Mexico fifteen million dollars – a small amount considering the vastness of the land annexed by the U.S., though much needed for Mexico’s dwindling coffers. Then, “Two weeks after the exchange of treaty ratifications, Mexico’s Congress passed a law appropriating two hundred thousand pesos for defense against Indian raiders, to be divided more or less equally among the governors of states exposed to attacks.... Private organizations and public officials created funds for head and scalp bounties, and soon scores of mercenary outfits were doing across the north what [famous scalp hunter] James Kirker and others had done” (DeLay, *War* 5994).

<sup>44</sup> McCarthy wrote in a letter to scholar John Sepich that “he had, indeed, read hundreds of books to make his *Blood Meridian*” (i). Sepich’s *Notes on Blood Meridian* is a tremendous tool for McCarthy scholars searching for *Blood Meridian*’s sources. The acquisition of McCarthy’s papers by Texas State University’s Wittliff Collections in 2007 introduced another excellent resource for McCarthy scholarship.

<sup>45</sup> Bartlett may be a second source, along with Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession*, for Judge Holden: “We were fortunate enough to meet with a gentleman, Judge H, who was one of the prisoners, and whose singular escape may be worth relating. . . . As he saw the lips of the Mexican officer move to give the order for the soldiers to fire, he fell upon his face as if dead” (683). Judge H’s trickster behavior, his evasion of death, remind one of the novel’s Holden.

<sup>46</sup> Bartlett’s book reads well thanks to his narrative voice. He comes off as an endearing melancholic, a long-suffering surveyor simply trying to do his work and struggling against a bureaucratic machine – not unlike Thomas Pynchon’s surveyor, Charles Mason, in *Mason & Dixon*.

<sup>47</sup> See Dana Phillips, Dwight Eddins, and Amy Hungerford, respectively.

<sup>48</sup> The New Mexico Office of the State Historian places the most infamous scalp hunting massacre at Santa Rita del Cobre. “A party of scalp hunters led by James Johnson sought to reap a quick and easy fortune under this [1837 scalp hunting] law. They entered into an arrangement with Robert McKnight which provided for the mass extermination of the entire tribe of Mimbreno Apaches, who were then living in the vicinity of the mine. McKnight would benefit from such a scheme by being freed to work the mine without the petty interference from the Mimbrenos, since a massacre would also serve as a warning to the potentially more dangerous Warm Springs Apaches, who were beginning to show signs of resentment due to the increased number of miners that were entering their homelands resulting from the expansion of operations at the mine. The scalp hunters, in turn, would be able to collect the rewards offered for the scalps of the slain Indians from either Chihuahua or Sonora. The plan was for McKnight to

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invite the Mimbrenos to the mine for a gala fiesta and once the Indians were gorged and drunk, the scalp hunters would massacre them. The Indians readily accepted and came almost en masse. On April 22, 1837, the inhabitants of Santa Rita del Cobre lived up to their promises of “hospitality.” Roast beef, corn meal mush, and mescal were served in abundance. During the feast, the miners carried out sacks of corn meal and heaped them in a stack in the center of the plaza of the settlement. Off to the far side was a screen of saddles and other baggage. Behind this screen lurked Johnson and his men with a six-pound cannon which had been loaded to the muzzle with slugs, musket balls, nails, pieces of chain, glass and other odds and ends. The cannon had been previously zeroed in upon the spot where the sacks of corn meal were being stacked. As soon as all the sacks had been placed in the plaza, McKnight invited the Mimbrenos to help themselves to the corn meal as a gift from the people of Santa Rita del Cobre. Not dreaming of treachery, the Indians rushed to the pile and started gathering up the sacks. At this moment, Johnson touched his cigarro to the vent hole of the cannon. The charge mowed through the Indians like a giant scythe. As soon as the blast died out the scalp hunters and miners leaped forward to finish off the slaughter. Soon the plaza was strewn with corpses and fouled with blood. Only a few fleet footed Indians escaped the melee. It has been estimated that from nine hundred to a thousand Indians — men, women and children — perished in the Santa Rita del Cobre massacre” (Bowden).

<sup>49</sup> Bloom apparently does not distinguish between the scalp hunters and filibusters.

<sup>50</sup> McCarthy makes clear in his notes that he understands the epilogue’s man to represent, at least in one of his valences, a posthole digger. He writes, “CODA – the post / fencehole / digger: fence as symbols of fear It is an embryonic wall”; and again, elsewhere, on the margins of a draft of the epilogue, “fence an embryonic wall (this is also a burial scene)” (“Holograph”; “Typescript pages”).

<sup>51</sup> McCarthy wrote the *Blood Meridian* on an Olivetti Lettera 32 typewriter that recently sold at auction for \$254,500 (Kennedy).

<sup>52</sup> See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*

<sup>53</sup> Robert Brenner provides a nuanced account of this problem in *The Economics of Global Turbulence*

<sup>54</sup> For more on the rise of the cartels and their links to the neoliberalization of Mexico, see Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone*.

<sup>55</sup> Brenner: the economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s “did not lead, as might otherwise have been expected, to...serious repression or depression. This was because the government’s of the advanced capitalist world, led to an ever-increasing extent by the United States, made sure that titanic volumes of credit were made available” (xxiii). Greta Krippner charts the relationship between the new “titanic volumes of credit” and the rise of finance in *Capitalizing on Crisis*.

<sup>56</sup> The final chapter is the twenty-third. In one draft, McCarthy writes under the roman numeral XXIII, which marks the chapter, “PSALM,” evidently referring to Psalm 23, the most famous of the Psalms and associated with death (“Typescript, early”). It reads:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

    He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
    he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
    for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley

    I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
    your rod and your staff—  
    they comfort me.

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You prepare a table before me  
    in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
    my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
    all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
    my whole life long”

(*New Oxford* 791-2)

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Isenberg describes the economics of the bone trade in detail. He writes, “After the bison had been hunted out . . . the plains were strewn with their bones. . . . Poor homesteaders and Indians soon found a use for the bones. . . . They scavenged the plains for bison bones, which they sold to bone dealers for delivery to sugar refineries or fertilizer plants. It took one hundred skeletons to amass one ton of bones, which sold for \$4 to \$12. . . . The bone trade was immense. In 1886, a resident of Dodge City saw a rick of bison bones a quarter of a mile long and as high as the bones could be thrown. . . . The bone trade was the final episode in the reduction of the most prominent resource of the plains to its salable parts and their incorporation in the American industrial economy. . . . While poor Euroamericans and Indians scavenged the plains for bison bones, industrialists added to their wealth by transforming the bones into fertilizer. In the plains, the slaughter left in its wake not wealth but poverty and misery” (160-2).

<sup>58</sup> *Blood Meridian* carries evidence of the economic history of the United States in the nineteenth century from the heights of the cotton trade to the end of the bison robe market. In the opening pages, the kid, leaving Tennessee, sees “Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden” (4). Daniel Walker Howe notes that, in 1832, “textile companies comprised 88 of the 106 largest corporations in the United States” (136). He also writes that, “Cotton, fueling an expansion of transatlantic industrial capitalism, enormously enhanced the importance of the United States in the world economy. . . . By giving the United States its leading export staple, the workers in the cotton fields enabled the country not only to buy manufactured good from Europe but also to pay interest on its foreign debt and continue to import more capital to invest in transportation and industry. Much of Atlantic civilization in the nineteenth century was built on the back of the enslaved field hand” (128; 132). *Blood Meridian*’s “shadowed agony in the garden” registers that the foundation of the booming wealth in the United States during this period – the reason why the nation could continue to imagine itself an Eden – was black slavery. Similarly, the focus, at the end, on the destruction of the bison registers how this booming United States commodity depended on the mass deaths, ethnic cleansing, and forced enclosure of American Indians.

<sup>59</sup> By this period in their history, the Comanches, for those who remained, lived a life intricately linked with the bison. “Just a few thousand Comanche,” notes S.C. Gwynne, “were watching their old world die and losing their identities in the process” (263).<sup>59</sup> For the Comanches, the bison hunt was apocalyptic, and from it emerged an apocalyptic prophet, Isa-tai, “who had a vision of a new order,” and believed “the time of salvation was near” (Gwynne 265).

<sup>60</sup> The novel historicizes the old woman’s cannibalism as an effect of colonialism, known in the novel as the period of Death-Eye Dog. Everyone living within colonialism, according to *Almanac*, whether colonizer or colonized, is subject to the danger of personal corruption. The anecdote of the almanac – and Part 1 of the novel – ends: “As long as all our days belong to Death-Eye Dog, we will continue to see such things [as the old woman’s plotting cannibalism]. That woman had been left behind by the others. The reign of Death-Eye Dog is marked by people like her. She did not start out that way. In the days that belong to Death-Eye Dog, the possibility of becoming like her trails each one of us” (253).

<sup>61</sup> Silko upends the persistent paradigm in which the peoples indigenous to the Americas practice oral traditions but cannot and do not write. Not only was the denial of indigenous writing central to early colonizers – as Sean Kicummah Teuton notes, “the Native American savage was defined precisely by his

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lack of true language and, more specifically, writing” – but it has shaped American Indian literary studies (1107). Kenneth Lincoln, in his generative study *Native American Renaissance*, defines the surge of Native American literature in the late 1960s and 1970s as “a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms,” and much of the subsequent criticism has followed suit (8). Craig Womack, writing as a Creek Indian and in reference to pre-columbian Maya and Aztec books, challenges this paradigm, commenting that, “As rich as oral tradition is, we also have a vast, and vastly understudied, written tradition,” yet few scholars have taken up this challenge within American Indian literary studies (2). Silko urges the history of indigenous writing to the foreground in *Almanac of the Dead*.

<sup>62</sup> Bruce Love, who has done important work with the Paris Codex, narrates the survival of Maya books as follows: “Maya books and the practice of writing them has survived in two forms. In their pre-Hispanic form – screenfold pages with glyphs and pictures – the books endured in the hands of Maya priests who refused to convert. Sometimes the priests clandestinely secluded the books within the very towns where Franciscans ruled, sometimes the books escaped with Maya people who fled to the hinterlands,” such as in the case of Silko’s imagined codex (5). Love continues, “Maya codices also survived by transforming. . . . The same Maya intellectuals, Maya of noble descent who understood pre-Hispanic books, were the first to become literate in Spanish. . . . Among them were practicing subversives, believers in tradition who risked brutal retaliation to pursue a form of cultural treason. They wrote – and therefore preserved forever – the ‘scenes and histories’ from the ancient hieroglyphic books. These books, written in the Mayan language using Spanish characters, are known today as the *Books of Chilam Balam*” (6).

<sup>63</sup> Several hundred pages later, we find English translations of “Fragments from the Ancient Notebooks” (570). Among these is a passage that refers to a different type of ancient text from the codices, the *Books of Chilam Balam*: “Error in translation of the Chumayel manuscript: 11 AHU was the year of the return of fair Quetzalcoatl. But the mention of the artificial white circle in the sky could only have meant the return of Death Dog and his eight brothers: plague, earthquake, famine, incest, insanity, war, and betrayal” (572). Intertextual references and a lack of context make this passage esoteric. Mention of “the Chumayel manuscript” refers to one of the *Books of Chilam Balam* – the *Book of Chumayel* – and “11 AHU” is itself a misspelling of 11 Ahau, the designation of a cyclical date, specifically that of 1539, which “initiated the cycle of the Spanish Empire” (*Ancient xvii*). “Death Dog” is a figure that pervades the novel, often named “Death-Eye Dog,” and appears to be Silko’s invention; it refers to the period of European colonization of the Americas. The passage, then, while still not entirely clear, presents a paradox: the year 11 Ahau, coupled with the description of an eclipse (“artificial white circle”), seems to signify the return both of Quetzalcoatl and of Death Dog, both of a Maya deity and of European colonization and its devastations, which should be mutually exclusive. The author of this passage simultaneously acknowledges the undecidability of the paradox and asserts that the correct translation would correlate 11 Ahau to Death Dog, thereby demonstrating that the Maya in fact predicted not the return of their god but the appearance of the Europeans. The arrival of the Europeans creates a crisis for the reading of the ancient text, which this passage longs to resolve.

According to Bruce Love, the *Books of Chilam Balam* descend directly from the codices. “The same Maya intellectuals, Maya of noble descent who understood pre-Hispanic books, were the first to become literate in Spanish. . . . Among them were practicing subversives, believers in tradition who risked retaliation to pursue a form of cultural treason. They wrote – and therefore preserved forever – the ‘sciences and histories’ from the ancient hieroglyphic books. These books, written in the Mayan language using Spanish characters, are known today as the *Books of Chilam Balam*” (6). In other words, certain Maya responded to the destruction of their books by writing, as a subversive political act, more books: by taking the language taught to them by the colonizers and composing forbidden books. These new books continued to transform over time and became very different from the codices. Rather than a ritual handbook for a priest, the *Book of Tizimin*, one of the *Books of Chilam Balam*, “constitutes an outline history of Yucatan from the seventh century to the nineteenth”; this is not an almanac but a chronicle (*Ancient xi*). Silko’s use of such a “secret history” engages *Almanac of the Dead* in a long-standing and ongoing tradition of resistance to European colonization through writing (*Ancient xx*).

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A third type of ancient Maya text Silko draws from in *Almanac* is the most famous: the *Popol Vuh*. Editors of a recent volume comment, “A watershed event in Maya literary studies that brought Mayan Colonial literature to a lay public was [Dennis] Tedlock’s translation of the *Popol Vuh* in 1985,” which would have been available to Silko while she was composing *Almanac (Maya)*. Tedlock writes of the *Popol Vuh* that it “tells the story of the emergence of light in the darkness, from primordial glimmers to brilliant dawns, and from rainstorms as black as night to days so clear the very ends of the earth can be seen” (15). That is, it is a Maya creation narrative, one that mostly tells of mythical events, but which reaches into the present of its composition, or about 1554 (Tedlock 57). Like the *Books of Chilam Balam*, it is written in Mayan through a Latin alphabetic script. Silko appropriates narrative elements from the *Popol Vuh* to serve as the basis for characters and plot developments in her novel. For instance, the *Popol Vuh* features two Hero Twins who descend into the underworld, trick the lords of the underworld into volunteering to be sacrificed on the premise that they will be resurrected, and then leave them killed, which allows for the creation of human beings. In *Almanac*, two leaders of the transnational resistance are twin brothers, Maya, named Tacho and El Feo. Tacho kills Menardo, one of the novel’s lords of the underworld, who believes a bulletproof vest will save him from death (510-11). Silko’s use of the *Popol Vuh* also extends her particular engagement with indigenous writing. Tedlock writes of the ancient Maya, “They knew whether war would occur; everything they saw was clear to them. Whether there would be death, or whether there would be famine, or whether quarrels would occur, they knew it for certain, since there was a place to see it, there was a book” (29). Silko understands *Almanac* as visionary, suggesting that she knew early on that “in the book the characters would foretell the future” and that “this old almanac of [Lecha and Zeta] correctly predicted the Zapatista uprising [in 1994]” (*Yellow* 1618; 1782).

<sup>64</sup> See endnote 2

<sup>65</sup> Eric Cheyfitz provides an excellent account of Wilson Weasel Tail’s speeches with regards to federal Indian law in his essay “The (Post)colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Indian Literatures and Federal Indian Law.”

<sup>66</sup> Feher, Michel. “On Credit, Self-esteem, and Sharing: An Introduction to the Neoliberal Condition.” Cornell University. Public Lecture. 10/24/2013.

<sup>67</sup> The Mexican debt crisis of 1982 was instigated by, on the one hand, rapacious loans from transnational commercial banks, which were “making enormous profits on their cross-border lending to the developing countries and on the other by excessive spending predicated on future oil income (Sachs 8; Lustig xx).

<sup>68</sup> This riffs off the *Popol Vuh*, which features two Hero Twins who descend into the underworld, trick the lords of the underworld into volunteering to be sacrificed on the premise that they will be resurrected, and then leave them killed, which allows for the creation of human beings

<sup>69</sup> See Brigham, Jarman, and Olmsted.

<sup>70</sup> See footnote 4

<sup>71</sup> If we are to believe Mario Incandenza’s adaptation of his father’s film *The ONANTIad*, made, by Mario, into a puppet show, the U.S. President decided to subsidize time after inspiration from both the placemats at a Chinese restaurant (Year of the Rat, etc.) and NCAA college bowl games (“the Ken-L-Ration-Magnavox-Kemper-Insurance-Forsythia Bowl”) (442).

<sup>72</sup> In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man* in which he argues that, with liberal democracy, we may have achieved the final form of government.

<sup>73</sup> To be clear, Michael Clune finds “the specter of a purely economic world” a thrilling prospect, utopic. In *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*, he produces a theory of the literary that, incredibly, marries Heidegger’s aesthetics to Hayek’s economics. For Clune, aesthetic works open up “a space outside the social world” in which “market relations are set to work organizing experience” (7; 15). He celebrates this possibility: “The economic fiction gives us the opportunity to see what is vital, capable of inspiring connection and desire in the great modern dream: that the strange connections of the market economy shelter the possibility of a beautiful new world” (157). Clune brilliantly give us the strangest of literary theories: a Heideggerian-libertarian fantasy of neoliberal aesthetics.

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<sup>74</sup> *Infinite Jest* is steeped in literary history, such that critical discussions of the novel have been dominated by its relationship to postmodernism or, as Andrew Hoberek argues, “a return not to postmodernism but to the form of the novel in place before even the rules of realism were fully formulated,” that is, the eighteenth-century novel (220). A brief turn to the history of the novel will, then, be instructive.

Michael McKeon argues that the novel emerged as a coherent form from the insight that “questions of truth and questions of virtue” could be “mediated and illuminated by the reflection of the other” (397). In other words, the novel, by mediating these questions through characters, could unite the problems of how to gain knowledge of reality and of how to live well – in fact, that such mediation constituted “the enabling foundation of the novel” (397). That is McKeon provides nuance to what Thomas Pavel puts clearly, but too simply, when he writes that, “From its earliest incarnations, the novel attempted to understand the relationship between individuals and the ideals and norms meant to guide their lives” (23).<sup>74</sup> By *Infinite Jest*’s 1996, McKeon’s questions of truth and virtue have become instead questions of language and economics. And, whereas for McKeon and others<sup>74</sup> the early novel helped people navigate new norms and engage in the market economy, for Wallace the novel becomes a form through which to resist – though not entirely successfully – the linguistic turn in theory and the neoliberal turn in economics, which he pursues through the surprising elevation of the literary figure of cliché.

<sup>75</sup> *Infinite Jest* is notable for how it deviates from Mark McGurl’s thesis about the centrality of the university and the creative writing program in post-1945 fiction, turning away from the institution of the academy to that of Alcoholics Anonymous.

<sup>76</sup> Wallace uses inverted commas to mark quoted speech in *Infinite Jest*, rather than quotation marks. Because I follow standard formatting in this dissertation, using quotation marks to quote text and inverted commas to quote quotes within text, this detail of punctuation will be obscured.

<sup>77</sup> Wallace will echo Marathe on worship and the national character and personal well-being about ten years later in what has become perhaps his best-known piece of writing, his Kenyon College commencement speech.

<sup>78</sup> At this point, Steeply offers the disingenuous response, “these are just the hazards of being free,” which is lame because it fails to explain why these hazards appear now (318). Why does “freedom of choice” lead to apocalyptic consumption in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment but not before? We might interpret Steeply’s flippant patriotism as a tacit or accidental recognition of the self-destructive threat lodged within the U.S.’ own political logic, why Jacques Derrida called *auto-immunity*.

<sup>79</sup> The history of the rise of “the addict” is more involved than I have space here to do justice to, involving a number of institutional, legislative, socio-economic, and cultural factors of which the appearance of the debt economy in the 1980s is only one late, if very important, one. See Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*.

<sup>80</sup> The populations at ETA and Ennet House, though they show strong tendencies, do not split cleanly along lines of race and class. Several whites become residents at Ennet House, including marijuana addicts Ken Erdedy and Kate Gompert. Erdedy is upper-middle-class, an “account executive” for “Viney and Veals Advertising” (the same agency that helped institute subsidized time). Geoffrey Day is another middle-class white at Ennet House; he teaches at a “jr. college” and, before entering the House, “manned the helm of a Scholarly Quarterly.” The situation is less diverse at ETA, with almost no people of color and only Michael Pemulis from the lower economic brackets.

<sup>81</sup> For more on how historical pressures changed the Bildungsroman’s possibilities, see: Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*; Marianne Hirsch, “From Great Expectations to Lost Illusions: The Novel of Formation as Genre”; Douglas Mao, *Fateful Beauty*; and Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*.

<sup>82</sup> Such a formulation runs counter to common understanding: most addicts, in bingeing, profess little-to-no forward-thinking; they do not seem to be calculating that, to maximize long-term happiness, they should enjoy their substance today (and today, and today); rather, the present-oriented forward-thinker seems an apt description for an AA “drunk” in recovery: one day at a time.

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<sup>83</sup> As Elizabeth Freudenthal observes, “Gately’s mode of fighting addiction is the only one in the novel that actually works” (191)

<sup>84</sup> In an early draft of this disclaimer, Wallace described AA as a “cult” (“First”)

<sup>85</sup> “Focalization” is a narratological term, an improvement on the old “point-of-view.” It refers to the lens, or perspective, through which the narrative is told. Wallace’s method of focalization is, to my knowledge, unique. He frequently uses what I will call *modified free indirect discourse*. “Free indirect discourse” is another narratological term; it describes the literary technique by which narrators ventriloquize characters, presenting bits of narrative as if from a character’s mind and voice. The technique, pioneered by Jane Austen and popularized by Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, provides the reader a sense of intimacy with a novel’s characters. Wallace *modifies* free indirect discourse in *Infinite Jest*. His narrator frequently ventriloquizes characters, but at the same time retains his (or her) distinctive vocabulary and syntax; this is why Wallace sentences are almost immediately recognizable as such. Wallace interrupts our reading at a number of points to identify this irregularity, footnoting egregious examples to acknowledge that a word or phrase is not the character’s own, although the surrounding passage inhabits the character’s language. This irregularity or modification irrupts late in the novel, becoming a matter of discussion between characters, or between a character and a character’s ghost. As Don Gately lies in a hospital bed, the ghost of Hal Incandenza’s father appears and, among other things, implants “ghostwords” into Gately’s mind and the novel’s consequent free indirect discourse, often in all-caps. I have no explanation for why the novel’s unique modified free indirect discourse becomes thematized like this.

<sup>86</sup> In the first edition the ration was closer to half, with the testimonials expanding with each new edition.

<sup>87</sup> Gately follows the archetype, among others, of the medieval knight who is gallant in love and protects an estate. As a child he names himself “Sir Osis of Thuliver” (mishearing his mother’s diagnosis of cirrhosis of the liver) and, later, as an addict and burglar his girlfriend refers to him as her “Night Errand,” pun (on the girlfriend’s part) unintentional (449; 924).

<sup>88</sup> AA’s fantasizes its utopia as post-racial (a fantasy that *Infinite Jest* somewhat absorbs): “Alcohol being no respecter of persons, we are an accurate cross section of America, and in distant lands the same evening-up process is now going on” (vx).

<sup>89</sup> After reading Giovanni Arrighi’s account of the cycles of finance capitalism in *The Long Twentieth Century*, Fredric Jameson wrote “Culture and Finance Capital” (1997) in which he updates and revises his argument from *Postmodernism*, specifically elevating the cliché or stereotype as the privileged narrative mode under late twentieth-century finance capitalism. The essay makes several false starts, only reaching its argument in its final paragraph, a deferral that results from an argument that is not yet fully formed. Jameson relies on a spurious homology; he claims that, as finance capital “supremely, like cyberspace, can live on [its] own internal metabolisms and circulate without reference to an older type of content,” so does the cliché circulate, “with no outside in terms of which it could be found lacking” (265). Jameson’s use of cyberspace, still novel in 1997, is revealing, as cyberspace is, contrary to Jameson, no freer from “an older type of content” than finance capital. Cyberspace requires countless servers, physical machines in physical places, for its internal metabolisms to run. Finance capital is not independent from, but requires, productive capitalism, from which it reproduces itself parasitically. As such, Jameson’s homology falls apart. Yet I believe his intuition is right, that cliché is a privileged form under finance capitalism. But I will come to that conclusion differently.

<sup>90</sup> Academics have written little on cliché. As Marshall McLuhan comments, cheekily, “The banishing of the cliché from serious attention was the natural gesture of literary specialists” (55). Though the editors of a recent collection of essays on Wallace recognize “the impassioned defense the author under scrutiny here mounted of cliché,” it has yet to be taken up as a topic for sustained analysis. To the contrary, one of the few academic essays that addresses Wallace’s use of cliché treats it as scandal: “No one who champions a work so original and thought-dense can possibly endorse Ennet’s beliefs about living with clichés” (Letzler 319). This critic rightly notices the peculiar tension in *Infinite Jest* between its extensive vocabulary and inventive style on the one hand and its celebration of cliché on the other, yet his tone of outrage brings us no closer to learning what makes cliché almost magic.

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<sup>91</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, reading *Infinite Jest* from an ecological perspective, writes in a similar vein, “If the problem originates in the presumption of autonomy that is the founding principle for the liberal humanist self, then nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution” (692)

<sup>92</sup> Trysh Travis comments on recovery culture’s role in subject formation: it “presents an opportunity for self-formation within a fragmented postmodern world devoid of culture-wide systems of meaning” (9). To which we can add Zijderveld on cliché: “neither science, nor the state bureaucracy and the corporations are able to provide the individual with meaning; rather they demand his everlasting functionality. In this situation, it seems to me, clichés are very useful” (37).

<sup>93</sup> Marshall McLuhan’s *From Cliché to Archetype* is less an account of cliché than a compendium of eccentric musings on the contemporary condition.

<sup>94</sup> Viking Penguin dropped *Girl with Curious Hair* because of the threat of lawsuit from Wallace’s use of numerous living people as characters, including David Letterman, Pat Sajak, and Alex Trebek. “The turn of events would be a terrible blow to any writer, but to Wallace, who felt he had traveled so far in his work from [*The Broom of the System*], it was particularly devastating” (Max 109). The collection was later published by W. W. Norton.

<sup>95</sup> Further, in an anecdote about two-thirds into the novel, Steeply tells Marathe about how his (Steeply’s) father spent his last years becoming ever more deeply involved with the TV show M\*A\*S\*H, allowing the show to become reality. As Steeply observes, “crucial distinctions had collapsed, I think, now. Between the fictional Burns and this Linville who played Burns” (643).

<sup>96</sup> Wittgenstein makes clear his rejection of “meaning” and his approval of “use” as concepts with which to understand (or not) language in the first few pages of *Philosophical Investigations*. Wallace had a long history with philosophies of language, especially poststructuralism and Wittgenstein. He even studied briefly under the neo-Wittgensteinian Stanley Cavell as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. And Wittgenstein plays an important role in the plot of Wallace’s first novel *The Broom of the System*, in which he was the protagonist’s great-grandmother’s mentor (which is more important to the novel than it sounds).

<sup>97</sup> According to Robert Antonio and Alessandro Bonanno, neoliberals deify the Market: “Globalization advocates re-enchant the spirit of capitalism, treating neoliberal globalization as a messianic mission and making it the religion of business and state. As theologian Harvey Cox argues, they ascribe to ‘The Market’ powers of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, and, ultimately, treat it as if it were ‘God’” (50).

<sup>98</sup> I am thinking of Deirdre Lynch’s *The Economy of Character*, Catherine Gallagher’s *Nobody’s Story*, Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic*, and Mary Poovey’s *Genres of the Credit Economy*, to name a few. Annie McClanahan has been writing essays – for example, “Dead Pledges: Debt, Horror, and the Credit Crisis” – that extend this work in to the twenty-first century.

<sup>99</sup> Arrighi published his cyclical theory in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. One of Arrighi’s achievements was to remind us that finance capitalism is not new to the late twentieth century, but “is a recurrent phenomenon which has marked the capitalist era from its earliest beginnings in late medieval and early modern Europe”: centered first on Genoa, then Holland, then England, then the United States (ix-x). Each period of financial expansion marks, in Fernand Braudel’s words, “a sign of autumn,” the decline of the dominant state power and the transition to the incoming state power as a center of newly profitable productive capitalism. Each turn in cycle also marks the system’s expansion (the U.S.’s economy larger than England’s, and so forth). As such, Arrighi’s “thesis is that capitalist history is indeed in the midst of a decisive turning point” (1). He wonders in his conclusion about the coming future, whether we are facing “the end point of capitalist history or of all human history” (356). Arrighi’s work has been widely influential, and is important for several writers who are important to this chapter, including Ian Baucom, Fredric Jameson, and Greta Krippner.

<sup>100</sup> I am thinking, especially, of John McClure’s *Partial Faiths*, Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief*, and Benjamin Widiss’ chapter, “The Gospel According to Dave,” on *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* from *Obscure Invitations*.

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<sup>101</sup> Krause's end is even more grotesque than I have allowed above. The *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* capture Krause along with Randy Lenz, ex-resident of Ennet House whose felt need to kill cats and dogs late at night is what leads to the violent event in which Don Gately is shot. Krause and Lenz, as test-subjects, are shown the Entertainment; then the Entertainment stops and to make it continue they must cut off their own fingers and pass them under the door – the ostensible point being to see how badly subjects desire to continue watching. But Lenz “was discovered to have been severing and pushing beneath the room of storage's closed door the severed digits of the second of the newly acquired test-subjects – this was a mis-dressed and severely weakened or addicted man dressed in the clothing of a gauche woman, carrying multiple purses of suspicious nature – rather than his own digits, marring the statistics” (845).

<sup>102</sup> Gately receives “figurant” as a ghostword from Hal's father's ghost. Figurants, according to the ghost, are “the myriad thespian extras” who are “always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound” (834). Horrified by the implications of this silence, Hal's father made films without figurants in which every actor and extra could speak, which “party-line entertainment-critics” called “incredibly dull and self-conscious and irritating,” but which Hal's father (or at least his ghost) considered “radical realism” (836).

<sup>103</sup> As Stephen Burn recognizes, “The narrative clearly moves toward an apocalyptic collision...a feast of the dead is imminent” (65)